

Alternative path for the future or a return to the past? Araujo's "philosophical" history of psychology

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Abstract

Araujo begins by criticising what he calls the “social turn” in the history of psychology. He singles out the work of Kurt Danziger for special criticism in this regard. He then outlines the emergence of an allegedly new field called “History and Philosophy of Science” (HPS) and calls for a different approach which he labels a “philosophical” history of psychology. Here I examine his criticism of Danziger’s work and suggest that it is unjustified. I also point out that there is nothing new about the field of HPS and nothing original about the idea of relating history and philosophy of psychology. I conclude by suggesting that, although Araujo’s criticism is unjustified, it can give some insight into where his alternative path for the future will lead. It is an attempt to excise the sociology of knowledge from historical discourse and to return to a more traditional history of ideas.

Keywords

Kurt Danziger, history and philosophy of science, history of psychology, sociology of scientific knowledge, Wundt’s methods

Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK)

Araujo’s (2017) point of departure is what he calls “the social turn” (p. 87) in the history of science and its impact on the history of psychology. He refers to a great deal of the relevant literature but he discusses three books in more detail. These are Kurt Danziger’s *Constructing the Subject* (1990), Martin Kusch’s *Psychological Knowledge* (1999), and Gerhard Benetka’s *Denkstile der Psychologie* [Thought Styles in Psychology] (2002). What all of them have in common is that they were influenced by a field known as “the sociology of scientific knowledge” (SSK).

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The complicated name is due to the fact that there was an earlier positivist sociology of science that is associated with figures such as Robert Merton. In the early part of the 20th century, it was generally held that, while religious beliefs and political ideologies could be explained sociologically, scientific knowledge was beyond the pale. The sociology of science, therefore, confined itself to examining the kind of social conditions that would enable science to flourish. As a result of the work of T. S. Kuhn and other developments in the history and philosophy of science, sociologists of science became less hesitant about applying their theories to scientific knowledge and they did so with some interesting results (Shapin, 1982).

According to Araujo, one of the problems with this literature is that it neglects philosophy. He also suggests that it is “lacking methodologically” (2017, p. 90). In making this point, he relies heavily on a critique of the “new” history of psychology that Benjamin Lovett published in the journal *History of Psychology* (Lovett, 2006). Lovett was a graduate student in school psychology at the time and his knowledge of the area was weak. I have responded to his arguments in some detail in another article that I published in the same journal (Brock, 2016) and there is no point in repeating the contents of that article here. Instead I will focus on an aspect of Lovett’s criticism that Araujo develops in more detail: the issue of consistency. According to Araujo, “this poses the most difficult methodological challenges to the new historians” (2017, p. 91).

He singles out Kurt Danziger for special criticism in this regard:

The issue of consistency can be illustrated by considering the specific case of Wundt’s psychological project. In this area, Danziger’s work is very important. Having spent more than a decade reevaluating Wundt’s psychological project, he made significant contributions to Wundt scholarship However, his analyses are not without problems. In his *Constructing the Subject* (1990), for instance, he argues that in the historiography of psychology “what is missing is the recognition of the socially constructed nature of psychological knowledge” (p. 2). ... However, in his analysis of Wundt’s key methodological concept—introspection—Danziger seems to forget his social constructivist approach and, instead of showing the social determination of Wundt’s concept, moves his analysis toward a conceptual history of introspection, without showing how this should be integrated into his approach. ... Danziger’s analysis is unable to show the social determinations of Wundt’s epistemic aims, which frustrates the highest goal of his social constructivist approach. (p. 91)

There is an interesting sequence of logic here. Having portrayed Danziger as a “social constructivist” who neglects philosophy, the fact that he provides a conceptual history of introspection is seen as evidence of his inconsistency. A less biased observer might come to the more obvious conclusion that he does not neglect the philosophical aspects of the topic.

The whole argument is based on the view that one can write about social construction or engage in philosophy but not both. Social constructionism can itself be an all-embracing philosophy and I suspect that the prominence of Kenneth Gergen in this field has led some psychologists to falsely conclude that everyone else who writes about social construction shares his anti-realist views (e.g., Gergen, 1985). This is not the case. As Elder-Vass (2012) has pointed out in his book, *The Reality of Social Construction*, we can also maintain that social construction is real. This is Danziger’s

view. As Stam (1992) wrote in his review of the book: “Danziger relies on recent realist philosophies of science, particularly those influenced by Bhaskar, to defend some extra-psychological reality” (p. 631).¹

The claim that Danziger fails to demonstrate “social determination” (Araujo, 2017, p. 91) is based on a misunderstanding of what the sociology of knowledge is about. Shapin (1982) refers to this view as “the coercive model” (p. 194). As in all branches of the social sciences, there have been different views on the sociology of knowledge but no one would commit it to one form of explanation. We can certainly portray scientists as being influenced by their social surroundings but we can also portray them as active subjects who use their theories to achieve social ends.

Danziger (1990) does relate the method of introspection to the wider society:

During most of the nineteenth century a positive attitude to introspection tended to go with the philosophy of liberal individualism, while negative attitudes were more likely to be found among those who stressed the priority of collective interests or institutional requirements. (p. 23)

Liberal individualism was a significant force in Britain in the 19th century and it was accompanied by a tendency among the British empiricists to favour the method of introspection. Many Continental thinkers were less enamoured of both. A notable example is Auguste Comte, who promoted the field of sociology. He argued that the limits of attention make it impossible for us to engage in complex mental tasks and to observe ourselves doing it at the same time. One of the British empiricists, John Stuart Mill, responded by saying that, while we might not be able to engage in complex mental tasks and observe ourselves doing it at the same time, we could look back on the situation and remember how we had accomplished those tasks (Wilson, 1991).

Wundt's methods

Before we can arrive at an understanding of where Wundt stood in relation to these views, we need to examine Araujo's claim that introspection was the “key methodological concept” (2017, p. 91) of Wundt's psychology. It is the polar opposite of Danziger's view:

On this issue (as on several others) he never emerged from the shadow of Kant, which meant that he basically accepted the object of knowledge to which introspection corresponded but denigrated the method itself. He never doubted that the private consciousness was the object that psychology had to study, but he agreed with Kant and later critics like Comte and Lange that introspection was not the method that would transform this object into a scientific object. In fact, he went so far as to ridicule the introspectionist, likening him to a Baron von Münchhausen attempting to pull himself out of the bog by his own pigtail. (1990, p. 34)

Danziger (1990) also suggests that “Wundt would have been horrified to find himself being classified as an introspectionist” (p. 36). This view is supported by other writers. Kusch (1999), for example, similarly refers to “Wundt's opposition to introspection” (p. 121). How can we explain these radically different views?

Araujo (2017) points out in one of his endnotes that Wundt did not use the term, “Introspektion.” It was not commonly used in German at the time and it seems to be a later borrowing from the English language (Koch, 1976). The usual translation was “Selbstbeobachtung” [self-observation] and there is no question that Wundt rejected it as a method for psychology. He agreed with Comte that we could not engage in complex mental tasks and observe ourselves doing it at the same time. In response to J. S. Mill’s objection, he replied sarcastically that we were unlikely to be able to remember something that we had not been able to observe (Wundt, 1888). Wundt was particularly forceful in expressing these views when he criticised the method of “systematische experimentelle Selbstbeobachtung” [systematic experimental introspection] that was used by his contemporaries at the University of Würzburg (e.g., Wundt, 1907).

Wundt advocated a method that he called, “innere Wahrnehmung” [inner perception]. While it might superficially appear to be equivalent to the English term, “introspection,” it was different in a number of respects. It was an experimental procedure and it had to be connected to an external stimulus. The reaction had to be immediate and it had to be repeatable (Wundt, 1888). Wundt’s method was not vastly different from the psychophysical methods of his predecessors at the University of Leipzig—Ernst Weber and Gustav Fechner—and it was probably derived from them. We do not usually characterise these methods as “introspection” and it is misleading to describe Wundt’s method in this way.

Referring to the distinction between “Selbstbeobachtung” and “innere Wahrnehmung,” which was obviously important to Wundt, Danziger (1990) writes:

It is most unfortunate that English-language references to Wundt’s position have so often failed to reproduce this basic distinction and have generally used the term, “introspection” to cover both concepts indiscriminately. This of course makes it impossible to understand Wundt’s practice. (p. 209)

It is even more unfortunate that Araujo has continued this practice of using the term “introspection” indiscriminately for both.

More importantly, Wundt did not advocate one method; he advocated two. In contrast to his experimental psychology, which was concerned with individual consciousness, his *Völkerpsychologie* dealt with the collective consciousness of different cultural groups and it did this by examining their products, most notably language, myth, and custom. This practice is similar to that of Freud who investigated the individual unconscious by examining its products, such as dreams and slips of the tongue. Wundt devoted the last 20 years of his life to *Völkerpsychologie* and he expressed the view that he considered it to be more important than experimental psychology and that it was destined to eclipse the latter (Wundt, 1906).

Having arrived at a more accurate view of Wundt’s methods, we are in a better position to relate them to the wider society. It is more than obvious from Wundt’s writings that he was opposed to liberal individualism (e.g., Wundt, 1912), and his emphasis on the collective aspects of consciousness in his *Völkerpsychologie*, as well as his rejection of the methods that we usually associate with the term, “introspection,” place him very firmly in the anti-individualist camp.

Space restrictions prevent me from discussing Araujo's criticism of the other literature, though much of it is similarly unjustified. The object of the exercise is, of course, to compare this work unfavourably with his own. He calls his approach a "philosophical" history of psychology and makes a number of claims for it. I will discuss these claims in the final part of this comment. For the moment, I want to briefly examine the history of the relationship between history, philosophy, and sociology of science.

History, philosophy, and sociology of science

According to Araujo, the history of science has existed in splendid isolation, though it took a "social turn" (2017, p. 89) somewhere along the way. More recently, there have been calls for the integration of history and philosophy of science and it has led to a new field of studies:

In recent decades, many authors have argued for an integration of the history of science and the philosophy of science, leading to proposals for a new field of studies: the history and philosophy of science (HPS). (p. 93)

Araujo himself can be accused of inconsistency on this point. On the one hand, he uses words like "new" and "recent" to describe the field. On the other hand, he traces it back to the 1960s:

From the 1960s onward, official initiatives at integration of the two areas began to appear, such as the foundation of the first HPS Department in the United States at the University of Indiana. (p. 93)

He also points out that the journal *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* was founded in 1970. What he does not mention is that the International Union of History and Philosophy of Science was founded in 1956.² There is nothing new or recent about the field.

Araujo bases his claim that the field is "new" on the existence of a contemporary movement for the integration of history and philosophy of science. One of the works that he cites has the subtitle: "Renewing the Dialogue between History and Philosophy of Science" (Arabatzis, 2012). As this subtitle suggests, it is not an attempt to forge a new relationship but the "renewal" of an existing one.

It is certainly true that not everyone who has been involved with the history of science or the philosophy of science has been interested in integrating the two. This is particularly true of academics in the United States where specialisation exists to a greater degree than elsewhere. This situation is also reflected in the organisational structure of the American Psychological Association, which has a division for theoretical/philosophical psychology (Division 24) and a division for the history of psychology (Division 26). However, even in the United States, there is Indiana University and several other universities with a department or programme of HPS.³

The tendency to combine the two fields is more common in other countries and it is no coincidence that the relevant sections of the British Psychological Society and the

Canadian Psychological Association define their area of interest as “History and Philosophy of Psychology.” It may well be the case that some of their members view this arrangement as a marriage of convenience, but this is by no means true of all. Several years ago some members of the Canadian section produced an edited book in which they examined the relationship between history, theory, and philosophy in psychology (Hill & Kral, 2003). One of its contributors was Kurt Danziger who, according to Araujo, neglects philosophy (Danziger, 2003).⁴ In my review of this book for *Theory & Psychology*, I also expressed the view that these areas belong together (Brock, 2005). This was partly due to my own background in HPS.⁵

Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK) was a relative latecomer. It arose in the 1970s and early 1980s and it was an almost exclusively British interest in its early years (Shapin, 1995). The Science Studies Unit at the University of Edinburgh was an important centre and one of its members, David Bloor, published one of the defining statements of the field (Bloor, 1976).

This sequence of events helps to explain why the subject is still generally known as “History and Philosophy of Science,” though some of the departments and programmes that have been created in more recent years have used the term, “Science Studies” (or “Science and Technology Studies”) to allow for the existence of the sociological approach. The programme in Science Studies at the University of California, San Diego is a case in point. It included some prominent figures in SSK on its faculty when it was established in 1989.

This sequence of events also helps to explain the controversies that initially surrounded SSK. Some philosophers of science were reluctant to share their expert status with this upstart discipline and questioned its right to exist. It did not help that some sociologists of scientific knowledge claimed that their field would eventually replace the philosophy of science. As Riesch (2014) has pointed out, it was as much a competition for resources and social authority as anything else. It gradually began to dawn on people that the two fields are not incompatible. Just as there has been a movement to integrate history and philosophy of science, there has been a movement to integrate philosophy and sociology of science (e.g., Francois, Loewe, Mueller, & van Kerkhoven, 2011). Some of the best work in the field has successfully combined all three.

Araujo’s claims

We are now in a better position to assess Araujo’s claims. He is keen to portray HPS, and more specifically, history and philosophy of psychology, as “a new field of studies” (2017, p. 93) because it underpins his claims to originality. If it could be shown that both have already been around for many years, it would suggest that he is reinventing the wheel.⁶

The claim that HPS is a new field also underpins his argument that the more socially oriented histories neglect philosophy. However, as we have seen, SSK is the more recent of the two. Given that history and philosophy of science were already closely related when SSK emerged, its practitioners were obliged to address the philosophical implications of their work.

The same thing cannot be said of Araujo's "philosophical" history of psychology. The word "philosophical" in the name refers only to its subject matter. According to Araujo, we can write history without any metaphysical assumptions. Presumably the philosophy that guides the history itself is some form of naive realism.

Araujo claims that his approach is not intended to displace what he calls "social history" (2017, p. 89). It is meant to be complementary. This approach can only be complementary if the work of his predecessors is lacking in philosophy, as Araujo claims, but this is not the case. It also leaves open the question of what the scope and limits of each one should be. His earlier remark that social history cannot explain the "epistemic aims" (p. 91) of Wundt's psychology suggests that he views its role in similar terms to that of the earlier positivist sociology of science, which confined itself to the peripheral aspects of science and left the task of explaining scientific knowledge to the philosophers.

The claim that this approach is integrative is also open to doubt. There is nothing integrative about a dualistic vision of a "philosophical" and a "social" history existing side by side. On the contrary, it would destroy the integration that already exists.

Conclusion

Araujo's claim that the work of his predecessors neglects philosophy is based on the unwarranted assumption that one can write "philosophical" or "social" history but not both. It is this assumption that leads him to his dualistic vision of the future of the history of psychology, whereby these two kinds of history exist side by side. However, as we have seen, there is no reason why these different kinds of history cannot be integrated and this has already been done in some of the work that he is so keen to criticise.

The claim that the work of his predecessors is "lacking methodologically" (Araujo, 2017, p. 90) is also unjustified. The more specific claim that Danziger's work is inconsistent is based partly on a misunderstanding of what the sociology of knowledge is about and partly on a misunderstanding of Wundt's methods. The connection between psychology and society will always be elusive if the nature of the psychology and the nature of the connection have been misunderstood.

Although this criticism is unjustified, it gives some insight into where Araujo's alternative path for the future will lead. His "philosophical" history of psychology is not new or original and it is neither complementary nor integrative. It is an attempt to excise the sociology of knowledge from historical discourse and to return to a more traditional history of ideas.

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Notes

1. Danziger discussed the relationship between his social constructionist approach and his realist philosophy of science in an interview that I conducted for the journal *History of Psychology*: “Psychologists construct their objects, the things that they take themselves to be investigating. They also reconstruct them; that is, they change their definitions of those objects. They even abandon certain objects and invent new ones. It does not follow from all that that there are no objects. The interesting question is that of the adequacy of the constructed objects to the real objects, which I am not denying are there” (Brock, 2006, pp. 6–7).
2. <http://iuhps.net/pages/history.php>
3. The University of Notre Dame, the University of Pittsburgh, and the University of Washington are a few examples.
4. Araujo writes in an endnote: “I am well aware that Danziger moved from a purely constructionist to a more balanced approach to the history of psychology (Danziger, 2003)” (2017, p. 101). There has been no such change in Danziger’s views. As noted earlier, *Constructing the Subject* is based on a realist philosophy of science (Stam, 1992). Danziger has consistently maintained this position ever since (Brock, 2006, 2015).
5. I did a Master’s degree in the subject at the University of Cambridge in 1986–87.
6. Araujo comes close to admitting this when he writes in an endnote: “philosophically inclined histories are not new” (2017, p. 101). He then goes on to say: “debates on the implications of HPS for the history of psychology are lacking, hence the need for a new approach to be articulated more clearly in the future” (p. 102). This promissory note carefully avoids the problem of explaining what it is about this allegedly new field of HPS that is capable of transforming his “philosophically inclined history” into something that is different from its predecessors.

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