

# History in psychology

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**Zusammenfassung:** *Zahlreiche Autoren haben beobachtet, daß – so wie Guilford es ausdrückte – „in der Psychologie Ideen kommen und gehen“. In diesem Beitrag wird die Auffassung vertreten, daß dieser Prozeß nicht zufällig sondern regelmäßig und insbesondere kontinuierlich abläuft. Mit dem Begriff der „Hauptströmung“ (Main Current) wird dies zum Ausdruck gebracht. Unter Hauptströmungen werden Begriffsnetze verstanden, die über relativ lange Zeit hinweg in der Theoriebildung eine wichtige Rolle gespielt haben. – Dann wird versucht herauszuarbeiten, daß in Anbetracht der dynamischen Beziehungen zwischen einigen der wichtigsten Hauptströmungen ein „Kommen und Gehen“ nicht nur für einzelne Begriffe, sondern für ganze Begriffsnetze beobachtet werden kann. Dies bildet die Grundlage für die Hauptthese dieses Beitrags: In der Psychologie stellt die Vergangenheit Teil und Ausschnitt der Gegenwart dar. – Im abschließenden Teil des Beitrags werden einige gegenwärtige Themen der Historiographie aufgegriffen.*

**Abstract:** *Numerous authors have observed that, as Guilford put it „in psychology ideas seem to be going in and out“. It will be argued that this process is not entirely haphazard but can be seen to display a measure of order and, especially, continuity. This is brought out in the concept of Main Current. Main Currents are understood as clusters of concepts that can be demonstrated to have played a central role in theory-formation over a relatively long period of time. – Next, it is pointed out that in view of the dynamical relation between some of the most important Main Currents a „going in and out“ can be noted not only of single concepts but of entire clusters of concepts too. This provides the basis for the central argument of the paper: In psychology the past is part and parcel of the present. In other words, there is a good deal of history in psychology. – In the final part of the paper some pertinent historiographical issues are taken up.*

Sometime ago, a British colleague (Anderson, 1989), likened psychology to university canteen food: its concepts and ideas were mostly reheated left-overs and rarely was there anything spicy and new. Since he must have been referring to British cooking, his outcry may not particularly strike you. But a decade ago, Sarup (1978), taking a similar view, used the metaphor of old wine in new bottles and both authors are certainly not alone in pointing out that it is not always as easy as we might hope, and expect, to distinguish between what's old and what's new in our discipline. Let me just mention Guilford (1979) who complained about ideas „going in and out“ psychology depending upon fashions, or Koch (1964) who in the sixties observed a return of ideas and topics that at the time had been repressed for nearly half a century.

Especially the field of cognitive science abounds with ideas which seemed dead and neatly buried for generations but somehow got reanimated.

The return of these ideas, and the very idea of ideas in particular, is in fact far more spectacular than was perceived by Sigmund Koch. A historical continuity may be seen between key-concepts in seventeenth century philosophy of mind on the one hand, and current Computational Theory of Mind on the other. A pivotal role in this Chain of Thinking (with apologies to Lovejoy) is played by the Cartesian conception of idea, which provoked heated discussion about the question as to whether ideas were to be understood as objects or as activities of the mind. As Haselager (1992) describes, Malebranche favoured the interpretation of ideas as objects but, it should be noted, these objects were construed along Platonic lines. That is, ideas were seen as representations of the essences of things. They were thought to exist in the mind of god; not in the human mind. The effects of objects on the senses cause movements in the brain, which induce us to postulate external objects as their cause. Hence, even if Malebranche called ideas objects he did not conceive of them as representations in the mind. Arnauld on the other hand, did understand ideas as located in the mind but construed them as mental activities rather than representations. In other words, the controversy boiled down to the question as to whether ideas were mind-independent objects or mind-dependent acts. The debate remained unresolved. Later however, when John Locke combined both positions ideas came to be seen as *objects in the mind*. Conceived thus, ideas took the place of objects in the external world and so became the only objects with which the mind could ever get in touch. In this respect, Locke's idea concept anticipated the solipsistic view of representation found in the Computational Theory of Mind, along with several of its features, such as causal role and constituent structure. And all this history in current psychology can be seen to have a direct bearing on the field. Haselager (1992) draws the attention to a „notable peculiarity of many of the strongest advocates of the Computational Theory. Especially workers in Artificial Intelligence tend to be more or less immune to reactions and criticisms that are not formulated from within this seventeenth century context.“ As an example Searle's Chinese Room thought experiment is given, which is refuted by a furious Hofstadter calling it a „religious diatribe“ and „one of the wrongest articles“ he has ever read in his life.

Haselager's work provides us with a fine example of what I think of as Main Currents in Psychology. The concept of Main Current denotes clusters of concepts that can be demonstrated to have played a central role in psychological theory-formation over a relatively long period of time. Haselager's idea-

tradition does cover a long period and a good many psychologists, approaching the development of the discipline from equally many angles have ended up with more or less similar Main Currents.

In an attempt to make up for the lack of paradigms in psychology, Watson (1967, p. 436) isolated 18 pairs of opposite themes or historical „prescriptions“. I will only mention a few of them:

indeterminism vs. determinism, subjectivism vs. objectivism, and so on with molarism, centralism, qualitativism, and dynamicism.

These six prescriptions happen to be virtually congruous to the factors and dimensions which emerged from more theoretical studies by Coan (1968) and Kimble (1984). The two dichotomous „cultures“ of psychology which the latter perceived in these dimensions were coined, the „tough-minded“ scientist culture and the „tender-minded“ humanist one. A similar dichotomy was found by Coan, which he called the Leibnizian versus the Lockian tradition. And more authors could be mentioned, such as Bakan (1958, 1966; cf. Couzin, 1970), Allport (1955), Cronbach (1957), Wertheimer (1972), Stagner (1988), Gergen (1982), and Leahey (1987). Some of these authors are of the opinion that the traditions or Main Currents may be thought of as historical constants. Since Allport, Watson, Gergen and Haselager traced their Main Currents to seventeenth century philosophy this conjecture does not seem far-fetched. Kimble went even further when pointing out the beginnings of psychology's two cultures in ancient Greek philosophy.

Incidentally, in view of Van Strien's recent interest in a social psychology of science it might be interesting to mention that Watson (1979) has tried the same. Inspired by Gergen's *Social psychology as history* (1973) he conceived of the prescriptions in terms of attitudes and thus of history as a „social psychology of the past“. But as early as the thirties, Lovejoy (1936) had an open eye for the psychological side of unit-ideas, as had Holton (1973) with regard to thematic analysis.

In view of what was said earlier, the clusters of prescriptions or dimensions, the cultures, the traditions, in short, the Main Currents may perhaps provide a conceptual means by which a measure of order can be set up in the apparently continuing process of concepts „going in and out“, as Guilford put it. At the same time, however, the Main Currents themselves form an example of that very process at a higher level of aggregation since a dynamic relation between them has been observed by several authors.

Kimble approvingly quotes William James who saw the history of philosophy and psychology as a running battle between the two cultures mentioned above. Although Kimble perceived a trend toward an armistice he did not expect the war to be over soon. And Gergen (1982) saw the history of

psychology as a zig-zag course between the endogenic and the exogenic worldviews, while Coan concluded that the pattern of change must be cyclic, since, the more a given subject matter or perspective is neglected, the more it is likely to be needed as a corrective for the emphases that have displaced it (Coan, 1968, p. 722).

Putting together the Main currents and the dynamic relation between them, I would like to join the company of many authors by suggesting that this phenomenon demonstrates a characteristic feature of the discipline. Indeed, it may well be an important reason why so many works have appeared and are still being published bearing titles such as „Foundations“ —phenomenological (Giorgi, 1976) or otherwise (Rogers, 1984) — of psychology or Artificial Intelligence (Partridge & Wilks, 1985) or titles making out the discipline as being in conflict (Kendler, 1981) or misdirected (Sarason, 1981) or having a compositional problem (Hillner, 1987) or being in a serious crisis of disunity (Staats, 1983) or what not — in short, a science that needs re-visioning (Hillman, 1975).

As can easily be found out, this is not the kind of material that you are likely to find in the library of a natural science department. Although our traditional anxiety about psychology not being properly scientific should not lead us to overrate the natural sciences it can be argued, I feel, that from the conceptual point of view the field is less well-established than these „exemplary sciences“ (Van Strien). Concepts and even entire Main currents going „in and out“ would seem to entail that psychology’s past may at any moment re-emerge and thus become relevant to the discipline as currently pursued. Phrased in another and for the sake of argument somewhat stronger way: in psychology the past is part and parcel of the present. As Stocking wrote,

Because (the behavioral sciences) are pre-paradigmatic, the various competing schools of the present and of the past exist in a sense contemporaneously. But because they have on the whole such notoriously short historical memories, the behavioral sciences of the present have very little awareness that their predecessors were in many instances asking questions and offering answers about problems which have by no means been closed (Stocking, 1965, p. 216).

In philosophy the same situation obtains to an even stronger degree. In that discipline, history is accorded an inherent position. An historian of philosophy put the matter thus,

Contrary to (-) the physical sciences, in philosophy the new never eliminates the old (hence) the knowledge of its past (is) a vital concern to philosophy itself (Dupré, 1989, p. 63).

„... the new *never* eliminates the old“, the philosopher wrote. It is not certain of course, if in psychology the new will never be able to unsettle the old but the argument of this paper can be summarized as, „*so far* the new has not eliminated the old“. The argument may be summarized even shorter — by a single word: The argument being that the past is part and parcel of the psychological present, that summarizing word can't be but *presentism*.

Presentism is often seen as the historian's mortal sin but I tend towards a different view. To begin with, it has been argued that Butterfield was probably ill-advised when he literally transferred the whig label from political history to history of science (Mayr, 1990, p. 302). Moreover, and more importantly, what is wrong about „sinful“ presentism is not simply that one is interested in the past for the sake of the present — it is the *moral commitment* to the present (Stocking, 1965). But since this pitfall is not unavoidable, I am sympathetic to D.L. Hull's observation (quoted by Mayr, 1990, p. 305) „if we are not prepared to interpret the past in terms of the present, why should we care about the past?“

The particular kind of presentism that is maintained here must be one of the reasons why students in psychology are offered courses in History of Psychology, History & Systems of Psychology, and the like. This is not the case in the natural sciences but in our field history in one form or other is on the undergraduate programme in most departments in Western Europe. In America few feel inclined to throw the subject out of the curriculum: a course in History and Systems formed part of all of the four undergraduate curricular models — traditional and alternative — which were presented in a recent issue of the *American Psychologist* (McGovern et al., 1991). And in this country, De Groot, in a speech given at the opening of the new laboratory in Amsterdam, expressed his hope that psychology in the twenty first century might become richer, and more exhaustive and consistent — and essential to this is in his opinion that we learn more and better things from the history of the field (De Groot, 1991).

Many colleagues feel the same about historical work, which is not really surprising. After all,

Most scientists have had considerable interest in the history of science (-) The interest of the scientist, however, is quite specific and in many respects different from that of the historian trained in the humanities. The foremost interest of the modern scientist-historiographer is the development of ideas, from their origin through all their permutations up to the present day. The reason for this interest is that it is impossible to understand many of the current controversies and prevailing concepts without studying their history (Mayr, 1990, p. 304).

Indeed, in a review of Heuer & Sanders's edited book on *Perspectives on perception and action* (1987) Zelaznik commented on the historical chapters contributed by Prinz and Scheerer that they provide,

illuminating examples of the worth of understanding the history of the ideas that are still being explored in research today (Zelaznik, 1989, p. 427).

It should be noted that, probably unwittingly, Zelaznik referred in this quotation to a particular type of historiography when speaking of „... the history of the ideas that are still being explored ...“. History of Ideas is one of various kinds of doing history that are usually brought under the umbrella of Intellectual History. This term denotes the history of what people have produced intellectually, such as cultural, societal, political, economical, and also scientific ideas. As has been elaborated by Scheerer (1988), the history of the last mentioned category, scientific ideas, can be subdivided in such a way that an impressive intellectual mountain range unfolds. Firstly, the historiographical eye spots the foothills of History of Mentality, next an Intellectual-Historical mountain-chain is seen, and finally the lofty peaks of History of Ideas in the strict sense may be perceived along with those of *Begriffsgeschichte*, *Problemgeschichte*, and Doxography. Such Teutonic systematicity however, has largely been wasted on the historians of psychology. In most cases not even the difference between History of Ideas and Intellectual History has been taken notice of.

History of Ideas has been described by the editor of the *Journal for the History of Ideas* as follows,

the major focus is (-) on individual authors (-) on particular texts (-) on ideas, doctrines, theories, systems, and „-isms“ of various sorts, usually along national or disciplinary lines; and on traditional questions of periodization (-) Questions of „influence“ still loom large; texts are still ramsacked for „thought-content“ and „ideas“, which are passed (-) from thinker to thinker ... (Kelley, 1990, p. 13).

In other words, History of Ideas deals with single ideas and traces their historical evolution. Intellectual History on the other hand, tends to be broader in outlook since it aims at the reconstruction of not one but many items of the „intellectual furniture“ of an historical period, usually in their interconnection. But as has been mentioned already, the difference between the two has not played a noticeable role in the historiography of psychology.

Over the past twenty five years or so, history of psychology has been more or less professionalized. The field expanded considerably, took the empirical turn, joined forces with the social sciences — and has come in danger of splitting up so to speak, in history on the one hand, and psychology on the other. This is of course, very much the situation in the older sciences where scientists cannot be bothered anymore about the history of their field. However, I feel that our discipline is not in the position to let this happen and the reason for this is the conceptual instability mentioned above. In the early volumes of the *Journal of*

*the History of the Behavioral Sciences* there were already warnings sounded against such an eventuality. Nevertheless, the situation has come about that, as noted by Van Strien (in press),

History and theory seem antipoles. History stands for the particular and theory stands for the general, the abstract world of laws that claim validity regardless of time and place.

The relation between history and theory, along with the problem of context has been the topic of extensive discussion between Van Strien and this speaker. As a result I have been hardened in my historiographical stance. Whereas Van Strien — borrowing Leahey's (1987) terms — remains the pluralist fox, I would like to stick to the position of the more „traditional“ hedgehog.

Does the emphasis on Main Currents and hence continuity inevitably entail that you cannot keep an eye on their context? No, quite apart from the heavy political load of the term context, Main Currents do not necessarily entail internal history (cf. Wertheimer, in Brozek & Pongratz, 1980). Ash (in press) has suggested that Main Currents be linked up to forms of social organisation. This speaker wonders if the Main Currents, whose cultural existence Van Strien is fully prepared to accept, might not also be approached from the point of view of social representations and the study of collective mentalities. I would also like to point out that on hearing the word context being used, one should not forget to ask just what context is meant. After all, as suggested by Mitchell Ash (personal communication), „traditions“ by their very nature form already a way of contextualization — *diachronic* contextualization, that is. But I will grant my discussant that there is no reason why diachronic contextualization should exclude the more usual synchronic one — or vice versa, for that matter.

And this brings me to my final point: I wonder if it might not be fitting to the occasion to conclude this paper by trying to resolve our discussion.

It is only recently that it occurred to me that the History/Theory issue, and much of what is connected to it, might perhaps be laid to rest by the simple expedient of asking a question — and in retrospect a pretty obvious question at that: *How do you conceive of psychology?* Do you want to see the discipline as developing on the basis of socially determined practices and hence yielding mostly temporary and local „theories“ (Van Strien) or do you rather stick to a more „traditional“ view of psychology as pursuing systematic knowledge along pathways covering good long stretches of time and ground? (Van Rappard). Do you perhaps feel that ultimately psychology is a culturally grounded moral science (Danziger, 1990) or do you favour a conception of the discipline in terms that are more congenial to psychologists in their day-to-day concerns? (Van Rappard).

If I say that I feel all these positions to be defensible, I am not opting for an easy way out. Rather, what I would like to suggest is that the really interesting and important questions concern the relation between the various historiographical approaches, and their *relative* merit in particular.

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