

## IV. Ideas and Constructions: Reply to Reviewers

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Like my commentators, I too would have been happier had I extended my historical analysis of the investigative practices of psychology beyond the first four decades of the 20th century. But, as the old saying has it, art is long and life is brief. One has to stop somewhere, and the practice—beloved among writers of introductory textbooks—of stopping only at the present all too readily implies that the present constitutes the end of history. What is important is that the stopping-point of a historical account should not be arbitrary but reflect a natural break, turn or step in the material itself. My account stops when it does, rather than somewhere else, because the beginning of the Second World War marks the point at which the pattern of investigative practice which was to characterize the discipline for many decades thereafter had been clearly laid down, a supposition that is borne out by James Capshew's study (1992, this issue).

Not only did my historical analysis have to stop somewhere short of the present, it also had to be selective in its emphases. As Tim Rogers observes (1992, this issue), my main focus is on experimentation. That is because of the peculiar importance that disciplinary ideology assigns to experimentation. The fact that the hour of the birth of modern psychology is commonly established by reference to the beginning of its experimental laboratories reflects a pervasive belief that the discipline's scientific status stands or falls with the use of experimentation. In methodological discussions experimentation tends to be regarded as the inner citadel of scientific rationality. Hence the analysis of experimentation as a set of historically constituted social practices demands special attention in a history of the discipline. But such an analysis is only a beginning. If my book stimulates others to pursue related lines of inquiry, it will have served its major purpose.

One cannot pursue historical inquiries without some historiographic framework, explicit or implicit. In challenging the framework used in my book, John Mills (1992, this issue) brings some fundamental issues into the open and presents, albeit sketchily, an alternative framework. I would like to clarify the nature of the issues that divide us.

The problem that seems to me to lie at the heart of John Mills' comments is this: What exactly is the relationship between the objects to which the discipline addresses itself and the historical path that the discipline has traversed?

There is a classical rationalist answer to this question which seems to form the basis for John Mills' position. According to this view, the relationship between disciplinary objects and disciplinary history is essentially an antagonistic one. History is a comedy of errors, a stage on which 'social forces' play out their intrusive game, intellectual laziness takes its toll and rhetoric befuddles the mind.

But behind—or should one say above—this sorry scene there hover the ‘real’ objects that all the fuss is about. These exist in some transhistorical, intellectual space where reason reigns supreme.

I think it is because he has chosen to look at the world from this dualistic, if not to say downright Manichaeic, perspective that John Mills arrives at his characterization of what he calls the constructivist position. It is only through the bifocal spectacles of the rationalist that the social nature of scientific cognition and practice appears in forms like ‘rationalization’ and ‘rhetoric’ that are to be sharply distinguished from the ‘real’ (i.e. purely rational or factual) objects of a science.

But this is not the way I look at the history of psychology in *Constructing the Subject*. It seems to me that the profound relevance of the history of a discipline for understanding the content of that discipline arises out of the recognition that *there is no such thing as a private science*. Any epistemic access to the world afforded by a science like psychology is a collective access, and the objects to which the practices of the science are directed cannot be other than social objects constructed through the interaction of real historical individuals. The norms which regulate psychological research practice are, of course, social norms and as such are the product of specific historical conditions. The rationality embodied in these norms is a local and limited rationality, but that does not turn it into mere rationalization.

Achieving historical insight into the scientific life of the discipline depends, I believe, on understanding such local and limited forms of rationality. In the case of psychology this means understanding such forms as the Wundtian program for psychological experimentation or alternative versions of statistical rationality, as represented by Boring and Kelley. But what kind of understanding is at issue here? If we are to achieve more than an elementary technical understanding of various texts we will have to place these texts in some kind of historical context. This could be a biographical context if we were interested in scientific biography, but if our concern is with disciplinary norms as collective achievements the appropriate context is to be looked for at the level of social and cultural formations. The level of analysis here is systemic rather than individual. From John Mills’ perspective the explanations available at this level are not regarded as real explanations because he does not recognize the intrinsically social nature of science, seeing the social context merely as a source of the biases, errors and deficiencies of individual scientists. I do not believe that any understanding of the development of psychology *as a discipline* is to be gained on the basis of such a position, and I am glad to note that in his own excellent historical work he frequently abandons it.

## References

- Capshew, J.H., Mills, J.A., and Rogers, T. (1992). Review symposium on Kurt Danziger’s *Constructing the subject*. *Theory & Psychology*, 2(2): 243–254.
- Danziger, K. (1990). *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.