

Prospects of a Historical Psychology (2003)

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Abstract: The project of a historical psychology must be distinguished from the history of psychology and from psychohistory. Unlike the latter, it conflicts with the assumption that what psychology studies is an ahistorical human nature. Although human psychology is deeply historical the discipline of psychology bears the imprint of its relatively recent origin. Historical psychology does not address an imaginary unity but explores the transformations of specific objects posited in discourse and targeted by intervening practices. Memory is taken as an example of such an object, some of its most salient features having been subject to historical change. Its history illuminates the background of current priorities.

Introduction

Some years ago I wrote a paper whose title asked the question: “Does the History of Psychology have a Future?” (Danziger, 1994). That question provoked a certain amount of controversy, as I had rather hoped it would. Today I would like to begin by asking a somewhat related question, namely: Does historical psychology have a future? This time I am really going out on a limb. Whereas the history of psychology is at least a recognized, if marginal, topic within the discipline, historical psychology has usually been regarded as being quite beyond the pale for any self-respecting psychologist.

At least, that is the state of affairs in North America, where this year marks the thirtieth anniversary of Ken Gergen’s (1973) plea for a historical social psychology, a plea that has been cited an enormous number of times, but that has never, as far as I am aware, led to any actual research in the field. The edited book on historical psychology (Gergen & Gergen, 1984), which followed a decade later, fell on the same stony ground. In Europe, on the other hand, the mutual isolation of psychology and history has been less extreme and psychologists have not left the field of historical psychology left entirely to historians (see Peeters et al, 1988; Scribner, 1985; Sonntag, and Jüttemann, 1993).

On the whole though, the prospects for historical psychology seem rather bleak, to say the least. It is my view, however, that this bleakness is not quite deserved, that in our wholesale neglect of this field we may have thrown out the baby with the bath water. In other words, I think that, though the project of a historical psychology is undoubtedly problematic, there are certain kinds of historical studies that are quite capable of making a contribution to the discipline of psychology and should be pursued by psychologists.

I will develop my argument in two parts. In the first part I want to look at reasons for the exclusion of historical psychology. I am quite sympathetic to some of these reasons, and I will advance some considerations for avoiding the pitfalls that have beset the field in the past. In the second part I want to discuss the possible relevance of historical psychology for contemporary psychological work. To do this I will draw on my own studies of the history of memory.

But before I go any further, I should explain that by historical psychology I do not mean psychohistory, a field dedicated to the interpretation of historical events, often the lives of particular individuals, in light of current psychological theories. Erikson's (1958, 1969) classical studies of Luther and Gandhi would be examples. Psychohistory assumes the universal, trans-historical validity of some contemporary psychological concepts, perhaps the concepts of psychoanalysis or some other system. Historical psychology, on the other hand, would try to question contemporary psychological concepts in the light of historical evidence.

Reasons and Remedies for the Marginalization of Historical Psychology

There is little doubt that most psychologists, and probably most historians, feel that anything like historical psychology is the business of history, not of psychology. People trained as psychologists are not equipped to handle historical evidence and should stay away from it. There is much to be said for this argument, and undoubtedly much of the primary research will continue to be done by historians. But this does not provide a valid reason for psychologists' *ignoring* of historical information. Consider an analogous case: Psychologists usually leave the technical conduct of neurophysiological investigations to physiologists, but no one would conclude from this that they should therefore ignore neurophysiological information. This unequal treatment of history and physiology suggests that there is more involved than merely the principle of maintaining a strict segregation between disciplines.

If disciplinary boundaries have to be rigorously protected against *historical* incursions, whereas smuggling up to neurophysiology is treated with indulgence, the implication is that psychology has a much greater affinity for some disciplines than for others. Where psychology is counted among the natural sciences information from related natural sciences will be regarded as more relevant to its concerns than information from a human science like history.

Whether we define psychology as a natural, a social, a human, or a historical science has implications for the way we regard its subject matter, or, to use a more accurate term, its objects of investigation. A natural science investigates natural objects, that is, objects regarded as part of the natural order, objects whose characteristics conform to universal regularities and whose properties are independent of human beliefs and practices. Insofar as psychology is defined as a natural science the assumption is that its objects are of this type, and that means they are essentially unaffected by human history.

Regarded as a working hypothesis this position is not altogether unacceptable. In practice, however, it has not been treated as a hypothesis but as something that is self-evidently true and beyond question. To a very large extent psychology *has* investigated its subject matter as though it belonged to an ahistorical human nature. This may have produced results, but the assumption of ahistorical validity remains only an assumption until it is tested against relevant evidence. The relevant evidence in this case would have to be historical, and that leads one straight to the subject matter of historical psychology. In other words, the scientific grounding of the belief that historical psychology is redundant would itself require evidence from historical psychology. This does not appear to offer a sound basis for rejecting the field.

In Europe, and especially in Britain, skepticism about the prospects of historical psychology has taken an altogether different form. There is no rejection of the entire field because of a belief in the natural, ahistorical, nature of psychological processes, but there are worries that the field is unmanageable, that it has no clear boundaries, that there are no acceptable criteria by which one might define its subject matter (Richards, 1987; Smith, 1988). These kinds of concerns are based on the conviction that matters psychological are in fact deeply historical, in other words, a position that is exactly the opposite of experimentalist ahistoricism. But if one believes in the deep historicity of psychology one faces the dilemma that, in one sense, almost everything in human history pertains to psychology, yet, in another sense, almost nothing does, except during the last century or two. Psychology's status as a natural science, and hence its commitment to certain methodologies, impose fairly clear limits on its territory. But if we were to drop these restrictions and regard all the historical expressions of human nature as fair game, then historical psychology would certainly become a field without boundaries and without discipline.

It is also argued that the discipline of psychology is itself a historical formation, a way of regarding the world and a way of acting that is a product of a particular historical context, and a relatively recent one at that. If that is so, then we are not entitled to inflict this modern psychological perspective on times when it did not exist. Doing so would amount to a distortion of the historical facts. But in that case historical psychology lacks legitimacy if it is pursued beyond the most recent period of human history.

If one accepts that such arguments should not be lightly dismissed, and I do, does that spell the death knell of anything like a historical psychology? If one does not wish to flounder in a field that is totally amorphous, nor end up as a crude presentist, are there any lines of work that might constitute an acceptable form of historical psychology? My answer is a cautious yes because I believe that the implications of the critique need not be entirely negative.

In the first place, one must not expect historical psychology to be a unified field: no grand schemes for the social evolution of the human mind à la Wundt (1912), nor problematic constructions of cultural history, such as the unique "mentalities" attributed to different ages by some historians (Lloyd, 1990). I see the field rather as a collection of studies tracing the historical background of specific psychological objects.

There are areas where this approach to historical psychology has been relatively successful, child development and abnormal psychology in particular. A considerable literature on "the history of childhood", some of it contributed by psychologists, has used historical evidence to probe the universal validity of concepts developed in the context of contemporary realities, including of course the contemporary understanding of the concept of childhood itself (see e.g. Kessel and Siegel, 1983; James and Prout, 1990; Niestroy-Kutzner, 1996). In the field of abnormal psychology there are many relevant studies in the history of psychiatric diagnosis, including hysteria (Micale, 1995), schizophrenia (Boyle, 1990), post-traumatic stress disorder (Young, 1995), multiple personality (Hacking, 1995), and many other conditions (Peeters, 1996; Borch-Jacobsen, 2001). Useful studies have also been devoted to the historicity of categories of human emotion (Harré, 1987; Stearns & Stearns, 1988).

These kinds of investigation avoid becoming bogged down in a field without boundaries by limiting themselves to the history of specific psychological categories taken from current psychological practice. The historicity of these categories is then explored by tracing their antecedents. The metaphor of genealogy (Foucault, 1977) nicely expresses the simultaneous attention to historical continuity and discontinuity which characterizes these studies. A genealogy traces intergenerational continuity, but this continuity implies anything but intergenerational identity. Each generation is unique though tied to the others by a historical bond.

Viable studies in historical psychology also tend to be non-Cartesian, that is, their subject matter is treated as neither part of the natural world nor a matter of subjective experience. These studies are concerned rather with discursive objects not found in the natural world but constructed by humans through the use of language and other semiotic devices. Psychological categories have a human history only as discursive objects and as markers defining the targets of human social practices.

For example, in my own recent work I have been concerned with the history of a venerable psychological object, namely memory. Discussions of the nature of memory go back to the philosophy of Ancient Greece and a readily identifiable corpus of writings on memory extends from those early times to the present. Those texts provide a basis for the development of a historical psychology of “memory” as long as we do not expect them to tell us more than they are capable of telling us. They cannot, for example, tell us about the subjective experience of people who lived a long time ago, as some early versions of historical psychology claimed. As long as we restrict ourselves to the material and discursive practices involved in the production of textual evidence we are on relatively firm ground. What texts offer the historical psychologist are discursive realities. The history of these is neither a history of natural objects, nor a history of subjectivities, but a history of discursive objects.

Historical Psychology and Current Psychological Research

I now want to address the question of whether historical psychology has anything to contribute to contemporary psychological research. Many psychologists might well agree that historical psychology is a legitimate field of scholarly interest though they would see it as a field without the slightest relevance for current work in psychology. This assumes that the break between scientific and pre-scientific psychology is absolute. But this is simply untrue.

For example, a juxtaposition of the modern and the ancient literature on memory reveals an amazing continuity in explanations of how memory works. From Plato to theories of information processing these explanations have relied heavily on the metaphor of storage (Carruthers, 1990; Danziger, 2002). In trying to understand how they were able to recall things they learned or experienced in the past people have always made use of analogies from storage devices, especially information storage devices, with which they were familiar, from wax tablets to books and libraries to computers. That metaphor has played a major role in theories about memory right up to the present is uncontroversial. Prominent memory researchers have explicitly recognized this (e.g. Roediger, 1980) and a few years ago metaphors of memory were even a subject for extended discussion and comment in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (Koriat &

Goldsmith, 1996). But memory is probably not a special case, and antique metaphors are likely to have played an equally important role in other areas of psychology (Leary, 1990).

However, historical continuity operates not only on the level of ideas and concepts, but also on the level of practice. Psychological practices, including research practices in particular, do not exist in some hyperrational space outside of culture. No, they are very strongly influenced by the culture in which they arose and the culture which maintains them in being. These cultures have historical roots, which means that psychological practices have historical roots.

To go back to memory, we note that since ancient times people have not only theorized about its nature, they have also tried to intervene in its operations. For more than two thousand years there have been systems of memory improvement or mnemonics, and in times when external memory aids were far less adequate than they are today these systems were accorded far greater respect than we accord them today. Systems of memory improvement have been described and discussed for many centuries. Traditionally, a distinction was made between *artificial memory*, which was memory operating with the help of deliberate mnemonic procedures and *natural memory*, which was memory operating without these aids.

Mnemonic procedures and the experimental procedures of memory research have something in common in that both employ deliberate, planned interventions in the spontaneous operations of memory. Where they differ is in the primary purpose of these interventions – practical improvement in the case of mnemonics and better knowledge of the nature of memory in the case of research. This obvious difference in purpose entails obvious differences in the process of intervention. However, one cannot intervene in the spontaneous operations of memory in the abstract. One can theorize about memory in the abstract, but in practice, whether in an experiment or in a course of memory improvement, one is obliged to make use of one or other kind of content: word lists, rhymes, stories, pictures of faces, or whatever. The choice of content is potentially unlimited, so it makes sense to ask why one kind of content is chosen rather than another. Many factors are at work here, including considerations of technical feasibility and convenience. But typically these technicalities only enter the picture after the field of options has already been narrowed down by other factors. One of these is tradition. Those who intervene in the operations of memory typically do not do so in isolation. They either belong to a community of scientific investigators who all use similar kinds of content, for example, nonsense syllables or word lists; or they are part of a collection of experts on mnemonics who, historical evidence tells us, have copied from one another since time immemorial.

In both cases the force of tradition imposes a certain inertia when it comes to the choice of content for improving either memory itself or knowledge about memory. But traditions are not unchangeable. Eventually, nonsense syllables lost their popularity and, over a much longer time span, the content of mnemonic systems changed too. No doubt, both continuity and discontinuity in practices of memory intervention depend to some extent on simple pragmatic factors. For example, both nonsense syllables and certain mnemonic procedures were abandoned because it gradually became clear that they just didn't do what they were supposed to do – eliminate meaning in the case of nonsense syllables. But this is not the whole story. The content on which memory intervention procedures rely is not culturally neutral, and for that reason, if for no other, it is liable to be affected by broader cultural changes.

For example, a striking feature of the first century of scientific memory research was the ubiquitous use of *verbal* stimulus material. Towards the end of that period memory for other kinds of material gradually came in for more attention, but in the words of one researcher, “up until the early 1960s, students of memory had been resolutely and single-mindedly concerned with verbal materials” (Snodgrass, 1997, p.202; see also Bower, 2000, p.25). Why was this? In answering this question it is hardly possible to overlook the fact that the concentration on verbal materials was established at the very beginning of memory research and became a tradition that later investigators could not ignore. They needed to link their work to previous work in the field, and that meant using verbal materials, unless they were prepared to launch a far reaching critique of the whole approach, which did eventually happen, though with only partial success.

But how was this fixation on verbal memory able to flourish in the first place? Here broader cultural and historical factors become relevant. For example, it is significant that a concentration on verbal materials was already a feature of the mnemonic systems that were popular around the time experimental memory research made its appearance. In this respect there was a certain continuity between the mnemonic and the experimental way of intervening in spontaneous memory processes. Both were primarily interested in verbal memory and relied on materials that were most often verbal in type.

A historical psychologist would want to pursue this matter further. Mnemonics, as I have mentioned, has a long history, and one does not have to go too far back to find that the focus on verbal memory is historically a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, verbal memory, though clearly recognized as a specific form of memory, was generally downgraded in the classical texts on what was known as “the art of memory”. That only began to change in the eighteenth century. In earlier times there was far more emphasis on the mnemonic importance of imagery and of spatial relationships than on verbal mnemonics. When one adopts a wider historical perspective, one has to face the possibility that the verbal bias of much modern memory research may be essentially a continuation of a long term trend in the cultural meaning of memory. By opening up this kind of perspective historical psychology could help to counter the effects of cultural-historical bias on the direction of empirical research. In areas like memory, historical studies can draw attention to potentially interesting aspects that have been neglected, excluded, or rendered invisible by current fashion.

Let me cite another example. As I have indicated, cultural-historical bias invades experimental research through the medium of the materials used to study one or other psychological domain. In the case of memory research there is one feature that is even more pervasive than the use of verbal content and that shows little sign of being on the way out. I am referring to the use of printed stimulus materials. When such materials are used it means that the memory being studied is memory for content that has been given a lasting form by a process of inscription. This means that there is always a definitive version against which anyone’s memory performance can be compared. This is the kind of memory that is paramount in educational and scientific contexts but in many everyday situations memory cannot possibly work like that. When two of us remember a common experience that was not recorded we may or may not agree on what really happened, but the question of memory accuracy cannot be decided by reference to a definitive version because there isn’t one. Memory then operates in a different way, becoming an

intrinsically social rather than an individual performance, perhaps through the co-construction of an agreed upon version (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

In preliterate societies this is the way all memory must operate, and among illiterate people this must surely remain the dominant form of memory. But until relatively recent historical times there were no societies in which the majority of the population was not illiterate, and even now, of course, a large part of the world's population remains in that state. Remembering information recorded in a definitive text and remembering unrecorded information have coexisted for many centuries. But their relative valuation has changed. Plato, for example, was quite derisive about the value of remembering written texts, and in Roman times the whole topic of mnemonics was subsumed under the study of rhetoric, that is, memory improvement was assumed to be in the service of public speaking. That began to change in the Middle Ages when accurate memory of holy and then legal texts was highly prized. With the spread of printing and secular education accurate remembering of all kinds of texts became increasingly important. A new, largely verbal, mnemonics supervened whose aim it was to facilitate the accurate regurgitation of itemized factual information recorded in printed sources. This very special form of memory became the ideal and was increasingly equated with memory as such. That provided the cultural context in which the earlier psychology of memory developed and from which it derived its unspoken presuppositions. By offering an insight into the historical contextualization of particular research approaches a historical psychology, for instance of memory, should provide an antidote to the common vice of substituting one part of a psychological domain for the whole.

One final example of the relevance of a historical psychology of memory for current work: Most psychological studies of memory, and particularly neuropsychological studies, appear to be designed and interpreted as though the seat of memory were entirely within the individual. Yet everyone knows that this is not true. Not only is remembering an activity that is frequently performed in concert with others, but it also depends on the information that is stored in things, in books, filing cabinets, computer memories, and so on. Effective remembering is often the product of a system that includes both objects and humans as its components. Historical studies are useful adjuncts to the study of such systems because they provide evidence of relationships between internal and external memory that are no longer available for inspection today. It can be shown, for example, that historical developments in the display and arrangement of written material on a page served mnemonic functions. There was constant interaction between the technology of external memory and the way people used the memory in their heads.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a general observation: The prospects for a viable historical psychology ultimately depend on an end to the unhealthy division between the disciplines of psychology and history, a division that reflects the opposition between two sets of prejudices, those of naturalism and of historicism. Naturalism naively assumes that any entity which happens to be the target of current psychological research, theory or intervention must be a natural phenomenon that has always been there waiting to be discovered. Naturalism goes hand in hand with presentism which essentially junks history and values it only insofar as anticipations of the present can be read into it. Historicism, on the contrary, insists on taking the past on its own terms and emphasizes the

discontinuities between past and present. Therefore it would limit the history of psychology to the modern period of scientific psychology.

It is possible, however, to steer a course between presentism and historicism without suffering shipwreck. Presently existing psychological objects must provide a base from which historical inquiry departs and to which it returns. But the present is not privileged in other ways. It does not represent the final truth but simply another point in a temporal order that guarantees its imminent obsolescence. Instead of judging the past in the light of the present historical psychology needs to interpret the present in the light of the past. It then becomes, in Foucault's famous phrase, a history of the present.

Many of the objects which modern psychology targets and investigates did not emerge *de novo* when the first psychological laboratories were founded. Their pre-scientific history opens up questions which are not being asked though they should be asked. For example, were there historical changes in the operation of human memory, and if so, what were the factors involved in such changes? That is the kind of question which, though important and legitimate, is likely to vanish in the deep gap that currently exists between the disciplines of history and psychology. It is however exactly the kind of question that would fall within the province of historical psychology if we had one.

NOTE

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