

## Seeking history

Roger Smith argues that the historical story is not dispensable – it is key to being a good scientist

Henry Ford supposedly snapped: 'History is more or less bunk.' Ford, I think, meant that if we pay history much attention, it holds us back. Many scientists agree: better to construct knowledge, improve the human lot, rather than scratch at old sores. Of course, scientists concede, there is nothing to stop people who like history, collectors of facts and artefacts, to have fun digging around in the past. But for the serious business of knowledge and practical effectiveness, we need science.

Why is this so wrong?

I declare straightaway my interest. As a historian of science, not a psychologist, I have an occupation and a subject to defend. But everyone does, and to observe that someone has an interest in arguing one way rather than another says nothing in itself about the value and reasonableness of what they argue.

There are a number of possible routes to address the no-nonsense psychologist, the sort of person who likes to claim that they move in the real world, whatever other people do. The best response is to do history, to write or to display history in such a way that people find it irresistible and become caught up in it, perhaps even in spite of themselves. This happens with huge numbers of people who read biography, and it happens when people read a number of finely crafted books in psychology, of which Michael Billig's *The Hidden Roots of Critical Psychology* is one. Billig argues the case for the social content of psychological discourse, but his

rhetoric is historical not abstract and he carries the reader along with a good story. The story is not disposable, since the thesis is that psychological knowledge is embedded in a historical way. There are other eminently readable historical studies with hard-to-dismiss arguments about the nature and direction of psychology – David Joravsky's *Russian Psychology*, for instance, or Douwe Draaisma's *Metaphors of Memory*.

Good stuff, the psychologist may agree, but ultimately storytelling and not science. This is what I want to discuss, leaving aside many other kinds of argument about the place and value of history. There are perhaps two themes to focus on: the supposed opposition between storytelling and science; and the question whether stories are an important kind of knowledge in psychology.

Science is many things, but scientific knowledge, at least in principle, is systematic, precise, self-consistent, objective, responsive to all the available evidence. These are abstract values. In practice, these values exist in the concrete ways scientists write up and propagate their claims. One result is the highly disciplined research paper, with its esoteric protocols, statistics, definitions, literature reviews, and so on, its rhetorical

voice far from that of the storyteller. All the same, even in the research paper, there is an implicit story, a story about how certain kinds of thinking and practice have come over time to be a worthy occupation and topic for discussion. If the research paper were not implicitly understood to be embedded in history, it would not make sense or have any significance. What the historian of psychology then does is make the implicit, explicit. How did research or some other practice come to have the meaning and significance that it does?

I just so happen to have been reading a bit about what psychologists say on free will. Until recently, they rather left the topic alone. Why? There are historical reasons – connected in part with past views about what was thought a topic for philosophy rather than empirical science. There is now, however, for example, empirical work on when people attribute free will to an action; this work draws on the past development of certain kinds of experimental expertise. History can only help us understand all this.

Part of history, then, is the study of why psychologists do what they do and what sense that activity has. If so, factual storytelling (or history) and science are not antagonistic, since the historical knowledge is part of understanding what science means. I think this becomes especially evident when scientists talk to wider, non-specialist audiences; the good communicator fills in more of the history in order to be better understood.

If the ideal of scientific knowledge is self-consistency, objectivity, responsiveness to all the available evidence, and so on, exactly the same is true of the ideal of historical knowledge. The ideals of the research psychologist ought to make the psychologist want the history to be done properly. But, because the psychologist unthinkingly takes the history not to be serious knowledge, she often enough uses the history as 'mere' rhetoric and doesn't worry too much whether the history is right or wrong. That's just sloppy.

Then there is the second theme, the question whether the story is an important form of knowledge in psychology. Here we come to the debate about the place of the individual and the personal in psychology, and the associated debate about the place of qualitative methods such as the case history. (Note the term, 'case history': clearly doctors have long thought history of a certain kind has something important to say!) Of course, if as a scientist you think

"The historical perspective makes it possible for her to be more objective"

### references

Billig, M. (2008). *The hidden roots of critical psychology: Understanding the impact of Locke, Shaftesbury and Reid*. Los Angeles and London: Sage.

Draaisma, D. (2000). *Metaphors of memory: A history of ideas about the mind* (Trans. Paul Vincent). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Joravsky, D. (1989). *Russian psychology: A critical history*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Smith, R. (2007). *Being human: Historical knowledge and the creation of human nature*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; New York: Columbia University Press.

knowledge should consist of a generalised set of mathematical relations between variables, you aren't likely to hold much brief for stories in science. (Though, as I have said, I still think that communicating what the mathematical relations mean will pitch even this kind of scientist into telling a story.) But psychology is a staggeringly diverse field, and many psychologists do not pursue knowledge in such a generalised form – and some that did, like Clark Hull, did not produce lasting knowledge. In many areas of psychology, a history, with all its particularity about individual people or groups, is just what is needed for knowledge. It is certainly what many people like to learn about, as the popularity of gossip, anecdote, storytelling and biography attests. The history may enable us to answer the question we want answered: why, for example, did this young man take drugs?

There is often a viewpoint at work in this theme about what it is to be a person, as I have tried to discuss elsewhere (Smith, 2007). There is a humanistic point of view: as the subject matter of psychological science is the human person, there is an obligation on psychological knowledge to recognise the irreducible individuality and value of the person. This, surely, lies behind all the preoccupations of ethics committees. If there is this ethical dimension to the science, the science must include knowledge appropriate to knowledge of particular people – not just 'people' in general, and such knowledge certainly includes the details of people's history and of the social world to which they belong.

All very well – but let us consider Dr average cognitivist/neuropsychologist, perhaps a researcher on memory disorders. Let me give her story – her case history. She has obtained (at what huge effort and cost!) a set of brain scans which seem to show differences in a cortical area, correlated with the presence or absence of a drug. The results are not expected. She wants her colleagues to know, and she addresses a conference and publishes (with many co-authors) a paper. Her topic is the memory function of part of a brain system. For an audience of people who do very similar work, very

little history is needed for her paper to be understood – just enough reference to past literature to locate her own research as moving beyond or adding to what others have done. But then she's invited to speak at the BAAS (British Association for the Advancement of Science), so she explains more of the historical development of interest in the brain system she's concerned with and the history of certain illnesses with symptoms of memory loss. Liking public speaking, she subsequently takes up the cudgels for her kind of research, in opposition to those who continue to talk about the mind as if it floated free of its material conditions. Very likely, she alludes to Descartes and to the historical legacy of dualism.

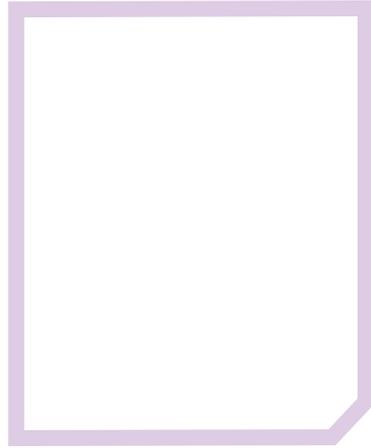
What historical knowledge can do, in a nutshell, is give our heroine perspective, help her reflect critically on what she argues. With historical knowledge, she will be able to see that the sort of arguments she makes grow out of practices and ways of thought

which she shares with others. That's not news, of course; but the precise sense in which it is so, the historical and social detail, is indeed often news.

If our researcher really gets into history, she may even come to think about her own research as the result of historical and social processes and not as a historically detached encounter with nature. That won't stop her seeking real knowledge. Quite the contrary. The historical perspective makes it possible for her to be more objective, more self-consistent, more responsive to the available evidence about her own place in science. Our heroine, with historical perspective, is a better scientist. Perhaps not in the short run, assessed by crude measures of productivity, if she is reading about the social shaping of the psychological field rather than getting out yet another research paper on a modified recording procedure. But in the long run, once the effect she studied has been shown to be trivial, she is able to widen the scope and depth of her research.

The histories that psychologists tell, implicitly if not explicitly, are part of the dialogue about what sort of knowledge the field should produce. To legislate out history, to dismiss it as bunk, is to reduce the options on dialogue.

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The ideals of both scientific and historical knowledge are the same

## Looking back, and forward

The 'Looking back' section began two years ago in order to promote historical research and the dissemination of its results. The project was embarked upon in a spirit of adventure, but not without trepidation. The initial fears quickly proved ill-founded and it has been wonderful to discover the level of interest in the history of our subject. Moreover, it seems that dedicated researchers who apply their expertise to historical exploration often produce extremely high-quality articles.

If you have enjoyed reading, for instance, such pieces as 'The story of Nellie Carey', (Valentine, January 2008), 'Phineas Gage – unravelling the myth' (Macmillan, September 2008), 'You can be healthy, successful, and happy' (Benjamin, May 2009) or 'Dancing plagues and mass hysteria' (Waller, July 2009), you are likely to find much to interest you in 'Looking back' in the coming year (and if you are interested in looking back at 'Looking back' articles, the History of Psychology Centre has gathered them all together at [www.bps.org.uk/hopc/lb](http://www.bps.org.uk/hopc/lb)).

The popularity of 'Looking back' has led to a healthy stock of articles. Nevertheless, if you are thinking of contributing to this section please tell me about your ideas. Alternatively send me articles about any aspect of the history of psychology or concerning the psychology of history. If accepted, you might have to wait for a while to see your piece in print. However, when it is published, it will be read by a lot of people.

We also like to mark special anniversaries. For example many psychologists believe that experimental psychology began with Fechner's (1860) *Elemente der Psychophysik*. If this is so, then the discipline has existed for 150 years this year. I think this is a milestone that should be remembered. If you have done or are doing research in this area and have something to say about Fechner or his famous book, please e-mail me on [j.perks@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:j.perks@staffs.ac.uk).

Julie Perks (Associate Editor, 'Looking back')