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# What is a polycentric history of psychology?<sup>1</sup>

O que é uma história policêntrica da psicologia?

¿Qué es una historia policéntrica de la psicología?

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## ABSTRACT

The term, “polycentric history of psychology” was originally used by Kurt Danziger and it has since been adopted by other historians of psychology. The article provides an introduction to this approach. The trend towards the internationalisation of psychology has led to the history of American psychology being supplemented by other local histories. Polycentric history is contrasted this approach. It is concerned with the interrelationships between centres and not individual centres considered in isolation. The article concludes with some examples of history that has been written from a polycentric perspective.

**Keywords:** polycentric, history, Danziger, internationalisation, interrelationships.

## RESUMO

O conceito “história policêntrica da psicologia” foi originalmente utilizado por Kurt Danziger e, desde então, tem sido adotado por outros historiadores da psicologia. O artigo faz uma introdução a esta perspectiva. A tendência à internacionalização da psicologia implicou que a história da psicologia norte-americana pudesse ser complementada com outras histórias locais. A história policêntrica contrasta com esta abordagem, pois se preocupa com as inter-relações entre os centros, e não pelos centros considerados isoladamente. O artigo finaliza com alguns exemplos de história que tem sido escritos a partir de uma perspectiva policêntrica.

**Palavras-chave:** policêntrica história, Danziger, internacionalização, Inter-relações.

## RESUMEN

El concepto “historia policéntrica de la psicología” fue originariamente utilizado por Kurt Danziger y, desde entonces, ha sido adoptado por otros historiadores de la psicología. El trabajo brinda una introducción a este enfoque. La tendencia hacia la internacionalización de la psicología ha llevado a que la historia de la psicología norteamericana pudiera complementarse con otras historias locales. La historia policéntrica se contraponen a tal perspectiva. Se preocupa por las interrelaciones entre los centros y no por los centros individuales considerados de manera aislada. El trabajo concluye con algunos ejemplos de historia de la psicología que han sido escritas desde una perspectiva policéntrica.

**Palabras claves:** policéntrica, historia, Danziger, internacionalización, interrelaciones

## 1 Introduction

The notion of a polycentric history of psychology was originally used by Kurt Danziger in a guest editorial that he wrote for a special issue of the journal, *History of the Human Sciences* (Danziger, 1991). It was subsequently discussed in greater detail in a paper that he presented at the XXVI International Congress of Psychology in Montréal, Canada in 1996 with the title, "Towards a polycentric history of psychology" (Danziger, 1996). Although this paper was not made publicly available until 2010, it was discussed in a book chapter that Irmingard Staeuble published in 2004 and large parts of it were incorporated into a book chapter that Danziger published in 2006 (Danziger, 2006; Staeuble, 2004). It is largely through the latter that the concept has become well known.

Wade Pickren discussed the concept in an article that he published in 2009 and the textbook that he and Alexandra Rutherford published in 2010 has contributed significantly to popularising the term (Pickren, 2009; Pickren & Rutherford, 2010). It contains a chapter titled, "Internationalization and Indigenization after World War II" (p. 238). The authors open the chapter with a quotation from Danziger's book chapter of 2006 and write: "We frame the chapter with the concept of intellectual geography of center and periphery, which we borrow from historian Kurt Danziger" (p. 238). They also write: "we offer a historical account of these events with the intention of contributing to a polycentric history of psychology" (p. 239).

I organised a symposium with the title, "Towards a polycentric history of psychology" for the XXX International Congress of Psychology in Cape Town in 2012 and this article has its origins in the introduction that I wrote for the symposium (Brock et al., 2012). One of the papers from the symposium, "French ideas in the beginnings of psychology in Argentina" by Hugo Klappenbach, has already been published (Klappenbach, 2013). Klappenbach is the President Elect of the Interamerican Society of Psychology. In an interview with him that was published in the newsletter of the International Association for Applied Psychology, he refers to the notion of a polycentric history of psychology twice (Klappenbach & Carpintero, 2013). Other authors have referred to the concept in their work (e.g. Benjafield, 2012; Sensales & Dal Secco, 2014). Although the concept is still not well known among historians of psychology, it has clearly been adopted by at least some of the scholars in this field.

In posing the question, "What is a polycentric history of psychology?", it is not my intention to replace Danziger's own accounts of the

concept, which are freely available on the website devoted to his work ([www.kurtdanziger.com](http://www.kurtdanziger.com)). It is partly to make the concept better known and partly to draw attention to an aspect of Danziger's programme that is in danger of being overlooked. Before doing that, I will provide a brief overview of the concept for those who are not familiar with it. Readers who want to explore the concept further would be well advised to consult Danziger's own work on the subject (Danziger, 1991; 1996; 2006).

## 2 Overview of the concept

He begins by posing the question of whether there can be any such thing as "the" history of psychology; that is, a single narrative that covers the entire field. This is, of course, the assumption that is made in the standard textbooks. The traditional view is that psychology originated in the laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig and was then transferred via Wundt's American students to the United States. This is the view that was successfully promoted by E. G. Boring in his influential textbook, *A History of Experimental Psychology* (Boring, 1929; 1950). Danziger suggests that this account can only be achieved by privileging certain local developments. Germany was the centre of the new experimental psychology at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but this was, and continues to be, only a part of the subject. One of the most important tools of the modern psychologist is the psychological test in the form of the intelligence test, the personality test, the aptitude test etc. and this has its origins in England with the work of Francis Galton, as do many of the statistics that psychologists currently use. There were also important developments in France, including the transformation of hypnotism into psychotherapy and the rise of crowd psychology, which many see as the original form of social psychology. Last but by no means least, many of the modern branches of applied psychology, including clinical, forensic and consumer psychology, were pioneered in the United States. Thus accounts which centre the early history of psychology on Germany provide us with a selective view of the origins of the field.

It is no accident that Boring privileged these developments. His book was titled, *A History of Experimental Psychology* and it has been claimed that it was an attempt to promote this field at the expense of other branches of the subject (O'Donnell, 1979). This takes us to another aspect of Danziger's account: the privileging of certain developments in psychology applies not only to the geography of the discipline but also to its conceptual content. Just as Germany was portrayed as the geographical centre of the new psychology, so experimental psychology was portrayed as the central branch of the

field. Only it could produce laws that were thought to be of universal relevance. It was up to the applied psychologists to apply its findings to specific situations. As Danziger (1990) has pointed out elsewhere, this model of the relationship between experimental and applied psychology is equally misguided. Applied psychology has tended to solve its problems independently of experimental psychology and there are several historical examples of innovations in applied psychology being adopted by experimental psychology, such as the use of the control group in experimental research.

Danziger suggests that the model of centre and periphery, both in geographical terms and in terms of conceptual content, came about largely due to the dominance of American psychology in the years immediately after World War II. It enjoyed a dominance during these years that had not existed before. Although the United States had been the most important country for psychology in the period between the First and the Second World Wars, it did not have the kind of dominance that it had when much of Europe was devastated in the years immediately after the Second World War. Also of relevance is the fact that psychology had yet to be exported on a large scale to other parts of the world. The main international body for psychology, the International Union of Psychological Science, was founded in 1951 with 12 charter members, 10 of them in Western Europe plus the United States and Japan. The United States became the undisputed centre of the field and its psychology laid claim a universality that no other country could claim. It was out of this situation that the model of centre and periphery emerged and it had an impact on the history of psychology in that the history of American psychology came to be viewed as the history of psychology in general, while the history of psychology in other countries could only lay claim to local significance (Brock, 2006a).

This situation did not and could not last forever. Europe would eventually get back on its feet and psychology there expanded significantly in the 1960's and beyond. The same is true of other developed countries, such as Canada and Australia. Psychology also began to grow in many developing countries after World War II. It is thus returning to the polycentric situation that existed in the early years of the discipline. Indeed, it is even more polycentric now than it was in the early years of the discipline when all the major centres of psychology were in Europe and the United States. This is no longer the case. Danziger's argument is, therefore, that the model of centre and periphery is now obsolete and should be abandoned in favour of a polycentric approach.

### **3 Internationalisation**

The geographical diversity of psychology has led to an increasing emphasis on the internationalisation of the field. The American Psychological Association established a Division for International Psychology in 1997 and it was followed by a wave of literature which attempted to provide a more international view of the field, such as *The Handbook of International Psychology* (Stevens & Wedding, 2004) and *Towards a Global Psychology* (Stevens & Gielen, 2007). There has also been literature on the internationalisation of the teaching of psychology (Leong et al., 2012). These developments have inevitably had an impact on the history of psychology and I made a contribution to the relevant literature with the edited book, *Internationalizing the History of Psychology* in which Danziger's chapter arguing for a polycentric history of psychology appeared (Brock, 2006b; Danziger, 2006).

This situation has resulted in a proliferation of local histories. It is now common to see someone from Brazil writing about the history of psychology in Brazil, someone from India writing about the history of psychology in India, someone from Japan writing about the history of psychology in Japan and so on. It should also not be forgotten that, a few notable exceptions notwithstanding, most American historians of psychology are concerned exclusively with the history of the subject in the United States. This situation is understandable. People may feel that they know the situation in their own country better than anywhere else and the issues involved may be of more relevance to their interests and concerns. They will also have better access to archival material and be in a better position to interview the actors involved.

This trend has also been encouraged by certain editorial practices. For example, the *Oxford Handbook of the History of Psychology* has the sub-title, *Global Perspectives* and is concerned with the internationalisation of the field (Baker, 2012). The sub-title is something of a misnomer since it consists of 27 chapters, each one on the history of psychology in a particular country that has been written by someone in that country. The only exception to this rule is a chapter on the Caribbean, which is a region rather than a country. This was a model that I explicitly rejected in *Internationalizing the History of Psychology* in spite of the pressure on me to adopt it. I wrote in the introduction:

Once potential authors had been identified, they were allowed to write on any topic they wanted, as long as it was compatible with the aims of the book. If the authors been asked to conform to a pre-existing model, such as having one chapter per country that was written by an author in that country, as one anonymous reviewer of the proposal wanted me to do, a great deal of creativity would have been lost. Fortunately, the

psychology editor at New York University Press, Jennifer Hammer, understood my objections to that suggestion, and I am grateful to her for her support (Brock, 2006a; p. 13).

It was largely the influence of Danziger's work that led me to reject this model. In his paper, "Towards a Polycentric History of Psychology", he wrote:

There is a vast difference between a polycentric historiography of the discipline and the mere addition, in disconnected chapters, of one local history after another. What is needed now is not a string of parochial visions but a focus on the changing interrelationships among centres that have constituted the world history of the subject in the modern period (Danziger, 1996; p. 4).

Thus when Sensales and Dal Secco (2014) write, "Within the framework of a 'polycentric' historical perspective valorizing local histories, the present study ..." (p. 36), they are using the term differently from how it was originally intended. "Valorizing local histories" is not what a polycentric history is supposed to be about. In making this point, I am not saying that local histories are pointless or a waste of time. Having contributed the chapter on Ireland to the "Oxford Handbook", it would be hypocritical of me to do so (Brock, 2012). There are interesting stories to be told about the events in countries that have traditionally been neglected in the history of psychology. However, there are also interesting stories to be told about the interrelationships between these countries.

#### **4 Interrelationships**

Danziger (1996) gives some examples of the kind of interrelationships that have existed in psychology in the past:

When students from many countries flocked to Leipzig and to other German centres in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and then returned home with new ideas they established a pattern that was to be repeated throughout the modern history of the discipline, though the direction of travel changed. Of course, the pursuit of formal studies abroad was only one avenue through which international links were established. Books were translated and marketed, money was invested in scholarship funds, instruments were exported and imported, innumerable conferences were held, and so on. In the long run, no local tradition could be unaffected by this, but

neither was the result a complete homogenization of psychological discourse (p. 4).

A polycentric history must allow for the possibility of both international influence and the existence of local differences:

A polycentric historiography must attempt to do justice to the complexity of such phenomena. To do this it must work with categories that seek to capture the interrelations among centres, rather than the characteristics of centres considered in isolation. Intellectual migration is perhaps the most obvious of these categories, not only in reference to persons, but, more significantly, in reference to concepts and practices. What happened to psychological concepts, theories, procedures when attempts were made to transplant them? Why did some of these prove to be much better travellers than others? How did travelling change them, sometimes beyond recognition? Who found them useful and why? There are stories of successful transfer to be told here, but also stories of misunderstanding, mistranslation, total incomprehension and downright hostility that are often more illuminating (pp. 4-5).

This approach is "international" in the true sense of the word, the prefix, "inter-" being related to the word, "between". A genuinely international approach should, therefore, focus on interrelationships between countries rather than individual countries considered in isolation. This is why I rejected the "one country per chapter" model when editing the book in which Danziger's influential chapter appeared.

## **5 Examples of polycentric history**

This point is not lost on Pickren and Rutherford who, like Danziger himself, focus on the topic of indigenisation (Danziger, 2006; Pickren, 2009; Pickren & Rutherford, 2010). The indigenisation movement arose when psychology was exported from Europe and the United States to other parts of the world in the years immediately after the Second World War. Psychologists in these places began to complain that the psychology that was being imported into their countries was inappropriate for their needs and would have to be modified to suit the local situation. The movement has been particularly strong in Asian countries like India, the Philippines and Taiwan (Kim & Berry, 1993; Kim, Hwang & Yang, 2006). Indigenisation is an important aspect of any polycentric approach to the history of psychology since it is concerned with what Danziger (1996) calls "intellectual



migration" (p. 4); that is, the transfer of psychological theories and practices from one place to another and the changes that occurred as a result of this transfer.

The work of Klappenbach on the influence of French psychology in Argentina also fulfils the requirements of a polycentric history (Klappenbach, 2013). People in Latin American countries like Argentina and Brazil tended to view France as a fellow "Latin" country and it was unusual among these countries in being a major industrial and military power that was pre-eminent in science. They consequently tended to view French influence more favourably than the influence of Germany or English-speaking countries like the United Kingdom and the United States. France, for its own part, was keen to spread the influence of its language and culture around the world and it consequently encouraged this relationship. Klappenbach's work shows that it is possible to produce work that is centred on one's own country but still polycentric in its approach. The crucial point here is that it does not consider the history of psychology in Argentina in isolation but in relation to psychology elsewhere.

Although the amount of work that has self-consciously been produced as "polycentric history of psychology" is still quite small, there is plenty of other work that meets the criteria of polycentric history without being labelled as such. One example is the work of John Carson on the history of intelligence testing in France and the United States (Carson, 2007). The choice of these two countries is far from arbitrary. It was of course Binet and Simon who produced the first successful intelligence test and the test was subsequently adopted in a big way in the United States. One of the more curious features of this situation is that the Americans were more enthusiastic about intelligence testing than the French. There was a much greater emphasis on so-called "objective" tests in the United States than there was in France where people were more willing to rely on the judgment of experts. Related to this difference was the fact that France had a centralised system of education, whereas the American system was much more diverse. It contained many private schools, including schools that were operated by a variety of religious groups. Intelligence tests provided a semblance of standardisation that was lacking in the educational system itself. The background to all this is a common feature of liberal democracies which have a commitment to equality of opportunity and a system of differential rewards. This leads to the problem of how these differential rewards are to be allocated. In his review of the book, Danziger (2008) points out that a comparison of two different national contexts highlights the relationship between psychology and the social order much more clearly than an examination of one national context would. He also suggests that the book can serve as an exemplar of this approach.

The transfer of knowledge from Europe to the United States was a characteristic of the early history of psychology but this transfer underwent a decline in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It re-occurred on a more modest scale in the 1930's as large numbers of refugees arrived from central Europe following the rise to power of the Nazis in Germany. Some of the stories involving these refugees are appropriate topics for a polycentric history of psychology. One figure who has received a lot of attention in recent years is William Stern, largely due to the efforts of James Lamiell (e.g. Lamiell, 2003; 2012). Lamiell points out that Stern's name was initially familiar to him, as it is to most psychologists, as the person who invented the intelligence quotient or IQ. His personalistic approach to psychology is less well known. When Danziger (1996) wrote the following words, he could have easily had Stern's personalistic psychology in mind:

What happened to psychological concepts, theories, procedures when attempts were made to transplant them? ... There are stories of successful transfer to be told here, but also stories of misunderstanding, mistranslation, total incomprehension and downright hostility that are often more illuminating (pp. 4-5).

Stern's views had their origins in the *Methodenstreit* (dispute over methods) that took place in Germany in the 1890's. This centred on the issue of whether it was more appropriate for psychology and the other disciplines that are concerned with human affairs to use the model of the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften) or the humanities (Geisteswissenschaften). Stern held that, like historical events, people are unique and it was consequently inappropriate to understand them through the medium of general laws. These ideas became known to Americans largely through the work of Gordon Allport who studied with Stern in Germany and even rented a room in his house. Allport's views were less radical than those of Stern. Whereas Stern wanted psychology as a whole to take a personalistic approach, Allport was content to promote a "psychology of persons" that would focus on individual uniqueness as a way of supplementing the nomothetic or law-based approach. Even this proved to be controversial and Allport was criticised for being "anti-science". He eventually realised that he was fighting a losing battle and threw in the proverbial towel. With very few exceptions, of which Lamiell is one, the personalistic approach was abandoned by American psychologists and this situation has continued to the present day. As mentioned earlier, in the years immediately after the Second World War, the United States enjoyed a period of unparalleled dominance in psychology and it became an exporter, rather than an importer, of psychology. It was this situation that led to the rise of the indigenisation movement. Given that this movement is primarily

associated with developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, one of its earliest manifestations came from a surprising source: European social psychology. In the 1960's and -70's, European social psychologists like Serge Moscovici and Henri Tajfel began to argue that the social psychology that was being imported into their countries from the United States was inappropriate for their needs. In an argument that has now become familiar, they suggested that American social psychology was not just "American" in the sense that it was produced in the United States; it reflected American culture and values. Among other things, it was excessively individualistic, empirical rather than theoretical, and it tended to shy away from socially-significant topics like unemployment and racism. They needed to develop their own approach and their efforts led to important institutional developments such as the establishment of the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, a European handbook and a textbook that took a European approach (Moscovici & Marková, 2006). Whether or not they succeeded in establishing a truly indigenous approach has been a topic of controversy in recent years but examining this episode involves a polycentric approach regardless of the position that we take on this issue since it concerns the relationship between two major centres of social psychology (Hewstone et al., 2012; Markova, 2012; Schruijer, 2012).

The majority of historians of psychology live and work in Europe and North America and so it should come as no surprise that most of the existing work has focused on these two continents. There are, however, some exceptions to the rule. One of them is the work of Christiane Hartnack on psychoanalysis in colonial India (e.g. Hartnack, 1987; 2001). British expatriates like Owen Berkeley-Hill drew on psychoanalysis to legitimise British colonial rule. In an essay that he published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1921, he attributed negative characteristics to the Hindus and much more positive characteristics to his fellow Englishmen. Berkeley-Hill also concluded that the Hindus do not have a psychological disposition for leadership and thus need to be ruled. Similar views were expressed by another British expatriate, Claud Dangar Daly. In an essay that he published in *Imago* in 1927, he compared the character traits of Hindus to those of European neurotics. Another strategy for justifying British colonial rule was to compare the Hindus to children and this was done by both Berkeley-Hill and Daly. In an essay that Daly published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1930, he wrote that "the Hindu people would have to make an effort to overcome their infantile and feminine tendencies ... The role of the British Government should be that of wise parents" (Hartnack 2001; p. 67). Meanwhile, Indian psychoanalysts like Girindrasekhar Bose, a Bengali Hindu physician who founded the Indian Psychoanalytical Society in 1921, had contact with the leaders

of the independence movement and their writings contained an anti-colonialist stance. Bose also broke with orthodox Freudian doctrines when he thought they were culturally inappropriate. Unlike Freud, his patients were predominantly male and, contrary to the doctrine of penis envy, he noted a desire to become female among many of them. He also suggested that, in Indian families, the father was more likely to be jealous of the son because of the attention that he received from his mother and not the other way around, as the theory of the Oedipus Complex would predict. Hartnack's work is an exemplary study of intellectual migration in the history of psychology. She shows how some aspects of psychoanalysis failed to transfer from Vienna to India and the ones that did changed significantly as a result of the move.

These examples are not intended to be exhaustive. Many other examples could have been given. They show that a large body of literature that is written from a polycentric perspective already exists, even when it is not consciously described as such. They are also indicative of the diversity of topics that can be examined using a polycentric perspective.

## 6 Conclusion

The practice of confusing the history of psychology in the United States with the history of psychology in general is gradually giving way to a more diverse picture of the international origins of the field. However, within this picture is an unfortunate tendency to replace one local history with many local histories. This results in an inaccurate view of the history of psychology. Psychologists in different countries have been in contact with each other from the earliest beginnings of the discipline and many of its most important characteristics arose as a result of this contact. Considering individual countries in isolation means that important topics are left out. A history of psychology that is adequate to its subject-matter cannot ignore topics like power relationships and cultural biases and barriers.

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