The Dictionary ... 1


The definite article in the title of this book indicates a certain *chutzpah*. As the author points out in his Preface (page xiii), more than 100 dictionaries of psychology and psychiatry have been published in English since 1892, and most readers will therefore think of the dictionary under review as *a* (rather than *the*) dictionary of psychology. My own *Dictionary of Psychology* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press, and therefore I have an interest to declare, but I am happy to acknowledge that Corsini’s dictionary is in a class of its own in terms of its size, scope, and coverage. It is almost a million words in extent – roughly equivalent to one and a half bibles – and it contains over 30,000 entries, three times as many as any of its English-language precursors and competitors.

Page ix of the prelims is devoted to a brief note ‘About the Author’, the US counselling psychologist Raymond Corsini. But Corsini did not actually sit down and write the 30,000 entries himself. A careful reading of his Preface reveals his actual methodology.

First, he interviewed 100 psychologists, asking them what they would like to see in a dictionary of psychology. From these interviews he concluded that what was needed was as many entries, illustrations, and biographies as possible. Second, he hoovered up a collection of headwords from 24 existing dictionaries, encyclopedias, and reference books, and from the glossaries at the backs of 50 textbooks. Next, for some headwords he simply lifted the definitions ‘directly from three already published books’ (page xiii) with permission from the original publishers. These books are not identified and, surprisingly, the original sources are not acknowledged. For most of the remaining headwords, he recruited 111 eminent consulting editors whose names are listed at the front of the dictionary, plus two more who ‘asked not to be identified’ (page xiv), to write definitions, and he wrote some himself. All of the entries are anonymous, so it is impossible to discover who wrote what. Finally, he had all the entries checked by a subset of the consulting editors, who are not separately identified, by Alan Auerbach, the American Psychological Association’s dictionary expert, and by an unspecified number of ‘additional psychologists’ hired by the publisher.

This process took seven years to complete, and Corsini’s achievement is colossal, the more so when one recalls that he was in his mid eighties by the time he finished the job, an interesting and inspiring fact that is coyly omitted from the biographical note. None the less, it might have been more accurate to have identified him as the editor or compiler of this remarkable dictionary rather than as its author.

The definitions are all short, averaging about 30 words, and they are located where you would expect to find them, so that you are not sent on wild-goose chases. For example, if you look up ‘cortical deafness’, you will immediately find the following no-nonsense definition under that headword: ‘Permanent inability to hear (deafness) caused by damage to the cortex of the brain, which is involved in auditory functions’. I would take issue with aspects of that definition – deafness is not invariably permanent, nor is the impairment necessarily associated with total ‘inability to hear’, and it is difficult to see what useful information is added by the clause ‘which is involved in auditory functions’ – but at least the definition is straightforward, clear, and easy to find. It is instructive to make a comparison with *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (Reber, 1995), currently the leading competitor. If you look up the same term, what you find is a typically frustrating entry, which reads, in its entirety: ‘cortical deafness → cerebral *deafness*. You need to remember that the arrow means ‘see’, indicating a cross-reference, but there is no point in trying to look up ‘cerebral deafness’, because it does not appear as a headword in the dictionary. No; the asterisk indicates that you must look under ‘deafness, cerebral’, of all places, where you will find
the following definition: ‘A general term used to cover any form of deafness caused by brain lesions. Several other terms are used [including] cortical deafness for lesions in the cortex’. As so often happens, after a roundabout and irritating search, the definition is finally located in an unexpected place, and in this case it does not tell us very much. The Dictionary of Psychology is certainly better organized and much easier to use than The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology.

When a large number of people contribute to a joint venture, such as the dictionary under review, the problem of social loafing can arise. It is defined in the dictionary as ‘a tendency to “take it easy” and perform less when working on a group project in comparison with how a person works if held individually accountable’. Could this phenomenon have affected the compilation of the dictionary? According to the Preface (page xiv), ‘credit has been given, where known, to coiners of headwords as well as those people believed to be primarily responsible for basic research in various topics’, but in the entry on ‘social loafing’, as if to illustrate the phenomenon, no names are mentioned. Why were the 113 consulting editors and ‘additional psychologists’ hired by the publisher unable to supply any information about the pioneers in this area? It is well documented that the French agricultural engineer Maximilien (Max) Ringelmann (1861–1931) was primarily responsible for investigating this phenomenon in a series of experiments that he carried out in 1882–7 and published in 1913, and competent social psychologists know that the term social loafing was coined by the US psychologist Bibb Latané and colleagues in an article in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology in 1979.

In many other entries, originators of terms and concepts are not given credit although their names could have been discovered without too much effort, and more worryingly, the attributions that are given are sometimes unreliable. One example is ‘prisoner’s dilemma’, which is attributed to ‘R. D. Luce & H. Raiffa’. It is true that Luce and Raiffa discussed the Prisoner’s Dilemma game in their influential textbook Games and Decisions in 1957, but the game had been discovered in 1950 by Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher, and the person who named it, in a seminar at the Psychology Department of Stanford University later in the same year, was Albert W. Tucker, and this is all common knowledge among game theorists.

Social loafing may have contributed to some of the other errors and omissions that have crept into this dictionary. Among those that I spotted are the following. The ‘blood-brain barrier’ is not ‘a semipermeable membrane surrounding blood vessels in the central nervous system’, although a similar definition is given in The Macmillan Dictionary of Psychology by Stuart Sutherland (1995). It is a complicated mechanism involving (among other things) tight junctions between the capillaries that supply blood to the brain and their encirclement by the end feet of astrocytes, providing glial sheaths around them; semipermeable membranes play no part in this mechanism as far as I am aware. The ‘Lee-Boot effect’ is not ‘a tendency toward false pregnancies in mice housed together, due to a pheromone in the urine’; it is more accurately defined as the suspension of oestrous cycles in groups of females of various species housed together in the absence of males of the same species or their pheromones. The illustration accompanying ‘Asch conformity effect’ depicts a pair of cards on which participants in Asch’s original experiments were asked to indicate which of the three lines on one card was the same length as the comparison line on the other, but in the illustration none of the three lines matches the comparison line, which was never the case in the Asch experiments. Finally, the definition of ‘ratio’ as ‘a relationship between the numerator and the denominator of a fraction expressed as a decimal number’ is not right – and I wonder whether ‘ratio’ belongs in a dictionary of psychology anyway.

It is easy to criticize any dictionary for the words that it omits, because in practice every dictionary excludes far more than it could possibly include. But given that this dictionary finds space for such headwords as ‘ratio’, it seems fair to comment on some notable omissions that are closer to home. Arbitrarily taking the letter M, and leaving aside many omissions that are debatable, I have found just a baker’s dozen that would be difficult to justify: Magendie’s foramen,
magnocellular system, male erectile disorder, manic episode, meme, mental model, mesolimbic system, microtubule, minimal group situation, minority social influence, mossy fibre, motor cortex, muscarinic receptor. Almost two-thirds (8/13 or 62 per cent) of these missing terms refer to biological aspects of psychology, and this exposes a feature of the dictionary that is worth stressing, namely that its coverage is relatively porous in biological areas of the discipline. But this exercise also reveals that in general the coverage is exceptional good, for in any other dictionary of psychology I would have found many more serious omissions.

The copy-editing and proof-reading should have been done more carefully, in my opinion. Just a few illustrative examples should suffice. On page xii of the prelims, in a table of appendixes, prefixes are referred to as ‘refixes’, and for some reason page numbers of appendixes have not been inserted. In the main body of the dictionary, the entry for ‘lie scale’ contains the cross-reference ‘See MALINGERING SCALE’, but no such headword is to be found. On page 1095, in an appendix devoted to the Greek alphabet, a lower-case psi, arguably the most important Greek letter in psychology, is missing. Lastly, on page 1119, the introductory note at the head of the appendix devoted to biographies begins with a paragraph in which the many people who examined and approved the appendix are acknowledged, but ironically none of them seems to have noticed that the paragraph is duplicated immediately below.

This dictionary is to be commended for including a substantial biographical appendix, containing brief details about many famous psychologists. However, I was disappointed to find that, although most major contributors to the terminology of the discipline are still alive, the appendix is restricted to dead psychologists. A curious exception is the US psychologist Lee J. Cronbach (born 1916), who is very much alive and living in Palo Alto, California, and may therefore have mixed feelings about the illustrious company in which he finds himself, but to sue for defamation might be tempting fate. The error was probably picked up from the Biographical Dictionary of Psychology (Sheehy, Chapman, & Conroy, 1997), in which it was unfortunately stated that Cronbach died in 1994.

In spite of the lapses to which I have drawn attention, others that I have not mentioned, and probably many more that I have not even noticed, this is without doubt a splendid dictionary and a substantial advance on those that have gone before. It is a truly monumental reference work, although I doubt that it will ever come to be regarded as the dictionary of psychology, eclipsing all others. I am sure that it will prove useful to psychologists, students of psychology, and other interested readers for many years to come, and I have no hesitation in recommending it warmly.

References

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