

The Study of the History of Psychology

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Why study the history of psychology?

To most historians of science the question is not very interesting. The answer is quite obvious: the historical study of man's Promethean attempt to understand himself on this planet is a fascinating adventure that needs no rationale. It is the view from the mountain tops, the surveying of man's most profound problem against the huge panorama of his history, the place where the grandeur is, where the findings, theories, changing importances, and intellectual heroics of every age — including the present one — are woven into exciting patterns. Why study the history of psychology? Because it *is* psychology, all of it, and psychology cannot be studied seriously apart from its history.

One way to see that is in the everyday nature of contemporary research. Throughout his research, each scientist is actually an historian in his own specialty. Every journal article he writes describing new results necessarily begins with the immediate history of the problem. And it is only that context of history, of what has led up to that particular research, that can give significance and meaning to new findings. And so it is with his specialty. Its meaning, its significance within psychology, depends upon its relation to the larger ongoing history of which it is a part.

This first answer to our question merely touches the surface, for if we probe deeper we come upon more profound reasons which are not so apparent. There is, for example, a kind of truth in the history of a science which transcends the science itself. The history of a science as a kind of metascience is rarely seen by the individual scientist confined to his own specialty, for the very historical contexts that bestow significance on any discovery or specialty reach back in time to prior contexts, which in turn have been generated by still prior causation.

As we examine these matters, we are struck by a remarkable fact: the paths of these questions and contexts through time are not necessarily linear or logical. They diverge and come together, expanding and contracting, on the basis of many variables, only a few of which are what we generally think of reasoning out the world. The purpose of history is to discover and understand this historical structure which lies at the very foundation of the logical surface of science and to which all present discovery is relative. Why study the history of psychology? For itself alone.

Neither science nor the individuals who perform its rites of discovery are outside historical causation. Psychologists, in particular, are as deeply embedded in textures of personal and chance situational causation as the very subjects they study. We can see what to do only by seeing what has been done. We can discover in the present only what we have conjectured in the past. We can recognize in front of us only what past scientific perception has trained us to see. And just as an individual, on the basis of his past history, selects out of his environment a particular phenomenon to attend to and to label as important, so an entire science, utilizing instruments of perception, moves about through its problems and its vital aspects with the same dependence on its history. And just as an individual, to be free, must verbalize the past that has resulted in his present, so an entire science must remain in dialogue with its past and analyze its hidden biases and omissions if it is not to wither away into dried-up specialties and unfulfilling

evasions. Why study the past of psychology? Because it is the only way to understand the present.

Most of what I have said so far pertains to all sciences. But there are reasons applicable to psychology alone, for current psychology is wedded to its history with much stronger ties than any other science. As a laboratory investigation, psychology is only a century old; as a body of insights, observations, and hypothesis, it is the oldest science in the world. Moreover, its history is not a musty attic of intellectual bric-a-brac and mildewed curiosities, as are often found in the history of chemistry or neurology, for example. It is instead a continuing discussion of the perennial and enduring problems of human and animal nature. It attempts the same questions again and again, even by the same routes. Current work on the nature-nurture problem, on emotion and intellect, on thought and language, on the problem of consciousness — all are simply the most recent voices in discussions which have been reverberating through history for more than two thousand years. Why study the history of psychology? It is relevant to present research, a fact that is not true of other sciences.

Another particular reason is the recently complicated and often bewildering growth of psychology. The oldest science in the world has suddenly expanded its factual content and the ranks of its scholars at a rate exceeding all other sciences. No other science, in no other century, has moved with such swiftness, confusion, and vigor. This is seen in the number of persons in professional societies, the expansion of academic departments and the demands upon them by students, the proliferation of specialist journals, the tumultuous diversity of research papers, the special jargons and schismatic methods, the huge conventions now too cumbersome to fulfill their original purposes, and the influence of psychology on the entire fabric of our times. What geology was to the early nineteenth century, biology to the late nineteenth century, and physics to the first half of the twentieth century, so psychology is very much the central major science of the latter half of the twentieth century. How did all this happen? The need for proper study of this phenomenal growth and its deep causes, rational and irrational, is obvious and urgent.

The urgency stems from the fragmentation by specialization that has accompanied this astonishing growth. Psychology has not only been expanding, it has also been separating. How can we understand it all? One problem has led to another, moving psychology to newer subspecialties at an ever-increasing rate. And with each new field, thousands of research titles soon make their appearance. Psychology has diverged beyond the scope of any one specialist, shattering into brilliant fragments by its own progress and causing areas to lose touch with each other in their very successes. All about us, research pushes into research, often evading the larger questions with which it began.

As a result, psychology is at a critical stage in its development, and I would suggest that only its history can fit together all this divergence. The increasing multiplicity of psychology is not logical, but historical, like a jigsaw puzzle that cannot be fitted together in space, but only in time.

Why study the history of psychology? For all the reasons I have mentioned: to discover the historical structure under the logical surface of science, to understand the present, to be relevant to real questions, to liberate ourselves from the persuasions of fashions, to comprehend psychology as a whole, but also because it is the only way to understand a field of such divergence and conflicting emphases, which is at the same time the central science of our era.