

Something Old, Something New

The 'Reappraisal' of Wilhelm Wundt in Textbooks

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ABSTRACT. Between 1970 and 1980, Blumenthal and Danziger published a series of works in which they criticized the mythical accounts of Wundt in history textbooks. The source of these accounts was E.G. Boring's *History of Experimental Psychology* (1929/1950). Subsequent generations of textbook writers had merely copied from other textbooks without consulting original sources. Boring's flawed account had become increasingly distorted as it was passed on from one generation to the next. How did the textbook writers of the 1980s respond to this challenge? This work examines some of the changes which were made and the explanations which were given for them.

The historical study of myth is interesting, therefore, in that myth, taken as a whole, cannot be sober dispassionate history since it is always created ad hoc to fulfil a certain sociological function.

(Malinowski, 1926)

It is now over 20 years since Blumenthal (1970) began the modern 'reappraisal' of Wilhelm Wundt with his statement:

American textbook accounts of Wundt now present highly inaccurate and mythological caricatures of the man and his work. (p.11)

This statement was expanded in a series of articles with titles such as, 'A Reappraisal of Wilhelm Wundt' (1975) and 'The Founding Father We Never Knew' (1979). Around the same time Danziger published a series of works in which he criticized the popular view that E.B. Titchener was the main representative of Wundt's psychology in the United States (e.g. Danziger, 1979, 1980a, 1980b). How did the textbook writers of the 1980s respond to this challenge? The following work examines some of the changes which were made and the explanations which were given for them. These are used to highlight the mythical nature of 'textbook history'.

The view that a great deal of psychology's history consists of 'origin myths' is far from new. It was Samelson (1974) who coined the term in his discussion of Allport's claim that Comte 'discovered' social psychology.¹ One of the most enduring origin myths in history textbooks is that Wundt 'founded' the modern discipline of psychology in 1879. Murray (1988) writes:

In the late 1860s the work of Weber, Fechner, Helmholtz, Hering, and Donders was read by a scattered few who were interested in psychology in its own right, but it remained for Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) to establish the discipline as a unitary field of endeavour with its own department in universities, its own MAs and PhDs, its own textbooks, and its own journals. (p.199)

Few people realize that Wundt was strongly opposed to the view that psychology should become an independent discipline (Ash, 1980). He believed that psychology was so intimately tied to philosophical issues that it could never become truly 'independent'. Wundt wrote a highly polemical essay on this subject in 1913 when he became involved in a controversy with a group of psychologists who wanted to break away from philosophy (Wundt, 1913). He wrote in his autobiography that the title of his journal—*Philosophische Studien* [Philosophical Studies]—was deliberately chosen to show that psychology was a part of philosophy (Wundt, 1920). This is commonly regarded as psychology's first journal. Boring (1950) noted that 'the title sounds strange' (p.325). It has caused problems for textbook writers ever since.

The traditional approach to Wundt in history textbooks has been to offer him lavish praise for 'founding' psychology but to criticize him for his own approach to the subject. A common way of doing this has been to portray Wundt as an 'introspectionist' and then to criticize him for it. Schultz and Schultz (1987) write:

Like any great man, Wundt was subject to criticism with regard to many points of his system and his experimental technique of introspection. It is hard to verify research findings obtained by introspection. When introspection by different persons gives different results, how can we decide who is right? Experiments using introspection do not ensure agreement among experimenters because introspective observation is a private affair. (p.69)

The most frequently cited example is the so-called 'imageless thought controversy' in which different introspectors are said to have been unable to agree because of the 'private' nature of their phenomena. How a controversy could have arisen between the *schools* of Würzburg and Cornell if introspection is 'a private affair' is rarely discussed. Wundt's sole contribution to the dispute was a bitter attack on the introspectionist methods of the Würzburg school (Wundt, 1907).² It was *Titchener* who used the introspectionist methods with which Wundt came to be mistakenly associated. Titchener did not enter the fray in order to defend Wundt's views—as is commonly supposed—and specifically stated that he did not agree with them (Titchener, 1909). The view that Wundt was an 'introspectionist' was created by later generations. Wundt became a convenient straw-man for behaviorists who wanted to demonstrate the superiority of their approach (e.g. Watson, 1928).³ The purpose of this myth is clear. It provides an easy explanation for the rejection of Wundt's approach to psychology and helps to explain the origins of psychology as a 'behavioral science' (Brock, 1991).

This view of Wundt's psychology was largely a product of behaviorism. By portraying Wundt as an 'introspectionist' and then pointing to the alleged deficiencies of this view, it served to justify the behaviorist approach. The modern 'reappraisal' of Wundt should be seen in the context of the decline of behaviorism and the rise of cognitive psychology during the 1960s. The traditional view of Wundt's psychology had begun to outlive its usefulness and a new 'origin myth' emerged to take its place. It would be no exaggeration to say that Wundt changed

because psychology changed. In his 'Reappraisal of Wilhelm Wundt', Blumenthal (1975) wrote:

Strange as it may seem, Wundt may be more easily understood today than he could have been just a few years ago. This is because of the current milieu of modern cognitive psychology and of the recent research on human information processing. (p.1087)

Strange indeed! Blumenthal tried to translate Wundt's psychology into 'the jargon . . . of human information-processing capacities' (p.1082). It should come as no surprise that Blumenthal is himself a cognitive psychologist. Like Boring, he seems to have created his own 'founding father' (Weimer, 1974; Ash, 1983).

The point was not lost on other cognitive psychologists. Leahey (1979) subsequently published an article entitled 'Something Old, Something New', in which he tried to compare Wundt's work with modern cognitive psychology—though he candidly admitted that 'the connections between the two systems are tenuous at best' (p.242). In his textbook on the history of psychology, Leahey (1980) wrote:

Wundt is remembered primarily as a ponderous old German introspectionist of no importance save as psychology's founder. Contemporary scholars, however, have begun to demonstrate that Wundt's system was very different from the way it is usually presented and that it has contemporary relevance. Today, cognitive psychologists are returning to the study of the mind, if not of consciousness, and are rediscovering many of the basic mental phenomena first discovered by Wundt. (p.185)

Leahey embraced the 'reappraisal' of Wundt with some enthusiasm and claimed that Wundt was 'the most misunderstood of all psychology's major figures' (p.185). The appearance of this view in a textbook on the history of psychology is of particular importance since textbook writers generally base their work on other textbooks.⁴

The 'reappraisal' of Wundt presented no great threat to psychology's self-image. Its biggest threat was to that of the textbook writers themselves. The easiest solution to the problem was to simply ignore it. Hillner (1984) writes:

Although Wundtian voluntaristic psychology was more general and comprehensive than Titcherian structuralist psychology and included a *Völkerpsychologie* (folk psychology) component dealing with human beings as social and linguistic creatures, the two systems were continuous with each other, and we are not going to be concerned with a few, relatively minor differences existing between them. (pp.18–19)

Hillner includes Blumenthal's 'Reappraisal of Wilhelm Wundt' in the bibliography but mentions none of his other works (p.311). The work of Danziger is not mentioned at all (p.314). The bibliography contains several books and articles by Wundt but whether Hillner has actually seen these works is open to some doubt. Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* (1900–1920) is said to consist of four volumes, rather than ten, and the single-volume *Elements of Folk Psychology* (1916)—which is an entirely different work—is said to be a translation of these (p.333).⁵

Some writers discussed the changes openly and sought to provide an explanation for them. Kendler (1987) quotes from Leahey's textbook and tries to blame Wundt for the problem:

The blame for this confusion is not entirely the fault of those historians who

misrepresent Wundt's position. Unfortunately, Wundt himself contributed to the misunderstanding, by an ambiguous writing style, compounded by a penchant for changing theoretical positions. Wundt, even before the days of 'publish or perish', was a prodigious writer; his bibliography contains approximately 500 publications spanning a variety of fields. (pp.18–19)

This can hardly account for the problem. The grossly exaggerated figure of 500 publications is taken from Boring (1950) who preferred to count the pages of Wundt's works rather than read them.⁶ Wundt's publications span a period of 68 years. It would be highly surprising if he had not changed some of his views during this time.⁷ In spite of this, it cannot be claimed that Wundt once held the views which have been traditionally attributed to him and then later abandoned them. He never held those views at any time in his career. There is nothing about his writing style that would have led a reader to that conclusion. The problem is not that Wundt was 'misread' but simply that he was not read at all.

Schultz and Schultz (1987) offer a different explanation. The first three editions of this popular textbook had portrayed Titchener as a fanatical zealot who was completely committed to Wundt's system. By the time that the fourth edition appeared in 1987, the authors had decided that this view was no longer tenable. They open the chapter on Wundt with a section entitled 'A Case of Distorted Data' (p.58), and try to blame Titchener for the problem:

How could such a mistake be made with such a prominent person? Wundt wrote many books and articles presenting his views on the nature of his psychology. His system was there for all to see, for all who were fluent in German and who were willing to devote the time needed to study Wundt's amount of phenomenal published material. But why go to all that trouble? Most psychologists did not think it necessary to read Wundt in the original because so many of his important works were translated into English by his student E.B. Titchener . . . Titchener apparently elected to translate only those portions of Wundt's publications that supported his own approach to psychology. (pp.58–59)

This cannot account for the problem either. There was no need to be 'fluent in German' or to read a 'phenomenal amount of published material'. As Danziger (1980b) has pointed out, anyone who had taken the trouble to read the small number of Wundt's publications which were available in English would have known that the systems of Wundt and Titchener were very different. Wundt provided concise accounts of his views in several places. One of these can be found in his *Outlines of Psychology* which was: 'Translated with the co-operation of the author by Charles Hubbard Judd, PhD (Leipzig)' (Wundt, 1897).⁸

The problem of 'distorted data' in history textbooks raises the question of what this 'data' actually is. As far as the traditional view of Wundt is concerned, it seems to have been taken from other textbooks—in particular, Boring's *History of Experimental Psychology* (1929/1950). This is a clear example of how myths are passed on from one generation to the next without recourse to original sources. Schultz and Schultz (1987) come close to admitting this when they write:

Thus, generations of students have been offered a portrait of Wundtian psychology that may be more myth than fact, more legend than truth. For 100 years after the event, texts in the history of psychology, including the previous editions of this one, and teachers of the history course, may have been compounding and reinforcing the error under the imprimatur of their alleged expertise. (p.59)

One can only admire the honesty of this statement.⁹ The reference to 'compounding the error' is an acknowledgement of the fact that myths and legends become increasingly transformed as they are passed on. Even Boring cannot be held entirely responsible for the problem. Boring pointed to some important differences between Wundt and Titchener (e.g. Boring, 1950, p.419). The view that Titchener's psychology was a mirror-image of Wundt's is a more recent creation (Leahey, 1981). All this casts doubt on the view that Wundt is 'the most misunderstood of all psychology's major figures' (Leahey, 1987, p.179).¹⁰ If such mistakes can be made with the so-called 'founder' of psychology, it is unlikely that the accounts of other major (or minor) figures are any more accurate.¹¹

My aim in this paper has been to examine the nature of an *institution* and not to criticize the work of particular individuals. Anyone who undertakes to write a history of psychology from the Ancient Greeks to the present cannot be expected to have first-hand knowledge of any particular author, however important. Some textbook writers like to pretend otherwise. The attempt to blame Wundt's writing style or Titchener's translations helps to maintain this pretence. What all this fails to acknowledge is that the new 'reappraised' Wundt is no less a product of secondary sources than its predecessor. Secondary sources are often the work of highly interested parties. If one is to avoid being misled by these, it is essential that primary sources are used. The vast scope of 'textbook history' makes this virtually impossible. Myths are an inherent part of the institution itself (e.g. Samelson, 1974; Harris, 1979; Finison, 1983).

Why then does it continue to be so popular? This must surely be seen in terms of the important socializing function which it serves (Ash, 1983). In an interesting discussion of this subject, Brush (1974) points out that the aim of introducing historical material into science courses is not merely to provide the future scientist with information but also to inculcate the 'correct' attitude towards current theories and research methods. Brush argues that historical scholarship can often conflict with this aim and suggests that '*fictionalized* history of science' (p.1170) is a more suitable alternative. This may explain why historical accuracy is not an important priority in textbooks. Their main function is to provide myths which serve to socialize new members into the scientific community (Brock, 1991). It is, of course, essential that these should be seen as historically accurate if they are to fulfil this role.

Notes

1. This article led to an interesting response. One of the editors of *The Handbook of Social Psychology* removed the section on Comte and left the rest of the essay intact. No explanations were given. The essay is said to be 'lightly abridged' (Allport, 1985, p.1). Hopefully, my own recent work on Allport's account of Hegel and Völkerpsychologie will lead to the removal of that section as well (Brock, 1992).
2. For some of Wundt's comments on 'introspection', see Sills and Merton (1991).
3. Danziger (1980a) writes: 'the very notion of an "introspectionist psychology" is a product of behaviorism' (p.241). Boring (1953) suggested that the term had been created because 'protesting new schools needed a clear and stable contrasting background against which to exhibit the novel features of their ideas' (p.172).
4. This point should be emphasized. Scholarly work on other historical figures has been completely ignored (Finison, 1983).

5. This should not be seen as an isolated case. Brennan (1986) continued to equate Wundt and Titchener: 'Their conclusions about psychology were highly compatible and our overview will consist of a synopsis of their collective writings' (p.155).
6. Boring's page-count was based on a bibliography which had been put together by Wundt's daughter (E. Wundt, 1927). Boring (1950) wrote that the bibliography contains '491 items' but mentions that this figure includes 'many one-page items', 'every revised edition' and 'mere reprinted editions' (p.345). (Three works alone account for 46 of these 'items'.) Boring also claimed that 'Wundt in these 491 items wrote about 53,735 pages' (p.345). Why did Boring try to inflate the figures in this way? His final words are quite revealing: 'It is no wonder then that Wundt's psychology and philosophy still lack an adequate summary' (p.345). It seems to have been Boring's way of apologizing for the inadequacy of his secondary sources. The mistakes in his account of Wundt's psychology suggest that he had obtained his information from Titchener (e.g. Titchener, 1920, 1921a, 1921b). The idea of counting the pages of Wundt's works may have come from Hall (1912) who estimated that Wundt had written 16,000 pages.
7. Hoorn and Verhave (1980) have examined Wundt's views on psychology at different times in his career. Many of these are remarkably consistent.
8. For an account of Wundt's part in its translation, see Judd (1921). Other translators were R. Pintner (Wundt, 1912) and E.L. Schaub (Wundt, 1916).
9. Note that the statement is extremely cautious. The words 'may be' and 'may have been' were removed for the 5th edition (Schultz & Schultz, 1992, p.79).
10. These words have now disappeared from the 3rd edition (Leahey, 1992). Presumably, Leahey no longer finds it necessary to make this point.
11. See, for example, Burston (1991) on textbook accounts of Erich Fromm.

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