

## The Historiography of Psychological Objects (2001)

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**Abstract:** An interest in the analysis of theories and concepts, implicitly accepted as discursive products, was already apparent at the early meetings of the European Society for the History of the Human Sciences. Becoming more explicit about this approach leads to an examination of the notion of discursive objects and the problematic notion of history without a subject. If a kind of discourse idealism is to be avoided an analytic distinction between discursive objects, human interests and social practices must be preserved. It is suggested that in the future more attention should be paid to diachronic studies of investigative practices and to the “epistemic objects” that result from these practices. The recent metaphorical use of “biography” in connection with diachronic studies of scientific objects has already proved fruitful. This is illustrated with some examples from the history of the concept of memory.

Two decades have elapsed since the first meeting of this Society. What kinds of topic were addressed at its early meetings? A glance at the *Proceedings* of the first three meetings (Bem et al, 1983-85) shows that questions of historiography were important for a significant number of contributors. This was only to be expected.

Even more frequently, however, the papers presented at our meetings focused on a particular theoretical system, or more often, on a specific concept to be found in the writings of an identified historical figure, or occasionally, a number of figures. Examples from the first Amsterdam meeting would be a talk by Sandie Lovie on “Images of Man in Early Factor Analysis”, a contribution by Sybe Terwee on William James’ conception of emotion, or Willem van Hoorn on “Freud’s two Definitions of Instinct”. By my count this kind of contribution accounted for nearly 30% of all contributions during the first three years. It was the clear favourite and perhaps has remained so. Let us call this content category “conceptual analysis”.

This is of course a very broad category. At least two variants of this approach can be distinguished. In the one case the focus of the analysis is on a set of interrelated concepts, a theoretical system, in the other case the focus is on a particular concept, for instance emotion, instinct, violence, youth, social influence, or subjectivity. I would like to explore some ways in which this second kind of conceptual analysis might be developed in the future.

But before I do that I want to make an observation that is so obvious that it is usually treated as something that goes without saying. Yet it is precisely the things that go without saying which often hide truths that are crucial for understanding human practices. For the practice of conceptual analysis one crucial observation that must be made is that it invariably deals with texts, that is, a discursive reality. Most of the texts that formed the basis for conference contributions of the type I am talking about were published texts, that is to say, representations in the public domain. Whatever the private thoughts of the authors of these texts, the content we encounter and analyse is not the content of these private thoughts but the content of public documents. Some of us may want to speculate about authors’ private thoughts on the basis of

what these authors have put on paper, but that is always a further step whose riskiness stands in sharp contrast to the certainty we have about the textual basis of our evidence.

Unpublished manuscripts, and even private documents like notes and letters, are of course subject to the same observation. Whatever we find there is based on discursive forms that preceded any intervention by a particular author. The very notion of a novel contribution implies the existence of a prior discursive reality in terms of which such novelty is defined.

All this is hardly news to people who attend ESHHS meetings. But I think it is sometimes useful to restate the obvious in order to draw attention to the common ground on which most of us stand even while looking out in different directions. I also think it is helpful when explicit recognition of this common ground is reflected in one's terminology. Traditionally, the things to which conceptual analysis has been applied have been given various names. They have been called theories, concepts, categories, ideas, to mention only a few popular examples. The differences between these kinds of things are seldom addressed, and when they are addressed, the answers tend to be idiosyncratic. This does not mean that there are no distinctions to be made; there certainly are. But for a consideration of historiographic issues such distinctions are secondary to a primary recognition of something that all these things have in common. They are all discursive objects. They are objects that have an independent existence in a discursive domain shared by numerous subjects. As such – and this is a crucial point – they have a history of their own which is quite different from the history of any individual author who may have played a part in their history. A particular author's text on instinct, on emotion, on youth, on violence, and so on, may be part of that author's intellectual biography, but it is also part of the history of a certain discursive object which began before this author's intervention and continued after it. This second history is a history of objects, not a history of subjects.

As far as I can see, this kind of history was not yet on the agenda during our first meeting in 1982. Concepts were generally analysed as authorial achievements, not as stations in the history of discursive objects. But by the second meeting, a year later, the new history seems to have made its entry. Roger Smith's talk on 'Inhibition' in the nineteenth century provided a splendid example of the new approach (see Smith, 1992) and some other contributions showed a distinct tendency in this direction. There were probably a number of reasons for this relatively late appearance of a history of discursive objects, but I suspect one of these reasons involves a reaction against the positivist historiography characterising much of the older disciplinary history of psychology. That history had been concerned with objects, though these were never understood as discursive objects but as natural objects. It was taken for granted that the constructed categories within which psychologists conducted their research, categories like motivation, intelligence, and personality, corresponded to objective divisions in the natural world. The historically contingent character of such divisions was not recognized. Therefore, the history of psychology could never include the history of its objects; these were timeless, though their appearance was covered by a veil. This meant that history became an account of the discoveries and errors made by individuals as they sought to unveil the true essence of the natural objects that were the focus of their investigations.

By the time of our first meeting in 1982 this model had already been largely discredited, at least among those who were interested in the prospects of a Society that was not hampered by any

disciplinary ties, be they institutional or ideological. So among the contributions at our early meetings there were virtually none that followed the old model. Instead, we got several contributions whose analysis of specific concepts in the human sciences clearly indicated their constructed and historically contingent nature. No one could have been left in any doubt that at these meetings historical analysis would focus on discursive realities rather than on discoveries about the natural world.

To recapitulate, the two topics whose early prominence gave a certain character to our early meetings were historiography and conceptual analysis. I can think of no better way to mark the anniversary of the first of those meetings than by bringing these topics into relation to each other and considering some of the historiographic issues that conceptual analysis has had to face in the intervening years. To do that, I will have to widen the scope of my references beyond the early contributions to these meetings and pick out some of the more recent broader discussions and trends in the history of the human sciences, especially the history of psychology. I will also try to indicate a particular direction for this work which appears to me to be particularly promising.

I have already indicated that there are advantages in recognizing the targets of our ever popular conceptual analyses as discursive, rather than natural, objects. Talk about discursive objects is part of an anti-Cartesian trend whose influence in the history of the human sciences has been quite noticeable in recent years. This trend rejects the traditional dualism that insisted on maintaining a strict separation between the subjective and the objective. For this tradition the notion of a discursive object would be a contradiction in terms. Discourse was something that subjects engaged in and objects were things out there that were independent of the discourse of subjects. But nowadays we are more inclined to recognize that one cannot talk of objects without talking of their relation to subjects. Historically, the categories of the objective and the subjective arose together. One cannot have one without the other; they define the points of a polarity. How objects present themselves depends on the way people act in regard to them. In other words, there is an intimate relationship between human practices and the way the world of objects presents itself.

Where opinions differ is in the interpretation of this intimacy. At its most radical the insistence on the convergence of subject and object leads to their assumed identity in the overarching construct of “discourse”. There are dangers in this approach that have worried some historians of the human sciences. In particular, there is the danger of falling into the trap of so-called “discourse idealism”. If all is discourse we are not so far from a Hegelian view of history.

And here I have to introduce a name that, rightly or wrongly, has rather dominated discussion of these issues during the eighties and nineties. As some of you may have guessed, the name is that of Michel Foucault. Twenty years ago it might have been possible to have a discussion about the historiography of the human sciences without mentioning Foucault, but not to-day. Some new perspectives in the history of the human sciences show the invigorating effect of his influence, for example, the idea of a ‘history of the present’. In other respects his influence has been less felicitous. In Foucauldian history there are lots of wonderful things, like epistemes, historical a priori, regimes of truth, power/knowledge structures, problematizations, discursive strategies, and many more, but where are the people? True, this scheme of things makes room for bodies, but even bodies are not people. It is not that most of Foucault’s more specific concepts lack

heuristic value for historical studies, it is that taken together they amount to something less than history. To resurrect history one needs to put people back into the picture and to recognize that people forge social ties and develop interests that are not reducible to purely discursive phenomena. Without taking these into account the most beautiful analytic machinery will not get us from point a to point b in the historical succession of things.

Undoubtedly, the development of a subjectless history provided a much needed corrective to a romanticizing tradition that thrived on stories about great men and disembodied ideas. But – and maybe this will sound a bit like a death bed conversion – I have to say that this correction can be taken too far. To point out that many of the phenomena we look at in the history of the human sciences are discursive in nature is one thing, to claim that all is discourse is another. Such a claim may be all we need if our historical account is to be purely descriptive, but once we so much as imply causal interconnections we have to go outside discourse if we are not to relapse into a new kind of idealism, discourse idealism. Whether this represents an advance over more traditional kinds of historical idealism is a moot point.

In particular, social practices cannot be absorbed into discourse. There is little justification for doing so, except for the argument that practices can only be known in terms of some discursive description, such as “measuring”, or “testing”, and this anchors them firmly in the realm of discourse. But this ignores the fact that social practices are also known by their extra-discursive effects, something that Foucault made more explicit later in terms of the effects of power on the body. Whether in this or some other form, an extra-discursive status for crucial aspects of social practices has to be recognized.

It seems then that we need to make a clear analytic distinction between the three kinds of things we need to recognize in order to construct an adequate history of the human sciences. We need to recognize people, which means recognizing that they have interests, projects, preferences, resistances, and so on; we need to recognize social practices, including antagonistic and institutionalized ones; and of course we need to recognize discursive objects which include classifications, concepts, generative metaphors, and much more. These three things are in constant two-way interaction with each other. For instance, people construct discursive objects, but discursive objects also shape people. A good example of the latter effect is the “looping effect of human kinds” that Ian Hacking (1995) has discussed extensively. When people find themselves classified in a particular way it can greatly affect their self-perception and their actions. The history of any domain is largely the story of the interactions among people, practices and objects, discursive and otherwise.

In the second half of my talk I want to develop some implications of this position for the history of the human sciences. In principle, particular studies in our field may well focus on either people, social practices, or discursive objects. But when one looks at any list of contributions to our meetings one finds a heavy preponderance of studies focusing on the first and last items and not many studies that focus on social practices. My own contributions have mostly been among this minority, so it will come as no surprise when I express the hope that there will be more studies with this focus in the future. One service which historians can perform for the social science disciplines is to help in the demystification of what is known as “methodology” in those

disciplines, psychology in particular. The historical analysis of the social practices by which methodology is constituted can accomplish that, but more are needed.

Studies that focus on people, on the other hand, are not in need of any boost from me. They have always been popular and probably will continue to be. In the time that remains I would rather turn, or rather return, to the third topic focus I mentioned, i.e. discursive objects. First of all, a question of terminology. Although I freely used the term “discursive objects” earlier on in this talk, I now have to express some doubts about its suitability as an overall term for all kinds of objects that owe their existence to human constructions. As I have tried to indicate, discourse is not the only constructive activity that humans engage in; there are also social practices that cannot simply be assimilated to the category of “discourse”. But if one used “discursive objects” as a generic term one would be implying just such an assimilation, i.e. that all is discourse. I therefore prefer to borrow a term from a historian of science, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (1997), and speak of “epistemic objects”. That doesn’t commit one to a prejudgment regarding the relationship between discourse and practice.

Epistemic objects come in various kinds. One way of differentiating them is in terms of the kind of construction to which they owe their existence: some might be the product of purely discursive practices, others of material practices that impinge on bodies, human and non-human. Some are scientific objects that owe their existence to the investigative practices of scientific groups. Another way of differentiating objects is by their reference, by the kind of reality they imply. Then one can distinguish psychological objects, biological objects, physical objects, and so on. These distinctions could of course be discussed further, but what is more relevant for today’s occasion is the question of studying the historical trajectory of these objects.

We are all quite familiar with the genre of biography, which traces the historical trajectory of human individuals. This is probably the commonest form of diachronic studies in our field. But there is the possibility of another kind of diachronic study, to which I believe we ought to pay more attention, and that concerns the historical trajectory of epistemic objects. Foucault’s genealogical studies of the self, of sexuality, and so on, are still the best known, though controversial, examples of this genre, but more recently there have been other examples that owe little or nothing to Foucault and offer perhaps a better indication of the way things are moving in this field.

Last year, for example, there appeared a volume of studies edited by Lorraine Daston (2000) under the provocative title “Biographies of Scientific Objects”. The historians of science contributing to that volume accepted that the concept of biography could be metaphorically extended from people to scientific objects. These follow a certain course from the time of their first emergence to the time they have ceased to have any significant historical presence. In some cases, of course, that time has not yet arrived, and one is describing the past of an object that is still very much with us. That applies, for example, to two of the psychological objects studied in this collection, dreams and the self. These are still with us, but that does not mean we are prevented from studying episodes from their past.

One reason why it seems odd to speak of objects, scientific or otherwise, having biographies is that our histories have been so preoccupied with the acts of individual persons that the material

at which these acts were directed has been degraded to the status of mere *manipulanda*. Individual historical actors may well see them as such and it is quite proper for their biographers to follow them. But from the broader perspective of the historian it is clear that the objects at which individual persons direct their efforts are more than just *manipulanda*. They may be that, as far as the individual working on them is concerned, but they also exist independently of any individual's efforts. Moreover, they exist historically, that is, they change over time; the scientific object I encounter to-day is not the same object I would have encountered fifty years ago. The history of these changes is something quite different from the history of any one individual's contribution to these changes, no matter how significant they were.

What sorts of questions arise within the framework of a biography of epistemic objects? One set of questions that is typical of the historiography of epistemic objects addresses the *emergence* of such objects. We can trace the birth of the object from a time when it did not exist, or existed in a completely different form, or as something without any significance, to a time when it has become highly salient, broadly recognized and targeted in discourse and practice. The psychological object, "behaviour", provides a good example of such emergence. Right up to the late 19th century it did not exist at all; the word "behaviour" was part of a moral discourse that was the exact antithesis of the morally neutral discourse of which 20th century "behaviour" was such a crucial component. One can easily follow the course of this birth which took place over just a few years at the very end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century (Danziger, 1997). One can then inquire into the circumstances of this birth, what projects and interests propelled it onward, what practices endowed certain interpretations of phenomena with the status of objective truths.

A second and related set of questions pertains to the critical transformations that epistemic objects sometimes undergo in the course of their historical existence. To revert to the biographical analogy: Like William James, we can distinguish between the once born and the twice born. Some people go through a crisis at some point in their lives from which they emerge a changed person. Occasionally, this might even happen more than once in a lifetime. Similarly, there are psychological objects which seem to have been born more than once. They can even do something people can't do, they can have a rebirth after death. Dreams might be a good example. They were always known, of course, and endowed with all sorts of meaning, but their emergence as specifically psychological objects cannot be definitely established until the second half of the 18th century. Then they virtually died as psychological objects until they reemerged in the discourse and practice of psycho-analysis.

But this kind of rebirth is not so common. More common is the case where an object undergoes a critical transformation without an interim period of complete oblivion. The exceptionally long biography of the object "memory" could provide several examples, but I will just mention one, very briefly. For centuries, memory was defined as an object of the inner life, intimately tied to the conscious experience of recollection. (The fact that there was also a long tradition of speculating about the physical basis of memory did not affect this definition any more than speculation about the physical basis of perception affected the status of perception as a psychological object). Then, during roughly the last quarter of the 19th century, memory was reinvented as a biological object. Various developments converged to produce this result. First of all, the rapid recognition of phylogenetic evolution meant that there was now a third kind of

history to add to the histories of human collectivities and human individuals, and this was a biological history. What is more, this third kind of history seemed to many to be the most important, the most fundamental of all. But where there was history there was surely also memory. At least that was the conclusion invited by a number of prominent Darwinians, such as Samuel Butler in England and Ewald Hering on the Continent. What they propagated was an enormous expansion in the meaning of "memory" so that it could cover everything from visual recall to the inheritance of acquired characteristics, instinct, habit, and even the effects of exercising a muscle. Gradually, memory became a different kind of object, a transformation that was simultaneously being fostered by early medical studies of memory defects associated with brain lesions. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century memory as a biological object had its own name, it was often referred to as "organic memory". Quite soon, however, the implied distinction between memory as a psychological and a biological object was dropped and the biological object captured the unqualified term "memory" for itself.

These were significant developments for creating the "conditions of possibility" (as Foucault would say) for the emergence and increasing acceptance of the Ebbinghaus approach to the study of memory. His famous technique of testing for the reproduction of memorized lists could only be regarded as a technique for investigating "memory" if memory was given a very particular meaning (Danziger, 2001). Ebbinghaus explicitly considered the traditional phenomena of memory, conscious remembering, unsuitable for scientific study. But if one redefined memory as simple retention one had an entity that *was* susceptible to objective testing without any reference to conscious experience. Ebbinghaus' redefinition of memory was eminently compatible with the new conception of memory as a biological object. Without this background, it is doubtful that it would have been accepted as capturing the essence of memory. Indeed, someone like Wundt, for whom memory was not a biological object, never did accept it. However, Ebbinghaus, and G.E. Müller following in his footsteps, established a new set of investigative practices that were highly routinized and therefore eminently suitable for institutionalization. Thank to these practices memory as a scientific object could be produced over and over again in psychological laboratories. "The persistence of scientific objects depends on the institutionalization of practices" (Daston, 2000).

Approaching the history of psychology in terms of the biography of psychological objects has significant implications for the relationship between the discipline and its history. Traditionally, practitioners of the discipline have too often made use of a historical perspective to create two essentially false impressions, namely, that the field of psychology represents some kind of unity, and that, in spite of some ups and downs, history is a story of progress. The very title of many texts used for pedagogical purposes conveys the impression that there is indeed a relatively coherent and unified topic known as the history of psychology, and by implication, that the field whose history this is manifests a similar coherence and unity. But how does one decide what properly belongs in a history of psychology and what does not? Potentially, the history of psychology is as broad as a history of human subjectivity in general (Richards, 1987; Smith, 1988). It might include large parts of the history of art, literature and religion, as well as much else. If history of psychology texts tried to do justice to this potential richness they would either lack coherence or else convey a kind of coherence that is foreign to the kind of coherence projected by a science of psychology. So the content of texts is selected in accordance with implicit criteria that enhance the appearance of coherence and historical continuity. Assumptions that currently enjoy widespread acceptance in the discipline and issues that are currently salient

shape these criteria, and this easily generates an overall sense of progressive development towards the present.

There are various ways of presenting the history of psychology which help to avoid these dubious effects. One way is to embed this history in the much broader history of the human sciences (Smith, 1997), but more often, constriction rather than expansion of subject matter has been the preferred route. This can be accomplished in different ways, for example, by restricting oneself to one limited period and maintaining a relatively narrow cultural focus (Reed, 1997). The use of the biographical method opens up other ways of avoiding the mirage of coherence and progress (Fancher, 1996). Yet another approach is the one suggested here. If one treats the history of psychology in terms of the history of psychological objects one need claim no more coherence for the field than is implied by an assembly of such objects (Danziger, 2002). Although, for the psychologist historian, the choice of objects is likely to be determined by their recent salience within the discipline, the emphasis on their fundamental historicity works against any unjustified narrative of progress.

Although the same objects, memory or motivation for example, are targets for the investigations of both scientists and historians there is a division of labour between them. The latter investigates scientific objects as historical objects whereas the former treats them as natural objects. But because of a culturally reinforced tradition of taking for granted the status of psychological objects as natural objects their history as discursive objects has been relatively neglected. It is too easily assumed that psychological objects have essential qualities forever fixed by nature. Moreover, it is unfortunately the case that there are strong professional interests bound up with the belief in the rock solid permanence of certain psychological objects. The political implications of different constructions of the object "memory", for example, have been painfully evident during the last two decades (Pezdek & Banks, 1996).

That leaves historians with a twofold critical task. On the one hand, they need to investigate what lies behind the historical persistence of some psychological objects, the contribution of institutionalized structures or discursive practices for instance. On the other hand, they need to question the tendency to credit psychological objects with much greater historical persistence than they in fact possess and to make visible the extraordinary historical mutability of these objects. Inevitably, that will not make their work popular among those with vested interests in the status quo. But significant sections of the discipline will not be threatened by critical historical investigations and may even be encouraged by them (Danziger, 1994). Ultimately, historical studies are about historicity. The demand for a priori limits on historicity would subject historical investigation to a kind of censorship, producing a muzzled history that threatens no one. I believe that the historiography of psychology can make a more significant contribution to the discipline than that.

#### NOTE

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