Kritik/Critique

Taking history seriously

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- ((1)) Prof. Jüttemann and I agree on many things, not least the need for a historical psychology and the reasons for its neglect. In spite of this, there are many points of divergence between us and I suspect that much of the difference is due to our respective backgrounds. As far as I am aware, Jüttemann has a fairly orthodox background in psychology and developed an interest in historical psychology later in his career. My own background is in history of psychology. After taking a first degree in psychology, I did a second degree in history and philosophy of science and it was during this time that I began to do historical research. I then did a Ph.D. in history and theory of psychology under the supervision of the well-known historian of psychology, Kurt Danziger. In short, although I am officially a "psychologist", I am also a professionally trained historian and historical research is the only kind of research I have ever done. There are of course differences in emphasis between historical psychology and history of psychology but the theories and methods that are involved in writing history are the same.
- ((2)) Psychologists do not usually have training in the theories and methods of history and that may be a good argument for encouraging them to leave historical psychology alone. I am not entirely convinced by the argument because there is a small minority of psychologists who have both training and experience in historical research, even if they are usually to be found in history of psychology rather than historical psychology. A substantial number of these psychologists are self-taught and there is no reason why other psychologists cannot acquire the specialist skills and knowledge of the historian. It is, however, essential that they realise that their own background in psychology has not given them adequate preparation for this kind of research. More than that, those of us who specialise in writing history develop a sensibility for understanding the past that most psychologists do not possess. When they turn to history, they often have other agendas which get in the way.
- ((3)) There is no better illustration of this problem than the sad fate of Wilhelm Wundt in traditional histories of psychology. Wundt came to be designated the founder of psychology largely due to the massive influence of American psychology in the years immediately after World War II and, in particular, the influence of a certain E. G. Boring whose textbook on the history of psychology was seen as the authoritative work on that subject. The work had been profoundly influenced by Boring's mentor at Cornell University, the Englishman Edward B. Titchener. Titchener had spent two years as a student in Leipzig but he had very little contact with Wundt during this time. Psychology was relatively slow to develop in the

- United Kingdom and Titchener found that the best prospects for employment were in the United States. However, as a transplanted Englishman, he was out of step with mainstream American psychology, particularly since he wanted psychology to be a pure science without practical applications, and a rhetorical device that he often used to get his colleagues to take his work more seriously was to claim that he was an orthodox disciple of Wundt. This was true as far as his rejection of applied psychology was concerned but not in other aspects of his work. However, the idea of Titchener as Wundt's representative in the United States was encouraged by Boring and it became the orthodox view in American history of psychology for much of the 20th century. It was only through the efforts of historians of psychology like Arthur Blumenthal and Kurt Danziger that this view was overturned in the 1970's and psychologists came to realise that Titchener and Wundt were not the same (e.g. Blumenthal, 1979). Among the many differences between them was that Titchener had emphasised Wundt's experimental psychology and completely ignored his Völkerpsychologie.
- ((4)) It would be nice to think that we have now arrived at an accurate picture of Wundt. Unfortunately the interests which led Titchener to falsely claim that he was an orthodox disciple of Wundt have not disappeared. As a result of this work, Wundt suddenly became an orphaned ancestor and there was a rush of psychologists who were interested in adopting such a prestigious figure. In the years that I have been interested in this topic, I have seen claims that Wundt was the original cognitive psychologist, the originator of the social representations movement in social psychology and, more recently, the originator of the international trend towards the indigenisation of psychology. Wundt has become a blank screen onto which psychologists project their own form of psychology and then use that projection as a rhetorical device in order to get their fellow psychologists to take them more seriously because they now have the great Wundt on their side. It is a kind of celebrity endorsement and the endorsement of Wundt continues to be seen as desirable (Brock, 1993).
- ((5)) It is with his background in mind that I am sceptical towards the claims of Jüttemann that Wundt was the original historical psychologist. He has succeeded in finding the term "historical psychology" and "historical psychological method" within Wundt's work but it is always the same two references that he uses. I have seen these references myself but I would be surprised if Wundt used these terms more than two or three times in the many thousands of pages that he produced on Völkerpsychologie. To say that he originally preferred the term "historical psychology" and only later adopted, "Völkerpsychologie" without any great enthusiasm (31) is a distortion of history, pure and simple. Wundt took the name of the field from Lazarus and Steinthal who founded their Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft in 1860 and never deviated from it. Thus when Jüttemann accuses psychologists of distorting Wundt's legacy, the tu quoque argument could be applied. Perhaps the more interesting issue is not how often Wundt used these terms but what he understood by them. Along with many of his contemporaries in the 19th century, Wundt believed that human communities could be placed on a linear scale from

the most primitive to the most civilised. It was of course always the Europeans who were the most civilised and it was theories are themselves the products of history in that they this view that help to justify the European colonialism of the time. Europeans were said to be sharing the benefits of their superior civilisation with the rest of the world. Along with this view, Wundt gave his Völkerpsychologie the task of discovering the "laws of development" [Entwicklungsgesetze] that were thought to be applicable to all human communities. This view is embodied in the subtitle of his main work on the subject, Eine Untersuchung der Entwicklungsgesetze von Sprache, Mythus und Sitte. The word, "history" does not appear at all. It does appear in a smaller book titled, Elemente der Völkerpsychologie which is much more speculative and which Wundt wrote for a more general audience. Here the subtitle is Grundlinien einer psychologischen Entwicklungsgeschichte der Menschheit. Interestingly, Jüttemann uses this sub-title in the main body of the text (38), though he does not include the book that it is taken from in his bibliography. Here only the 10-volume work can be found.

((6)) Few people today would take seriously the idea that all human communities can be placed on a developmental scale from the most primitive to the most civilised. It is a typical 19th-century view and it is here that the view belongs. Although Wundt lived until 1920, his main ideas on psychology had already been formed by the 1860's, if not earlier. How much all this has anything to do with the kind of historical psychology that Jüttemann or I would like to encourage is an open question. I would prefer to leave Wundt in the 19th century, where he belongs, and not try to recreate him in my own image. I believe that the justification for a historical psychology is sound enough and does not need celebrity endorsement of this kind, especially when that celebrity endorsement can only be done through the distortion of history.

((7)) Historians generally study the past because they expect it to be different from the present. As will be clear from the above account, trying to understand the past is not what many psychologists do when they become involved with history. Other agendas can easily get in the way of understanding the past and it is usually these other agendas that take precedence. The end result is an approach to the history of psychology which historians usually call "presentism" and it is defined as "projecting the views of the present onto the past".

((8)) What applies to the history of psychology applies equally to historical psychology. For me, the first part of the Jüttemann's program, namely a psychology of human development, is not historical psychology at all. Insofar as it seeks to apply psychology to history and not vice-versa, it would be more appropriately described as "psychohistory". Some of the more famous examples of the genre are the psychobiographies of Erik Erikson on Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther. It essentially involves applying some modern psychological theory to historical persons and events. Although it has most commonly been done with psychoanalysis, it can be done with virtually any kind of psychological theory. The main problem with it is that it is undermined by the second part of Jüttemann's programme, the "history of the soul" which in my view is the only part of the programme

which merits the title "historical psychology". Psychological are always rooted in a particular time and place. For example, crowd psychology emerged in France at the end of the 19th century out of the situation of social unrest and a wellfounded fear among the upper classes of the revolutionary tendencies of the people. In short, psychological theories do not provide us with some kind of Archimedean point outside of history. Anyone who seeks to construct a historical psychology out of this material will find that it is built on shifting sand.

((9)) There is no better way of illustrating this point than to examine the historicity of psychological language. Unfortunately my knowledge of the history of psychological language in German is not good enough to illustrate my argument with examples. I will therefore use illustrations from English and there is no better source for these illustrations than Kurt Danziger's book, Naming the mind: How psychology found its language (1997). Here Danziger shows that many of the psychological terms that we take for granted are of relatively recent origin. For example, the word "motivation" can be traced back to the 1920's and "personality" in the modern sense of the term is a product of the 1930's. Some terms are older, "emotion" being a case in point. It was used in its modern sense for the first time in the 18th century but it did not become popular until the 19th century. A similar situation pertains to the word "psychology" itself. The oldest surviving work in which it is used was published in 1590 but it did not become popular in Germany until the 18th century and it was not known to most English speakers until well into the 19th century (Lapointe, 1970). These various terms or their German equivalents, which Jüttemann uses so freely, have themselves a very limited history and provide us with no basis on which to understand the past.

((10)) The issue of whether we can even speak about psychology prior to the establishment of the discipline that goes under that name has been the subject of much debate (e.g. Richards, 1987). Strictly speaking, there is no psychology, historical or otherwise, before that time and I therefore have some sympathy for people like Irmingard Staeuble who reject the term "historical psychology" in favour of "history of subjectivity" (e.g. Staeuble, 1991). I do not think that the name matters all that much as long as the spirit of historicity is understood. As far as I am aware, there has been no community of human beings that has not had some kind of theory of what being human involves. It is not always are expressed as a theory of psychology of course. It may be embedded in religion, philosophy or literature. To the extent that these theories are the historical equivalents of the theories of psychology that exist today, they can in my view be legitimately called "historical psychology". For example, the word "emotion" displaced the older term "passion", which had religious and moral connotations. According to one recent book on this topic, the linguistic change was part of a wider secularisation of society that resulted from the replacement of religion with science (Dixon, 2003). Not all psychological language is of recent historical origin. A notable exception to the rule is "memory", which in one form or another has been around since the beginning of recorded history. An examination of the vicissitudes of this particular term is another example of historical psychology (Danziger, 2008). Note that this work is not the same as history of psychology since only a small part of it is concerned with the work of professional psychologists. Much of the story takes place before that profession was created.

((11)) Jüttemann and I share a common belief in the need for a historical psychology and a shared understanding of the reasons for its neglect but we still have different views on how the subject should proceed. This should come as no surprise. Just about everyone who has ever written on historical psychology has had their own idiosyncratic view of the field. Psychology is a notoriously heterogeneous subject. What little agreement there has been during its history has been on methodological rather than theoretical grounds and even the consensus on methods has started to fall apart. What applies to psychology in general, applies even more so to historical psychology because the boundaries of this field are far from clear. Much of the relevant work that has been produced by historians has not been produced under that label. It is typically considered to be social or cultural history, while the work of someone like Norbert Elias is usually considered to be a contribution to sociology.

((12)) The whole area is a jungle of proposals and counterproposals and the last thing that we need at this point is another theory of historical psychology. What is lacking is historical research and this is another point on which history could be taken more seriously. In 1973, the well-known American social psychologist, Kenneth Gergen published a paper with the title, "Social psychology as history". It is one of the most cited papers in the history of psychology and yet it does not appear to have led to any historical research. Apart from the small number of psychologists who specialise in history of psychology, psychologists are not used to conducting historical research. It does not usually form part of their training and there are few institutional arrangements to support it. This is as true of Germany as it is of anywhere else. Although the journal, Psychologie und Geschichte (1989-2002) welcomed papers on history of psychology and historical psychology, only a small minority of the papers were devoted to the latter and many of these emanated from disciplines other than psychology.

((13)) Most of the people who advocate some form of historical psychology are aware of the institutional barriers that it faces and I am no exception to that rule. I do think, however, that the field will ultimately be judged by its fruits and producing yet another theory of historical psychology will not help us in this regard. What is needed is good historical research in order to show that history can make an important contribution to our understanding of psychology's subjectmatter. There is some good research being done by professional historians and more could be done to make psychologists aware of this work. It may also be possible to get some historians of psychology interested in historical psychology. Whatever happens, the field should be left to those with a solid background in history and a sensitivity towards the differences between the present and the past. The two things usually go together.

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Erklärungsprobleme einer historischen Psychologie

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((1)) Jüttemanns Skizze einer historischen Psychologie scheint mir in hohem Maße von einer Kritik an einer einseitig experimentellen Ausrichtung der neueren Psychologie geleitet zu sein, die ein ahistorisches Menschenbild unterstellen muss. Dieser Fehlentwicklung versucht er in expliziter Anknüpfung an den Klassiker Wundt entgegenzuwirken. Diese Position ist sehr gut nachvollziehbar, muss aber in meinem Kommentar ausgeblendet bleiben, da ich die Entwicklung der psychologischen Forschung nicht hinreichend beurteilen kann. Daher konzentriert sich mein Kommentar auf 3 Probleme, die mit der perspektivischen Anlage seiner Überlegungen verknüpft sind. Das erste Problem scheint mir in der Reichweite einer möglichen "psychologischen Fundamentaltheorie der Menschheitsentwicklung" (Zusammenfassung) zu liegen, die durch die Erklärungsansprüche anderer Disziplinen begrenzt wird und nur in Auseinandersetzung mit deren aktuellem Forschungsstand fixiert werden kann (siehe hierzu unten: ((2))-((5))). Ein zweites grundlegendes Problem sehe ich darin, dass der Autor funktionalistische Rückschlüsse von der Gegenwart in die Vergangenheit versucht, die die Möglichkeiten einer historischen Psychologie eher verstellen als erschließen (siehe hierzu unten ((6))). Ein drittes Problem besteht darin, dass der Autor seinen An-