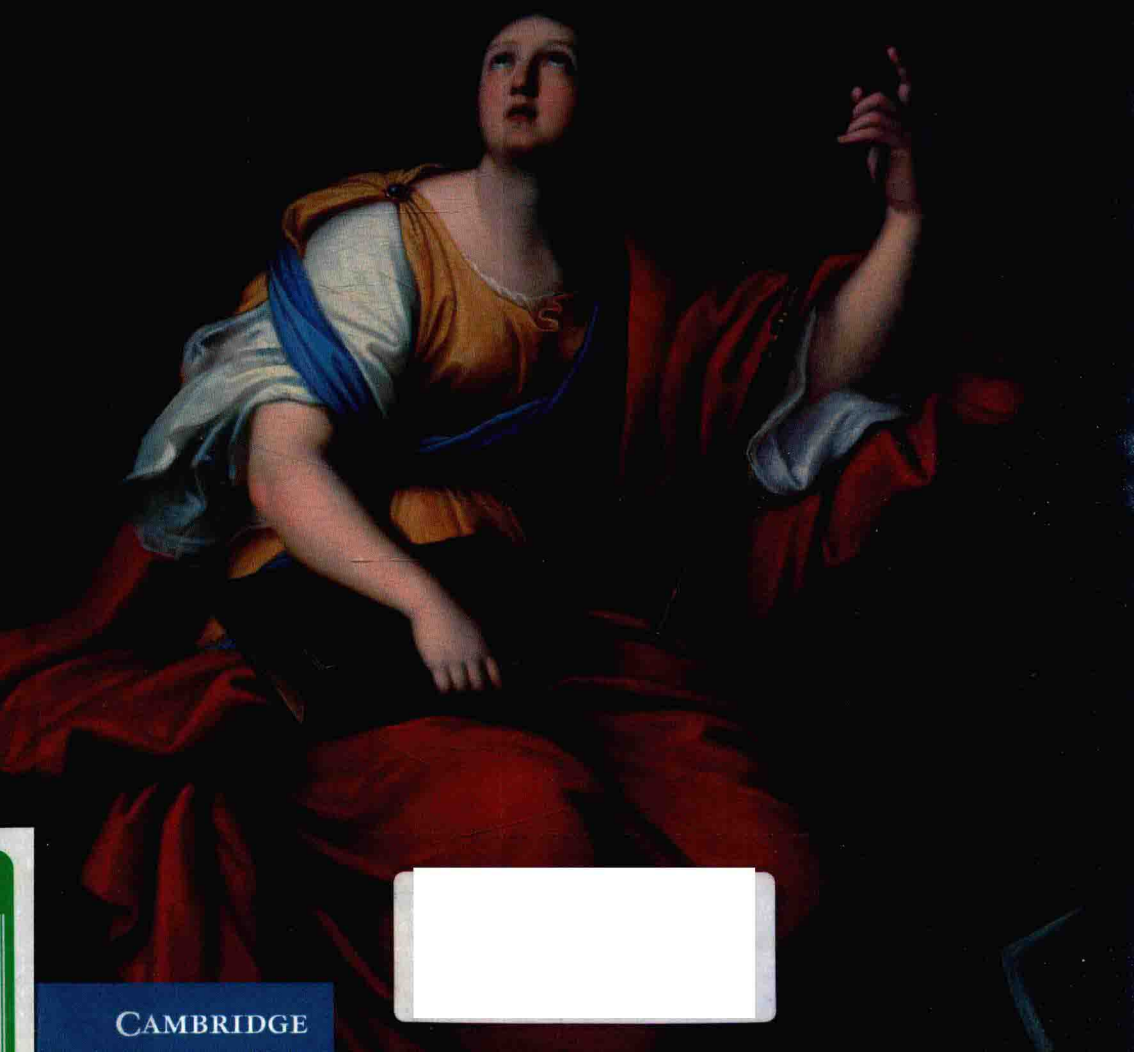
Edited by Cristian Tileagă and Jovan Byford

PSYCHOLOGY AND HISTORY

Interdisciplinary Explorations



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Psychology and History

As disciplines, psychology and history share a primary concern with the human condition. Yet historically, the relationship between the two fields has been uneasy, marked by a long-standing climate of mutual suspicion. This book engages with the history of this relationship and the possibilities for its future intellectual and empirical development. Bringing together internationally renowned psychologists and historians, it explores the ways in which the two disciplines could benefit from a closer dialogue. Thirteen chapters span a broad range of topics, including social memory, prejudice, stereotyping, affect and emotion, cognition, personality, gender and the self. Contributors draw on examples from different cultural contexts – from eighteenth-century Britain, to apartheid South Africa, to conflict-torn Yugoslavia – to offer fresh impetus to interdisciplinary scholarship. Generating new ideas, research questions and problems, this book encourages researchers to engage in genuine dialogue and place their own explorations in new intellectual contexts.

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Foreword

KENNETH J. GERGEN

One might suppose that in this time when the idea of *consilience* – the unity of scientific knowledge – sweeps across the disciplines, that an integration of psychological and historical studies would be untroubled. After all, they both employ the most sophisticated methods available to generate knowledge of human activity. And yet, if one were to select a key demonstration of the impediments to a unified science of human activity, the alienated relationship between history and psychology would be exemplary. The roots are deep, traceable at least to the late nineteenth-century debates between those favouring a model of the human sciences as *Naturwissenschaft* as opposed to *Geisteswissenschaft*, essentially the difference between claims to an observational versus hermeneutic grounds for knowledge. Closely related to this is the distance between psychologists' penchant for general laws or principles on the one hand, and historians' focal concern with the unique and particular. Indeed the central goal of the psychologist – for prediction and control – stands in contrast to the predominant concern among historians for contextual understanding.

Standing over these multiple estrangements is the implicit fear that each orientation, when extended to its fullest, can eliminate the other. If we fully accept the goals of the psychologist, then historical research is nothing more than a search for instances bearing on general laws, a second-rate enterprise at best, in its lack of experimental methods and predictive capacities. Yet, if we accept the orientation of the historian, the psychologists' claims to trans-historical knowledge are destroyed. We find that whatever psychologists claim to be true about human nature is nothing more than their application of historically and culturally fashioned concepts to the ever-shifting conventions of the times. This was the import of my 1973 paper, 'Social Psychology as History', and a major reason for its vociferous negation among my peers.[1]

[1] K. J. Gergen, 'Social psychology as history', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26 (1973), 309–20.

It is against this background that the present volume is a welcome addition. To be sure, strong echoes remain of these longstanding differences. Yet, as the editors so keenly realize, there are significant cracks in the walls of the disciplines. Curious scholars wander across the territories, and, as they do, creative hybrids emerge. One discerns, for example, that virtually all historical accounts contain at least an implicit psychology, unarticulated assumptions about why people act as they do. And one sees that even within the cause-and-effect paradigm of psychology – and its realization in the experimental method – there is a rudimentary narrative at play. Extend the cause–effect sequence into the past and you are soon doing history. The blurring of genres is nowhere as evident as in the recent interest in social memory. Here the laminations of connection are rich indeed. At the outset, this work functions meta-theoretically. That is, it concerns itself with how our understanding of history is socially constituted. At the same time, these accounts are teaming with broadly applicable generalizations about the nature of this process. And as well, the particular cases used to support these ideas are typically the result of research into a specific period of history.

Thus, in the present volume we are treated to a rich array of boundary-crossing adventures. We come to see how psychoanalysis can introduce alternative conceptions of time into historical analysis, the limits and potentials of 'neurohistory,' the historical location of conceptions of self, the wrestling of historians with issues of emotion, the potentials of cognitive psychology for historical understanding, and the blending of disciplines in social representation research. And we are also introduced to ways in which history and psychology can draw from each other in their shared concerns with race prejudice, ideology, national character and self-esteem. Of special note, one sees in these chapters how a given psychological concept (e.g. motivation, emotion, memory, prejudice) can function productively in both psychology and historical inquiry, but in different ways.

I join with the editors of this work in the hope that these chapters will serve as the beginning of a new and more vital relationship between psychologists and historians. Each tradition requires the other in order to reflect wisely on the limits and potentials of its otherwise taken-for-granted assumptions. More importantly, disciplinary boundaries are invariably an impediment to creative scholarship. However, in my view the possibility for future dialogue will be vastly enhanced by casting away the realist/empiricist assumptions still pervading both the disciplines of psychology and history. As long as psychologists and historians continue to believe that their descriptions and explanations are capturing the contours of the world as it is, the alienating tensions will remain. If it is an

objective fact that the world of human activity is made of unique composites of action and circumstance, there is no place for general laws or principles. If world leaders are, in fact, free to make decisions, and moral deliberation may change the course of one's action, then the discourse of psychological mechanics is mystifying. Yet, if it is objectively true that the world is composed of continuous repetitions of cause–effect patterns, there is little place for history as we know it. If psychoanalysis, social evolution, sociobiology, or neuro-behaviourism are true, then traditional historical study will perish.

In my view, it is far more promising to adopt a constructionist alternative to the realist/empiricist tradition. If we give up the idea that discourse serves as a potentially accurate map or picture of an independent world, and begin to understand the way in which our forms of representation shape the outcomes of our inquiry, we move into a new space of evaluating our endeavours. To be sure, historians would have to give up 'the noble dream' of an objective history.[2] And psychologists would have to abandon their view of infinite progress in prediction. However, we could begin to ask more generative questions of both pragmatic and moral/ideological import. We would not ask whether any given account – either historical or experimental – is transcendentally true, but what contribution such accounts make to the human condition. Historical accounts are often valuable in stimulating critical and/or appreciative reflection on our traditions, contributing to moral and ideological deliberation, and providing a sense of how we came to be as we are. Psychological accounts can provide an array of lenses through which we can appraise our actions, and thus consider multiple policies and practices of broad utility. At certain times and places, our capacities for prediction may even be improved. All this may occur without claims to obdurate objectivity. Most importantly for the present volume, without the impediments of such claims, we are liberated to create novel amalgams of unlimited variety – merging, borrowing, translating, reducing, and so forth. Removing the quest for transcendent truth, we may cross boundaries and combine resources to generate the kinds of inquiry that contribute to futures of value to humankind. It is neither to the past nor the eternal present that our inquiries in history and psychology properly contribute, but to our future lives together. Such endeavours may bring us all into productive and impassioned deliberation.

[2] P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: the "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank Paul Churchland for the permission to reproduce the figure in Chapter 3, and the British Museum for the permission to publish the illustrations that feature in Chapter 12.

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Contents

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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).

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.