

Introduction

Like the reactions it studies, psychology is living and oriented forward: there can be no end to its achievements.

(Bartlett, 1936, p. 52)

Man's life and search are a perpetual adventure ... all our advances towards self-knowledge are promises without end.

(Bartlett, 1951, p. 462)

Human beings are constructive. This means they are oriented forward in their actions and experience. From this perspective, what characterizes human beings is their innovating adaption to the environment. From primitive tools and classifications of the world to modern weapons of warfare and scientific theories, humans have persistently developed novel ways of acting and organizing their worlds. Every new generation must balance the need for continuity with the past and the need to innovate for the future. The tension between *conservation* of the old and *construction* of the new manifests itself in the life of every group and every individual. Both individuals and groups are dominated by their past but also creatively orient to the uncertain future; they are both curious and fearful, seeking out the strange while finding security in the familiar. Understanding the constructiveness of human beings in facing the future with the resources of the past was at the core of Frederic Bartlett's psychology. This book aims to explore how his ideas help us to understand human beings as constructive agents situated in a complex social and material world.

In writing this book, I came to realize that 'constructiveness' provides a unifying concept to approach Bartlett's *oeuvre*. Constructiveness is at the heart of his diverse contributions to both theory and methodology, yet it has been generally misunderstood. Bartlett's celebrated theory of constructive or reconstructive remembering, for example, has typically been taken to mean that memories are inaccurate and distorted. In contrast, Bartlett saw 'constructive' as a positive, future-oriented characteristic that could also lead to accuracy in memory. Rather than lamenting

2 Introduction

the follies of human memory when compared with literal reproduction of information by computers, he saw it as entirely functional within the needs of human life. In a similar vein, the leading memory researcher Daniel Schacter (2012) has recently begun to speak of ‘*adaptive* constructive processes’ to highlight the neglected functional meaning of the word.¹ At a general level, Bartlett consistently emphasized constructiveness throughout his career to show that novelty emerges through human adaptation to the ever-changing environment. He was critical of mechanistic methodologies that simply looked at how a certain stimulus caused an isolated response, or an input led to a given output. This focus on predicting human behavior led most of psychology to adopt a one-sided view of human beings that greatly underestimated their creativity and agency in meeting new challenges.

According to Bartlett, psychology needs an approach that looks at the whole, active person or group constructively using the past in order to move toward the future. We are here concerned with the mind as a unity, not separate mental faculties, and how it operates in interdependence with an environment that is at once social and material.² Thus, psychological processes (e.g., imagining, thinking, and remembering) cannot be adequately understood without taking account of the context in which they operate and the material on which they work. They occur *through* a certain environment and carry a particular history. Although Bartlett is most famous for how he uses this approach to study remembering as a constructive process, his contribution is much more wide ranging. His ideas are particularly instructive in that he developed a constructivist theory that works on and between different levels (e.g., individual and group), and applied it to a variety of topics (e.g., perceiving, imagining, remembering, thinking, group dynamics, political propaganda, cultural transmission). The breadth and diversity of his approach is part of the reason he has become a seminal figure for a variety of social scientific fields.³ How Bartlett has been selectively interpreted and used by different groups of psychologists and to some extent anthropologists will be discussed in depth in this book.

Bartlett’s work has been and continues to be a key source of inspiration for psychology and across the social sciences. Despite this, a rather skewed understanding of it is now in circulation, especially in psychology. This has come from the limited attention paid to his broader thinking about culture and group dynamics (which sets the frame for his famous experiments), as well as his holistic, affective, and temporal approach to psychological processes. Neglecting these aspects of his thought has consequences for interpreting any part of it. As a result, even his most widely known concepts have taken on meanings very

different from their original use, without any acknowledgement that a change has occurred. For example, ‘schema’ is often now understood as a knowledge structure in the head that stores information, a notion Bartlett was trying to overcome (see Chapter 4). I have also already mentioned that ‘reconstructive remembering’ is now typically taken to mean that memory is distorted, rather than that the past is accessed, formed, and used by individuals and groups to meet the needs of the present. It is also worth noting here that Bartlett theorized construction in its dynamic relationship to the conservation or retention of the past, rather than as an invention out of nothing.

The reconstruction of Bartlett’s psychology in this book likewise aims to use the past in order to make advances on problems facing the discipline today. This book is the first extended and integrative reconstruction of Bartlett’s work and legacy.⁴ A book that simply ‘reproduced’ Bartlett’s ideas as they were in the original would be unhelpful – it would be much better simply to read Bartlett’s own works. An act of reconstruction brings the past to bear on the present in a movement toward the future. This is not to say that we can be sloppy in our scholarship, but rather that we become engaged with the past in the pursuit of particular aims that help to select what is relevant from the past. The aims of this book are not only to explicate and contextualize Bartlett’s ideas but also to adapt them to advance psychology as it is now practiced. Although this book is the most extensive reconstruction of Bartlett’s ideas to-date, it is of course necessarily selective and open-ended. Its objective is to stimulate a renewed surge of interest in Bartlett and his legacy, leading to new interpretations and reconstructions that shed light on issues not covered by him or in this book.

In interpreting and reconstructing ideas from the past, we need to proceed with some caution. When major earlier figures are remembered, there is a tendency to reproduce them in our own image rather than engage with them on their own terms. What we tend to recognize as valuable are those ideas and practices we see as akin to our own and what we criticize are those that violate contemporary norms of scientific practice. From this perspective, the history of a discipline becomes a progressive march toward the present way of doing things. This attitude blocks us from using the past to critique and develop current ideas and practices in a discipline. Major thinkers of the past often had very good reasons for thinking and doing things differently than is routinely done today. If the past is a foreign country, we need to be willing to step into the native’s territory, learn about their beliefs and practices on their terms, to avoid holding a rather empty and stereotyped view of them. This involves familiarizing oneself with the general background of ideas and practices within

4 Introduction

which key thinkers developed their approach. By doing such an analysis, we also see that original ideas tend to be a synthesis of already existing ideas rather than the creations of a lone genius.⁵

I am not implying we should avoid criticizing ideas from the past – just the opposite. It is only through a thorough understanding of a thinker and their context that their limitations become fully clear. What we need to be wary of is what Bartlett (1918) called ‘conventional criticism,’ whereby something is criticized simply for being different from some conventional idea or practice. This kind of criticism is particularly easy to do and unsurprisingly it is widespread in everyday life and often in science as well. To further develop a science, however, one must move beyond this form of criticism to one in which different positions are analyzed for their ability to generate further knowledge and cope with different phenomena. I will consider this book a success if it is effective in generating a constructive dialogue on a number of key issues for psychology and other social sciences such as: the understanding of an experiment; the relationship between individuals and social groups; the conceptualization of schema; what makes remembering constructive and social; how to think about and study thinking; and how culture and ideas are transmitted and transformed in science and society.

In our efforts to interpret the past, we cannot free ourselves from the background we bring with us, nor should we. It is precisely our own background that provides a way into another’s way of thinking, but we must be willing to let the other have a voice as well (cf. Gadamer, 1989). It is worth mentioning at this point my own background as a cultural psychologist, from which I was originally drawn to Bartlett and have reconstructed his work in this book. Cultural psychology (re)emerged⁶ in the 1990s and encompasses a heterogeneous group of thinkers that nonetheless share a common interest in the ways persons and social-cultural worlds mutually make each other up (Shweder, 1991). In other words, human beings both are molded by culture and create culture. Culture here is not a thing, bounded group, or variable to be manipulated, but the medium through which we live our lives (Valsiner, 2014). The central idea is that people act on the world on the basis of the meaning they give to it (Bruner, 1990). This principle is effectively captured in Bartlett’s idea that all psychological processes involve ‘an effort after meaning.’ From this standpoint, it makes little sense to develop abstract models of psychological processes that are removed from the social and cultural existence of the people studied. As we will see, many cultural psychologists – including Jerome Bruner, Michael Cole, and James Wertsch – have taken inspiration from Bartlett on this point. I will argue that Bartlett’s approach is both

compatible with many of the central premises of cultural psychology and capable of offering new insights for developing this field.

The reconstruction offered here thus involves attending to Bartlett as a researcher of culture and a truly ‘social’ (as opposed to individual) psychology. It is only by drawing out this often-neglected side of his thought that we can fully understand his ideas. This is not a point I simply presuppose, but one I will demonstrate in considerable detail in the pages to follow. Also I have not shied away from criticizing approaches that neglect or underemphasize the social and cultural as well as the holistic, affective, and temporal dimensions of his work. On this point, critique often falls on *early* work in cognitive psychology for two main reasons. First, it was by far the most successful subdiscipline to appropriate Bartlett’s work and propagate definitions of his concepts and methods for the discipline as a whole. Second, it was originally very explicit in its efforts to remove the social, cultural, and historical from its scope, so as to reduce the complexity of the phenomena under study (see e.g., Gardner, 1985, for an early summary of the field). This is a methodological strategy that Bartlett in fact devoted numerous pages to refuting. Although recent work in cognitive psychology has moved away from this strategy toward a more Bartlettian position,⁷ many of the earlier interpretations of Bartlett’s work nonetheless persist. The fate of notions such as an experiment, schema, and reconstruction all provide illustrative examples of the transformation of ideas away from their social, cultural, temporal, affective, and holistic understandings. I will consider each of these in detail in the chapters of this book and also highlight some lesser-known research inspired by Bartlett’s work, which demonstrates that his ideas can be taken in a different vein than is typically done today.

Consequently, although this book is centered on Bartlett it encompasses a much wider terrain. Research for it very quickly became an enormous task. I found it necessary not only to read through Bartlett’s entire *oeuvre*, but also to follow up on the wide range of different thinkers who influenced him and those who later appropriated his ideas. Bartlett’s writings are full of insightful ideas but he does not frequently offer fully worked-out analyses of them, something he himself often admits. The task of further developing many of his suggestive concepts was often left to others coming after him; thus it made sense to follow on some of these efforts in this book. In each chapter of this book, I discuss the thinkers who both preceded and proceeded him. The predecessors help to better contextualize his approach, while those who came after him show how current understandings and evaluations of concepts and methods have reached us today (or alternatively not reached us) as

6 Introduction

well as how they have been developed.⁸ Thus, this book can be read in two ways: first, as an explication of Bartlett and his legacy and second, as a case study in the diffusion and reconstruction of ideas in a science. In the pages of this book, we see the different sources that Bartlett brought together in his thinking, the development of his ideas over his career, and how these ideas have been selectively appropriated and transformed by others who have followed him.

In short, this book aims to explore the context, development, and appropriation of Bartlett's ideas. In doing so, it furthers the development of psychology toward a social and culturally inclusive study of the mind, which puts constructiveness at its center. It is my contention that one can be both accurate and constructive in this project; however, this requires being explicit about where transformations of his approach have taken place and could potentially take place. I speak of 'misunderstandings' only when a thinker attributes a position to Bartlett that he did not hold, and try to avoid it when a thinker is explicit about elaborating his approach in a given direction. As Bartlett's own studies showed, the transmission of culture involves both the processes of simplification and elaboration, aspects of the material are both omitted and added in ways that transform the whole. I should mention here my own selection in focusing on the theoretical side of Bartlett's work as opposed to his applied research.⁹ In this book, I will only describe his applied research in so far as it has directly influenced his theoretical and methodological ideas (viz., his work on skill done during Second World War). I am also well aware that I have only covered a few selected examples of the recent explosion of research inspired by Bartlett's work. Future reconstructions will have to fill in some of these remaining gaps.

Preview of this Book

The first chapter of this book, 'Life and Work of a Cambridge Psychologist,' outlines Bartlett's life, ideas, and influence and situates them in historical context. Understanding Bartlett's particular intellectual trajectory requires attending to his personal biography, the Cambridge context, wider shifts in the discipline of psychology, and major historical events, such as the First and Second World Wars. As Bartlett (1932, p. 15) himself said: "The study of any well developed psychological function [e.g. a person's thinking] is only possible in light of a consideration of its history." In the chapter, we see how Bartlett's thought develops through different influences throughout his life as well as the tension between his institutional role and his own scientific production. Describing Bartlett's life and work further functions to

contextualize the different phases of his career and thus the core concepts thematized in the preceding chapters. The five chapters that follow are ordered to track the approximate chronological development of Bartlett's thinking, though each chapter does not confine itself to a particular period of his life. Instead, each chapter focuses on a specific theme and follows the pattern of (1) describing the intellectual context from which his ideas emerged, (2) explicating Bartlett's work, and (3) showing how subsequent thinkers reconstructed it. Let us consider each chapter in turn.

Chapter 2 'Experiments in Psychology' explores the meaning of an experiment. It aims to review and contextualize Bartlett's early experimental studies, done in the 1910s but only published as a systematic monograph in 1932 with the release of *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. These experiments provide concrete examples from Bartlett's research to be drawn upon in the explication of his theoretical ideas in the chapters that follow. The chapter begins by situating Bartlett's methodology within the continental research tradition of his time, which was in a state of transition from a focus on elements (à la the method of psychophysics) to a focus on wholes (later culminating in Gestalt psychology). The defining feature of Bartlett's early experiments is his holistic treatment of human responses, in which the basic unit of analysis is the active person relating to some material within the constraints of a social and material context. This manifests itself in a number of methodological principles that contrast with contemporary understandings of experimentation in psychology. The contrast is further explored by reviewing the history of 'replications and extensions' of Bartlett's experiments, demonstrating how his methodology was progressively changed and misunderstood over time. An argument will be made for reintroducing an open, qualitative, and idiographic experimental method, along the lines of the one Bartlett practiced.

Bartlett's famous 'experiments on remembering' were actually first pursued as contributions to diffusionist anthropology (see Bartlett, 1916b, 1920a). The Bartlettian universe is one in which culture (e.g., folklore, designs, ceremonies) is continuously reconstructed in communication and action. Bartlett was well aware that his experiments left aside the wider social and cultural dynamics of the diffusion and reconstruction of culture, and set out to address this gap. Chapter 3 'Cultural Diffusion and Reconstruction' explores the broader theory of social and cultural dynamics that he developed through his wide anthropological readings rather than his experimental studies. His framework is a development of diffusionist anthropology, particularly as his mentor W.H.R. Rivers understood it. In fact, Bartlett had

8 Introduction

originally intended to go into anthropology but was convinced by Rivers that psychology would be the best preparation for it. Through a number of historical contingencies, he never left psychology. Nevertheless, his early writings highlight the interrelation of cultural and psychological processes, and cover anthropological topics, such as cultural contact, folklore, and symbols. The chapter focuses mainly on Bartlett's first book on psychology, *Psychology and Primitive Culture* (Bartlett, 1923), though there is coverage of other material, including his later works dealing with cultural dynamics, such as his book *Political Propaganda* (Bartlett, 1940). It also contextualizes his theory in relation to the anthropology of his day (viz. Haddon, Rivers, and Lévy-Bruhl) and discusses Moscovici's (2008) Theory of Social Representations as a contemporary extension of Bartlett's diffusionist ideas.

In the next phase of his career, Bartlett's theory of cultural dynamics was used as an analogy to develop his famous concept of schema. Chapter 4 'Concept of Schema in Reconstruction' explores Bartlett's reconstructive theory of remembering, his most well-known contribution, through an analysis of the schema concept. No other concept in Bartlett's psychology has generated as much attention as that of schema. However, contemporary schema theories generally think of schema as a knowledge structure in the head that stores memories. In contrast, Bartlett (1932) used it to provide the basis for a radical *temporal* alternative to traditional *spatial* storage theories of memory. He took remembering out of the head and situated it at the enfolding relation between an organism and its environment. The basic model for this approach is how we adapt normalized patterns of response and the just-previous-body-position to the ever-novel present moment, much like groups adapt to new challenges on the basis of their established cultural patterns. This explains why memories tend to become generalized over time. However, higher psychological functions (i.e., those involving self-reflection, such as remembering, imagining, and thinking) involve a process of "turn[ing] around upon [one's] own schema and to construct them afresh" (Bartlett, 1932, p. 206). In doing so, we break determination by schema (i.e., the seamless flow of action in context) and with it take active control over our mind and behavior. The chapter contextualizes Bartlett's concept of schema within his general theory and other theories of his time (viz. the trace theory of memory and the work of Henry Head); examines its temporal dimensions in relation to embodied action and memory 'reconstruction'; shows how these temporal dynamics are abandoned by early cognitive psychology's 'schema' theories (which revert to the metaphor of static storage); and explores how we might fruitfully bring schema back into psychology as a temporal,

embodied, dynamic, holistic, and social concept. The social nature of remembering is the main focus of the chapter that follows.

At the end of Part I of *Remembering*, Bartlett formulated his reconstructive ‘theory of remembering’ at the level of the individual through a discussion of ‘schemata’ and ‘images.’ However, in Part II of the book Bartlett further elaborated his theory to highlight the social and cultural framework in which remembering occurs, thus connecting it up with his earlier work on cultural diffusion (discussed in Chapter 3 of this book). David Middleton once said to me that when he first read *Remembering* the pages of the first half of the book had all been cleanly cut, while the second half (on social psychology) remained uncut and thus unread. This story is an example of a larger bias in Bartlett scholarship (at least until recently) toward the more cognitive side of his thought, at the expense of his understanding of the social and cultural situatedness of mind and memory. Chapter 5 ‘Social Psychology of Remembering’ outlines the principles of his social psychology and their importance for understanding the psychology of remembering. It begins by contextualizing Bartlett’s approach in relation to Jung’s and Halbwachs’s theories of collective memory. These two psychologists represent opposing views, the former biological and the latter social. This is followed by a discussion of what Bartlett understood by social psychology and how it was implemented in the study of the ‘matter and manner of recall.’ He illustrated these ideas with examples taken from his 1929 trip to South Africa, at which time he was able to at least partially realize his early ambition to do anthropological fieldwork. The chapter ends by considering how others (viz. Nadel, Bateson, Cole, and Wertsch) have developed his social psychology of remembering through a number of psycho-anthropological field studies from the 1930s until the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 6 ‘Thinking about Thinking’ describes the last major phase of Bartlett’s research career. This was the period just before the study of thinking became the study of cognition, at which point the focus shifted from a person’s experience solving problems to an emphasis on mental errors and distortions. A research program on thinking was a natural extension to the ideas presented in *Remembering* (1932). This took form in a number of studies on what came to be called ‘constructive’ or ‘everyday thinking’ (Bartlett, 1938a, b; Carmichael, 1939a, b, 1940). Bartlett’s St. John’s Fellowship Dissertation (1916b), in fact, already includes a number of ideas for developing this program. However, the Second World War interrupted this development by shifting Bartlett’s research toward the production of knowledge to aid in the war effort. This wartime research focused on understanding complex skill in

10 Introduction

human–machine interfaces and how they could be modified to improve information flow. Bartlett’s notion of complex skill was itself an extension of his schema concept. The principles discovered about skill became the framework for Bartlett’s book *Thinking: An Experimental and Social Study* (1958), while the cognitive revolution that followed shortly afterward picked up on the idea of information and machine interactions. The chapter highlights the comparative dimensions of Bartlett’s approach to thinking: namely, the comparison of (1) thinking with bodily skills, (2) different varieties of thinking (e.g., in closed systems, science, everyday life, and art), and (3) the thought patterns of different social groups. It makes the argument that each kind of thinking needs to be understood on its own terms rather than through the standard of logical thinking.

This book’s concluding chapter ‘Conclusion: From Past to Future’ summarizes and synthesizes the core findings of the previous chapters. It both outlines the key themes of Bartlett’s constructivist approach and points out how his key ideas have been reconstructed by others. Like Bartlett’s method for analyzing cultural transmission, it attends to what was omitted, retained, and added at different times. The approach sketched out here aims to overcome the one-sided focus on human reactivity by including people’s history, material, and social environment, wider experiences, aspirations for the future and, most of all, the constructive ways in which humans live and are oriented forward. As a final note, it is important to stress here that *construction*, on both individual and collective levels, does not occur out of nothing; rather the past serves as a source for innovation in the present. In this way the continuous development of ideas requires flexibly engaging with the past, as this book has aimed to do in relation to Bartlett and his legacy.

Notes

1. Significantly, Schacter (2012) begins his article with a discussion of Bartlett’s theory as a framework to understand these processes.
2. Bartlett’s focus on how material culture conditions psychological processes connects up well with the materiality turn in social sciences. In contrast to some interpretations of Bartlett’s work (e.g., Douglas, 1986), the social and cultural dimensions never entirely disappeared from his approach. However, they did take an increasingly subordinate role, especially toward the end of his career (see Chapter 1).
3. Bartlett has been influential in social, cognitive, cultural, discursive, and ecological psychology, and the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, the philosophy of science, and ergonomics.

4. An earlier edited book titled *Bartlett, Culture and Cognition* presents a range of different perspectives on Bartlett rather than an integrated framework for understanding him. Nonetheless, it has been an important source for this book, particularly in following up how his ideas have been appropriated by others.
5. Bartlett (1958) himself discussed his approach as a synthesis of ideas coming from others, a perspective that clearly fits his own theory of constructive thinking.
6. I say ‘re-emerged’ because cultural psychology has been born multiple times through psychology’s short history (Wagoner, Chaudhary, and Hviid, 2014). Its first incarnation was in the mid-nineteenth century in the guise of *Völkerpsychologie*, at which time social and cultural psychology were synonymous.
7. Extended, situated, and distributed cognition (see e.g., Sutton, Harris, Keil, and Barnier, 2010) are all highly compatible with a Bartlettian approach.
8. In this latter endeavor, I have been particularly inspired by the historians of psychology Kurt Danziger (1990, 1997, 2008) and Jaan Valsiner (2012; Valsiner and van der Veer, 2000).
9. Bartlett’s applied research became particularly important after the Second World War, but was already present in research he did during the First World War.