

Dialogue and debate in psychology: commentary on the foundational myth of psychology as a science

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Abstract

This paper proposes to consider the discourses surrounding the “birth” of psychology, especially the stories around the Leipzig laboratory, as collective memory. It argues that analysing this ‘foundational myth’ of psychology may shed light on the current oppositions and divisions within the field. Seeing psychology as the product of an original and necessary separation between two distinct branches may indeed have sterilised the debate far beyond those who started it. Finally, drawing on dialogism and pragmatism, it considers that the recognition of the legitimacy of the knowledge of the other and the reopening of the epistemological debate are necessary steps towards the instauration of a fruitful dialogue within the field.

Introduction

The history of psychology is full of divisions in sub-disciplines, schools, tenants of one specific theory, each assuring that they understand the true causes of human behaviour and privileging one level of explanations over another. However, nowadays most scholars tend to call for more cooperation between fields. It is the current fashion to assure that each theory just sheds light on one specific aspect of human reality, without contradicting the others. But this polite acknowledgement is usually far from being transformed into cooperative research: it seems quite clear that tomorrow is not going to be the day we will see evolutionary psychologists and social constructivists walk hand in hand towards the bright future of psychology. In order to try to understand why the current display of good intentions is not enough to build the necessary bridges between the different fields of psychology, I propose a brief analysis of one of the foundational myth of psychology as a science”: Wundt’s two psychology. This leads me to argue that this ‘original split’ has had long term consequences in the field, and especially on how the opposition between ‘mainstream’ and ‘critical’ psychology is understood. I then discuss how the dialogical paradigm and a pragmatist epistemological stance can help us move beyond this dichotomy and develop a fruitful dialogue.

Debates, history and collective memory

Collective memory, or the representation a group has of its past has long term consequences on its identity, how it interpret the world and relate to others (e.g., Liu & Hilton, 2005; Wertsch, 2002). These group narratives also have the potential to essentialise social identities (Raudsepp & Wagner, 2012; Wertsch, 2002), influence intergroup relations (Delori, 2011) and give specific meanings to present issues (Lee, 2014). By doing so, they also defend how the discourses of others should be considered (de Saint-Laurent, in press).

This paper thus argues that analysing the myths of the foundation of a discipline can help us understand the current oppositions and controversies within and around it. In the case at hand, psychology, having a closer look at one of those myths – Wundt’s two psychologies and the Leipzig laboratory – could shed light on the difficulties faced by psychologists when attempting to build bridges between its different subdisciplines. Such attempts have of course been made in the past, for instance to bridge ethnology and psychoanalysis (Devereux, 1951), psychoanalysis and cultural psychology (Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011) or even cultural psychology and neurosciences (Harre & Moghaddam, 2012). However, these attempts remain isolated in a field that tend to create more subdivisions than re-integrations. Therefore, analysing the myth of the ‘original split’ between two psychologies could help us understand how it has been repeated across the discipline.

The choice of this particular event was motivated by two reasons. First, it is the one that is most commonly considered as marking the foundation of psychology, although the question of what is to be included in the history of psychology provokes much debate (e.g., Billig, 2008; Brown & Farr, 1991; Stenner, 2009;). Second, it is generally considered as been so fundamental because of the scientific project of the Leipzig laboratory, and therefore has the potential to crystallise the epistemological debates taking place within psychology. What is proposed here is a brief analysis of the general discourses surrounding this event with the aim of underlying what could be gained from a reflection on the past of psychology as collective memory and not history.

Remembering psychology’s history: the Leipzig narrative

Calling the foundation of psychology as a science a myth might be going too far, but what I wish to emphasize here is that there is a necessary distinction to be made between history and collective memory. Wertsch & Batiashvili (2012) define the later, in opposition to the former, as tending “to reflect a single, subjective, committed perspective of a group and its identity project” and as downplaying “ambiguity and doubt about the past and the motivations of actors” (p.38). Although it originally referred only to the recent past of the group (Rautenberg, 2010), the

processes involved in the treatment of the distance past were shown to be similar enough for many authors to abandon the distinction (de Saint-Laurent, in press). And in the case of psychology, it translates by the general recognition that Wundt is the one who established this discipline as a science, downplaying the role of other psychologists before him, as well as the one who gave a voice to psychology that would allow it to free itself from philosophy.

However, psychology was first considered as a science and theorised as such by Herbart (Jahoda, 2007), and Wundt's psychology was, primarily, not addressed to philosophy but was a critic of Herbart's work (Malone, 2009). The latter choice of Wundt over Herbart is certainly not anecdotic and the separation Wundt thought between two psychologies can be seen as the "foundational act" of psychology as a science. The first psychology would study the 'pure' form of simple and elementary phenomena through laboratory experimentations, while the second psychology would tell the story of the folk, for which little methodology was thought through (it consist of "considering successively the main forms of expression of the folk mind", (Wundt, 1916/2003, p.xiii). The discourse of the first psychology can be said to be monological in the sense that it was not built as in interaction with anything else and that it had the monopole in the publication of articles of Wundt and his followers (Malone, 2009). Conversely, the discourse of *Völkpsychologie*, as it was proposed by Wundt, can be thought as cacophonous: composed of dissonant voices, therefore impossible to grasp for science and reduced to a succession of stories. Consequently, it is possible to consider that in the collective memory of psychologists, their discipline became a science – as opposed to a philosophy – by presenting a monologue against the backdrop of the incomprehensible complexity of human reality.

Consequences: cacophony and monologues

The effects of Wundt division can still be seen in the multiple divisions and subdivisions of today's psychology. Creating social psychology was not enough: its sociological and psychological forms had to be distinguished (Moscovici & Marková, 2006); in some areas, the separation between two discourses that would not interact was thought, again, as foundational (e.g., Devereux, 1951 on complementarism and ethnopsychiatry); and generations of psychologists were driven to the laboratory, trying to turn the complexity of our reality into a sum of elementary phenomena, each to be singled out by a specific experiment that could allow the study of its characteristics through a truly scientific method (see for instance Milgram, 1974 or Tajfel, 1978). Not only this was proved impossible to achieve – each experiment had to be reproduced to classify specificities, domains of non-applicability, and so on, until the lists of factors turned into laundry lists (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 69) – but its validity has become more and more controversial. Indeed, what is the interest of specifying the 'pure' form of a phenomenon

which never exists as such in human life? It “creates a fictitious abstraction” (Himmelweit, 1990, p. 29), whose ‘real’ counterpart appears in a complexity far from being a logical sum of single elements, but is instead the product of a specific interaction, in a specific context, at a specific time. The argument is far from new, however: already in 1932, Bartlett criticised the tendency shown by researchers working on memory – and in particular Ebbinghaus – to reduce stimuli to meaningless syllables in order to study its ‘pure’ form. Bartlett’s own investigations on meaningful material – such as stories and images – showed that on the contrary, recall is organised in an “effort after meaning” that cannot be separated from the cognitive processes that make memory possible (Bartlett, 1932/1995).

Even though most scholars insist today on the importance of the context in which the phenomenon they are studying arises, their discourses remain monologues against the cacophony of human reality. It is assumed that their superposition would make sense of the paradoxical and ever-changing aspects of our world, if only we could clear off the messiness of human life one phenomenon at a time, forgetting that dialogue is more than a mere superposition of voices. The voice of the other may be recognised, but it does not mean that it is heard. Nonetheless, if a dialogue has never been properly conceptualised, each area of psychology can be conceived as an answer to the limitations of another: cognitivism to behaviourism, societal psychology to an overly experimental social psychology, cultural psychology to a too westernised field but which considers itself ahistorical and acontextual, and so on. Indeed, as stated above, one of the first challenges of psychology was to find its own voice, to ‘justify’ its creation by the adoption of a specific discourse that would explain its separation from philosophy. At a time filled with positivist discourses, it is thus the language of natural sciences that was adopted. As a result, dissonant voices were soon to be heard, which are often regrouped under the large heading of “critical psychology” (Billig, 2008): a psychology that would not reduce human life to quantitative statements, isolated functions or rational thinking. However, if the monological discourses of mainstream psychology supported the representation of the ‘scientific psychologist’, critical psychology provided its own professional identity built on its opposition with mainstream psychology.

Moving beyond the good psychologist and the bad psychologist

The critique proposed above of what is commonly termed ‘mainstream’ psychology should not be taken as exempting critical psychologists of all kinds to reconsider their own discourses. The way we at times present ourselves as the ‘descendants’ of Wundt’s second psychology, in opposition to a psychology turning human beings into decontextualised quantitative units, is also a way to dichotomise discourses between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ psychology. Between the

one that tries to account for the complexity of a situated human life, and the one that turns us into mindless creatures whose behaviour is best understood through neuroimaging and statistics. The divisions seen as foundational and exposed above were also the work of more critical forms of psychology, and even when rewriting the history of psychology opposing voices remain central to the story (e.g., Billig, 2008).

For a dialogue to be made possible, one therefore needs to go beyond the aim of convincing the other of the uppermost validity of one's knowledge system, and accept for the end of the encounter to remain open instead of solely determined by the desire to persuade the other (Heath et al., 2006). However, the establishment of a dialogue between the different areas of psychology should in no way be an attempt to unify the field and rid it of all controversies. There is indeed much to be gained from debate, although for that to happen the different parties need to engage with the discourses of the other (Heath et al., 2006). Because it considers both elements of the equation – differences and interactions with such differences – as inherent to social life, the dialogical paradigm may be here the necessary frame to think such a dialogue.

Dialogues in context

Dialogism and the production of knowledge

Stemming from the works of Bakhtin (1986), dialogism refers to “*any kind of human sense-making, semiotic practice, action, interaction, thinking or communication as long as these phenomena are ‘dialogically’ [...] understood*” (Linell, 2009, pp. 5-6, all italics in original) and it stands on “the assumption that human nature and human life are constituted in interrelations with ‘the other’, that is, in *other orientation*” (Linell, 2009, p. 13). Therefore, dialogism can be considered as a meta-theory stating that the objects of study of the social sciences are involved in “*interdependencies that cannot be reduced to outer cause-effect relations. Relational wholes and interactions are the basic ontological primitives and analytical primes*” (Linell, 2009, p. 15). However, as Gillespie (2011) puts it, “peeking under this umbrella term reveals a heterogeneous assemblage of scholars seeking shelter, sometimes more unified by trying to avoid the rain than their choice of umbrella” (p. ix). Important to note, it is not my aim here to discuss how dialogism is conceived today or should be (see for instance Gillespie & Cornish, 2010; Gillespie, 2011; Linell, 2009 for some interesting discussion on the topic) but simply to highlight some of its key concepts, potentially useful to develop a dialogue between the different subdisciplines of psychology.

Firstly, understanding the world as a product of interactions allows us to recognise contradictions, argumentations and paradoxes as inherent to self (Hermans, 2002) and social

life (Billig, 1987). Therefore, it defends the idea that oppositions and controversies are part of the development of knowledge: it is because different standpoints are possible and disagreement is possible that ideas are expressed (e.g. Gillespie, 2008) and it is through such disagreements and the argumentation it leads to that new ideas can be developed (e.g., Muller Mirza & Perret-Clermont, 2009; Zittoun, Perret-Clermont, & Carugati, 1997). Controversies thus need not to be reduced to a monologue and opposing theories can be understood as co-constitutive. Being aware of such dynamics has led some researchers to propose a shift in focus for psychology, arguing that instead of focusing on the differences between the various subdisciplines of psychology – and thus encouraging a radicalisation of the different epistemologies – the basic unit of analysis should be the person. This “repopulation” of psychology (Bayer & Shotter, 1998), puts the person at the centre and considers her as an agent – doing the thinking and not the brain – all the while being able to do so because of specific physical and biological characteristics (Wagoner, 2012).

Secondly, stating that reality needs to be understood in terms of ‘relational wholes’ highlights the necessity to contextualise: the context is not simply the ‘outer’ of a situation, but is both constitutive and constituted by the interactions taking place in it (Linell, 2009). Recognising the importance of contextualisation involves building on the specific to understand the general, reversing the balance of a psychology trying to define the universal in order to understand the particular. As a result, it has been proposed to consider some areas of psychology – namely social psychology – as a form of history, considering the context within which a phenomenon takes places as constitutive of its existence and therefore universalisation as an impossible aim (Gergen, 1973).

Finally, dialogism, with its focus on the interrelations of the different participants of a situation, facilitates the study of their power dynamics (see for instance Hawes, 1998, for an account in postmodernist and poststructuralist feminism), provides a space for different perspectives to be voiced and therefore highlights the ethical responsibility psychology has towards its object.

Pragmatism and the utility of knowledge

Apprehending the dynamic behind the interactions of the different sub-disciplines in psychology cannot, indeed, be done without accounting for what each represents in terms of power and ethical considerations. To name a few, favouring one level of explanations over another is also to attribute responsibility for the status quo and the possibilities to change it; the choice of a methodology is not independent of the considerations a researcher has for the subjects he uses; the relations between the sub-disciplines of psychology are not free of what the discourse of science means in terms of power and how is it unequally attributed between them, in the same

way that the repercussions of choosing a perspective over another in a study cannot be understood if one does not account for how this specific perspective relates to those of others.

This issue, related to the status of knowledge and the interests served by different areas of research, has been one of the recent focuses of the proponents of pragmatist epistemology. Indeed, pragmatism (James, 1922; Pierce, 1877) argues that knowledge always serves a purpose and that any truth is necessarily contextual. If we seek new knowledge it is to solve the issues we are faced with, thus the only value it can have is that it 'works'. As a result, something is not true because it is the mirror of an underlying absolute reality, but it may be in a given context if it has proven to be a useful tool (Rorty, 1998). Applying this epistemological stance to Health Psychology, Cornish & Gillespie (2009) have argued that we should not attempt, as it has been done in the past, to hierarchise the 'scientific validity' of the different methods used in psychology. Instead, the use of one method over the other – from statistical analysis to case studies – needs to be related to the aims of the study. Moreover, researchers need to be aware that knowledge is never neutral but depends on whose interests we are serving.

The interest of pragmatism lies in the fact that it does not attempt to reduce science to a single perspective, but instead that it encourages us to rethink how to deal with the multiplicity of perspectives. Building bridges between different subdisciplines of psychology does not involve, therefore, unifying the field for the sake of reaching a global agreement, but engaging with the knowledge produced by others on the ground that it sheds light on the issues we try to address from another and potentially complementary perspective.

Conclusion

It has been argued here that dialogism and pragmatism can be useful tools to rethink the interactions between the different subdisciplines of psychology. On the one hand, dialogism conceives dialogue and contradictions as inherent to social life. Even though its development in psychology remains recent and incomplete, dialogism offers new possibilities to psychology: to grasp and accept the paradoxical, argumentative and ever-changing aspects of our world. Agreement is thus not the ultimate goal of a dialogue (Heath et al., 2006), but the recognition of the legitimacy of the knowledge of the other (Jovchelovitch, 2007). On the other hand, pragmatism proposes to assess the value of knowledge on the grounds of what it allows us to *do* in the world, instead of focusing on differences between various scientific perspectives (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009). What both paradigms advocate is thus that considering different theories as “complementary rather than contradictory and [that encouraging] more dialogue between

researchers” could be the first steps towards a fruitful cooperation between the different branches of psychology (Glăveanu, 2011, p. 489).

However, what pragmatism also highlights is that preferring one level of explanation or a method over another does not only touch upon political and economic issues, but more fundamentally brings to the fore the question of how we conceive knowledge and truth, and therefore how we can seek it. If we consider that the epistemological questions raised by a science where we are our own object of study have already been answered from the beginning, all we are left with is the writing and rewriting of the myths of how they were solved. But opening up a dialogue within psychology involves making our assumptions, beliefs and aims clearer to others, and therefore bringing back to the fore the ‘big questions’ that have now been left out for almost a century (with a few notable exceptions, e.g., Brinkmann, 2012; Cornish & Gillespie, 2009; Gergen, 1973). Indicating the existential questions and beliefs from which a research project emerged, just as showing our doubts and mistakes, is certainly not encouraged by the institutions surrounding science, especially not through the writing standards of the community (Billig, 1998, 2011). But asking what psychology is and should be, how it studies its object and with what purpose may be a necessary first step in the opening of a dialogue, notwithstanding how much our myths have us believe that such questions can be answered once and for all.

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