

Presentism and Diversity in the History of Psychology

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Abstract Providing an entry on the history of psychology for the online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia has proved to be more problematic than one might expect. In particular, someone who goes under the internet name, ‘Jagged_85’ inserted claims to the effect that most of the major developments in the history of psychology have their origins in the medieval Arab world. Similar claims and at least one attempt to challenge those claims have appeared in the professional literature. A special issue of the online newsletter, *Advances in the History of Psychology* devoted to this topic has also appeared under the title, “Presentism in the Service of Diversity?” The term, “presentism” has several meanings but it usually refers to projecting the views of the present onto the past instead of making a serious attempt to understand how historical figures themselves understood the world. The present paper endorses the view that the claims of authors like ‘Jagged_85’ constitute presentism in the usual sense of the term. It also offers suggestions for how diversity without this type of presentism might be achieved.

Keywords Priority claims · Presentism · Diversity · Historiography · Indigenisation

Priority Claims

The inspiration for this paper came from an unusual source: the entry for “history of psychology” in the online

encyclopaedia, Wikipedia. The Canadian historian of psychology, Christopher Green had devoted a great deal of time to improving this and related entries in the encyclopaedia and he found to his intense annoyance that someone else was changing the entries he had made (Green 2008). As is well known, anyone can make changes to the entries in Wikipedia, irrespective of their knowledge or qualifications, and this makes its reliability problematic.

The identity of the person who was making the changes was never revealed but he or she went under the internet name of “Jagged_85”.¹ All of the changes had a certain logic to them: they involved attributing most of the major developments in the history of psychology to medieval Arab or Muslim scholars. Here are some examples:

- The first psychiatric hospitals and insane asylums were built in the medieval Islamic world in the 8th century....
- The concepts of mental health and “mental hygiene” were introduced by the Muslim physician Ahmed ibn Sahl al-Balkhi (850–934)...
- In the 1010s, the Iraqi Arab scientist, Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen) introduced the experimental method in several areas that are now part of experimental psychology....
- Avicenna was a pioneer of psychophysiology and psychosomatic medicine. He recognized ‘physiological psychology’ in the treatment of illnesses involving emotions....

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¹ I will refer to Jagged_85 as “he” from this point onwards. I do this simply to avoid having to write “he or she” over and over again. It should be noted, however, that the gender of Jagged_85 is unknown.

Even the prophet, Muhammad was said to be “an important medieval psychologist”.²

If this was merely an argument about the Wikipedia entry for history of psychology, it would be nothing more than an interesting sideshow. However, Jagged_85's claims were based on published sources which he or she cited. For example, the Sudanese psychologist, Omar Khaleefa (1999) has published an article in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Science* in which he claims that the true founder of psychophysics and by implication, experimental psychology was not Gustav Fechner or Wilhelm Wundt but Ibn al-Haytham, an Islamic scholar who lived in Cairo in the 11th century. These claims have been reproduced, cited and quoted on dozens of Arab or Muslim websites.

What is the basis for these claims? Al-Haytham did research on vision and perception. His most important work is titled the *Book of Optics*. It was originally written in Arabic but it was translated into Latin in either the 12th or the 13th century and it influenced many European scholars of the time. The invention of the printing press was a later development and the only printed edition of the Latin translation was published in 1571 (Lindberg 1967). Like many medieval Arab scholars, al-Haytham's contributions have only belatedly been recognised in the West. Eurocentrism was almost certainly involved but there was also the practical difficulty of accessing his work. It was only available in Arabic and Latin and copies of his books were rare. An English translation of the *Book of Optics* did not become available until 1989 but, as soon as it did, vision scientists like Ian Howard were quick to acknowledge the importance of the work (Howard 1996).

All this had happened before Khaleefa (1999) published his article and the only thing he added to it was the claim that al-Haytham should be regarded as the founder of psychophysics and experimental psychology. The Canadian psychophysicist, Craig Aen-Stockdale has more recently published a critique of these claims in the journal, *Perception* (Aen-Stockdale 2008). No one doubts that al-Haytham is an important figure in the history of science and, more specifically, in the history of research on vision and perception. No one doubts either that his work has been unjustly neglected. However, the claim that he founded psychophysics and experimental psychology is more questionable. Khaleefa (1999) writes:

If Ibn al-Haytham had lived for another ten years, he may have written an eighth and ninth chapter of The Book of Optics titled “Psychophysics” and “Experimental Psychology”, combining psychology with physics, or the mind with the body. (p. 22)

² These comments are reproduced in the online newsletter, *Advances in the History of Psychology* (Green 2008). They were still in the encyclopaedia when I checked it on 9 January 2010 but the entry has since been changed again (Anonymous 2010, 2015).

This is pure speculation. Al-Haytham may have done these and many other things but, as Khaleefa (1999) himself acknowledges, he did not. Aen-Stockdale (2008) writes, “Al-Haytham made great contributions to vision” (p. 638) but adds “it somewhat belittles the remarkable contribution of Fechner and others to suggest that, because of al-Haytham's contributions to *vision*, he founded *psychophysics*” (ibid.).

As for the claim that al-Haytham should be regarded as the founder of experimental psychology, this accolade is usually given to Wilhelm Wundt, perhaps in recognition of the fact that experimental psychology is a much broader field than psychophysics. Wundt is said to have founded his laboratory for experimental psychology at the University of Leipzig in 1879. The biggest organisation of psychologists in the world, the American Psychological Association, declared 1979 to be the year of psychology's “centennial” and the XXII International Congress of Psychology was held in Leipzig to mark the occasion. Khaleefa (1999) does not engage with this version of events. He simply assumes that the founder of psychophysics is also by implication the founder of experimental psychology.

Priority claims in the history of psychology are nothing new. Around the time of the “Wundt centennial”, some Americans found it difficult to accept that the founder of experimental psychology was not American and began to put forward the rival claim that William James already had a laboratory for experimental psychology at Harvard University in 1875. According to Hillix (1980), one of the issues of the monthly magazine of the American Psychological Association, the *Monitor on Psychology*, from that time contains a cartoon showing Wundt and James engaged in a duel, presumably over which of them had the first laboratory. Although most psychologists have decided the issue in favour of Wundt, some American authors still regard it as “controversial” (e.g. Hergenhahn 2008).

Another example concerns the origins of the word, “psychology”. It is generally accepted that the term was first used in its Latin form, “psychologia” in the 16th century and that the earliest surviving work with the word in its title was published by the German scholar, Rudolf Göckel in 1590 (Brock 2014a). However, a Croatian author has claimed that it was used in the title of an earlier work by a fellow Croatian, Marko Marulić. The problem here is that the only evidence of its existence is a handwritten bibliography of Marulić's publications whose date is unknown. The work itself has never been found (Krstić 1964).

These claims are often a vehicle for nationalism or chauvinism of some other sort. It is surely no coincidence that the nationality or the ethnic background of the person for whom priority is claimed and the person making the claim to priority is always the same. It is also interesting that the priority claims in Wikipedia relate to the Arab or Muslim world. It has an ancient civilisation but the same is true of China, India and other parts of the world. Why is this argument not taking place

over Buddhism or Confucianism? It might have something to do with the ancient tensions between the Muslim world and Christendom, which go back at least as far as the Crusades, and the modern tensions over the Western support of Israel, radical Islamicists and the military intervention in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. As is often the case, conflicts that appear to be about the past have their origins in the present.

Presentism and Diversity in Opposition

Christopher Green edits an online newsletter called, *Advances in the History of Psychology*. In response to the frustration that he experienced over the changes that were being made to his encyclopaedia entries, he devoted a special issue to this topic. The special issue is titled, “Presentism in the service of diversity?” (Green 2008). The term, “diversity” will be readily understood. It is concerned with incorporating non-Western material into the history of psychology. The term, “presentism” will be familiar to professional historians, including historians of psychology. However, given that this journal is aimed at a broad audience of psychologists, it may require some explanation. Green (2008) explains it as follows:

For the professional historian, Jagged 85’s attributions smack of presentism: the imposition of modern epistemic categories and values on the actions of people from the distant past; people who did not share our categories and values and who may well have been up to quite different kinds of projects despite their superficial similarity to our own. There was no discipline of “psychology” in medieval Islamic times, and the individuals cited, whatever their intentions might have been, could not have been aiming to advance such a discipline.

Green invited Jagged_85 to respond to these comments, which he did. He freely admits that he is not a psychologist but says that he defines psychology as “the study of mental processes and behaviors” and anyone who studied these things is a psychologist as far as he is concerned (Jagged_85 2008). I imagine that this view will seem reasonable to many psychologists, especially the ones who are concerned with making the discipline more diverse. Underlying these differences are different concerns. Green is concerned with writing good history, something that is of little or no interest to many psychologists. Like the anthropologists who study cultures that are different from their own, historians study the past because it is different from the present. As it was famously expressed in the opening lines of the novel, *The Go-Between*: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” (Hartley 1953, p. 3) If we insist on projecting the views of the present onto the past, the subtle and nuanced differences between the present and the past will be overlooked.

It should be noted that this view does not rely on an a priori definition of psychology. Historians are well aware that words can change their meaning over time. They consequently work with the definitions that the historical actors themselves used. Wundt clearly understood his work to be a contribution to a subject called “psychology”, even though psychology was still regarded as a branch of philosophy at the time but, as Green points out, al-Haytham could not have understood his work to be a contribution to a subject called “psychology” because there was no such subject at the time. However, this aspect of the situation is not the most interesting part. Al-Haytham must have had some understanding of what he was doing and a serious historian will seek to find out what that understanding was. Assuming in advance that it was “psychology” will be a barrier to a genuine understanding of al-Haytham’s thought. The same is true of the other medieval Islamic scholars for whom priority in the history of psychology has been claimed.

Psychology’s Short History and Long Past

These issues take us beyond the priority claims with which we started and on to the more complicated subject of what the history of psychology should contain. This topic was discussed by two eminent British historians of psychology towards the end of the 1980’s in articles that are now considered to be classics in the field. The first is by Graham Richards and is titled, “Of what is history of psychology a history?” (1987). One of the reviewers of the manuscript was Roger Smith and reading it inspired him to write a related article with the title, “Does the history of psychology have a subject?” (1988). Ebbinghaus (1908) famously wrote that psychology was a discipline with “a long past but a short history” (p. 3) and both of these authors are concerned with how the history of psychology should relate to that past.

Textbook writers have traditionally been ambivalent on this subject. On the one hand, they have sought to establish the scientific credentials of the discipline by tracing it to the establishment of Wundt’s laboratory for experimental psychology in 1879. On the other hand, they have sought to give it legitimacy by providing it with a long and distinguished ancestry. One of the ancestors who has been co-opted in this regard is Aristotle on the grounds that he wrote a work that is usually known by its Latin title, *De Anima* [On the Soul] (ca. 350 BCE/2008). Thus one of the most popular textbooks of the 1960’s was called, *The Great Psychologists from Aristotle to Freud* (Watson 1963).

Both Richards and Smith take the view that Aristotle cannot legitimately be called a “psychologist” since there was no such profession at the time he was writing. This is of course similar to the point that Green made in relation to al-Haytham. Presumably Aristotle had some idea of how his work on the

soul was related to the fields of knowledge that existed at the time and the task of the historian is to find out what exactly that was. Assuming in advance that it was “psychology” would be a barrier to understanding the views of the past.

We do not need to go back as far as Aristotle to illustrate this point. 17th and 18th century authors like John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith wrote on topics that were related to psychology but they also wrote on topics that were related to philosophy, political science, economics, education and, at least as far as Hobbes is concerned, physics. They were not bound by these disciplinary categories because they did not exist. They probably understood themselves to be doing “philosophy”, though their understanding of that term would be much broader than ours and would encompass what we would regard as the natural and the social sciences. This older meaning of the term survives in the practice of awarding the “Doctor of Philosophy” or “PhD” degree to people from a wide range of disciplines.

Richards and Smith reach the obvious conclusion that the history of psychology begins in the second half of the 19th century and anything that happened before it should not be regarded as a “psychology”. Richards (2010) subsequently published a textbook which encompasses these views. The first chapter is a general discussion of the history of psychology, the second chapter is titled, “Before Psychology: 1600–1850” and the third chapter deals with the founding of psychology after 1850. He readily acknowledges that people had thoughts on what it is to be human prior to 1850 but he calls this “reflexive discourse” (p. 20). It is reflexive in the sense that it involves human beings trying to understand what it is to be human. Psychology is of course a form of reflexive discourse but only one form. Reflexive discourse can be found in the whole range of the human or social sciences, sociology, anthropology, linguistics etc., and in subjects like philosophy, theology, history, literature and the law, to name only a few.

In addition to pointing out that considering reflexive discourse that is older than 1850 to be psychology is historically inaccurate, Richards offers a more practical argument in support of his views. If all reflexive discourse were included in the history of psychology, the subject would be so vast as to be unmanageable. Why stop at Aristotle? Shakespeare is generally regarded as an astute observer of the human condition and this may explain the universal and enduring appeal of his plays. Should we retroactively label him a “psychologist” as well? The same might be said of Plato, Aquinas, Kant, Marx, Darwin and anyone else who has ever written about the human condition. With such a loose definition of “psychology”, we would rapidly arrive at the point where the history of psychology is coterminous with the history of human civilisation.

Implications for Non-Western Thought

Richards and Smith are concerned only with Western thought prior to 1850 and what the relationship of the history of psychology to it should be but their views have obvious implications for non-Western thought. If we refuse to regard the work of Aristotle as “psychology”, consistency would require us to do the same with the work of Buddha, Confucius, the Upanishads and Lao-tse. They belong to what Richards calls reflexive discourse but not to that modern form of reflexive discourse that we call “psychology”. The latter has its origins in Western Europe and it was exported from there to the rest of the world. There are some interesting stories to be told in this regard. For example, Chinese did not have a word for “psychology” when literature on the subject began to arrive from the West at the end of the 19th century and controversy ensued over how the term should be translated. It was eventually decided to express it by using a compound of three Chinese characters which represented, “heart”, “spirit” and “study” (Blowers 2006). The problems here are no different from the problems that result from applying the epistemic categories of the present to the past. If we assume that China had psychology all along, this aspect of its history will be overlooked.

Some might be willing to acknowledge that psychology has its origins in Europe and that it was exported from there to the rest of the world but they will characterise it as “Western psychology”. The question then arises as to whether there is any other kind of psychology. In this respect, the expression, “indigenous psychology” could be regarded as an oxymoron since psychology is not indigenous to the places where that term is usually employed. It would be more accurate to speak of “indigenised psychology” (Brock 2014b).

The person who has written most extensively on this subject is the German historian of psychology, Irmingard Staebble (e.g. 2004, 2006). She points out that the various disciplines that comprise the human or social sciences should not be taken for granted. They are a product of a certain time and place and they reflect a particular set of views. There is some irony in the fact that Indian psychologists like Durganand Sinha should complain about the individualistic orientation of Western psychology since it was precisely the view that individuals could be understood apart from society, culture and history that led to the creation of the various disciplines that specialise in these things. Her conclusion is that these disciplines should be abandoned in favour of a unified social science and she makes this point not only on ideological grounds but also on practical grounds. In countries with limited resources, it makes no sense to replicate the disciplinary structure of the West with its separate departments, textbooks, conferences, journals and the like.

I have my doubts as to the practicality of this suggestion. The various disciplines that comprise the human or social sciences are now so firmly entrenched in the universities and

the wider society that it will be difficult to dispense with them. Interdisciplinary programmes exist but one of the problems with them is that their graduates often have difficulty in obtaining employment elsewhere. Having said that, I think it important to maintain the distinction between what Richards calls “reflexive discourse” and that particular form of reflexive discourse that we call “psychology”. Psychologists in non-Western countries who insist on regarding their own intellectual traditions as “psychology” may be unwittingly involved in an act of cultural imperialism since they are viewing them through the filter of a concept that has its origins in the West.

Diversity Without Presentism

Is it possible to have diversity without presentism? It all depends on what we mean by presentism. One of the contributors to the special issue of *Advances in the History of Psychology* who goes under the internet name of “Knitting Clio” accused Green of presentism by taking psychology as it currently exists as the starting point for his view of its history (Knitting Clio 2008). Historians do not generally have a problem with this understanding of the term. It is similar to what the French historian, Michel Foucault famously called “a history of the present” (e.g. Garland 2014) or what Smith (1988) has called a “thoughtful presentism” (p. 151). Historians accept that they live in the present and that the questions they ask of history are driven by present-day concerns. Historical work is only presentist in the pejorative sense of the term if the answers to those questions have their origins in the present as well.

An important step towards achieving diversity in the history of psychology is to follow Smith’s advice that “*the* history of psychology should be abandoned” (1988, p. 162). Accounts of the history of psychology are inevitably selective. Sometimes the author may not be consciously aware that selection is taking place. You cannot decide to leave something out of the history of psychology if you are not aware of its existence. Unfortunately this advice runs counter to the standard practice of offering a single undergraduate course on the history of psychology supported by a textbook that pretends to cover the entire history of the field.

Many of these textbooks are of American origin and what happens in practice is that they offer a history of American psychology, not a history of psychology in general. Developments in Europe are covered only to the extent that they had an impact in the United States. For example, Wilhelm Wundt is an important figure because he had many American students and Kurt Lewin is well known because he emigrated to the United States and was successful there. However, others who played a significant role in the history of psychology in Europe but who had no connections with the United States are left out of these accounts. As for developments in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania, they are rarely covered at all

(Brock 2006). The recent textbook by Wade Pickren and Alexandra Rutherford (2010) does include some material on these places but it is unusual in this respect and the amount of material it contains is small. The need to produce what purports to be a comprehensive history of psychology means that such material has to compete for limited space.

A similar point is made by Eugene Taylor (2008) in the special issue of *Advances in the History of Psychology*. He says that the Wikipedia entry on the history of psychology maintains the fiction that there is only one history of psychology, whether it was intended or not, and this one history is a peculiarly Western view. This is certainly true but Taylor (2008) then goes on to undermine this valid argument by suggesting that the alternatives include “Islamic science, Hindu psychology, Buddhist psychology, Afro-centred systems, Confucian or Taoist views etc.” Green (2008) predictably dismisses this view as presentist:

I think that calling the latter forms of “psychology” is simply a historical error. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Africans, etc. — ancient Greeks, for that matter — do/did not have a discipline called psychology. Their epistemic categories are/were structured differently from those in the West (e.g., physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc.) and to label as forms of psychology the portions that seem superficially similar to those we collect under the term “psychology” is, I think, to distort them and falsely assimilate them to a system of knowledge that is alien to their origins. It is, in essence, a cross-cultural analog of presentism. They should, instead, be presented in the contexts of their own cultural origins, rather than being forced into Western categories like “psychology.”

In making the point that “*the* history of psychology should be abandoned”, Smith (1988, p. 162) was not suggesting that reflexive discourse be included in the history of psychology. The argument for multiple histories concerns the inclusion of aspects of the history of modern or scientific psychology that have traditionally been left out of the standard accounts. These aspects might include the history of psychology outside of Europe and the United States.

The Place of Reflexive Discourse

These considerations make it difficult to incorporate intellectual traditions from outside the West into the standard histories of psychology. The problems can be seen in a recent textbook by Man Cheung Chung and Michael Hyland (2012). They present what is essentially a standard history of psychology

and then include two chapters containing non-Western material at the end. They write in the introduction:

Our text has the unusual feature of including philosophy from both Western and Eastern perspectives. Although academic psychology was developed within a Western intellectual tradition, philosophical ideas originating in the East are just as relevant (p. 2).

Relevant to what? The content of these chapters bears no relationship to the chapters that have preceded them. I am not suggesting that this material is without interest or importance but all books have a certain subject-matter and this book purports to be a history of psychology. The two chapters are simply tacked onto the end without an adequate or convincing explanation for why they should be included in a textbook on this subject.

Is there some way that the reflexive discourse of non-Western cultures can be included in the history of psychology without falling into the trap of presentism or cultural imperialism? Fortunately there is and this is because of a caveat suggested by Smith (1988):

I suggest that historians of psychology may legitimately search in earlier periods in order to trace traditions of thought, the social background of individuals or institutions, cultural value, or economic and political circumstances, that become part of a later psychology. But then this is historical research in the earlier period with a purpose, and about a subject, defined by the later psychology. (pp. 156–7)

Even if we accept that psychology emerged in the second half of the 19th century, there is no need to assume that developments prior to this period are of no interest or relevance. Psychology did not come from nowhere. The ground had already been prepared for it by developments in disciplines like philosophy, medicine and biology. Darwin's theory of evolution precedes the formal establishment of psychology and yet it had a profound influence on the discipline in its early years and continues to do so. It is therefore a part of the history of psychology. The same is true of the sensory neurophysiology that is associated with Helmholtz and the psychophysics that is associated with Weber and Fechner.

Such connections are easy to establish since the events in question occurred immediately before the establishment of modern psychology. What about the historical events that are more distant from the 19th century? The eminent historian of psychology, Kurt Danziger (2008a) has questioned the radical discontinuity that is implied by Ebbinghaus' distinction of the short history and long past. Referring to his own work on the history of memory (Danziger 2008b), he points out that the storage metaphor is still widely used by memory researchers

and yet it can be found in some of the earliest writings of Ancient Greece, including those of Plato and Aristotle. Thus these writings too are a legitimate part of the history of psychology since they have influenced the modern discipline that goes under that name. It should be noted, however, that this does not give us licence to call their writings "psychology". We are referring here to the content or subject-matter of psychology, not the discipline itself. This content or subject-matter may have belonged to a different discipline in the past. Danziger is still of the view that psychology is a historically recent creation and his remarks are more of a friendly amendment to the work of Richards and Smith than a critique. All of them agree that events which occurred prior to the establishment of psychology but which shaped the way in which it subsequently developed are a legitimate part of its history. He simply wants to point out that the degree of continuity may have been underestimated.

Danziger (2008a) also points out that the distinction between psychology's history and its past was not original to Ebbinghaus. It can be found in a work that is not well known today but which would have been standard reading among German psychologists around the time that Ebbinghaus was writing. The work in question is Max Dessoir's *History of Modern German Psychology* (1902). Although Dessoir made the same distinction between psychology's history and its past, he used these terms in a different way. If something has had a lasting influence on psychology, it is a part of its history. However, something that did not have a lasting influence on psychology belongs to its past. Thus, according to Dessoir, the ancient thought of India forms part of psychology's past. It is not a part of its history because there is no historical connection between the two. The ancient thought of Greece, however, is a part of psychology's history since it has had a lasting influence on the field.

In suggesting that the ancient thought of India was not a part of psychology's history, Dessoir could not have foreseen one of the more interesting developments in psychology in recent years: the rise of the indigenisation movement (Brock 2014b). It began when psychologists in Asia, Africa and Latin America argued that Western psychology was inappropriate for their needs and that they needed to develop their own indigenous approaches. Many psychologists in India have now incorporated the ancient thought of India into their work (e.g. Rao et al. 2008, Cornellison et al. 2011). There is also an Islamic psychology that is based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the work of medieval Islamic scholars (e.g. Haque 2004; Husain 2008). To the extent that Indian thought and Islamic thought have had an influence on these forms of psychology, they are a part of their history, just as Plato and Aristotle are a part of the history of Western psychology.

At the heart of the claims of Jagged_85, Khaleefa and others like them is a contradiction: they have embraced Western psychology and yet they want to pretend that its historical

origins are in the Middle East. If they want to incorporate medieval Islamic thinkers into the history of psychology, they should study their works and pursue a psychology that is influenced by them. The solution lies in abandoning the naïve view that Western psychology has universal validity and taking the reflexive discourse of their own culture more seriously.

I do not expect that these remarks will put an end to the priority claims. They do, however, offer a way of introducing greater diversity into the history of psychology without being in conflict with the scholarly standards of historians of psychology. Hopefully, I am not alone in considering both of these things important. They coincidentally avoid the cultural imperialism that is involved in re-interpreting the reflexive discourse of non-Western cultures in terms of a discipline that has its origins in the West and open up the space to think critically about the assumptions that underlie the disciplinary order on which it is based.

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