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REFLECTIONS

# Thinking Outside the Disciplinary Box: a Reply to the Comments

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**Abstract** This article is a reply to the comments on my target article, "Presentism and diversity in the history of psychology" (Brock *Psychological Studies, 60,* 2015a). The most controversial aspect of the article by far was my views on what it is appropriate to call, "psychology" and what it is not. Having established that psychology has its origins in Europe, I refer to the efforts of psychologists from outside the Western world to construct an "indigenous psychology". I conclude by discussing the view of Staeuble (2006) that the disciplinary order of the social sciences is "Eurocentric" in that it reflects the assumptions of the culture in which it was produced. As long as psychologists outside the Western world continue to unquestioningly adopt a disciplinary order that reflects its cultural origins in the West, and even insist on projecting it backwards onto their own intellectual traditions, the process of indigenisation will be incomplete.

**Keywords** Presentism · Diversity · History · Psychology · Disciplines

My reply to the comments will be selective. On a practical level, the comments consist of nearly 10,000 words and I have been given a maximum limit of 5500 words for my reply. It is not as big a problem as it might at first appear since it is usual in these situations for commentators to move the discussion away from the topic of target article to other topics that are of greater interest to them, and which they know more about, but it seems to have happened to an inordinate degree here. The most blatant example is the comment by Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) which they begin by saying that they will not talk about the history of psychology, which is what the target article was about, but will talk about the future of psychology instead. Others have done the same without being as open about it.

If I were to follow the commentators in all the different directions in which they want to take the discussion, the reply would be lacking in coherence and we would run the risk of losing sight of what the target article was about. I will therefore reply only to the comments that relate directly to the content of the article. The most controversial aspect of the article by far was my views on when it is appropriate to use the term, "psychology" and when it is not. I will therefore concentrate on this aspect of the discussion in my reply. Before I do that, we need some clarity on where the historical origins of psychology are to be found.

## Origin Myths and Historical Scholarship

One could easily get the impression from Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) that the various accounts of psychology's origins are simply origin myths that are equally valid (or invalid). This point is underlined later on the piece where they refer to psychology's "alleged birthplace" (Valsiner and Brinkmann 2015). They consequently offer a form of epistemological relativism that no serious historian would endorse.

Historians have discussed the topic of origin myths but always with an eye to providing a more scholarly account (e.g. Brock 2013). The priority disputes that I refer to in my article are not "disputes... among historians", as Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) suggest. Jagged_85 is not even a psychologist, while figures like Khaleefa (1999) and Aaen-Stockdale (2008) are psychologists who dabble in history at best. The same is true of E. G. Boring, the American psychologist who

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is largely responsible for the most famous origin myth of all: the view that psychology can be traced back to the establishment of Wilhelm Wundt's laboratory for experimental psychology at the University of Leipzig in 1879 (Boring 1929). Boring was an experimental psychologist with over 500 publications in this field and he usually did his historical work during his summer holidays (Young 1966).

Boring died nearly half a century ago and his work is no longer representative of the field. It is a much more professional enterprise than Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) seem to realise. This situation has resulted in some interesting work on the origins of psychology in recent years. Two books on this subject were published almost simultaneously in French. One is *La naissance de la psychologie* [The birth of psychology] by Paul Mengal (2005) and the other is *Les sciences de l'âme XVIe-XVIIIe siècle* [The sciences of the soul, 16th-18th centuries] by Fernando Vidal (2006). The latter has since been published in English translation under the title, *The Sciences of the Soul*: *The Early Modern Origins of Psychology* (Vidal 2011) and it was awarded the book prize of the International Society for History of the Social and Behavioral Sciences in 2014.[1]

Both of these authors date the origins of psychology to a subject called, *psychologia* which emerged in Central Europe in the 16th century. It had little in common with psychology as we now understand the term but was a branch of theology that was concerned with the soul. During the course of the 18th century, it was transformed from a religious account of the soul into a secular account of the mind. This is no origin myth that was designed by a psychologist with an inner-disciplinary agenda. It is the work of professional historians who have devoted many years to examining original manuscripts from the 16th century to the present in as many as eight different languages.

As unpalatable as this account of the origins of psychology might be to some psychologists, it is supported by a wealth of evidence and it is an account that no professional historian of psychology would dispute. As Valsiner and Brinkmann's fictional example of the newly-discovered laboratory for experimental psychology on the Faroe Islands shows, history is always open to revision in the light of new evidence but in the absence of such evidence, we must base our view of history on the evidence that we have.

## Pragmatic Considerations

Having adopted the relativistic view that no account of psychology's origins is better than any other, Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) suggest that we base our view of presentism on pragmatic grounds. The decision to brush aside all historical considerations in favour of pragmatic considerations is already indicative of their lack of interest in history. However, the pragmatic considerations themselves are indicative of this lack of interest as well. For example, the point that Richards (1987) made that if we include all reflexive discourse in the category, "psychology", the history of psychology would be so vast as to be unmanageable does not form part of these considerations. Their gaze is fixed firmly on the future of psychology. While they are perfectly entitled to decide what is of interest to them and what is not, it is worth pointing out that the future of psychology is a topic that I did not even mention, let alone discuss. My article was about writing the history of psychology. The point is important because the same pragmatic considerations are not applicable to both.

This might explain why Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) can see no benefits to avoiding presentism. I outlined its benefits in my article:

> Like the anthropologists who study cultures that are different from their own, historians study the past because it is different from the present. As it was famously expressed in the opening lines of the novel, *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." (Hartley 1953, p. 3) If we insist on projecting the views of the present onto the past, the subtle and nuanced differences between the present and the past will be overlooked. (Brock 2015a).

The importance of history is that it shows that the way we currently do things is not the only possible way. To take a simple example, seventeenth-century figures like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes were not psychologists, sociologists, political scientists etc. in the way we now understand these terms and wrote work that is of relevance to all of them. They were not bound by these disciplinary categories because the categories did not exist. This point should serve to remind us that disciplinary categories should not be taken for granted and it will surely be of interest to those who want to abandon these disciplines in favour of a unified social science. Exploring the views of historical figures provides us with new ways of understanding and opens up the possibility of doing things in a different way.

In addition to suggesting that there is nothing to gain from avoiding presentism, Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) suggest that there is much to lose. Apparently the view that some forms of knowledge are not psychology will result in psychologists concluding that they are of no relevance to their interests and can be ignored. This argument would only work if psychologists believed they had nothing to gain from reading the literature of disciplines other than their own. Would anyone seriously maintain that neuropsychologists have nothing to gain from reading the literature of biology or clinical psychologists have nothing to gain from reading the literature of

[1] https://www.uakron.edu/cheiron/book-prize/.

psychiatry? In discussing the views of philosophers like Richard Rorty and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) are themselves proof of the fact that psychologists do not limit their reading to the work of other psychologists. Decisions by psychologists about what they should and should not read are usually guided by their interests, not the disciplinary affiliations of the authors concerned.

Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) also throw marketing considerations into the mix:

> Brock (2015a) suggests that we should all abandon "the naïve view that Western psychology has universal validity and take the reflexive discourse of their own culture more seriously." This solution could work if the issue of reflexive discourse about psychology happened within an open, unconstrained field of an epistemic market... But that is not the case.

It is certainly true that psychology has more prestige than subjects like philosophy and literature in some societies but this has not prevented psychologists, Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) included, from reading the literature of these subjects and incorporating it into their work. If the argument is that psychologists who are interested in the work of historical figures like Aristotle or Shakespeare are more likely to get their colleagues to take these interests more seriously if they describe this work as "psychology", I doubt that this is the case. It is not as if these figures are unknown and psychologists are likely to have their own views on its relevance to psychology. Describing it as "psychology" is unlikely to change their views. It is also overly cynical to suggest that we should allow marketing considerations to determine our view of history. That is a slippery slope.

This last point should remind us that pragmatic considerations have their limitations. They are usually endorsed by people who have abandoned any hope of arriving at the truth. I am not suggesting that any historical account represents the absolute truth but it would be doing a gross disservice to historical scholarship to suggest that one historical account is as good as any other and that we should base our view of history on purely pragmatic grounds.

## Essentialism

Both Hopkins (2015) and Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) suggest that my views imply essentialism and so this topic has to be addressed. Hopkins (2015) writes:

> I worry that employing constructs from the past as analytic categories may be counter-productive. Such concepts may encourage essentialist and ahistorical analyses, and may also prove to be 'greedy concepts' (Billig 2014), encouraging us to overlook the distinctive particularities of the phenomena before us and their contingency on social practice.

The crux of the misunderstanding appears to lie in this term, "analytic categories". At no point did I suggest using historical categories in this way. What I did suggest was that we should temporarily put aside our own categories and listen to what historical figures had to say. Some will have understood their work to be a contribution to a subject called, "psychology"; others will not. However, and here comes the anti-essentialist part, even among the former, their understanding of the term will vary enormously. For example, Wundt undoubtedly understood his work to be a contribution to psychology but psychology was considered to be a branch of philosophy at the time and so he understood it to be a contribution to philosophy as well. This is why the journal that he founded had the name, *Philosophische Studien* [Philosophical Studies]. As for the view of Billig (2014) that we should refrain from overgeneralising concepts and understand them in relation to their time and place, I could not agree with him more.

Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) compare my views with those of the late American philosopher, Richard Rorty, who was allegedly an essentialist as well:

> The discussion about philosophy (inside and outside the imagined hemisphere of the West) seems to be exactly parallel to the one going on in psychology. Taking Rorty's argument to psychology would imply that all psychology (even when it is practiced in China, India, or Saudi Arabia) is Western, because it was created by Western scholars, who referred back to other, pre-psychological Western scholars. This argument only works if there is something psychology essentially *is*, connected to its alleged birthplace.

I am no expert on the work of Rorty but I suspect that Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015) are misrepresenting his views, just as they are misrepresenting my own. The point that should arouse our suspicion is their acknowledgment that Rorty "was otherwise a great opponent of all essentialisms". It seems implausible to suggest that he was opponent of all essentialisms but he made a special exception in this case. I cannot speak for Rorty and I would not want to but there is nothing that is *of necessity* essentialist about his views. He is simply pointing out that there are two cultural traditions and they are not exactly the same. If I say, for example, that Tibetan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism are not exactly the same, I am not *necessarily* attributing essential characteristics to them. I am simply referring to the characteristics that they currently have. Comparing the characteristics of cultural phenomena does not preclude the possibility that their characteristics might change.

The connection between psychology and its "alleged birthplace" [sic!] need not be essential either. It can also be cultural and this is the point that the advocates of indigenous psychology have been making over the years. The argument runs that Western, or more usually American, psychology is not the universal science that it pretends to be but reflects the cultural characteristics of the place in which it is produced. They consequently regard this form of psychology as inappropriate for their needs and suggest that it should be modified to suit the local situation (e.g. Misra and Mohanty 2002; Kim et al. 2006).

## The Eurocentric Order of the Social Sciences

Although the advocates of indigenous psychology, have tried to cut the ties between psychology and the Western culture from which it emerged, they may not have been entirely successful. Staeuble (2006) has argued that psychology should not be viewed in isolation but as part of what she calls, "the Eurocentric order of the social sciences" (p. 183).

The notion of the abstract individual who exists independently of society or the state has deep roots in Western culture (Lukes 2006). It seems plausible to suggest that this was the basis for the separation of psychology and sociology or political science. If psychology is based on the notion of the abstract individual, those who think that this notion is not in accord with reality might be inclined to unite the various disciplines that go to make up the social sciences. The end result would be more in accord with the reflexive discourse that predates the 18th century. As I pointed out earlier, figures like John Locke or Thomas Hobbes were not concerned with whether their work was psychology, sociology, political science etc. because these disciplines did not exist. Furthermore, if these disciplines did not exist in the present, there would be no incentive to project them onto the past.

Whether or not the social sciences will eventually be abandoned in favour of a unified social science is a point on which Hartnack (2015) and I disagree. It is not an issue that can be decided here. All we can say with any certainty is that the various social sciences are well-established in many countries around the world and there are no prospects of them disappearing soon. In making this point, I am not suggesting that individual social scientists cannot adopt an interdisciplinary approach in their teaching and research.

Even in the absence of a unified social science, we can still appreciate two important points. First of all, psychology does not, and has never had, a monopoly on reflexive discourse. The existence of the various social sciences, along with subjects like philosophy, law, theology and literature, serve to remind us of that. Secondly, the disciplines that make up the social sciences are not what philosophers call, "natural kinds" (Bird and Tobin 2015); that is, categories that reflect the pre-existing divisions in nature. They are human products and it is therefore legitimate to question the assumptions that led to reflexive discourse (a) being divided into different disciplines and (b) being divided in this particular way.

## Monopoly and Power

Unlike Valsiner and Brinkmann (2015), Paranjpe (2015) is willing to acknowledge that psychology has its origins in the West. He then poses a rhetorical question:

> Granted that the particular view of psychology as a "discipline" originated in the West, does it mean that Westerners have a monopolist ownership over the label "psychology" which non-Westerners cannot use without obtaining a license?

It is strange that Paranjpe should attribute this view to me since he contributed a chapter on India to my edited book, *Internationalizing the History of Psychology* (Paranjpe 2006). In addition to the chapter on India, the book contains chapters on other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Brock 2006). The irony here is that I am well known in history of psychology circles as one of the few people in Europe or North America who is interested in the history of psychology outside the Western world.

*Internationalizing the History of Psychology* was mainly concerned with the history of psychology in the 19th and 20th centuries. My article here was concerned with older work and I suggested that, given that the discipline of psychology is no older than the 18th century, work that was produced prior to that century could not logically have been a contribution to that discipline. I was just as willing to apply this argument to Aristotle or Shakespeare as I was to anyone else. There are no double standards here. At no point did I say or imply that Westerners have a monopolist ownership over the label, "psychology" and it is a grotesque mischaracterisation of my views to suggest that I did.

Paranjpe (2015) continues with the theme of monopoly and power:

> Believing in, or even implying, a monopolist view of psychology is to give oneself power over the use of language and concepts. As Francis Bacon famously pointed out, knowledge is power. But the converse is not true; power is not knowledge. The presumption of power to define concepts or words cannot do any better.

Paranjpe is just one of many psychologists, both Western and non-Western, who have described historical figures as "psychologists", even though they lived and worked before

there was a category of professionals who went under that name. The practice is similar to that of the Mormons who retroactively baptise their ancestors into the faith.[2] Psychologists who engage in this practice and have failed to appreciate its problems will no doubt view me as some sort of linguistic policeman who wants to lay down the law on who they can call a "psychologist" and who they cannot. That too is a mischaracterisation of my views.

I suggested that instead of projecting our language and concepts onto the past, we should make an attempt to understand the language and concepts that historical figures used. For example, Paranjpe (2015) refers to the Sanskrit word, *citta* and tell us that it means "mind":

> Personally I have gone public in claiming that Patañjali, the author of a "textbook" of Yoga who lived around the 2nd century CE, was a psychologist. My defense in saying this is that Yoga is an enterprise in understanding what the mind (called *citta* in Sanskrit) is like, and how its fluctuations can be controlled.

This statement invokes one form of presentism in order to justify another. According to the website of the American Sanskrit Institute:

> There are no English equivalents for citta. To substitute an English word like "mind" or "mindstuff" makes a genuine understanding of yoga virtually inaccessible. To leave the word citta as it is and make an enquiry into its meaning by contemplating its use throughout the Yoga Sutra text leads to meaning as rich in dimension as life itself.[3]

This is hardly surprising. Not even the modern Dutch and German languages have an equivalent for the English term, "mind" and so it would be surprising if it had an equivalent in Sanskrit. The same is true of other English-language terms like "emotion" and "the self" that interpreters of the ancient Indian texts have ascribed to their authors. They are relatively recent additions to the English language and they too have no equivalents in other European languages. For example, Spanish has no equivalent for "the self" (Brock 2015b).

The argument is about understanding language and concepts, not power. On the contrary, it is the practice of casting aside the language and concepts of historical figures and replacing them with our own that involves the exercise of power since it represents a sort of "colonisation of the past" (Chalcraft 2004). It is a particularly dubious exercise in the Indian context since the language and concepts being used are those of the former colonial power.

[2] http://www.mormon.org.uk/values/family-history
[3] http://www.americansanskrit.com/sanskrit-language-of-meditation

## Ad hominem Arguments

Paranjpe (2015) suggests that Green (2008) is being presentist and therefore inconsistent in using the word, "advances" in the title of his newsletter, *Advances in the History of Psychology*. I must admit that I was surprised when I first saw this title but only Green can explain the background to his decision to use it. Even if it could be shown that he was being inconsistent, it would not invalidate his views.

The argument that Paranjpe is making here is known to philosophers as the *argumentum* ad hominem [argument to the man] and it involves directing one's comments at an alleged characteristic of the person making the argument and not the argument itself. It is also a particular sub-species of the *argumentum* ad hominem that is known as *tu quoque* [you likewise]. It goes something like this:

1. Person A claims X.
2. Person B alleges that Person A has said or done something that is inconsistent with X.
3. X is therefore false.

The argument is clearly invalid. If someone says that smoking is unhealthy and that person is a smoker, it does not mean that the statement is false.

Paranjpe (2015) has a more important target in his sights. He points out that I reproduced the title of Green's newsletter in my article: "(quoted by Brock)". The implication here is that I am being inconsistent as well. This is another subspecies of the ad hominem argument that is known as "guilt by association". I am obviously not responsible for the title of a newsletter that I do not produce and informing my readers of the title of Green's newsletter prior to discussing its contents does not change that situation.

Unfortunately, Paranjpe (2015) continues in this vein:

> I am among the non-Westerners who, in Brock's words "insist on regarding their own intellectual traditions as 'psychology'". If Brock is correct, I may then be "unwittingly involved in an act of cultural imperialism since they are viewing them through the filter of a concept that has its origins in the West." I find this whole approach rather ironic and amusing. It is ironic because, look who is saying this! An inheritor of the legacy of the imperialist West is suspecting of cultural imperialism in someone whose cultural forebears have witnessed the systematic denigration of the systems of Indian thought as worthless.

The statement is very emotive and is clearly designed to create a sense of "us" and "them". It is also misleading. While it is undoubtedly true that there were Westerners who denigrated systems of Indian thought as worthless, there is also a

long list of Western intellectuals who had enormous respect for them. They include the philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer (1844/2010), who was profoundly influenced by Indian thought, and the literary figure, T. S. Eliot (1933) who famously wrote that Indian philosophers "make the great European philosophers look like schoolboys" (p. 40).

More importantly, it is another example of the *ad hominen* argument and another attempt to establish "guilt by association". Just as I am not responsible for the title of a newsletter that I do not produce, I am not responsible for everything that every Westerner has ever said or done. I suspect that the enduring popularity of the ad hominem argument is that it provides us with an easy way of dismissing views that we do not like. It may also be a sign of desperation. If Paranjpe had some way of refuting my arguments, he would not need to direct his comments at an alleged characteristic of the person who is making them.

## Concluding Remarks

My article is an expanded version of a paper that I presented at the annual meeting of the International Society for History the Social and Behavioral Sciences in 2010. The title of the paper and the article are exactly the same.[4] The paper was well received and it was not considered to be controversial.

I provide this information to make a point. Most readers are likely to view the current debate as an exchange of opinions between psychologists. If one views the debate in this way, it might appear that I am in a minority of one. That would be misleading. First of all, I am not a psychologist in the way that people usually understand the term. I began my career in History and Philosophy of Science and I became a specialist in history and philosophy of psychology during this time. It has now been my speciality for nearly 30 years and I have no other interests in psychology. Secondly, while it might appear that I am in a minority of one, most of my colleagues who are specialists in the history of psychology hold broadly similar views. Kurt Danziger, Christopher Green, Graham Richards, Roger Smith and Irmingard Staeuble are just some of the historians of psychology whose views I discussed. This is why the paper on which the article is based was not considered to be controversial when it was presented at a conference of historians. The obvious conclusion here is that the debate is not an exchange of opinions between psychologists; it is a clash between the values and standards of psychologists and historians.

Having set the scene by talking about the priority claims over medieval Islamic science, I discussed the views of Green (2008) who described them as "presentism in the service of diversity". Like most of my fellow professionals in the history of psychology, I was in broad agreement with his views. However, given my previous track record in introducing more diversity into the history of psychology (e.g. Brock 2006), I was not content to leave it at that. I set myself the task of finding a way in which the history of psychology could be made more diverse without being in conflict with the scholarly standards of historians and I offered a way in which it could be done. It is important to point out that this was the main aim of the article since it is an aim that none of the psychologists who commented on it have discussed. What they done instead is *criticise the scholarly standards themselves*. I am, of course, well aware that most psychologists know nothing about the scholarly standards of historians and care even less. This explains why the psychologists who commented on my article show little understanding or sympathy for my views.

One could even get the impression from their comments that the article was about achieving less diversity, not more. This is the result of a series of false attributions ranging from the claim that, in saying that psychology is a cultural product that has its origins in the West, I am saying that it is the exclusive property of the West, or because I say that the literature of ancient civilisations, including that of Ancient Greece, was not a contribution to a subject called "psychology", I am saying that it is of no interest to psychologists and should be ignored. There is nothing in my article that will lend support to either of these views.

Can presentism be a path to greater diversity, as most of the commentators suggest? I doubt it. The historian's warnings against presentism are about being open to the possibility of *difference* and, in particular, the differences between the present and the past. It is only by putting aside our current ways of thinking that we can begin to understand other ways of thinking that are different from our own. These other ways of thinking will inevitably include different ways of describing and classifying knowledge. The main problem here is that most psychologists have a strong commitment to their discipline and this places limits on the amount of diversity that they are willing to accept.

This takes us back to the Eurocentric order of the social sciences. While it might be legitimate to question the assumptions that led to their discipline being created, it is the last thing that most psychologists are likely to do. As long as psychologists outside the Western world continue to unquestioningly adopt a disciplinary order that reflects its cultural origins in West, and even insist on projecting it backwards onto their own intellectual traditions, the process of indigenisation will be incomplete.

[4] https://www.uakron.edu/dotAsset/2205309.pdf

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