Psychology’s History for the Postmodern Student

A review of

A History of Modern Psychology in Context
by Wade E. Pickren and Alexandra Rutherford

Reviewed by
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The members of the generation of psychologists for whom a history of psychology text meant E. G. Boring’s History of Experimental Psychology have retired or are about to do so. Today the instructor of the history course is faced with choosing from many texts. The selection of a textbook for the history course is particularly important for two major reasons.

First, the history course, often seen as the capstone of the major (Benjamin, 2010), has to pull together the threads of a discipline our students frequently view as overspecialized, overly technical, and fractionated. Second, the course has to attend to issues of general history, philosophy of science, and historiography, but it is frequently taught by amateurs; few teachers of the history of psychology course have formal training in the history or philosophy of psychology (Fuchs & Viney, 2002).
The Ideal History Textbook

The teacher of the history course is probably underprepared to teach an important course to students who are often inclined to believe that the history of anything is boring and who have likely forgotten all the brief histories they heard in their earlier courses (Henderson, 2006). So what would an ideal history of psychology textbook do to help?

Great Debates

The ideal textbook would capture the substance of the larger debates that have defined and perplexed the field. Discussions of Baldwin and Titchener on the proper subject matter of psychology, Hall and Thorndike on the appropriate study of children, Hull and Tolman on the nature of learning, Chomsky and Skinner on language, Garcia and the establishment on equipotentiality, and the pros and cons of the Rorschach and lie detectors would provide forums for helping students understand the issues that have guided psychology’s history.

Psychologists Doing Psychology

Consistent with the stress in the “new history” on everyday life, the ideal history text would provide a sense of how doing psychology has changed over time. Where did Binet get his tasks? Why would Watson not get IRB approval for his dissertation today? Where did Skinner get his pigeons? What did Harlow’s Goon Park look like? Why did most psychology departments once own a big box called a tachistoscope?

The Big Picture

The ideal textbook would cast the work of psychologists in the broad context of a philosophy and history of science. This context would help explain why theories originate, change, and disappear. Why are there so many theories in psychology? How do the many theories relate to and differ from each other? A broad philosophy of science would help give students tools for thinking about where psychology might be expected to go in the future. A broad history of science would provide a historical and social context that correlates trends and events or even begin to provide causal explanations. Why did behaviorism capture the imagination of American psychologists but not of European psychologists? Why did psychology blossom in so many ways in the 1950s and 1960s?
The Context of Time

Students reading the ideal textbook would get something they are almost always in need of: a functional mental time line that includes meaningful landmarks. A mental time line would help students who do not remember when the United States was not at war in the Middle East understand why the measurement of intelligence became an issue in the 1920s or why clinical psychology grew rapidly in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Vividness

The ideal history textbook would depict the people and events of the history of psychology in interesting ways. Characterizations of people would be vivid even if not central to the substantive development of the field. Images of Titchener lecturing in his robe or playing tennis with graduate students tell nothing of his psychology or how he distorted Wundt, but they do humanize him and make him and his ideas memorable. Events would be presented so that they are self-evidently important or at least contributory.

Historiography

Finally, the ideal history of psychology text would convey enough about historiography that readers would get a sense of how historical scholarship is done in psychology. They would get to see how the knowledge base has been constructed and how they might do historical scholarship of their own. Students would see the history of psychology as an active endeavor, not just the recounting of long known events.

A Postmodern Textbook

Meeting all of these criteria is too much to ask of any textbook. Textbook authors need to be selective about what they cover, and instructors need to supplement the textbook with readings and activities that round out a course. In *A History of Modern Psychology in Context* Pickren and Rutherford are selective. In their introduction, they explain that their main emphases are a concern for the “context” in the title of their book and the provision of an “inclusive” history of psychology.

Pickren and Rutherford want to provide a history of psychology that describes how culture, race, ethnicity, and gender have influenced psychology’s development within social, political, and economic contexts. They intend to provide a postmodern, social constructionist treatment of psychology’s history that is accessible to undergraduate students.
The results are mixed. The last four chapters on post-World War II psychology well serve the vividness and context criteria. One of these chapters provides a sampling of developments in psychology in other countries, including India, the Philippines, and Latin America. While these presentations are sketchy, their very inclusion is novel and attention getting.

Although a self-conscious attempt to attend to the role of women in psychology is common in modern history textbooks, Pickren and Rutherford provide more material than the usual. In addition to a chapter on the feminist critique of American psychology, nine of the 13 chapter sidebars are on the contributions of female psychologists. With so much emphasis on women’s roles, students born in the 1990s may wonder what the feminists were critiquing. Another novel chapter discusses late 20th-century psychology in terms of the struggles of minorities and the tension between scientists and practitioners.

In a number of other ways Pickren and Rutherford do a good job of providing an original description of the field’s social and historical contexts. They spend an unusual amount of space describing how various organizations of psychologists have developed and on influential meetings of psychologists (the reader could easily infer that what psychologists do is to go to meetings). Every chapter begins with its own timeline listing numerous psychologists, founding dates for organizations, book titles, and a few major world events. Some aspects of the book are quite student friendly. It is relatively brief; the authors say what they are going to say, say it, and say what they said. Many students will appreciate the stress on clinical and humanistic psychology.

Other criteria of the ideal textbook are not met or not addressed. Perhaps the most significant weakness is that the book does not provide an effective overarching perspective on the development of psychology. The authors appear to assume a Kuhnian philosophy of science, but Kuhn is not in the index and there is no discussion of any post-Kuhnian philosophy of science. The author’s use of the distinction between “Big P” Psychology (referring to the formal discipline) and “Little p” psychology (psychological subject matter and everyday people’s psychology) confuses more than it illuminates.

The use of the social constructionist and new history perspectives is undermined by several features of the text. For example, the time lines are packed with the names of eminent psychologists and their books, and most of the pictures in the book are static portraits of these people. Some of the general social history–psychology connections the authors make are weak, and some important ones are hardly mentioned. For example, arguably the most important contextual factor in the development of psychology as a discipline has been change in countries’ systems of higher education and their funding. That is certainly true for the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. Yet the proximal role of higher education is barely mentioned.

Finally, a pedagogical weakness of Pickren and Rutherford’s book is that the authors’ explanations frequently are too terse or assume knowledge that the typical undergraduate psychology major will not have. For example, the question of whether there was a
behaviorist revolution is raised without historical or philosophical context. Indigenization is defined with reference to a bipolarized Cold War and emergent postcolonial nation building—two references many students will not recall. The authors jump from Rosenzweig’s rat enrichment studies to the origins of Head Start, a leap the historians of Head Start would surely find jarring.

No textbook of reasonable length can meet all the criteria I set out for the ideal. Some potential adopters of Pickren and Rutherford’s book will wish for more attention to the philosophy of science, to psychology’s great debates, to the regular activities of the researcher and clinician, or to historiography. Other potential adopters will be swayed by the broadening effect of the final four chapters. Pickren and Rutherford do a credible job of providing an alternative version of our discipline’s history that students and professors ready for a postmodern textbook will find novel and instructive.

References

