

# Pedagogy and research



**Adrian Brock**  
examines the  
changing role of  
history and  
philosophy within the  
psychology  
curriculum.

**T**EXTBOOKS on the history of psychology are almost as old as the discipline itself. Ebbinghaus's famous statement that psychology has a short history and a long past did not prevent writers such as Dessoir (1912), Rand (1912), Brett (1912-21), Baldwin (1913) and Klemm (1914) from publishing works on what they understood to be the history of psychology.

By the time that Boring's classic text, *A History of Experimental Psychology* (1929), appeared, there was already a substantial literature on the history of psychology. This literature was mainly pedagogical in its aims and was used to supplement courses in this subject. Boring's own book was based on lecture notes which he had prepared for a course at Clark University in 1921 and subsequently refined at Harvard University.

This course was, in turn, based on a course which Boring's mentor, E.B. Titchener, had taught at Cornell University (Boring, 1961). Although Boring's text came to be regarded as the authoritative work on the history of psychology, it was only one of several that appeared around this time. Murphy's *A Historical Introduction to Modern Psychology* and Pillsbury's *The History of Psychology* were also published in 1929. The appearance of three textbooks on the history of psychology in the same year suggests that this subject was already being taught widely in American colleges and universities.

## Variety

Philosophy of psychology was never as well established in the psychology curriculum as history of psychology. The traditional animosity of psychologists towards philosophy, as expressed in the taboo on armchair speculation, was largely responsible for this situation. There was a need, however, to explain the bewildering variety of approaches to psychology which had emerged in the first two decades of the 20th century. Works such as Woodworth's *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* (1933) and Heidebreder's *Seven Psychologies* (1933) served to meet this need. These works were typically used in courses titled 'Systems and Theories of Psychology'

(e.g. Chaplin & Krawiec, 1960). Often, they would be merged with history of psychology into a course titled 'History and Systems of Psychology' (e.g. Riedel, 1971). This term continues to be widely used in the United States and many modern textbooks on the history of psychology are centred on the notion of 'systems'.

When psychology began to experience a period of sustained growth after the Second World War, 'history and systems of psychology' was firmly entrenched as a part of the psychology curriculum and new editions of the texts by Woodworth (1948), Murphy (1949) and Boring (1950) were published to meet the demand. The subject area is still an important part of the undergraduate curriculum in the US where it is often a compulsory or 'core' course (Ash, 1983). This is also true of postgraduate degrees. The American Psychological Association requires that all of its approved training programmes for applied practitioners contain at least one course on 'history and systems of psychology' (APA, 1995, p.7).

No systematic survey exists of how widely taught history and philosophy of psychology is in British colleges and universities. The British Psychological Society does not require that this be taught at any stage of its approved undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. In theory, one could qualify as a psychologist without knowing anything at all about this subject<sup>1</sup>. In practice, a course is typically offered at some stage of the undergraduate degree, usually as part of a general introduction to psychology during the first year.

What is particularly interesting about this situation is that 'history and systems of psychology' became an area of pedagogy without becoming an area of research. The psychologists who teach these courses may or may not be interested in the subject, but it is rarely their main area of specialist training and/or research. In this respect, it differs from other areas of psychology and is more of a 'service' course like research design and statistics. One often sees advertisements in *The APA Monitor* for a cognitive or a social psychologist who can also teach either 'history and systems of psychology' or 'quantitative methods'.

These comments apply equally to the authors of the textbooks which are used to support the courses. Given that history and philosophy of psychology has not traditionally been regarded as an area of research, one could legitimately ask where the authors of these textbooks get their information from. The usual pattern is for psychologists to teach a 'history and systems' course at some stage in their careers and then to publish lecture notes which have been taken from a sample of the pedagogical literature.

Developments have been taking place since the 1960s which have begun to render this situation obsolete. In the 1960s, Division 24 (Theoretical/Philosophical Psychology) and Division 26 (History of Psychology) were established within the American Psychological Association. The establishment of these two Divisions was only part of a wider series of developments that included the establishment of the Archives for the History of American Psychology, the Cheiron Society (Society for the History of the Behavioral and Social Sciences) and the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*. The archives served to provide material for original research, and the professional organizations and the journal provided an outlet for this research.

This trend quickly spread to other parts of the world. Many national organizations of psychologists, including The British Psychological Society, now have divisions, sections or special interest groups devoted to history and/or philosophy of psychology. New international organizations, such as the European Society for the History of the Human Sciences (ESHHS) and the International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP), have been established. Journals have proliferated at a remarkable rate. In addition to the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, there is now the *Journal of Theoretical/Philosophical Psychology*, *History of the Human Sciences*, *Philosophical Psychology* and *Theory and Psychology*; as well as bilingual journals like *Psychologie und Geschichte*, *Revista de Historia de la Psicología* and *Storia della Psicologia*. New journals are continuing to appear. The American Psychological Association began publishing a new journal, *History of Psychology*, at the start of this year.

History and theory/philosophy of psychology is now an active area of research. It is unlikely that it would have grown so quickly if it did not have a pedagogical basis from which to work. Many researchers became interested in the field after taking a 'History and Systems' course as undergraduates. What kind of influence has this new situation had on the pedagogical basis from which it all began?

## Research area

The first signs that the field had become an active area of research came when a handful of psychologists started to criticize the accepted authorities on the history of psychology, such as Boring's *A History of Experimental Psychology* or Gordon Allport's essay in the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (e.g. Samelson, 1974; Danziger, 1979; Harris, 1979). In an interview which I conducted with Kurt Danziger in 1994 (Brock, 1995), he compared his situation with that of 'a subject in an Asch conformity experiment':

I decided to make use of the opportunity presented by a sabbatical in 1973–74 to really acquaint myself with the primary literature in the history of psychology — in particular, the German literature — Wundt, Fechner, Helmholtz and many less prominent characters. My experience at that point was a bit like a subject in an Asch conformity experiment because what I was reading didn't seem to jibe with what I had previously read in secondary sources like Boring and some others. Of course, I had simply trusted these sources previously. (p.357)

Trusting secondary sources had been the root of the problem. Boring (1929/1950) had based his work on the pedagogical literature which existed up to that time and the anecdotal accounts of figures such as Hall (1912) and Titchener (1920). Subsequent writers had based their accounts on the work of Boring and his contemporaries. It was like the old party game where a message is passed along a line of people and becomes increasingly distorted along the way.

Perhaps the best known example of this process concerns the work of Wilhelm Wundt. In response to the criticisms of Danziger and others, many textbook writers completely revised their accounts of Wundt. Schultz and Schultz (1987) wrote:

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.238)

The response has generally been to treat such cases as the exception rather than the rule. In a more detailed analysis of textbooks, I have argued that they are the rule rather than the exception (Brock, 1993). This situation exists because history and systems of psychology has traditionally been regarded as an area of pedagogy but not as an area of research.

Since the 1970s, specialists have gen-

erally ceased their criticism of 'textbook' or 'preface' history and prefer to get on with the business of serious research. Many now accept that myths and legends have a life of their own. A small minority have been enticed by the huge market in 'history and systems' textbooks and have begun to produce more scholarly texts. While these works are undoubtedly a vast improvement on most of the pedagogical literature that exists, they are still constrained by the limitations of the genre, which essentially involves compacting the entire history of psychology into the pages of one book. A basic canon of historical/philosophical research is that one should always go back to the original sources and no human being can claim to be familiar with the work of every writer on psychology from the Ancient Greeks, or even from the 17th century, to the present. Specialists who write in this genre are also forced to rely on secondary sources, and reliable material on many of these writers does not exist. There has simply not been enough research to provide anything like a comprehensive account of the history of psychology.

Meanwhile, the authors of the most popular textbooks are not specialists and continue to derive their accounts from the pedagogical literature. The psychologists who teach these courses are rarely specialists either and simply trust the information that they find in these texts. A major problem here is that, while history and philosophy of psychology has been growing as an area of research, the psychologists who specialize in this field are only a tiny percentage of the profession as a whole; whereas the 'history and systems' course has been institutionalized throughout the entire discipline.

## Hobby

If history and philosophy of psychology is to make a serious contribution to the intellectual life of psychology, then it must have a pedagogy that is informed by research. In this respect, it does not differ from any other area of psychology. A second aspect to the dialectic which is often overlooked is that the research must be informed by pedagogy. A small number of researchers in the field come from a background in history and philosophy of science, but these are few and far between. Departments of history and philosophy of science continue to be heavily focused on the natural sciences (Danziger, 1994). The vast majority of researchers are professional psychologists, but very few of them have any formal training in history and/or philosophy. The usual pattern is for psychologists to qualify in a more traditional area of psychology and then to turn to history and philosophy of psychology as a part-time hobby or as a second career. Some have acquired the

skills and background knowledge that are needed to make this switch, but many have not. In 1966, the Cambridge historian of science, Robert Young, described the field as 'an avocation with very uneven standards' (p.18). That remark is still true today. It is marked by very uneven standards precisely because it is an 'avocation'.

The only way to remedy this situation is to go beyond the brief introductory sketch that is offered in the first year of undergraduate degrees and to provide opportunities for advanced training and research. There has been little movement in this direction because it requires a willingness on the part of psychology departments to use their limited resources to support this kind of work.

Fortunately, there are some exceptions to the rule. In 1967, the Department of Psychology at the University of New Hampshire began to offer MA and PhD degrees in history and theory of psychology. The specialization still exists and many students have graduated since that time. A postgraduate option in history and theory of psychology was also established in the Department of Psychology at York University, Toronto in 1980. The option continues to thrive and currently has a dozen students at various stages of their MA and PhD work (Fancher, 1995). Similar opportunities for advanced training and research exist in psychology departments at universities in Brazil, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia and Spain (Brozek, 1983, 1994). Psychology departments at British universities have been slow to follow this trend but one suspects that such opportunities will eventually exist in the United Kingdom as well<sup>2</sup>.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This situation will change in the near future (Elizabeth Valentine, personal communication, 4 July 1997).
- <sup>2</sup> I write these words in the knowledge that attempts are currently being made to establish a centre for advanced training and research at a British university.

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