How Old is Psychology, particularly Concepts of Memory?\(^1\)

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Abstract

The history of psychology before its modern incarnation as a quasi-scientific discipline suffers from a lack of non-arbitrary criteria of relevance because the domain of psychology lacks any natural unity. Its history is that of a multiplicity of "psychological objects", mostly of relatively recent origin. "Memory" is an interesting case because of its antiquity, though in the 19th century there was uncertainty about its status as a scientific concept and a crucial change in its meaning. But this historical discontinuity masked the more profound continuity of an implied analogy between internal and external memory that can be traced back to Plato. The longevity of this inscription metaphor is attributed to the technical and social practices of a culture of literacy. Regarded as a natural object memory has no history, but its history as a discursive object is relevant to contemporary practice and theorizing.

Past and Present

How old is psychology, and does it matter? That depends on how we take the question. If we take it to be a question about so-called great dates, as in "was 1879 a great date for experimental psychology" or "was 1898 a great date for social psychology", then yes, the question about psychology's age easily becomes trivial. Aside from furnishing convenient excuses for memorial merrily making specific dates are generally not worth worrying about.

Yet, clearly, something rather striking happened to psychology around a century ago. Since that time psychology has had a social presence and methods of inquiry it did not have before, and psychology as subject matter has been intimately tied to a new social identity, that of psychologist. These novelties provide us with usable criteria for deciding what parts of the history of modern psychology.

But of course modern psychology did not come from nowhere. It had antecedents. The name "psychology" itself is older than the modern discipline, and so are many of its key terms, emotion, perception, stimulus and memory, to mention only a few. No sooner had the modern discipline established a historical presence than it occurred to one of its luminaries, Hermann Ebbinghaus, that, while it had only a short history, it also had a long past.

What to do about this past? Textbooks of the history of psychology usually have a few chapters at the beginning devoted to psychology's "long past", a chapter on the Greeks, a chapter on the Middle Ages, and so on. Apart from the reduction of history to a few potted platitudes, such texts fudge a fundamental issue: if it is indeed the case that in some sense psychology has a long past and a short history\(^2\), how does one present the relationship between the two? What exactly were the links between ancient philosophy and recent psychology that could justify presenting the

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one as the precursor of the other? The justification for these links seems to be derived from an often implicit agenda that guided the authors of these texts. In the most widely followed model (Boring, 1950) the idea of progress towards the emergence of experimental psychology furnished the guidelines for narrating the relationship between past and present (Kelly, 1981; O'Donnell, 1979).

Even texts that departed from this scheme shared its fundamental assumption that “the subject of psychology is universal” (Smith, 1988, p.152). It was taken for granted that there existed a distinct part of objective reality that was “psychological” and that was gradually accessed by great figures, either through brilliant speculation or through diligent empirical investigation. This psychological part of reality did not change through history, what changed was valid knowledge about it. History was the story of the discovery of truths about matters that were at least as old as the human species, and sometimes older. This view of the relationship between psychology and history converged beautifully with the self-understanding of a discipline that considered itself part of the natural sciences.

Is there any way of escaping this type of narrative? Suppose we do not privilege the traditional canon of psychological writings but cast our net more widely? Not a bad idea, but it leaves us without criteria that enable one to establish what was and what was not part of psychology’s “long past”. For example, a recent work with the sub-title “The Emergence of Psychology” (Reed, 1997) devotes most of one chapter to the Shelles, both Percy and Mary. That is certainly a refreshing departure from convention, but why stop there? Why not another chapter or two devoted to the strong and often innovative psychological elements in the work of various 19th century novelists? Why not a chapter on the Impressionists and their relation to theories of perception? One can sympathize with Graham Richards (1987, p.211) when he asked, some years ago, “of what would History of Psychology not be a History?” or with Roger Smith (1988, p.153), when he notes that authors of classical textbooks on the history of psychology “possess no rational criteria of inclusion or exclusion”. True enough, but why is it that textbook writers find themselves in this situation?

It seems to me that much of the problem derives from a questionable implication that is commonly conveyed by the titles, and indeed the very existence, of texts, courses, journals etc. devoted to a domain identified as “the history of psychology”. The implication is that the domain in question constitutes some kind of natural unity that exhibits a certain rational coherence. That is what one has come to expect from fields of study that are demarcated by their own texts and other institutionalised markers. Indeed, the major pedagogical function that texts and courses on the history of psychology have been expected to fulfill seems to derive from their effectiveness in suggesting a certain unity and coherence for the field as a whole. But unfortunately they are only able to play this role by applying implicit criteria of inclusion that depend more on currently accepted biases and conventions than on any principle of natural coherence.

Perhaps the time has come to give up this pretence of unity. If the domain of psychology is looking more and more like a collection of virtually independent areas and theory one cannot expect its history to supply the unity which the domain itself lacks. Of course, this does not mean that psychology has no history. It does, but only as a multiplicity. One can certainly trace the history of its various professional and investigative practices, its instruments, and its organizational and institutional forms. But that is not all. There is an approach to the history of the discursive content of psychology that is based on the recognition of multiplicity rather than the myth of unity. One can trace the history, not of psychology, but of a variety of discursive objects that go to make up its content.

In constituting or, if one prefers, representing their subject matter, psychologists have always been obliged to use certain discursive resources. They developed a particular scientific discourse that resulted in a collection of discursively and practically constructed psychological objects, each of which has a traceable history. Although the new disciplinary language had many novel aspects (f. own scientific c already posited everyday lan gut this use. The lin had not been in language became “Memory” app thought and pra has a truly anc (Rozeboom, 19); such evidence 4 back without ev will indicate th contexts.

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This duality between great antiquity and recent innovation provides an opportunity for exploring the relationship between psychology’s long past and more recent history in the case of a particular psychological object. More accurately, this would be a history of what is now discursively constructed as a psychological object that is now part of a field known as psychology. Interrogating the present about the stuff out of which it was constructed (Rose, 1996) does not commit one to a trans-historical conception of psychology or of its subject matter: “the psychological”. Inquiries about the possibly “long past” of this or that current psychological object need not involve any assumption that in the past, as in the present, psychology constituted a recognizable field with non-arbitrary boundaries. On the contrary, the point of historical inquiry is not to equate the present with the truth but to question its certainties as to their historical contingency.

If the history of psychology is the history of a multiplicity, a collage perhaps, questions about the antiquity of psychology become questions about the antiquity of particular psychological objects. Historical studies of specific cases replace the history of psychology. Accordingly, my aim in the brief sketch that follows is to disentangle some of the elements of continuity and discontinuity that form the historical background for modern psychological conceptions of memory. Although the present context allows for only a broad outline of the issues, this may suffice as an illustration of the kind of case study that needs to be undertaken within the framework of a history of psychology as multiplicity.

Is memory a scientific category?

In the case of “memory” the transition from the old to the “New Psychology” was marked by profound discontinuities, not only on the level of investigative practice, but also on the conceptual level. Until the closing years of the 19th century it was by no means obvious that a science of psychology should concern itself with memory. Some pretty heavy guns were lined up in opposition to that idea. Particularly in Continental Europe, some of the most prominent early advocates of a new, scientific, kind of psychology explicitly rejected the category of memory as hopelessly unscientific. Two key figures, Herbart and Wundt, both thought that memory was a category of folk psychology that had no place in a scientific treatment of psychological topics.

Folk psychology was based on the notion of psychological faculties, of which memory was one. Herbart believed that faculty psychology constituted the greatest obstacle to the reconstitution of psychology as a science and therefore pleaded for the abandonment of categories like “memory” by serious scholars. When we take into account the diversity of the phenomena grouped together
under the heading of “memory”, and the lack of coherence among them, we have to recognize “that all that remains of so-called memory is an empty name” (Herbart, 1824/1890, pp. 198 and 203).

Wundt’s position was quite similar. In the first edition of his famous textbook (Wundt, 1874) he only mentions memory in order to reject it as a promising category for scientific psychological investigation. Ordinary language terms, like memory, are dangerous for the project of a scientific psychology because they lead people to think of psychologically complex and heterogeneous processes as essentially unitary and homogeneous. For Wundt, “memory and all processes of recollection are complex results...analogous to a large number of other forms of mental work; such, for example, as reading, writing, counting, and using numbers for complex processes of calculation” (Wundt, 1896/1907, p. 281/2). So “memory” is no more a core category of psychology than is “reading” or “counting”. There is no science of memory just as there is no science of roundness. It is therefore not surprising that in Wundt’s huge opus one finds very little attention paid to memory as a distinct psychological topic.

Wundt and Herbart were preoccupied with the problem of how to carve a scientific psychology out of a psychology that had thus far existed only in the discursive practices of people who were not scientists. To solve this problem they had to develop criteria that would enable them to decide which parts of traditional psychological discourse could safely be adopted for scientific purposes and which parts should be rejected as scientifically unproductive (Danziger, 2001).

During the incubational years of the “New Psychology” the rejection of faculty psychology and its language functioned as a primary criterion for deciding on the scientific viability of psychological categories. Anything that smacked of faculty psychology was banished forthwith. The concept of memory had been deeply tainted by faculty psychology over a period of centuries, so of course it had to go.

However, this position soon proved untenable. First of all, a resurgent interest in problems of memory could not be halted at the borders of a scientific psychology, and in any case, the horror of mental faculties was not shared by everyone. An increasing medical-psychiatric interest in memory as a source of individual pathology, of which psycho-analysis is only the best known example (Hacking, 1995; Leys, 1996; Roth, 1989), was tied to specific sites and practices of investigation which had strong claims to the prestigious label of science. In the long run, that could not be a matter of indifference to the discipline of psychology. Moreover, issues formulated in terms of memory were emerging at other sites with traditional ties to psychology, most significantly in the new area of educational research (Collins, 2001). A science of psychology that had nothing to contribute to these developments would have been a considerably diminished science. Would the new psychology be up to the challenge? To some it seemed that Ebbinghaus’ experimental memory research showed the way.

Ebbinghaus’ achievement has always been regarded as essentially methodological: his serial learning technique had provided a way of investigating memory experimentally and quantitatively. However, what is commonly overlooked is that this technique could only be regarded as a technique for investigating “memory” if memory is given a very particular meaning. Ebbinghaus (1983) considered the ordinary 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 precise experimental investigation. Using the criterion of what one might call experimentability, Ebbinghaus created a restricted conceptual space within which an experimental psychology of memory could operate.

Only within this space could the learning of lists of apparently meaningless items be accepted as a reasonable way of studying human memory. In due course, it became clear that meaningfulness was neither achievable nor necessary. What was essential was the use of fixed and separate units; written words and printed pictures would do as well as nonsense syllables. But this does not lessen the significance of a conceptual reduction that had been indispensable for laying the foundations of what turned out to be one of modern psychology’s most durable research traditions.

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Ebbinghaus’ reduction of memory to pure retention was not the only conceptual alchemy that
was brewing in the late 19th century. This was a period when the drawing of analogies between
biological and psychological phenomena became quite the fashion, and it transformed the meaning of
many psychological concepts, memory among them. The suggestion was that memory in the
traditional, psychological, sense was simply one manifestation of a more fundamental biological
process. The idea was popularised by writers such as Samuel Butler (1880), but it was also propagated
by the eminent physiologist, Ewald Hering (1870/1902), who, in 1870, addressed the Imperial
Academy of Sciences in Vienna on the topic of “Memory as a universal function of organized matter”.
Essentially, what Hering proposed 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,
even the effects of exercising a muscle. This was a crucial move in transforming memory into an
essentially biological category, a transformation that was simultaneously being fostered by early
medical studies of memory defects associated with brain lesions. The result was a striking change in
the status of “memory”: from having been degraded to “a mere name” earlier in the century it had risen
to the status of a fundamental property of living matter by the end of the century. 2

The durability of metaphor

In the light of these vicissitudes one might well be tempted to conclude that the relationship
between the more recent history of “memory” and its earlier past should be represented as
essentially one of discontinuity. However, that would mean ignoring the fact that the conceptual
foundations of modern trends entailed hidden assumptions about the nature of memory that were far
from modern. The example that is of most immediate interest to the historian of psychology is the
research tradition that derives from the conceptual and methodological innovations of Ebbinghaus.
While this tradition distanced itself from psychology’s long past through its experimentalism and
objectivism it remained in thrall to this past insofar as its definition of memory preserved an ancient
metaphor, the storage or container metaphor of memory, a point which several authors have noted
(e.g. Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996; Roediger, 1980; Wilson, 1998). It appears that what, on one level,
constitutes a bold modern break with the past may harbour critical elements of continuity with that
past on another level.

Likening memory to a place of storage for discrete objects was a favourite image for many
centuries. Memories had been compared to pieces of furniture in a house, gems in a treasure chest,
coins in a purse, birds in a cage, and so on (Carruthers, 1990). In a recent book, Douwe Draaisma
(2000) has shown in great detail how closely the pre-scientific literature on memory was tied to the
storage metaphor. It is ironic that the first experimental paradigm for memory research turned out
to give this truly ancient metaphor a new lease of life. Although there were exceptions (one thinks
of Bartlett in particular), the storage metaphor was dominant for most of the 20th century, receiving
a tremendous boost with the advent of information storage in computers.

However, more recently, there have certainly been quite concerted efforts to get away from
the storage metaphor. Not many years ago there was a discussion of this development in
Behavioral and Brain Sciences (Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996) without much agreement about what
exactly was the alternative to the storage metaphor. All too often, the proposals to get away from
crude images of storage rely implicitly on another ancient metaphor that was long ago built into
everyday concepts of memory and more recently reissued in scientific guise. This is the metaphor
of memory as analogous to writing and recall as analogous to reading. The fact that none of the two
dozen participants in the BBS discussion on metaphors of memory so much as mentioned the
metaphor of writing, though many of them blatantly employed it, suggests that its insidious
influence is alive and well.3

Historically, there is no mystery about the connection between memory and writing. Symbolic
inscription functioned as the key metaphor which inspired the very birth of the traditional
concept of memory and has accompanied it ever since. In the literature of the West, the invocation of “memory” as an inner-personal attribute that accounts for particular human achievements and failures goes back to the Dialogues of Plato. There, memory is embodied in metaphorical “wax tablets of the heart” on which experience engraves its imprint. Wax tablets happened to be a medium for receiving and storing inscriptions that was familiar in Plato’s time. His actual metaphor for memory is not constituted by the wax tablets as such but by the activity of writing for which they are a prop. He is quite explicit about this, speaking of memory as an “internal scribe” that can be said “to write words in our souls” (Plato, 1961a, p.1119). Plato, of course, is only the first in a long line of authors who employ the writing metaphor for memory. But metaphors that are widely used over a long period of time tend to become dead metaphors. Typically, they are no longer recognized as metaphors and are taken literally. What happens then is that they are no longer taken as possible descriptions of their objects but as constituting these objects in a particular way (Danziger, 1990). When two domains are metaphorically linked without recognition of the metaphorical nature of the link, a whole set of features will be unreflectively transferred from one domain to the other. If memory is regarded as a kind of inscription, it will be assumed to work in much the same way as the inscriptions with which one is familiar, whether they be made on wax, parchment, paper, photographic plates, or magnetic tape. The metaphor generates a very specific model of how memory functions, and ultimately, how one should study it. In a research context it acts as a kind of “promissory note” (Seyland, 1994).

Some of the more fundamental implications of the inscription metaphor are the following. First, if memory is akin to writing, that is, laying down an inscription that persists, it would be useless without a further process that would have to be akin to reading. In other words, this is a model which splits memory into two distinct operations: one, akin to writing, which makes the record, the other, akin to reading, which later deciphers the record that was preserved in the meantime. Plato's "internal scribe" would labour in vain without some kind of internal reader to recover what was inscribed. So memory as inscription splits the process of remembering into at least two quite distinct stages, making the record and later reading it. But as the record must persist in order to be read later, a third distinct stage must be inserted between the initial inscription and its later reading. This is the stage of storage. The metaphor, in effect, commits one to a three-stage model of memory. First, there is inscription, or encoding, to use the modern term, then there is preservation, or storage, and this is followed by reading or "retrieval", as it is now called. Although the three-stage framework is usually taken for granted in modern memory research and not problematized in any way, some researchers (e.g. Watkins, 1990) have explicitly recognized that the three-stage model represents a "pretheoretical orientation". Because this orientation underlies the specific memory theories as well as the investigative practices of the field, neither theoretical considerations nor empirical findings are likely to throw it into doubt.

A second implication of the inscription metaphor is almost equally obvious. One might call it the assumption of the individual trace. An inscription leaves a specific trace that is distinct from other inscriptions. Remembering then becomes a matter of dredging up specific items of inscribed experience. In antiquity this aspect of the inscription model proved useful in the development of mnemonic techniques which relied on a dissection of experience into specific components and the deliberate formation of imaginary links between them. In more recent times, the experimental techniques of classical memory research investigated retention in terms of distinct “items” remembered and explained its results in terms of the strength of associations between them.

Thirdly, the inscription metaphor, invented and maintained within a “culture of literacy” (Brockmeier, 2000), constitutes memory as analogous to the reproduction of an autonomous, decontextualized, text; that is, a text whose meaning is preserved irrespective of social context, as in the case of books. This was a gradual development because some inscriptions preserve visual images and others represent texts whose meaning depends on the social context in which they are employed (Olson, 1994). But in the course of time the preponderance of autonomous textual inscriptions became more and more; has almost invat

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The effects of this analogy are evident in modern memory research and theory. On the level of research practice there is a heavy, and generally unquestioned, preponderance of written verbal stimulus material. More profoundly, there is the assumption that the reproduction of a publicly available definitive version constitutes the paradigm case of human remembering. In the case of memory for texts a recalled version can be compared to an original definitive version, but in non-literate contexts there may be no single definitive version, and any original version may be irretrievably lost. Many everyday instances of remembering patently do not fit the textual model (Edwards & Potter, 1992), yet inscription of autonomous texts as the defining metaphor for memory has proved remarkably tenacious.

Certain limitations of the inscription metaphor were recognized early. Plato himself only used this metaphor for relatively trivial examples of memory. In other contexts, he advances considerations that clearly spell out the limitations of this model. For instance, he makes a distinction between remembering and reminding (Plato, 1961b, p.520 ff). Writing, and by implication, all inscription-like traces, can function only as reminders, objectified deposits to be used by individuals as an aid to memory. There is a clear separation between the marks, external and internal, that function as reminders and the individual who makes use of these marks. Remembering, however, is a lived individual experience in the present. It is a constituent part of individual and social life, not a tool or possession employed in the service of that life. One finds echoes of such conceptions in the mediaeval cultivation of memory as an aid to meditation and personal salvation (Carruthers, 1990; Illich, 1993; Zinn, 1974), but in the post-medieval period objectified textual reminders become the pervasive paradigm for memory as such (Fentress & Wickham, 1992).

Nevertheless, there have always been dissident voices. In the 20th century, Frederic Bartlett (1932) constitutes the most prominent example (Shottet, 1990), though the long delayed reception of key parts of his message provides further evidence for the tenacity of the reigning tradition. Actually, alternatives to the metaphor of inscription can be traced to the same early sources as that metaphor itself. If one pays attention to Plato's method, rather than his doctrine, one discovers quite a different model of how memory works (Caygill, 1999). In the Dialogues individuals do not retrieve knowledge unaided, they have to rely on a helper, Socrates, who uses the analogy of the midwife to describe his role. This is a metaphor derived from social life, not from inscriptive practices. Historically, that is unusual, though not unique: in the Renaissance, the theatre was often used as a memory metaphor (Yates, 1966). But there appears to be no continuous metaphorical tradition of memory as a social achievement that is in any way comparable to the dominant inscription model. Recent attempts to develop a social psychological approach to memory (e.g. Middleton & Edwards, 1990; Trabasso, 1997) have therefore had no conspicuous metaphorical resources to draw on. That may change as a result of the current interest in "networks".

Metaphor and social practice

How can one account for the perennial attraction of the inscription model of memory? Plato's choice of writing as a metaphor for memory suggests an answer. In his time writing was still a relatively new technology for the Greeks. Socrates, Plato's teacher, wrote nothing and still relied very heavily on oral communication. But by the time Plato went to school written exercises were being introduced (Harris, 1989), and as an adult he became a very accomplished writer. He was obviously fascinated by the consequences of the new technology, and he discussed its pros and cons in more than one of his dialogues.

What makes Plato's situation interesting is that it was not unique. I think we can see it as one instance of a human experience that was to be repeated many times in the course of history. At a
certain point in their cultural evolution humans began to use artificial marks on material objects as reminders. These marks could be painted or engraved on stone, incised in wood, tied as knots into ropes, or they could take more transitory forms. Such reminders constituted what Merlin Donald (1991) has called an external memory system. We know from the archaeological record that external memory systems underwent progressive changes which in some cases led to the development of various forms of writing.

These practices functioned as means for all kinds of well-known ends, from the administration of the law to the composition of works of literature. But they also functioned as a source of explanatory metaphors for a range of topics. To take only one example, for long periods the natural world was conceived as a book, the Book of Nature, written by God. The phenomena of remembering were prime candidates for metaphorical explanations derived from inscriptive practices because the social functions of writing were so similar to the social functions of unaided human memory.

But it is not only that writing as such provides such a splendid paradigm for human remembering, in due course its evolving products also took over this function. Among these products were the archive, the book, and the library, so that, increasingly, memory was being thought of as a kind of archive of texts. In the history of conceptions of memory the palpable inscriptions of external memory are continually seized on as the obvious models for the invisible, intangible workings of internal memory. Of course, it is quite true that new forms and uses of external memory require appropriate adaptations of internal memory. Unfortunately, there has been less interest in exploring these than in introjecting and reifying forms of external memory, so that the history of psychological ideas about memory can sometimes appear as a kind of ghostly counterpart to the history of memory in its external manifestations.

This kind of perspective may provide a key for understanding the historical longevity of concepts of memory. When we examine these concepts we find that they are essentially abstractions of a limited number of root metaphors, mostly derived from the inscription practices that constitute external memory. The longevity of memory concepts is the longevity of metaphors whose plausibility depends on the survival of the practices on which they are based. As long as the practices of literacy remain in place there will be a temptation to think of memory in terms of models of inscription. Insofar as these practices are undergoing significant changes in our own day we can expect that to be reflected in theories of memory.

**Conclusion**

Most of the concepts that modern psychology uses to organize its subject matter are younger than the discipline itself, or, if older, not much older (Danziger, 1997). Amnesia for the historically recent construction or reconstruction of psychological categories like intelligence, motivation, behaviour, social attitude, and so on, helps to maintain the conviction that psychology's subject matter is fixed and natural rather than historically contingent. Memory, on the other hand, has been discussed for millennia. There are profound continuities in the historical vicissitudes of memory as a discursive object. However, this historical fact does not entitle one to draw conclusions about the antiquity of psychology or about the trans-historical nature of its subject matter. The historical continuity we observe is a discursive continuity, not a continuity of natural objects, like rocks or organisms. Moreover, it is a continuity that does not pertain to the discursive context in which the object "memory" is embedded. In order to use the antiquity of "memory" as evidence for the antiquity of "psychology" one would have to demonstrate a continuity of discursive context which does not exist. Psychology has "a long past" only in the sense that longer discursive continuities exist in respect of a few of its objects.

The case of "memory" suggests that the source of this discursive continuity lies in certain root metaphors that have become embedded in the language and that have their origins in particular human practices. Some discursive resources, like the inscription metaphor for memory, have shown great historical perdurance. The long and complex profound transformation of the social practice tablets to computer works. But that is left to be as diverse as is human memory. Perhaps this will in

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great historical persistence. But this is not due to the fact that they capture the essence of a timeless
category of nature but because they are a reflection of human practices and artefacts that have had a
particularly durable historical presence. Some recent historical studies (Sutton, 1998) also suggest
that this metaphorical transfer has long had a defensive function. Thinking of memories as static
inscriptions provides reassurance against threats to personal integrity posed by memory’s fluidity
and unreliability.

But, from a historical perspective, fluidity marks conceptions of memory as much as individual memories. As the present exploration has shown, even a brief look at some moments in
the long and complex history of memory concepts indicates that these concepts have been subject to
profound transformations under the influence of a diversity of factors. The latter include changes in
the social practices of inscription that provide the templates for memory metaphors, from wax
tables to computer networks. These changes affect the prototypical exemplars of how memory
works. But that is only one aspect of memory as a discursive object. As a category for ordering
and interpreting phenomena memory is also characterised by the extent and nature of its domain.
Some conceptions of memory have been quite restrictive in scope, others, including some currently
fashionable ones, have been so broad as to resemble metaphysical abstractions more than useful
scientific generalizations. This feature is closely tied to historical vicissitudes in the cultural
salience of memory as a discursive category, the importance assigned to it in human affairs and its
relationship to other explanatory categories. The causes of these historical discontinuities are likely
to be as diverse as their effects. A few possibilities have been identified in this preliminary study.
Perhaps this will indicate some directions for future work in the history of psychology.

Because of an unfortunate tradition of taking for granted the status of psychological objects
as natural objects, their history as discursive objects has been relatively neglected by historians of
psychology. Most of the relevant work has been done by others. But psychologists need not feel
that there is anything shameful about the historical contingency of their basic categories. The
concepts that human beings use to interpret the behaviour of other human beings have always been
and will always be contingent on particular historical contexts. Historians of psychology can make
a useful contribution by introducing these contingencies into disciplinary discourse. For example,
as long as one takes the inscription metaphor of memory as a literally true reflection of the natural
order, and does not even recognize it as a metaphor, one is in no position to take alternatives
seriously. In this situation, historical analysis may help. For it shows that, contrary to the
inspiration that drives much modern theorizing, memory has no natural essence. It only presents
itself through a framework of shifting metaphors. Empirical research is possible and valuable
within any of these frameworks, but it cannot establish any one of them as the correct one. As
Wittgenstein (1953, 1, §265) observed in another context, that would be like buying additional
copies of the morning paper to make sure it was telling the truth.

References

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Notes

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2. From the persq psychology acq disciplines happr practices there i 20th century.
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How Old Is Psychology...


Notes

1 Criteria that are appropriate for a disciplinary history would not be appropriate for a history of all forms of expertise that are based on the "psychological" (Rose, 1999).

2 From the perspective of a purely philosophical history this distinction disappears and modern psychology acquires a history of several centuries (Hatfield, 1997). But if the emergence of modern disciplines happens, not only on the plane of ideas, but on the level of institutions and social practices there is nothing remotely comparable to the break that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th century.

3 Here one cannot overlook the possible influence of a pervasive late 19th century preoccupation with a past that was fast fading away because of rapid technological and social change, a phenomenon that has been well documented by historical scholarship (Terdiman, 1993; Shore, 2001). This preoccupation was conducive to re-establishing memory as a target of scholarly and medical-scientific interest, all the more so, as the past was seen both as a source of stability and as a block to progress, on a personal as well as a social level.

4 The reference is to the original manuscript of Ebbinghaus' famous monograph on memory which contained crucial reflections that did not appear in the published version.

5 More recently, the term "memory" has benefited from a further source of scientific respectability, namely, its employment in the field of computer engineering. Ironically, the enormous appeal of...
computer analogies in psychology completed an analogical circle because the original, rather cavalier, choice of the term “memory” to refer to computer storage devices had been based on a loose analogy in the first place.

Outside the discipline of psychology there is an extensive literature on the memory-writing connection; see Krell, (1990) for an introduction.

I am not qualified to comment on other literatures. Comparative studies in this area would be highly desirable.

For descriptions of these techniques see Carruthers (1990) or Yates (1966).

For a brief overview see Morris (1992); for an enthusiastic account of the early development of these techniques see Haupi (1998).

Here it is worth noting that both sides in the notorious recovered memory debate are committed to an essentially textual conception of an original definitive version of the truth that is reproduced in subsequent versions with varying degrees of veridicality or distortion (Prager, 1998). In the laboratory setting the experimenter creates the definitive version in the form of materials to be remembered, in clinical settings life itself is often assumed to have created a definitive version of events. The very notion of a definitive version, however, derives, not from life, but from inscribed texts.

On the nature and consequences of this process of “literalization”, see Barclay (1997).

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Abstract

In the context of Psychology acr relationship be which the discr been doing in relevance to the History of Psy ‘constructionist which this deb coherent unify graduate traini

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