

1

Approaching the History of Psychology: Recurrent Questions in Psychology

In 1910, Hermann Ebbinghaus famously described psychology as having “a long past but only a short history” (p. 9). By “history,” Ebbinghaus was apparently referring to the brief period of time when experimental psychologists had been consciously working as members of a new, official discipline; the first psychology laboratory had been opened only about thirty years before his comment. By “past,” Ebbinghaus seemed to reference the age-old questions about human behavior and experience that psychologists study; for thousands of years, scholars had been debating and writing about these topics. If you have taken other courses in psychology, you are likely already familiar with some of these questions, and it is helpful to consider them as we take a brief tour through the history of psychology.

Perhaps the most pressing question throughout psychology’s “long past” has been whether a science of the mind, a psychology, is possible. If it is, how is it to be defined and what should its methods be? In the nineteenth century Auguste Comte denied the possibility of a science of the mind. The mind, Comte asserted, can study all phenomena but its own. His contemporary, John Stuart Mill, refuted Comte’s assertion and proposed a science of the mind, a model of the mind’s operations, and a method for studying its contents (Chapter 2). Mill’s position was adopted and extended by Wilhelm Wundt (Chapter 4) when he established a science of psychology and developed methods that allowed a classic question of philosophy – “How do we perceive and come to have knowledge of the world?” – to be addressed scientifically. One of the triumphs of the first generation of experimental psychologists was Ebbinghaus’s own research on human memory (Chapter 6). He was able to show that memory can be studied scientifically and that the methods of psychology can be as rigorous and its results as reliable as those of older, established sciences, and the essentials of Ebbinghaus’s results remain unchallenged today.

In the twentieth century John B. Watson (Chapter 13) asserted that, to be scientific, psychology should abandon all concern with the mind and

study only behavior. His radical proposal and methods gave birth to *behaviorism*, which became the dominant approach to psychology in America in the mid-twentieth century. Later on, the study of the mind in the form of *cognitive psychology* experienced a renaissance within psychology, and much of the research being done by cognitive psychologists bears a striking similarity to research and theories developed by Oswald Külpe (Chapter 6) and Edward Tolman (Chapter 14). Today, neuroscience approaches have come to be major (even dominant) ways of studying certain areas of psychology (Chapter 15), and so many psychologists seem to study the brain as much as the mind or behavior. In sum, discussion over the proper definition and methods of psychology is a perennial feature of the discipline.

A second recurrent question in the history of psychology and philosophy concerns the relationship between the mind and body. The ancient philosophers had curious ideas about the seat of the mind; for instance, Aristotle located it in the heart. Today we confidently locate the mind in the brain and describe mental functions as products of the brain's operations; neuroscientists have provided impressive evidence for relationships between specific psychological phenomena and precise brain areas (Chapter 3). However, perhaps because of the brain's complexity – with its 85 billion nerve cells and estimated 1 quadrillion potential connections between them – a complete description of the relationship between the brain and behavior as well as between the brain and consciousness still eludes us, and some thinkers doubt that a full understanding of those relationships is even possible (see e.g., McGinn, 1991).

Another recurrent question concerns the relative contributions and importance of *nature* (the genetic constitution) and *nurture* (the environment) to development and individual differences. The ancient philosopher Aristotle favored an environmentalist position, stressing the importance of experience. Indeed, it was Aristotle who first used the lasting metaphor of the mind at birth as a *tabula rasa*, or blank tablet, to be filled by experience. (This position is sometimes referred to as *empiricism*.) Aristotle's teacher Plato recognized the importance of individual differences in temperament, character, and ability, and he believed that such dispositions are largely inborn and therefore adopted the position of a *nativist*. Throughout the history of psychology these empiricist and nativist positions recur: Aristotle's empiricism has similarities in the ideas of the "modern" philosopher John Locke (Chapter 2) and the twentieth-century psychologist B. F. Skinner (Chapter 14), whereas Plato's nativism finds intellectual descendants such as the later philosopher René Descartes (Chapter 2) and the nineteenth-century scholar Francis Galton (Chapter 8). The "nature–nurture debate" has been one of the most heated in all of psychology and remains so in recent years. Psychologist Steven Pinker (2002) wrote a forceful attack on extreme "nurture" positions that prompted many rebuttals (e.g., Dupré, 2003), and more recently the behavioral genetics scholar Robert Plomin (2018) put forth a bold argument for the ability of heredity to determine human outcomes – an argument that will no doubt attract detractors as well.

Why Study the History of Psychology?

The recurrent questions just described provide one answer to the heading: certain current issues in psychology can be better understood by studying psychology's history, as the issues have been around for centuries or even millennia. Learning about the history of viewpoints on these issues is a guide to why today's debates have the contours that they do. To take one example, why is experimental research sometimes viewed as better than correlational research, and why do psychologists who engage in the latter type of research often feel defensive (e.g., Detterman, 1979)? This has a history dating to an influential graduate-level textbook published by the Columbia University psychologist Robert Woodworth in 1938 (Winston, 1990). In the same way that scholars who are interested in understanding international conflict look to the history of the disputes, psychologists can profit from understanding how the different positions in the field evolved. As the novelist William Faulkner (1951) famously observed, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

There are other intellectual reasons to study the history of psychology as well – for instance, to acquire general cultural knowledge. Many major figures such as Sigmund Freud (Chapter 11), William James (Chapter 9), and B. F. Skinner (Chapter 14), have had influence outside of psychology, on other academic disciplines, and particularly on American society as a whole. Freud's ideas are perhaps taken more seriously in English departments than in most psychology departments, James is more likely to be taught in philosophy courses, and Skinner's influence on the field of education – while controversial – is undoubtedly quite significant. The emerging field of behavioral economics (Chapter 15) also shows his influence. Skinner was a frequent interview guest on TV, reaching the general public with his ideas. Educated people in a variety of fields and professions share a common repertoire of cultural understanding, and these figures are part of that understanding.

A final intellectual reason is pure interest! Students often seek out courses in child development or social psychology, but the fascinating ideas and people in the history of psychology are hidden pleasures. Many students have admitted to us that they were not looking forward to the history of psychology course but were pleasantly surprised by how much they enjoyed it. The true stories behind famous experiments and the personal lives of the great psychologists make for more interest than some would expect. Did you know that Ivan Pavlov sold his dogs' stomach acid as a digestive tonic to make extra money? (See Chapter 13.) Or that the philosopher René Descartes had his head severed after death so as to fit in a too-small coffin? (See Chapter 2.)

Still other advantages flowing from studying the history of psychology are more concretely practical. Undergraduate students preparing for the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) psychology subject test, and graduate students planning to take the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP) will find the history of psychology an excellent foundation when studying for these tests.

In addition, students seeking doctoral degrees in clinical, counseling, and school psychology should know that doctoral programs accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA) are required to include coursework in the history of psychology, and a recent survey found that 75 percent of bachelor's degree programs in psychology offer the course, with 45 percent of programs requiring it (Norcross et al., 2016).

A Brief History of the History of Psychology

Scholars have written about the “history of psychology” even before psychology existed as a separate academic discipline. In 1892, the philosopher-psychologist William James wrote: “it is indeed strange to ... write ‘Histories of Psychology’ when into the real elements and forces which the word covers not the first glimpse of clear insight exists” (James, 1892, p. 468). These early histories were essentially about the psychological views of the philosophers. When the Harvard psychologist Edwin Boring (1929) wrote *A History of Experimental Psychology*, this represented a major shift. Although Boring did cover some philosophers' views in detail, he viewed them more as stepping-stones along the way to the more recent and scientific laboratory experimental psychology. Boring's textbook went into a second edition in 1950, and for decades it was standard assigned reading for graduate-level courses. (To take one example, at Syracuse University, the volume was still the required textbook – and still in print – in the 1980s!)

Boring's book – while important and influential – had certain limitations worth noting. First, its focus on experimental (as opposed to applied) psychology seems to have led later textbooks to have the same near-exclusive focus, which is somewhat ironic given that most psychologists now work in clinical or other applied settings. Second, and more problematically, Boring's view of history appears to have been affected greatly by what his mentor Titchener (Chapter 5) told him. Titchener, in turn, had rather idiosyncratic views on the history of psychology, which Boring seems to have accepted. These views also made their way into later history textbooks, until they were debunked in the 1970s and 1980s (we discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 5).

The study of the history of psychology became more professionalized and institutionally supported in the 1960s. Under the leadership of Robert Watson, the University of New Hampshire established the first graduate program in the History and Theory of Psychology (Evans, 1982). Watson was well placed to lead that program. His text *The Great Psychologists*, first published in 1963, was highly influential. Though dedicated to Boring (“E.G.B. my teacher under whom I have never studied”), the text provided an appealing “personalistic” alternative to Boring's “naturalistic” approach to the history of psychology. Those two approaches will be contrasted later in this chapter. Hilgard, Leary, and McGuire (1991) described Watson's other contributions to the history of psychology: his editorial direction

of the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences (JHBS)* from its founding in 1965 to 1974; in 1968, his role in founding *Cheiron*, an international society for the history of the behavioral and social sciences; finally, his central role in establishing Division 26 of the APA on the History of Psychology in 1965. He was that division's first president as well (Hilgard, Leary, & McGuire, 1991).

Since then, the University of New Hampshire has closed its graduate program, but two similar programs opened in Canada, one at York University in Toronto and the other at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. (The Canadian programs include study in theoretical psychology as well as the history of psychology.) The *JHBS* continues to be a strong outlet for historical articles on psychology, with a series of distinguished editors since Watson: Barbara Ross, University of Massachusetts, Boston (1975–1996), John Burnham, The Ohio State University (1997–2000), Raymond Fancher (2001–2005) and Christopher Green (2006–2008), both of York University, and Ian Nicholson, St. Thomas University, New Brunswick, Canada (2009–present).

In 1998, APA's Division 26 started a second journal, *History of Psychology*, to publish "refereed articles addressing all aspects of psychology's past and its interrelationships with the many contexts within which it has emerged and has been practiced." The founding editor was Michael Sokal, Worcester Polytechnic Institute (1998–2004), followed by James Capshew, Indiana University (2005–2009), Wade Pickren, Ithaca College (2010–2015), and Nadine Weidman, Harvard University and Boston College (2016–present). The *American Psychologist* and the *American Journal of Psychology* also publish papers on the history of psychology.

In 1965 John Popplestone and Marion White McPherson established the Archives for the History of American Psychology at the University of Akron in Ohio. Robert Watson was instrumental in convincing the university administration to support the Archives. From a modest beginning, the Archives have grown to be the world's largest repository for papers, equipment, audio/visual recordings, and other artifacts related to the history of psychology. Without such a repository accepting donations, those sorts of items are likely to be thrown out when a psychologist retires. It is a Smithsonian Affiliate Association. In 2014 it was renamed the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology in recognition of the generous financial support of Drs. Nicholas and Dorothy Cummings.

Other important archival collections include:

- The Adolf-Wurth Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Würzburg, which focuses on European and especially German psychology.
- The History of Psychology Centre of the British Psychological Society at the University of London, which preserves and documents archival materials relating to British psychology.
- The History of Psychology Archive at the University of Rome, Sapienza; and the Archives for the History of Psychology in Spain at the University of Barcelona.

- The Reiner Rozestraten Archives for the History of Psychology at the Universidade Catolica Dom Buro in Brazil.
- In Japan, the Center for Psychological Studies at the Tokyo Imperial University houses records of research and clinical studies.
- Archives of Chinese Psychology are located at the Nanjing Normal University, Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Beijing Normal University.

The Cummings Center includes archives for researchers' use and also a museum for students and the general public. They also arrange rotating exhibits on various aspects of the history of psychology, and many of their exhibits are online, a boon to individuals around the world. At the time of this writing, the current web resources include one on Phineas Gage (see Chapter 3) and one on animal training done by students of B. F. Skinner (see Chapter 14). More generally, the Internet has been immensely helpful in disseminating scholarship on the history of psychology. Scholars maintain weblogs, utilize social media, and of course use the Internet to conduct research as well. (Even in the past ten years, far more has become available online; for instance, Google Books now allows you to read and download full text versions of many old psychology books that have been scanned in from major university libraries.) In short, research on the history of psychology is flourishing.

Framing the History of Psychology: Complementary Approaches

History of psychology, like entomology or cognitive psychology or French history, is its own academic field, and like any such field, its scholars have varying ideas about how scholarly work should be done. There are two general approaches that have been identified in the history of psychology, and since one approach appears to have been present before the other, the two approaches are known as the *old history of psychology* and the *new history of psychology* (see e.g., Furumoto, 1989). Below we use those terms not to refer to the age of the historians or to when the historians did work, but to refer to the two approaches. Although the differences between these approaches have often been overstated (see Lovett, 2006, for discussion), the old vs. new history dichotomy is a helpful way of illustrating the different background ideas that can influence historians' work – and more specifically, the way in which the history of psychology has been presented in books and to students. We present these ideas in three sets of pairs.

Presentist vs. Historicist History

One such pair consists of **presentism** and **historicism**. The old history of psychology is generally described as presentist, while new historians of psychology

aspire to be historicists. Presentism is often defined as interpreting the past through the lens of the present. For instance, if a historian of psychology was studying the philosopher John Locke's ideas about education (Chapter 2) with a desire to determine whether Locke's model of learning through experience involved classical or operant conditioning, this would be a presentist approach. The distinction between classical and operant conditioning only came hundreds of years after Locke died, and so Locke's ideas might not fit neatly into either category. Moreover, this illustrates a potential problem of presentism: trying to ask an improper question about Locke's ideas may keep a historian from understanding what Locke really did say. If a cognitive psychologist with an interest in history read Ebbinghaus's (1885) treatise on memory (Chapter 6) to find out if Ebbinghaus's conclusions had been correct, this would also be presentist, since the historical work is being read with the present in mind. Historicist history tries instead to understand the past "own its own terms" rather than imposing modern categories and terminology onto it; historicists try to "get inside the heads" of historical figures to understand their ideas through conceptual frameworks of that era. This approach may also lead historians to sympathize with historical figures, and keep them from unduly harsh judgments about thinkers of the past. Indeed, one of presentism's dangers is that it can lead us to hold psychologists 50 or 100 years ago to unreasonable expectations, judging them as bad scientists if they failed to hold the psychological – or moral – views that we generally hold today. Historicists would urge humility, pointing out that each age has its own perspective, and our current perspective is likely to be viewed as incorrect and even naïve at some point in the future.

Presentism, then, has clear risks, but it has advantages as well. If you are a student of psychology, one such advantage should be obvious: connections between the past and the present require some degree of presentism. Whether we are finding similarities or differences between Locke and Skinner, any attempt at comparison involves an assumption that the two thinkers can be set next to each other on the same terms. The hypothetical cognitive psychologist described above should not be discouraged from reading Ebbinghaus with an accusation of presentism. Whenever we trace the history of an idea, either to note historical influences on the present or to simply note coincidental relationships, some presentism is needed. A related advantage of presentism is its ability to acknowledge progress over time. Psychologists generally view their discipline as a science, and science is often thought to have a degree of cumulative accomplishment – we know more today about, for instance, meteorology than was known in 1950, and we knew more in 1950 than we did in 1900. Historicists are generally uninterested in studying progress in psychology and may even show hostility to such claims. Admittedly, an unthinking assumption of progress is dangerous. Indeed, studying the history of psychology with an arrogant attitude that we psychologists today have finally figured out the correct answers, and past thinkers' ideas were mere stepping-stones leading to today's climate of wisdom, is a problematic approach

known as the *Whig history of psychology* (after the British political party that wrote histories of political ideas in this model). Historicism is a defense against Whig histories, but as we hope to have shown, presentism has its place in the history of psychology as well. In this book, we try to draw connections between the past and present while also understanding early thinkers within their own intellectual framework, and without assuming that today's psychologists *necessarily* know better than our forebears.

Internalist vs. Externalist History

Old history of psychology is also generally **internalist**, which means that its scholarship tends to focus entirely on the ideas and writings of psychologists themselves. Old historians were generally trained as psychologists (without formal academic degrees in history), and so their knowledge base was often limited to psychology (and perhaps related disciplines such as philosophy) rather than knowing a great deal about events that occurred far outside of the field. An extreme form of internalism would implicitly imagine the psychologists' lives as taking place entirely at a scholarly convention or research institute with no contact with the outside world. Internalists, then, locate the influences on historical figures' ideas in the work of other psychologists and in a psychologist's own research.

Externalism, which is more popular among new historians, emphasizes the role of influences that came from outside the field – and from outside academia entirely. For instance, group IQ tests were first developed in response to the drafting of American men for service in World War I; there was a need to test many men quickly, and IQ tests that had been developed for individual administration needed to be adapted to a new use (Chapter 12). Although it is likely that group IQ tests would have been developed eventually anyway, it was an external societal event that happened to cause them at that particular time. In addition, psychologists are typically influenced by general social trends and by economic and political ideas that are dominant in their age. For instance, IQ tests became popular in the United States during a time of “progressivism,” and the tests were seen as a new, scientific and objective way to order society (see e.g., Raferty, 1988). New historians of psychology, many of whom have advanced and specialized training in history (not just the history *of psychology*), are generally more familiar with the details of external influences.

Internalism and externalism both contribute to a full understanding of psychology's history, and depending on the historical phenomenon to be explained, internal or external influences may be more prominent. Some psychological ideas and theories appear to be based on psychologists' own curiosity and testing of other psychologists' ideas, whereas other products of psychology are created in response to external events. Since history of psychology coursework is typically taken by psychology students, and since that is our own academic background as

well, we tend toward internalism in this book, focusing on the work of psychologists and scholars in closely related fields. We do note some important discrete societal events, and we occasionally mention general social trends at different times in history, but we do not presume advanced knowledge of general history. (We assume that our readers generally have more psychology background than history background.)

Personalistic vs. Naturalistic History

Old historians of psychology often came to specialize in that corner of the discipline out of interest in the great psychologists – the *people* who make psychology. (Psychologists, after all, are typically interested in people more generally!) This led to histories of psychology that were heavily biographical, and that emphasized the achievements and ideas of individual heroic figures. At its extreme, this **personalistic history** approach could mean viewing each historical figure as one whose ideas emanated from that person's inherent brilliance without assistance or other influence.¹ All of the old historians knew better, of course, but ignoring context can inadvertently imply that context was not important. For instance, if you see an introductory psychology textbook describe the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's ideas without historical context, this could make those ideas seem entirely novel, and as if Freud deserves all of the credit for claims about the importance of the unconscious. (Such an approach could also make Freud's ideas seem more bizarre, and so you can see how personalistic history and presentist judgments are related.) Understanding that Freud's ideas (a) occurred in the context of other thinkers who had already emphasized unconscious influences on behavior, and that (b) he was part of a group of physicians actively engaged in treating patients experiencing a then-widespread affliction (hysteria) that was apparently relieved by bringing repressed topics to consciousness helps to make his ideas more understandable and far less bold. Of course, some historical figures seem to have played a role in creating a heroic mythology of a lone genius; Freud deliberately tried to erase his former friends and collaborators from the history of psychoanalysis, and similarly, B. F. Skinner failed to cite Edward Thorndike's earlier and similar work, only apologizing when Thorndike complained (Joncich, 1968).

The historian Edwin Boring liked to emphasize **naturalistic** influences on the development of the field – that is, ways in which individual thinkers' ideas

¹ A sign of this is *eponyms* – terms named after people, as if to imply that one person was able to come up with an idea or invention without significant assistance. Referring to a “Skinner box” (operant chamber) or “Schwann cells” (a type of cell in the peripheral nervous system) are common examples of eponyms. Skinner and Schwann certainly “stood on the shoulders” of scientists whose work came before theirs, but the credit that they get suggests personalistic interpretations of history.

were affected by broad intellectual climates. Boring often spoke about the *Zeitgeist* – a German word that refers to the “spirit of the times.” The *Zeitgeist* typically consists of a general intellectual framework at a certain time in a certain place. For instance, Charles Darwin’s ideas (Chapter 8) about evolution occurred in the context of a *Zeitgeist* where other thinkers (whom Darwin read, corresponded with, or otherwise knew) were proposing evolutionary ideas. This both influenced Darwin’s ideas *and* their reception. With regard to the latter, Boring argued that if a psychologist (or other thinker) was “ahead of their time,” in the sense that no *Zeitgeist* was present to support the psychologist’s ideas, the ideas would generally be ignored (see e.g., Boring, 1950). This may have been the case with Darwin’s own grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, who proposed his own theory of evolution (Chapter 8).

The effects of the *Zeitgeist* also go in the opposite direction; it is easy to interpret and publish ideas without much fear of criticism if they are in concert with the *Zeitgeist*, even if the ideas are based on poor-quality research. For instance, the nineteenth-century physician Pierre Paul Broca (Chapter 3) concluded from his neurologic studies that women are inferior products of evolution, that their brains are significantly less developed than those of men, and that this difference in brain size increases with each generation. We now know that his conclusions were in error. However, since they were in harmony with prevailing assumptions and beliefs of the time, they went unchallenged. Social psychology’s recent “replication crisis,” in which researchers were unable to replicate the findings of past published studies, appears to be an instance of this as well; research studies that had severe flaws were accepted because the conclusions seemed to support ideas that were part of the *Zeitgeist* (Simmons & Simonsohn, 2017).

The debate over the relative merits of personalistic and naturalistic history is very similar to the debate between personality and social psychologists as to whether someone’s enduring traits (e.g., extraversion) or their situational environment is a greater determinant of behavior (e.g., Judge & Zapata, 2015). Just as these two kinds of psychologists generally do not deny that both influences are important, the two types of history of psychology need not be mutually exclusive. Personalistic historians are like personality psychologists in focusing on influences from the historical figures’ own traits such as intelligence and conscientiousness, and naturalistic historians are like social psychologists in emphasizing situational context. Both types of influences matter, and good historians acknowledge this. In this book, we often discuss connections between thinkers, and we certainly acknowledge the power of the *Zeitgeist*, but we also discuss the personality and character of the individual psychologists, and we use their lives to organize most of the chapters. We hope this makes the material more engaging and memorable; we think that learning about the psychologists as fascinating people who led interesting lives is more enjoyable than learning about them as faceless brains who simply stated different claims about psychology.