

History is Us: Historiography and the relevance of history to psychology

Henderikus J. Stam

University of Calgary

Abstract: Histories of psychology have a minimal role to play in a discipline that values history less than the technological advances achieved by appropriating technological tools from neighboring disciplines and professions. As history threatens to quit the curriculum altogether, its practitioners have adopted historiographical tools from the history of science that have only alienated the mainstream further. Historiography can still save the history of psychology but only through the recognition that the forces that have shaped psychology are likewise those very forces that have created the problems of subjectivity that so bedevil us. In this paper I will provide one example of the historicization of psychology through the history of European phenomenological psychology. Kurt Danziger has continually reminded us that the psychology's subject and its subject matter are both historical and hence we cannot escape an historical understanding if we wish to understand human action.

Kurt Danziger is a proficient practitioner of not only the history of psychology but also the historicization of psychological categories, or what he called the "project of a historical psychology." He has argued on a number of occasions that the categories we take for granted as markers of the discipline, categories such as personality, motivation, behavior, emotion, and so on are themselves recent inventions whose history reveals the degree to which we are governed by contemporary social trends that we have universalized and de-contextualized. Moreover, in 2003 Danziger addressed the question directly in a paper he gave to this Section of CPA, "Prospects of a historical psychology," and which was subsequently published in the Bulletin of the section (Danziger, 2003). In this paper he argued that historical psychology "would try to question contemporary psychological concepts in the light of historical evidence." Danziger has done just that in a number of works, including his 1997 volume *Naming the mind: How psychology found its language*, and the more recent *Marking the mind: A history of memory* (2008).

These are important studies of the way in which contemporary and often taken-for-granted categories of classification, understanding, and subjectification are themselves evolving, changing and are plastic conceptions of human nature. There is of course a niggling doubt that hangs behind such analyses, and this is the one that Danziger himself has raised, namely the possibility that a full-blown historicism will simply lead us into a relativistic morass whose contours cannot be marked and whose open-endedness will leave psychology with no boundaries. The fear expressed is that the older, more established notion of psychology as a natural science is indeed more clearly definable and provides the limits, although often not the epistemological foundations, that psychology as a historical subject might never have (Danziger, 2003).

Is there more to a historical psychology than merely historicizing the very categories we use to explain ourselves? Might we be engaged in a project that moves us away from psychology altogether? One need only have a passing familiarity with some major 20th century continental European thinkers to realize how deeply embedded is the conception that we are actors in a historical drama, the depth of which we can barely surmise. Time itself is coeval with the actor, who is continually applying the past to the future and in so doing makes a present. Heidegger presents us with one version of this thesis, deeply problematizing time by

arguing that understanding itself is a projection toward a potential being (Heidegger, 1953/1996). And authentic being is, for Heidegger, always historical but not bound by history, or, to quote Heidegger, “the question of historicity is an *ontological* question about the constitution of being of historical beings” (p. 368). Although an outsider to Anglo philosophical traditions, including the philosophy of psychology, Heidegger had an implicit influence in the second half of the 20th century. Consider for example a more familiar version of historicity that comes to us through the work of Michel Foucault. His historical studies of the prison, the clinic, sexuality, and ultimately the self are studies of historically bound subjects whose broad dispositions are themselves deeply historical discourses and practices working themselves out in new forms of power, self-discipline and governmentality. Here a naturalized subject is no match for history. And by a naturalized subject I mean one whose contours are determined by the kinds of disembodied, decentered functions that make up the subject of modern psychology. Instead history on a Foucauldian analysis always works through us, both from below and above consciousness and in ways we can only dimly surmise.

This dilemma (and I want to argue that this is a real conundrum for the social sciences) is rather obscure within a psychology where history serves, most often, a decorative or celebratory function. And of course decorations can be taken down when times are difficult and cash is in short supply. But let me try to broaden this question somewhat. For after all, it is not a new question but one deeply engrained in the western scholarly tradition. The modern incarnation of these difficulties originate with Hegel who problematized history in such a way that it was not to be avoided or ignored. I will not do justice to this complex trajectory here; save to say that the most quoted sentence in Hegel’s *the philosophy of history* is that which argues, “the history of the world is none other than the progress of consciousness of freedom” (Hegel, 1899/2007, p. 19). On this view the history of the world seen teleologically provides the very foundations for understanding the present and the future. However it also provides a key to understanding the human subject whose real task is to understand the forces of history so that the subject is no longer blind to its compulsions. We know of course that Hegel’s critics vociferously rejected this conception of rationalism and subjectivity, most notably Karl Marx. Yet Marx too believed in the inevitable march of history and the need to align ourselves with its dictates if we were to free ourselves from its forces, even if those forces were those of the market place. It would be the 20th century that would overturn the historicism of the Hegelians. By the middle of the 20th century we had so thoroughly decimated the notion of history as progress, if only by sheer example, that any notion of history as fixed and moving forward was naïve and unwarranted. But what remains of these 19th century traditions is not that history moves in certain directions but rather that history continues to play us even when we think otherwise.

Psychology as history

It was tempting in the early 20th century to greet the emergence of a science of psychology as a resolution to the endless debates about the kind of beings humans truly are. The German *Methodenstreit* seemed to have been settled in the new experimental psychology by a turn to scientism and naturalism. The experimental precision and the natural scientific details of the new psychology promised much even though, in its original incarnation, it delivered little of lasting value. This is not a judgment so much as recognition of the limited progress that psychology as a discipline made in the late 19th century.[1] While the continental tradition of philosophy continued to explore the very complexity of historical being, psychology emerged as a champion of the immediate, causal, elemental, functional capacities of humans as

foundational to their psychic life. And although Wilhelm Wundt, William James and other founding figures of the discipline had some misgivings about the limited nature of the experimental enterprise, subsequent generations did not share these hesitations nor their commitment to a broader conception of human beings whose full expression is found in its capacity to live communally and meaningfully.

Outside the narrow confines of the Anglo-experimental tradition however there have been, with varying degrees of success, multiple candidates for historically relevant psychologies. I will have time to discuss only one, namely, Husserlian phenomenological traditions, but I could add several others, for example the Vygotskian inspired versions of Activity Theory, or many forms of psychoanalysis all of which take seriously the historical constitution of human existence. None of these are momentary academic fashions, nor do they lend themselves to quick and easy summaries. However, they have in common the aim to integrate the natural and the historic considerations under a single psychology and hence serve as a reminder that we have not always been ahistorical in our understanding of human being and naturalistic in our fixations.

Phenomenological Psychology

Philosophical Phenomenology, ironically, began its existence in the conflicts of late 19th century philosophy, and in large measure as a response to the new experimental psychology of Wilhelm Wundt. A conflict between the new experimental psychologists (who were philosophers still) and other philosophers had broken out in the German speaking countries of Europe just prior to World War I. On one side was Wilhelm Wundt and many of his former students. On the other was (among others) Edmund Husserl as one of the founders of the new phenomenological movement who was deeply concerned with psychology even as he tried to argue that phenomenological, that is descriptive psychology, would form the foundations of experimental psychology. Indeed, in the *Logical Investigations* of 1901 Husserl argued, “pure phenomenology represents an area of neutral investigations, an area in which different sciences are rooted. It serves to prepare the ground for *psychology as an empirical science*” (see Kusch, 1995, p. 179).

Wundt responded to Husserl at various points over the next decade and a half, culminating in his book *Die Psychologie im Kampf ums Dasein* (1913). The latter book was in response to a petition, signed by 107 professors of philosophy from Germany, Austria and Switzerland in 1913. It demanded that no more philosophical chairs go to experimental psychologists and was a response to the Ministry of Education's refusal to hire a systematic philosopher in Marburg after having appointed another psychologist instead. Wundt wrote his *Die Psychologie im Kampf ums Dasein* in response to the petition and it constitutes a plea for retaining a close link between psychology and philosophy.

In 1910 already, however, Kusch notes that Wundt had responded to Husserl by accusing the latter of studying not the phenomena of thought “as these were given to consciousness but instead the ‘linguistic form’ of such phenomena of thought” (Kusch, 1995, p. 180).

Furthermore, Wundt argued that these linguistic forms were studied from “the viewpoint of a logical meta-reflection on the results of grammar” (Kusch, p. 180). Ostensibly Wundt would have preferred that the linguistic forms be studied from the perspective of psychology or history, as he would himself do in his *Völkerpsychologie*. In short, Wundt disqualified phenomenology as a foundation for empirical psychology whereas Husserl had clearly advocated the opposite.

Husserl's retort, as reported by Kusch, was like so many critical responses to psychology in the 20th century an attack of the scientism inherent in experimental psychology. Husserl argued that a "science of fact cannot provide the foundation for normative disciplines and that natural science, including psychology was epistemologically naïve" (Kusch, 1995, p. 181). Having neglected the descriptive analysis of consciousness, experimental psychology was unscientific. Husserl argued further that

... experimental psychology relates to original psychology as social statistics relates to original social science. Such statistical research collects valuable facts, and it discovers valuable regularities; but it does both only indirectly. The interpretive understanding and the real explanation of these facts and regularities must come from an original social science, that is from a social science which brings social phenomena to direct givenness and which studies their essence (Husserl, 1911, cited in Kusch, 1995, p. 182).

Furthermore, experimental psychology treated mental objects as if they were physical objects, which, according to Husserl was "pure absurdity" since a "mental phenomenon was a phenomenon and *not* nature" (Husserl, 1911, cited in Kusch, 1995, p. 183).

At the time of his exchange with Wundt however Husserl had already moved towards a notion of phenomenology that was distinct from descriptive psychology. Psychology required a phenomenological analysis for its foundations. Moreover without such a foundation its methods, language and concepts would also be incomplete (Kockelmans, 1967). Instead, we should return to the "things themselves," [*den Sachen selbst*] to "understand by 'experience' and 'thing' that which emerges within a particular experience; it is this experience, in which the 'object' and the 'experience of the object' emerge, that phenomenology [attempted] to describe." Phenomenology chose on Husserl's account a field of original phenomena that are immediately present to consciousness (Kockelmans, 1967, pp. 110-112).

In Husserl's developing thought during the second decade of the 20th century, there emerges the claim that one needs a phenomenological psychology that would bridge the gap between phenomenological philosophy, which was a transcendental science of pure consciousness, and scientific psychology, the natural science of consciousness (Kockelmans, 1967). This phenomenological psychology would be founded on Brentano's descriptive psychology and Dilthey's human science of lived experience. In his book, *Ideas* of 1913 Husserl articulates an Eidetic Psychology, the first of such attempts to provide a bridge between philosophy and scientific psychology. An eidetic science is a science of essences, a pure transcendental phenomenology. "Experiencing, or *intuition of something individual* can become transmuted into *eidetic seeing (ideation)* – a possibility which is itself to be understood not as empirical, but as eidetic. What is seen when that occurs is the corresponding *pure* essence, or Eidos..." (Husserl, 1913/1983, p. 8).

The eidetic reduction then becomes the means of producing an eidetic psychology as a half-way point between empirical psychology and transcendental phenomenology. With intuition and description as the way toward understanding the a priori, Husserl appeared to create a new psychology that he could oppose to the experimental psychology of his day. But this was not merely a philosophic argument. As noted above, in the first decade of the 20th century, leading up to WWI, experimental philosophers – those trained by Wundt – would gradually take away precious chairs in philosophy in German universities. The petition that was signed by 107 professors of philosophy from Germany, Austria and Switzerland in 1913 was an

attempt to stop the assignment of the new psychologist-philosophers, that is, the experimentalists, from usurping all of the chairs in philosophy. By 1913, of the 44 full professorships in philosophy, psychologists held 10 or almost a quarter. Of these, seven were first or second-generation students of Wundt (Kusch, 1995).

Philosophy, which the petitioners claimed was also growing, needed more chairs dedicated to it alone. In short, the petitioners asked that “experimental psychology should therefore be supported only by the establishment of its own professorships, and everywhere where previously philosophical professorships are occupied new chairs of philosophy should be created” (petition, trans. Ash, 1980, p. 408). Others had already complained vociferously about the new psychology, such as Windelband[2] who noted (in Wundt’s paraphrase who is quoting Windelband) that “occasionally someone is thought to be qualified for a philosophical chair as soon as he has learnt to press electric buttons in a methodological way, and as soon as he can numerically prove by means of well-ordered and tabulated series of experiments that some people get ideas more quickly than others” (Wundt 1913, trans. Kusch 1995, pp. 193-194).

Wundt, who was 80 at the time, was among the first of the psychologists to respond to the critics (Kusch, 1995). He argued both against the desire to remove psychology from philosophy and the removal of philosophy from psychology. Indeed, he remarked that experimental psychology was hardly all of psychology, arguing that the critics had forgotten his by then partially completed volumes of the *Völkerpsychologie*, and that there was no need to specialize as either an experimentalist or philosopher, it was possible to do both. His major worry was that the split would turn experimental psychologists into mere artisans when the most important psychological questions were closely linked to epistemology and metaphysics (Kusch 195, p. 196). His concern, as he looked across the Atlantic, was that an independent psychology might become an altogether applied discipline.

Without wishing to reduce this to a problem in the sociology of knowledge[3], it is crucial to appreciate that the conflict concerned nascent ideas among what would become two of the more powerful trends in 20th century thought: experimental psychology and phenomenology. Indeed, the very question being debated was just how one ought to further the project of understanding human nature, through the means of a science of experimentation on the one hand or through the apriori conditions laid out in the eidetic and apodictic science of phenomenology on the other hand. Indeed, the very nature of consciousness and experience were foundational to this struggle, emerging at a time when a third alternative was already making itself felt on the horizon: psychoanalysis.

Only experimental psychology was an ahistorical natural science of the mind, or so it claimed. And it too would rapidly succumb to further mechanistic interventions. It sought to specify just what one could know about human nature and activity through the precise conditions of experimentation. Phenomenological psychology, although vague in outline and unclear in its relationship to phenomenological philosophy, attempted to create out of sheer experience the historical conditions of its own understanding.

War, as it often is, was the deciding factor in this debate. Both psychologists and philosophers in Germany suspended their disagreements and supported the German war effort. After the war, Husserl was viewed as essentially right about the status of psychology and psychology’s involvement in applied projects during the war ensured its separation from philosophy thereafter. In the chaos of Weimar Germany, with its hyper-inflation and the now

impoverished conditions under which academics had to labor, notions of crisis were predominant (Kusch, 1995). The *Lebensphilosophie* that emerged was a philosophy of experience, and Husserl was easily one of its most prominent spokespersons. Husserl was also, prior to WWI, a relatively minor figure in German philosophy and had to compete with the neo-Kantians for attention. After the war however, argues Kusch, both the neo-Kantians (such as Rickert) and the experimental philosophers (the psychologists) went into decline in philosophy departments. Wundt was clearly out of favor and the rapid ascension of Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger represented the new, the philosophy of life. But phenomenology was not a strict school, as Scheler and Heidegger readily adopted the label for themselves even as they rejected Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Rather than a school, the new phenomenologists claimed for it the status of an attitude as Scheler argued, "a new *techné* of the seeing consciousness" (cited in Kusch, 1995, p. 256). It also made the transition to the French phenomenologists and existentialists, particularly that of Merleau-Ponty, relatively easy.

Before the next war, phenomenology had put down deep roots in France and Belgium and the northern countries such as the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and Germany. In addition, the possibility of an alternative, phenomenological psychology had manifested itself in many of these countries. Instead of a phenomenology, psychology itself took, in some locales, a phenomenological turn. For a brief period after World War II a rigorous empirical phenomenological psychology took root, driven in part by the gap left in university curricula at the end of the war and the time it took before American educated psychologists returned home from their studies in the US and brought with them the new behavioral psychologies (van Hezewijk & Stam, 2008).

Hence in mid-century, there were at least two clear possibilities for psychology, representing two distinct views of human nature. The one scientific, by then thoroughly behavioral and technical, adopted on the promise of a science whose future appeared bright. It staked its claim on developing knowledge of human activity that was outside the subject's awareness. The other was experiential, existential, or committed to a new analysis of consciousness and meanings, ethics and life. It crossed over into neighboring disciplines, borrowed heavily from art and literature and even from physiology and biology. Its focus was the meaning-making person at the center of the knowledge of human being. Merleau-Ponty notes in *The structure of behavior*, (Merleau-Ponty, 1942/1963, p. 224) after a lengthy critique of all that counted as behavioral and reflex psychology in the first half of the 20th century, that "the natural 'thing,' the organism, the behavior of others and my own behavior exist only by their meaning; but this meaning which springs forth in them is not yet a Kantian object; the intentional life which constitutes them is not yet a representation; and the 'comprehension' which gives access to them is not yet an intellection."

Here then was one way in which a historical ontology was embedded in a way of doing psychology. There were, to be sure, serious questions about this form of psychology. It suffered not only from a certain lack of clarity about its subject matter but also a lack of proper methods to proceed. Nonetheless it took seriously the fact that the historicization of the life-world was an inherent feature of experience and hence consciousness could not be articulated without it.

Let me end with a brief reference back to Danziger's 1994 paper "Does the history of psychology have a future?" In it he argued that,

The demonstration that psychology's investigative practices are historically contingent products reflecting a limited set of knowledge interests . . . may contribute to the break-up of the discipline's methodological gridlock. Historical studies can also provide access to alternative ways of conceptualizing the procedures and the subject-matter of psychology. If nothing else, historical inquiry can serve to [citing Gergen, 1991] 'challenge the taken for granted and objectified realities of the present' (Danziger, 1994, p. 480).

I have no illusions about the impact and nature of a historical psychology on what we nominally call the mainstream. But let's be clear-human inquiry cannot do without either. Everywhere we turn in the human sciences there are deeply historical studies of a psychological nature: on the self, personhood, our capacities to know, sense and feel, and so on. And there is a good reason for this. In our attempts to navigate a post-industrial world whose human landscape seems ever more uncertain, historically constituted beings like ourselves turn to a past to seek what we are as moral beings. No naturalized psychology, no matter how sophisticated, can ever provide a firm grasp on such a question.

References

- Ash, M. (1980). Wilhelm Wundt and Oswald Külpe on the institutional status of psychology: An academic controversy in historical context. In W. G. Bringmann & R.D. Tweney (Eds.), *Wundt studies: A centennial collection*, pp. 396-421. Toronto: Hogrefe.
- Danziger, K. (1994). Does the history of psychology have a future? *Theory & Psychology*, 4, 467-484.
- Danziger, K. (1997). *Naming the mind: How psychology found its language*. London: Sage.
- Danziger, K. (2003). Prospects of a historical psychology. Downloaded from <http://www.kurtdanziger.com/Paper%2011.pdf>, June 9, 2011.
- Danziger, K. (2008). *Marking the mind: A history of memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hegel, G. (2007). *The philosophy of history*. New York, Cosimo. (Original published 1899)
- Heidegger, M. (1953/1996). *Being and time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy*, F. Kersten, trans. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff (Original published 1913)
- Kockelmans, J.J. (1967). *A first introduction to Husserl's phenomenology*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Kusch, M. (1995). *Psychologism: A case study in the sociology of philosophical knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1942). *The structure of behavior*, A.L. Fisher (trans.), Boston: Beacon Press. (Original published 1963)

van Hezewijk, R. & Stam, H. J. (2008). Idols of the psychologist: Johannes Linschoten and the demise of phenomenological psychology in the Netherlands. *History of Psychology, 11*, 185-207.

Wundt, W. (1913). *Die Psychologie im Kampf ums Dasein*, 2nd edition. Downloaded from <http://philosophiebuch.de/wundtpsy.htm>, June 9, 2011.

Notes

[1] Progress in psychology in general has been a controversial topic among historians and critics of the discipline. The major fault lines of this debate lie in a disagreement over the extent, if any, of progress when contrasted with progress in the traditional, established sciences. However, this broader debate is not of concern here.

[2] Martin Kusch (1995) argues that this is Windelband. The quote appears in Wundt (1913).

[3] And indeed, Martin Kusch (1995) does exactly that