WISHING YOU GOOD MENTAL HYGIENE: AMERICAN PSYCHIATRY IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

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The mental hygiene movement was an early 20th century American reform movement that aimed to apply psychoanalytic principles to the management of society.

James Jackson Putnam and other American physician reformers championed the work of Freud and sought to use his ideas to transform society.

In order to legitimize their intervention in society, psychiatrists framed issues such as education policy and foreign affairs in medical terms.
Citing research on child development that showed personality to be more malleable during childhood, reformers pushed for psychiatrists and social workers to play greater roles in the schools.

Mental hygiene proponents such as William Alanson White argued that schools should promote personality formation rather than more traditional academic goals.

Reformers focused their efforts on identifying and ‘curing’ juvenile delinquents while they were still in their formative years.
Foreign Policy

Reformers conceptualized war as a form of mental illness, or ‘globalunacy,’ that could be stamped out with psychoanalysis.

WWII-era psychiatrists took to the pages of newspapers offering their ‘prescription for peace’.
Conclusions

- The progressive era was a period of increased social engagement for psychiatrists and other mental health professionals.
- By cloaking their work in medical terms, reformers gave their interventions an air of scientific neutrality that was often unwarranted.
- Psychiatrist reformers at times resorted to coercion and social control to advance their aims.
- Despite their best intentions, reformers were ultimately unsuccessful in their efforts.
Works Cited