

Psychology in the modern sense

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Abstract

The article addresses Daniel Robinson's claim that the term, "modern psychology" is vague and imprecise. It points out that there is general agreement that the modern period of history begins no later than 1500 and that any psychology that existed after this date can be legitimately described as "modern." It also suggests that the qualifier, "modern" is superfluous since there was no psychology prior to 1500.

Keywords

Aristotle, Danziger, discipline, history, modern, Robinson, Wolff

I would like to address some of the issues raised by Daniel Robinson in his article, "Historiography in psychology: A note on ignorance" (2013). He begins with a quotation from Kurt Danziger's book, *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found Its Language*:

Because Aristotle was responsible for a book about "the soul," he was long credited with being the first to write systematically about psychology. Textbooks on the history of psychology commonly begin with the Greeks, ignoring the fact that the very notion of "psychology" in the modern sense, forming a distinct field of study, can hardly be said to have existed before the eighteenth century (1997, p. 21).

Robinson then questions the use of the term, "modern":

One does not speak of "modern rain" or "modern mountains," for their essential properties are not subject to change. To say that modern chemistry has certain debts to Renaissance alchemy is, among other things, to point to significant differences. Beyond these considerations, there is the phrase itself: "'Psychology' in the modern sense" suggests something definite though

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undefined. Just what is “psychology” in the modern sense? Moreover, just who in the 18th century might be said to have shared and promulgated that “modern” sense? (2013, p. 820)

It should be noted that Robinson has changed the terms of the debate. In speaking of “psychology,” we can refer to the discipline that goes under that name or its subject matter. I doubt that many people would subscribe to the view that the subject matter of psychology is as natural as rain or mountains but that is a side issue. The important point is that Danziger was applying the word, “modern” to psychology as a discipline. It is perfectly legitimate to question whether it is appropriate to apply the term in this way but that is not what Robinson is doing here. He is applying the term to something completely different, namely psychology’s subject matter, and questioning that application instead.

We do not speak of “modern rain” or “modern mountains” because “modern” is an historical concept and history is by definition (i.e. “his-story”) the study of human affairs. This is precisely what the history of psychology as a discipline is all about. It is the story of the various people who were involved in creating the discipline, the theories they employed, the experiments they carried out, the instruments they used, the institutions they founded and so on. We thus speak of “modern psychology” in the same way we speak of “modern history” and “modern languages.” The fact that we do not speak of “modern mountains” is irrelevant to the issue of whether it is appropriate to speak of “modern psychology,” just as the fact that we do not speak of “edible mountains” is irrelevant to the issue of whether it is appropriate to speak of “edible mushrooms.” All it shows is that the categories of language have their appropriate uses but they can be used inappropriately as well.

Robinson also complains that the term is imprecise:

So when does psychology “in the modern sense” begin? Does one know it when one sees it? Is it simply a matter of what happens to be taking place right now? How about tomorrow? Last week? The point should be obvious: “Modern” is neither a temporal nor a historical term of scholarship. (p. 823)

The last statement is quite simply false. Part of the entry for “history” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* reads as follows:

Western historical study traditionally divides history into *ancient*, *medieval*, and *modern history*. Although these have no definite chronological limits, ancient history is usually thought of as ending with the fall of the Western Roman Empire in a.d. 476, and medieval history, when considered as separate from modern history, with the discovery of the Americas in the late 15th cent. (History, n.d.)

History is not unique in this respect. Part of the entry for Modern English reads as follows:

“*Modern English* ... is the name given to the stage of English which follows *Middle English*. It is usually considered to start about 1450–1500” (Modern English, n.d.).

And this is the entry for modern Latin:

“Latin (in various forms) as developed after c1500, esp. as used in scientific discourse and terminology” (Modern Latin, n.d.).

Although no one can put a precise date on when the modern period begins, there is broad general agreement on what it means. It begins no earlier than 1450 and no later than 1500. The voyage of Columbus to the Americas in 1492 is often chosen as the start of the modern period because it is a memorable event that occurred between these two dates.

Having established that Danziger was referring to psychology as a discipline, and not some untouched aspect of nature whose essential properties are not subject to change, and having established that the modern period of European history begins somewhere between 1450 and 1500, we are now in a position to ask how these two things might be related.

Although textbooks on the history of psychology usually contain some material on the ancient and medieval periods, the start of psychology has traditionally been regarded as 1879. This is the year in which Wilhelm Wundt is said to have established his laboratory for experimental psychology at the University of Leipzig. This view was promoted by E. G. Boring whose textbook, *A History of Experimental Psychology* (1929, 1950) has been extraordinarily influential. When Nance (1962) conducted a survey of American colleges and universities in the early 1960s, no less than 75% of them reported using it as the textbook for their history of psychology course. The biggest organization of psychologists in the world, the American Psychological Association, subsequently declared 1979 to be the year of psychology's "centennial." The International Congress of Psychology is held every four years and so it was not possible to get the exact date right but the closest date to it was 1980 and the 22nd International Congress of Psychology was held in Leipzig in that year.

Boring's textbook was no longer regarded as an authoritative source by historians of psychology at that point and his account of Wundt had been criticized by writers like Blumenthal (1975) and Danziger (1979). The body of scholarship that Laurel Furumoto (1989) famously characterized as the "new" history of psychology was beginning to emerge. As Roger Smith (1988) noted around the same time, there was a new consensus over the origins of psychology whereby the field was defined in social terms. Rather than choosing some arbitrary date, the new historians took the start of psychology to be the appearance of an institutionalized discipline called "psychology" with all that this implies: university departments, textbooks, conferences, journals, etc. Thus the new consensus retained the view that psychology was a product of the second half of the 19th century but for different reasons. This view can be seen in the textbook by Graham Richards, *Putting Psychology in Its Place: Critical Historical Perspectives* (2010). The first chapter is a general introduction to the history of psychology, the second chapter is titled, "Before Psychology: 1600–1850" and the third chapter is devoted to the founding of psychology after 1850.

All this talk of Aristotle obscures the fact that some interesting scholarship on the origins of psychology has been published in recent years. It is the work of professional historians and it is based on an extensive knowledge of the primary sources in the languages in which they were written. Two important books on the subject were published almost simultaneously in French. They are *La naissance de la psychologie* [The birth of psychology] by Paul Mengal (2005) and *Les sciences de l'âme XVIe-XVIIIe siècle* [The sciences of the soul, 16th–18th centuries] by Fernando Vidal (2006). The latter has since been published in English translation under the title, *The Sciences of the Soul: The Early*

Modern Origins of Psychology (Vidal, 2011). Both these books take issue with the view that psychology is a product of the 19th century and suggest that it is older, though they disagree on when it began. Mengal dates it to the end of the 16th century and Vidal to the 18th century.

The earliest recorded use of the Latin word “psychologia” is in the 16th century. The earliest published work with the word in its title is *Psychologia: hoc est de Hominis Perfectione* [Psychology or On the Perfection of Man; 1590] by Rudolph Goclenius. It has little in common with psychology in the way that we now understand the term and deals with theological matters concerning the soul. Mengal wants to date the origins of psychology to this time. Vidal disagrees with this view because psychologists do not usually consider their discipline to be the study of the soul. He shows how the subject was transformed from the study of the soul to the study of the human mind in the 18th century and this is why he dates the origins of modern psychology to this time. According to Vidal, a precondition of this transformation was “the disintegration of the Aristotelian framework” (2011, p. 58) and the adoption of the mechanistic framework that was associated with René Descartes. In answer to the question, “just who in the 18th century might be said to have shared and promulgated that ‘modern’ sense?” (Robinson, 2013, p. 820), there are many contenders but one of the most important is Christian Wolff, whose works, *Psychologia empirica* (1732/1738) and *Psychologia rationalis* (1734/1737) did a great deal to promote this new study of the mind.

In his review of the books by Mengal and Vidal, Smith (2009) points out that their claims that psychology is older than the 19th century result from the term “discipline” being loosely defined. There was clearly a subject called “psychologia” from about 1590 onwards but it was scattered across many branches of knowledge—including logic, metaphysics, moral philosophy, anatomy, and theology—and this continued to be the case in the 18th century. This is why Vidal uses the word “sciences” in its plural form in the title of the book. If we understand “discipline” in terms of an institutionalized academic subject with a clearly defined group of specialists, we are back to the second half of the 19th century.

Psychologists are no different from other people in that they like to celebrate anniversaries and the year 1879 will no doubt continue to serve this social role. However, there was no official founding of psychology in the way that a new ship might be launched by breaking a bottle of champagne against the side or a new building might be opened by cutting some ribbons. It was a gradual process that occurred over several centuries. Where we place the start of the discipline will depend to a large extent on the criteria we are using. It might be the appearance of the subject “psychologia” in the 16th century. It could also be when this subject ceased to be the study of the soul and became the study of the mind in the 18th century or it could be when it became an institutionalized academic discipline in the 19th century. There are no hard and fast rules on where we should draw the line. Fortunately, none of this is of any relevance to the current debate since the period from 1500 to 1750 is usually described by historians as “early modern” (e.g. Smith, 2009). This is why the English version of Vidal’s book has the sub-title: *The Early Modern Origins of Psychology* (Vidal, 2011).

All this should go some way towards answering the question, “Just what is ‘psychology’ in the modern sense?” (Robinson, 2013, p. 820). The point was made at the

beginning that the categories of language can be used inappropriately and that “modern rain” and “modern mountains” are examples of inappropriate usage. Given that the discipline that we call “psychology” is no older than the 16th century, expressions like “Aristotle’s psychology” and “medieval psychology” are examples of inappropriate usage as well. The qualifier, “in the modern sense” is only needed because the term “psychology” has been used inappropriately by textbook writers over the years. In reality, it is a modern concept and it has no other sense.

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