

Conducting Archival Research on the History of Psychology

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Undergraduate psychology students need not be enrolled in a history of psychology course in order to use primary sources. Primary sources such as original research data and publications are important when conducting varying types of undergraduate research such as an empirical research study or a literature review. Reviewing original data and rough drafts of results intended for publication can be useful to undergraduates when initially developing an empirical study. Correspondence and memorandums of a colleague's review of a psychologist's research can help students to understand the strengths and weaknesses of past research in addition to learning what the original researcher may have altered within the study that produced his or her final results.

When conducting a literature review or a historical analysis it is crucial that students do not rely solely on textbooks and other secondary sources. Secondary sources are often described as interpretive or narrative sources for good reason—it is the author's interpretation of the original source (Eicher, 2007). In reviewing the primary sources for themselves, undergraduate students can make their own interpretations, some of which may differ from published secondary sources.

The Importance of Primary Source Material

There appear to be two recurring themes in the literature (the teaching of psychology literature, the teaching of history literature, and the library and information science literature) regarding the use of primary sources in teaching history. Psychologists, historians, librarians and archivists all agree on the importance of critical thinking in the undergraduate classroom and all believe that primary source material can be a supreme catalyst in generating critical thinking skills. Unfortunately, many of those people also agree that a majority of undergraduate students do not know what primary sources are or how to interpret them. Thus the job is two-fold for the instructor who wishes to use primary sources in her or his classroom—they must first teach students

what primary sources are and how they can be used in historical research before introducing archival material into the curriculum (Kunkel, Weaver, and Cook, 1996; Matyn, 2000; Allen, 1999; Eicher, 2007; and Sutton & Knight, 2006).

According to Baker (2002) there are two central maxims in historical scholarship within the “new history”: (1) the consideration of context and (2) the use of primary source materials. These maxims work together as primary sources often provide a sense of historical context. Historical research involves the identification of sources as well as the selection of evidence from those sources. It is important to ask students what is it about the source (whether it is a letter, a diary, a film, or a photograph) that supplies evidence and how does that evidence and the primary source in general fit within the greater historical context? Students must think about the social and political atmosphere of the time when considering what can be viewed as evidence within a primary source document. Using critical thinking skills to determine why and how a certain source provides the evidence it does is central to historical research, regardless of subject matter.

It is also important that students understand that the historical record is not infallible. Primary source materials vary widely not only in their format but also in the usefulness of the evidence they provide. Instructors should remind students to take into account the possibility of such factors as human error, carelessness and even dishonesty within the historical record. Discrepancies provide an opportunity for students to sort out the facts by judging the credibility of a number of sources on the same topic. Sutton and Knight (2006) claim that students who use primary source material in the course of their research often begin to “see themselves as stewards of their own learning.” Through a critical analysis of primary and secondary source material students begin to understand how secondary sources are created and general knowledge is obtained. These are skills that students can take with them to any number of college classes and apply to information resources in all areas of their lives.

While working as a teaching assistant for the undergraduate history of psychology course at The University of Akron I was able to assist in the creation of several projects that allowed students to use primary source material. Students enrolled in the history of psychology course at The University of Akron have an immense advantage as they can physically access material maintained at the Archives of the History of American Psychology (AHAP) located on the university's campus. However, the same issues arose in this class that occur in many classrooms—a significant number of students were unfamiliar with archival material and many did not understand how to interpret the evidence discovered within the resources.

In many cases students enrolled in history of psychology courses are psychology majors who do not make historical research a priority. The history class is often an elective and some students may have never taken a history class beyond the university's required core courses. The history of psychology instructor has the opportunity to teach students more than just the history of psychology. Instructors can teach students how to conduct historical research, how to understand primary sources and interpret their evidence and how to use critical thinking skills to answer questions and generate their own opinions and judgments in areas of controversy.

However, primary sources need not be used solely in the history classroom. Students are required to conduct research and write research papers in nearly all of their psychology classes and primary sources can play a role across a student's curriculum. Often the first source a student turns to is the course textbook. Although textbooks are often good references as they are an interpretation of primary sources they are not infallible. Students should look for specific primary source citation within the textbook and make an attempt to review those sources for themselves.

An excellent example of misinterpretation within a psychology textbook can be found in an article regarding John B. Watson's alleged sex research at Johns Hopkins University (Benjamin, Whitaker, Ramsey, & Zeve, 2007). Psychologist James V. McConnell, unsatisfied that the sole reason of Watson's forced resignation from Johns Hopkins was his affair with one his graduate students (Rosalie Rayner), sought to discover if there was an additional reason for Watson's departure.

In the 1950s McConnell met and spoke with a colleague of Watson's in the advertising business who informed McConnell that Watson had told him he conducted research during sexual intercourse using himself and Rayner as subjects. McConnell eventually took this statement as fact and included it

in his introductory psychology textbook, *Understanding Human Behavior: An Introduction to Psychology*, without any citation whatsoever. Several other history and introduction textbooks included the story as well (Benjamin, et al identified six different textbooks that included the story) citing only McConnell's textbook as their evidence. Scholars and biographers of Watson could not find evidence to back the claim and when they asked McConnell for his source he simply retold the story that he heard from Watson's colleague. Although McConnell continued to publish the story throughout the life of his introductory textbook, eventually other authors dropped the story when they realized that it was likely just that—a story.

The problem here is that it is quite possible that at some point in time an undergraduate may have cited the textbook and Watson's alleged sex experiments in a research paper without questioning its authenticity. However, had the student conducted a literature review of Watson's actual published work and sought out other primary sources they would have discovered little, if any, evidence behind the story. Primary sources and secondary sources reveal the most when used in a complementary fashion rather than simply relying on one or the other as both can present problems to researchers (Stewart and Kamins, 1993).

Digitization of archival material opens many new avenues of learning. Although progress is being made, and more and more archives are putting digital content on their websites, it is still a slow and arduous process. Beyond the time and monetary resources involved in digitization efforts there are numerous copyright issues that surround archival material. AHAP and other archives are often more than happy to collaborate with instructors in creating assignments and providing photocopied or digitally scanned primary source material as long as ample time is provided, instructors do most of the background research, and requests are not overly demanding.

Using Primary Source Material in the Classroom

To familiarize students with primary source material numerous examples were taken to the classroom from the archives. Encapsulated correspondence, memoranda, photographs, and various other archival materials were presented to the students in class. The students were able to handle the material and gain a general understanding of what constitutes archives and special collections. This is truly the first step in getting students to understand

the usefulness and value of primary source material. Students were often asked to work in groups to interpret sources and present their interpretations to the class. Specific questions were asked of the students so that their analysis remained focused and concise.

Examples of Primary Sources in the Classroom

The Walter Miles Papers include a series of correspondence between psychologists Walter Miles and Helen Bradford Thompson Woolley shortly after her dismissal from Teacher's College at Columbia University. Over the course of several letters Woolley explains her plight to Miles and seeks advice for her future. Seven different letters from the series were encased in a protective Mylar sleeve, a technique known as encapsulation, and students were asked to form seven small groups in order to review the correspondence and answer several questions that were provided to them (see Appendix A for questions). Students had interesting ideas concerning Miles' and Woolley's relationship and a class discussion followed the exercise. Later all of the letters were scanned and made available to the students digitally on WebCT so that they could review the entire string of correspondence and determine the accuracy of their interpretations and assumptions.

Students read about and are exposed to numerous interpretations of original research far removed from the original researchers and their interpretations. A classic example is the 1920 "Little Albert" study conducted by John B. Watson and Rosalie Rayner. Watson and Rayner's original publication, *Conditioned Emotional Reactions*, is a primary source. Holding a class discussion about "Little Albert" and asking students what they have been taught about the study is an excellent opportunity to determine what students actually know about the classic experiment.

Asking students to read the original 1920 publication and use their critical thinking skills to establish differences in what they have been taught and what actually happened provides an opportunity for students to become conscious of the fact that history is interpreted differently by different historians. A variation of this would be to provide students with secondary sources written about Watson's and Rayner's work and have them interpret those sources as well. Numerous seminal works in the history of psychology are available in full-text on a website maintained by Christopher Green of York

University, "Classics in the History of Psychology" (<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/index.htm>)

At The University of Akron students are assigned to write a short, ten-page biography on a psychologist. Some of the students were lucky enough to choose or be assigned psychologists whose papers are maintained at AHAP. When I began working as a teaching assistant in 2006 I offered to help the students conduct research in the archives. I learned very quickly what has been reported in the literature—most students did not understand how to use finding aids in order to locate material pertinent to their research and many seemed afraid to ask questions. It is often more important to spend time locating relevant material and providing it to the students so they can use and interpret it rather than having them spend their time sifting through finding aids and attempting to determine what will be useful. This is especially true for novice researchers. It may take more time on the instructor's part but is much more valuable to students.

For the spring 2007 course a group project was created in which students were required to conduct research in the archives and include primary source evidence in their final project. Topics for the projects were created in advance and students were asked to sign up for the topic that interested them most. The topics included, "What was it like to be a student of Wilhelm Wundt's"; "Pioneering women in functional psychology"; "The history of eugenics and family planning in psychology"; "The history of behavioral technology"; "The history of the founding of the Association of Black Psychology"; and "The history of directive and non-directive counseling techniques."

It was up to the group members to delegate tasks and develop a creative presentation for the class in addition to writing a short five-page paper using a minimum of one primary source and four secondary sources. Private discussion boards were set up in WebCT to help facilitate conversation amongst group members. When group members came to the archives they were provided with a list of materials within the collection that were related to their project. They were also provided with several examples of secondary sources. Determining relevant material and noting its location within AHAP's collection was done well in advance of the students' arrival in the archives. Providing examples of primary and secondary sources allows students to spend more time finding the evidence they are looking for as well as critically analyzing and comparing it to other published sources.

For example, the group attempting to discover what life was like for students in Leipzig under Wilhelm Wundt was provided with the journals and

notebooks of two students who worked with Wundt in some capacity—psychologists Foster P. Boswell and Raymond Dodge. Reading handwritten notes can be a difficult and time-consuming task, so having the journals already available for students to view allowed them to spend more time researching rather than trying to determine what material from the larger Boswell and Dodge Collections would be of use. Students were also able to use a secondary source from the AHAP’s library, Ludy T. Benjamin’s *A History of Psychology in Letters* which includes a chapter of reproductions of letters that psychologist James McKeen Cattell wrote home to his parents while he studied in Leipzig with Wundt. (Benjamin, 2006). In analyzing these three very different sources students were able to look for similarities and differences amongst the experiences of the three American psychologists during their time in Leipzig.

Conclusion

Finding primary source material to use in an undergraduate history of psychology course is becoming easier. Both Division 26 of the American Psychological Association (APA) and Cheiron: The International Society for the History of Behavioral and Social Sciences provide links to archives and archival material on their websites. More and more archives are posting finding aids on their websites and most are more than willing to help professors and instructors in locating primary source material that can be used in the classroom. However, instructors in the history of psychology must be prepared to conduct their own research and ask their own questions in order to locate archival material that will fit within their curriculum.

Students and instructors must remember that primary source documents do indeed have a place outside of the history of psychology classroom. Reviewing primary sources in the course of other psychological research can provide a foundation and a context for current research trends. The proliferation of primary source materials on college campuses in archives and libraries as well as those available on the internet provide students with ample opportunities to interpret history for themselves.

Sutton and Knight (2006) encourage instructors to share with students their own historical research in order for students to better understand the relationship between primary and secondary source material. The “testimonial” can be a powerful tool in inspiring students to get excited about the archival material that provides the evidence for what is being taught as the history of psychology. The introduction of primary source material into the classroom alone is

not enough to get students genuinely interested in the history of psychology. Instead instructors must find a balance, and even more importantly, teach students the history of psychology with enthusiasm and accuracy. “If you as a teacher convey to your students an excitement for the material you are presenting, then many of them will catch the enthusiasm, and few, if any, will be disappointed with the course” (Benjamin, 1979, p. 15).

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Appendix A.

History & Systems of Psychology
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In-class Archival Exercise
(Material taken from the Walter R. Miles Papers)

- (1.) What is the date of the letter? Who is the sender? Who received the letter?

 - (2.) What is the main point of the letter? What is the author trying to convey to the receiver?

 - (3.) Can you tell why the author wrote the letter? Does it appear to be personal or professional correspondence?

 - (4.) Can you relate any of the ideas expressed within the letter to anything we have discussed in class or anything you have read for class?

 - (5.) How does this correspondence fit within the larger context of the role of women in psychology during this time period? How could a historian use this letter as evidence?
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