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A Beginner's Guide to Cultural Media Criticism of The History of Psychology

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Introduction

Exploring the historic event of psychology from an interdisciplinary perspective will bring a potentially richer and fuller picture than that of a singular view. This *interdisciplinary* way of thinking has quickly become a formative influence in the European university. Approaching the subject matter from not one or another academic discipline, but rather, from between two or more subject matters has proved to be useful to contemporary European intellectuals. Mostly following the research of early critical theory scholars, the interdisciplinary approach has much to offer to the field of historical psychology. The main tools, concepts, and theoretical frameworks of cultural media analysis are presented and explained here, with pertinent examples from the history of psychology. A new context, framework, and approach is explored which can be useful to the historian of psychology.

The interdisciplinary exploration of the history of psychology undertaken in this article will be focused on historiography and cultural media theory. Through an amalgamation of these two disciplines, we understand not only the story of psychology, but also the ideological context within which it exists. This interdisciplinary approach, which has been embraced in the universities of Germany, France, and Switzerland has also spawned the

establishment of new research centers and experimental academic institutes in all areas of Eastern and Western Europe. This article will explore this aspect through a cultural media analysis of psychology.

The history of psychology has been approached as a subfield within the discipline of western, empirical, psychology. From this perspective, certain observations, narratives, and conclusions have become standardized and accepted as empirical and factual. The underlying ideology of this approach reveals critical aspects of the history of psychology, while simultaneously concealing other aspects of the story of the discipline. When a perspective of this field of study is taken from outside the codified discipline, new aspects of the narrative are unconcealed which profoundly influence how one understands the discipline. The perspective of this paper will be that of European, cultural media analysis. Through this interdisciplinary approach, new and profound aspects of the field and its subject matter can be excavated, moving towards a postmodern archeology of psychology.^a

Cultural media analysis seeks to understand the history of psychology by analyzing the ideological bedrock that shapes the view of the history itself. This article will introduce the main concepts and techniques of field, while reflecting on the history of psychology, in an attempt towards *unconcealing* the ideological constraints of that history. The concepts of cultural media analysis will be presented with examples from the history of psychology and a fresh look at that history will unfold in the proceeding considerations from the cultural media analysis viewpoint.

What is Cultural Media Analysis?

Cultural analysis of the history of psychology is a shift in perspective, a necessary dislodging of a fixed standpoint which ultimately reveals aspects of the subject matter that are otherwise shrouded from view. By approaching the history of psychology with this methodology, historians of psychology distance themselves from the field of psychology. This distancing offers a fresh point of view on the subject matter, one that yields new understandings that can be entered into the historical conversation.

Cultural media analysis is *interdisciplinary*, using tools and methodologies from many academic disciplines including the humanities, social, and physical sciences.^b A cultural media analysis is also *political* in that it opens up a greater social dialogue regarding the area of study. Because critical media theory analyzes the social implications of power structures within a culture, it is inevitable that the analysis itself will become a cultural artifact that is *self-reflexive*. In other words, the act of doing cultural media analysis brings an awareness of certain aspects of the topic of study that will undergo scrutiny and eventual change. What makes cultural critical analysis powerful, and oftentimes controversial, is its implicit political power. Such analysis is not simply a taxonomy of events, a structuring of a narrative, but an integrated part of that story itself.

In his article, *History Without the Past*,^c Thomas Leahey describes a “new history of psychology” that sounds much more in step not only with cultural media studies, but also with new movements in historiography itself. Leahey describes several “sins” of the old, traditional history of science. Much of what Leahey describes (*Whig history, presentism, internalist views, great man histories, historical stereotyping,*

etc...) is conducive to the cultural analyst’s perspective. For example, Leahey’s description of “Great Man” myths, approaching history as a succession of male “giants” who serve as the legends of psychology, concurs with cultural media theory’s interest in *exclusion* based on sex, gender, or disability. Leahey describes other “sins” of the old history of science that dovetail with cultural media analysis including *stereotyping, difference, assimilation, exclusion, othering, and assimilation*. These concepts of cultural theory are used to understand not only the history of psychology, but also, the underlying ideology that shapes that history.

In *A History of Psychology* Leahey describes science as a worldview. Citing philosopher Thomas Nagel, Leahey describes the scientist’s “view from nowhere;” the ideology that science can achieve objective knowledge, “a description of the world in which people play no part at all, knowledge that has no point of view”.^d The cultural theorists would view this as *normalized ideology*. The scientific “view from nowhere” is, in fact, a view from somewhere. The concept of independent *objectivity* is an ideological point of view that has a rich tradition in philosophy. In other words, the “view from nowhere” is itself an ideology that will shape the perception of anything viewed from that place.

Cultural media analysis joins here with rhetorical, Marxist, and psychoanalytic media theory to question the very presupposition of an independent object separated from a perceiving subject. This area of critical media studies examines the fundamental ideology of what is called the “subject-object split,” an ideology that the Gestalt psychologists called into question. The Gestalt psychologists, in line with critical media theory, explored the way the ideology of a *knowing subject* influenced the theories and conclusions we come to in

science. Cultural media theory, and Gestalt psychology, both view an object enmeshed within the subject, the subject as an active participant in creating the object that is understood to be “out there”.

The cultural media theorist views history not as a chronology of facts, but rather as a construction of arguments. The approach attempts to understand surface level artifacts at a deeper, underlying, symbolic level. The cultural media theorist believes that through understanding the underlying ideology of a culture, certain aspects of the culture will become evident that were previously concealed. The ideology is, in fact, a questioning of ideology, a treatment of *facts as arguments*, and a pragmatic effort to not only understand, but also practically apply the methods of cultural analysis towards a more effective way of living and knowing.

The Categorization of Culture

To understand the position of the cultural media theorists, as well as the discipline’s understanding of the history of psychology, one must first understand the concept of culture, from the critical media theorist’s position. “Culture is simply what human beings produce and the means by which we preserve what we have produced.”^e As Brian Ott and Robert Mack define it, “the ‘building blocks’ of culture fall into roughly three categories”.^f These three categories are: *physical culture*, *social culture*, and *attitudinal culture*.

Physical culture consists of any artifacts that are produced by the people of that culture. “Artifacts are any of the material aspects of daily life that possess widely shared meanings and manifest group (national, social, political) identification to us”.^g In media studies, artifacts include all material aspects of a culture. In the history of psychology it would include lectures,

journals, books, instruments, laboratories, classrooms, and virtually everything that is a product of, or utilized by, the discipline. The artifact is a *symbolic medium* that represents the culture of psychology.

Social culture refers to the codes, rules, and structures that served to produce the physical artifacts. These are the practices and conventions of psychology that underlie the physical culture itself. For example, through studying the various physical media of journals, books, and laboratories, the underlying social culture of experimental empiricism is revealed to the media archeologist. These physical media symbolically represent the underlying social structure of the history of psychology, as well as psychology itself.

Attitudinal culture reflects the attitude of psychology. When physical and cultural artifacts are taken together, one begins to understand the position from which the historian of psychology is looking. Emphasis on empiricism and fact, as well as the predomination of *sex*, *gender*, and *education* of the manufacturers of the artifacts, reveal certain ideological and attitudinal influences within that point of view.

Cultural analysis views culture as *rhetorical*, in the sense that it functions symbolically. Culture is not seen as something that is biologically intrinsic to human beings, but rather a function of *shared symbolic systems* among human beings. Images and words are transmitted between individuals and are symbolically meaningful to the individuals within that culture. In the culture of psychology, and the history of psychology, experimentation, *presentism*, and *hagiography* all carry symbolic power that is significant to members of these two cultures. The symbol holds a specific meaning within a particular culture. For example, the tradition of printed publication in psychology holds a certain

symbolic meaning. The printed word, from a cultural analysis, takes on a privileged status over the spoken word only when the culture itself agrees upon this rhetorically. There is no rationale that a spoken exposition of an historic topic should be less legitimate than a published exposition of a topic, except for the accepted, symbolic, legitimation of the published text.

Cultural Media Analysis and Ideology

Cultural analysis also views culture as *ideological*. Ideology is the underlying structure that shapes how we come to see the world and the object that we are attempting to understand. The origin and function of ideology is contested within the field of cultural media analysis, and is typically reduced to the viewpoints of Marx and Althusser.^h Generally speaking, ideology is seen as the unconscious, unquestioned ideas that shape and define our understanding of the world. The cultural media analyst seeks to uncover these ideologies with hope that in doing so certain biases will be understood that will permit a new experiencing of the world. According to Ott and Mack, cultural theorists describe four ways in which ideology shapes our experiencing of the world.ⁱ

Limitation refers to the ideological function that endorses and legitimates certain approaches while diminishing other perspectives. For example, certain schools of thought within the field of psychology endorse laboratory experimentation while others promote observation and description. The laboratory-centered schools of thought are partial towards experimental “cause and effect,” i.e. “scientific” psychology. Even though observation and description are widely accepted forms of scientific research, the experimentally inclined perspectives tend to limit their understanding of the field to experimentation. This limitation might

offer concrete forms of evidence for theories, but it also limits those perspectives to certain aspects of their subject matter. Excluding evidence that is not experimentally gathered is a limitation to the understanding of the subject matter itself.

When certain schools of thought repeatedly limit what is accepted as legitimate evidence the limitations can become *normalized*. Normalization takes place when a certain procedure or technique is advanced to the point that it becomes “the normal way things are done.” In psychology, we train our students with textbooks that repeatedly emphasize the need for “empirical” evidence. Although a survey of introductory textbooks will reveal that empirical research includes *observation, correlation, biological measurement, as well as experimentation*, the experimental method is repeatedly sanctioned as being superior. Through repeated emphasis of experimental research, this one method becomes normalized as *the* method of a scientific psychology. Schools of thought that use other empirical methods of research (such as naturalistic observation) are often depicted as substandard to experimentation. However, this limits the scientist from a full, unbiased understanding of all aspects of the subject matter. For example, certain areas of affective and behavioral, social and personal, interactions are observable only in an undisturbed, naturalistic setting. The introduction of the unnatural laboratory setting influences the outcome of the research. There are various aspects of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral phenomenon that are not conducive to experimentation. Should these aspects be ignored for the sake of the certainty of “*cause and effect*”? By repeatedly emphasizing the importance of the experimental method, that method becomes normalized, which reveals to us

an important aspect of the ideology of the science of psychology: *maximized certainty at all costs*.

When certain methodologies are limited and normalized within a culture, they become privileged. *Privileging* is the effect of ideology that serves as a function of power over other methodologies. Privileging serves as the way one ideology maintains control, power, and *legitimation* over other methods of research and theories. In psychology, we have come to see the privileging of experimental schools of thought over descriptive schools of thought. Cognitive and biological psychology hold not only the institutional privilege in psychology, but also the economic power through research grants and professorships. In the recent history of psychology we have seen the privileging of behaviorism until the 1960s, and cognitive-neuro psychology in our present time. Until the 1960s psychologists practicing research outside the ideology of behaviorism were largely excluded from professorships and research funding.^j The same can be said of today for cognitive and biological psychology, by examining the description of nearly all faculty position advertisements. Privileging reveals the underlying ideology of the science of psychology, as well as the potential limitations through *exclusion*.

When a culture, in our instance the culture of psychology, views itself as its ideology, it becomes, as Althusser described, *interpellated*.^k Althusser argued that individuals become so enmeshed with a prevailing ideology that they become that ideology. In this way, humanist psychologists actually identify themselves as humanists, not only as a theoretical position, but also as persons. The same would hold true for all of the schools of thought of psychology. This raises the concern of a humanist, psychodynamic,

evolutionary, behavioral, cognitive, or neurobiological bias in research.

How Ideology is Spread

The contemporary approach to the history of psychology has been described by Furomoto as “critical rather than ceremonial, contextual rather than simply a history of ideas, and more inclusive, going beyond the study of ‘great men’.”^l This perspective is conducive with the cultural media analysis of the *processes of ideology*, or how an ideology becomes prevailing in a culture. As contemporary historians of psychology we might be interested in how the neurobiological and cognitive schools of thought have become the dominant way of *doing* psychology. Cultural media analysis describes three processes of how ideology is spread. These include *myth*, *doxa*, and *hegemony*.

A photograph appearing in many introduction to psychology textbooks is that of behaviorist B.F. Skinner posing in front of a complicated computer, wearing a white lab coat, while holding a white lab rat. We can examine this artifact not only as a photograph of Skinner, but also as text that can be read. The symbolism of the computer, lab coat, and lab rat are clear: Skinner is a scientist.

Roland Barthes, in his text “Mythologies,” describes how we can read images as texts, communicating messages through symbols.^m These symbolic texts express and dispense an underlying ideology of the subject. In the example of B.F. Skinner, we can read the symbolic text as one that allies not only Behaviorism, but also Skinner himself with the “hard” laboratory sciences. The forming of psychology into a hard science was the project of behaviorism since its inception with John B. Watson. However, the symbolic posturing in the photo serves to

propagate the myth of psychology as a hard science. *Myth*, in Barthes' sense, does not necessarily mean falsehood. Myth is taken to be the epic narrative. The intentions of the behaviorists were clear, "Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science."ⁿ In this sense, we can understand myth as the symbolic distribution of an ideology, which serves to reinforce the ideology in those who receive the symbolic text. It is a way in which an ideology becomes "taken for granted".

When an ideology becomes taken for granted, or commonsensical, we find it difficult to think beyond its parameters. An example from physics is helpful in illustrating this. Before Einstein's breakthrough with the theories of special and general relativity, the way of understanding space and time was firmly within the Newtonian model. The Newtonian view, now called *classical mechanics*, had become the *doxa* of physics. In other words, physicists approached the space-time phenomenon through the accepted Newtonian view of physics. It was Einstein who questioned not space and time, but rather, the *doxa* of Newtonian physics. When Einstein reevaluated this *doxa* he formulated a new model which opened up new potentials in physics.^o *Doxa*, as described by Pierre Bourdieu, describes the problem of the questions themselves, rather than the phenomenon being investigated.^p

In psychology we encounter a *doxa* that is so strongly embedded in our culture that it might seem strange to question it, but as cultural analysts we do question it. That *doxa* is the Enlightenment tradition and concepts such as causation, progress, and fact. "Science," according to Leahey, "seeks to answer universal questions that are true for all times and all places."^q A cultural media theorist would question the *doxa* of

these three ideologies and explore how that *doxa* restricts the discipline from a possible breakthrough. A cultural media theorist might find that contemporary, scientific psychology is caught in a Newtonian worldview, while its model of science, physics, moved beyond that paradigm over 100 years ago.

The final process of ideology is *hegemony*. As described by Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, *hegemony* is *how* an ideology achieves and maintains domination in a culture.^r *Hegemony* can be understood as the obedient support of a system that ultimately fails in its undertaking. An example from psychology can be seen in the continued utilization of psychotropic medications by patients who enter a revolving-door scenario of increases and decreases of dosage and a brand to brand med-jumping, in a never-ending quest to "get it right". Despite the notable failures and negative side effects of the psychotropic medications, individuals continue to support the program of treatment. A hegemonic analysis would research not only the patient's desperation for a cure, but rather, the underlying hegemonic belief in the *doxa* of scientific treatment of depression, anxiety, as well as a variety of non-psychiatric issues. The underlying *doxa* could be analyzed as the hegemonic dominance of modern science in a culture that has largely come to view all other options as ignorant.

In an age when many patients reject traditional and historical treatments (such as spiritual counsel or talk therapy) the option of science seems reassuring. Science and technology have come to serve as not only the solution but the hope for an educated, modern society. This issue is not an argument towards the return to religion or spirituality, methods that have proven to be equally as problematic, but rather the power structure of the ideology of "science as the

path to truth” as an obstruction towards the realization of other possibilities. For the cultural media theorist the question is not merely what is being forgotten, but rather, what is not being seen through the hegemonic consent?

An example can be helpful in illustrating hegemony as it has been experienced in the history of psychology. During the build-up to the Second World War, a group of psychologists fled Nazi Germany and established themselves at various research institutions in the United States. The psychology they brought with them, “Gestalt” psychology, had its roots in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. The research agenda of these psychologists was far-reaching and quite progressive. However, American psychology at the time was firmly in the grip of behaviorism. Gestalt psychology lived a short life in a few research labs, mostly in New York. It was not until a radical linguist named Noam Chomsky undermined the hegemonic stronghold of behaviorism that some of the ideas of the Gestalt tradition could find a place in American psychology. Today, we call that paradigm *cognitive* psychology.^s Not only did behaviorism’s hegemonic discourse crumble after Chomsky’s exposé, Chomsky went on to describe the hegemonic structures of modern political systems.^t It was an outsider, someone who could see beyond the doxa of the discipline, one that could see the hegemonic discourse taking place, that ushered in the *cognitive revolution* to psychology. A cultural media critic would analyze the hegemonic position of cognitive-neuroscience in contemporary psychology.

Conclusion

Examining topics within the history of psychology from the traditional position

restricts the researcher’s point of view. By dislodging oneself from the traditional vantage point, through an interdisciplinary approach, new and useful discoveries can be made within the field. In approaching the history of psychology from the positioning of the cultural media theorist, underlying ideological influences can be entered into the conversation of the history of psychology.

We have explored the major theoretical models and methodological tools of the cultural media analyst. We have demonstrated how hegemony and ideology are often taken for granted in a way that makes it difficult to think beyond them. Cultural analysts, however, do question accepted parameters and prevailing beliefs. This introduction to the tools, methodologies, and theories of cultural media analysis opens new conversations in the field of psychology, one that has become the predominant, interdisciplinary approach of most contemporary Eastern and Western European intellectual traditions.

^a Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

^b Brian Ott & Robert Mack, *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 135.

^c Thomas H. Leahey “History Without The Past,” in *Evolving Perspectives on the History of Psychology*, edited by Wade E. Pickren and Donald A.

Dewsbury (Washington, DC: APA, 2002), 15-20.

^d Thomas H. Leahey "History Without The Past," in *Evolving Perspectives on the History of Psychology*, edited by Wade E. Pickren and Donald A. Dewsbury (Washington, DC: APA, 2002), 22-23.

^e Michael Richardson, *The Experience of Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 2.

^f Brian Ott & Robert Mack, *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 124.

^g Ibid., 124.

^h Ibid., 127.

ⁱ Ibid., 127-129.

^j Thomas Hardey Leahey, *A History of Psychology: Main Currents in Psychological Thought, Fifth Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 494-518.

^k Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Other Essays*, translated by B. Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85-126.

^l L. Fujimoto, "The New History of Psychology," in *The G. Stanley Hall*

Lecture Series (vol. 9), Edited by T.S. Cohen (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association), 16.

^m Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109.

ⁿ John B. Watson, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views it," *Psychological Review*, 20 (1913): 158-177.

^o Richard Dewitt, *Worldviews: An Introduction to the History and Philosophy of Science* (Malden, MA: Blackwell), 201-224.

^p Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Translated by R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 169.

^q Thomas Hardey Leahey, *A History of Psychology: Main Currents in Psychological Thought, Fifth Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 22.

^r Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated by Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith (New York: International Publishers, 2003), 12.

^s Thomas Hardey Leahey, *A History of Psychology: Main Currents in Psychological Thought, Fifth Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 269-274.

[†] Noam Chomsky, "A Review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior," *Language* 35 (1959), 26-58.