

## On Historical Scholarship: A Reply To Dehue

---

**Kurt Danziger**

YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO

**ABSTRACT.** In her comment, Dehue (1990) advocates and practices the occasional, rather than the principled, use of contextualism in historical studies. However, I regard contextualism as a regulative principle of such studies which applies to the historian as well as to the subject matter. Because historical studies are themselves historically situated, Dehue's 'symmetrical contextualism' must remain an illusion.

**KEY WORDS:** historiography, history, psychology, science

Discussion of this topic is coming perilously close to exceeding decent lengths, so I will restrict my comments to Dehue's characterization of the difference between our conceptions of how to approach the historical study of psychology. Baldly stated, she prefers her own 'symmetrical contextualism' in historical studies to the asymmetric contextualism which she imputes to me.

First, a word about contextualism. At the very least, this refers to a regulative principle that distinguishes a historical approach from that of the antiquarian, the chronicler, the praise singer, and so on. Contextualism means seeing human actors in their historical setting and accounting for their actions in terms of that setting. Different varieties of contextualism might go on to make additional assumptions about the relative importance of various features of historical settings, but they share a commitment to seek out such features.

Dehue's 'conclusion' provides a good example of what contextualism is not. She offers an explanation of scientists' responses to historical studies in terms of various factors: the scientists' historical ignorance, the irrelevance of such studies to current concerns, the interpretive nature of such studies. No one is likely to doubt that these are real factors. But is their identification acceptable as the conclusion of a quest for historical understanding? Do we stop researching and thinking once we have enumerated factors of this kind? I think not. Should we not go on to ask a few questions?

For instance, scientists' historical ignorance is a highly selective ignorance and one ought to inquire into the reasons for it. If one does, one finds that it is tied up with the priorities of psychological training, preconceptions about the nature of psychology and its subject matter, and so on, all of which emerged historically. As one pursues this inquiry one begins to be able to contextualize one's original observation; one can see the psychologists' response in terms of its historical setting. It is precisely through such an analysis that it emerges as a 'justifiable' response.

The same principle applies to the other factors mentioned by Dehue, and indeed to any factors of that kind. Thus, faced with a response of 'irrelevant to present-day

issues', does one leave it at that or does one probe further to ask questions about historically evolving criteria of relevance, ways of relating past and present, and so on? In my 1994 analysis these questions were given some prominence precisely because I was looking for the framework within which reactions like the 'irrelevance' response would be justifiable and not unreasonable. Similarly, the characterization of historical studies as 'interpretive'—with the implied claim that experimental studies are not—should raise questions about the origin of such distinctions and their function in the ongoing business of science.

In sum, I am not sympathetic to the *occasional* contextualism that Dehue appears to favour. If one is serious about exploring scientific developments in their historical setting, one should not switch one's questioning on and off as the comfort level fluctuates. We all have to start with the surface of events, and we can choose whether or not to probe further. Contextualists make it a rule to probe further whenever possible. Not that 'jubilees' are to be shunned at all times. Everyone deserves a party now and then. But I would rather prefer to be an occasional party-goer than an occasional contextualist.

More seriously, occasional contextualists have the problem of deciding when to question and when not to question. Leaving aside pure opportunism and personal whim, where is one to get the criteria that might guide such a basic decision? The answer to that question depends on where researchers place themselves with respect to the historical process they are investigating. Are they part of that process or are they entirely outside it? In either case their position will supply the criteria they need, but they will be different criteria. Or, to put the question in a slightly different way, does contextualization apply to historical researchers themselves, or is it something to be applied only to the objects they study?

This is the question of *symmetry* which Dehue has raised, though in a more limited sense. She applies it only to the equitable treatment of different aspects of the historical object, but not to the historian. Thus, she chides me for contextualizing only mainstream psychology and not non-mainstream psychology, although a glance at my original paper (Danziger, 1994) will show that I actually devoted more space to the latter than the former. But although Dehue's specific use of the asymmetry question may be inappropriate, she is on the track of a rather profound issue in raising this question at all. There is a sense in which my understanding of historical contextualism does involve a kind of asymmetry. But it is an asymmetry that derives primarily from the contextualization of the historian, not that of his or her subject matter.

The fundamental issue I sought to identify in my original contribution to this discussion concerned the *situatedness* of historical studies. No matter how hard one tries, one cannot step outside history in order to write about it. Every historian occupies a particular place in a historical world and can only describe the historical process as it appears from the perspective afforded by that place. In more specific terms, the vision one gets from inside a historical phenomenon, like successful laboratory experimentalism, is different from the vision one gets from outside that location and inside another one—some variety of feminism, for example. Moreover, none of the platforms from which history may be viewed is itself stable. In due course, they will all be changed by history, so that a point of view that seemed clear enough in the past may no longer be available today. That is why history will always be rewritten.

In my 1994 article I described some of the salient features of histories of psychology constructed from perspectives that have been influential in the past and pointed to locations that might afford different points of view in the future. What I did not do was to advocate a stance that would oblige one to situate oneself outside history in order to be able to see without any limitation of perspective. Such a 'view from nowhere' is not vouchsafed to mere mortals; it is reserved for gods—or to positivists in their own estimation. One can pretend to such a view only by recourse to what Donna Haraway (1991) quite appropriately calls 'god tricks', discursive devices that help to construct the illusion of the totally impartial observer. In other words, we cannot avoid being partial, we can only avoid owning up to it.

The contextualist orientation, which Dehue and I share up to a point, recognizes the situatedness of historical knowledge. Where we seem to differ is in our readiness to accept the reflexive implications of this position. The even-handed practice of what Dehue calls 'symmetric contextualism' would be possible only for someone able to step outside all historical entanglements. But that would mean asserting the situatedness of all historical knowledge except one's own. If this is not where we want to end up, then there really is no alternative to accepting the historical grounding of one's own point of view. That means accepting the partiality which is entailed by such grounding. As long as we are obliged to look at events from some place rather than no place there will be an irreducible element of what Dehue calls 'asymmetry' in our representations. 'Knowledge is necessarily produced through partial perspectives' (Biagioli, 1996, p. 194).

What implications does this have for standards of scholarship in the history of science? Do these standards suffer? Quite the opposite, I think. As long as no one has found a way of eliminating interpretation, eliminating a situated point of view, from scholarly practice, the first, essential, requirement of good scholarship is surely the recognition of the location from which it is practiced. The greatest obstacles to good scholarship are to be found in the 'god tricks' that serve to hide and obscure the necessary partiality involved in knowledge production. Being unaware of one's biases is hardly a guarantee of good scholarship, whether in the experimental or the historical sciences.

## References

- Biagioli, M. (1996). From relativism to contingentism. In P. Galison & D.J. Stump (Eds.), *The disunity of science: Boundaries, contexts, and power* (pp. 189–206). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Danziger, K. (1994). Does the history of psychology have a future? *Theory & Psychology*, 4, 467–484.
- Dehue, T. (1998). Community historians and the dilemma of rigor vs relevance: A comment on Danziger and Van Rappard. *Theory & Psychology*, 8, 653–661.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs and women: The reinvention of nature*. New York: Routledge.

KURT DANZIGER is Professor Emeritus at York University, Toronto. His most recent books are *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found its Language* (Sage, 1997) and *Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). ADDRESS: 32 Greengate Road, Don Mills, Ontario M3B 1E8, Canada. [email: kdanzig@yorku.ca]