

Chapter 13

Commentary 2: The Past and the History of Psychology

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The chapters for this volume have provided many arguments for the value of analyzing the history of psychology, as well as focusing on several historical contributions that are relevant to the present state of the discipline. Taken as a whole, the volume shows that the building of the future of the discipline can only be achieved through the valorization and interpretation of its past.

I am not a historian of the discipline; my competence on past psychological theories is unsystematic and instrumental. Thus, the considerations I can provide come from the standpoint of someone who is a user rather than a producer of historical knowledge. Such considerations are aimed at supporting the basic thesis that the understanding of its past is essential for the future of psychology. Accordingly, I try to highlight how the awareness of the history of the discipline may guide and support efforts to go beyond the cul-de-sac in which contemporary psychology is entrapped. More specifically, I will focus on two fundamental issues that are both blind spots in contemporary psychology and, as such, act as constraints on psychology's ability to develop and innovate. I view them as "fundamental" because they are the foundation of research and theory-building practices, being assumptions that act as the meta-code to define the canons governing the way theories are elaborated (see Valsiner and Brinkmann's chapter in this volume). I will briefly outline each issue to show that they are not new at all but have already been raised and addressed in the past of our discipline. Such earlier efforts can teach a lot to those who are unsatisfied with the morass in which psychology is bogged down nowadays.

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13.1 The Unit of Knowledge

The first issue I will mention concerns what could be called the *unit of knowledge*. I will argue that a historical awareness about its past is needed to enable contemporary psychology to recognize the fragmentation into which it has fallen and how such fragmentation hampers the chances of scientific development.

Contemporary psychology has a huge array of targets, which it tries hard to increase. Any phenomenon that has an impact on society and can be associated with the experience and/or the behavior of one or a set of individuals is eligible to become a target of psychological science—from psychopathology to learning, from economic choice to consumer behavior, from sexual orientation to hate crimes, and so on and so forth. In some cases, psychological targets are regarded as the effect of other circumstances and processes (e.g., the emotional reaction to catastrophes or the psychological status associated with somatic diseases); in other cases the target is seen as the determinant of a significant social behavior (e.g., the psychological factors underpinning bullying or personality traits associated with compliance). However, the set of targets is virtually infinite, as is the range of human facts that can be represented in terms of individual and social behavior/experience and therefore assumed to be associated with and/or the expression of mental functioning and therefore part of psychological science (Salvatore, 2006, 2016).

One might think that a psychologist should be happy with the extraordinary extension of the domains of psychological science—the whole world of human affairs gives psychology untold chances to carry out its activity. Yet things are not necessarily as they seem. Indeed, there is no reason to trust the appropriateness of the way contemporary psychology chooses its targets. The reason for this is as obvious as the fact that it seems to have been forgotten is astonishing: a given science needs to define the target phenomenon (*explanandum*) in a way which is consistent with own explicative categories (*explanans*) (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2014). For instance, physics does not consider the falling of stones as its phenomenon simply because its explicative categories (in this case, those expressed in gravitational theory) do not concern the falling of stones in themselves but falling bodies as a general class, defined by the fact of being the set of elements that have mass, namely, that are subject to the pull of gravity.

Psychology seems to be blind to such a very elementary methodological tenet, the requirement of consistency between *explanans* and *explanandum*. And thus one has a lot of theories focused on specific daily life phenomena. Some of these targets have even acquired the status of subdisciplinary domains within the realm of psychology, for example, health psychology, sport psychology, school psychology, and work psychology. In these and in many other cases (e.g., bullying, consumer behavior, moral behavior), a community of researchers and professionals is engaged in developing modalities of understanding and addressing the target phenomenon as if the latter responded to modalities of functioning that are specific for the phenomenon, the expression of its specific properties. To come back to the analogy with physics, it is as if the latter had developed the theory of falling stones, the

theory of the falling Ming vase, the theory of falling people who intend to kill themselves by jumping out of windows, and so forth.

The critical issue here is not this choice in itself but the lack of any conceptual analysis of the condition of its validity. In point of fact, especially when the target of psychological science is a phenomenon defined within and in terms of sociohistorical circumstances, to take it as a valid scientific object is at best incautious: by definition, the sociohistorical dynamics that shape this kind of phenomenon have nothing to do with the theoretical requirements that scientific objects must comply with. As a result, psychological investigation remains entrapped within the logic of the black box. It is able to identify covariation between the target phenomenon and alleged explicative factors, yet it is unable to model the mechanism underpinning the covariation, that is, what happens within the black box between the input and the output.

Take, for instance, psychotherapy. It is a social practice, a set of events and acts whose boundary depends on historical and institutional contingencies rather than axiomatic statements. Yet, despite this, psychotherapy has been taken for granted as a scientific object; accordingly, over the last four decades, an enormous number of studies have been carried out with the aim of understanding how the clinical exchange works. No attention has been paid to the very basic theoretical question of whether psychotherapy is a valid unit of psychological scientific knowledge. It has not been asked if the notion of psychotherapy identifies a class of phenomena that (a) have a specific way of working (i.e., that work in terms of characteristics due to properties and aspects immanent to this class of phenomena) and (b) depend on psychological processes (namely, a class of phenomena that are addressable by psychological *explananda*) (Salvatore, 2011). My thesis is that such a lack of attention is the main reason for the difficulty of research in the field, which has been able to collect a huge amount of factors recognized to play a role in the clinical exchange, yet fails to build a model of the psychotherapy process as such (Salvatore & Gennaro, 2015).

Needless to say, the point is not to abandon psychotherapy as one of the interests of psychology. On the contrary, it is precisely to pursue this interest that one should consider the possibility that the phenomenology of psychotherapy reflects a dynamics not specific to psychotherapy, not immanent in the characteristics of such a social practice, but dependent on a more general way of working of the human mind. In sum, for the sake of a deeper understanding of psychotherapy, one should consider the possibility that psychotherapy is for psychology what a Ming vase is for physics, a particular specimen of a more general abstract class, the peculiar properties of which (e.g., shape, value, weight) are not relevant.

These considerations seem to go somewhat against the mainstream and may even seem paradoxical. Here the history of the discipline comes to our aid. Indeed, a quick glance at the past of psychology is enough to show how different things are. Theories elaborated by gestalt psychologists and by Piaget, Freud, and Vygotsky are all very well-known examples of concept building focused on abstract objects. Notions like gestalt, equilibration, primary process, and mediation, just to mention a few, do not refer to specific phenomena but are meta-empirical, namely, they

concern more abstract and general dynamics, and as such they can be used for understanding a plurality of phenomena. This is even programmatic for Piaget, who considered child development a local phenomenon whose investigation should lead to the building of a general theory of knowledge.

13.2 The Fundamental Aim of Psychology

The second issue I intend to outline briefly concerns the basic purpose of the discipline. The question is: “Psychology, what for?” As in the previous discussion, I argue that only a historical understanding of the past of the discipline may enable contemporary psychology to provide the right answers to this question.

In the context of contemporary psychology, this question has been replaced by a collection of local and middle range goals, each of them concerning the analysis of a certain phenomenon, the understanding of which is assumed to be an end in itself. Somehow, contemporary psychology has forgotten the “for”: the question it focuses on is “what,” rather than “what for.” For a large segment of the discipline, forgetting the “for” is associated with the taken-for-granted assumption of the centrality of human experience, intended both as the object and the “stuff” of the investigation. Participants are interviewed about their ideas and experiences and asked to fill out questionnaires and to respond to self-report measurements concerning attitudes, judgments, opinions, and so forth. Broadly speaking, those efforts are aimed at understanding the subjects’ inner states (what people think and feel), how such subjective worlds are organized (how mental contents are linked to each other), and how they trigger/motivate behavior. Needless to say, there are very large differences among these efforts; yet most of them share a very basic assumption: they consider the content of the experience as the primitive notion on which psychology has to be grounded.

As in the previous discussion, the critical point is not the approach in itself but the lack of any reflective attitude on the taken-for-granted assumption grounding its conceptual validity and therefore its theoretical limitations. In other words, the issue that needs to be raised is whether the aim of psychology can overlap the aim of naive psychology, namely, the human tendency to understand others’ behavior in terms of mental states acting on and acted out by outer/inner circumstances (e.g., understanding in terms like she acted Y because she felt X, and she felt X because this is her typical reaction to Z).

Recently, I argued for a negative answer to this question (Salvatore, 2016). Psychology must not be confined within the domain of experience, because in so doing, it would leave out the basic aim of modeling the very emergence of inner states, that is, the issue of the micro-genetic dynamics of the constitution of experience. Human beings experience their inner state; they are aware and represent themselves as thinking, feeling, reasoning, perceiving, and imagining. They consider such contents as the experience of their inner world, and as such they attribute ontological substance to the latter, regardless of the level of their referentiality. I think of a flying horse, I know that horses do not fly, yet I also know that the thought/thinking of the

flying horse is something real, something that belongs to me, and it is something of mine. Contemporary psychology seems to start from this point, as if the attributions of ontological substance were a state of fact and void of scientific interest and therefore that the scientific enterprise could start only after such a point and be aimed only at understanding the vicissitudes of such content. To be precise, psychology expresses a certain interest in the ontological attribution, but this is limited to circumstances when the content of the experience is void/has a weak level of referentiality, for instance, in the case of misconceptions or, even more, delusions. In other cases, those when the content of the experience appears justified in its referentiality, the very basic fact of the construction of an inner experience endowed with value of life (Salvatore, 2012) seems an obvious fact that does not ask to be understood.

It is worth highlighting the fact that the issue at stake here is not the epistemic linkage between the characteristics of the mental representation and its reference. More basically, the issue concerns the very fact of the mental representation that the subject experiences as (a) part of himself/herself and (b) part of a certain piece of the world. This distinction hardly finds room in the context of contemporary psychology. In this case also, even a quick glance at the past of the discipline comes to our aid, by showing that the issue of the constitution of experience has been and therefore can again be the core of the project of psychological science. The main focus here is gestalt theory and its interpretation of the Husserlian notion of *presentification*, that is, the process underpinning a content of experience that is not based on sensorial input (e.g., in immediate memory retrieval or in imagination). The gestalt theory generalized such a notion, making presentification a basic process that is also involved in the perceptual construction of the object and not only when the sensorial ground is absent. People perceive totalities and forms. This means that perception and meaning are not distinguishable, if by meaning one understands the form the perceiver gives the object. As the Kanizsa (1955) experiments showed, totalities are not held in the field of experience but have to be conceived of as the product of the mind's inherent constructive activity, indeed, of its capability in presentification. With cognitive theories, psychology has shifted the focus from presentification to representation. In this terminological shift, there is a major conceptual change: psychology no longer cares how the object of the representation comes about as mental content. In other words, psychology no longer considers the fact that a representation is a *re-presentation*. Its functionalist standpoint leads to pulling apart the issue of the generative process of psychological life, fully substituting for it the task of describing its way of working.

13.3 Conclusion

To have a past is not enough for having a history. Indeed, history is the *interpretation* of the past through which the present is understood and the future is designed. To make the past into a history means connecting events and elements together within a meaningful dynamic picture; in the case of the history of a scientific

discipline, this means that ideas, theories, and important findings have to be recognized as part and parcel of the trajectory that a trans-generational community of researchers follows in order to address fundamental questions lying at the core of the discipline's scientific vision.

One may wonder whether contemporary psychology has a history or merely a—glorious—past. As it seems to me, contemporary psychology works as if no fundamental issues were relevant, focusing on local, particular objects of interest that can supposedly be understood in themselves. Psychology seems to live in an endless present, made up of more and more sophisticated procedures for the accumulation/computation of data. Such procedures may be fostered by previous procedures and data, and the past is therefore studied and reviewed as the introduction of the studies of today (the latter written with the perspective and the wish to become a past study that will be reviewed by the studies of tomorrow). The *historical* merit of this volume is to propose a different scenario, to call for a rediscovery of psychology as an intellectual enterprise fuelled by local efforts to pursue knowledge, yet making these local efforts meaningful in relation to a fundamental trajectory of thought that transcends them: the Promethean effort to comprehend what the mind is and how it is able to become the lived experience of the world.

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