

# Introduction

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Not very long ago readers of this journal were advised in no uncertain terms that '*the* history of psychology should be abandoned' (Smith, 1988: 162). Does the publication of an entire issue devoted to 'New developments in the history of psychology' mean that this advice is about to be flagrantly ignored or perhaps to be directly disputed?

Smith's argument was based on the insight that the subject for the history of psychology has to be constituted in writing that history. Not only has psychology, in the modern disciplinary sense, had a relatively brief historical presence, but that presence has been marked by a variety of subjects. Thus in presuming to present *the* history of psychology one has to manufacture a continuity across time and place that is essentially a product of the historian's philosophical and political biases.

Having myself arrived at rather similar conclusions along a somewhat different path (Danziger, 1990), I am not inclined to quarrel with Smith's historiographic strictures. By all means let us bury the ghost of *the* history of psychology. Having done so, however, let us ask what expectations for studies in the history of psychology might now be appropriate.

As Smith notes, modern psychology owes its historical identifiability to its presence as a social activity. Once the subject is constituted for us by the discipline-related actions of specific historical agents certain parameters for historical studies of these actions have become fixed. Although the question of a pre-modern history for psychology may remain exceedingly problematic, the appearance of psychology as a discipline does provide something of an anchor for historical studies. The implications of this kind of anchoring, however, point in a very different direction from that taken by linear disciplinary histories.

If history of psychology is not to become the story of discoveries about a timeless 'human nature' but is to be grounded in specific social activities that constitute such a subject, one is forced to come to terms with the local character

of such activities. The contrast between the universalistic nature of its knowledge-claims and the localized social basis for erecting such claims has been an inescapable feature of modern psychology since its inception. Not only did the discipline have multiple origins, but the course of its development has hardly been one of linear convergence. On an international scale – and this would surely be the appropriate scale if one were dealing with a natural science – there was considerably more agreement about the methods and content of the discipline at the beginning of the twentieth century than during the decades that followed the First World War. It is only by privileging certain local developments over others that it becomes possible to speak of *the* history of psychology, even during its modern existence as a discipline.

The choice of *which* local developments were to be thus privileged was never an arbitrary one. In the past, two considerations were particularly salient in determining this choice. First of all, historians of psychology who were themselves actively engaged in the internal politics of the discipline had an interest in awarding the central position to their particular version of the disciplinary project. A well-known example is provided by a text that achieved canonical status for a considerable time, E. G. Boring's (1950) *A History of Experimental Psychology*. Here the core of disciplinary continuity is provided by the development of *experimental* psychology, compared to whose sun the other parts of the subject shine, at best, with a reflected glow. Such a definition of the subject-matter was not unconnected with this experimenter-author's struggles against the onslaughts of the practicalists within the discipline who had a rather different agenda (O'Donnell, 1979).

There is a second consideration which has played a rather obvious role in the elevation of local developments to general significance. It derives from the spectacularly unequal national growth of psychology as a discipline. Virtually from the beginning, this discipline flourished in one country as it did in no other. Moreover, the period of rapid disciplinary expansion within the USA coincided with the period of expanding American influence in the world. It was therefore to be expected that the history of American psychology would come to occupy a privileged position within the short disciplinary history of psychology. The only serious competitor had been German psychology, but its international influence had been seriously damaged by the First World War and its aftermath and had ended with the intellectual migration of the 1930s. For a time, at any rate, twentieth-century psychology seemed to have a well-defined geographical centre. One could still produce histories of what had happened at the periphery, but such histories were clearly identified as purely local in significance, histories of British, German, Dutch, etc., psychology. Only American histories could dispense with this qualification and make a serious, though usually implicit, claim to represent the history of psychology as such.

This state of affairs was particularly favourable to certain tendencies that afflicted purely disciplinary histories in any case. It made it easier to structure the

history of the discipline in terms of a continuous subject, a normative core development, in relation to which, dissonant elements could be treated as special cases subject to unique local influences. It made it particularly easy to complete the marginalization of many trends that did not fit in with the perspectives of mainstream American psychology. It made it possible to play down the pervasiveness and the significance of fundamental disagreements and therefore to represent the core history of the discipline as the product of an immanent and progressive evolution. For example, the more recent emphasis on cognition can be represented as progress in relation to the behaviourist phase that preceded it, but only if one adopts an American rather than a European focus.

In recent years the *relative* decline of American influence within the discipline has become increasingly evident, a decline that is of course not unconnected with similar developments taking place on other levels. The emergence of significant loci of disciplinary growth, not only in Europe, but also in certain developing countries, has led to the appearance of a historical consciousness that represents a break with the historiography of the immediately preceding period. What has been abandoned is the implicit model that organized disciplinary development around what was simultaneously a geographical and a conceptual centre. The metaphor of centre and periphery is being replaced by a polycentric one, and the selection of articles for this issue reflects this change.

Another development reflected here is the ever-increasing latter-day mobility of scholarship, manifesting itself both in the mobility of persons and the mobility of ideas. The growing number of scholars whose cultural background deviates significantly from that of the human object of their studies has certainly helped to reduce the credibility of the more traditional kind of tribal history for which the celebration of disciplinary origin myths was a major preoccupation. At the same time, the study of international cross-currents has replaced older uni-directional accounts and has given a special significance to locations, such as the Netherlands, which were at the centre of such cross-currents.

The shift to a polycentric understanding of the history of the discipline has proved to be highly compatible with a second major development, namely, the increasing social contextualization of historical accounts. Although the sources of this development lie outside the area of disciplinary history, it was bound to be favoured by the declining credibility of accounts that privileged one historical line over others. As long as the model of centre and periphery prevailed it was easy to see developments at the periphery as subject to local social influences, while the centre represented universal values or even rationality as such. As already noted, centre and periphery were as much conceptual as they were geographical, so that certain core areas of the discipline, usually involving particular methodological commitments, were left untouched by mundane social life. With the end of privilege, both on the geographical and the conceptual level, this position becomes untenable, and all parts of the subject come to be seen in terms of their social relationships.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that for most of the present century the path of European psychology was very different from that of North American psychology. But how are we to interpret this? By representing American psychology as the home of 'science', while regretting that (continental) European psychology, in spite of its promising beginnings, succumbed to various extra-scientific, philosophical and ideological influences? That kind of interpretation has not lacked appeal, especially in reference to developments in Germany between the wars, but it will no longer do. This is an interpretation that is based on a privileging of one understanding of 'science', one that became dominant in American psychology at a very early stage. It therefore leads to an idealization of the history of that understanding and a complementary tendency to demonize some of its alternatives by linking them to totalitarian and anti-scientific ideologies.

This is where the history of psychology in a country like the Netherlands becomes particularly instructive. As the articles by T. Dehue and P. J. van Strien indicate, what we find is a marked tendency for an early empiricism to be replaced by a 'human science' orientation using German models. This cannot be explained simply by German cultural influence because it persists well beyond the end of the Second World War, which had given the Dutch every reason to reject such influence. Moreover, explanations in terms of peculiarly German cultural traditions obviously do not apply here and, in any case, Dutch psychology did eventually adopt a version of 'science' that was much closer to American models.

Such fundamental shifts in the definition of the psychological enterprise were certainly not unique to the Dutch experience. However, their non-linear and quite variable course is hard to reconcile with any explanation in terms of a progressive unfolding of scientific reason that reaches its apogee in the present. Rather, as Dehue points out, it is the meaning of 'science' itself that changes, a fact that is equally troublesome to 'internalist' and 'externalist' accounts of scientific change. Dehue's analysis of the fundamental methodological changes that occurred in Dutch psychology is based on the notion that particular scientific identities and particular social identities mutually entail one another, so that changes in the one involve changes in the other. In order to understand why, at a particular time and place, psychologists saw themselves as the representatives of a certain kind of 'science' – and hence of a certain kind of psychology – it is necessary to inquire into the position they occupied in a broader social context. Thus, it turns out that the period during which a kind of humanistic psychology dominated disciplinary thought and practice was also a period in which Dutch psychologists found themselves in the position of spiritual mentors whose authority was based on personal culture rather than on their command of esoteric technical procedures. The change from one basis of expert authority to another – and hence from one kind of psychology to another – Dehue suggests, was part of a more general shift in the prevailing pattern of work relationships.

This kind of analysis illustrates very well the change of focus which has been a feature of the more recent polycentric historiography of psychology. As long as disciplinary histories are in the business of privileging certain approaches or certain locations they tend to elevate their subject-matter above its context and to favour immanent principles of development, be they of the rational-technical or cultural variety. More recently, however, there has been a tendency to see all disciplinary developments, including the formerly privileged ones, as first of all *local* developments, embedded in local situations. Although this is a feature of all the contributions to this issue, there is considerable variation in the units of analysis. These range from the very broad sweep of P. J. van Strien's article, which takes the entire course of disciplinary development in one country as its explanandum, to R. von Mayrhauser's training of the historical microscope on a few crucial months in the onward march of American psychology.

The authors of the articles in this issue share a common concern with the complex interrelationships between the contributions made by psychologists and the social and intellectual fields within which these contributions have their place. Depending on the case under consideration and on the level of analysis they conceptualize these interrelationships in different ways. At the most general level P. J. van Strien explores the adequacy of various metaphors for expressing the shifting course of the science and society relationship. The market metaphor is apt in so far as the fate of psychological concepts and practices depends on the needs of their 'consumers'. But there are important rhetorical elements in the relationship which are better expressed in a theatre metaphor where the consumers become an audience. Both 'consumer' and 'audience', however, do not do justice to the crucial case of psychologists' interaction with a non-lay public, where it seems more appropriate to speak of the 'alliances' that are provided for by a coalition metaphor.

Questions of coalition are also central to von Mayrhauser's fine-grained analysis of the relationship between psychologists and the American military during the First World War, out of which grew the practices of mass testing that were to transform the discipline. Although disciplinary historians may be inclined to award the active role in the development of psychological practices and concepts to the professional psychologists, von Mayrhauser's study indicates that the military were far from being passive consumers but left their stamp on the product, even against the opposition of some of the psychologists. It also becomes clear that neither the psychologists nor the military constituted homogeneous interest groups but that each group had its factions, with the final outcome being a product of a complex set of conflicts and compromises.

What was at issue in such interactions was not only the nature of specific social practices, like mental testing, but also the categories of psychological discourse, 'aptitude' and 'intelligence' in von Mayrhauser's case. It is not simply that the discipline of psychology had to start with discursive categories already in existence, but that it had to insert its own discourse into an existing discursive

field defined by varying interpretations of key concepts linked to conflicting social interests. Here too a variety of local circumstances were historically important. While von Mayrhauser focuses on the American discourse of intellect, Ash's article is concerned with the discourse of holism in Weimar Germany. Gestalt psychology became a part of this discourse, running counter to its domination by conservative forces. The parameters of this discourse were set by the clash between modernity and antimodernity, though the most characteristic feature of the Gestalt contribution lay in its consistent attempts at overcoming this polarity (and thereby perhaps saving the Weimar compromise). Although the categories of psychological discourse may be tied to a local discursive field, they need not constitute a passive reflection of particular elements in that field.

Most of the articles in this issue have implicitly adopted a solution to the problem of a subject for the history of psychology by concentrating on situations in which psychology had an identifiable disciplinary, hence social, presence. This certainly gets rid of those naive textbook constructions which treat the categories of current psychologies as properties of a timeless human nature for which a continuous line of speculation can be traced back to antiquity. But is there not a danger that by limiting the history of psychology to disciplinary history we are resigning ourselves to accepting whatever constricted definitions of the subject-matter held sway within the confines of the discipline? This concern informs I. Staeuble's contribution to this issue and leads her to reopen the question of the subject of the history of psychology. For her, 'the psychological construction of the subject covers only a minute aspect of psychological realities'. What lies beyond the history of disciplinary constructions, however, is not the history of speculations about a fixed human nature but the historicity of human subjectivity. Modern psychology is the product of a process of disciplinary fractionation that has left it with certain bits of human subjectivity to investigate as natural objects. But the nature of human subjectivity is essentially historical, and the conceptualization of that historicity potentially forms the critical complement to bounded disciplinary history.

Whether a history of human subjectivity actually succeeds in going beyond the horizon of naturalistic psychology depends on how it frames its questions. Staeuble's article provides a critical review of a variety of attempts at treating human subjectivity historically, some of them as yet unavailable in English. Her main interest is in 'how problems are posed', rather than in the 'results' of specific investigations. The 'historiography of feelings' provides her with a field of examples for illustrating the strength of some formulations and the weakness of others. Adopting a perspective based on critical social theory she situates such typically psychological constructions as 'emotion' and 'cognition' within a modernist 'topography of reason, feeling and moral imagination' that emerged under specific historical circumstances. The framework within which one investigates the history of psychological categories needs to be broad enough to illuminate their role as 'elements in local ideological practices'.

In contrast to an earlier tradition of 'ceremonial' history (Harris, 1980), all the contributions to this issue share an outlook for which the autonomy of the field of psychology has become highly problematical. Not only does an emphasis on the local embeddedness of the field lead to an implicit relativizing of autonomy claims, but such relative disciplinary autonomy as does exist may even be regarded as a loss rather than a gain, a stance that becomes particularly clear in Staeuble's contribution. This distinctly sceptical attitude to the achievement and the value of disciplinary autonomy certainly represents a distinct break with those pedagogical histories that serve the positive affirmation of disciplinary identity (Ash, 1983). Such a break has the effect of suggesting that the 'process of autonomization' (Ringer, 1990) may be the major problem for disciplinary history. A quarter-century ago R. M. Young (1966) criticized scholarship in the history of the behavioural sciences for being preoccupied with the wrong kinds of questions, often of the type 'Is A buried in B's grave?' One likes to think that at least the questions have improved in the meantime.

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