Why History?

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One of the things I most enjoy is walking into my history and systems class on the first day of the semester and announcing with much enthusiasm to students that they are about to embark on a magical mystery tour of people, events, and ideas that will change forever the way they think about things and will have lasting value for their lives. The initial reaction, as you might guess, is a certain degree of skepticism. Some surreptitiously check their day planners to see if they are in the right classroom. After all, the course does have the word “history” in its title.Fulfilling the promise of magic, of course, is a tall order. The history course can be a hard sell to some students, especially after they learn the name of psychology’s most famous historian (you know who). And they might wonder why they are taking a “history” course when they thought they were studying “psychology.” But I firmly believe the history course, taught well, can deliver. Further, I believe that students can be convinced by the end of the semester that their experience with psychology’s history has been of lasting value to them. Beyond the reasons normally given for studying history, which few students buy, and for good reason (e.g., we can avoid the “mistakes” of the past), I believe there are six essential reasons why our students should study psychology’s history.

Understanding the Present

This is perhaps the most basic reason for studying any history. It is simply impossible to have a thorough understanding of the present time without understanding something about the history that led to it. For example, students in a motivation and emotion course might learn about the facial feedback hypothesis and about cross-cultural similarities in facial expressions of emotions. But that knowledge will be superficial without some understanding of what William James said about the connection between physical activity and emotion and what Charles Darwin had to say about the origins of emotional expressions. I make this point about understanding the present repeatedly in my course, and I force students to think of at least one example from their own experiences by asking them the following question on the take-home portion of their final exam: “Think about one of your other psychology courses and some psychological concept or principle that you have learned. Explain how your understanding of that concept or principle has been enriched through your study of psychology’s history.”

Understanding the Dangers of Presentist Thinking

This is a major theme in my history course and, when students “get it,” this is one of those ideas that can seriously change the way they think about lots of things. Presentism is the tendency to evaluate historical events with reference to present-day standards, understanding, or values. Conversely, the historian and the student of history must make an attempt to understand historical events in the context of what was known, understood, or valued at the time of those events. Avoiding presentist thinking might be impossible in an absolute sense—after all, we are

products of our environments, affected by them in ways we do not always understand. To truly comprehend history and the lessons of history, however, it is essential to make the effort to put aside our current understanding.Getting students to overcome presentist thinking puts a real burden on the instructor, and is the reason why I think history is the most difficult course in the psychology curriculum to teach well. The main reason for this difficulty is that to get students to evaluate historical events in context, the instructor must know context (political, military, economic, institutional, and sociocultural). This means knowing just about everything that was going on in world outside of psychology during the historical period being studied. Understanding why Skinner's 1948 novel Walden II made little impact in the 1950s but became popular in the 1960s requires knowing about the post-WWII fears of communism and the increased liberalism of the 1960s, to take just one small example.One of the ways I try to incorporate historical context into my course is to assign readings that are excellent models of contextual history. One of my favorites is an article on spiritualism by Deborah Coon (1992). She does a remarkable job of showing why the phenomenon was popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, enticing such luminaries as William James, but was seen as dangerous by other psychologists (e.g., G. Stanley Hall). In the context of a time when marvelous new inventions were occurring left and right, the idea of contact with spirits was not so far-fetched. If the telegraph could make someone's voice magically cross hundreds of miles, why couldn't other forms of energy (i.e., mental energy) be transmitted across distances as well? Another part of the historical context in America at that time was a ready supply of people desperately wishing to contact the spirits of those who died too young (i.e., in the Civil War).Another item from my take-home final reads: "Describe two things you learned from this course that might be of value in your life. Don't just describe some things that you found interesting or some things you didn't know before—describe things that you learned that could affect you as a person, how you think, etc." Many of my students respond to this by making reference to the dangers of presentist thinking and they sometimes even extend the concept into the realm of interpersonal relations—maybe they need to be careful about judging someone without knowing something of the "historical context" within which that person acted.

Connecting the Dots

The venerable sage Charles Brewer is fond of saying that "everything is connected to everything else." This truth is nowhere more evident than in the history course, and one of my stated goals for the course is to get students to see connections among the many things they have learned throughout their careers as psychology majors. Students occasionally tell me that before they took the history course, they had taken a series of psychology courses that appeared to be disconnected from each other, but that the history course helped to "tie it all together."It is difficult to say exactly how this integration happens, but I think there are some ways that instructors can facilitate the process. For example, a topic in the history course often meshes with and enriches something they have learned in another course. For instance, by the time they take my history course, most students have taken social psychology and have learned something about Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory. In the history course, describing Lewin's field theory requires saying something about his concept of equilibrium. When I tell them that Festinger was a student of Lewin's, the remark often elicits an "Aha" moment—a connection has been made, and because of their new knowledge of Lewin (and also of gestalt psychology), they now have an enriched understanding of the basis for cognitive dissonance theory.

Enhancing Critical Thinking

Given that we want our students to become critical thinkers, the history course offers some unique opportunities. What I wrote earlier about presentism and contextual history definitely applies here, but there are other examples. Consider one typical attitude about history, for instance. Many students (who enter the course thinking that history is “just one d_ _ _ thing after another”) believe that once a history has been written, that’s it—it’s just a matter of getting some chronology lined up properly and writing it with some coherence. End of story. What I try to show them instead is that histories continually need to be rewritten in light of new information and, especially, in light of new ways of thinking. All history is new history, and psychology’s history is a perfect example. For instance, it’s easy to point to the various ways that Wundt and his work have been portrayed in a distorted fashion over the years, that the problem relates to Titchener’s influence on Boring and Boring’s subsequent historical writings about Wundt, and that the reassessment of Wundt in the 1970s would not have happened in the same way had not psychology become more cognitively oriented. On the take-home question about life’s lessons, it is gratifying when students comment that they have become more skeptical about what is written in their textbooks. As the author of the textbook we use in my class, I sometimes discuss the decisions I made about what to include and how I could best describe and analyze it. Moreover, I discuss how these decisions represented my best judgment at the time, that I could have taken other directions, and that other historians might disagree with me for legitimate reasons.

Providing us with Models

Psychology’s history is loaded with people whose actions can help guide our lives. One of my favorites is Edmund Sanford, an early experimental psychologist, who to some extent lessened his own professional career for the sake of his students (e.g., letting students have sole authorship of research when he easily could have claimed co-authorship or even first authorship). There are lots of other examples that are relevant for students in the history course. Concerned about the future and worried about taking a big risk? Think about Titchener’s willingness in 1892 to take a job at Cornell in the remote wilderness of central New York, or Köhler’s willingness to stand up to the Nazis. Seeing some evidence of a glass ceiling and frustrated about it? Think about what Margaret Washburn, Mary Calkins, and Christine Ladd-Franklin were able to accomplish. Worried about balancing career and family? Think about Lillian Gilbreth, who had two separate PhDs and a dozen children. Concerned about overcoming health problems? Think about Hull’s work despite polio or Terman’s accomplishments while fighting tuberculosis.

Keeping One Humble

Finally, as academics, it is easy for us to delude ourselves into thinking we know a lot. Studying history is a great antidote. I am continually amazed by how little I know about psychology’s history, but at the same time, it motivates me to keep learning more. This is a trait I think can benefit our students, especially when we model it for them. I continually remind students in my course that they are just scratching the surface of a fascinating story.

Resources for Teaching the History of Psychology

Fortunately, there are numerous resources available to those lucky enough to be teaching the history course. Carefully mining the Internet can be fruitful; one useful strategy is to access interesting historically relevant images by doing Google image searches. The most important Internet site for historians of psychology is the Web Site for the Society of the History of Psychology (SHP), APA's Division 26 (_ HYPERLINK "http://shp.yoku.ca" _http://shp.yoku.ca_). Chris Green of York University maintains the site and has put together an extraordinary array of resource material that can be easily accessed from the main SHP page. These include links to hundreds of history-related sites, as well as Green's "Classics in the History of Psychology," which includes full text versions of more than 25 books (e.g., William James's monumental Principles of Psychology) and over 200 articles that have important places in psychology's history. "Classics" also includes "Special Collections," selections of articles and books relevant to some particular issue. For instance, a special collection on the debate between structuralism and functionism includes reprints of 32 articles, book chapters, and books. As for printed resource material, space does not permit an adequate listing. However, my chapter (Goodwin, 2002) in the book on teaching dedicated to Bill McKeachie and Charles Brewer has a large section on resources, as does Hilgard, Leary, and McGuire's (1991) chapter in Annual Review of Psychology.

In Closing

I love teaching the history of psychology. I especially enjoy seeing the (admittedly) occasional students, who might start the course hoping the ordeal will soon be over, but finish the semester with smiles on their faces, thinking perhaps that their magical mystery tour through psychology's history has not ended, but has only begun.

References

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