1 Introduction

This is a book about the ways that psychologists have used examples in their writing. Unusually for a psychological book, it contains little theory and less methodology; it brings no new sets of data, and it surveys no current populations. Instead, the book looks backwards, as I discuss some of my favourite writers of psychology from the past. My selection is unashamedly personal: with one exception, these are writers that I have enjoyed reading. Some are little known, while others are more obvious choices. Few would seriously question whether William James or Sigmund Freud deserve to be placed among the greatest writers of psychological issues. What is it about their writing that makes them so appealing? As I will be suggesting throughout the book, good psychological writers use well-chosen examples. Freud and James filled their works with superb descriptions; their books come alive because readers can grasp lives being lived, including the lives of the authors.

In a number of respects, this book complements my earlier work, *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*. There, I criticised the way that social scientists tend to write these days: they often use lots of dry jargon and big theories, producing page upon page devoid of people. Throughout *Learn to Write Badly* I griped and I grumbled. Constant criticism can become tiresome, and some reviewers thought that I spent too much time saying what I disliked, without recommending positive steps. In effect, those critics were exclaiming in exasperation, 'Moan! Moan! Moan! Don't you like anything?'

So, here, with this present book, I come to praise, not to grump. However, I would advise any reader who is also a writer of psychology and who takes care with their writing not to rush to the index to check for their name. I will not be citing them in any list of honour, calling them to an imagined podium to receive an award – perhaps for 'Best Writer of an Article in Cognitive Psychology for 2018' or for 'Metaphor of the Year in Developmental Psychology'. There is a simple reason why no reader is about to be offered a fantasy award. In looking for examples of good psychological writers, I am going back in time. Rather than assessing

living writers, I will be discussing in depth a few writers from the past, all of them deceased, some long deceased.

My mood might appear to have changed from the previous book, but the critical urge still remains. I will even be criticising some of my heroes: Freud, for example, does not emerge super-pure from the chapter that is devoted to him. Right in the middle of the book is a big, fat chapter of complaint. This chapter lets rip at a famous figure whose works I definitely have not enjoyed reading. The object of this criticism, the French psycho-analyst Jacques Lacan, is someone whose writings, in my view, contain far too much abstract jargon and far too few down-to-earth examples. He is included because he constitutes an extreme case of what can happen when analysts of the mind free themselves from the obligation to provide clear, detailed examples of what they are talking about.

Here, in this book, I am specifically concerned with the writing of psychology. As such, I am following in the wake of Kurt Danziger, the great historian of psychology, who showed in *Naming the Mind* (1997) how psychology's vocabulary has developed in the past 150 years. Rather than looking at individual concepts and their history, I will be looking at ways of arguing and, above all, ways of using examples. Like Danziger, I will be restricting my attention to psychology: I do not presume that my analyses will be applicable to academic writing about microbes, minerals or mediaeval plainsong.

In recent years, many books have aimed to help academics improve the quality of their writing – books with titles such as *The Quick Fix Guide to Academic Writing; Writing for Peer Reviewed Journals; Writing No Matter What: Advice for Academics*. The authors of these books do not tailor their messages to particular disciplines; rather, they offer advice to academics from across the university campus. Much of their advice is sensible: clarify what you want to say, write your article with a specific journal in mind, reserve a dedicated physical space for doing your writing and so on. The present book, by contrast, is not a general how-to-write-academically book. It is concerned only with writing psychology, and its examples are taken from the past.

Actually, I am not exclusively concerned with the past. I may be looking backwards much of the time, but my neck is not persistently turned away from the present. When discussing past psychologists, I will be raising psychological questions that are still current. Does the mind work like Locke said it did? How do we repress troubling thoughts? Why is it inappropriate to explain the Holocaust in terms of general theories of prejudice? How should we describe the lives of the poor? And, as a connecting theme, how should psychologists treat examples? These are not matters that are purely of historical interest, and, although the

questions might have been raised through historical examples, attempted answers should involve more than history. This is why I see the book as being psychological as well as historical, with the history providing a background for the psychology.

Examples of Examples

Psychologists often consider that their discipline rests on two twin pillars: theory and methodology. Every student should be formally instructed about these, the discipline's Castor and Pollux. Psychological researchers need a theory from which to derive hypotheses, and then they need a method for testing those hypotheses. If their testing is sufficiently rigorous, they will be contributing to knowledge and thereby to the development of theory, from which more hypotheses can be derived and then tested. This is very much a self-sustaining business.

Psychology also requires a third element that tends to be overlooked and certainly is not treated as equivalent to the broad-backed twins: psychology needs to be written. If psychologists did not write down their hypotheses, theories, methods and findings, there would be no discipline, because every academic discipline needs its textbooks, journals and written records. Students of psychology are taught about theory and methodology, but they are expected to pick up, as they go along, the ways to write appropriately. They will acquire the disciplinary rhetoric through their reading of publications and through the critical marginalia that teachers might scribble on their essays and project reports.

As Charles Bazerman showed back in 1987, there are set rhetorical conventions for psychological writing (see also Billig, 2011, 2013). Writing experimental papers, for example, means presenting theory-derived hypotheses and summarising how previous experiments have not resolved the matters under question. Then, the author must describe the methods that they have used to test their hypotheses, using suitably impersonal rhetoric, typically achieved through passive-voiced verbs. They must also describe their results impersonally: '2 × 2 ANOVAs were conducted on the scores of the four experimental groups' and not 'I decided to search for significant results by running the scores through a load of programmes that I found on SPSS'. Lastly, researchers must write their interpretations of the significant statistical differences that they have found, and they should also interpret the statistical differences that they failed to find. If researchers encounter problems in writing their reports appropriately, and if they receive continual rejections from journal editors informing them of this, then they might well benefit from consulting one of the how-to-write-academically manuals.

Initially, the present book was conceived as a way of showing that there are more ways of writing psychology than the leading journals currently recognise. Basically, the standard experimental report is empty of humans. The authors discuss the effects of variables on other variables, for example the effects of 'priming' on the judgement of shapes. The researchers get groups of participants who have been 'primed' differently to judge shapes. Then, they combine the scores of participants in the different priming conditions and statistically compare aggregates of reactions. No actual participant is introduced to the reader; rather, the aggregate scores representing the tested variables are what seem to be real. In consequence, experimental reports can be example-free, human-free zones.

My early intention was to show that there is nothing natural or inevitable about this sort of writing. I hoped to show this by going back in time and presenting case studies of psychological writers who wrote in other ways; then I was going to show the advantages of these other ways to write psychology. This would be, I hoped, a means for demonstrating the importance of writing, because it would suggest that psychologists, especially if they know the history of their discipline, have choices in the ways they write. Accordingly, I would be able to suggest that writing should stand alongside theory and method and thus that psychology is supported by the more stable arrangement of resting on three pillars rather than two.

A confession about that early intention: I had hoped to produce a book on the cheap by putting together some articles that I had previously published. This would include pieces on John Locke, William James, Abraham Tucker, Henri Tajfel, Jacques Lacan and Freud, as well as a few others. However, I could not resist changing what I had already written. I then entirely re-wrote some of the pieces, such as the one on Freud, whose basic argument I now find unsatisfactory. Others were greatly changed and expanded, such as the chapter on Lacan, and I wrote some entirely new chapters, like those on Locke, Lewin and Jahoda. This was not, after all, to be a book compiled on the cheap. Fortunately, there was much, much more work to be done on all the chapters.

As I worked on these separate case studies, new themes began to emerge, particularly one theme which had initially been comparatively minor but which became increasingly major as I wrote and re-wrote. This was the theme that examples are crucial when writing about the mind. Example-free psychology was impoverished psychology, disconnected from the lives of those who were being studied. It became increasingly clear that the third pillar should not be 'writing' but rather 'examples'.

However, this brought a problem: what exactly was the role of examples in psychological writing? History could offer different examples of the

ways that writers used examples. For instance, examples can be used to illustrate theory, and later I will be discussing how John Locke, as he analysed how the mind associates ideas, deployed examples to illustrate his theory. If examples are treated primarily as a means of illustrating theory, then they become subservient to theory rather than constituting an equal, self-standing pillar.

As I worked through my historical examples of psychological writers, I became persuaded that examples were often rhetorically in tension with theory. The more that theory was valued, the more examples were devalued or restricted. On the other hand, the more that examples were treasured, as in the writing of Abraham Tucker and William James, the more the role of theory qua theory was diminished. This tension between theory and example is clear in the work of the ultimate example of this book – Marie Jahoda. She was a great user of examples in her work, and she believed that psychologists constantly over-valued theory.

If there is tension between theory and examples, then it was always naïve to think that examples could simply be added as a third pillar supporting psychology. The metaphor of pillars is wrong, for it suggests that theory and examples offer each other mutual support. The difficulty of that assumption – that everything fits nicely together – is discussed in the chapter on the so-called father of social psychology, Kurt Lewin. There, it is argued that his motto, 'There is nothing as practical as a good theory', is more wishful thinking than a guide to what actually happens.

Championing the rhetorical role of examples in psychological writing means pushing against the dominance of theory. It means reassessing what Thomas Scheff, in his brilliant analyses of the social sciences, has called the relations between parts and wholes (e.g. Scheff, 1990, 2006, 2010). The parts may have privileged status in some areas of the social sciences, for instance in ethnography, conversation analysis and history, where analysts directly examine specific examples of life rather than trying to construct general, overall theories. In psychology, it is the wholes of theory that currently have the upper hand, squeezing examples to the margins. This creates a specific problem for anyone who wishes to rebalance the present rhetorical arrangements within the subject. How, in all consistency, can the case be argued?

Arguing through Examples

One might think, surely there should not be a problem. All one needs to do is clarify what constitutes a good psychological example and then argue why psychological research would benefit from good examples. We might base the case on what philosophers call 'epistemology' and

argue that people generally acquire knowledge by acquiring particulars rather than abstract wholes, and that constitutionally, humans need to understand wholes in terms of particulars, and so on. What is the problem with doing this, apart from the fact that it would be nothing like the book that I was hoping to write?

The problem is simple: the means of making the argument would conflict with the content of the argument. I would be arguing theoretically against the role of theory and would not be basing my argument in favour of examples upon examples of examples. To be consistent, it is necessary to use examples rather than theory when arguing for the importance of examples in psychological writing.

And a word of warning: I will not be defining what I mean by the word *example* for reasons that I hope will become clearer later. I do not use the word in a single way, as a strict theoretician might try to do. Often I use *example* almost as a synonym for 'concrete, individual case'. In the context of psychology, both in the present and in the past, the word has been used in this way as a contrast to *representative sample, theory, abstraction* or *generalisation*. Sometimes I use *example* to indicate illustration and sometimes as a model to be followed.

To avoid the problem of privileging theory over examples (or over concrete individual cases) by proceeding theoretically, I stuck with my original intention of writing about particular psychological writers and their ways of writing psychology. I should concede that this is not the most efficient way of proceeding. If a reader were to turn at random to a later page, it is quite possible, maybe even probable, that they would find no mention of 'examples'. The page might be describing a writer's life, politics or intellectual approach. However, as will be suggested, this is characteristic of extended examples: they overspill the demands of theory.

As Lewin's teacher of philosophy, Ernst Cassirer, argued, scientific theories simplify. That is true of psychological theories, including those that Lewin formulated. When examples and case studies are described in detail, they go beyond the simplifications of theory. However, if we want to argue that point, then we should not rely on a simplified argument about the essence of examples. Instead, we should seek to express the point within the rhetoric of our own writing, that is, with examples of examples that will overspill any simplifications about the concept of an example.

In writing about past characters – whether Freud, James, the third Earl of Shaftesbury or the other historical figures featured in this book – I hope to overspill the narrow demands of any theoretical point about the usefulness of examples. Their usefulness is diminished when examples are only considered to be worthwhile because they serve a specific theory. I will consider it

a success, not a failure, if the examples discussed in subsequent pages overspill any attempt at a theory of examples. Theoretically superfluous details must be mentioned so as to convey a sense of particular lives, individual thoughts and the social worlds of those lives and thoughts.

There is something else about the book: it seems to be simultaneously looking backwards and forwards. The book is obviously historical by the choice of psychological thinkers to be discussed. The chapters on these figures can stand alone: to understand any of the individual chapters, a reader does not have to read the whole book. For instance, anyone interested in Kurt Lewin or Henri Tajfel could just turn to the relevant chapter, read what is written there and then put the book aside. Obviously, I hope that such readers will be tempted to read more, because there are inter-connecting themes between the chapters.

The double nature of the book is expressed in its title and subtitle. *More Examples, Less Theory* expresses the connecting theme of the individual chapters, and it is also a plea for the future of psychological writing. The subtitle conveys that the main work of the book looks backwards, for the work revolves around historical studies of psychological writing. These studies are the means by which the forwards-facing plea was formulated, and I hope they provide support for that plea. As such, the book is not properly a work of history: historians usually try not to be distracted by the future when they examine the past. As the subtitle suggests, the book is historical rather than a history. Yet, there may be a connection between title and subtitle, between looking forwards and looking backwards. Historians generally are more concerned with particular events and particular people than with constructing general theories. Being historical, in this sense, means attending to the particular rather than the general.

How the present book should be categorised is not for me a major matter. My job has been to write the book, not to classify it. Personally, I prefer the term 'historical psychology' to 'history of psychology', as I am comfortable with the idea of doing psychology historically and this includes historically examining ways of writing psychology. Previously, I have referred to myself, not altogether seriously, as an 'antiquarian psychologist' (Billig, 1987). I also feel that the term 'historical psychology' gives a psychological writer more licence: there is not the obligation to produce a chronological account, for the writer of historical psychology, unlike the historian, can dive in and out of the past in the search for interesting examples that might help to understand the present in the hope of influencing the future.[1]

[1] At the start of Chapter 3, I will return to the topic of 'the history of psychology' and 'historical psychology'. In that chapter, I refer to the work of Kurt Danziger and Adrian Brock, who have considered in great depth and with considerable acumen the categories of 'history of psychology' and 'historical psychology'. I do so there, because that chapter does

Structure of the Book

There are seven chapters analysing thinkers, and they typically concentrate on particular pieces of writing which are set within the wider context of the thinker's life and work. Some of the chapters, such as those on Freud, Lewin and Lacan, deal with a single figure. Others deal with two thinkers, comparing specific pieces from each in order to highlight similarities or differences between the two. In the double-figured chapters, one of the figures is illustrious, while the other has been comparatively neglected in the histories of psychology. A sub-theme of this book is that academic fame is not necessarily a sign of intellectual quality nor is obscurity reserved for the second-rate.

The chapters are roughly arranged in chronological order, but strict chronology was neither achieved nor attempted. Chronology, as determined by birthdate, would have dictated that the final analytic chapter should have occupied the penultimate place. However, the final chapter has been held back so that its subject, Marie Jahoda, could be praised as the ultimate example, as the example who sets standards of writing and of intellectual humanity that psychologists today would do well to follow. Putting chronology aside is another sign that this book is not a straightforward history of psychology but an exercise in addressing some current issues historically.

The first analytic chapter, which of course is the second chapter of the book, goes back to a time before the word 'psychology' was part of the English language. It deals with John Locke, the founder of associationist psychology, and the third Earl of Salisbury, who described Locke as his foster father. I concentrate on Locke's chapter on the association of ideas which he added to the fourth edition of his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. There we can see him presenting examples of the various types of association that he is carefully distinguishing. His examples are minimal, conveying little extra detail: they are shackled to the demands of his theoretical distinctions. In the work of the foster son, we find an altogether different view of the mind and Shaftesbury uses language in a very different way. His examples are extended, and he does not coerce them into a theoretical structure. In fact, Shaftesbury believed that theoretical systems prevent people from understanding themselves and their place in the world. In the contrast between Locke and Shaftesbury, we can see the beginning of debates about the mind that persist in the present.

something that some historians would consider unhistorical: I explore the similarities between two thinkers who lived in different times.

The following chapter deals with two figures who represent the extremes of eminence and obscurity: William James and Abraham Tucker. Despite their differences in fame and being separated by almost a hundred years, the two held strikingly similar views about the mind; and both were skilled experts of the telling example. Tucker anticipated James' view of consciousness as a stream and much more besides. He also recognised that theory and examples often stood in conflict one with the other. Both James and Tucker – the famous and the forgotten – take their places as heroes in this story of examples.

After the chapter on Tucker and James, comes one devoted to a single figure: Sigmund Freud. The chapter concentrates on his analyses of an episode in his own life. During a holiday he surprisingly forgot the name of the Italian artist Luca Signorelli. He wrote three slightly differing descriptions of the episode, the most famous being the first chapter of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, a book filled with examples. By examining Freud's different accounts of this example and by comparing them with his insights about other people, we can see how Freud's analysis of the Signorelli incident both reveals and conceals. It is suggested that Freud, by analysing the episode and then immediately preparing his analysis for publication, may well have been trying to push something troubling from his mind.

The next chapter is slightly out of chronological sequence, but it continues with the psycho-analytic themes of the Freud chapter. This is the chapter whose tone does not match that of the other chapters. It looks at Jacques Lacan in a highly critical manner, and it offers no polite praise. The piece of Lacan's writing to be analysed is his account of the mirror stage – an idea that has been extremely influential in literary and cultural analyses. Ostensibly, Lacan bases the idea of a mirror stage on the work of psychologists, but when examined closely, his references to psychologists and to their work seem to evaporate. On the other hand, he avoids referencing a French psychologist who proposed very similar psychological ideas. The chapter is designed to counteract any tendency to say that, if psychology is based on writing, then all that matters is composing well-phrased, literary accounts and we need not bother gathering evidence and examples.

Kurt Lewin is the focus of attention in Chapter 6, which examines his general view of psychology as well as his famous study comparing the effects of different styles of leadership. In this study, Lewin showed how examples of real-life behaviour could be created experimentally. The focus here is upon his report of the study in a journal of social psychology, where Lewin seems to comply with the standard rhetoric of social psychological writing.

The chapter looks at the conflict between examples and theory in Lewin's own work – a conflict that is optimistically glossed over in his famous motto 'There is nothing as practical as a good theory'. Lewin claimed to have derived his idea of a good theory from his teacher, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer. However, he overlooked Cassirer's warnings that theories impoverish reality and that science needs good descriptions. Although the chapter criticises some of Lewin's specific ideas, he is praised for his wider vision, sense of humanity and optimistic character, all of which he expresses within his work.

The following chapter discusses another social psychologist, my teacher Henri Tajfel. I have not picked one of his famous papers, but I have chosen a short preface which he wrote for the re-publication of a neglected book on anti-Semitism, originally written in the 1920s by Fritz Bernstein, a German Jew living in the Netherlands. Bernstein had proposed a general theory of group relations to explain anti-Semitism. What Tajfel wrote about Bernstein's pre-war book is revealing, as are Bernstein's post-war reflections on his own book. The sort of language, which might have been appropriate for writing about anti-Semitism in the 1920s, had become wholly inappropriate after the Holocaust. The singularity of the Nazis' organised murder of millions would be misplaced if it were absorbed into a general theory of group relations. Significantly, Tajfel avoided using his own 'social identity theory' to explain Nazism. His praise of Bernstein expresses an understanding and depth of feeling that are beyond the simplifications of any theory.

The final analytic chapter presents the ultimate example, an example to be followed: Marie Jahoda. In so many respects, Jahoda embodied the virtues that are praised in the earlier chapters. She was the author of a classic report looking at the effects of mass unemployment on the lives of those living in an Austrian village in the early 1930s. Her report detailed the desperate conditions of the villagers and she made telling use of examples. Just as her examples overspill any theory of unemployment, so the reasons why Jahoda might herself be heralded as an example to follow overspill her abilities to use examples. She had a wider moral and political vision which she maintained throughout her life; she understood the tensions between theory and examples; she wrote directly with minimum jargon and maximum clarity; and she felt that the pressures to publish were corrupting academic values. In short, her use of examples and her suspicion of theory in psychology were just two aspects of a humane, courageous vision.

There is a final chapter, which does not offer an overarching theory of examples to cover all the psychological writers. On the other hand, I try to pull together some of the connecting themes from the previous chapters.