

Overview of Psychology's History

By Amy Quarton

Agenda

- What are systems?
- Why do we study the history of psychology?
- How do scholars study history?
- What are presentism and historicism?
- What are internal and external histories?
- What are personalistic and naturalistic histories?

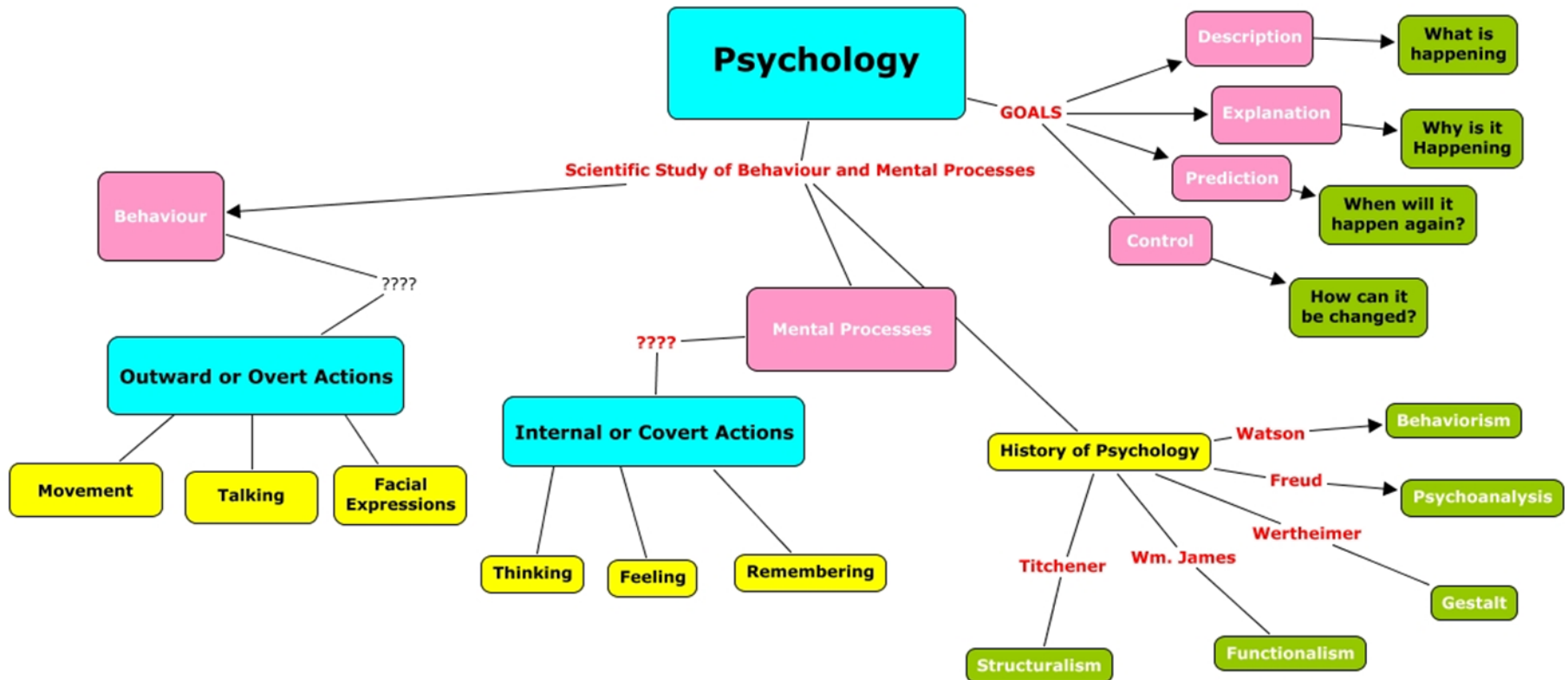


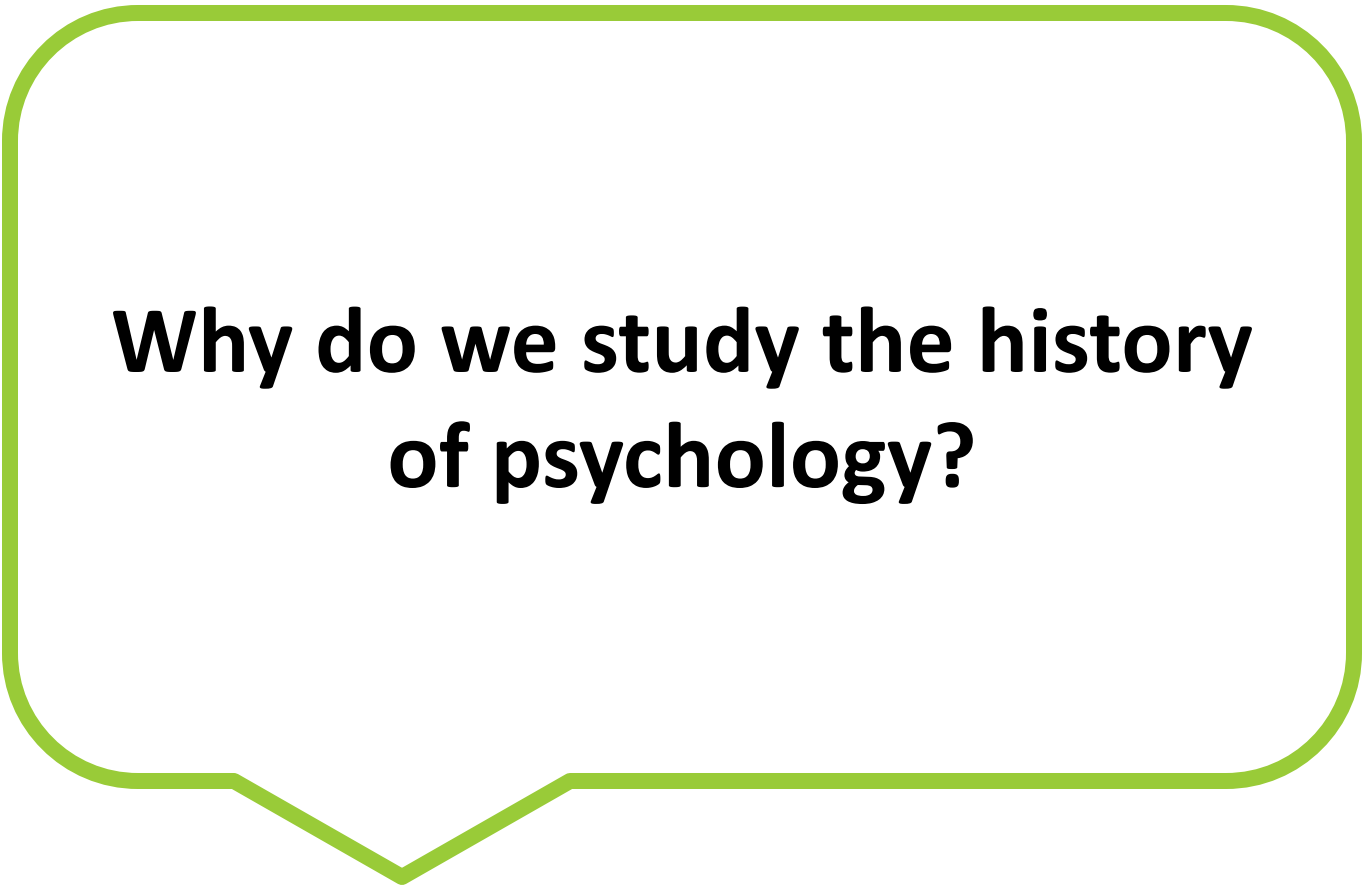
What are systems?

What are systems?

- Psychology is a **system**, an organized set of ideas, theories, models, and principles that work together to make it function.
- A change to one part changes the whole system, and a change to the system changes its parts.
- A system is shaped by the context.
- Psychology was (and is) impacted by the economic, cultural, social, political, and intellectual climate.

What are systems?

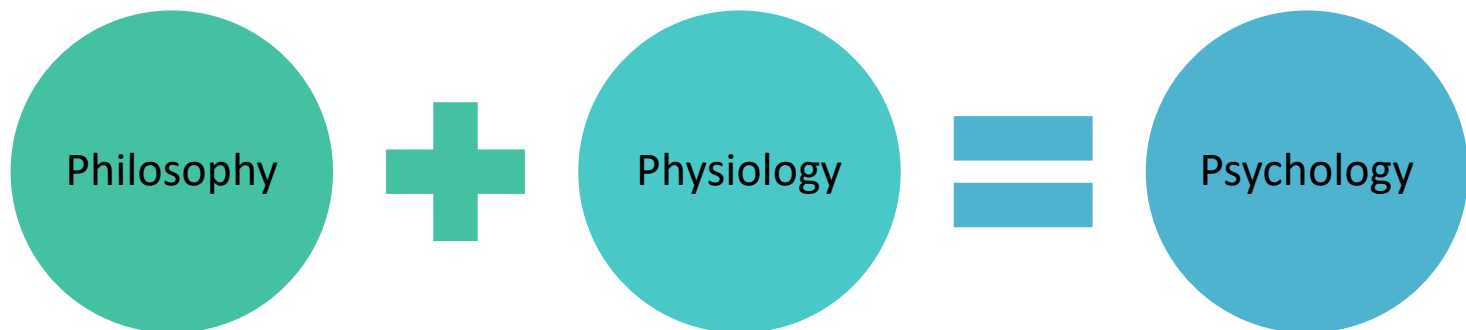




**Why do we study the history
of psychology?**

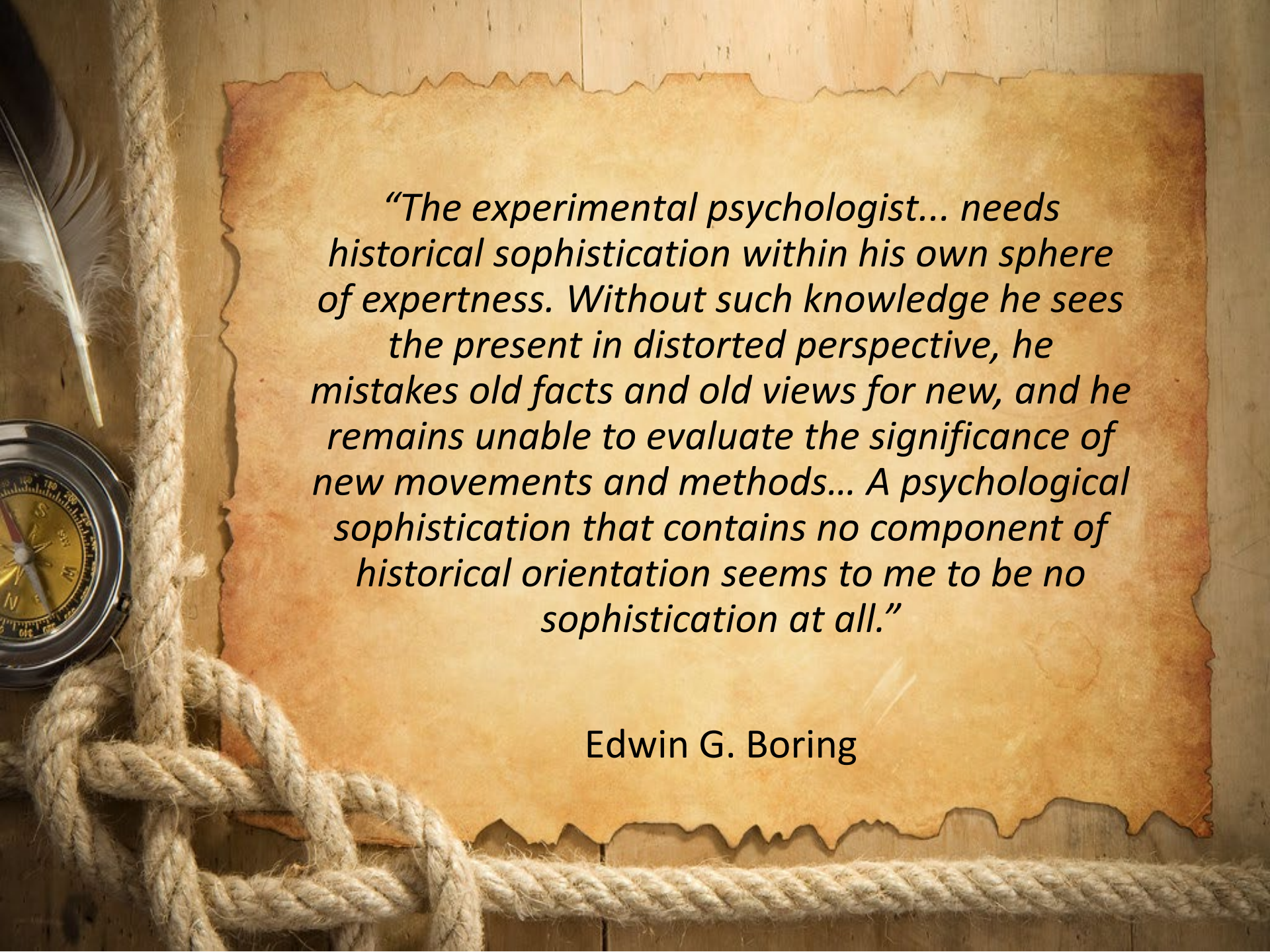
Why study the history of psychology?

- **Hermann Ebbinghaus** (1908) wrote that the field has “a long past but a short history.”
- It was influenced by ancient philosophers and early physiologists, but it is only about 150 years old.
 - It was established in **1879** when **Wilhelm Wundt** created the first experimental psychology laboratory in Germany.



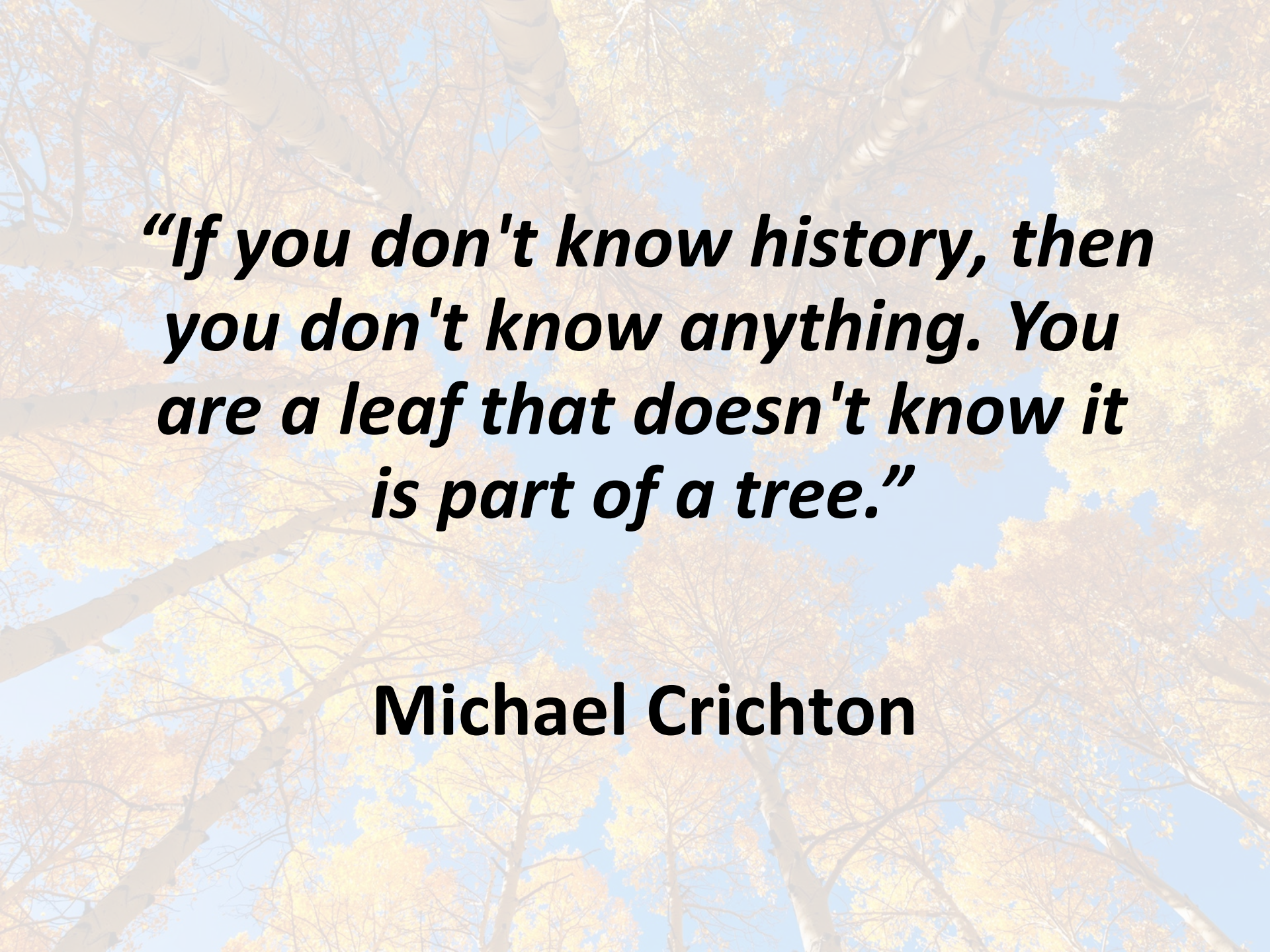
Why study the history of psychology?

- The study of history helps us understand the past and the present and make progress in the future.
 - A consideration of individual's personal qualities and the historical context helps explain how and why.
 - An understanding of changes in the field helps identify truly novel ideas and evaluate their implementation.
 - A common history unites the subfields around common goals for the future.



“The experimental psychologist... needs historical sophistication within his own sphere of expertness. Without such knowledge he sees the present in distorted perspective, he mistakes old facts and old views for new, and he remains unable to evaluate the significance of new movements and methods... A psychological sophistication that contains no component of historical orientation seems to me to be no sophistication at all.”

Edwin G. Boring



***“If you don't know history, then
you don't know anything. You
are a leaf that doesn't know it
is part of a tree.”***

Michael Crichton

Why study the history of psychology?

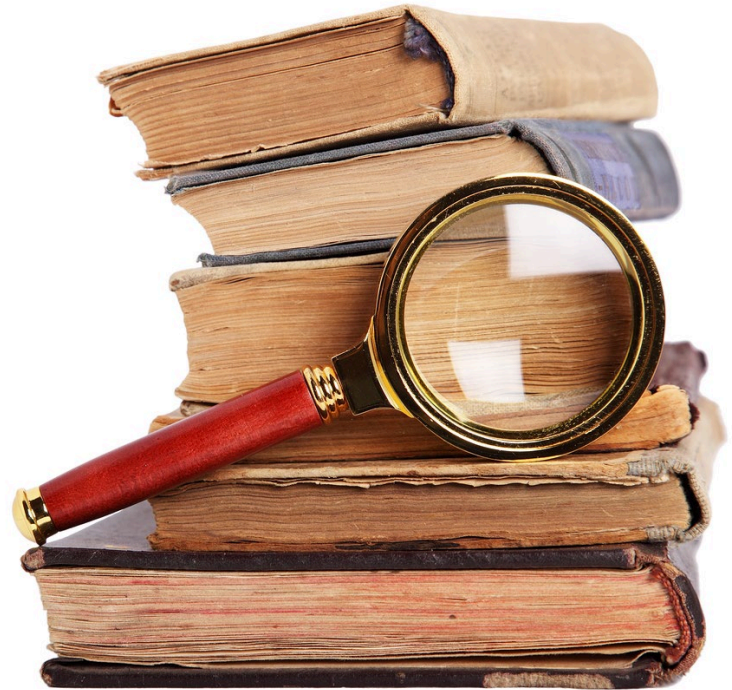
- However, some experts caution that the past is too different from the present to be of relevance.
 - [G. W. F. Hegel](#) said, *“The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.”*
- Others point to the limitations of history as reasons to be skeptical of its relevance.
 - In [1881](#), [Wendell Phillips](#) said, *“History is a series of lies agreed upon.”*



**How do scholars study
history?**


How do scholars study history?

- **Historiography** refers to the techniques, principles, and issues involved in historical research.
- It includes the study of historical writing published in books, magazines, academic journals, and conference proceedings.



How do scholars study history?

- **Primary sources** were written during the event or era being studied and by the person of interest.
 - E.g., autobiographies, letters, notes, diaries, speeches
- **Secondary sources** were written after the event or era passed and by a person other than the one of interest.
 - E.g., biographies, journal articles, magazine articles

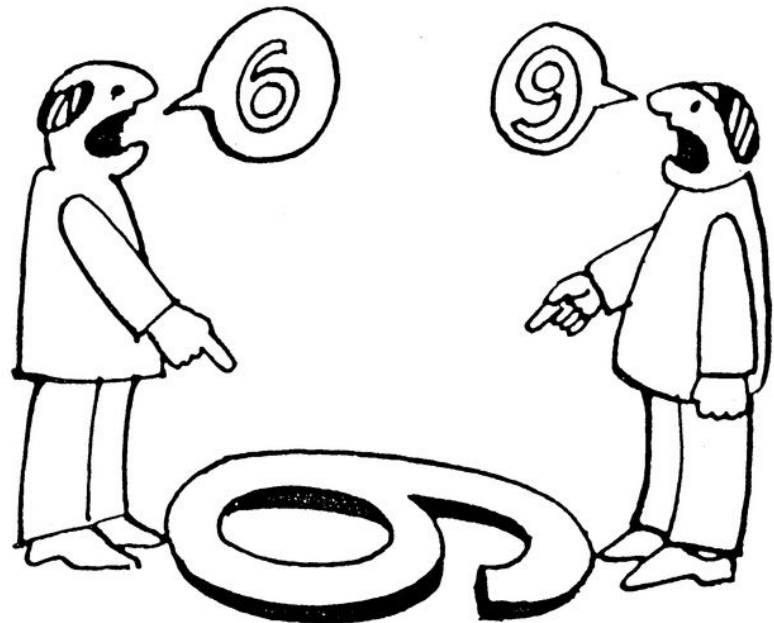


How do scholars study psychology?

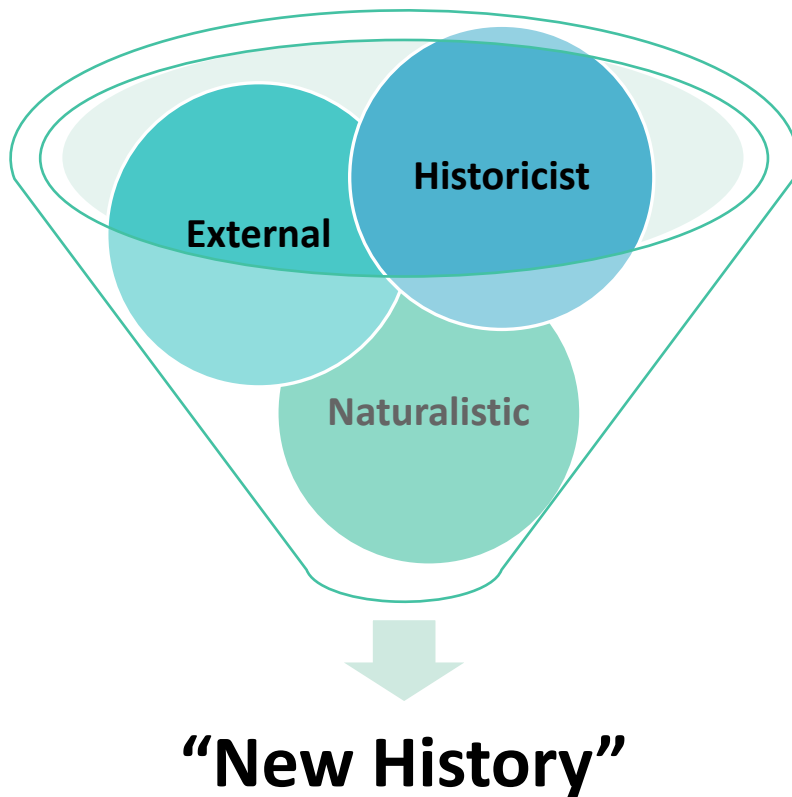
- Historical data are not always complete or accurate.
 - Some people destroyed their work before it could be published.
 - E.g., [John B. Watson](#)
 - Some information is not publicly available or has not yet been found.
 - E.g., [Sigmund Freud](#), [Charles Darwin](#)
 - Some information is deceitful.
 - E.g., [Carl Jung](#)

How do scholars study history?

- Their interpretations are prone to bias and errors.
 - Several historians may interpret the same event or era differently.
 - **Edwin G. Boring**, one of the most well-known historians of psychology, was heavily influenced by his mentor **Edward Titchener**.



How do scholars study history?



- As they find new sources of information, their understanding of an event may change.
- They rely on a **new history approach** characterized by historicism and external and naturalistic histories.



**What are presentism and
historicism?**

What are presentism and historicism?

- **Presentism** interprets past events through a modern lens using current knowledge.
 - We cannot escape it.

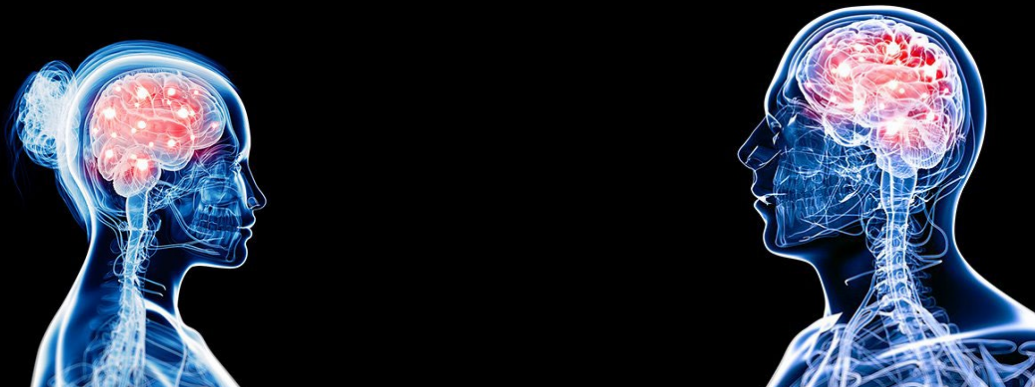


What are presentism and historicism?

- **Historicism** interprets past events through a historical lens and considers the **zeitgeist**, or the climate of the times.
 - Contextual factors like economic opportunities, wars, and discrimination played a significant role in the development of psychology.

What are presentism and historicism?

- **Paul Broca** (1861) wrote that women were intellectually inferior to men because their brains were smaller than men's brains.
 - Presentism might interpret this idea as sexist.
 - Historicism recognizes that this idea was consistent with popular opinion in the 1860s.





What are internal and external histories?

What are internal and external histories?

- **Internal history**
includes the records of people, events, and ideas within the field of psychology.
 - This approach traces the work and contributions of different individuals.

- **External history**
focuses on the forces outside psychology that impact its development.
 - This includes contextual factors as well as developments in other fields and industries.

What are internal and external histories?

1980-2020

National Identity

- Continued sense of superiority as the world's leading superpower

Technology

- Development of the Internet and cell phones

Culture and Society

- Increased diversity

Geography and Environment

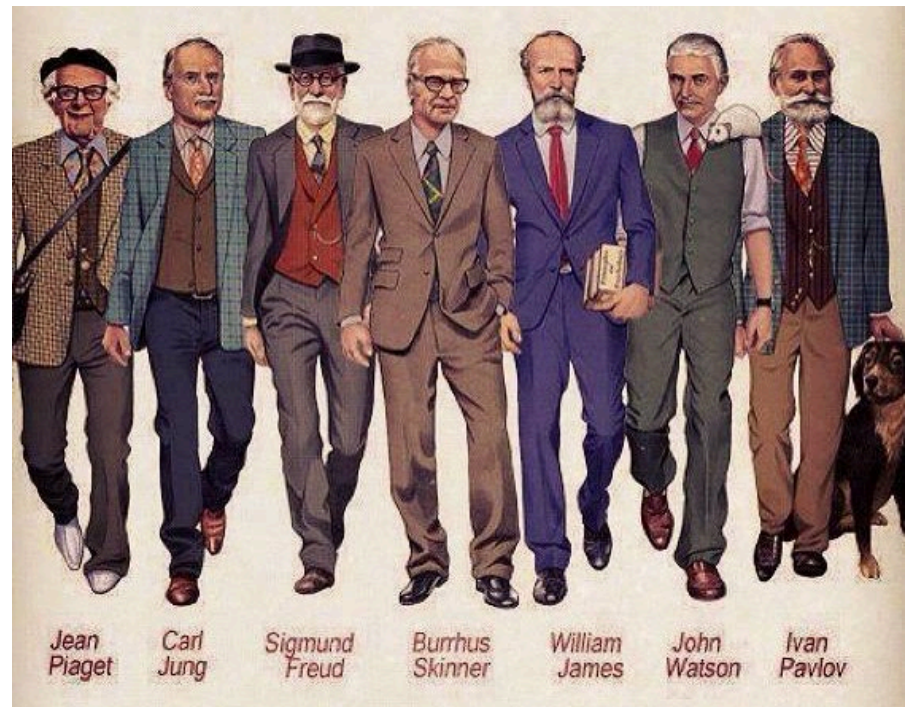
- Increased eco-consciousness in energy and food



**What are personalistic and
naturalistic histories?**

What are personalistic histories?

- A **personalistic theory** of history focuses on people and their contributions to psychology.
 - Scholars epitomize some eras, theories, and concepts by naming them after influential people.
 - E.g., Freudian slip



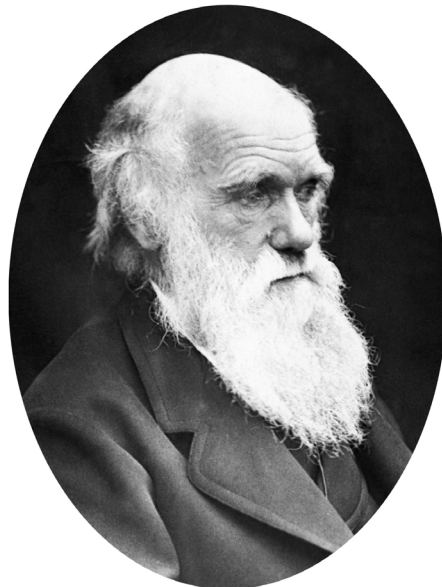
What are naturalistic histories?

- A **naturalistic theory**, in contrast, focuses on the forces of nature that impact the field.
 - This includes the study of **multiples**, when occur when two or more people independently create the same theory or make the same discovery.

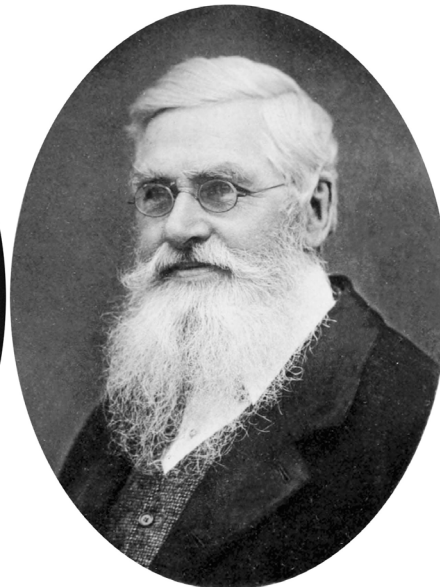


What are naturalistic histories?

- An example of a multiples event is when **Charles Darwin** and **Alfred R. Wallace** simultaneously yet independently developed similar theories of evolution in the **1850s**.



Darwin



Wallace