

Towards a Polycentric History of Psychology (1996)

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Abstract: The most influential histories of psychology tend to adopt the perspective of a particular centre of psychological development, most often the USA, with developments elsewhere forming a kind of periphery. Conceptualizations and practices favoured by social conditions at the centre are treated as universally valid core principles of the discipline while knowledge emerging at the periphery is often awarded only local significance. More recently, this model has become difficult to maintain and the history of the field is more readily seen in terms of an interaction among several focal centres. Such a perspective leads to an analysis of the way in which the generation, transmission and application of psychological knowledge has been shaped by power relationships as well as by cultural biases and barriers. A polycentric history has considerable relevance for current developments within the discipline.

Is there such a thing as the history of psychology? Is there a definitive linear narrative to be told about the origins of psychological speculation in Ancient Greece, its long imprisonment in the philosophical discourse of mediaeval and post-mediaeval Europe, its liberation by nineteenth century laboratory methods, and its flowering in twentieth century America? Many American textbooks have followed such a historical path. Yet, there are several reasons why this path is misleading. For one thing, psychology, in the modern disciplinary sense, has a relatively brief historical presence - about one century. Even the use of the term "psychology" to distinguish a particular subject matter is not very much older than that - in English, only half a century older. It is therefore up to the historians to choose what is to be included and what excluded from the history of a subject that was not recognized as such during most of its history. Their choices will of course be affected by their present day agenda, by their intellectual horizon, by their prejudices. The linear narrative of psychology's history is their creation - it is not a mirror held up to an unambiguous course of events. For this reason a prominent British historian of the subject has suggested that "the history of psychology should be abandoned" (Smith, 1988).

There is another reason why there can be no such thing as the history of psychology, even if we restrict ourselves to modern psychology. This discipline did not develop from a single seed sprouting in one specific location, certainly not from Wundt's Leipzig laboratory. 20th century American psychology represents a virtually complete break with everything that Wundt stood for, starting with his insistence that psychology remain affiliated with philosophy. One has to go Galton's anthropometric laboratory in London, to Charcot's clinic in Paris, to the Bureau of Salesmanship Research at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, and to many other places if one really wants to trace the roots of modern psychology. Different versions of modern psychology appeared at more or less the same time in a number of countries. Nor did these versions undergo a progressive fusion. On the contrary, during the three decades between 1915 and 1945 the gap between different national psychologies did not narrow, it widened. Therefore, it is only by privileging certain local developments over others that it is possible to construct anything like the history of psychology, even for the most recent century.

But which local developments will be singled out in this way? What criteria will determine this choice? In the past, two criteria have played a prominent role. First, there was the historian's own affiliation with a particular part of the discipline, an affiliation which could easily lead him to assign a central, unifying, role to that part, even substituting the history of that part for the history of the field as a whole. A well known example is provided by E.G. Boring's *A History of Experimental Psychology* (1950), where the traditional experimental parts of the discipline are at the centre of attention and everything else becomes a matter of merely peripheral interest. It has been suggested that this bias was connected to the author's involvement in intra-disciplinary politics where he represented the interests of the experimentalists (O'Donnell, 1979).

But emphasis on a part of the discipline at the expense of the rest has not supplied the only, or even the most important, criterion for privileging certain historical developments. A second criterion has its source in the national diversity of psychology, which provides scope for historical accounts organized around one particular national tradition. As long as this bias is made explicit, there is nothing objectionable about it.

However, a serious complication is introduced by the extremely unequal national development of modern psychology. In most countries the discipline had a difficult time in getting established. But there was one massive exception, the USA. Throughout the twentieth century, psychology has flourished there as it has nowhere else. Coupled with the emergence of American economic and military predominance, as well as the ravages of wars and political disasters in Europe and elsewhere, this resulted in a dominant position for American psychology on a world-wide scale. The fact that the discipline seemed to have a recognizable geographical centre imposed a particular structure on its historiography (Danziger, 1991). American textbooks on the history of psychology could ignore virtually everything outside the USA and still claim, with some degree of plausibility, that they were presenting, not a history of American psychology, but a history of modern psychology as such. Other nationally based histories would have to accept the status of merely *local* histories. Yet, a history of psychology that takes its perspective from American developments is as much a local history as a history that takes its perspective from developments in, for example, Japan or India.

The time when this could go unrecognized is now past. That is due to the gradual decline of American predominance and the relatively greater prominence of several other centres of significant disciplinary activity. As a result, the image of a discipline that has one geographically defined centre is fading fast. The model of centre and periphery is being replaced by a polycentric one (see e.g. Moghaddam, 1987).

In a sense, modern psychology is returning to the position from which it began: a polycentric position in which there are diverse but intercommunicating centres of psychological work that reflect a diversity of local conditions and traditions (Danziger, 1991). As these centres emerge against a recent historical background of domination by one centre, they first of all feel the need to define their own historical identity. This often takes the form of "contributionist" history in which local figures are given their due. In due course, however, there occurs something analogous to what Woodward (1994: 203), speaking of feminist historiography, has referred to as "a Gestalt switch from seeking predecessors and role models to constructing science differently". What does this mean?

First of all, it has to be recognized that the metaphor of centre and periphery applied not only on the level of geography, but also on the level of conceptual content and methodology. It implied a particular model of the internal structure of the discipline. As long as this model prevailed developments at the periphery could be seen as subject to local social influences, while the centre represented universal values or even rationality as such.

Certain areas of the discipline, usually involving particular methodological commitments, were designated as "basic" or "core" areas and others as areas of "application". In the core areas experimental research was to discover universal principles of psychological functioning, while in the peripheral areas less rigorous procedures might suffice to study local manifestations of these principles. The basic principles were always conceived of as asocial and ahistorical, and their investigation was typically pursued in a decontextualized manner. Examples of such principles are the so-called laws of learning or the principles of cognition. There is supposed to be nothing intrinsically social about these laws and principles; they are thought to apply to individual organisms and individual minds, irrespective of the social content of either learning or cognition. It is assumed at the outset that the laws of learning and the principles of cognition are the same everywhere and at all times. They have the same kind of universality as the laws and principles of chemistry. However, just as in chemistry, local conditions can affect the results of their operation. In psychology, these local conditions are often social in nature. So we get a dualistic model: On the one hand, basic processes that are regarded as inherent features of individual organisms and individual minds, and on the other hand, local social conditions that affect the specific manifestations of these processes. The core of psychological science is constituted by the investigation of universally valid basic processes; the study of human psychology in social and historical context, however, is regarded as peripheral to this core endeavour, less important because its results are not universally generalizable.

There was always a very marked parallelism between core and periphery on the level of geography and on the level of disciplinary content. Those at the geographical periphery usually did not have the resources to mount major investigations of basic processes. That kind of thing generally remained the prerogative of those at the geographical centre. Those at the geographical periphery typically had to content themselves with being at the scientific periphery as well. If they claimed universal validity for their findings, they could expect these claims to be ignored. But more often they did not make such claims; accepting the leadership of a far away centre, they accorded their own work a purely peripheral significance in terms of the discipline as a whole. They would take over the conceptual categories and the methodological imperatives of the centre and try their best to apply them under local conditions that differed profoundly from those that prevailed at the centre. They were subject to the limitations imposed by what has sometimes been called a "borrowed consciousness" (Easton, 1991).

In more recent years this situation has changed to the point where the structure of the discipline, on the conceptual as much as on the geographical level, no longer conforms to the model of one preeminent centre and its periphery. I have already discussed geographical decentralization. Conceptually, the discipline has fractionated into numerous sub-fields that, for the most part, have very few ideas in common. The age of "grand theory", when a single set of principles was to unify the discipline, is long past. Even on the level of methodology, which always united the discipline

much more effectively than any theory, there are strong signs of an advancing eclecticism and an increasing receptivity to procedures that were once considered beyond the pale.

I believe that changes in the historiography of psychology must be seen in the light of these developments. It is said that every age has to write its own kind of history. If that is the case, the polycentric historiography that is now emerging certainly seems appropriate for our era of increasing decentralization on both the geographical and the conceptual level. This shift to a polycentric understanding of the history of the discipline has favoured a shift towards a more contextualist historiography. As long as there was an equation of one locally generated truth with the truth as such, the question of the social roots of that truth was not likely to be asked. But with the end of privilege, both on the geographical and the conceptual level, the intelligibility of alternative accounts rests on seeing them in terms of their social context.

For a polycentric historiography the question of how to characterize social context therefore becomes crucial. Here there are two temptations, that are actually two sides of the same coin, which I think must be resisted. One temptation is to adopt the popular discourse of modernization and to write the history of world psychology in terms of the onward march of scientific, that is to say modernistic, psychology. What such an account overlooks is that modernism does not come in only one model, that it is always someone's version of modernism, whether American, Japanese, German, Russian, or whatever. In each case, local cultural features have been incorporated in a particular version of modernism. There is no such thing as modernism-in-the abstract that floats above all local cultures.

The other side of this coin is formed by a romanticizing of local traditions that ignores the very real interlinking of local influences that has always been such a significant feature of the history of modern psychology. There is a vast difference between a polycentric historiography of the discipline and the mere addition, in disconnected chapters, of one local history after another. What is needed now is not a string of parochial visions but a focus on the changing interrelationships among centres that have constituted the world history of the subject in the modern period.

I must stress again that "interrelationship among centres" is to be understood in both the geographical sense and in the sense of particular contents. When students from many countries flocked to Leipzig and to other German centres in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and then returned home with new ideas they established a pattern that was to be repeated throughout the modern history of the discipline, though the direction of travel changed. Of course, the pursuit of formal studies abroad was only one avenue through which international links were established. Books were translated and marketed, money was invested in scholarship funds, instruments were exported and imported, innumerable conferences were held, and so on. In the long run, no local tradition could be unaffected by this, but neither was the result a complete homogenization of psychological discourse (Sloan, 1990).

A polycentric historiography must attempt to do justice to the complexity of such phenomena. To do this it must work with categories that seek to capture the interrelations among centres, rather than the characteristics of centres considered in isolation. Intellectual migration is perhaps the most obvious of these categories, not only in reference to persons, but, more significantly, in reference to concepts and practices. What happened to psychological concepts, theories, procedures when

attempts were made to transplant them? Why did some of these prove to be much better travellers than others? How did travelling change them, sometimes beyond recognition? Who found them useful and why? There are stories of successful transfer to be told here, but also stories of misunderstanding, mistranslation, total incomprehension and downright hostility that are often more illuminating.

The link between knowledge and power cannot be ignored when considering such issues. Questions arise about the circumstances under which the spread of modernistic psychological knowledge and practices can be seen as a manifestation of cultural imperialism. It has been observed that the proliferation of the discipline of psychology all over the world owes a great deal to "North American advertising of its value in society" (Valsiner, 1996, p.129). At the same time, the conceptualization of the contrast between "us", meaning the scientifically enlightened modernizers, and "them", meaning the backward traditionalists, was historically linked with the role played by western social science, including psychology, in imperialist projects (Staeuble, 1992). The way in which such contrasts converged with certain methodological patterns in the social sciences is now beginning to become apparent.

Other questions relate to the extent to which resistance to imported ideas, a kind of intellectual protectionism, has shaped the history of modern psychology. Such resistance certainly played an important role in the history of modern American psychology. Its first half century was, after all, a period of "indigenization" that resulted in the Americanization of concepts and practices originating in the very different intellectual and social climate of Europe.

From this perspective the history of modern psychology cannot be regarded as a unilinear movement from the pre-modern to the modern (Mitchell & Abu-Lughod, 1993), where the modern is identified as being scientific, the pre-modern as pre-scientific. Conceptions of what it means to be scientific in psychology have varied at different times and in different places (see e.g. Danziger, 1990; Dehue, 1995), and each conception of the scientific has entailed a corresponding conception of the non-scientific. It is of course possible to write a historical account in terms of linear developments leading up to any favoured variant of scientificity. But all such accounts suffer from a fatal arbitrariness. A polycentric historiography would replace them with studies of developing co-constructions of different versions of modernity and pre-modernity.

Such studies would have to break with another powerful convention of the traditional historiography of psychology, its marked disciplinary focus. The history of modern psychology is commonly identified with the history of the discipline of psychology, where the boundaries of the discipline are defined by academic and professional organizational structures, not by the subject matter. Whether some topic is regarded as forming part of the history of modern psychology depends on its reception by academic departments and professional associations. But this too is subject to local and temporal variation. Common examples of topics with a variable status are psychoanalysis, graphology, parapsychology, and much of social psychology. However, instead of being taken for granted, organizationally and administratively enforced boundaries become a major focus of inquiry for a polycentric historiography. The locally variable reasons for the erection of such boundaries and their historical effects constitute important features of variant developments in different parts of the world. Clearly, when the historical construction of disciplinary boundaries becomes an object of inquiry, the perspective of a purely intra-disciplinary history has to be

abandoned. Historical studies will then be able to contribute to an outcome that is long overdue, namely, the "de-parochialization of the disciplines" (Prewitt, 1996).

That raises the question of the relationship of the discipline and its history. It is obvious that the new historiography will change this relationship. The older linear historiography took the natural sciences as the model for the relationship between history and disciplinary content. In the natural sciences theoretical achievements and investigative practices are generally regarded as being independent of local culture. Therefore the history of a science, especially its social history, is seen as irrelevant to current issues in that science. A physicist does not need to be enlightened about the history of physics to be a good physicist. In the social sciences, however, the claim for the independence of scientific categories from specific cultural traditions is rather less plausible. Subject and object of study are generally linked by common cultural understandings which are the products of a certain historical experience. The relationship between current social science and historical studies is therefore potentially more intimate than in the case of the natural sciences (Danziger, 1994).

A polycentric historiography of psychology would have to explore the historical dependence of the categories and procedures of scientific psychology on culturally embedded beliefs and on local forms of institutionalized practice (Danziger, 1997). This is likely to reinforce existing trends in the direction of a less autocratic, more self-reflective, form of disciplinary practice. But localization is only one side of the historical process. The other side involves the interaction of centres and the consequent emergence of common understandings as well as renewed differentiation. In the past, certain locally generated categories of psychological discourse were often regarded as the only true descriptions of the universal attributes of a timeless "human nature". Insofar as they were built into the ahistorical methodology of so-called "cross-cultural psychology" they were immune to empirical refutation. A different approach to the history of psychology, however, offers the possibility of another perspective on the question of the universality of psychological phenomena. Though it is wrong to begin by taking such universality for granted, one could treat it as one possible outcome of specific historical conditions that are open to investigation. "Trans-social meanings emerge not as a result of methodological tricks, but of a real historical process" (Stompka, 1990). Modern psychology, with its universalizing categories and methods, might well be accorded a significant role in this process. The new historiography is well placed to investigate such questions.

Thus, the turn away from a unifocal linear history to a socially contextualized polycentric history is not a matter of interest only to antiquarians. It entails an enhanced link between historical reflection and current practice and will move the self-definition of the discipline much closer to the socio-historical rather than the natural sciences. Ultimately, this involves a long overdue historicizing of psychological knowledge.

NOTE

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