

Exploring the Pages of Psychology's Past: Archival Research in the History of Psychology

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“If you would understand anything, understand its beginning and its development.”
-Aristotle

Everyone has heard the clichés about why we should study history. History helps us avoid the mistakes of the past. It gives us a better understanding of the present. It makes us more critical of contemporary work. These clichés are indeed true. However, there is another good reason for studying the history of psychology: good old-fashioned curiosity and enjoyment.

There is nothing quite like finding out where that particular personality test came from, how a particular specialty was established, or how your own psychology department came to be. The history of psychology is full of odd, interesting, and unexpected facts. Did you know that one of the first large corporations to fund psychological research was Coca-Cola? Or that William James practiced spiritualism and attended séances? Or that Darwin almost didn't make it on to the Beagle voyage because of the shape of his nose? The history of psychology is full of these fascinating facts; you just have to take the time to look for them.

Researching and writing the history of psychology takes many forms. For many historians, however, archival research is one of the greatest perks of the job. Journals and biographies can be used to trace the history of an idea or influential figure, but there is a different “feel” about archival documents. There is a sense of raw, unrestricted data. Clearly, archival documents pose their own difficulties. They are fragmentary, censored, and like all historical data, they require reconstruction. But these documents help us to see a different side of institutions, individuals, and schools of thought. In this article, we outline the ins and outs of archival research to help interested psychologists get started. We also hope to show that while researching the history of psychology can be challenging, it is also very intriguing and, with careful planning and preparation, can be done quite easily.

Finding an Archive

Archives hold a variety of material; whatever your topic, there is a good chance that somewhere an archive contains documents relevant to your research. Holdings include personal papers, governmental documents, newspaper clippings, oral history recordings, and more. The material comes in many forms, including textual sources, photographs, microfilm, and audio/video recordings. To find a relevant archive, start with an online search engine (see resources section). Universities, colleges, and governmental bodies maintain their own archives or can direct you to where pertinent materials are held.

Preparing for the Archives

Gather as much preliminary information as you can prior to visiting the archives. Know the significant

people, places, and dates connected to your topic because this information will often appear in the archival documents. Creating a timeline of important events will help you keep track.

Next, search for an online finding aid. A finding aid is essentially a guide to the collection. Some are more detailed than others, but most will give you an idea about the scope of the collection, what time period it covers, and information regarding access restrictions. Many will give you an itemized account of the specific contents. It is important to note where the material is located; if it is stored off-site, you will need to request the material in advance. It is always a good idea to contact the archives before your visit. Inform them of what collections you are interested in, when you intend to visit, and ask if this will be a convenient time.

At the Archives

Every archive will have a registration process, which typically involves signing up for a reader card. Personal belongings are not permitted in the reading room and policies regarding the use of laptops and digital cameras vary. Pencils and paper may or may not be provided. Lockers are not always available, so leave your valuables at home.

Photocopying and microfilm printing are typically done by the archivist and may not be available the same day. Note, however, that both of these services are costly so choose carefully. Before you leave an archive, familiarize yourself with their publication policies to avoid any later issues with publishing materials belonging to the collection.

After the Archives

Be sure to acknowledge the archives in any presentation of your research. As for referencing, APA is still developing a standard method, but generally the rule is to provide as much information as possible (box number, file number, archive, etc.).

And that's it! The steps may make the process seem quite involved, but with preparation, it is really no more difficult than a trip to the library. Remember, the history of psychology is not for historians alone. Delving into the history of your current research topic may supplement your literature review and provide you with insight into your topic that would not have been gained from other empirical styles. It may also prove to be a valuable research project in its own right. Regardless you will find that delving into historical research is just plain interesting and fun!

Archival Resources

Archive Grid

Global repository of archival collections.

<http://www.archivegrid.org/web/index.jsp>

Archives of the History of American Psychology

Collection pertaining to the history of American psychology. Includes papers of over 740 prominent American psychologists.

<http://www3.uakron.edu/ahap/>

General Resources

History and Theory of Psychology Student Network Information on the History/Theory community

<http://www.student.yorku.ca/~jbazar/htn/index.html>

History and Philosophy of Psychology Web Resources Collection of history of psychology resources

<http://www.psych.yorku.ca/orgs/resource/>

Classics in the History of Psychology

Primary texts in the history of psychology

<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/>
