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978-1-107-00729-1 - A History of Psychology in Western Civilization

Bruce K. Alexander and Curtis P. Shelton

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A History of Psychology in Western Civilization

This book is a re-introduction to psychology. It focuses on great scholarly thinkers, beginning with Plato, Marcus Aurelius, and St. Augustine, who gave the field its foundational ideas long before better known founders, such as Galton, Fechner, Wundt, and Watson, appeared on the scene. Psychology can only achieve its full breadth and potential when we fully appreciate its scholarly legacy. Bruce Alexander and Curtis Shelton also argue that the fundamental contradictions built into psychology's history have never been resolved, and that a truly pragmatic approach, as defined by William James, can produce a "layered" psychology that will enable psychologists to face the fearsome challenges of the twenty-first century. *A History of Psychology in Western Civilization* claims that contemporary psychology has overemphasized the methods of physical science and that psychology will need a broader scientific orientation alongside a scholarly focus in order to fully engage the future.

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Dedicated to Patricia Holborn Alexander

Dedicated to Cecelia Roberts

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Preface

BY BRUCE K. ALEXANDER

This book began as a course in the history of psychology that I taught for more than four decades at three different Universities. The course went through a series of metamorphoses as the world changed and I changed my understanding of it. By 1985 it included the idea that most of the real insights in psychology come from its scholarly ancestors, and that this scholarship needs to be carefully re-introduced to students if they are to fully utilize the intellectual treasures that they have inherited as psychologists. Contemporary psychology's conceit is supposing that it can comprehend deep psychological problems using science and technology that do not have deep roots in intellectual history. Many psychologists are beginning to appreciate this as we move into the future.

More immediately, this book is a collaboration by Curtis Shelton and myself that began when he was a teaching assistant in my course in the history of psychology at Simon Fraser University in 2005. Our collaboration continued as he and I produced an earlier book on the psychology of addiction together, although I was the sole author of that book (Alexander, 2010).

In this jointly authored book on the history of scholarly psychology, the narrative voice that tells occasional personal stories and the majority of the text writing is mine. We found that stories from my long career as a psychologist help put parts of the scholarly history into contemporary context. Most of the organization, resolution, and focus to get the project done came from Curtis. He is also the principal author of Chapter 3, many key ideas throughout the text, and many of the thought questions that accompany Chapters 2 through 9. The book took my direction as senior author, and I alone bear the responsibility for its most radical and flamboyant statements. However, all of the positions have been shaped by sometimes lengthy discussions between Curtis and myself and the final form of the book is a joint product.

The small amount of autobiographical content in this book all comes from my very long career and is written with the pronoun "I". A little autobiographical information here at the outset should help to put some of the strong opinions expressed in this book in context.

I began working in a university psychology department in 1958. I was eighteen years old at the time, and a second-year undergraduate student at an American state university. I had become, it seemed, the university's most promising first-year chemistry major, since I had won the Freshman Chemistry Award the previous spring. On the first day of the fall semester, I took my prize (a chemistry handbook) with me to the psychology department office and announced with some drama that I would like to change my major to psychology. Dr. Switzer, the white-haired department chairman, agreed to meet with me in his office.

I had two reasons for my precipitous change of major, but I told only one of them to Dr. Switzer. I told him that as a science student, I felt motivated to work in a field that was scientifically underdeveloped and to help it in the course of its future scientific development. This was the way that I had learned to look at psychology in the chemistry department. Kindly old Dr. Switzer, who had done some highly regarded experimental research in Clark Hull's famous psychology laboratory at Yale University (e.g., Switzer, 1933), refrained from laughing at my youthful effrontery, and graciously welcomed me to my new major department.

Perhaps I was not the only ex-science student who had ever introduced himself as God's gift to psychology. Moreover, 1958 was still the heyday of behaviorism and positivism in psychology, and Dr. Switzer probably agreed with my clumsily expressed wish to continue moving psychology toward the model of the physical sciences. He gave me a book to read in order to help me catch up with my new major field, since I had missed the Introductory Course. It was John B. Watson's *Behaviorism* (1930). He made me promise to read a textbook on the history of psychology too, but, in my enthusiasm for advancing science in my newly adopted field, I did not get around to history until a decade later.

When I told Dr. Switzer how little money I had, he offered me a job in the department that I thought befitted my scientific sophistication. I was to help build equipment in the shop of the psychology department's brand new building and to take care of the departmental white rat colony, emptying the pans under the cages that collected the rat droppings. In those days, white rats were the subject of choice in psychology experiments in the United States and most psychology departments maintained a colony.

The white rat colony at my university was fairly large, not only because 1958 was the heyday of behaviorism, but also because money was plentiful. It was a time of accelerated university expansion in the United States after the shock of the 1957 Soviet launch of the first orbiting space capsule, Sputnik I. Although none of the professors in the small psychology

department at my university were doing rat research at that time, they had purchased plenty of white rats to stock the banks of cages in the rat colony room in the new psychology building, just in case. I was honored by the unexpected job offer and I definitely needed the seventy-five cents per hour salary, which provided my first earnings as a psychologist. I read Watson's book and became a psychologist in spirit as well, as it seemed to me. I have worked as a psychologist ever since.

The other reason that I had decided to change my major to psychology was that I was suffering from serious anxiety. I was afraid and had few friends to talk to in the university. I believed that something was wrong with me, but I didn't know what. I thought being a psychology major might possibly help me figure out my problems. I liked chemistry well enough, but I knew it was not going to help me with my personal distress.

Now, more than half a century later, I can say that studying psychology probably did help me to work out my personal anxieties and that I probably made a fortunate decision in that regard. I continued to suffer from anxiety for some years after I changed my major, but gradually worked through it with some ideas gleaned from psychology textbooks, a little help from my friends, and the unswerving support and encouragement of my family. I never required psychological treatment or medication, nor did I become clinically depressed, psychotic, alcoholic, or addicted, although I might have. I stopped worrying about these kinds of problems decades ago and have been able to turn my attention to other issues.

My goal of helping psychology to develop as a science went nowhere. I pursued that project earnestly as an undergraduate with my rats, the mazes and the Skinner box that I built from plywood, and a precocious research paper that was considered, but politely rejected, by the venerable *Journal of Experimental Psychology* in 1960. When it was time to go to graduate school, I chose three places that fascinated me because I saw them as boldly applying scientific methods to deep psychological issues. I applied to only those three graduate schools. Miraculously, I was accepted by all three with generous offers of financial support. Perhaps they recognized the zeal of a true believer or, more likely, they responded to my overachiever's astronomical grade point average and the fact that I had won a Woodrow Wilson Scholarship.

I put my passion for scientific psychology to work on the science of "affectional systems" with rhesus monkeys at the Primate Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin under the supervision of Harry F. Harlow. I continued the quest as a young Ph.D. working in the Reproductive Physiology Laboratory at the University of Oregon Primate Research Center and then in my own rat laboratory at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, BC,

Canada, which became my permanent academic home. Later at Simon Fraser I undertook research on addiction, which had become my main interest in psychology. It began with rat research in psychopharmacology (the “Rat Park” project), then interviews and multivariate analyses of large numbers of university students, and finally analysis of local and national issues of drug policy.

In the first couple of decades of my university teaching, I extolled the virtues of the hypothetic-deductive method of experimental research and of prediction and control of behavior to more than a thousand undergraduate students. When I taught history of psychology, I faithfully used E.G. Boring’s (1950) famous text, *A History of Experimental Psychology*. When students complained that the subject matter of that text was too narrowly scientific and that the author richly deserved the name he had been cursed with, I reminded them that experimental psychology was the hardcore center of psychology and the lighter topics could be learned with ease once the fundamentals were mastered.

As I gradually matured as a psychologist, however, it increasingly dawned on me that the research methods that I was using and teaching were not sufficient to answer the most important questions in psychology. My experiments, even those published in prestigious journals, were all subject to alternate interpretations. I began to see that other people’s experimental results were endlessly debatable, including those that were proclaimed as incontrovertible truth for a while. In sum, only a little significant knowledge was accumulating from a lot of earnest scientific activity. I also came to see that the history of psychology became more interesting for the students and me if I broadened the content beyond the early experimental psychology laboratories.

Over the years, I published on a variety of topics, acquired a good reputation as a teacher, and gradually ascended the academic ranks from cage cleaner to Professor Emeritus. Although I continued to recognize that experimental research had a valuable and genuinely indispensable role in modern psychology, it became clearer and clearer to me that the best of my research was not done with funded research experiments, but with informal investigations that I carried out with students in conjunction with courses. Even more curiously, I did my best work on the psychology of addiction – which became my main research interest after 1970 – after I completely gave up writing grant applications and doing experiments around 1995. Instead, I began spending lots of time with addicted people both inside and outside the university and focusing much of my attention on the history of psychology, including the ancient and early modern writers (Alexander, 2010, Introduction).

There was no blinding flash, no epiphany, but somewhere in that fifty-five-year career as a psychologist, I became convinced, as did many of my colleagues and students, that psychology had made a wrong turn with its singular attachment to science on the model of the physical sciences. I now believe that whereas experimental research is often stimulating and genuinely indispensable, it is never sufficient. I now think that the scholarly history of psychology provides a wealth of opportunities to improve psychology's functioning in the future, and that we should study it at a much greater depth than we have. I learned over the years that these were uncomfortable topics to discuss with many of my colleagues, so I kept my attention on my specialized study of addiction most of the time, leaving other historically oriented psychologists, most prominently Kurt Danziger and Daniel Robinson, to brave the defenses of the conventional wisdom of scientific psychology.

Psychology has been good to me. Long ago, it gave me enough good ideas to work out my personal problems in a reasonable way. It later gave me the opportunity to meet a few thousand students, many of whom have wonderfully active, assertive minds. Some were willing to challenge not only the psychological material that I was teaching them, but also my critical commentary on it, which tended toward the bombastic. Psychology provided me with an academic home, including four decades at Simon Fraser University, which continues to support my work. It gave me colleagues whose company I could enjoy and who were willing to put up with my carping. Some of these good friends and colleagues are now dead, and I have written my critical comments about psychology with them in the back of my mind. I would never want to offend the memory of those who were so accepting of me.

But I must say, in the end, that I am convinced that psychology is not all that it should be. Psychology has the mandate to address the deepest problems that beset our troubled age. It is well funded and it has a prominent status in the public mind. The deep knowledge that it could provide is sorely needed. And yet, its ideas are too shallow to get to the root of society's most urgent psychological issues. Its research methods rarely produce really fruitful results, although they are often promulgated with great fanfare and excitement. Its therapeutic methods are only somewhat successful. Intellectually, psychology is not really challenging, and the brightest young people may find themselves attracted to more stimulating fields.

If I could renew my conversation with Dr. Switzer – who died decades ago – I would not renew my impetuous offer to lead psychology to the brave new world of high tech science. Rather, I would suggest that we psychologists now need to take a breather from the science race to examine our

history with much more depth and intensity than we usually do. I would also urge that we try much harder, painful though it will be, to comprehend the unique and turbulent twenty-first century, and our place in it. I think such discussions would enable us to serve our mandate better than we presently do. This book proceeds along those lines of thought.

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The book is an extended collaboration between its authors and hundreds of students and many colleagues in psychology, as well as learned friends and great thinkers of the past whom we know only through their writings.

One of the earliest and most important among the student collaborators was Terry Fowler, who I (BKA) have not seen for decades. Terry and her husband Rod took my course in the history of psychology at Simon Fraser University and initiated many interesting discussions on various aspects of it. I have forgotten the details of those discussions now, but I can never forget what happened after Terry told me that the course should be a book. She asked for a look at my lecture notes, which were in a horrible, scrawled mess. She took the notes at the end of the semester and typed them out on an old-fashioned, line-by-line word processor on the university's mainframe computer. It was a deciphering task from hell. However, she did it single-handedly all the way through, and she asked for no payment at the end. All of the text in this book has changed since that time, of course, but it all built on successive revisions of her original document on successive generations of computers. Without Terry's labors – and Rod's tolerance of her spending so much time at it – the book might never have been begun.

Many other students, teaching assistants, and academic colleagues collaborated in the development of the book as I struggled to make it useful to classroom students in continuing revisions. I have forgotten the names of many of these generous collaborators with the passage of decades. Those that I have not forgotten are Kim Alscher, Barry Beyerstein, Marilyn Bowman, Charles Crawford, John Damron, Gary Dawes, Jules Epp, Anand Paranjpe, Ross Powell, Don Todd, Robert Underwood, Randy Tonks, Sven van de Wetering, and Linda Wong. To these fellow travelers of that era and those whom I have forgotten: Thanks again.

More immediately, this book is a collaboration between Curtis Shelton and myself that began when he was a teaching assistant in my course in the history of psychology and later a teaching assistant in my course on the psychology of addiction at Simon Fraser University. Our collaboration

continued as we produced an earlier book on the psychology of addiction together, under my authorship. The present jointly authored volume on the history of psychology is a full collaboration.

As the book progressed, we increasingly realized how deeply its depiction of professional psychology over the last century is influenced by Kurt Danziger and Daniel Robinson, psychologists we have never met, but whose books we have read and reread. We believe that Danziger and Robinson will emerge as the classic historians of psychology for our era. They have given us the courage to acknowledge the shortcomings of the psychological profession in our own times and the inspiration to dream about what it could become as the twenty-first century progresses. Historian Ellen Herman has had an extremely important influence on this book too, although we became aware of her work much later in the process. Our Simon Fraser University colleagues Anand Paranjpe, Jack Martin, and the late Barry Beyerstein also contributed in major ways.

Our final efforts to make a university course into a book for a wider audience could not have succeeded without the contributions of many thoughtful people who have read chapters and helped us work through troublesome ideas in the last few years. These include George Alder, Benjamin Alexander, Patricia Holborn Alexander, Ethan Alexander-Davey, Jeremy Carpendale, Connie Greene Davey, Russell Day, Arleigh Dudar, Paul Dutton, Mary Etey, Kathleen and Gordon Gray, Frank Harris, Ken Lyotier, Daniel MacDonald, Sande-Annie MacMaster, Joanne McKinnon, James Meacham, Barry Morris, Morten Nissen, Terry Patten, Ross Powell, Cecelia Roberts, Vanessa Roberts, Ernesto Salvi, Michael Schmitt, Kate Slaney, Lauren Slater, Julian Somers, Frederick Toates, Thomas Teo, Don Todd, Randy Tonks, Emily Torres, Jon Tsou, Robert Underwood, Sven van der Wetering, Joan and Michael Wolf, and the staff of the psychology department of Simon Fraser University, led by the stalwart Bev Davino.

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Figure 2.1: Illustrations by Vanessa Roberts.

Chapter 3

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Chapter 5

Figure 5.1: Euclid’s Proposition 47 from Book 1 of THE THIRTEEN BOOKS OF EUCLID’S ELEMENTS (Vol. 1), Cambridge University Press, 1926, translated from the text of Heiberg with introduction and commentary by Sir Thomas L. Heath, reprinted by Dover Publications, New York, 1956.

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