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Trends. Developmental Psychology and the Uses of History: Does the Past Affect the Present and the Future?

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A recent contribution by developmental psychologist Michael Lewis has a bearing on a common, seemingly transcultural belief: that the psychological past significantly affects the psychological present and future. This belief is a bedrock of political psychological pursuits, such as how one can best learn from history, how early experience may affect later political ideology and behavior, and entire subfields like psychohistory. The same belief seems to be the very bedrock of psychology as an academic discipline encompassing the hoary but widely influential perspectives of psychoanalytic and cognitive-behaviorist studies.

Yet Lewis takes a contrary position in a subfield--developmental psychology--that has often seemed fully imbued with the regency of the psychological past. In his textbook *Altering fate: Why the past does not predict the future*, he champions the view that human development is significantly influenced by factors of the present to which humans attempt to adapt--that there is little fixed determinism stemming from past events and perhaps little reason to posit significant probabilities for the appearance in predetermined order of various moral, psychosexual, and cognitive stages. For example, he advances the view--very contrary to established wisdom--that a baby's attachment to its mother does not influence how well-adjusted that child will be in later life.

Yet, as with so many simultaneously real and bogus scientific controversies--e.g., that of the nature-nurture controversy--a more useful stance would involve a weighted integration of differing views. A strong case can be made that--with several qualifications--the past does affect the present and future. (1) The past may not usually account for significant variance. (2) Even a significant past effect may necessarily interact not only with various current conditions but also with other past effects and conditions that are salient at varying time intervals. (3) Measurement problems--viz., the social science preference for linear over nonlinear statistical models and techniques--may have something but not everything to do with low predictabilities of past to present and future. (4) There may be a confounding of past and present events that are within or without (outside of) an individual. (5) Notions of the past differ from a so-called objective past event to one's social perceptions and cognitions of said event at various points in time. (6) In a lay phenomenological sense the past affects the present and the future among people who believe that it does. (7) Psychological reactance and the social transformation of knowledge can subvert even generalizations from well-replicated studies. (8) The very notions of past, present, and future may be subjugating discourses at the mercy of a myriad of deconstructive attempts.

So, as political leaders ponder history in seeking to predict the turn of current crises--e.g., in Bosnia, Iraq, Northern Ireland, Japan--with and without the benefits of various foreign policy interventions, they would do well to ponder that there is huge controversy even on very basic questions of history's very utility. (See *A history of learning from history*. (January 17, 1997). *IBPP*, 1(8); *A psychological task of the historian*. (May 15, 1998). *IBPP*, 4(19); *Attempting to learn from history: NATO, anti-drug policies, and intelligence assets*. (July 18, 1997). *IBPP*, 2(12); Blakeslee, S. (August 4, 1998). *Re-evaluating significance of baby's bond with mother*. *The New York Times*, p. B9, B13; Kincanon, E., & Powel, W. (1995). *Chaotic analysis in psychology and psychoanalysis*. *Journal of Psychology*, 129, 495-505; Lewis, M. (1997).

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Altering fate: Why the past does not predict the future. NY: Guilford Press; Newman, L.S. (1996). Trait impressions as heuristics for predicting future behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 395-411.) (Keywords: Developmental Psychology, Historical Perception, Michael Lewis, Psychological History.)