

THE HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY:

A NEGLECTED AREA

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IN the United States psychology is provincial, both geographically and temporally. While almost any European psychologist whom we meet surprises us by his knowledge of our work, we fall far short of equivalent familiarity with psychological activities in his country. Our relative ignorance of current psychological activities outside the United States is so well known and seemingly so complacently accepted as hardly to need exposition. It is not my intent to discuss our geographical provincialism except to point out that it seems to be similar to our historical provincialism, suggesting the possibility of common causal factors. Instead, I propose to document the extent of the current neglect of the history of our field, to suggest some of the factors which help to bring about this neglect, to answer certain possible criticisms of devoting one's time to advancing knowledge of our history, and to try to show some positive values to be found by research in our history. I shall close with a few comments about the preparation for work in the history of psychology.

A variety of sources of evidence shows our neglect of the history of psychology. Some evidence may be found by examining the number of historical articles in our journals, by establishing the extent of expressions of interest in history by APA members, and by finding the number of psychologists who are members of the leading history of science society in the United States.

Three journals publish most of the historically oriented publication of psychologists in the United States: the *American Journal of Psychology*, the *Journal of General Psychology*, and the *Psychological Bulletin*. The contents of each of these journals for the last 20 years (1938–1957) were examined. Articles, excluding program descriptions, accounts of meetings, and obituaries, were classified as historical or nonhistorical. To be classified as historical the major theme of the article had to be placed in an historical perspective. Reviews, for example, which acknowledged they cov-

ered the work of 10, or 20, or some identified number of years, were not considered historical if they treated the research they discussed as more or less equally contemporaneous. In the *American Journal of Psychology* 12 out of 1,207 articles were historical in nature in this 20-year period. In the *Journal of General Psychology* only 13 historical articles appeared from a total of 937 articles. In the *Psychological Bulletin* 682 articles were published during this period of which 13 were historical in nature. It seems evident that psychologists publish only a handful of historical articles: 38 were primarily historical out of more than 2,800 articles over a 20-year period in the three journals examined.

An obvious source for the expression of interests by psychologists is the statement of their interests given by APA members in the *Directory*. Every tenth page of the 1958 *Directory* was searched for mention of interest in the history of psychology. In this way the stated interests of 1,638 psychologists were examined. Those mentioning an interest in history numbered 6. Extrapolating from the sample to the total membership of 16,644 gives only about 60 psychologists who consider the history of psychology among their interests, irrespective of whether or not they publish.

The History of Science Society is probably the leading organization in its field in the United States. We have some information about its membership. Using the 1951 APA *Directory* as the source, Daniel and Louttit (1953) listed the professional organizations to which a 12% sample of APA members belonged. They stopped listing by name of organization when they reached societies with five or less APA members. The History of Science Society was not listed. Moreover, not a single psychologist was found by a name-by-name check of about 5% of the organization's membership list.

On the basis of number of publications, expressed interest in the field, and membership in a speciality society, it seems appropriate to conclude that the history of psychology receives relatively little at-

tention from psychologists in the United States at the present time.

Neglect of our history is an indication of a value judgment on the part of psychologists. Almost all psychologists simply have not been interested in it enough to be curious about it, let alone to work and to publish in this area. Probably there is a general distaste for historical matters among scientists in the United States, including psychologists. If this be true, psychologists as social beings share in a characteristic aberration of our times: a relative lack of curiosity about our past. Moreover, we have reached an age of specialization in psychology. The age of encyclopedists, if it ever existed, is certainly past. We must reconcile ourselves to limitation within our field. In short, we are specialists, not generalists.

It is one of the dubious fruits of specialization that one makes a sharp distinction between the historical development of his subject and the additive process by which he, himself, is developing it. The contemporary general lack of interest concerning the past and the age of specialism is shared by psychologists with other scientists. It is my impression that this neglect is even greater in psychology than in neighboring fields such as biology, medicine, and sociology. In these fields even a cursory acquaintance shows signs of considerably greater historical activity.

Specific to psychology, two related factors may accentuate our temporal provincialism, both stemming from psychology's relatively recent emergence as a science in its own right. First, we may be a bit ashamed of our past. The *nouveau riche* does not search his family tree. Second, self-conscious, as we are, of our recent hard-won victory of full-fledged scientific status, we may regard our heritage, as well as much European psychology, as somehow not quite respectable fields of interest simply because they smack of the unscientific. Interest in history is, save the mark, even scholarly!

In a somewhat more encouraging vein, still another reason for our relatively greater neglect of history is our sheer exuberance and what we have before us in the way of what appear to be limitless opportunities for research and service. Making history, we do not study what others have done in the past. There can be little question that our advances apparently are rapid, our expansion in numbers amazing.

The tremendous advances in scientific knowledge in our own and other fields lead to a feeling of exhilaration and satisfaction that should not be decried. The last 50 years has perhaps seen more scientific industry directed toward psychological problems than has all time before it. In the perspective of the future this optimistic judgment concerning the present half century may be shared by our successors, despite the doubt derived from the curious similarity of this remark to that made by many, many others concerning their own particular age. Be that as it may, I suspect many psychologists are influenced by some such unspoken opinion to the detriment of interest in the history of their field.

These speculations about the neglect of the history of psychology just presented may or may not be correct. Whatever their objective status as truth, they do not deal with the crucial question. One may still ask: "Assuming what you have said is correct, of what contemporary interest is the psychology of the past?" To put it baldly, why should serious attention and respect be given the history of psychology? It is necessary to inquire whether or not this lack of attention is precisely what the history of our field deserves. The question may be made more specific by asking whether this lack of attention to history does or does not reflect lack of significant material or lack of relevance of the material even if available.

It might be argued that the neglect of history that has been demonstrated is simply a reflection of the lack of significant material. Within the compass of this paper illustrations from only one temporal period may be given. The most unlikely period of all—the Middle Ages—is chosen for this purpose. Serious attention to the medieval period in our history has not been given since Brett published his *History of Psychology* nearly 50 years ago. In the meanwhile, as I propose to demonstrate, new sources have become available, and the number of workers in the general field of the history of science, who incidentally have touched upon matters of psychological interest, has increased considerably.

The basic source of my illustrations is to be found in the monumental *Introduction to the History of Science* by George Sarton. In connection with the medieval period he prepared a synopsis of about 2,000 pages in length. In these pages he

made reference to what I consider to be psychological work on the part of 49 men. These references were to work either said to be psychological by Sarton or to psychological topics such as sensation and oneirology. For records of their accomplishments to appear in this survey of Sarton, they must have been preserved through the centuries of the medieval period and the 500 years since. One would expect that in view of this form of eminence the odds would be in favor that they should be known at least vaguely to psychologists. Selecting every fifth name from the list of 49 gives the following: Ibn Sirin, Al-Mas-Udi, Ibn Hibat Allah, Ibn Al-Jausi, Bahya Ben Joseph, Ibn Sabin, Peter of Spain, Thomas of York, and Witelo. I rather suspect that very, very few would be known to most psychologists.

It is relevant to compare the list of names of men found by reading Sarton to have worked in areas of psychology during the 900 years of the medieval period with those considered in Brett's history 50 years ago. Only 15 of the 49 are considered by Brett. A great majority of the Muslims and Jews found in Sarton were not mentioned at all by him. It would be a mistake to infer that Brett considered the workers he did not discuss as irrelevant because of lack of contact with Western intellectual development. Scholars in the Muslim world, including the Jewish workers among them, are acknowledged to be the intellectual leaders of the later centuries of the medieval period. Most of their works were translated into Latin in their own time or in the centuries that followed. Western commentaries on these works also appeared. Only at the end of the medieval period did their influence wane. It is quite plausible to believe that they were neglected by Brett because knowledge about them was either relatively inaccessible or even unknown at the time he was working.

It is difficult to classify medieval scholars into the neat categories demarcating the fields of knowledge of today. In any age the greater the man the more apt he is to range beyond the boundaries of one particular field. Yet it is possible by study of their contributions to classify them roughly into one or another field of knowledge. Sarton's description of the activities of these 49 medieval scholars was used as the basis of classification.

Contrary to expectation, less than one-half (21) were primarily philosophers and/or theologians. Nearly one-third (14) were physicians. The rest

were scattered in a variety of other fields, none including more than two representatives. These fields were that of the chronologist, philologist, oneirologist, folklorist, traveler, physicist, astronomer, mathematician, historian, jurist, and oculist. Only one man, Isaac of Stella, was identified by Sarton as primarily a psychologist. In a broader sense he was a philosopher and was so classified by me. It will be remembered that 15 of these 49 workers were utilized by Brett in his history. Over half (8) of those to whom Brett referred were theologians and philosophers; while of those remaining, 6 were physicians and physicists. It is evident that only one of the 14 representatives of the other more peripheral fields, identified in Sarton, was utilized by him. Moreover, 10 philosophers and 10 physicians were found in Sarton that were not touched upon by Brett at all.

Two of the medieval psychologists are chosen for slightly more detailed exposition. One has been already mentioned—Peter of Spain, later John XXI. He had been trained as a physician (and in the classification was so placed) and had wide medical, zoological, logical, philosophical, and psychological interests. In psychology he wrote a volume on psychology, *De Anima*, which included an account of the historical development of psychological ideas found in Greek and Muslim works covering a *thousand years* of the history of psychology. Lest this work be dismissed as "mere" philosophy, it should be added that, according to Sarton, it stresses physiological and medical aspects! Elevated to the pontificate in 1276, he died in an accident eight months later. That there was a psychologist pope is probably not even known among most Catholic psychologists.

One of the greatest minds of the Middle Ages will serve as the second illustration—Moses Maimonides. He is best known for his *Guide for the Perplexed*, a monument of Jewish theology. Other than one relatively obscure reference, it never has been called to the attention of psychologists that this work contains material of psychological significance. For example, memory is discussed in Chapters 33–36 of Part I, and mind in Chapters 31–32 of Part I and Chapter 37 of Part II. Maimonides also wrote on medical matters, including descriptions of prophetic visions as psychological experiences; on the rules of psychotherapy; and various other psychological-medical matters. There is a strong probability that careful study of his

works would reveal a theory of personality of some significance for us today.

These two men—Peter of Spain and Moses Maimonides—should have a special appeal to psychologists whose background of Catholic or Jewish scholarship makes them especially well prepared to evaluate their significance.

In general, there appears to be evidence that the 900 years from the sixth to the fifteenth centuries were not without their share of psychological speculation and observation. Scholars have examined this material in a philosophical perspective, but there has been an almost complete neglect of the psychological aspects.

It was following the medieval period that the revival of learning at the beginning of the modern period took place. This was the rebirth of Greek, particularly Aristotelian, ways of thinking in the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, which gave us the origin of the empirical, especially experimental, ways of approaching nature. Out of the work of Renaissance man comes what we know about the origins of our present knowledge.

That greatest of modern historians of science, George Sarton, has shown that the "Dark Ages" transmitted the science of the Greek and the Hellenistic worlds. Transmission is, in itself, just as important as discovery and is sufficient reason to study the Middle Ages. But even more important, as Sarton puts it, medieval progress occurred not because of, but in spite of, its presumed crowning achievement of scholastic philosophy. Medievalists, he claimed, have stressed the scholastic aspects to the detriment of the real scientific advance especially in the Muslim world. In spite of scholastic and obscurantist tendencies which repel the modern mind, examination of the contributions of these men of the Middle Ages to psychology as psychology, separated from philosophical and theological preoccupation, would seem to be a worthwhile venture.

For the Middle Ages, and presumably even more cogently for other ages, we do not lack new material, and there would appear to be at least some contemporary relevance for its study. A more general statement of the values of historical study in psychology seems indicated.

It would be a serious mistake to consider the history of psychology to be limited to a mere chronology of events or biographical chitchat. It is a study of long-time cultural trends over time.

Psychological contributions are embedded in the social context from which they emerge. Psychology has always responded in part to its social environment, but it also has been guided by an internal logic of its own. We cannot emphasize one of these trends at the expense of the other. Psychology neither reflects culture with passive compliance nor does it exist in a social vacuum. External and internal circumstances are present, and there is a constant interplay between them.

It is a truism of one approach to history that each generation rewrites the history in terms of its own values and attitudes. As yet, we have not looked back on the past from the perspective of today finding values for the present from the past. Old material is still to be seen in a new perspective. In the past writing of our history, material either ignored as irrelevant or simply not known at that time now can be utilized. The material from the Middle Ages commented upon earlier would illustrate the new material available. The presence of newly relevant material needs further comment. The field of psychology has expanded enormously in recent years. That it has re-extended beyond the limits of experimental psychology is a statement of fact on which there can be no disagreement. Consider the influence of the rapidly burgeoning fields of application, such as clinical psychology, and remember that the moment we expend our present concerns in psychology to that extent we have broadened and changed our past. The moment we embrace, even in the smallest degree, the traditions of others as, for example, we have done for some aspects of medicine, we have embraced some aspects of their past as well. Consider the importance in psychology today of personality theories and other influences of quasi- or nonexperimental nature. The history of experimental psychology is the solid core of our history, presumably less changed in this re-examination; but other aspects of its history do exist. In recent years no one has examined all major aspects of our history in the light of these changes.

An even more serious consequence of the neglect of history needs comment. To modify somewhat a statement from Croce via Beard: when we ignore history in the sense of the grand tradition of that field, narrowness and class, provincial and regional prejudices come in their stead to dominate or distort one's views without any necessary awareness of their influence. If psychologists are determined

to remain ignorant of our history, are we not, at best, determined to have some of our labors take the form of discoveries which are truisms found independently and, at worst, to repeat the errors of the past? To embody a past of which they are ignorant is, at best, to be subject passively to it, at worst, to be distorted by a false conception of it. Ignorance does not necessarily mean lack of influence upon human conduct, including the human conduct of psychologists. Ignoring the study of the history of one's field through formal sources and published accounts does not result in lack of opinions about the past. Like the traditional man in the street who, too, refuses to read history, such psychologists inevitably have a picture of the past, by and large one which deprecates its importance. This inevitably influences their views just as does any other aspect of the "unverbalized." However little their ahistorical view of the past may correspond to reality, it still helps to determine their views of the present. To neglect history does not mean to escape its influence.

This has been a plea for greater attention on the part of psychologists to their history. With assumption of some knowledge and experience in contemporary psychology, the first stage of development of attention to history would be an interest in it and a conviction that it is a worthwhile field of endeavor. But knowledge, interest, and conviction are not enough for competence. It is not merely a matter of deciding to work in historical aspects of our field. With justice, professional his-

torians have been indignant about the bland assumption, all too often made by scientists, that, because one knows something about a scientific field, the essential equipment for historical research automatically is available. Historical work does not consist of finding a few old books and copying this and that. Trained as he is in his own exacting techniques, the psychologist does not always realize that the technique of establishing the truth of the maximum probability of past events, in other words historical research, has its own complicated rules and methods.

There is a variety of areas with which more than a passing acquaintance is necessary if historical study is planned. Knowledge of the methodology of history—historiography—is essential for more than anecdotal familiarity with any area capable of being approached historically. Knowledge of the philosophy of history is also needed by the psychological historian as a defense against errors of procedure and of content. In psychology, as in similar disciplines, acquaintance with the history of science in general is demanded. Moreover, some appreciation of the influence of social and cultural factors in history is important if the findings are to be seen in broad context. I, for one, think it would be worth the trouble and time to secure this background in order to carry on the task of understanding and interpreting our past in the perspective of today.

REFERENCE

- DANIEL, R. S., & LOUITTIT, C. M. *Professional problems in psychology*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1953.