

What happened in 50 years? Comparing introductory college level texts

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The topic

- How is psychology communicated in universities and colleges?
- How does such communication affect “folk psychology” notions?
- How has the content of what is communicated changed from 1950?
- This is mostly about teaching at the introductory level, not professional training
- ... but even experts probably are much affected by “untrained thought”
 - See work on clinical judgment
 - Or on experts in other fields, e.g. risk assessors and managers

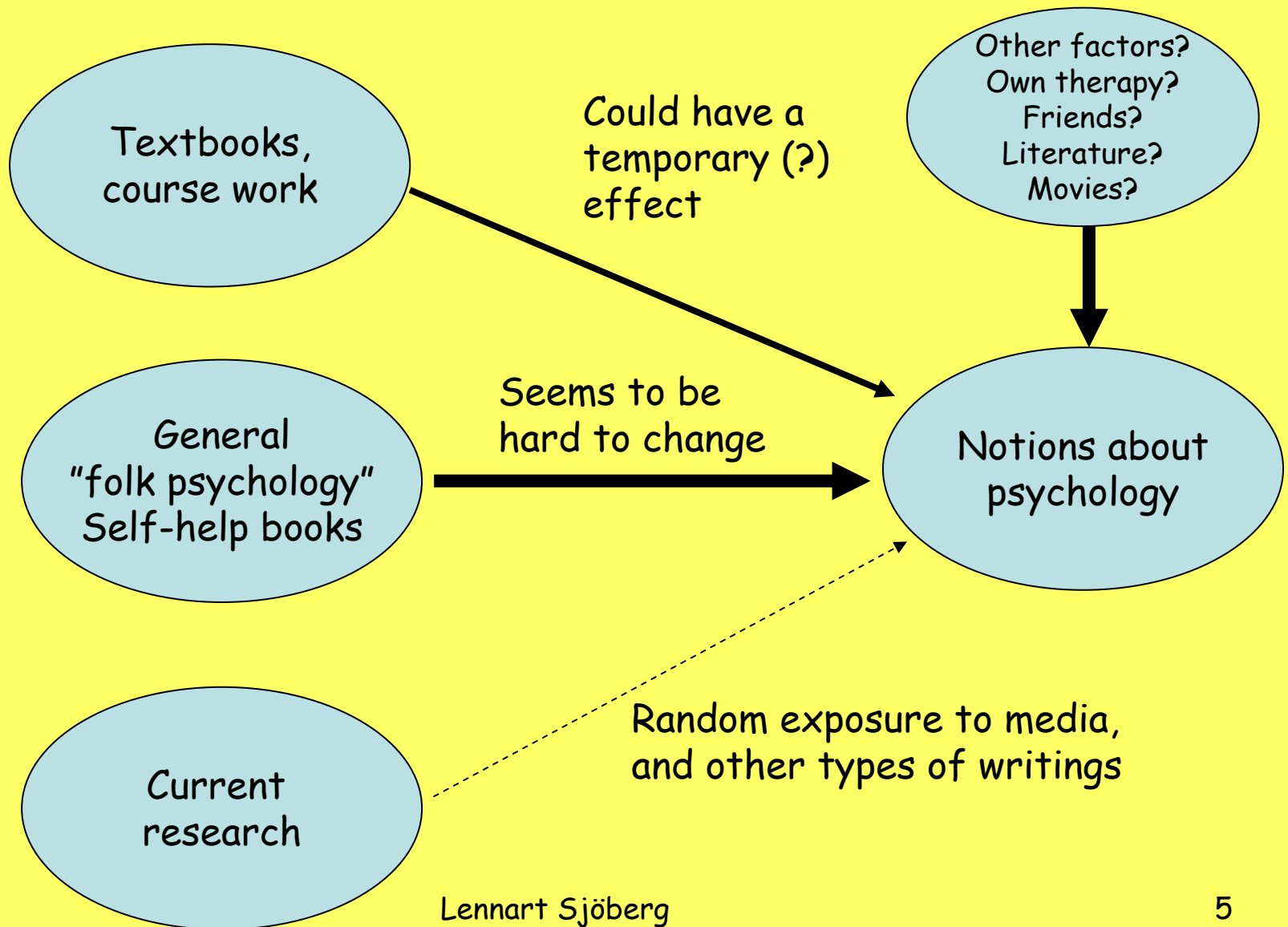
Hypothesis

- College education, and textbooks, have a moderate and possibly temporary influence
- Contact with such formal education is brief as compared to socialization in culture
- Yet, one must remember that Psychology is a very popular college discipline, perhaps largest of the social sciences

Further questions

- How do textbooks conceive of discipline, historically and in a wider context?
- How do such books depict the discipline?
- How does the message change over a long term span?

What creates the notions about psychology among academically educated people?



Limitations

- I use only two textbooks in my analysis
- The I get are, however, probably not unique to them or their respective "surfaces"

Texts

- The 1950's: Boring, Langfeld och Weld *Foundations of Psychology (BLW)* (Published in 1948)
- Current: Passer and Smith *Psychology. The science of mind and behavior (PS)*
- Both used by the University of Stockholm
- They can fairly be said to define "mainstream psychology" as presented to college undergraduates
- Both books also clearly aspire to represent mainstream psychology

Similarities and differences of BLW and PS

- Great overlap but PS is more mentalistic and cognitive, less emphasis on behavior and learning
- Both books are "positivistic", stressing the importance of empirical data, measurement and experiments
- The books surely depict *the same scientific discipline*
- PS defines psychology as the study of the mind and behavior, BLW as the study of "the Nature of man".

Books such as these...

- Define the discipline for all beginning students, i.e. Psychology in its scientific and established disguise
- It is almost never questioned if Psychology could not be something else
- And an academic subculture is established, which defines the rules of the game

Remarkable survival of positivism

- PS seems not to take notice of the extensive critique of positivism
- This is a reflection of the state of mainstream psychology which finds its ultimate scientific justification in psychobiology and reductionism
- BLW devotes a very large share of its space to sensory physiology and other psychobiology concepts
- The reader is furthermore appealed to by a number of "interesting" illustrations based on currently important phenomena such as bystander passivity, or body image beliefs and preferences by men and women
- Are these the components which explain the attraction of the discipline?

Psychology as an American project

- PS takes the American mainstream for granted as being *the* dominating culture in psychology; European work is hardly mentioned except in being historically of some importance around 100 years ago
- BLW devotes more space to early European work, and philosophical roots
- PS seems to take the American domination for granted more clearly than BLW; any non-US researcher is explicitly described as such
- This patriotic attitude is of course also reflected in current US handbooks and literature surveys

Effects on students?

- Thesis and project work at all levels tends to be inspired by US examples, even when obvious cultural differences should call for caution
- Example 1: "White male effect" in risk perception
- Example 2: Lack of interest in one's own country and its specific and unique conditions, e g in forensic psychology work

There is profound confusion about the substance of the discipline

- What is "the nature of man"? Is there such a thing, fixed for all times and cultures? Is this definition too broad?
- "Mind and behavior" is perhaps better, and very common, but is it also not much too broad? Many disciplines study these matters, e g sociology, anthropology, economics...

Effects of confusion

- Most students and even researchers retain a shallow view of the place of psychology in social sciences
- They also seldom have an interest in such alternative perspectives
- As a consequence, the discipline is isolated - a case of "splendid isolation", because Swedish psychology researchers are quite successful in international publication
- Compare with e.g. business administration!

More about similarities and differences between the two books

- Certain basic ideas and theories remain: PS gives much space to classical psychoanalytic theory, while they only mention Gestalt Psychology in passing
- Indeed, according to BLW Gestalt psychology was obsolete already in 1948!
- The whole field of cognitive psychology is of course "new"
- At the same time it is surprising that PS devotes much space to a new and so far rather little supported theory by Mischel about person-situation variation. It is an interesting approach, but solid and extensive empirical evidence is largely lacking

Surprising survival of tests

- Cattell's 16pf from 1949 is given much space by PS
- The same is true of Rorschach and TAT
- PS is very cautious about critical research, they tend to conclude "there is some practical value in these methods"

More about the cautious attitude of PS

- Classical and very well-known concepts such as Maslow's need hierarchy, are given ample space, but with some critical material and suggestions to the reader to decide for him/herself
- In this way they may perhaps succeed in providing the material which is demanded by teachers who are "believers", at the same time as they save their souls - in Sweden this is called a "Brask-lapp"

Why caution?

- Commercial reasons: text books need to be sold
- It is also possible that there are other reasons why texts should have a positive tone
- Patriotic reasons: American mainstream thought is hardly questioned

Comments

- "Folk psychology" and self-help books are often erroneous or at least misleading, e.g. see how they often lean on Aristotle's idea of catharsis. At the same time they have great survival value. Education is not likely to affect the deeper layers of folk psychology which are constantly reinforced by the media culture
- Cp. Also the psychology communicated in literature - articulated phenomenology but also - and mostly - sheer constructions
- Textbooks embrace compromise and abhor radical criticism, however justified it may be. They are "positive" and do not confront "folk psychology" at its core

Researchers and teachers

- - have most of their education in the theoretical side of the discipline, seldom in the practical
- - cannot assess how reasonable such statements are, as made in PS, where heavily criticized methods such as the Rorschach, are still claimed to be "practically useful"
- - are very specialized and may well have critical and independent ideas within their own field of work, but have little interest in the broader applications of psychology in society
- My be even less responsive to the "articulated phenomenology" of literature than many others at the same level of education
- An interesting topic is the effects of movies which are much more widely spread than literature

The result

- Psychology seems to change very slowly, which is just not true!
- It changes still more slowly when you regard psychology as imported in other disciplines, such as business administration which relies heavily on an obsolete view of psychology, about 40 years behind
- Teaching in schools of social work probably tells the same story
- The impact of critical research is modest, because textbook writers want to seem to be positive and non-controversial in order to maximize economic profit
- A book about "psychology" must deal with certain conventional topics and NOT with others (non-Western traditions, the interaction with economical factors, to name a few) which would make teachers feel at a loss
- It is all a question of interaction with "folk psychology"