

Kurt Danziger at York University

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Abstract: Kurt Danziger's career and accomplishments at York University are described from my personal standpoint as his colleague and friend for more than 40 years. Kurt was hired in 1965 as only the second Full Professor in York's fledgling Psychology Department, and served as its Acting Chair during its early years of enormous growth as it became the largest in Canada. Among the new appointments during his tenure were several scholars with strong secondary or even primary interests in historical/theoretical issues in psychology, and as a consequence York was unusual in permitting occasional theses and dissertation in those areas. After an official assessment by the Ontario government singled out York's unusual strength in these fields in the late 1970s, Kurt and David Bakan, supported by several younger faculty, took the lead in creating a new program for graduate study in the History and Theory of Psychology. This program has attracted outstanding students, who to date have completed more than 50 theses and dissertations, many of which Kurt supervised. Even in his "retirement" Kurt continued to contribute strongly to the program and to the field, especially through seminal new writings including *Naming the Mind* and *Marking the Mind*.

It's hard for me to believe that 41 years have passed since I became Kurt Danziger's colleague in the Psychology Department of York University, and almost 31 years since I followed his lead and helped establish York's unique graduate program in History and Theory of Psychology. In a minute I will indulge in some personal reminiscences about these events – but first should present some “prehistory” about Kurt at York before I arrived there.

When Kurt was lured from South Africa to York in 1965 (which is a story in itself), the university was only five years old and had just moved to its new and permanent location in the northern suburbs of Toronto. Kurt was just the second full professor in a Psychology Department that then had fifteen members. Kurt was promptly named the Department Chair, and between 1966 and 1968 he presided over a period of explosive growth as the faculty increased to 37 members and was well on its way to becoming the largest in Canada. When I arrived as a young Assistant Professor in 1970, the number had increased to 53.

Thanks in large part to the Danziger influence, York psychology from its earliest days showed a tolerance for approaches to psychology that lay to some degree outside of the North American "mainstream." It took me a little while to realize this after I arrived in 1970. My job talk had focused on my empirical research in the relatively mainstream areas of person perception and dream recall, and for some time I thought it wise to play down my stronger interests which lay in the historical investigation of psychoanalysis. It turned out that this caution was unnecessary, however, because among my senior colleagues whom Kurt had helped to bring to York were several kindred spirits.

David Bakan had recently published *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (Bakan, 1965), as well as an iconoclastic critique of mainstream experimental psychology in *On Method: Toward a Reconstruction of Psychological Investigation* (Bakan, 1967). The new Department Chair Malcolm Westcott was conducting qualitative investigations of intuition and freedom, and the Clinic Director Neil Agnew had joined with his younger colleague Sandra Pyke in writing incisively on what they called "The Science Game" (Agnew and Pyke, 1969). Shortly after I arrived Morris Eagle and Irwin Silverman came to the department in senior positions, with broadly theoretical/historical interests in psychoanalysis and social psychology, respectively. Among my closer contemporaries, Peter Kaiser and Hiroshi Ono had strong interests in the historical background of visual sensation and perception, Michael Cowles had begun teaching statistics from an historical perspective, and Fred Weizmann was nurturing interests in the history of developmental psychology.

So in general, here were a substantial group of colleagues who were open to historical, theoretical and non-quantitative approaches to psychology. One indicator of this, which at first surprised me greatly, was that occasionally students were even permitted to write historical/theoretical theses. Thus to my surprise and delight my own historical interests were not just tolerated but actively encouraged throughout the early and mid 1970s as I completed my book on the development of Freud's thought (Fancher, 1973) and began research for the first edition of *Pioneers of Psychology* (Fancher, 1979).

It was perhaps one disadvantage of being in a very large department, as well as testimony to the fact that I can be a slow learner, that during these early years I had little appreciation or knowledge of Kurt Danziger's role in creating this supportive atmosphere, or even of his own developing interests in the history of psychology. He was at this time just a nodding acquaintance, whom I thought of primarily as a distinguished social and developmental psychologist whose book on socialization I had used in my Introductory Psychology classes. Even after he sent me a gracious note acknowledging my Freud book in 1973, I blush to report that I completed most of the first edition of my *Pioneers of Psychology* without realizing that he was concurrently carrying out his own monumental reanalyses of Wilhelm Wundt.

By the late 1970s I learned better and got to know Kurt as a good friend as well as colleague. Coincidentally, at about that same time the Ontario Council on Graduate Instruction conducted a formal appraisal of our graduate program, which was then being directed by Fred Weizmann. Somewhat to our surprise but completely to our delight, the Council's final report commented explicitly and positively on York's unusual strength and productivity in historical and theoretical approaches to psychology. The Council's report stimulated Kurt, with the enthusiastic support of the new Graduate Director Michael Cowles, to explore the possibility of establishing History and Theory of Psychology as an explicit new specialization area in our graduate program. This would enable us to formally advertise our expertise, and to explicitly solicit outstanding new students in the field to conduct PhD as well as master's research.

A series of organizational meetings were held in the fall of 1980, attended by 15 faculty members. In the remarkably short time of two months a consensus was reached to establish "History and Theory" as a new graduate specialty area joining York's more traditional ones in clinical and counselling, clinical-developmental, general experimental, social-personality, and developmental psychology. Because of the then-current governmental red tape, it would have to be called an "Option" instead of an "Area," but in all essentials it would be a full partner with the others. A curriculum was drawn up and Kurt Danziger became the new area's first Coordinator, joined by David Bakan and myself as "primary" faculty members, and with the dozen others – prominently including Mac Westcott and Fred Weizmann – declaring formal but secondary affiliations.

(I should mention parenthetically that at about this same time, Kurt Danziger became an organizational pioneer in yet another way. He sent out a questionnaire to representative members of the Canadian Psychological Association, inquiring about interest in creating a section devoted to the history and philosophy of psychology. The many positive responses he received provided the direct stimulus for the creation of the CPA's Section 25, whose beneficiaries we all are today.)

York's new "option" accepted its first class of students in the fall of 1981, and ever since has been blessed with a small but steady flow of outstanding candidates from around the world. Their research over the years has been diverse and of high quality, and at York they have won competitive fellowships, teaching appointments, and thesis and dissertation awards out of proportion to their numbers. I can't do justice to all of these fine students in my allotted time today, but to give you an idea of their quality and scope will briefly describe the first few PhD dissertations completed by them.

The first was by my co-panelist today Richard Walsh-Bowers, who wrote a dissertation supervised by Kurt entitled "A Social History of the Research Relationship in Community Psychology." I will say no more about Richard except that obviously he turned out well as the first product of our program. Next to finish was Dan Burston with "Fromm's Legacy: A Critical Appreciation." This became the basis of his definitive biography, *The Legacy of Erich Fromm*, and Dan has gone on to a distinguished career at Duquesne University. Following closely after Dan was Tory Hoff, with a beautifully illustrated work entitled "Theories of Body Expression in the Historical Relationship to Psychological Concepts." It is unfortunate that publishers began slashing their budgets for illustration at just about the time Tory completed this, so it remains as an underappreciated gem in the York Library. Next on the list comes Jim Parker, whose study of the development of American Personality Psychology, "In Search of the Person," is still widely cited today as a major source. As you may know, Jim has gone on to a truly major research and administrative career at Trent University. Number six on the list is none other than our symposium organizer Adrian Brock with his dissertation "Karl Böhler: His Life and Work." I will only say today that Adrian is another one of our students who has turned out pretty well....

Our next dissertation was Sheri Winestock's "William Emet Blatz: The Development of a Developmental Psychologist," which shed some fascinating light on the history of the

Psychology Department at our sister institution the University of Toronto. Soon after completing her dissertation Sheri's talents were redirected towards competitive bridge playing and teaching as she has partnered with the current World Champion of Bridge, Fred Gitelman. The three next names will already be familiar to many of you. Ian Nicholson's dissertation on Gordon Allport's early career became the basis of his wonderful book, *Inventing Personality: Gordon Allport and the Science of Selfhood*. Geoff Bunn examined the history of polygraphic lie detection in his fascinating dissertation entitled "The Hazards of the Will to Truth," and Scott Greer provided a social constructionist perspective on the history and measurement of the concept of the self, in the imaginatively titled "Making Sense out of the Self." As most of you will know, Ian and Scott have played major roles in this History and Philosophy Section of CPA, and Geoff is the current Chair of its counterpart in the British Psychological Society.

Throughout the program's formative years Kurt and Flora Danziger graciously hosted regular monthly sessions at their home where history/theory students and faculty gathered over wine and cheese to discuss their work and socialize. In an extremely large department where it is often easy to get lost in the crowd, this helped to provide a welcoming oasis for our students, who developed an unusually strong sense of camaraderie and group identity. This tradition of regular gatherings and group solidarity has been maintained by the extremely able group of younger faculty who have come to York over the past two decades: Chris Green, Thomas Teo, Alexandra Rutherford (herself one of the distinguished products of our program), and Mike Petit. Considered collectively along with the steady replenishment of our population of gifted students, all of these represent a marvellous legacy of Kurt Danziger.

I want to close with just a few words about Kurt as a scholar. He is a few years ahead of me in the retirement game, and as I get further into it myself he remains a marvellous inspiration and model to try to follow as best I can. For all of the value and impact of his earlier work, I believe his scholarship has continued to mellow like a fine wine and his post-retirement works are my personal favorites. When *Naming the Mind* was published I was still a slow learner and after a quick skim and casually put it aside until one of my students gave such a glowing class report on it that I knew I just *had* to read it carefully. After doing so I told Kurt that it put me in mind of T. H. Huxley's famous reaction upon reading Darwin's *Origin of Species* when he declared: "How stupid of me not to have thought of that!" In its straightforward and eminently fair manner, this book makes crystal clear the historically, socially and culturally constructed nature of our most popular psychological categories. Even though this was an "obvious" point that others might have suggested, no one I knew of had previously made it so clearly and irrefutably. Kurt's more recent work on memory, summarized in his book *Marking the Mind* (2008), shows this same deft quality as it analyzes memory both as a historical psychological subject and as a metaphor for the study of history itself. In this late work Kurt displays an almost uncanny ability to reveal deep insights, but with a light touch. Like my favorite musical virtuosi, he is able to do something that is extremely hard, while making it look easy and natural.

My time is just about up, so in conclusion let me simply say, Happy Birthday, Kurt. And thank you for being an innovator of programs and institutions from which I have benefitted greatly, an inspiration and role model as a scholar, and above all a great colleague and friend.

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