Introducing the history and philosophy of psychology

Chapter outline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>History of definitions</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Different definitions and the problem of interpretation</td>
<td>Types of history</td>
<td>Box 1.1 &quot;Great psychologists&quot;</td>
<td>Assumptions about historical change</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Cognitive interests and types of sciences</td>
<td>Definitions of knowledge and truth</td>
<td>Different ways of thinking about science</td>
<td>Assumptions of positivist science</td>
<td>How science changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Assumptions about historical change</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reasons for studying the history and philosophy of Psychology</td>
<td>Philosophical issues in historiography of Psychology</td>
<td>Disciplinary support</td>
<td>Critical history</td>
<td>Critical historiography</td>
<td>Concrete steps of reflexivity</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Introduction

In this chapter we begin a journey through the vast and varied terrain of the history of psychological topics by attempting to clarify what the terms “psychology,” “history,”
Introducing the history and philosophy of psychology

“science,” and “philosophy” mean. We discuss some central ideas underlying a critical history and philosophy of psychological topics. Then we place the work of scientists in context and describe social realities that influence scientists’ attempts to be objective and unbiased. As such, we propose a view of science as socially embedded.

Because the discipline and professions of Psychology as practised currently are indebted to both ancient and modern philosophy, we examine domains of philosophy that seem most relevant to Psychology. Our view is that a philosophical outlook on psychological issues strengthens systematic critical inquiry. By “critical” we mean an approach that not only examines what psychologists are doing, but also why they are doing what they are doing. This approach includes an analysis of the implicit assumptions as well as the contexts in which psychological thinking and practice are embedded.

The aims of this chapter are to describe:

- Different definitions of psychology and how they have changed historically.
- Different definitions and types of history, the crucial role that interpretation plays, and different assumptions about historical change.
- How to practise the history of psychology with relative objectivity.
- Different definitions of science, basic assumptions of the natural-science approach, and assumptions about how science changes.
- What a critical approach to the history and philosophy of any science entails when practising science.
- The value of philosophical questions and critical thinking for understanding the history and philosophy of psychology.
- Four interrelated themes that summarize the main issues discussed in this chapter: multiple psychologies, reflexive historiography, intersubjective science, and critical thinking.

Part 1 What is psychology?

Before we can explore the history and philosophy of psychology, we need to clarify what we mean by the term “psychology.” The questions “what is psychology?” and “what are the discipline and professions of Psychology?” are best answered as: “It depends on history!” Although authors of current introductory textbooks typically define psychology as the study of behaviour and mental processes, in the past, psychologists did not share that definition.

History of definitions

Diverse definitions of psychology have been the historical norm. For instance, Friedrich Beneke (1798–1854), a German philosopher-psychologist who understood his own
personal psychology as the new psychology of his time, published a book, *Textbook of Psychology as a Natural Science*. Students of philosophy and education and interested laypersons studied it. In it Beneke (1833/1845) defined psychology as the natural science of inner experience. He suggested that psychology was everything that one apprehended through internal perception (perception of one’s own thinking, feeling, and willing). For Beneke the subject matter of psychology was “what you find in yourself” (p. 1) and this definition complemented his particular natural-scientific approach.

**Wilhelm Wundt** (1832–1920), the famous German psychologist who is considered one of the founders of the discipline, defined psychology’s subject matter as the total content of experience in its immediate character in his *Outlines of Psychology* (1896). **William James** (1842–1910), considered one of the pioneers of US Psychology, defined topics of psychology in his 1890 book *The Principles of Psychology as the science of mental life, both of its phenomena and of their conditions*. Clearly, Beneke’s, Wundt’s, and James’s psychological terminology and theoretical and methodological frameworks differ from those of present Psychology.

An analysis of more than 200 introductory textbooks, published between 1887 and 1987, showed that prior to 1930, definitions of Psychology included the concepts of mind, consciousness, or mental activity 67 per cent of the time, whereas behaviour was only used 14 per cent of the time (Henley, Johnson, E. Jones, & Herzog, 1989). But from 1930 to 1969 terms referring to the mind were only mentioned 7 per cent of the time, while use of the term “behaviour” escalated to 68 per cent. Then, in the 1980s, terms referring to the mind increased again to 33 per cent, even while “behaviour” climbed to 79 per cent, indicating that later authors tended to use both sets of terms (behaviour and mental activity).

There is a tendency for current definitions of Psychology in Anglo-American nations (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA) and in many non-anglophone nations to abide by twentieth-century “American” definitions of natural-scientific Psychology. The natural-science perspective was influenced briefly by Wundt, then dominated by earlier and later forms of behaviourism (the science of behaviour) and more recently by cognitivism (the study of mental processes) and neuroscience (the science of brain–behaviour relations). Changing definitions of Psychology reflect dominant research programmes in particular times and places.

European psychologists, however, especially before World War II, generally did not share the natural-science view. But after the war, a process termed the Americanization of psychology reflected the expansion of US economic power, and with the increasing global dominance of US Psychology the US terms became the norm.

From a theoretical perspective, it is curious that, when US psychologists expressed a preference for studying behaviour or mental processes, they did not discuss how these two domains interact. Yet, why not assume that Psychology is the study of behaviour, cognitive processes, and their interaction? One answer is because, historically, this interaction was not considered a primary research problem. Academic communities at different times have developed different definitions of what Psychology should be, and these definitions themselves depend on the story of Psychology in specific cultural contexts.

So far we have covered a few definitions of psychology from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But the issue becomes more complicated when we examine even earlier times. In the eighteenth century, German philosopher **Christian Wolff** (1679–1754) divided psychology into rational and empirical psychology. Rational psychology, for him, was the
science of what was possible by the human soul, which included the mind. Within rational psychology Wolff discussed the soul’s substantiality, simplicity, immateriality, immortality, and the mind–body problem.

By contrast, the aim of Wolff’s empirical psychology was to identify psychological principles with the aid of concrete experiences of what actually happens in the human soul. His use of the term “empirical” did not mean what it suggests today, but something that one can attain through direct human experience rather than through reason. Within his empirical psychology Wolff discussed the soul’s ability to know and desire, the interaction of soul/mind and body, and the soul/mind’s “faculties” (capacities).

Outside the history of psychology and theology it might be difficult to understand what Wolff intended. However, his psychology was the culmination of centuries of thought on the soul, which traditionally scholars have claimed originated with the ancient Greeks (see Chapter 2), specifically Aristotle (384–322 BCE).

Although most psychologists today do not discuss the soul and they understand the mind as material, historically psychology remained the study of the soul until the nineteenth century with few exceptions. Then in the second half of that century, German philosopher Friedrich Lange (1828–1875) proclaimed a psychology without a soul, which reinforced the movement towards a natural-science definition of psychology (see Chapter 12). This and other developments led to the formal emergence of scientific psychology. But the term “behaviour,” which emanates from late nineteenth-century biology, would have been foreign to Psychology’s predecessors.

Did Lange, Wolff, James, Wundt, and Beneke mean the same thing when they defined “psychology”? Clearly, although there is some overlap among their definitions, the general framework, meaning, and purpose of Psychology have changed rather significantly over time. Accordingly, it is important to distinguish four different domains when considering the history of psychology:

- **Psychological topics.** Scholars, philosophers, poets, etc. have studied certain psychological topics for millennia. For instance, Aristotle discussed memory, recall, and recollection. However, he did not study IQ, stereotype-threat, or mirror-neurons, nor did he use the term “psychology.”

- **Psychology as a separate field of study.** Although there is controversy on this issue, Psychology as a distinct field of study independent of philosophy did not exist before the eighteenth century (Danziger, 1997b). In 1590 Rudolf Goclenius (1547–1628), a German professor of physics, mathematics, logic, and ethics, used the term “psychologia” (psychology) in a book title. Evidently the term was used sporadically even earlier, but psychology was not yet a separate field.

- **Psychology as an institutionalized discipline.** Psychology as a formal discipline of research and teaching at universities did not exist before the nineteenth century. So, when did the institutionalization – meaning establishing an academic discipline that follows institutional rules – of Psychology occur? One might claim 1824 as its birth-year, when Prussia established psychology as an examinable discipline at its universities where professors of philosophy were required to teach courses on psychology and pedagogy to high-school teachers-in-training (Gundlach, 2004). Customarily, however, authors of histories of Psychology cite 1879 as the discipline’s birth-year, when Wundt began to conduct experiments in his psychological laboratory in Leipzig.
Psychology as a profession. Although one could consider local events of professionalization occurring at different times in different nations, Psychology as a profession and an expert occupation emerged only in the twentieth century (Ward, 2002). This fact means that in 1850 our ancestors were unable to go to a psychologist for assessment or treatment. Furthermore, Psychology’s professionalization was linked to the development of other institutions in a given society. For instance, German psychology was professionalized in the context of Nazi militarization beginning in the 1930s (Geuter, 1984/1992), whereas in the USA after World War II the Veterans Administration was an important factor in the establishment of clinical psychology as a profession (R. Baker & Pickren, 2007).

Part 1 conclusion

It is difficult to attribute the birth of a discipline to a single event. The evidence suggests that the institutionalization of Psychology occurred at different times in different geographical or national contexts. In this sense it is difficult to write the history of Psychology according to a single narrative (R. Smith, 2005). Instead of a solitary global event of institutionalization, one finds many local ones. Psychology originated in Germany differently than in Brazil, China, or South Africa, for example.

Furthermore, the term “psychology” has been ambiguous historically. British historian of Psychology Graham Richards (2010) deals with this ambiguity by using Psychology (with an upper-case P) to mean the discipline as a science (and later as a profession). The discipline of Psychology is a construction of nineteenth-century European scientists that has flourished ever since in Western societies and currently pervades popular consciousness. Richards uses psychology (with a lower-case p) to mean psychological subject matter with aged roots, practised in diverse cultures through philosophical inquiry or self-reflection. Accordingly, in this textbook we use the generic term “psychology” to encompass psychological subject matter and topics and psychology as an independent field of study. We reserve the specific term “Psychology” for the academic scientific discipline and its professional and applied branches.

Finally, as British historian Roger Smith observed (1997), the discipline is so diverse in its theoretical positions that multiple psychologies prevail rather than one unitary Psychology. Thus, we do not accept the claim that Psychology is exclusively a natural science. Despite the efforts of many psychologists to convey a public image of uniformity, conceptual diversity has been the historical norm in the discipline (see Chapter 7).

Regardless of intellectual boundaries concerning what is and is not legitimate Psychology, definitions of the discipline always have been contestable, because what constitutes “psychology” varies significantly over time and culture. Accordingly, we attempt to account for the range of definitions and conceptual approaches to Psychology. In addition, we do not share a priori (as an assumption that is not tested) the view that the latest is also the best Psychology. There is an inherent problem in such an idea of progress: if the latest is always the best, then the present Psychology cannot be the best, because it will be outdated tomorrow.

In sum, psychology as a subject of inquiry has had different definitions over the thousands of years that human beings have thought about their own and others’ experiences. The term psychology has meant the study of the soul, consciousness, behaviour, the mind, or the brain, depending on the era and cultural context investigated.
Introducing the history and philosophy of psychology

Similarly, psychologists have defined the focal points of their studies quite differently. Psychologists with a natural-science orientation typically emphasize the prediction and control of behaviour; in more recent decades they added mental processes, meaning cognitive and brain functions, to their definition. Psychologists with a human-science orientation generally stress subjectivity (i.e., personal experiences of thinking, feeling, and willing, and the meanings that human beings attribute to these experiences) and making one’s intentions known to oneself or others in a context of meaningful action and reflection. In subsequent chapters, we distinguish between natural-science and human-science Psychology.

Small-group discussion. Based on your understanding of the current definition of Psychology, how valid might this definition be in 25 or even 100 years?

Part 2  What is history?

Before we can explore the origins of different theoretical perspectives and describe influential scientific psychologists and practitioners, we should define what we mean by “history,” describe how historians construct interpretations of the past, examine underlying assumptions about historical change, and discuss the ways in which scholars understand history as a discipline. These are all issues of historiography, which means the philosophy, history, and methods of history as a scholarly pursuit.

Different definitions and the problem of interpretation

As with “psychology,” different definitions of “history” are possible. A basic definition of history suggests that history is the record or chronicle of past events. But what events should a history record?

Imagine that you have to write a chronological account of the daily events in your life. What is important to you might not be important to your mother, friend, teacher, or (if you have one) your psychotherapist. You would have to select certain events as significant and relevant for documentation yet neglect other events. Thus, in history, a complete chronological account is impossible. Moreover, one always filters events through cultural–historical lenses. This statement means that selecting meaningful events depends on both objective and subjective criteria.

Philosophically, historians’ procedures of selecting and interpreting events and objects do not differ qualitatively from psychologists’ investigative procedures. Researchers do not just observe, because they always observe something that interests them. Making sense of observations without a meaningful context is impossible psychologically. Moreover, what is considered an important observation or interpretation often is based on the consensus of experts, which itself entails subjectivity.

Another way to appreciate the historical dimensions of significance and relevance is to consider that what nineteenth-century scholars regarded as important might be insignificant presently. Many peers regarded Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841) as one of
psychology’s most important innovators (see Chapter 4). Yet today his name is hardly known outside the history of Psychology.

You can see, therefore, that interpretation plays a significant role in choosing a chronicle of past events and giving them meaning. This conclusion leads us to a second definition of history: the interpretation of the record of past events in order to understand them. But, as we explain in Part 3, interpretation always depends on the interpreter’s present horizon of understanding (i.e., on the extent of one’s own current perspective).

This point, in turn, points us to the issue of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. For us, objectivity and subjectivity are located on a continuum. Complete subjectivity produces solipsism, the philosophical notion that nothing beyond “me” exists and that everything else in the world is “my” invention. Of course, clinical psychologists today might characterize such thoughts as psychopathological.

On the other hand, complete objectivity is impossible, because any record of past events is inherently too complex, and the selection and interpretation of past events to understand their importance always entail subjectivity. Nevertheless, objectivity as an ideal, in the sense of attempting to do justice to the complexity of past events and objects, remains a valid goal, if it is combined with reflexive knowledge about the limitations of all interpretations. Yet, we would argue, better and worse interpretations do exist. Moreover, objectivity itself has a history and differing ideas of what constitutes this ideal have been proposed (Daston & Galison, 2007).

The hermeneutic circle

As the above discussion indicates, data and interpretation are significant elements of historians’ work. Historical data consist of published works, letters, archival material, oral records, objects, instruments, films, etc. Interpretation refers to the art of understanding such material.

The discipline in which scholars develop understandings of interpretations is hermeneutics. For Emilio Betti (1890–1968), an Italian hermeneutic scholar, interpretation is the procedure that evokes understanding. One pioneer of hermeneutics in historiography was the German scholar Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). He believed that history is the description of what has taken place, but this description is only partially accessible through the historical material itself. How one makes sense of that material involves interpretation.

German scholar Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) called the complex procedure of interpreting data the hermeneutic circle. Each selection can be understood only within the whole to which it belongs, and vice versa. In order to understand the meaning of a fact in history you have to understand the context to which it belongs. But the whole context can only be understood based on the parts that make up the whole.

Classical types of interpretation

Emphasizing the historical method of understanding, Johann Droysen (1808–1884), a German historian, specified four types of interpretation (Droysen, 1858/1967):

- Pragmatic interpretation organizes the basic historical material and provides a sketch of the factual context. This form resembles what is known as chronological history, for
Introducing the history and philosophy of psychology

example, a history of all the important events in Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) life. Interpretation is involved in selecting and organizing this material.

- Interpretation of the conditions involves analyzing the factors that influence a historical event, object, or person, such as space, time, economy, technology, religion, etc. This form resembles what is known currently as social history. We could study the religious, technological, economic, and social contexts during Freud’s life and their influences on his theory.

- Psychological interpretation means biographical reconstruction with a special focus on psychodynamic interpretations of personal actions. In Freud’s biography we would try to understand his relationship with his parents and colleagues in order to understand his theory. Interpretation involves arguing that his relationship with his mother or his drive for success influenced the form and content of his theories.

- The interpretation of ideas means analyzing what ideas were dominant at a certain point in time. For instance, the notion of unconscious processes was not new at all when Freud originated psychoanalysis. In fact, in his era there were different conceptions of “the unconscious” (see Chapter 9). Thus, one could argue Freud gave specific meaning to an existing idea. This form of interpretation is now known as intellectual history. A similar term is zeitgeist (a German noun meaning literally “the spirit of the time”), which refers to the intellectual and cultural climate of an era.

A working definition

The definition of history that we prefer is: the interpretation of past events from multiple perspectives in order to understand their meaning. Interpretation is pivotal. That is, historians construct a plausible vision of the past, based on data, but this vision inevitably is selective, based on how they organize the available evidence. How humans construct historical events and objects (e.g., documents) is crucial. Events and objects are not simply discovered in nature, but are the social consequences of humans embedded in culture and historical time.

In our definition of history we stress fostering multiple perspectives, which facilitates a more differentiated understanding of historical events than does operating from a single frame of reference. Another interpretive safeguard is to report “the informed judgment of others” (Barzun, 2000, p. x). As a scientific principle, it is important to focus on confirming evidence, yet it is also wise to report disconfirming evidence.

Interpretations themselves derive from a more or less explicit theoretical framework, embedded in history, culture, and personal preferences. Thus, in our working definition, history and philosophy of psychology are intertwined. As the historian of psychology Kurt Danziger (b. 1926) argues, there is no scientific theory without personal and social history and no personal and social history without theory. Philosophy and history complement each other in that philosophy contributes to answering current historical problems, while history allows for a more adequate understanding of philosophical-psychological issues.

Accordingly, in this textbook, we try to examine individual dimensions and social forces as well as ideals that incline people to action (Brinton, 1963). In this sense, history is the story of ideas in social context with predominant ideals and material factors.

Understanding the past in this way means that historical explanations comprise both reasons and causes. Historical figures might give reasons for their ideas, but their ideas are
also the consequence of unconscious motives and social factors. For example, a scientist might propose a new concept that has rational value, but he or she also might be impelled to propose the idea, because of competition with a rival scientist and the desire to win the race to claim discovery of the concept.

Types of history

Answers to the question of what historians study are quite varied, because there are many types of history.

Biography of “great men”

Biographical history, or the “great man” (sic) approach, focuses on the life and works of individuals who are considered to have significantly shaped the outlook of a given field. In this genre, historians usually emphasize the individual more than the social context. Biographical history also is termed personalistic theory of history. Biographical history includes “psychobiography” wherein the historian applies psychoanalytic concepts to understand a “great man’s” internal conflicts, as in the 1958 study by Erik Erikson (1902–1994) of the Protestant改革者 Martin Luther (1483–1546).

Some historians of Psychology focus on eminent researchers and their “discoveries.” These individuals are termed “great psychologists” (Watson & Evans, 1991) or “pioneers of psychology” (Fancher & Rutherford, 2012). A review of this type of history in Psychology appears in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1 “Great psychologists”

Based on the nature of their discipline, psychologists often focus on individual greatness (e.g., Simonton, 1994). Some have researched whether “great” people differ from the rest of us in terms of specific personality traits that predispose them to become world leaders, scientific geniuses, and athletes, while the rest live ordinary lives. Psychologists adopting this standpoint have examined genetic inheritance, intuition, aesthetic appreciation, birth order, formal education, sexual orientation, aging, IQ, and substance abuse.

But the question remains how a conception and orientation towards history with an exclusive focus on people and personalities can be integrated with the social context within which the individual lived and that influences what an individual does and is able to do. Would calculus have been developed if German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) had died as a child? The answer is “yes,” because Isaac Newton (1642–1727) was working on calculus simultaneously. For another example, it is very likely that the theory of evolution would have come to prominence had Charles Darwin (1809–1882) never lived.

As such, to be most comprehensive about a psychological topic under investigation, it is important for historians to focus on ideas, theories, or systems of psychological thought, while acknowledging individual and social contexts.
Introducing the history and philosophy of psychology

From the zeitgeist to social history

Those historians who emphasize the zeitgeist concentrate on the intellectual, cultural, and sometimes technological atmosphere of the era in which their subject lived. In scientific psychology, historians attempt to elucidate the zeitgeist of a particular pioneer during which he or she developed new theories, methods, and practices. From this perspective, psychoanalysis, for example, was inevitable in the social climate of late nineteenth-century Vienna.

Robert Watson (1977), an early US historian of psychology and Psychology, asserted that psychological works are embedded in the social context from which they emerge. Thus, for him, history is neither chronology nor biography, but the study of cultural trends. However, the disadvantage of an exclusive focus on the zeitgeist is that such reconstructions lack specificity; for example, in what ways, concretely, does the zeitgeist influence a psychologist?

Consider that Plato (429–347 BCE) and Aristotle were central figures in ancient Greece (see Chapter 2). They lived in roughly the same zeitgeist and drew upon common extant ideas, but they produced different understandings. Social conditions and the zeitgeist were the background for, but did not determine, their ideas.

An approach related to the zeitgeist approach is social history, a very broad term, in which scholars focus on social developments, including political-economic and legal aspects. This approach expanded in the 1960s, using local studies of concrete activities of everyday life, in solidarity with people who have been marginalized in society, to give a vision of the larger society (e.g., Zinn, 1985). Using a kind of “bottom-up” narrative, social historians study the ordinary lives of people excluded from the mainstream due to gender, class, ethnocultural status, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, etc. In the field of Psychology, for example, instead of asking who invented critical psychology, social historians would examine underlying socioeconomic and political developments, the students and faculty members, and institutional and educational developments that led to the emergence of critical psychology and its different expressions in various countries.

In social histories of science scholars situate scientific activity in the everyday world of socioeconomic and political contingencies. Rather than ignoring the context, social historians of science investigate such factors as the exclusion of women from science, the dependence of many male scientists on networks of socially subordinated groups (e.g., women), and the shift of scientific practice from private homes to institutions during the seventeenth century (Fara, 2004).

Feminist history

Feminist accounts emphasize women’s stories in areas such as philosophy, science, and scientific psychology. Feminist historians claim that women’s contributions to the history of ideas and science, such as those of Anne Conway (1630–1679) and Emilie du Chatelet (1706–1749), were excluded systematically. The societal consequence of maintaining the invisibility of women and ignorance of their contributions is entrenchment of patriarchal domination intellectually (Spender, 1983).

The exclusion of women from history occurs in several ways. Until recent decades, the founding scientists and subsequent generations were almost entirely men.