

Subject, object and practice: Three fundamental concepts in Kurt Danziger's work

Adrian C. Brock

University College Dublin

Abstract: In an interview which I conducted with Kurt Danziger for the journal, *History of Psychology*, I pointed to his early interest in Wundt, his subsequent interest in the history of psychological methods and his more recent interest in the history of psychological categories and asked if there was a common thread in this work. This was his reply: "I have used three fundamental concepts to organize historical information. The three concepts are subject, object and practice. The conceptual content of psychology consists of psychological objects which are produced by certain psychological practices. However, those practices ... are always the practices of actual people, historical subjects. So there are three histories to pursue, the history of psychological objects, the history of psychological practices, and the history of the subjects involved with these objects and practices." The history of psychology to date has largely been a history of subjects and much of the originality in Danziger's work is due to its focus on objects and practices. The previous neglect of these topics was probably due to an erroneous belief that they are timeless. Now that it has been shown that they have a history, a shift in emphasis is required.

In 1987, Graham Richards published an article with the title, "Of what is history of psychology a history?" (Richards, 1987). It is a well-known article and those who are familiar with it will be aware that Richards was concerned with the issue of how historians of psychology should deal with the long period of history before psychology became a distinct field in the second half of the 19th century. Traditional histories of psychology have not hesitated to apply the label, "psychologist" retroactively to figures like Aristotle, even though there was no such profession at the time that he lived (e.g. Watson, 1963).

Richards' question can be posed in a different way: "Which aspects of psychology can and/or should be the focus of our histories?" To the best of my knowledge, this question has never been discussed. Most histories of psychology focus on psychologists, usually as individuals but sometimes as groups (e.g. the Würzburg School). They also tend to be centred on theories of psychology so that the field is often described as "history and systems of psychology" in the United States. Kurt Danziger's work does not follow this pattern. His early work in the history of psychology was focussed on Wilhelm Wundt but he then moved on to the history of psychological methods in the 1980s and his work since the 1990s has been centred on the history of psychological concepts and categories. In this paper, I will argue that these different topics go beyond matters of individual preference. They have implications for our understanding of psychology and, in particular, its relationship to history.

In an interview which I conducted with Danziger for the journal, *History of Psychology*, I pointed to the diversity of his work on the history of psychology and asked if there was a common thread running through this work. This was his reply:

I have used three fundamental concepts to organize historical information. The three concepts are subject, object and practice. The conceptual content of psychology consists of psychological objects which are produced by certain psychological practices. However, those practices don't just hang in the air. They are always the practices of actual people, historical subjects. So there are three histories to pursue,

the history of psychological objects, the history of psychological practices, and the history of the subjects involved with these objects and practices. I have concentrated on the first two of these histories but tried not to forget about the third (Brock, 2006; pp. 10-11).

Given that Danziger regards these three concepts as “fundamental”, they may be a useful way of approaching his work.

First I will deal with the notion of the subject. This word has been used in different ways by different people. Psychologists have traditionally used it to describe the people who participate in their research. The term when it is used in this sense has passive connotations. Danziger is not using the term in this way. He is using it to refer to the historical actors who we usually call "psychologists". Histories of psychology that are centred on psychologists need no introduction. They are probably the most common form. Danziger has been critical of the Foucauldian notion of a history without a subject. According to him, historical events do not simply occur. They require real people to make them happen (Danziger, 2010). At the same time, he has been equally critical of the histories of psychology that have been centred on individual psychologists:

My view is that historical biography of individual figures is a perfectly legitimate and interesting field in its own right, but I think it is a different field from history ... Historical biography works with certain categories for the explanation of individual human action and, quite appropriately, it can take those categories from contemporary theories of human action, motivation and so on. History, on the other hand, works at a trans-individual level. It works with trends, phenomena, forces that are not to be equated with individual action at all. It works with changing cultural patterns, social institutions, ideological formations, social rules, customs and power relationships. (Brock, 2006; p. 12).

In Danziger's view, scientific activity is irreducibly social. The view of the lone scientist confronting nature has always been a myth but it is particularly so in psychology where the object of investigation is not usually nature but other human beings (Danziger, 1993a). Thus Danziger's concept of the historical subject is social and it was so even when his work was centred on Wundt. One of his earliest works on the history of psychology is titled, "The social origins of modern psychology" and much of it is concerned with criticising previous work which had attributed the origins of modern psychology to Wundt (Danziger, 1979).

As Danziger indicated in the first quotation used above, his work has been mainly concerned not with subjects but with objects and practices and so any discussion of it must concentrate on those. I will deal with psychological practices first since Danziger's work on this subject pre-dates his work on psychological objects. I am referring here in particular to Danziger's work on the history of psychological methods. This was the main focus of his work in the 1980s and it culminated in what is probably his best-known book, *Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research* (Danziger, 1990).

Again, some clarification of Danziger's terminology is needed. He uses the term, "practice" differently from the way in which psychologists use the term. They might use it to refer to the application of psychology in the wider society, as in the example of a clinical psychologist who has a private practice. Danziger uses the term to refer to anything that psychologists do and consequently uses the term, "investigative practice" where most psychologists would use

the term, "methodology". Why the difference? Danziger sees the term, "methodology" as implying a set of impersonal technical procedures that are unrelated to human interests. "Investigative practice", on the other hand, includes the latter:

In terms of the way in which the concept had been used in the literature, the term, 'practice' or 'social practice' seemed to be a suitable one for describing activities that would have both a rational and a socially contingent aspect to them without separating them into two different compartments. So I prefer to use the term 'investigative practice' as incorporating both the quasi-rational rules that scientific activity follows, to a greater or lesser extent, and the social contingencies of scientific activity as well. It is an integrative concept (Brock, 2006; p.10).

Danziger has a longstanding interest in philosophy and has always insisted that historical work must be informed by philosophy (e.g. Danziger, 2003). A recurring theme in his work is positivist philosophy of science, largely because of the influence it has had on psychology. Many psychologists continue to subscribe to its tenets, even though its limitations have been widely recognised in history and philosophy of science for over 50 years.

One of the distinctions that positivist philosophy of science introduced was that of "the context of discovery" and "the context of justification" (Danziger, 1993a). It was accepted that scientific discoveries could be explained in social and historical terms. For example, the background to Darwin's theory of evolution was Britain's status as a naval power in the 19th century and its desire to produce accurate maps of the world. It is unlikely that Darwin would have had the opportunity to gather the evidence in support of his theory without this background. This is the context of discovery. According to positivism, the social and historical background of a scientific theory is irrelevant for the purpose of explaining why the theory is true. Scientific theories were thought to be based on a combination of empirical observation and deductive logic. Because of this, they transcended their time and place. This is why there was a need for a separate context of justification.

This distinction resulted in a sharp division of labour between historians and philosophers of science. The former were restricted to dealing with the peripheral aspects of science; for example, the biographies of individual scientists. It was the latter who were given the task of explaining scientific knowledge itself. However, there is little evidence from history to suggest that scientists at all times and in all places have followed a standard set of procedures. On the contrary, the methods of science have varied enormously not only across the different sciences but also within the individual sciences themselves.

A lack of consensus regarding the timeless methods of science resulted in a vacuum which historians filled with case studies of scientific research. No longer confined to the peripheral aspects of science, they sought to explain the adoption or rejection of scientific theories in social and historical terms. Theories that are now widely regarded as false were once widely accepted. Phrenology is a case in point. Conversely, theories that are now widely regarded as true, such as Darwin's theory of evolution, were not universally accepted and are still not universally accepted today. The acceptance or rejection of these theories can only make sense if it is viewed in social and historical terms.

Danziger has acknowledged the influence of work on the history and philosophy of science on his thought and his own work is a contribution to this literature (e.g. Danziger, 1990). In *Constructing the Subject*, he shows that the methods used in Wundt's laboratory were

different from the methods that are used in psychology today. One important difference is that they typically used one research participant rather than statistical averages based on results from large numbers of people. Ebbinghaus famously conducted his memory experiments on himself and the respective roles of experimenter and research participant arose for the simple reason that it was impractical to carry out the experimental tasks and record the results at the same time. Danziger also shows that the methods used in Wundt's laboratory were different from the methods that were being used by his contemporaries in England and France. Psychology had a number of different models from which to choose and so the question arises as to why it adopted a particular model and not some other. This question can only be answered with reference to human interests. Different methods are suited to producing different types of knowledge and the methods adopted will depend on the kind of knowledge that is sought. This takes us back to the distinction between "methodology" and "investigative practices" which Danziger makes.

Yet another untenable distinction that was made by positivism was that of facts based on observation and theories designed to explain those facts. This distinction is in accord with common sense and it is reflected in the use of terms like "data" and "findings" by psychologists. However, it should be recognised that all observation is theory-dependent. Psychologists who administer intelligence or personality tests do not describe their results in terms of pencil marks on a page. They refer to their results as "scores" and these scores are assumed to reflect some underlying characteristic of the person taking the test.

It is widely accepted that psychological theories vary historically. What are not thought to vary historically are the fundamental objects that these theories seek to explain, objects such as emotion, behaviour, personality, motivation, learning, attitudes etc. As Danziger has shown in his book, *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found Its Language*, these objects have a historical dimension. They are all of relatively recent origin and often replaced older terms like passion, conduct and character (Danziger, 1997).

Danziger traced his interest in this subject to his experience in Indonesia at the end of the 1950s where he encountered a local psychology that did not share the concepts and categories of Western psychology but had its own concepts and categories that were unknown to Western psychology. Unless one was willing to take the position that only English-speakers in the second half of the 20th century had developed a set of concepts and categories that were reflective of the natural order, and that every other linguistic community had got it wrong, the inescapable conclusion was that they are the products of a particular culture at a particular point in history. Also, as with his work on the history of psychological practices, Danziger's work on the history of psychological objects was in tune with developments that were taking place in history and philosophy of science. For example, Roger Smith had published a history of the concept of inhibition and Lorraine Daston published an edited volume on the history of scientific objects (Smith, 1992; Daston, 2000).

Although Danziger makes a conceptual distinction between subjects, objects and practices, he sees them all as closely intertwined. He is at pains to point out that psychological objects are not to be seen as merely discursive. They are intimately related to psychological practices which are carried out by real historical actors on real people:

I am always concerned to show how the emergence of psychological concepts and categories, and changes in them, are tied up with practices and changes in practice in the real world. One could mention the tie between the emergence of the category of

"motivation" and emerging managerial practices in the larger corporations in the early part of the 20th century. Another example would be the emergence of the "attitude" concept in its modern form. This changed quite fundamentally in its meaning as a result of marketing practices and both consumer and public opinion research (Brock, 2006; p. 10).

Further examples of this link can be found in Danziger's more recent book, *Marking the Mind: A History of Memory*, where he shows that, under different social and historical circumstances, different kinds of memory were valued and practices were developed for cultivating these different kinds. For example, the high value placed on literal accuracy in remembering (and the corresponding mnemonic techniques) is of relatively recent origin and coincides with the widespread availability of the printed text (Danziger, 2008).

Danziger has also related the concepts of subject, object and practice by adopting the distinction between "natural kinds" and "human kinds" that is associated with the Canadian philosopher, Ian Hacking (e.g. Danziger, 1999). This distinction rests on the understanding that our descriptions of the natural world do not affect the objects that they seek to describe but our descriptions of human beings have such effects. An interesting example is Charcot's theory of "grande hystérie". It was thought to have four stages and they could be easily observed among the patients in Charcot's care. It was, however, noticed by his contemporaries that this type of hysteria only existed in Paris and it even disappeared from there after Charcot retired (Fancher, 1996). The ways in which our classifications of people lead to changes in their behaviour has been described by Hacking (1995) as "looping effects" since the changes in their behaviour lead to further classification in a never-ending circle.

It is a common complaint among historians of psychology that their field is not taken seriously by psychologists (e.g. Chamberlin, 2010). Underlying this neglect are the assumptions of positivism which assumes that the practices and objects of psychology are timeless and universal. In producing work that is centred on psychological practices and objects, Danziger has moved history from the periphery of psychology to the centre-stage. These topics can, therefore, be recommended to historians of psychology on grounds of self-interest, quite apart from anything else.

REFERENCES

- Brock, A. C. (2006). Rediscovering the history of psychology: Interview with Kurt Danziger. *History of Psychology*, 2006, 9, 1-16.
- Chamberlin, J. (2010). Don't know much about history. *APA Monitor*, 41 (2), 44.
- Danziger, K. (1979). The social origins of modern psychology: Positivist sociology and the sociology of knowledge. In A. R. Buss (Ed.), *The social context of psychological theory: Towards a sociology of psychological knowledge* (pp. 27-45). New York: Irvington.
- Danziger, K. (1990). *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Danziger, K. (1993a). Psychological objects, practice, and history. *Annals of Theoretical Psychology*, 8, 15-47.

Danziger, K. (1993b). The social context of research practice and the priority of history. *Psychologie und Geschichte*, 4, 178-186.

Danziger, K. (1997). *Naming the mind: How psychology found its language*. London: Sage.

Danziger, K. (1999). Natural kinds, human kinds, and historicity. In W. Maiers et al (Eds.), *Challenges to theoretical psychology* (pp. 78-83). Toronto: Captus Press.

Danziger, K. (2003). Where theory, history and philosophy meet: The biography of psychological objects. In D. B. Hill & M. J. Kral (Eds.), *About psychology: Essays at the crossroads of history, theory and philosophy* (pp. 19-33). State University of New York Press.

Danziger, K. (2008). *Marking the mind: A history of memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Danziger, K. (2010). The historiography of psychological objects. Retrieved on 16 May 2011 from <http://www.kurtdanziger.com/Paper%207.htm>.

Daston, L. (Ed.) (2000). *Biographies of scientific objects*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Fancher, R. (1996). *Pioneers of psychology* (3rd ed). New York: Norton.

Hacking, I. (1995). The looping effects of human kinds. In D. Sperber, D. Premack, & A.J. Premack (eds.), *Causal cognition: A multi-disciplinary approach* (pp. 351-382). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Richards, G. (1987). Of what is history of psychology a history? *British Journal for History of Science*, 20, 201-211.

Smith, R. (1992). *Inhibition: History and meaning in the sciences of the mind and brain*. London: Free Association Books.

Watson, R. I. (1963). *The great psychologists from Aristotle to Freud*. Philadelphia: Lippincott.