CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING PSYCHOLOGY’S HISTORY

History isn’t just something that’s behind us; it’s also something that follows us.
—Henning Mankill, 2011

PREVIEW AND CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter opens by describing why it is important to know about psychology’s history. A contrast is drawn between traditional histories of psychology, which emphasize the contributions of distinguished psychologists, the outcomes of famous experiments, and the debates among adherents of different “schools” of psychology, and a newer approach, which tries to situate events and people in a broader historical context. This chapter also considers the methods used by historians to conduct research in history and the problems they face when constructing historical narratives from available data. After you finish this chapter, you should be able to:

■ Describe the events during the 1960s that led to a renewed interest in psychology’s history among psychologists
■ Explain why it is important for everyone to have some understanding of history
■ Explain why it is especially important for psychology students to understand psychology’s history
■ Distinguish between “old” and “new” history, as Furumoto used the terms
■ Understand the concept of an origin myth, and explain the purpose such myths serve
■ Distinguish between presentist and historicist views of history, and articulate the dangers of presentist thinking
■ Distinguish between internal and external histories of psychology, and describe the benefits of examining each
■ Distinguish between personalistic and naturalistic approaches to history
■ Define historiography and describe the various selection and interpretation problems faced by historians when they do their work
■ Explain how the process of doing history can produce some degree of confidence that a measure of truth has been attained
WHY TAKE THIS COURSE?

Psychologists have always been interested in the history of their discipline. Histories of psychology were written soon after psychology itself appeared on the academic scene (e.g., Baldwin, 1913), and at least two of psychology’s most famous books, E. G. Boring’s *A History of Experimental Psychology* (1929; 1950) and Edna Heidbreder’s *Seven Psychologies* (1933) are histories. It was during the 1960s, however, that significant interest in the history of psychology as a specialized area of research began. Many people were involved, but the major impetus came from a clinical psychologist with a passion for history, Robert I. Watson (1909–1980). He began with a call to arms, a 1960 *American Psychologist* article entitled “The History of Psychology: A Neglected Area” (Watson, 1960), in which he documented a paucity of articles about history in psychology journals and urged his colleagues to renew their interest in psychology’s history. Watson then mobilized a small group of like-minded psychologists within the American Psychological Association into a “History of Psychology Group.” By the end of the decade, this group had accomplished the sorts of things that mark the creation of a new specialized discipline—they formed professional organizations (e.g., Division 26 of the APA, otherwise known as the Society for the History of Psychology), they created journals (e.g., *The Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*), and they established institutional bases for the production of historical research (e.g., a graduate program at the University of New Hampshire; the Archives of the History of American Psychology at the University of Akron).

Today psychologists generally recognize the importance of knowing the history of their discipline, and a history of psychology course is offered in virtually all psychology departments and required for psychology majors in about half of those departments (Fuchs & Viney, 2002). Despite this consensus, students majoring in psychology are often surprised to find themselves in a course about the history of psychology. They check with their chemistry-major friends and find nothing comparable in that department. They examine the college catalog and discover that the closest course is one in the history of science, but the history department teaches it, not one of the science departments. What’s going on? Why is there a history of psychology course taught by a psychologist, but not a history of chemistry course taught by a chemist?

The rationale for a history of psychology course is important, and will be considered shortly. First, however, let’s examine the more general question of why it is important to study the history of anything. Is it true that “history is more or less bunk,” as Henry Ford once said (quoted in Simonton, 1994, p. 3), or is it more likely, in the words of Swedish novelist Henning Mankell (2011), that “history isn’t just something that’s behind us; it’s also something that follows us” (p. 220)?

Why Study History?

A typical answer to this question is that knowing history helps avoid the mistakes of the past and provides a guide to the future. These well-worn platitudes contain a germ of truth, but they are both simplistic. Concerning the “mistake” argument, rather than learning from the past, much of history appears to provide evidence that humans ignore the past. This possibility led the philosopher–historian G. W. F. Hegel to worry that the only true lesson of history is that people don’t learn anything from history (Gilderhus, 2000). This almost certainly overstates the case, but it is also true that knowing the past provides, at best, only a rough guide, for history never really repeats itself because all events are tied into the unique historical context in which they occur. History is also a less than reliable guide
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to the future. Historians recognize this—as psychology’s eminent historian, E. G. Boring, once wrote, “The past is not a crystal ball…. The seats on the train of progress all face backwards: you can see the past but only guess about the future” (1963a, p. 5)—but the acknowledgment seldom prevents them from venturing forecasts.

If knowing history is won’t prevent repeating mistakes, and if history is an imperfect (at best) means of forecasting the future, then what is left? The present. In the sentence immediately following the one I just quoted from Boring, he wrote: “Yet a knowledge of history, although it can never be complete and fails miserably to foretell the future, has a huge capacity for adding significance to the understanding of the present” (1963a, p. 5). I believe the single most important reason to study history is that the present cannot be understood without knowing something about the past—how the present came to be.

Think of any current event, and you will recognize that it is impossible to understand the event adequately without knowing some of the history leading to it. For example, consider some recent history within psychology. I am sure that you have heard about APA, the American Psychological Association. You might also know about or at least have heard of APS—the Association for Psychological Science.¹ You might even know that the APS is a fairly recent creature—it was born in 1988. Perhaps you also recognize that the APS seems more focused on scientific research than the APA, but you might be wondering why there need to be two organizations for psychologists. Knowing some history would help you understand this. Specifically, your understanding of why APS exists and its purpose would be vastly enhanced if you knew of the long-standing tensions between research psychologists and psychologists whose prime interest is in the professional practice of psychology (e.g., psychotherapy). The problem traces to APA’s very beginnings in the late 19th century and contributed to the formation of a separate group of “Experimentalists” in 1904 (the story of this remarkable group is elaborated in Chapter 7). Also, when the APA was reorganized after World War II, the divisional structure that exists today was designed in part to reconcile the conflicting goals of scientists and practitioners. The goodwill that accompanied the end of the war led those with different interests in psychology to unite, but the unity didn’t last long. After decades of frustration with APA, researchers formed their own group—APS. Without knowing something of this history, you could never have a clear understanding of the APS, why it exists today, or why there is lingering tension between APS leaders and the APA’s governing structure. And there are practical consequences. As a student, if you have an interest in becoming a psychologist, you will probably want to join one of these organizations as a student affiliate. Deciding which to join requires knowing something of the history—someone aiming for a career in the professional practice of psychology might be more likely to join APA, but a future experimental psychologist might be better served by joining APS.

Another aspect of the importance of the past for understanding the present is that knowledge of history helps us put current events in a better perspective. For instance, we sometimes believe that our current times are, as Charles Dickens wrote, “the worst of times.” We complain about the seemingly insurmountable problems and the ever-present dangers (e.g., from terrorism) that seem to accompany life in the early years of the 21st century. We long for the “good old days,” a simpler time when nobody locked their doors and a good house could be ordered as a kit from Sears (this is true). We think that there really used to be places like Disney World’s Main Street, USA. But knowing history is a good

¹In 2006, APS changed its name from the American Psychological Society to the Association for Psychological Science. The name change was designed to highlight the scientific focus of the organization, while at the same making it international in scope.
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corrective here. Noted historian Daniel Boorstin, in an essay entitled “The Prison of the Present” (1971), described this fallacy:

We sputter against the Polluted Environment—as if it had come with the age of the automobile. We compare our air not with the odor of horse dung and the plague of flies and the smells of garbage and human excrement which filled the cities of the past, but with the honeysuckle perfumes of some nonexistent City Beautiful. We forget that even if the water in many cities today is not spring-pure ..., still for most of history the water of the cities (and of the countryside) was undrinkable. We reproach ourselves for the ills of disease and malnutrition, and forget that until recently, enteritis and measles and whooping cough, diphtheria and typhoid, were killing diseases of childhood, ... [and] polio was a summer monster. (pp. 47–48)

Knowing history won’t give us easy answers to current problems, but it certainly can immunize us against the belief that these problems are many times worse than they used to be. In fact, knowing the past can provide a comforting connection with it, and being aware of how others have wrestled with similar problems can provide us with some present-day guidance. There is at least the potential for learning from the past.

Besides making it possible for us to understand the present better, studying history provides other benefits. For example, it forces an attitude adjustment, keeping us humble in two ways. First, we occasionally delude ourselves into thinking we know a lot (especially true in my profession—university teaching). Studying history is a good antidote. For example, I grew up in southeastern New England, not far from Plymouth, and I thought I knew something about the Pilgrims. However, having read Nathaniel Philbrick’s (2006) brilliant history of the Pilgrims, *Mayflower*, I am amazed by how little I knew—and by how much of what I thought I knew (e.g., about Thanksgiving) was dead wrong. Second, sometimes ignorance of the past can lead us to a kind of arrogance; we believe that the present is the culmination of centuries of progress and that modern-day accomplishments and thinking are more sophisticated and far surpass those of a crude and uninformed past. Knowing history, however, forces an understanding that each age has its own marvelous accomplishments and its own creative geniuses. Modern-day neuroscientists seem to make fascinating discoveries every day, but the importance of their discoveries and the quality of their scientific thinking do not surpass the elegance of Pierre Flourens’s 19th-century investigations of the brain (Chapter 3), which disproved phrenology.

Finally, studying history ultimately means searching for answers to one of life’s most fundamental yet perplexing questions: What does it mean to be human? To study the history of World War II is to delve into the basic nature of prejudice, aggression, and violence. To study the American Revolution is to examine the human desire for freedom and self-determination. To study the history of Renaissance art is to study the human passion for aesthetic pleasure. And to the extent that history involves people behaving in various situations, studying history means studying and trying to understand human behavior. For this reason alone, psychologists should be inherently attracted to the subject.

Why Study Psychology’s History?

The preceding rationale for studying history is sufficient by itself to justify studying psychology’s history, but there are additional reasons why psychologists should be interested in their ancestry. First, compared with other sciences, psychology is still in its infancy—not much more than 130 years old. Much of the content of the other psychology courses you have taken traces back through at least half of those years, and many of the so-called classic studies that you learned about (e.g., Pavlov’s conditioning research) formed a major part of the first half of those years. Hence, modern psychology is closely tied to its past, so being a literate student of psychology requires knowing some history.
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A second and related reason for an interest in psychology’s history among psychologists is that the field is still grappling with many of the same topics that occupied it a century ago. Thus, an important issue today is the heritability of traits ranging from intelligence to shyness to schizophrenia. This nature–nurture issue, first popularized more than 140 years ago by Sir Francis Galton (Chapter 5) and pondered by humans for centuries, reverberates through the history of psychology. Seeing the parallels between the arguments made now about the interactive influence of heredity and environment, and comparing them with those made in earlier times, you will gain a more informed understanding of the issue.

Earlier, a question was raised about the presence of a history of psychology course and the absence of a history of chemistry course. Whereas an understanding of current research and related issues is essential in psychology, the situation is somewhat different in chemistry. Although the history of alchemy, with its stories of how people tried to transform lead into gold, is fascinating and can teach us a great deal about how science works and evolves, it doesn’t inform today’s students about the chemical properties of lead or of gold. Chemists, who tend to think (naively, as it happens) of their science as steadily progressing from the errors of the past to the truth of the present, aren’t normally interested in cluttering their students’ minds with “old” ideas. There is a small element of truth to this model of science as advancing through history (nobody tries to turn lead into gold anymore), but it is nonetheless unfortunate that many scientists don’t see the value of studying the history of their discipline. At the very least, it would round out their education and teach them something about how scientific thinking has evolved. Indeed, there ought to be a history of chemistry course for chemistry students to take. Instead, they have to settle for a history of science course, typically taught in history rather than science departments. Psychology majors, on the other hand, are lucky—they get their own history course.

A third reason why the history of psychology course exists is that it can provide some unity for what has become a diverse and highly specialized field. Despite its youth, psychology in the early 21st century is notable for its lack of unity. Indeed, some observers (e.g., Koch, 1992a) have argued that a single field of psychology no longer exists, that a neuroscientist investigating the functioning of endorphins has virtually nothing in common with an industrial psychologist studying the effectiveness of various management styles. Yet all psychologists do have something in common—their history. For the psychology major who has taken a seemingly disconnected variety of courses ranging from developmental to abnormal to social psychology, the history course can serve as a synthesizing experience. By the time you reach the final chapter of this text, where the issue of psychology’s increased specialization is again addressed, you will have learned enough to begin understanding the interconnectedness among the different areas of psychology.

Fourth, an understanding of psychology’s history makes one a more critical thinker. By being aware of the history of various treatments for psychological disorders, for example, the discerning student is better able to evaluate modern claims for some “revolutionary breakthrough” in psychotherapy. A close examination of this allegedly unique therapy might reveal similarities to earlier approaches. The historically literate student also is aware that on many other occasions, initial excitement over a flashy new therapy (e.g., lobotomy) is tempered by a later failure to find convincing evidence that it works. Similarly, knowing history makes one skeptical about “large claims” (Helson, 1972), for example, the recent idea that all psychology can be known by understanding the brain and that neuropsychology, therefore, is the future of psychology. Those with an understanding of history will recognize the similarity to claims made in the 19th century about phrenology, will recognize that a brain scan showing activity in area X when a person is lying does not explain lying, and will understand why neuropsychology is sometimes referred to as the new phrenology (Satel & Lilienfeld, 2013).

Finally, the history of psychology course may be a history course, but it is also a psychology course. Thus, one of its goals is to continue educating about human behavior. Studying historical
individuals as they helped develop the science of psychology can only increase our understanding of what makes people behave the way they do. For instance, our understanding of scientific creativity can be enhanced by studying the lives and works of historically creative individuals (e.g., Hermann Ebbinghaus, described in Chapter 4, who created nonsense syllabus to study memory). Some insight into the psychology of controversy and the rigid, dogmatic adherence to one’s beliefs can be gained by studying the behavior of scientists engaged in bitter debate with their peers (e.g., the Baldwin–Titchener controversy, described in Chapter 7). In general, if all human behavior reflects a complex interplay between individuals and the environments they inhabit, then studying the lives of historical characters being shaped by and in turn shaping their environments can only increase our understanding of the factors that affect human behavior.

**KEY ISSUES IN PSYCHOLOGY’S HISTORY**

A common misconception of history is that historians simply “find out what happened” and then write it down in chronological order. As you will learn in the next two sections of this chapter, the process is considerably more complicated. When they are engaged in their craft, historians are affected by several important issues. These were nicely articulated by Furumoto, in a 1989 article distinguishing between what she referred to as “old” and “new” history.

The old history of psychology, according to Furumoto (1989), emphasizes the accomplishments of “great” psychologists and celebrates “classic studies” and “breakthrough discoveries.” Within psychology, the preservation and retelling of these “great events” helped psychology secure an identity as an established scientific discipline. The milestones, whether accurately described or not, are passed down from history text to history text. Furthermore, previous insights or achievements are valued only if they somehow “anticipated” or led to some modern idea or research outcome. Old research or theory that is of no current relevance is considered erroneous or quaint and is either discarded or seen as an example of “how far we’ve come.” Thus, from the standpoint of old history, the purpose of the history of psychology is to legitimize and even to glorify present-day psychology and to show how it has progressed from the murky depths of its unscientific past to its modern scientific eminence.

One effect of the old history thinking about the past is the creation of so-called origin myths. These are stories overemphasizing the importance of particular events in psychology’s history. Their purpose is to highlight the contrast between what is said to be a prescientific approach to some psychological phenomenon and the emergence of a more scientific strategy. For example, modern social psychologists consider their field to be one in which scientific methods are used to establish certain laws about human social behavior. Fair enough. Holding this belief, of course, raises the question of when social psychology became “experimental” (i.e., real science, and therefore “worthy”). That is, when did it originate? The further back in history this origin can be placed, the greater the legitimacy of an experimental social psychology (“Oh yes, we have been around for a very long time, using science to explore social behavior.”). If experimental social psychology could be said to originate in the 19th century, for instance, then the social psychologist can claim well over 100 years of research, suggesting that modern social psychology is (a) well established and (b) has been accumulating an extraordinary amount of scientifically based knowledge over the years.

These concerns led Haines and Vaughan (1979) to ask whether 1898 was a “‘great date’ in the history of experimental social psychology” (p. 323). Their answer: not really. This conclusion probably came as a surprise to many social psychologists because 1898 was the publication date for what has become a famous study by Norman Triplett, who wondered why cyclists seem to go faster when they

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race against others than when they ride alone. He created a simple apparatus that simulated racing and appeared to demonstrate that the presence of a competitor “facilitated” performance (Triplett, 1898). This is similar to a research phenomenon later called “social facilitation” and so, to social psychologists in the mid-20th century, Triplett’s study seemed to be an early experimental demonstration of the phenomenon. Hence, some (e.g., G. Allport, 1954a) argued that Triplett was the founder of experimental social psychology, and the cycling study was the origin point. Now, the Triplett study was interesting one, but it is hard to justify it as the start of experimental social psychology. Triplett certainly did not think it originated anything like a new discipline—he was just interested in cycling. And a strong research tradition in social psychology did not begin to develop in the aftermath of the study, as one might expect if the Triplett study was a turning point. Deliberate efforts to make social psychology research based did not occur until the 1920s, with the work of Floyd Allport (1924), whose work is mentioned briefly in Chapter 14, and a significant push toward experimental research by social psychologists didn’t occur until the work of Leon Festinger (also discussed in Chapter 14) in the 1950s. Yet modern social psychology texts still continue to trace the origins of experimental social psychology to Triplett, and the origin myth continues to be promoted.2

Old versus new approaches to psychology’s history can be characterized in terms of three contrasts. Old history tends to be presentist, internal, and personalistic. New history, on the other hand, is more historicist, external, and naturalistic.

Presentism versus Historicism

Earlier, I argued that a major reason for studying history is to better understand what is happening in the present. This is indeed a valid argument. On the other hand, to interpret and assess the past only in terms of present understanding is to guilty of presentism. In an editorial in the opening volume of the Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences, George Stocking (1965) contrasted presentism with an approach called historicism. As he described it, the presentist interprets historical events only with reference to modern knowledge and values, whereas the historicist tries to understand the same event in terms of the knowledge and values in existence at the time of the event. Because the historicist tries to place historical events within the overall context of their times, this approach is sometimes called a contextual approach to history. The danger of presentist thinking is that it misleads us into thinking that individuals in the past should have known better and that they ought to have foreseen what was coming. Consequently, we may be led to judge historical individuals more harshly than we ought to. “What were they thinking?” we say to ourselves.

To demonstrate the dangers of presentist thinking, consider some aspects of the history of intelligence testing. As you will learn in Chapter 8, in the years just before World War I, the American psychologist Henry Goddard was invited to Ellis Island in New York to help screen immigrants. Those deemed “unfit” for various reasons were returned to their country of origin. Goddard firmly believed that intelligence was an inherited trait and that it could be measured with a brand-new technology—something created in France and just beginning to be called an IQ test. Goddard used a version of this test to identify “feebleminded” immigrants, and his work contributed to the deportation of untold numbers of people. His conclusion that large percentages of immigrants were “morons” (a term he invented to describe

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2 A close reading of the Triplett study shows that the “social facilitation” explanation oversimplifies what he apparently found (Stroebe, 2012). Thus, only about half of the subjects in his study performed better in competition than by themselves. The others were unaffected or even adversely affected. Furthermore, subsequent statistical analysis (not available to Triplett in 1898) questioned whether the study found any differences at all.
a subcategory of feeblemindedness) might have contributed to the atmosphere that led Congress to pass restrictive immigration quotas in the 1920s. From today’s standpoint, on the basis of an additional 75 years or so of research, we know about the need for caution when using and interpreting IQ tests. Hence, we find it difficult to believe that someone as smart as Goddard could have behaved with such obvious bias. “What was he thinking?” we might ask ourselves. But to understand Goddard’s behavior, it is necessary to study it from the vantage point of the historical period in which it occurred instead of that of today. This means knowing about such things as (a) the powerful influence of Darwinian thinking and Mendelian genetics on the psychological testers of that day, which led easily to a belief that intelligence was a trait that had been naturally selected and enabled a physically weak species (humans) to adapt to their environment during the “struggle for existence” and was therefore inherited; (b) the nation’s fears of being overrun with immigrants (large-scale immigration was a fairly new phenomenon at that time); and (c) the assumption, not yet brought into question by such inventions as atomic bombs, that any new technology (e.g., IQ tests) with the “scientific” seal of approval meant “progress” and was therefore good. The list could be continued but the point is clear. Goddard’s work cannot be fairly evaluated by what we know today; it can be understood only in the context of its times. On the other hand, his work does have relevance for us in the present. Knowing about it can (a) help us better understand modern concerns about immigration—it’s not a new problem; (b) inform us of the subtle influence of racism and other forms of bigotry, even in intelligent people; and (c) make us properly cautious about the alleged wonders of new technologies that arrive in our own day. Furthermore, just because we attempt to understand Goddard within the context of his own time, this does not mean that we cannot judge his actions; but our criticisms should be made with some caution, taking the form of arguments that were also made by others during the period in question. Thus, although the past can help us understand the present, our knowledge about the present should not be used to judge the past.

The Goddard episode illustrates how difficult it is for us to avoid a presentist orientation (Hull, 1979). After all, we are the products of our own personal histories, and it is perhaps impossible to ask us to think like a person who never experienced the events of 9/11 or the impact of digital technology. Nonetheless, for the historian and the reader of history it is important to at least be aware of the dangers of a presentist view of history and to constantly seek to understand historical episodes on their own terms. One must recognize, as pointed out by historian Bernard Bailyn (Lathem, 1994), that “the past is not only distant, but different” (p. 53). He went on to write that the major obstacle in overcoming presentism (or “anachronism,” as historians often call it) is the problem of “overcoming the knowledge of the outcome. This is one of the great impediments to a truly contextualized history” (p. 53). As to how we might go beyond our knowledge of outcomes and overcome presentist thinking, Bailyn had this suggestion:

Somehow one has to recapture, and build into the story, contemporaries’ ignorance of the future . . . One . . . tries to avoid assigning the heroism or villainy that was unclear at the time but that was determined by later outcomes. And, if possible, one gives a sympathetic account of the losers. If one can, up to a certain point, work sympathetically with the losers, one can—in some small part at least—overcome the knowledge of the outcome. (pp. 53–54)

Let me close this section by giving you an example of presentist writing that I found while reading a biography of Sir Isaac Newton (White, 1997). Even good writers and historians can fall into the trap. One of Newton’s strong avocations was alchemy, the quest to create gold from base metals. In describing the alchemy interests of one of Newton’s predecessors, Paracelsus (famous in the history of medicine), the author wrote that “following many an alchemist in a stereotypical fixation with finding the unattainable and achieving the impossible, [Paracelsus] traveled Europe in search of the secrets of
the ancients, squandering much of his talent and any money he earned along the way” (p. 120; emphasis added). This is a good example of writing from the standpoint of knowing the outcome (alchemy failed), while ignoring the importance of alchemy to the history of science and the historical context that made alchemy a respected endeavor for a time.

**Internal versus External History**

Histories of psychology are often written by psychologists who wish to trace the development of the theories and research traditions held by various psychologists. This kind of approach is referred to as an **internal history**—what is written occurs entirely within (“internal to”) the discipline of psychology. Such an approach has the value of providing detailed descriptions of the evolution of theory and research, but it ignores those influences outside psychology that also influence the discipline. An **external history** considers those outside influences.

Internal histories are often referred to as histories of ideas. Typically, they are written by people trained in the specific discipline being analyzed, and they tend to be written by people with little or no expertise in history per se. They are inward looking, focusing on the development of ideas or the progression of research to the exclusion of the larger world. On the other hand, external histories take the broader view—they examine societal, economic, institutional, and extradisciplinary influences. An exclusively internal history is narrow and loses the richness of historical context, whereas an excessively external history can fail to convey an adequate understanding of the ideas and contributions of a discipline’s key figures. A balance is needed.

The interplay between internal and external history is demonstrated nicely in the history of cognitive psychology, the study of such phenomena as attention, memory, language, and thinking. The story of cognitive psychology is told in Chapter 14, but for now a sketch of it provides a nice contrast between internal and external history. From the standpoint of internal history, cognitive psychology’s rise in the United States is often seen in relation to the decline of behaviorism. Behaviorism was a force in American psychology throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and well into the 1950s. Part of its attraction was its seeming ability to explain, by means of conditioning principles, all that was important about behavior. Humans were a product of their conditioning history, so the argument went. One problem, however, became increasingly clear in the 1950s: Behaviorist accounts of human language were inadequate. The nature of language and the learning of language by children seemed to be inconsistent with conditioning principles. That is, **within psychology**, a shift began to occur from a behaviorist paradigm to one that emphasized cognitive factors.

External to psychology, there were several other forces at work that helped bring about what some called a cognitive revolution. First, it is no coincidence that interest in cognitive psychology occurred in parallel with the growth and development of computer science because psychologists began to see the computer as an interesting metaphor for the human brain. In both cases, information was taken in from the environment, “processed” in various ways internally, and then put in the form of some output. In memory research, for example, diagrams of memory processes looked just like computer flowcharts, tracking the flow of information through a system. Second, the momentum for a shift from behaviorist to cognitive models grew significantly in the 1960s, a decade of great disruption and change in American society. The cultural climate embodied by the phrase “change is the only constant” made it easier for psychologists to embrace change within their discipline. In sum, then, understanding the development of cognitive psychology requires knowing not just about the difficulties encountered by behaviorism (e.g., language) but also about developments in the wider world (computer science, the ’60s).
Personalistic versus Naturalistic History

In addition to the presentist–historicist and internal–external distinctions, one additional contrast is worth noting. That distinction is between a personalistic history, one that sees the actions of individual historical characters as the prime movers in history, and a naturalistic history, one that emphasizes the overall intellectual and cultural climate of a particular historical era—what the German philosopher Hegel called the *zeitgeist*.

According to a personalistic history, the important events in history result from the heroic (or evil) actions of individuals, and without those individuals, history would be vastly different. Their actions are said to provide history’s “turning points.” This approach is often associated with the 19th-century historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle, whose “On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History,” written in 1840, is best remembered for this line: “The history of what man has accomplished in this world is at bottom the history of the great men who have worked here” (quoted in Boring, 1963a, p. 6). According to this view, people like Newton, Darwin, and Freud changed the course of the history of science; without them, the history would have been completely different. From this standpoint, the preferred method of writing history is biography. As a consequence of this approach, so-called *eponyms* (Boring, 1963a) are created. That is, historical periods are identified with reference to the individuals whose actions are believed to be critical in shaping events. Thus, we read of Newtonian physics, Darwinian biology, and Freudian psychology.

The personalistic approach has intuitive appeal. As individuals, we like to think of ourselves as agents—as individuals who have an effect on our world. It is not much of a leap from this type of thinking to an assumption that history is also profoundly affected by individuals: “Since we are agents, we have an interest in the efficacy of agency” (Menand, 2011, p. 69). Although Edwin G. Boring (featured in this chapter’s Close-Up) favored a naturalistic model of history and argued that “history is continuous and sleek,” he recognized that influential people “are the handles that you put on its smooth sides” (Boring, 1963b, p. 130). Boring argued that the persistence of a personalistic approach to history results from several factors, including a human need for heroes and the need of hardworking scientists for personal recognition (e.g., Nobel Prizes). More important, if history is continuous and sleek, then it is also immensely complex. In seeking to understand it, we try to reduce the complexity to understandable dimensions—categorization is a universal cognitive process, essential for achieving understanding. Our recall of concepts like the Freudian unconscious and Pavlovian conditioning is easier when the eponyms serve as retrieval cues.

**CLOSE-UP**

*EDWIN G. BORING (1886–1968)*

It is unfortunate that psychology’s most famous historian has a name that students often associate with the general topic of history. In fact, E. G. Boring’s writings are lively and elegant. His version of psychology’s history has been criticized, but historians of psychology owe a great debt to Boring’s pioneering historical work.

While an engineering student at Cornell University, Boring first encountered psychology in the fall of 1905 by taking an elective course in elementary psychology taught by the celebrated E. B. Titchener (Chapter 7). Boring described the lectures as “magic, so potent that even my roommates demanded, each lecture day, to be told what had been said” (Boring, 1961b, p. 18). He was not converted at that point, however; he continued his engineering studies and earned a master’s degree in 1908. But after 2 years as an engineer for a steel company and as a high school teacher, he returned to Cornell and earned a PhD from Titchener in 1914. While at Cornell, Boring’s
research interests included (a) human maze learning, during which he met, fell in love with, and eventually married one of his research colleagues, fellow doctoral student Lucy May (who died in 1996 at the age of 109); (b) nerve regeneration, studied firsthand by severing a nerve in his arm and charting its recovery; (c) the learning processes of schizophrenics; (d) eyewitness accuracy; and (e) his dissertation topic, visceral sensitivity. Boring studied this last topic by learning to swallow a stomach tube to varying depths, then pouring various substances into the tube and noting the (often unpleasant) sensory effects (Jaynes, 1969b). Nobody could ever accuse Boring of not being involved in his work.

After finishing his degree at Cornell and staying on briefly as an instructor, Boring served in World War I in the Army testing program (Chapter 8), taught briefly at Clark University, and then went to Harvard in 1922, where he remained for the rest of his career. At Harvard, Boring spent the next decade building up the laboratory and trying to convince authorities that psychology should be a separate department, not just part of the philosophy department. This creation of a distinct psychology department did not occur until 1934. During the 1920s, he wrote his famous A History of Experimental Psychology (Boring, 1929), partly to further his political fight with the philosophers and administrators at Harvard, and partly to bolster basic research in experimental psychology at a time when most American psychologists seemed to be more interested in applied psychology (O’Donnell, 1979b).

In his years at Clark and Harvard, Boring’s work habits, in imitation of Titchener, were legendary. In his words:

[M]y friends, my children, and my students know how I have talked about the eighty-hour week in the fifty-week year (the 4,000-hour working year) and I have scorned those forty-hour academicians who take long summers off from work. I have no hobbies, except for a shop in my cellar. My vacations were never successful until I got a little study with a typewriter in it and could answer eight letters a day and write up the waiting papers. (Boring, 1961b, p. 14b)

Also in the tradition of Titchener, Boring taught the introductory course in psychology, believing that a student’s first encounter with psychology should be from the master. He even became a pioneer in the video course: 38 half-hour programs on Boston’s educational TV channel WGBH in 1960 featured Boring demonstrating various phenomena, but mainly sitting “on the corner of a table and talk[ing] in a friendly, enthusiastic, paternal manner to the red lights on whatever camera was on the air” (Boring, 1961b, p. 77; Figure 1.1).

APA’s Division 26 was established in 1965, and some hoped that Boring would be its first president. According to Hilgard, Boring refused to run for the office but agreed to be named “honorary president.” Boring’s increasing deafness kept him away from the division’s inaugural meeting during the APA 1966 convention, but he sent a note to be read, describing himself as the “ghost of History Past, when the interest in the history of psychology had not yet become as vigorous as it is now” (Hilgard, 1982, p. 310). Modern historians of psychology owe much to Boring’s example.
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The alternative to a personalistic history is a naturalistic history, an approach emphasizing the forces of history that influence individuals. The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy was a famous advocate of this determinist approach. One of his goals in writing the massive War and Peace was to demonstrate that history is moved by forces beyond the control of individuals. For Tolstoy, so-called great men like Napoleon were in reality mere agents of historical forces larger than themselves. In War and Peace he refers to kings and generals as history’s slaves: "Every act of theirs, which appears to them an act of their own will, is in a historical sense involuntary and is related to the whole course of history and predestined from eternity" (Tolstoy, 1869/1942, p. 671).

Boring vigorously promoted a naturalistic view of history. Especially in his later years, he championed the zeitgeist concept, both in the second edition of his famous A History of Experimental Psychology (Boring, 1950) and in numerous essays. For Boring, understanding history meant understanding the historical forces that influenced the men and women living in a particular era. Although not denying Darwin’s genius, for example, Boring argued that the concept of evolution was common in the 19th century and extended beyond just biology (to geology, for instance). Without Darwin, someone else would have produced a theory of biological evolution. Indeed, Darwin’s theory might have been called the Darwin–Wallace theory, in recognition of Alfred Russel Wallace, a contemporary of Darwin’s who independently developed virtually the identical theory (Chapter 5 tells this fascinating story). Great scientists can and do influence events, but simply focusing on individuals leaves unanswered the question of how those individuals were affected by the worlds in which they lived.

In support of the zeitgeist concept, Boring pointed to two kinds of historical events. In the first, called a multiple, two or more individuals independently make the same discovery at about the same time (Merton, 1961). Darwin and Wallace codiscovering natural selection at a time when evolutionary thinking was “in the air” is an example. Darwin’s grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, illustrates the second type of event, a discovery or a theory that is said to be “ahead of its time.” Like his more famous grandson, Erasmus developed a theory of evolution; but he did so in the 18th century, when belief in the immutability of species (i.e., each species is created in its finished form by God and doesn’t change over time) was stronger than in the 19th century.

Relying on the zeitgeist as a way of explaining history can be problematic, however. For example, the uncritical observer might be tempted to reify (i.e., give a concrete and detached existence to an abstraction) the term zeitgeist and consider it a controlling force, independent of the historical persons who in fact give it meaning. That is, in answer to the question, “Why did event X occur instead of event Y at time Z?” one might be tempted to answer, “Because of the zeitgeist.” But such an answer hardly explains the event in question. The concept of the zeitgeist invites one to examine the attitudes, values, and theories in existence at the time of some event to be explained, but it cannot exist by itself as some mysterious directing agent. As Ross (1969) pointed out with reference to the history of educational psychology:

> It has been stated, for example, that neither James, Dewey, Hall, Thorndike, Cattell, Galton, nor Darwin were necessary to the rapid development of educational psychology in America, for that was the trend of the “Zeitgeist.” But certainly we only know what the Zeitgeist in fact was by the way in which James, Hall, Cattell, Darwin and others behaved. If they had not thought and acted the way they did, neither would the “Zeitgeist” they are said to embody. (p. 257; emphasis in the original)

Thus, a balanced view of history recognizes the complex interrelationships between people acting and the environments in which they act. The characters we will encounter shortly were all products of the world in which they lived, but they also made decisions that helped form and transform their world. Wallace might have been inspired to write a paper proposing a theory of evolution that matched the
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essence of Darwin’s, but it is no accident that the term evolution is associated with Darwin and not with Wallace. It was Darwin who invested the years of research examining the intricacies of numerous species, and it was Darwin who followed up his initial writings with the monumental texts that brought evolution into its fullest development.

This Book’s Point of View

This section of the chapter began with a reference to Furumoto’s distinction between old and new history. Presentist, internal, and personalistic approaches typically go together and comprise what she referred to as the old history of psychology. It is a history that interprets events from the standpoint of the present, concentrates on the development of ideas within a discipline, and views progress as reflecting the accomplishments of important people. The new history of psychology, on the other hand, combines historicist, external, and naturalistic approaches. It tries to examine historical events on their own terms, with reference to the times in which they occurred, looks for the influence of extradisciplinary forces, and looks beyond great men and women to examine the contextual factors that helped to produce their ideas. Furumoto also pointed out that new history is more critically analytical than ceremonial and celebratory.

For historians of psychology conducting research, Furumoto’s description of the new history of psychology provides a clear set of guidelines. The best historical research being published today is historicist, external, and naturalistic. For the author of a textbook and the teacher of the history of psychology course, however, the prescriptions about how to proceed are not quite as clear. As Dewsbury (1990b) pointed out in a review of several history of psychology texts, it is important to distinguish between “scholarly research directed at colleagues and… textbooks directed at introductory students” (p. 372). For the latter, the ideals of the new history need to be incorporated into the course, but they must be weighed against a need to inform students about content that is relevant to the psychology curriculum. This book presents a history of psychology that embraces the values espoused by Furumoto, but it is important to remember that the course for which this text is designed is a psychology course as well as a history course. Thus, although it is important to understand Pavlov’s work within the historical climate of the early 20th century in Russia—especially the effects of the Russian Revolution of 1917—it is also important to understand the various classical conditioning phenomena that he investigated and how his work related to American behaviorism and influenced research on conditioning. It is important to understand the influence of computer science on the development of cognitive psychology, but it is also important for the psychology student to know about the difficulties that behaviorists experienced when trying to explain human language.

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The simplest definition of historiography derives from the origins of the word itself—it means “to write history.” But the term goes beyond the writing of historical narrative, referring also to theoretical issues like the ones just described, and to the methods that historians use when doing the historical research that eventually leads to written histories. Although the primary purpose of this book is to inform you about the history of psychology, a secondary goal is to give you some insight into the behavior of historians of psychology. That is, we will examine the kinds of data of interest to historians and the problems confronting historians as they do their work. At the outset, it is important to be aware of one crucial distinction. It might seem obvious, but accepting it allows one to realize that all history involves
some degree of human interpretation. The distinction, pointed out by British historian Keith Jenkins (1991), is between “the past” and “history.” They are not the same—as Jenkins pointed out, “the past is gone and history is what historians make of it when they go to work” (p. 8). Hence, the past refers to the infinite number of events that have occurred before the present moment, and the past can never be known because it is gone. What can be known is history—the manner in which traces of the past are selected, interpreted, and written into coherent narrative by professional historians. Whether those writings approach “truth” is an issue that is taken up at the end of the chapter. For now, let’s examine these traces of history and what historians do with them.

**Sources of Historical Data**

Writers of psychology’s history, especially textbook writers, have often relied on secondary sources to write their histories. A **secondary source** is a document that has been published and is typically an analysis or summary of some historical person, event, or period. These sources include books, articles published in journals, magazines, encyclopedia, and the like. Those doing research in the history of psychology, however, rely more heavily on **primary sources** of information, which are usually found in archives. An **archive** is normally an area within a university library that holds unpublished information. This primary source information includes university records, correspondence, diaries, speeches, minutes of the meetings of professional organizations, and documents donated by individuals connected in some way with the university. In addition to these separate university archives, historians of psychology often find primary source material at the Library of Congress and other governmental archives in Washington, D.C., and, especially, at the Archives of the History of American Psychology (AHAP), part of the Center for the History of Psychology at The University of Akron in Ohio. In general, primary source materials are items written or created at or near the time of some historical event, whereas secondary sources are written at some time after a historical event and serve to summarize or analyze.

AHAP was founded in 1963 by John Popplestone and Marion White McPherson (Figure 1.2), two clinical psychologists passionate about psychology’s history; the founding was one of a series of
events mentioned earlier that sparked research interest in psychology’s history in the 1960s. AHAP’s collection includes the papers of more than 700 psychologists and professional organizations; more than 1,500 pieces of original laboratory apparatus; approximately 20,000 photographs, 6,000 films, and 4,000 audio recordings; and over 12,000 psychological tests.

What can you expect to find in an archive? Just about anything. When looking into the records of a professional organization, for instance, you would probably find lists of officers and correspondence among them, minutes of meetings, early drafts of position papers, and the like. When examining the papers of an individual psychologist, you might find (a) letters between that person and other psychologists; (b) personal diaries and/or appointment calendars; (c) course lecture notes and course schedules; (d) laboratory protocols, drawings of apparatus, data summaries, and other laboratory-related information; (e) early draft manuscripts of writings that eventually became secondary sources; (f) photographs and films of people, places, and research equipment; and (g) minutes of professional meetings attended by the psychologist. There will also be some surprises: One startling example was reported in Civilization, published by the Library of Congress. A researcher was studying the 19th-century Viennese physician Carl Koller, who was experimenting with the use of cocaine as an anesthetic in eye surgery. One of the folders contained a small pharmacist’s packet containing, you guessed it, white powder. Federal authorities were called in to remove the drug, but the envelope remains in the archive collection, labeled as follows: “Remainder of the 1st dose of cocaine, which I used in my first cocaine experiments in August 1884. Dr. Koller” (“A Stash,” 1996, p. 15).

How does a researcher interested in psychology’s history know which archives to contact or visit when starting a project? Because their holdings are so extensive, AHAP is a good place to start. Even if it is not the primary repository for the papers of the person being studied, AHAP might hold some correspondence from that person in the papers it does have. Another good starting place is the university where the person in question worked. Third, bibliographic sources exist. Although a bit dated, the best known is A Guide to Manuscript Collections in the History of Psychology and Selected Areas (Sokal & Rafail, 1982). Suppose you are interested in the work of IQ researcher Henry Goddard, for instance. The guide briefly describes the contents of the Goddard papers, which happen to be held at AHAP. It also informs you of additional Goddard materials in the papers of Edgar Doll and Emily Stogdill at AHAP, and in the papers of developmental psychologist Arnold Gesell in the Library of Congress.

Historians also rely on their general knowledge to aid in their search. For example, some years ago I became interested in Edmund Clark Sanford (1859–1924), the first director of the psychology laboratory at Clark University (Goodwin, 1987). Through contact with the archivist there and two visits, I accumulated some information, but not a great deal. Sanford didn’t seem to save very much, or if he did, the information didn’t find its way to Clark. Some of the university records were helpful, however, in determining such things as laboratory purchases, and the papers of psychologist–university president G. Stanley Hall yielded some additional data, including one exciting discovery—a series of photographs taken in the laboratory in 1892, several of which are to be found in later chapters of this book. Many of them showed (or simulated, most likely) experiments in progress, thus providing a glimpse of what it was like to be doing research in psychology then. By searching through secondary sources, I knew about other psychologists who were contemporaries of Sanford. I also knew from his obituaries that Sanford was very close to E. B. Titchener of Cornell and Mary Calkins of Wellesley (Sanford died of a heart attack in 1924 on his way to give a talk at Wellesley). Visits to Wellesley and Cornell yielded more information. The Titchener papers were especially helpful—unlike Sanford, Titchener seemed to keep just about everything. I also wrote to about two dozen other archives that I guessed might be holding papers that Sanford might have written to his colleagues (this was before the days of e-mail). Copies of a few letters trickled in. At the same time, I was reading everything that Sanford published
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(not much, actually) and everything else that could shed some light on him and the world he inhabited (e.g., general histories of the decade of the 1890s, when Sanford was most productive at Clark).

Over the past decade, archival searching has been made considerably easier through electronic means. Archives frequently post “finding aids” (these are detailed listings of the contents of a particular collection) online, and sought-after documents are often available digitally. Other archival holdings can be discovered through Google searches. For example, as part of some research on the experimental psychologist Walter Miles, I was looking into his activities as a researcher at the Carnegie Nutrition Laboratory in Boston in the period from 1914 to 1922. From the Miles papers at AHAP, I knew that the laboratory’s director was Francis Benedict. A Google search for Benedict yielded a connection to his papers at the archives of the Harvard Medical School, which in turn led to e-mail correspondence with a helpful archivist there and, eventually, to some important information about Benedict and the Carnegie Lab (e.g., the details of three different trips made by Benedict to Russia, where he visited Pavlov’s laboratory and reported on Pavlov’s research).

The Miles papers at Akron are a rich source of information for historians of psychology, mainly because Miles seldom threw anything away (Goodwin, 2003). The collection fills 128 boxes, which occupy 70 linear feet on the shelves; the detailed finding aid alone runs to 756 pages (in a searchable .pdf file, fortunately). To give you some idea of the range of materials that can be encountered in an archival collection, I will share some of the Miles documents with you at various places throughout the text. The first of these “From the Miles Papers …” pieces describes an event during a trip to Europe that Miles made while working as a researcher at the Carnegie Lab.

FROM THE MILES PAPERS…

MILES MEETS HIS ACADEMIC GRANDFATHER

From April until August, 1920, while a senior researcher at the Carnegie Nutrition Lab in Boston, Walter Miles (1885–1978) toured Europe, his first trip abroad (the Miles papers includes a postcard sent to his son of the steamship Miles travelled on, his cabin marked by an X). The purpose of the visit was to reestablish links between the Carnegie Lab and similar European laboratories that had been disrupted by World War I; for Miles, it was also a chance to become acquainted with some of Europe’s leading scientists. During his trip, Miles visited 57 labs in 9 different countries. He also went to several conferences, including one for the British Psychological Society in London. There he met Edward Scripture for the first time. When Scripture was at Yale in the 1890s, his best known student was Carl Seashore. Miles, in turn, was a doctoral student of Seashore. In terms of their academic genealogy, then, Miles was a direct “descendent” of Scripture, his “academic grandson.” Miles was therefore eager to meet Scripture, but was disappointed in the encounter, and it appears that the presence of Miles made Scripture less than comfortable. As described in a letter to Seashore shortly after returning to Boston, Miles wrote:

In England I attended a meeting of the British Psychological [Society] in Regent Park, London, Bedford College for Women. Dr. Spearman was in the chair. The first paper for lecture, somewhat over an hour long, was by Dr. E. W. Scripture on “Speech Inscriptions in Normal and Abnormal Conditions.” I was very glad of an opportunity to see and hear Scripture….Scripture looks and dresses the part of a wealthy consultant doctor of the Harley Street group of London. His hair was cut very short and worn pompadour, he has a Vandyke beard, and at first impression you would hardly think him more than forty-five years. He spoke with a great deal of gesture. I [illegible] his young wife with whom, according to what Spearman told me, he eloped from New York. I believe she was his former stenographer. Following Scripture’s lectures, we had tea and at the end of this, while he was picking up his lantern slides, I introduced
myself. The conversation which ensued was rather one-sided. I had to do most of it. He seems, I thought, a bit embarrassed. He spoke presently of you and he was pleased at the great success you had made. Very shortly after the meeting reassembled to hear the paper of Major Klein on the subject of camouflage in land warfare I saw Scripture and this very smartly dressed young woman slip quietly away. (Miles, 1920)

The Edward Scripture story is one that often has been made into a morality tale about the consequences of excessive conceit—someone who went from being a talented and creative yet excessively arrogant researcher to a disgraced and marginal bit player, whose obituary in the American Journal of Psychology appeared 20 years after he died because his death went unnoticed (Boring, 1965). Scripture founded one of the first psychology laboratories in the United States, at Yale in 1892, wrote a popular description of the “new psychology” (highlighted at the start of Chapter 8) in 1895, and had every reason to think that he would quickly rise to the top of his profession. Yet he was fired from Yale just after the turn of the 20th century after a series of conflicts; he was also accurately accused of plagiarism, with comparisons of his sentences and those of the original source made public; and he was divorced by his wife and more or less exiled to Europe. There he developed an expertise in speech pathology and, as seen in the Miles letter, made a living as a consultant on speech disorders in London.

Problems with the Writing of History

The journey from archive visits to a published paper or book is long, often tedious, occasionally exhilarating, but never easy. Along the way, the historian must confront two interrelated difficulties. First, there are problems associated with the collection of data. The historian must evaluate the validity of available data and select a subset of those data for inclusion in the historical narrative. The second problem concerns analysis. Historians are human, so their interpretations of the data will reflect their beliefs, their theories about the nature of history, and potentially, their biases.

Data Selection Problems Historians usually collect more information than will make its way into a historical narrative. Hence they must make judgments about the adequacy and relevance of the data at hand, and they must select a sample of the data while discarding the remainder. Sometimes, despite the large amount of data that might be collected during an archive visit, important pieces might be missing, further complicating the historian’s life. For example, Titchener and Sanford wrote to each other frequently, but only Titchener saved his correspondence. The Titchener papers contain several hundred letters from Sanford to Titchener, but the Sanford papers include none from Titchener. In trying to piece together the Sanford–Titchener relationship, the historian gets only half the story.3

Sometimes information that could aid a historian can be lost through what insurance adjusters would call an act of God. For example, after painstakingly tracking down descendants of Mary Whiton Calkins (Chapter 6), the APA’s first woman president, Furumoto discovered that many of Calkins’s papers had been entrusted to her younger brother. Unfortunately, he put them in his cellar, where they were destroyed by flooding that accompanied a famous New England hurricane in 1938 (Furumoto, 1991).

Data might also be missing on purpose. In the last year of his life, John Watson, behaviorism’s founder (Chapter 10), burned all his remaining notes, correspondence, and rough manuscripts. According to Watson’s biographer, when “his secretary protested the loss to posterity and to history, Watson only replied: ‘When you’re dead, you’re all dead’” (Buckley, 1989, p. 182). Similarly, on two separate

3More than half, actually. After about 1910, Titchener often made and kept carbon copies of his letters.
occasions Sigmund Freud also destroyed his papers, partly to make it difficult for others to trace the sources of his ideas (Chapter 12 details one of these episodes).

In addition to missing data, some information might be restricted by the donor and inaccessible to the historian. Even someone with the status of E. G. Boring could be denied. Writing to John Popplestone of AHAP, Boring indicated that even as a known historian and a faculty member at Harvard, he had been denied access to some papers at the Harvard archives. In his words:

I trust the general atmosphere of the Archivists at Harvard. This is because I have been denied access to some things that are none of my business, graciously denied it because I am a Harvard professor. But, nevertheless, shut off from certain files of William James. (Popplestone, 1975, p. 21)

Beyond dealing with missing or incomplete information, the historian must make judgments about the adequacy of the available data. We know that eyewitness descriptions of everyday events can be wrong, that two witness accounts can differ substantially. If eyewitness unreliability can be demonstrated easily in modern psychology laboratories, then it is safe to say that the same lack of reliability exists for eyewitness accounts of historical events. A good example of this was experienced by Boring. While preparing a history of Titchener’s Experimentalists (Chapter 7), Boring wrote to colleagues who had been to the meetings, asking for firsthand descriptions. There were numerous discrepancies among the letters, including one amusing example from a colleague who recounted to Boring in great detail a dinner conversation with Harvard’s Hugo Münsterberg at the 1917 meeting at Harvard. Boring wrote back gently reminding his friend that Münsterberg had died in 1916 (Goodwin, 2005).

Information found in someone’s correspondence or diary can also be of questionable value. Was the letter writer providing insight into the personality of a colleague or merely passing on unsubstantiated gossip? When the diarist described the meeting as meaningless and a waste of time, would others at the same meeting draw the same conclusion? Can letters and diaries be slanted by the writer’s knowledge that historians might someday read his or her words? To what extent do the contents of letters and diaries reflect the personal prejudices of the writer? I think you can see the difficulty here.

Those who create the data that eventually occupy archives are human and therefore susceptible to the subtleties of human belief, preconception, and bias. Those who explore the archives and write the history are also human and subject to the same frailties. By virtue of their training, historians are more disciplined than laypeople; nonetheless, when making decisions about what information to select for historical analyses and narratives, the historian is not a machine. Boring expressed the problem eloquently in the preface to his 1942 text on the history of research in sensation and perception:

Indeed, so much a matter of selection is the preparation of an historical text, that I am sobered by the responsibility. The [history] text of 1929 has existed long enough for me to see how the mood that determined the choice of an afternoon’s exposition can fix the “truth” of a certain matter upon graduate students for years to come. With industry and patience one may avoid the falsification of facts, but those virtues are not enough to make one wise in choosing what to ignore. For that one also needs the wisdom and the integrity of objectivity, and who knows for sure whether he commands such? (Boring 1942, p. viii; emphasis added)

As you will learn in a few paragraphs, this passage from Boring is ironic. One of the themes of modern historiography within psychology is that Boring’s writings reflect a strong bias for a specific brand of psychology. It also appears that he was motivated in part by the political and institutional context of his time.
Interpretation Problems  Winston Churchill is alleged to have said history would be kind to him because he was going to be the person writing it. Historians normally try to be objective though, while realizing that all historical narrative will necessarily reflect something about the writer. Decisions about selection and about writing history both involve interpreting information, and those interpretations are influenced by the individual characteristics of the historian and by the features of the historical context in which the historian is writing. That is, historians will be influenced by their preconceptions, by the amount of knowledge they already have, as well as by the theories they hold about the nature of history (e.g., personalistic versus naturalistic emphases). In addition, even without necessarily being aware of it, historians can be influenced by the historical context in which their histories are being written. For example, you will discover in Chapter 4 that the work of Wilhelm Wundt has been reevaluated recently (e.g., Blumenthal, 1975), and many of his ideas have been found to be similar to those of modern cognitive psychologists. This similarity would not have been noticed before the advent of modern cognitive psychology—Blumenthal was writing at the height of the so-called cognitive revolution in psychology. Thus, historical characters are not the only ones influenced by the historical context in which they live; historians are affected as well.

The famous 1929 history written by Boring is a case in point. You know from this chapter’s Close-Up that Boring was a devoted student of E. B. Titchener, and in the 1920s, he was a vigorous advocate for the development of a separate psychology department at Harvard that would emphasize “pure” laboratory research rather than application. Both of those facts played a role in the way he wrote his 1929 history text. First, his training as an experimental psychologist in Titchener’s laboratory at Cornell surely affected his overall conception of psychology. More specifically, it influenced what Boring thought about Wundt, in whose laboratory Titchener earned a PhD in 1892. In general, Boring believed that Titchener’s brand of experimental psychology, called structuralism, was virtually identical to Wundt’s psychology, and that Titchener had merely imported it to America. In fact, Wundt’s system was quite different from Titchener’s system. Because of Titchener’s influence on Boring, combined with the fact that Titchener translated much of Wundt’s work and that Boring was not fully knowledgeable about some of Wundt’s nonexperimental writings, the distinctions between Titchener and Wundt were lost. Thus, when writing his history, Boring’s description of Wundt was filtered through Titchener’s version and was consequently flawed. Because most psychologists trained in the period 1950 to 1980 learned their history by reading Boring’s monumental *A History of Experimental Psychology* (1929; 1950), the mythological identification of Wundt’s and Titchener’s systems became conventional wisdom.

A second distortion in Boring’s history relates to his emphasis on basic experimental psychology to the exclusion of applied psychology. As O’Donnell (1979b) has shown, Boring was disturbed by the growing status of applied psychology, especially mental testing. Believing basic laboratory research to be in jeopardy, he took several steps to restore its standing. One was writing the first edition of his history in 1929, which largely ignored the work of a substantial number of psychologists who were busily applying psychological principles to education, mental health, and the workplace. For instance, Boring (1929) began his brief section on mental testing by writing that “the history of mental tests can conveniently be excluded from the history of experimental psychology” (p. 545). The reader of his 1929 history could be excused for believing that applied psychology barely existed. In fact, as you will learn in Chapter 8, applications occupied center stage in America in the 1920s and 30s.

A common misconception of history goes like this: The events occurred in the past; now that they have been lined up chronologically and described in a historical narrative, that’s the end of it. As the E. G. Boring case shows, however, historical analyses are in continual need of revision in the light of
new information and new ways of examining old information. In recent years, for instance, scholars (e.g., Leahey, 1981) have taken a fresh look at the relationship between Wundt’s and Titchener’s ideas and the role of application in the development of psychology in America. As a result, newer histories describe the Wundt–Titchener differences more accurately and document the pervasive influence of applied psychology.

Comparing different editions of a history text can illustrate this reexamination process. For example, one popular history text, clearly influenced by Boring in its early editions, also shows the impact of the recent scholarship on Wundt in its later editions. In the book’s third edition (Schultz, 1981), Wundt is described in a chapter that has structuralism in its title. The following chapter, on Titchener, refers to Wundtian psychology being “transplanted” to America by Titchener and includes this sentence: “A knowledge of Wundt’s psychology provides a reasonably accurate picture of Titchener’s system” (p. 87). Six years later, in the fourth edition, structuralism no longer appears in the title of the Wundt chapter, there is an explicit description of the problems with Boring’s historical account, and the Titchener chapter opens by saying that the systems of Wundt and Titchener were “radically different,” and that Titchener “altered Wundt’s system dramatically while claiming to be a loyal follower” (Schultz & Schultz, 1987, p. 85).

The important lesson for the reader of history is to be alert to the dangers of assuming that if something is printed in black and white, it somehow must be true. Rather, it is important to read histories, including this one, with a healthy dose of skeptical awareness that other information might have been selected for inclusion in the narrative and that other ways of interpreting the historical record exist. As Bailyn (Lathem, 1994) put it, “there is no end to the writing of history—nor should there be, because new questions come up and new techniques develop, new data are discovered, and succeeding generations will and should tell the story differently” (p. 94). This raises an interesting question: Can history ever uncover the truth?

**Approaching Historical Truth**

From the foregoing discussion, you might be tempted to accept a version of historical relativism in which five historians make five different claims for truth and there is no reasonable way to decide among them. A degree of relativism among historians is an outgrowth of a reaction against traditional history, which held that the job of the historian is to search out the facts of “what really happened” and place them into a narrative with enough style to attract readers. The outcome was a tendency to write history from the standpoint of what happened to those in positions of power and influence, while ignoring the rich variety of alternative perspectives. Thus a traditional history of the American West, taught to American schoolchildren and grounded in a belief in Manifest Destiny, glorified the rugged pioneer who persevered in the face of daunting obstacles, including wild men who liked to shoot arrows. It is clear, though, that the very same history could be written from the standpoint of the Native American who valiantly defended the homeland against invasion by wild men who liked to shoot guns.

The critique of the narrowness and arbitrariness of traditional history has had the meritorious effect of enriching our knowledge of it. Thus we have come to recognize that history extends beyond the lives, deeds, and misdeeds of white males; it must be more inclusive. On the other hand, an unfortunate consequence of this broadening has been a relativism that, taken to extreme, can lead to absurd claims like the one made occasionally that the Jewish Holocaust in World War II never really happened but was merely “constructed” and exaggerated out of a few isolated events (said to have explanations other than genocide) by historians sympathetic to the Jewish movement who wished to encourage the creation of the nation of Israel following the war (Israel was created in 1948, three years after the close of World
SUMMARY

Why Take This Course?

- Interest in the history of psychology has grown steadily since the mid-1960s, as reflected in the creation of professional organizations for historians of psychology, journals, archival collections, and graduate programs.
- Knowing history might occasionally help us to avoid mistakes of the past and to predict the future, but its most important value is that it helps us understand the present. Knowing history puts current events into a better perspective; without knowing some history, we cannot understand current events.
- Knowing history can immunize us against the belief that our current time has insurmountable problems, compared to the “good old days.” Every age has its own set of problems. Knowing history also reduces the tendency to think that
modern-day accomplishments represent a culmination of the “progress” we have made from the inferior accomplishments of the past.

- Because psychology is a relatively young science, much of its history is recent and of relevance for understanding psychological concepts and theories. Also, many issues of concern to early psychologists (e.g., nature–nurture) are still important.

- The history of psychology course can provide a synthesizing experience, tying together the loose threads that comprise the diverse specialties of modern psychology.

- Knowing about historical examples of supposed breakthroughs in psychological research or practice, or new theories that were shown to be pseudoscientific, the student of history is able to evaluate modern claims more critically.

- Because the history of psychology course informs the student about people behaving within their historical context, the course provides further understanding of human behavior.

**Key Issues in Psychology’s History**

- The traditional approach to the history of psychology has been presentist, internal, and personalistic, and it tends to create what are called origin myths. Recently, historians have tended to be more historicist, external, and naturalistic.

- The presentist evaluates the past in terms of present knowledge and values, often passing judgment unfairly. The historicist tries to avoid imposing modern values on the past and tries to understand the past from the standpoint of the knowledge and values existing in the past.

- An internal history of psychology is a history of the ideas, research, and theories that have existed within the discipline of psychology. An external history of psychology emphasizes the historical context—institutional, economic, social, and political—and how this context influenced the history.

- A personalistic approach to history emphasizes the major historical characters and argues that history moves through the action of heroic individuals. When historical periods are labeled with reference to people, those labels are called eponyms (e.g., Darwinian biology). A naturalistic approach emphasizes the zeitgeist, the mood or spirit of the times, as the prime moving force in history. The existence of multiples, and of people with ideas said to be “ahead of their times,” is consistent with a naturalistic view.

**Historiography: Doing and Writing History**

- Historiography refers to the process of doing research in history and writing historical narratives.

- Historians rely on both primary and secondary sources of information. A secondary source is a document that has been published. Primary source materials constitute the raw data for historians and include documents created at or near the time of the historical event in question (e.g., diaries, letters).

- Historical research often takes place in archives, which hold primary source information such as diaries, notes, original manuscripts, and correspondence, as well as secondary source information. The major archive for historians of psychology is the Archives of the History of American Psychology.

- Archival collections can be extensive, but they can also be incomplete and have important information missing for various reasons. The information that is available is subject to numerous sources of error (e.g., the biases of the diary writer; the vagaries of eyewitness memory).

- Historians are faced with two major problems: selection of information for their historical narratives and interpretation of the information at hand. These decisions can reflect bias on the part of the historian, and they can reflect the historical context within which the historian is writing. Nonetheless, most historians believe that some degree of truth can be reached through the open exchange of information and by examining historical events through a variety of perspectives.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Explain why “understanding the present” is a more compelling reason for studying history than the traditional arguments about avoiding the mistakes of the past and predicting the future.

2. Explain why it is important for students of psychology to understand psychology’s history.

3. What is the point made by Boorstin in his essay “The Prison of the Present”?
4. Use Triplett’s study as a way to explain the concept of an origin myth.

5. Define presentism, give an example of presentist thinking, and explain the dangers of this manner of looking at history.

6. Explain why a historicist approach to history is sometimes called a contextualized history.

7. Distinguish between internal and external histories. Use the example from cognitive psychology to illustrate the point.

8. What is a personalistic history, how is it related to the concept of an eponym, and what are its limitations?

9. What is a naturalistic approach to history, and what kinds of evidence are used to support this approach?

10. Distinguish between primary and secondary sources of information, and describe some of the primary sources likely to be found in an archive.

11. Distinguish between “the past” and “history.”

12. Give examples from psychology’s history that illustrate the data selection problems that all historians face.

13. Use the example of Boring’s famous text to illustrate the interpretation problems that face historians.

14. In *Telling the Truth about History*, the authors describe the process of arriving at historical truth in Darwinian terms. Explain what they mean, and explain why they would argue that although absolute truth might not be reachable, some historical accounts are “truer” than others.