

Hyper-Loops or Ten Minute Musings from the Rocking Chair

Kurt Danziger's Remarks on receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award from the section for History and Philosophy of Psychology at the annual meeting of the Canadian Psychological Association, Toronto, June 3, 2011.

First, let me express my appreciation for an award that is particularly dear to me, coming as it does from colleagues with whom I have shared so many interests and concerns over so many years. Unfortunately, the physical limitations of old age prevent my active participation in gatherings, such as today's, at which these interests and concerns continue to be discussed. But that does not mean that they are no longer important to me, and I thought I might return to your midst in spirit by using this opportunity to share some musings about a rather significant problem that has been with us since the formation of this section. It is the problem of our somewhat precarious existence within the discipline of psychology.

I am sure nobody here needs convincing that there is indeed a problem. Everyone will have encountered colleagues who are at least puzzled by our claim to have a legitimate home within the discipline, not to mention other colleagues who explicitly reject this claim. Many of us have encountered pressures to restrict our presence, whether in the area of teaching or research. Some of us, including myself, have discussed the problem in print, but there has been no resolution; from what I hear, the problem seems to have become more acute over the years.

Our legitimacy within the discipline may be questioned for various reasons, but here I want to concentrate on one reason that is very frequently encountered, namely, the apparent irrelevance of our work for contemporary psychology, for the questions psychologists are interested in and for their day to day work in grappling with these questions. On our part, the natural response has been to point to the historical continuities that do in fact link the present to the past.

But we would not be able to construct such a response if our historical studies were not informed by certain metahistorical perspectives. Pure history can only tell us what happened once upon a time. To point out a link between past and present you have to adopt a perspective that incorporates both the time of the past and the time of the present. It is possible to do this quite superficially, for example on the basis of a continuity of place. You can reveal perhaps that "William James slept here". Unfortunately, some of what passes for history of psychology has not gone too far beyond this level.

More interesting links between past and present require a more significant perspective than continuity of place. One example would be a metaphysical perspective that posits transhistorical entities, such as ideas, which persist over time. There are other ways of constructing interesting historical relationships, but they all require the adoption of some philosophical, or at least theoretical, perspective. That is a major reason for linking history with theory or philosophy on a pedagogical and an institutional level. It is what many of us had in mind when we set about establishing the programme at York and also

this section of CPA. The "and" that occurs between history and either theory or philosophy was not meant to indicate a merely additive connection but one that was intrinsic.

But we have to recognize that when we pursue these kinds of studies within a department of psychology we open up a pretty deep gap between what we do and what our colleagues normally do. That gap has to do with the objects of our scientific attention. What most of us share with our mainstream colleagues is a commitment to the subject-object distinction that is foundational for both the natural and the human sciences. The whole enterprise depends on the distinction between a group of subjects, who are specially qualified experts, and a set of separate objects investigated by those experts. The objects range from physical particles to the movement of human populations, but the distinction between physicists, demographers, or psychologists and the objects of their investigation remains fundamental.

The objects investigated by mainstream psychologists are psychological reactions and attributes of, usually human, individuals who may be students, members of clinical populations, children or what have you, but in any case, not psychologists. Contrast this with the situation of those who specialize in the history/theory of psychology. The objects of their studies are usually other psychologists and the products of their work rather than members of the lay public. This rather fundamental divergence in our objects of study may be sufficient to lead to a certain estrangement.

Mainstream psychologists are not accustomed to finding themselves in the position of objects for scholarly investigation – they expect to be the subjects that guide such investigations. True, in most cases contemporary psychologists become the objects of scientific regard only by implication: the direct objects of investigation are their forebears, the people who founded their fields and established traditions of work that have survived. But when your clan history becomes an object of study your own historical identity is no longer something to be proudly taken for granted but an object vulnerably exposed to someone else's analytical dissection. This is not a comfortable situation.

And that brings me to the crux of my argument. In the human sciences subjects, that is investigators, and their human objects are linked by loops of mutual influence that are unknown in the natural sciences. This can happen on an interpersonal level, when it becomes part of the social psychology of psychological experiments, or it can happen on an institutional or sub-cultural level, as in the case of a sub-discipline that potentially takes the entire discipline as its object. We know that in experimental situations we encounter both acquiescence and resistance (as in cheating or non-cooperation) among those who are objects of investigation. But of course experimenters also modify their approach in response to their scientific objects, or as we misleadingly call them, their experimental subjects. That is why we have pilot studies.

Now how do these loops of mutual influence play out on the level of disciplinary culture? One big difference between the two levels involves a reversal in the relative power of

subjects and objects. In experimental situations those who conduct the investigation have considerable power, those who are the objects of investigation much less. By contrast, those who wish to take aspects of disciplinary culture as their object of study have little power in relation to representatives of that culture. Among the latter, reactions of acquiescence are therefore less likely than those of resistance. These can take the form of challenges to the legitimacy of sub-disciplines such as ours, disagreements about sub-disciplinary boundaries, and so on.

How do we meet these challenges? In the past, I have suggested we rely on the fact that psychology is not in fact a unified discipline but rather a fairly loose set of rather diverse sub-disciplines, some of which may even see us as an ally. Today I want to allude very briefly to another aspect of this problem, the pedagogical aspect.

Traditionally, historical perspectives were permitted a certain role in the psychological training curriculum, even when research founded on such perspectives was denied any real legitimacy within the discipline. Our teaching role was perhaps the source of what little strength our voice did have. I know that this tradition is fading, but before all trace of it is lost, it might be a good idea to pay more attention to pedagogical issues in our fight for survival.

When I say "pedagogical issues" I am not only thinking of classroom teaching but broader issues involving the formation of professional identities in psychology both now and in the past. Here we might well benefit from some recent trends in science studies that have switched from questions about the production of scientific knowledge to questions about the production of scientists. How are skills transferred from one generation of experts to another? How are professional norms internalized? What can we learn from an examination of divergent pedagogical cultures? What do changes in the style and content of textbooks tell us about their users? These kinds of question have not received the attention they deserve in studies of the history and theory of psychology.

Quite apart from their intrinsic interest and importance, I could imagine that such studies might help to build bridges between historians and practitioners in relatively new ways. For pedagogical practice in the training of psychologists depends much less on precise scientific knowledge than on historical experience, theoretical perspective and normative preference. And those are issues for which the expertise of members of this section can hardly be regarded as irrelevant.