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The History of Psychological Objects

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Approaches to the History of Psychology

There are many ways of approaching the history of psychology. The traditional way of approaching the subject in the United States has been to center it on systems of psychology. These might include structuralism, functionalism, behaviorism, Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis and so on. This tradition is so deeply entrenched that the field is often described as "history and systems of psychology" not only in the professional literature on the subject (e.g., Hart 1986; Riedel 1973) but also in the official documents of the American Psychological Association (e.g., American Psychological Association 2009).

Another familiar approach to the subject is through biography. One of the most explicit textbooks in this regard is *Pioneers of Psychology* (Fancher and Rutherford 2012), but many of the other popular textbooks center their accounts on individuals (e.g., Hothersall 2004; Schultz and Schultz 2011). This practice of basing history on individual biographies is part of a wider cultural trend and it is only to be expected that psychologists would follow this trend, given the emphasis of their discipline on individuals.

These two approaches account for the majority of the work on the history of psychology but it should not blind us to the fact that many other approaches exist. Another way of approaching the history of psychology is through its institutions. Thus one might, for example, write a history of the American Psychological Association or one of its many divisions (Dewsbury 1996–2000; Evans, Sexton, and Cadwallader 1992). There is also a literature that is centered on the instruments that psychologists have used (e.g., Sturm and Ash 2005). Yet another approach involves tracing the history of psychology's methods (e.g., Danziger 1990). None of these approaches is as popular as histories that are centered on systems of

psychology or individual psychologists but a substantial literature on all of them exists.

This chapter will outline and discuss a relatively recent approach to the history of psychology that is less well known and for which only a small amount of literature exists. This approach, as the title of the chapter indicates, is through the history of psychological objects. The term itself will be unfamiliar to many people and so it may be useful to begin by stating what it means. Psychological objects are the things that psychologists study. Some examples can be found by looking at the contents of an introductory psychology text. They include perception, memory, learning, intelligence, personality, attitudes and motivation.

Naïve Naturalism and Its Problems

One of the reasons why this approach to the history of psychology was slow to develop and is less popular than many of the other approaches described above is the prevalence of a view that is often described as "naïve naturalism" (e.g., Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). In the context of psychology, it is the view that psychological objects exist independently of anything that psychologists might say about them and consequently do not have a history. According to this view, we might have a theory of memory, a theory of intelligence or a theory of motivation, but the objects of our investigation are not affected by the theories that we hold.

Naïve naturalism is widespread and difficult to overcome. If we grow up in an English-speaking environment, we learn that people have memories and that their actions can be attributed to motives. We also learn that some people are more intelligent than others and that we differ in terms of our personalities. These terms are understood and used by everyone around us and so there is no need to question their validity or to assume that they are anything other than universal. The situation is reminiscent of the old proverb that fish are the last to discover water. Like fish in water, human beings are surrounded by culture and tend to take the culture in which they live for granted. It is only by encountering cultures that are different from our own that we cease to take our own for granted and to realize that it is specific to a particular group of people and not humanity as a whole. The experience can be disconcerting since it involves a dramatic shift in our view of the world.

A good example of this type of experience is outlined by Kurt Danziger in the first chapter of his book, *Naming the Mind* (Danziger 1997a). Towards the end of the 1950s, he spent two years as a visiting professor at a major Indonesian university. On taking up his new appointment, Danziger discovered to his surprise that he had a colleague who taught a subject that was to all intents and purposes a local form of psychology. It was called "ilmu djiwa" which roughly corresponds to "science of the soul." It was not based on Western psychology but on Hindu philosophy and the modifications that had been made to it in Java. Danziger was

intrigued by the existence of this field and suggested to his colleague that they conduct joint seminars in which the Western and the local views of psychology would be compared. They might, for example, have a joint seminar on motivation. Danziger's colleague replied that this would not be possible since motivation was not a topic as far as he was concerned. It seemed to him to group together a diverse set of phenomena which had little in common. Perhaps motivation was a bad choice. How about emotion or personality? Danziger went through a list of major psychological objects and got exactly the same response. His colleague could suggest alternative topics but these were as alien to Danziger as the topics that he had suggested had been to his colleague. Needless to say, the joint seminars never took place.

The phenomenon that Danziger encountered in Indonesia is familiar to anthropologists who are well aware that different cultures have different views on human beings. These views have been extensively researched in a branch of the field that is commonly described as "ethnopsychology" (e.g., Turner 2012). It is well-known, for example, that other cultures place great emphasis on emotions that have no equivalents in the English language. One such emotion is "amae," which is well-known in Japan (Yamaguchi and Ariizumi 2006). It is usually characterized as a feeling of dependence on another similar to that of a baby towards its mother. This sense of dependence on others tends to be emphasized in Japan but it has no equivalent in the more individualistic West. Another example is the Samoan emotion, "lotomama," which is usually expressed in terms of "having no angry feelings." Thus if two people have a disagreement and no resentment ensues, they are said to experience this emotion. It is so exotic to English-speakers that it can only be expressed in English in terms of the absence of an emotion and yet it is a specifically Samoan way of feeling (Gerber 1985). Just as dependence on others is emphasized in Japan, avoiding conflict is emphasized in Samoa. We can see from these examples how emotions are linked to cultural values and help to shape the actions of people in culturally-approved ways.

Other examples of ethnopsychology can be found in the well-documented phenomenon of "culture-bound syndromes" (e.g., Simons and Hughes 1985). It has long been recognized that there are psychological disorders that are unique to specific cultures. One such example is "pibloktoq," which is found among Inuit people and is sometimes described as "Arctic hysteria" (Higgs 2011). A more familiar example of a culture-bound syndrome is the Malay disorder, "amok" (Saint Martin 1999). The expression "to run amok" entered the English language when Malaya was a British colony and this is where its origins lie.

If psychologists are aware of these cultural differences, they do not usually consider them to be of relevance to their work. For example, the DSM-IV recognized the existence of culture-bound syndromes but it portrayed the disorders of Western psychiatry – anorexia, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and the like – as universal (American Psychiatric Association 2000). The majority of psychologists view the objects of Western psychology in a similar way.

Can this view be justified? We cannot consider them to be superior to the objects of other ethnopsychologies on the basis of empirical observation since they precede observation of this kind. Before we carry out a memory experiment or test someone's intelligence, we need to have some understanding of what memory or intelligence involves. Our observations may confirm these understandings but this is equally true of lotomama, pibloktoq, and other cultural views. What happened in practice is that English-speaking psychologists did not invent terms like memory, emotion, or the self. They took them from the culture in which they lived. That these terms are more widespread than the terms that form part of ethnopsychology can be attributed to the spread of Anglo-American culture around the world. Just as Western disorders like anorexia and depression are making their appearance in non-Western cultures (Watters, 2010), so the language of Western psychology is being spread around the world. In this respect, the pretensions of Western psychology to universality can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Moghaddam and Lee 2006).

We do not need to travel far to find cultural variations of this kind. German, for example, has no equivalent for the English word "mind." Its closest equivalents are "Geist," which is etymologically related to the word "ghost" and is best translated as "spirit," and "Seele," which is the equivalent of "soul." French makes no distinction between "consciousness" and "conscience," and uses the word "conscience" for both. Spanish has no equivalent for the word "self." The psychological objects of our own language may not exist in other languages, just as the psychological objects of other languages may not exist in ours.

If psychological objects have a linguistic and cultural dimension, as appears to be the case, we would expect them to change historically in ways that purely natural objects would not. Changes occur in nature, of course. Planets come into existence and eventually die out but usually over a time-span of millions or billions of years. The same is true of the evolutionary changes that Darwin outlined. Cultural changes tend to occur more frequently.

Relevant Literature from the History of Science and Medicine

As mentioned at the outset, the history of psychological objects has not been a popular area of research and it was suggested that this was largely due to the prevalence of naïve naturalism. This view was also common in the early years of the history of science. A notable exception is the work of Georges Canguilhem who published a history of the concept of "reflex" in the 1950s (Canguilhem 1955). He also examined the history of biological regulation and normality (Canguilhem 1977, 1991). More controversially, Michel Foucault, who was very familiar with the work of Canguilhem, explored the history of self and sexuality (e.g., Foucault 1979, 1988). A more recent contribution is a book by Roger Smith in which he examines the close relationship between the social and the

scientific meanings of the term "inhibition" (Smith 1992). The work was published in 1992 and Smith notes at the beginning that many people will find it strange to see a book on the history of a single word.

There is other relevant literature from the 1990s on the history of psychiatry. A well-known example is a book by Ian Hacking on multiple personality disorder from 1995 (Hacking 1995a). Here he examines the disorder as a cultural phenomenon. Its existence was acknowledged in the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century but it was thought to be relatively rare. Hacking tells the story of how it went from this situation to a disorder that had reached epidemic proportions by the end of the 20th century and how the nature of the disorder changed along the way. Less well-known but equally interesting is a book by Allan Young on the history of post-traumatic stress disorder (Young 1997). Like multiple personality disorder, it was recognized in the DSM for the first time in 1980 and Young shows how the diagnosis formed part of the opposition to the Vietnam War. The American government opposed the diagnosis, largely because of its financial implications. It was already spending a large amount on war veterans with physical disabilities and its spending would increase dramatically if it became responsible for the care of war veterans with psychological problems as well. However, once the diagnosis was adopted in the DSM, the writing was on the wall. The government realized that it would be pointless to challenge the views of psychiatrists in their designated area of expertise. Also, like Hacking, Young shows how the nature of the disorder changed over time. In this case, the most notable change was that the diagnosis was gradually applied to a larger population, many of whom had not undergone the stresses of war.

This type of history suggests that the disorders of American psychiatry are initially as culture-bound as the disorders that have been traditionally regarded as such, with the main difference being that they are subsequently exported to other countries while the disorders that are traditionally regarded as culture-bound tend to remain within their cultures of origin.

Another interesting contribution to the literature is a collection of chapters entitled *Biographies of Scientific Objects* which was edited by Lorraine Daston (Daston 2000). Two of the chapters cover topics of interest to psychology, namely dreams and the self (Goldstein 2000; Kaufmann 2000). The notion of a scientific object having a biography is of course metaphorical. Like people, scientific objects are born and many of them will die out. It is thus possible to trace their historical trajectory in the same way that a biographer would trace the life of an individual person. It is simply the unit of analysis that is different. Like all metaphors, the notion of biographies of scientific objects has its limitations. Scientific objects can differ dramatically in their lifespan, lasting for anything from a few days to thousands of years, and they can do something else that human beings cannot do, which is die out and have a rebirth at a later date. This seems to have happened with the topic of dreams as an object of scientific interest (Kaufmann 2000).

Yet another book that is worthy of mention is *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* by Thomas Dixon (Dixon 2003). The term "emotion" is of relatively recent origin, having been used for the first time in the 18th century. David Hume was one of the earliest writers on the subject. By the 19th century it had become widely used and was popularized through the work of influential figures like Darwin and James. There was an older term which has some similarities with emotion and that is passion, though the two objects differ in important respects. As the title of the book suggests, the passions had a religious dimension. Thus the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust) were all passions which had to be controlled. This transition from value-laden terms to *apparently* value-neutral ones was a general trend in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus character was replaced by personality, while conduct was replaced by behavior. Their value-neutrality is only apparent since we still talk of emotions, personality, and behavior in evaluative ways.

Emotion is an important object of psychological investigation but the same cannot be said of many of the other objects that have been discussed up to this point. Terms like reflex and inhibition are as much a part of biology as they are of psychology, if not more so. Also, while clinical and counseling psychologists may deal with the effects of multiple personality disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder, the main responsibility for defining them lies with psychiatrists rather than psychologists. Similarly, while the analysis of dreams may be an important part of psychoanalysis, it is not an important part of psychology. The main reason why much of this work is only of indirect relevance to psychology is that none of it was produced by psychologists. The authors are for the most part professional historians, including historians of science and medicine. Hacking has a background in philosophy of science and Young is an anthropologist. Psychologists have not generally taken an interest in this type of research, let alone carried out research of their own.

The Work of Kurt Danziger

There is a notable exception to this rule and that is Kurt Danziger who has been pursuing a largely unsuccessful campaign to put the history of psychological objects on the agenda of historians of psychology for over two decades. The bulk of his work on the subject can be found in two books, one of which has already been mentioned: *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found its Language* (Danziger 1997a). The other book is more recent and is titled, *Marking the Mind: A History of Memory* (Danziger 2008). He has also supplemented this work with book chapters on the history of the self and the history of the person and he has published several discussions of the theoretical and philosophical implications of this work (e.g., Danziger 1993, 1997b, 2003, 2012, 2013). Danziger's work represents the most important body of literature on the history of psychological objects. I will consequently draw my examples from this work in the space that remains.

Naming the Mind traces the history of psychological objects like intelligence, behavior, learning, motivation, personality, attitudes, and the ubiquitous variable. Perhaps the most striking thing about them is how historically recent they are. All of them are products of the late 19th century or early 20th century. To illustrate this point, Danziger refers to an authoritative work from the beginning of the 20th century, James Mark Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (Baldwin 1901–1905). He notes, for example, that the dictionary does not contain an entry for intelligence. As late as the 1920s, Charles Spearman was complaining that psychology texts contained no material on the topic. Although Francis Galton is usually credited with the idea of testing people's intelligence, Danziger points out that he did not actually use this term. Galton referred to "natural ability" and his understanding of the term was different from modern concept of "intelligence." The latter emerged only a few years before the intelligence test. The word existed prior to that. There was, for example, the theory of divine intelligence which held that the world is so complicated that it could only have been created by an intelligent being. This understanding of the term is very different from the view that intelligence is something that we all possess in varying amounts and that it can be measured like a person's height or weight.

The point that the modern view of intelligence emerged together with the practice of intelligence testing is an important aspect of Danziger's work. The psychological objects that are of interest to him do not exist merely in the realm of concepts or ideas; they are intimately related to social practices and have real effects on the people concerned. The social practice involved here is selection, particularly in the context of education.

Motivation is analyzed in a similar way. Again, Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* from 1901–1905 does not contain an entry on the subject. The first systematic text on motivation was published as late as 1928, though discussions of the subject began to appear a few years before that. These discussions were related to managerial practices in the workplace and schools. There was little faith in the view that work has its own intrinsic rewards and the discussions tended to center on the provision of incentives that would get people to work harder. Other literature discussed motivation with a view to increasing sales. This topic provides another example of how psychological objects are related to social practices, the social practice in this case being the manipulation of behavior.

Naming the Mind was concerned exclusively with psychological objects of relatively recent origin. It might be argued that it is easy to show that psychological objects with such a short history have a social basis. There are psychological objects that are much older and one of the oldest is memory which can be found in the writings of Ancient Greece and virtually every other historical period up to the present day. If any psychological object has a natural basis, it must surely be this. It was partly out of considerations like this that Danziger decided to devote the second of his two books on the history of psychological objects to the history of memory. However, far from being willing to concede that memory is a natural

object, he approaches it in a similar way to the objects that were examined in *Naming the Mind*. His main contention is that the category "memory" is linked to the social practice of storing information and that the persistence of the category can be attributed to the persistence of this practice. He also suggests that the prevailing view of memory has changed over the years.

A key concept here is "mnemonic values." Societies vary in the types of memory that they value. In some societies, for example, emphasis is placed on being able to recite passages from a holy book, such as the Bible or the Koran, while in others it is actively discouraged. Another key concept is "external memory." Remembering often takes place with the assistance of external aids. These can be written documents, such as books, notes, and diaries, but they can take many other forms, including photographs, audio recordings, and films. They can be something as simple as a knot in a piece of string. According to Danziger, the different views of memory are related to mnemonic values and external memory.

To illustrate these points, he discusses the use of mnemonic techniques in the ancient world and in medieval Europe. These were important in societies where both literacy and books, which had to be written by hand, were relatively scarce. It was largely due to the invention of the printing press that interest in these techniques declined. However, the existence of written records led to a new interest in the accuracy of memory since there was now a standard with which memory could be compared. In non-literate societies, stories are rarely told the same way twice, just as music is rarely played the same way twice. The existence of written records led not only to a change in mnemonic values so that accuracy became an important issue, it led to a new image of memory as a recording device.

Danziger ends the book with a section titled "Is memory in the head?" Both *Naming the Mind* and *Marking the Mind* highlight the limitations of the tendency in psychology to treat only things inside the individual as causally effective and to ignore inter-individual effects. Psychological objects are an important part of our social lives.

To prevent us from taking the category of memory for granted, Danziger points out that a belief in its existence was not universally shared. There was a common view in Germany in the 18th and 19th centuries that memory was a category of folk psychology that was not worthy of the attention of serious scholars. Herbart described it as "an empty name." This view was shared by Wilhelm Wundt. He believed that what people refer to when they use the term "memory" is a collection of disparate mental activities that have little in common. It was thus left to Ebbinghaus, who did believe in the existence of memory, to carry out the first systematic experiments on the subject. The prevalence of naïve naturalism within the history of psychology is such that this aspect of Wundt's views was previously unknown. It was generally thought that he did not carry out experiments on memory because he lacked the appropriate techniques (Danziger 2001).

The problem of naïve naturalism in the history of psychology extends to the category "psychology" itself. It too has specific historical and cultural roots. The term was created in Latin in the 16th century, though it did not become well known in Germany and France until the 18th century and it did not enter the English language until well into the 19th century (Lapointe 1970). When literature on psychology began to appear in China at the end of the 19th century, the Chinese language had no equivalent for the word and a debate ensued over how it should be translated (Blowers 2006).

A topic that has been hotly debated in the history of psychology in recent years is how the field should relate to the centuries before the modern discipline emerged. Traditional historians of psychology like Robinson (2013) are perfectly happy to talk of "Aristotle's psychology" or "medieval psychology." With the recent surge towards multiculturalism, one can even find discussions of "Islamic psychology" or "Confucian psychology." Critical historians of psychology like Richards (2010) argue that there was no psychology prior to 1850 and that this is when the history of psychology should begin. He is well aware that people held views on what it is to be human prior to 1850 but he calls this "reflexive discourse." Psychology is a form of reflexive discourse but only one form.

While sympathetic to the views of Richards, Danziger (2013) points out that they do not take account of the fact that some of the objects of psychology are older than the discipline itself. Memory is an obvious example. Attention and vision are others. By treating the history of psychology as a history of psychological objects, we can do justice to the antiquity of these objects without portraying the discipline as timeless and universal.

Theoretical and Philosophical Implications

While naïve naturalism may have hindered the popularity of this approach among historians of psychology, it is the challenge to naïve naturalism that it represents that makes it of interest to theoretical and philosophical psychology. Some might be tempted to identify it with the more radical versions of social constructionism which reject the idea of an external world that we can know. Mills (1993), for example, has suggested that Danziger's views imply sociological reductionism. Along with Stam (2004), I believe that such views are misguided. The history of psychological objects is incompatible with the sort of naïve empiricism which assumes that the objects of psychology are given to us in experience, but it is compatible with other epistemological views, including critical realism. Just because our understanding of the world might vary historically and cross-culturally, it does not follow that there is no world that we are trying to understand. Indeed, it might be suggested that coming to terms with this variation will improve our understanding.

We do not pay attention to every aspect of the world and it is often human or social interests that lead to the creation of psychological objects. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a case in point. When soldiers came home to their families at the end of the Second World War, it often resulted in problems like domestic violence and alcohol was usually the drug of choice. However, because the war had been relatively uncontroversial, these problems were generally ignored. It was the existence of a controversial war that led to an interest in the stresses of war and its impact on the soldiers involved.

Even when we take an interest in some aspect of the world, the phenomenon that philosophers call "underdetermination" can lead to it being understood and interpreted in different ways (Stanford 2009). Ian Hacking, whose work on multiple personality disorder has already been discussed, has taken an interest in the labels that we apply to human affairs. One example that he uses is "child abuse," a category he traces back to a conference of pediatricians in Denver, Colorado, in 1960 (Hacking, 1992). Hitting children was common practice at the time and for many years afterwards. A well-known piece of folk wisdom was "spare the rod and spoil the child." Many adults still engage in the practice but they run the risk in some countries of being reported to the authorities, especially if they do it in public.

According to Hacking, the relationship between the human sciences and their objects of investigation is different from that of the natural sciences since the people to whom these labels are applied understand them and respond in different ways. The debate over whether Pluto is a planet or a star had no effect on Pluto itself but the issue of whether we label hitting children as "discipline" or "child abuse" is of obvious interest to the adults who do it, not least because it can lead to an appearance in court. They may accept the label, they may contest it. The category "child abuse" did not just affect the adults who carry it out. It provided a new framework for adults to interpret their experience as a child. The labels that we apply to human affairs influence the self-understanding of people in ways that the labels that we apply to the natural world do not. Hacking calls this influence "looping effects" (Hacking, 1995b). The labels affect the way that people react and their reactions affect the labels in a never-ending loop.

Different interpretations and looping effects can be seen in the controversy that erupted in the last two decades of the 20th century over the reality of recovered memories of sexual abuse (Danziger 2008; Hacking 1995a). A typical scenario would be that someone, usually a woman, who was feeling unhappy or distressed would seek psychological help and, following a period of therapy, would come to the conclusion that her problems were due to sexual abuse in childhood and that the memory of it had been so traumatic that it had been repressed. It led to many cases of family breakdown and the authorities were left with the problem of how to deal with the alleged perpetrators of this abuse. Not everyone accepted the reality of these "recovered memories" and a new category, "false memory syndrome," began to emerge. The situation was further complicated when some

of the women who had accused their relatives of sexual abuse subsequently recanted and claimed that they had been brainwashed by their therapists during a vulnerable period in their lives. The whole episode provides a good example not only of different interpretations but also of how these interpretations affect the self-understanding of the people concerned.

The human sciences are not unique in that histories can be written about their objects of investigation. In addition to the examples drawn from the history of biology and medicine that have already been outlined, historians of science have produced histories of the objects of physics and mathematics (e.g., Feldhay 2000; Rheinberger 2000). However, the existence of these looping effects means that the human sciences influence their objects in ways that the natural sciences do not. Both Hacking and Danziger are of the view that this influence is real. Something that is cultural can still be real. It is simply the reality that is different.

Just as something that is cultural can still be real, so it can be universal. The point was made earlier that the categories of Western psychology and psychiatry are being exported all over the world (Moghaddam and Lee 2006; Watters 2010). In practice, many psychologists equate universal with natural. The possibility that some psychological objects are universal should not be dismissed but it can only be established after carrying out the relevant historical and cross-cultural research. Danziger (2003, 28) writes:

> The possibility that there are such universal psychological objects should not be dismissed a priori. But, on the other hand, neither can their existence be established a priori, as has been customary in the past. To plausibly establish the existence of such objects a great deal of historical and cross-cultural work is required. Until this work is done, there should be no pretense that any psychological object is anything other than of local and temporary relevance. An established tradition of assuming the opposite simply makes it unlikely that the required work will ever be done. In the interests of a less parochial, more truly scientific psychology, the onus of the proof should be placed squarely on those who would claim the status of a truth of nature for their favorite psychological objects.

Danziger's remarks about a less parochial and more truly scientific psychology lead me to the final issue that I would like to discuss: what is the relevance of this work to psychology?

The answer depends to a large extent on one's interests. One of the advantages of defining the history of psychology in terms of the history of psychological objects has already been discussed. In broader social terms, the realization that psychological objects are human products can have a liberating effect. If we assume that psychological objects like "intelligence" or "motivation" are part of the make-up of human beings, we are unlikely to question the social practices that go with them. The failure of psychologists to question the psychological objects of the wider culture has led to the discipline being profoundly conservative with

respect to that culture. Indeed, it serves to legitimate the wider culture by imbuing it with the authority of science.

The default assumption that psychological objects are local and temporary would lead to changes in the way that psychology is carried out. Exactly what those changes would be is a vast topic on its own but Danziger (1997a, 83) offers some pointers in *Naming the Mind*:

> Perhaps then it would have been better to approach the psychology of intelligence, not with the *a priori* assumption that intelligence is a quality that individuals possess, but with the observation that intelligence is something attributed to individuals in judgment situations…That would have led to questions about the nature of the situations in which such judgments are made, the expectations and implicit criteria on which such judgments are based, the variation of such judgments with the performance or the characteristics of the person being judged etc.

One of the changes is that it would lead to a different set of questions being asked.

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