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978-1-107-03431-0 - Psychology and History: Interdisciplinary Explorations

Edited by Cristian Tileagă and Jovan Byford

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Introduction: psychology and history – themes, debates, overlaps and borrowings

Cristian Tileagă and Jovan Byford

The main concern of this book is with the possibilities for an interdisciplinary dialogue between psychology and history. At first sight it might seem obvious that psychology and history, as scholarly disciplines, have a lot in common. For one thing the two traditions of enquiry share, and are continuously brought into contact by, their concern with the human condition: with individual and collective beliefs, mentalities, human behaviour and motivation, memory, personality, emotions and feelings. And yet the dialogue between the two disciplines has been, for the most part, sporadic and fraught with both theoretical and epistemological tensions.

Traditionally, both historians and psychologists have been aware of the need for a conversation with each other. Many historians have appealed for greater engagement with psychological literature. As the French historian Jean Chesneaux wrote, ‘social psychology and psychoanalysis add substantially to the historian’s intellectual equipment and enable him [*sic*] to cope more effectively with problems of collective consciousness and mass mentality’.¹ Historians of genocide and social conflict have similarly appealed for greater engagement with psychological literature, especially when researching topics such as memory, obedience, conformity or intergroup conflict.² Meanwhile, the pioneers of the fields of psychohistory and psychobiography (which gradually developed throughout the twentieth century, mainly in the United States) sought to apply the tools of psychoanalysis and depth psychology to the study of historical figures, past events and collective behaviours.³ Equally, to many prominent psychologists, the engagement with history (and other humanities and social sciences) promised a way of undermining the rigid positivism that reigns

¹ J. Chesneaux, *Pasts and Futures or What Is History For?* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), p. 130.

² See C. R. Browning, ‘Foreword’, in J. Waler, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. vii–viii.

³ See, for instance, W. M. Runyan (ed.), *Psychology and Historical Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

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within traditional academic psychology. Michael Billig, Kenneth Gergen and Serge Moscovici have all argued that psychology ought to be more attentive to the historical contingency of psychological phenomena and pay closer attention to the issue of how historical conditions, ideologies and cultural traditions produce and sustain particular forms of individual and collective thought and action.⁴

In spite of the increasing awareness that ‘history is far too important a matter to be left to the historians’ – and the same can be said to apply to psychology and psychologists – the conversation between the two disciplines has been anything but fluent.⁵ As Kenneth Gergen once observed, ‘psychologists and historians have not always been congenial companions’.⁶ Mainstream academic psychology treats history with ‘little more than tolerant civility’. Psychologists may ‘scan accounts of earlier times’, but only in the quest for ‘interesting hypotheses and anecdotes’, or for confirmation that the results of systematic and controlled empirical research have a wider currency and the much coveted ‘ecological validity’. But, history and psychology are seldom seen as being truly complementary. For many psychologists history is an incomplete enquiry, because of the evasive ‘messiness’ of history and social life.⁷ As Michael Billig explains:

Historians lack complete records of the past. They cannot run experiments to test hypotheses. A historian might claim that Protestantism was vital to the development of capitalism in the early modern period. Supporting evidence might be assembled. A plausible story might be told. But the thesis can never be ‘proved’ to the rigorous standards demanded by an experimental scientist, such as a chemist or physicist. No controlled experiment could be conducted on past events. One cannot re-run the processes of European history, this time controlling for factors such as Henry VIII’s divorce, the doctrines of Martin Luther and the failure of the Catholic Church to stop the selling of pardons, in order to assess what precise weightings these ‘variables’ would have on the rise of capitalism.⁸

The attitude of ‘tolerant civility’ found among psychologists is reciprocated by historians who have been sceptical of historical enquiry based on psychological theories and empirical findings. In his 1957 presidential address delivered at the American Historical Association’s annual

⁴ K. Gergen, ‘Social psychology as history’. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26 (1973), 309–20; S. Moscovici, ‘The phenomenon of social representations’, in R. M. Farr and S. Moscovici (eds.) *Social Representations* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 3–70; M. Billig, *Arguing and Thinking: a Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵ Chesneaux, *Pasts and Futures*, p. 9.

⁶ K. Gergen, *Social Constructionism in Context* (London: Sage, 2001), p. 82.

⁷ M. Billig, *The Hidden Roots of Critical Psychology* (London: Sage, 2008).

⁸ Billig, *Hidden Roots*, p. 10.

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dinner, the Harvard historian William D. Langer stated that ‘classical or academic psychology ... so far as I can detect, has little bearing on historical problems’.⁹ Curiously, Langer was more favourably inclined towards the potential of psychoanalysis and ‘depth psychology’. Other historians, however, have been less forthcoming. In Britain, the renowned historian of the twentieth century A. J. P. Taylor once wondered how anyone could take Freud seriously, a sentiment shared by other historians who see psychological reductionism as inherently ahistorical.¹⁰ One critic of psychohistory, Lawrence Stone, went as far as to accuse this approach of developing ‘along dogmatically ahistorical lines’, in that it emphasized causal factors ‘independent of the influence of historically based cultural conditioning’ and ignored ‘the critical importance of changing context – religious, moral, cultural, economic, social, and political’.¹¹ Even within the genre of biography, where the link between psychoanalytically informed psychology and history might seem most apparent, the cooperation between the two disciplines has been at best ‘uneasy’. Psychobiography has always been largely confined to the peripheries of mainstream academia.¹²

One important cause of the tensions that exist between psychology and history lies in their dissimilar approaches to evidence and ‘data’. As Christopher Browning, one of today’s foremost Holocaust historians acknowledges, different historians reading the same historiographic sources ‘would not produce or agree upon an identical set of “facts” – beyond an elementary minimum – out of which a narrative of events ... could be created’. In other words, the same material – official documents, eyewitness reports, memoirs, and so on – can produce multiple interpretations and explanations. There is no ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ means of adjudicating between competing interpretations, except through scholarly debate and argumentation.¹³ This is not something that can be easily reconciled with academic psychology’s empiricist credentials, obsession with method and, more often than

⁹ W. D. Langer, ‘The next assignment’, *The American Historical Review*, 63 (1958), 284.

¹⁰ C. Ginzburg, ‘Freud, the Wolf-Man, and the Werewolves’, in C. Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, OH: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); S. Nicholas, ‘Psychoanalysis and Psychohistory’, in P. Lambert and P. Schofield (eds.), *Making History: an Introduction to the History and Practice of a Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2004); A. C. Elms, *Uncovering Lives: the Uneasy Alliance of Biography and Psychology* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹¹ L. Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 26 and 40.

¹² See Elms, *Uncovering Lives*.

¹³ For the defence of scholarship as method see M. Billig, ‘Methodology and scholarship in understanding ideological explanation’, in C. Antaki (ed.), *Analysing Everyday Explanation: a Casebook of Methods* (London: Sage, 1988), pp. 199–227.

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not, quantification. Furthermore, as Lawrence Stone points out, psychologists exhibit a tendency to adopt ‘an almost consciously antiliterary style’ sacrificing narrative coherence and clarity, so important in historical writing, in favour of a language that is ‘obscure, turgid, repetitive, flatulent, studded either with meaningless jargon and neologisms, or with oversophisticated algebraic formulae and impenetrable statistical tables’.¹⁴

Also, academic psychology often has a problem with historiographic sources. Because psychology focuses mainly on human behaviour in the present (from which it draws often unwarranted universalist, ‘ahistorical’ conclusions), psychologists can claim to have a direct and unmediated access to their object of study. Put differently, in the context of experimental research in particular, psychologists are involved in the design and creation of the data they analyse. Historians, on the other hand, do not have that luxury: they deal with ‘data’ that, because its *locus* is in the past, is always imperfect, incomplete, contingent on interpretation and mediated through sources.¹⁵

The present collection of chapters hopes to help psychology and history move from their current state of sporadic engagement, towards genuine and authentic interdisciplinary dialogue. The thirteen chapters, authored by internationally renowned psychologists and historians, span a broad range of topics of mutual interest to the two disciplines, such as social memory, prejudice, stereotyping, affect and emotion, cognition, personality, gender and the self. The contributions explore these topics, drawing on examples from different historical periods and cultural contexts – from eighteenth-century Britain, through apartheid South Africa to the conflict-torn former Yugoslavia – and cover diverse issues, such as political decision making, the Darwinian theory of emotion and sexuality. Also, the chapters consider the various issues that arise from conducting research across the boundaries between the humanities and the social or psychological sciences. These include the nature and limitations of psychological and historical enquiries, the different epistemologies within and across the two disciplines, the tensions between the universal and the particular, the relationship between the individual and the social. The main aim of this collection of chapters is to rekindle the dialogue between psychology and history and encourage students and researchers working in the two disciplines to engage in this dialogue more directly and self-reflectively.

¹⁴ Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited*, p. 8; see also M. Billig, *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ L. Jordanova, *History in Practice* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), p.170.

Conceptions and meanings of interdisciplinarity

Before we present the outline of the book it is perhaps worth dwelling on the elusive notion of ‘interdisciplinarity’. As Ludmilla Jordanova points out, there is a ‘certain ambiguity surrounding what is meant by “interdisciplinary” – is it about exchanges between fields that remain distinct or a rather more intimate blending of domains with already blurred edges?’¹⁶

One notable form of interdisciplinary engagement between psychology and history involves what might be referred to as *merger* or *appropriation*. The sub-disciplines of ‘psychohistory’ and ‘psychobiography’ are relevant examples. Historians who embraced psychoanalysis turned it into a critical instrument for uncovering hidden motives, desires, life trajectories, and so on, of both individuals and collectives.¹⁷

Another common form of engagement is *transfer* or *borrowing*. This is where specific insights, ideas, or vocabulary from one discipline are used to shed light on a specific problem regarding human motivation, behaviour, and so on. The historian engaged in borrowing often takes on the role of the ‘seeker’ who looks for a particular idea, ‘poking about’ in the quest for ‘some formula, some hypothesis, some model, some method which has immediate relevance to one’s own work, and which seems to help one to understand one’s data better and to arrange and interpret them in a more meaningful way’.¹⁸ An example of this approach might include Christopher Browning’s work on the conduct of the members of the German Reserve Police Battalion 100 in Poland in 1942, which drew on the findings of Stanley Milgram’s classic social psychological study of obedience.¹⁹ On the other hand, when psychologists engage in borrowing, they look to history for accounts of real life events, which they then examine through the prism of psychological research and theory. One example is the study by Steve Reicher and colleagues, which looked at the rescue of Bulgaria’s Jews during the Holocaust as an example of bystander intervention and the mobilization of pro-social behaviour.²⁰

The determining feature of borrowing is that it is selective and focuses on solving a particular problem or issue: how does one account for the

¹⁶ Jordanova, *History in Practice*, p. 80.

¹⁷ P. Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past: the Psychohistorical Approach* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1996).

¹⁸ Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited*, p. 20.

¹⁹ C. R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

²⁰ S. Reicher, C. Cassidy, I. Wolpert, N. Hopkins and M. Levine, ‘Saving Bulgaria’s Jews: An analysis of social identity and the mobilisation of social solidarity’, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 36 (2006), 49–72.

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survival of Bulgaria's Jews? What explains the behaviour of members of a police battalion? Importantly, when historians or psychologists turn to each other, they do so for *suggestions* rather than prescriptions. What is to be borrowed and how much is usually determined by the perceived usefulness, applicability and relevance. As Jordanova argues, 'if conducted correctly, with due acknowledgement' borrowing can be seen, by both sides, as 'a productive transaction'.²¹

Occasionally, transfer or borrowing can lead to the creation of new vocabulary and novel ways of thinking about psychological or historical phenomena. One example of this process of *translation* is the new 'history of emotions' whose vocabulary and academic thesaurus is a transformation and reinterpretation of concepts from disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience and evolutionary science. Translation usually involves topics and concerns that are taken for granted by some researchers, but are seen as 'lost' and then 'found' by others. These 'recuperation' projects involve some degree of (more or less complex) transformation or translation.²² In the case of the 'history of emotions' the cross-disciplinary process of translation at the same time enriches historical practice, and revitalizes the psychological exploration of emotions, by placing them 'within an economy that depends on, and answers to, cultural expectations and social needs'.²³

Translation is usually intimately linked to a process of *historicization* of the object of study. For historians, this usually involves recasting individual-level types of phenomena (fear, emotion, etc.) and situating them within a cultural-historical framework.²⁴ For example, Bourke's cultural history of fear asks, 'how can we understand the way people in the past experienced emotions such as fear' given that, from a historical vantage point, 'subjective feelings are invisible'?²⁵ One cannot just expect to contemplate historical 'traces' and understand how individuals 'really felt'. 'Knowing' this requires squaring historical scholarship with insights from psychology and cognate domains.²⁶

²¹ Jordanova, *History in Practice*, p. 63.

²² U. Frevert, *Emotions in History: Lost and Found* (Budapest: Centra European University Press, 2011).

²³ Frevert, *Emotions in History*, p. 212.

²⁴ J. Bourke, *Fear: a Cultural History* (London: Virago, 2006); W. A. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: a Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²⁵ Bourke, *Fear: a Cultural History*, p. 6.

²⁶ Importantly, historicization is not in itself a guarantee against reductionism. Quite the contrary, the impetus to account for a certain socio-psychological phenomenon culturally and historically (in a full and comprehensive fashion) can lead someone to disregard particular or deviant cases.

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In any project of translation lurks the danger of *reduction* and oversimplification. In broadest terms, reduction can be defined as ‘recasting the type and level of phenomena from one that is complex to another that is less so: by implication, one too basic to be satisfying’.²⁷ A classic example of reduction in history is psychohistory. The majority of critiques levelled at the psychohistorical project have dealt in some way or another with its reductionism, its tendency to reduce complex historical phenomena, or individual biographies, to an (unsatisfactory) basic level, grounded in psychodynamic interpretations. However, as Paul Elovitz argues in his contribution to this volume, psychohistory should be seen as more varied and less reductionist than its critics would allow. Another example that can be given is the new approach of ‘neurohistory’, with its emphasis on the brain as the material and historical basis of experience.²⁸ According to Jeremy Burman (this volume), neurohistory suggests a narrative about past events that takes into account the biological underpinnings of experience, which, in any given context, are seen to *cause* the feeling of ‘what it was like’. One of the crucial suggestions of neurohistory is that historians need to take into account the ‘deep’ (evolutionary, physiological) structures, traditionally investigated by neurologists, neuropsychologists and cognitive psychologists. It is assumed that one can delve deeper into the history of the humankind by exploring the neural structures that make possible feelings, emotions, culture, social organization, and so on. Historians’ turn to the brain is akin to psychologists’ turn towards evolution and neurosciences: some psychologists increasingly see evolutionary, physiological and cortical correlates of behaviour as the sole answer to the various puzzles posed by human action, values and motivations. These are not considered particular to individuals, but rather as universal aspects that can offer the ultimate story of human existence and experience.

One of the problems with this approach is that the diversity of human actions is reduced to the brain, which is seen as determining the forms that cultural life and cultural experience take. What Kenneth Gergen has called the ‘expanding romance with cortical explanations of human action’ ignores the diversity of experiences, plurality of values and beliefs, issues of cross-cultural variation, and so on.²⁹ More importantly, what makes this approach reductionist is that it glosses over the idea that ‘the brain does not determine the contours of cultural life; cultural

²⁷ Jordanova, *History in Practice*, p. 68.

²⁸ D. L. Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

²⁹ K. Gergen, ‘The Acculturated Brain’, *Theory & Psychology*, 20 (2010), 19.

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life determines what we take to be the nature and importance of brain functioning'.³⁰

Appropriation, borrowing, translation and reduction, as forms of interdisciplinary engagement, are neither mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive. In fact, when looking at specific studies, it is not always possible to determine where borrowing turns into translation or where translation might acquire the properties of a merger. Instead, what can be discerned are elective affinities between the two disciplines, which imply the notion of a discretionary, flexible choice. This choice is guided by diverse factors including, but not limited to, the prevailing academic conventions in the two disciplines, hierarchies of specialization and expertise, the implicit or explicit models of the mind and human behaviour, assumptions about possible areas of overlap and dialogue, and so on. Most importantly, as the contributions to this volume testify, the key driver of interdisciplinary dialogue has been the need to solve puzzles and answer questions related to the human condition. Sometimes these puzzles are defined by the conventions of the discipline and previously acquired knowledge, sometimes by real world concerns, and sometimes by the interaction between the two. Also, whether the dialogue between psychology and history involves a one-way or two-way flow is less important than the fact that researchers from two seemingly different traditions of enquiry can and, in fact, do find common ground, and use insights from the other discipline creatively, as a guide to their endeavour. The dialogue between two fields of knowledge and the continuing exchange, transaction, and so on should strive to broaden the scope of both of them and make more meaningful the examination of the variety of assumptions and preconceptions about the human condition. This dialogue should not be mainly about *how* psychology and history ought to relate to each, but about actual ways in which psychologists and historians infuse their enquiries with each other's insights.

The recognition of this plurality of ways of doing interdisciplinarity is central to the present volume. Forthcoming chapters do not offer an 'instructional manual' on how to do interdisciplinarity; nor do they lay out a fully developed, singular interdisciplinary approach. Instead, as the title suggests, what follows is a collection of diverse and engaging interdisciplinary *explorations*, which track the intersection between psychology and history and consider different ways in which each discipline can enhance the understanding of the other. It is hoped that these explorations will raise awareness among researchers from both disciplines about the need to question their unspoken, often taken-for-granted assumptions, to

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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scrutinize their concepts and methods more carefully, to make innovations to existing research strategies, to generate new research questions, and to offer, where relevant, theoretical and contextual *appui* to other disciplines.

Outline of the book

The book is divided into three parts. Part I deals with central aspects of the theoretical dialogue between psychologists and historians. The emphasis is on the distinctive theoretical relevance of interdisciplinary engagement for understanding human behaviour. The opening chapter, by Geoffrey Cubitt, uses the example of social memory – a field of interest for both history and psychology – to examine the manner in which the boundaries between the two disciplines may be kept open or critically interrogated. Joan Scott discusses the possibility/impossibility of a productive dialogue between history and psychology, with particular reference to psychoanalysis. Scott argues that although history and psychoanalysis work with very different conceptions of time and causality, it is important for historians to recognize the latter's potential when examining the historical relevance of unconscious motivation and fantasy. Scott charts part of the history of the 'compatibility' between the two disciplines and the contexts that fostered or hindered their interaction. Jeremy Burman critically appraises some of the recent engagement between history and neuroscience. Burman explores the promises and limitations of 'neurohistory' as an emerging approach that seeks to do 'history from within' and interrogates some of its psychological assumptions. The fourth chapter in this section, by Paul Elovitz, uses the example of psychohistory and psychobiography to consider the successes and failures of some of the previous attempts to bring psychology and history closer together. Elovitz identifies crucial tensions that strained the relationship between historians and psychologists in the past, and suggests remedies for a productive and mutually beneficial interdisciplinary engagement. The concluding chapter of Part I, by Ivana Marková, looks specifically at micro-history and single case studies, and contrasts method and explanation in history and social psychology.

Parts II and III include examples of research in which psychologists and historians have borrowed from, developed, or explored each other's ideas. Part II focuses on *cognition*, *affect* and *the self*. Carolyn Dean writes about selfhood and sexuality in historical writing. Dean follows the historical trace of conceptions of selfhood and gender identity in historical scholarship, and generally considers the historical and cultural contingency of psychological notions. Rob Boddice critically appraises

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the ‘affective turn’ in history by considering how emotions are treated in historical writing. Using the history of evolutionary psychology as a case study, he engages with the question about how to ‘do’ the history of emotions. Mark Blum looks at ‘cognitive orientation’ as a factor in the decision-making processes of politicians, and argues that cognition offers a useful tool for the historian trying to understand the psychological underpinnings of political decision making and action. The chapter by George Turner, Susan Condor and Alan Collins explores the history of the concept of self-esteem, and shows that, contrary to popular belief, there existed a psychology of self-esteem in the writings of phrenologists, well before William James used the term in *Principles of Psychology* in 1890.

Part III offers further examples of the dialogue between psychology and history, which consider issues around *prejudice*, *ideology*, *stereotypes* and *national character*. By charting the two ‘histories’ of the concept of prejudice in social psychology, Kevin Durrheim argues that one cannot understand the social psychology of racism in apartheid South Africa outside of its historical context. Through the analysis of a largely forgotten early social psychological exploration of anti-Semitism, Michael Billig writes about the need for a more historically conscious social psychology, while Mark Knights focuses on the understanding of stereotypes as both psychological and historical constructions, and comments on history’s and social psychology’s shared interest in the public sphere, the arts of persuasion and the formation of attitudes. The final chapter, by Cathie Carmichael, examines the ways in which psychological and psychoanalytic language and interpretation of national character were mobilized for propaganda purposes in the former Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and 1990s.

The contributions by historians included in this volume show how taking psychology seriously can help construct a more comprehensive stance towards historical phenomena, events, chronologies, and so on, and disentangle the intricate web of human motivation, individual and social memory, values, attitudes, beliefs, social identifications, social representations, stereotypes, and so forth. Equally, the contributions by psychologists demonstrate how taking history and historical context seriously can help avoid the tendency towards unwarranted generalization, and develop a more reflective stance towards the historical contingency of psychological vocabulary and phenomena, such as values, attitudes and collective mentalities. Crucially, the volume does not privilege any specific school of thought within either psychology or history. On the contrary, it covers a whole range of theoretical, epistemological and methodological approaches, and considers myriad issues that arise from