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History Is Beautiful!
Review of: Psychology: Theoretical-Historical Perspectives.
(1998)
Robert W. Rieber, Kurt Salzinger
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It is not surprising that in the areas of the history and theory of psychology one finds as many different positions, interests, and perspectives as there exist in other fields of psychology. However, most historians of psychology are united by attributing significance to the past as a source for understanding the form and content of contemporary psychology. And most theoreticians, or rather metatheoreticians, are united by the conviction that metatheory and theory play guiding roles in research. But what is the relationship between theoretical and historical psychology? This question is answered differently by insiders. Some believe that one can study metatheory without including history, whereas others argue that metatheory without historical knowledge is shortsighted. History, on the other hand, does not necessarily require metatheory, but if historians of psychology wish to study more than chronological data, then they must certainly learn from and about metatheory. In a Kantian mode one might argue that metatheory without history is blind, and history without metatheory is vain. Or, as the editors of Psychology: Theoretical-Historical Perspectives, Rieber and Salzinger, argue in their Preface regarding the relationship between both, “no divorce of these two areas of knowledge is possible” (p. ix).

Nietzsche (1988) once discriminated among three types of history when discussing the use and abuse of history for life. In this vein, monumental history belongs to the active and powerful makers of psychology, to the “great men” of the discipline: Wundt, James, Watson, Galton, Binet, or Freud. Antiquarian history is performed by persons who conserve and celebrate psychology's past and who look back with love and pride to the roots of their discipline. Antiquarians collect first editions, instruments, and other memorabilia of celebrated psychological heroes. Nietzsche's critical history refers to psychologists who break with the past of their discipline, interrogate its roots, and expose embarrassing issues without hesitating to condemn them. In Psychology: Theoretical-Historical Perspectives, all three types of histories are loosely represented. One finds Skinner and Piaget writing about historical and theoretical issues relevant to their research programs, historians and theoreticians celebrating pioneers and theories, and a few critics of psychology's past, for example, David Bakan on “American Culture and Psychology.”

Six chapters of the book are subsumed under Part I, “Psychology Becomes a Science: Influences From Within and Without.” Part II of the book is devoted to “Socioeconomic and Political Factors in the Development of Psychology.” However, only 3 out of 19 chapters are devoted to a history of psychology that specifically aims to understand great men and their works in the context of the sociopolitical dynamics of theory development—and these chapters do so only in a cursory way. Ten chapters in Part III deal with “Psychological Systems Past, Present, and Future.” The book covers significant pioneers, such as Fechner, Mller, Wundt, Galton, James, and Baldwin. Major research programs, such as behaviorism, Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis, genetic

epistemology (Piaget), and the cultural-historical school (Vygotsky) are discussed.

There are changes and improvements between the first edition of Psychology: Theoretical-Historical Perspectives (published in 1980 by Academic Press) and the second edition. Research is updated and extended where possible. Five authors are listed in the Contributors' section as deceased, among them—as is well known—Skinner and Piaget. The new edition includes more chapters (19 instead of 16) and covers a greater number than the first edition of pioneers, programs, and problems. Some chapters which were contained in the old edition have been dropped, and the new chapters of the second edition seize nearly half of all pages. Thus, the edited book is not just a simple reprint of the first edition but a genuinely new book with many of the contributions highly innovative, cutting edge, and original. There should be no doubt that this is an important, excellent, albeit mostly traditional history of psychology, filled with significant and fresh details of the past and exemplifying the theoretical variety of psychology.

A crucial new chapter is that by Anand Paranjpe ("Theory and History of Psychology and the Denial and Affirmation of the Self") in which he compares conceptualizations of the self in the West and East (Upanisads, Buddhism). Paranjpe shows how the denial and affirmation of the self in the Euro-American tradition finds its parallel in Indian philosophy and at the same time points out the particular differences. Historiographically significant, too, are Edward Haupt's ("Origins of American Psychology in the Work of G. E. Mller: Classical Psychophysics and Serial Learning") and Eugene Taylor's ("William James on the Demise of Positivism in American Psychology") contributions.

Taylor's authoritative article on James argues against the constructed James and for the real James who presumably can be found in archival material, thus refuting in detail some misconceptions about James. If only Taylor, who has become the superego for Jamesian scholarship, had been as careful in referring to German psychology, for the constructed and "real" Wundt also differ, and the "Germanic view of science" (p. 119) was much more complex than suggested by Taylor. Haupt argues in minute detail that Muller's role in the history of experimental psychology has been underestimated and that his role in the development of psychophysics and memory research has been unjustifiably neglected.

Highly informative are the new chapters contained in Part III. This part includes chapters by David J. Murray and Bahar Farahmand titled "Gestalt Theory and Evolutionary Psychology," one by Robert Wozniak titled "Thought and Things: James Mark Baldwin and the Biosocial Origins of Mind," and one by Carl Ratner titled "Historical and Contemporary Significance of Vygotsky's Sociohistorical Psychology." All three chapters provide a rather unique perspective on their chosen topics. Murray and Fahramand's and Wozniak's contributions have a historical emphasis, with the former documenting the relationship between Gestalt psychologists and evolutionary theory, Ratner's presentation is more theoretical and demonstrates the relevance of Vygotsky's thought for today's psychology.

For obvious reasons, it is impossible to write a comprehensive history and theory of psychology that would satisfy every historian and metatheoretician who in the meantime can join different professional organizations and publish in various journals around the world. North American historians of psychology can choose, for example, membership in Cheiron (International Society for the History of the Behavioral and Social Sciences), Division 26 (History of Psychology) of the American Psychological Association (APA), or the History and Philosophy of Psychology Section of the Canadian Psychological Association. They can publish their research in journals, such as Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences, History of Psychology, and History of the Human Sciences. Metatheoreticians of psychology can join the International Society for Theoretical Psychology or Division 24 (Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology) of APA, and publish in Theory and Psychology, New Ideas in Psychology, Philosophical Psychology, and Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology.

Preference for a certain research program may lead a potential historian or theoretician to argue,

as Rieber and Salzinger point out with regard to a potential reviewer, that “the chapters are uneven and unintegrated” (p. ix), and I must add, that important threads of the history of psychology are absent. Indeed, missing is the history of philosophical and critical psychology (see Teo, 1999a), which includes such names as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Dilthey, Husserl, Brentano, or Spranger, and such research programs as humanistic, existential, or phenomenological psychology. Although I have conducted some of my own work within a Piagetian framework and think that Piaget's theory is still relevant to many psychological and epistemological questions, it does seem “uneven” to dedicate three chapters (by Piaget, Inhelder, and Voyat) to his work. It reflects the zeitgeist of the first edition of the book and not of the late 1990s.

Perhaps a more significant omission is a perspective that critically deconstructs, reconstructs, and constructs (Teo, 1999b) important aspects of the history and theory of psychology. Psychological practitioners, historians, and theoreticians should be concerned about the Euro-American character of psychology and the role and neglect of women and ethnic minorities in psychology's past and present. Only Anand Paranjpe draws attention to non-Western psychologies and points out that psychologists cannot neglect the indigenous character of the discipline, for psychology is not a natural science but part of a cultural, historical, and social construction (see also Danziger, 1997).

In the meantime, some historians of psychology have studied the contributions of women and their systematic exclusions from psychology (Furumoto & Scarborough, 1986) and have followed the career of African American pioneers of psychology (Guthrie, 1998). It is not uncommon for textbooks to account for these issues and include, for example, East Asian psychological frameworks (Taoism or Confucianism) and the role of women in psychology (see Benjafield, 1996). Critical histories, in the sense of Nietzsche, are not about political correctness but about a social-scientific understanding of a historical totality. Only the whole picture can provide historical truth and the whole picture includes personal, political, social, economic, and cultural contexts and idiosyncrasies in which research has been performed and executed, and theories advanced, modified, and abandoned.

There is an ugly side to the history and theory of psychology (for psychology's racism, see Richards, 1997). Thus, I do not want to hear apologetic statements about Galton's racist arguments, and I want to know that Oswald Kroh and Erich Jaensch were writing on Mller's life and work but also that they were leading psychologists in Nazi Germany—facts not mentioned in the book. A focus on the ugly side of the history and theory of psychology does not imply the moralizing of history but allows one to see the whole picture and when appropriate to inspire and extend psychology's contemporary activities. A plea to look at the deconstructive and ugly side, too, is itself only one part of the truth. History and theory remains an exciting and enlightening endeavor even when one deconstructs great men of psychology as general cognitive masterminds. Such an endeavor leads to a balanced view of the complexity of the history and theory of psychology. History and theory is as beautiful and ugly as life itself.

In terms of the technical merit of the book, the editorial work by the publisher was a little disappointing and had an exceptionally high number of typos. Some sentences changed their meaning ironically: “Trance consciousness, clairvoyance, telepathy… all had to be accounted for … in the steam [sic] of thought and feeling” (p. 110). In addition, Salzinger received a nonexistent middle name and is listed wrongly as Kurt D. Salzinger. APA was fair in pointing out this mistake to me when they sent me the book for review. Nevertheless, and despite my critical concerns, Psychology: Theoretical-Historical Perspectives is an important publication event in the history and theory of psychology.

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