SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, HISTORY AND THE STUDY OF THE HOLOCAUST:

THE PERILS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY 'BORROWING'

ABSTRACT:

The article offers a critical examination of 'borrowing' as a form of interdisciplinary engagement between psychology and history. This is where specific insights from one discipline are used (often selectively) by the other to shed light on a specific problem regarding experience, human motivation, or behaviour. Using two studies on the social psychological aspects of the Holocaust as relevant examples, the article highlights some of the epistemological and conceptual tensions implicit in this form of interdisciplinarity. These include the role of narrative and emplotment in historical reconstruction, the relationship between texts and historical context, the role of discourse and interpretation, and the tension between universalism and particularism. The article considers the different ways in which some of these challenges could be overcome in future research endeavours, and how one might take the interdisciplinary study of the Holocaust, but also other instances of mass crimes and genocide, beyond selective 'borrowing'.

Keywords: psychology, history, Holocaust, interdisciplinarity, bystander behaviour, perpetrators.

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The Holocaust is undoubtedly the historical event which has had the single most profound influence on social psychology. Not only were a number of seminal studies directly driven by questions posed by the dark legacy of Nazism – Adorno et al.'s (1950) work on the authoritarian personality, Milgram's (1963, 1974) experiments on obedience, Oliner and Oliner's (1988) study of altruistic personality are some relevant examples – but more generally, the inevitable question of *why* the Holocaust happened has traditionally invited explanations which are psychological in nature. Across the social sciences and humanities, accounts of the Holocaust invariably touched upon the questions of individual and collective beliefs, social influence, personality, the power of the situation, emotions, prejudice, aggression, etc. As a result, psychology – in the broadest sense – has been seen as potentially relevant to Holocaust scholarship, while the suffering of European Jews remained a regular motif in psychological literature on topics related to peace and conflict, and the question of why people do harm to others. On the other hand, the widespread acknowledgment of psychology's relevance to Holocaust studies has been offset by the recognition that, on its own, psychology could only take one so far. This is especially the case with the (over) confident approach of the likes of Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Sanford (1950) or Milgram (1963) whose quest for psychological mechanisms underpinning authoritarians and obedience tended to neglect the importance of broader socio-historical factors to which historical scholarship has been much more sensitive.

All this points to the possibility that psychology and history might be productively brought together to shed light on the Holocaust as a historical event. And

yet, the necessary interdisciplinary engagement has so far been marred by long-standing epistemological and theoretical tensions between the two areas of enquiry, and a climate of mutual suspicion. As Kenneth Gergen (2001, p.82) observed, psychologists regularly 'scan accounts of earlier times', but they do so mainly in the quest for 'interesting hypotheses and anecdotes', or for confirmation that the results of systematic and controlled empirical research have a wider currency and the much coveted ecological validity. But they seldom see psychology and history as truly complementary. Along similar lines, Billig (2008, p.10) notes that history is for many psychologists an incomplete enquiry, because of the evasive 'messiness' of history and social life: as history is concerned with past events, it leaves no scope for hypotheses, experimental controls or the manipulation of variables. Therefore, its claims 'can never be "proved" to the rigorous standards demanded by an experimental scientist'.

Among historians there is an equally widespread misgiving towards historical enquiry that appears to be overly reliant on psychological theories and empirical findings (see for example, Tileagă & Byford, 2014a, also Elms, 1994 and Nicholas, 2004). Historiography of the Holocaust offers an illustrative example. When Christopher Browning (1992), one of today's pre-eminent Holocaust historians, drew on Stanley Milgram's research on obedience to highlight certain aspects of the conduct of German reservists who participated in the murder of Polish Jewry, he was promptly accused by a fellow historian, Daniel Goldhagen (1997, p.391), of offering an 'ahistorical explanation', one that has been 'conceived in a social psychological laboratory'. The author of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* exhibited little understanding for Browning's devotion to 'multi-causal interpretations based on multidisciplinary scholarship' (Browning, 2002a, p. viii). At the core of Goldhagen's critique was the

assumption that psychology's universalist claims cannot account for the essential 'Germanness' of the Holocaust and 'the historic specificity of perpetrators […] and of a society that nurtured them' (Goldhagen, 1997, p. 94). This distrust of psychology also reflects another concern, namely that psychology, by purporting to explain the actions of perpetrators (especially by highlighting their 'ordinariness'), goes some way towards exonerating their actions (see also Billig, 2002; Miller, Buddie & Kretschmar, 2002). But, as Tindale, Munier, Wasserman and Smith (2002) have noted, even Goldhagen's supposedly non-psychological thesis, invokes both terminology and explanations that are essentially psychological. This points to the unavoidability of the contact between the two disciplines when it comes to accounting for human behaviour and motivation, but also illustrates the widespread reluctance to admit that this is so.

The 'Willing Executioners/Ordinary Men' debate highlights also an important aspect of historical research which alienates psychologists. Christopher Browning's and Daniel Goldhagen's diametrically opposed views were derived from the exploration of identical material – post war testimonies which members of the German army's 101st Reserve Battalion made before judicial investigators. As Browning openly acknowledges, 'different historians reading the same set of interrogations would not produce or agree upon an identical set of "facts" – beyond an elementary minimum –out of which a narrative of events […] could be created' (in Goldhagen, Browning & Wieseltier, 1996, p. 21). Thus, the same historical material can produce multiple, competing interpretations and explanations, and there are no means of adjudicating between them, beyond the good old-fashioned scholarly debate (see Billig, 1988). There is no fool-proof, 'objective' way or testing empirically the relative contribution of, for example, 'eliminationist anti-Semitism culturally

imprinted over centuries' or 'institutional, organisational and situational factors' (Browning, 2002b, p. 5).

In spite of these obstacles to interdisciplinary dialogue, psychologists and historians do engage with each other's work (see Tileagă & Byford, 2014a). In this article, we will focus on one form of engagement which is especially prominent in social psychological accounts of the Holocaust. It is what Jordanova (2006), called *borrowing* or *transfer*. This is where specific insights from one discipline are used (often selectively) by the other to shed light on a specific problem regarding human motivation, behaviour, and so on. When psychologists engage in borrowing from history (and historians), this usually involves selecting an account of a historical event, and then examining it through the prism of psychological research often with the, even if only implicit purpose of validating it or demonstrating its wider relevance. When historians 'borrow', they take on the role of the 'seeker' who is 'poking about' psychological literature in the quest for 'some formula, some hypothesis, some model, some method which has immediate relevance to one's own work, and which seems to help one to understand one's data better and to arrange and interpret them in a more meaningful way' (Stone, 1987, p. 20).

In what follows we offer a critical examination of borrowing as a form of interdsciplinarity, through the analysis of two specific Holocaust-related studies. The first is the exploration of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews as an instance of bystander intervention, by Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins and Levine (2006). The second is the book *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing and Dying* by two German scholars, Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, which explores the mentality of German officers by analysing covert recording of German POWs held in Allied prisons during the Second World War (Neitzel & Welzer, 2012).

Although the two studies share the focus on the Holocaust, and the desire to shed light on social psychological aspects of military conflict and mass crimes, they are nevertheless quite different. Not only do they explore different protagonists (bystanders and perpetrators) but they also belong to distinct traditions of scholarship. Reicher et al.'s (2006) work is rooted in the mainstream social psychological research on bystander behaviour, and draws extensively on social identity theory, an established approach with a venerable history in social psychology. Neitzel and Welzer's (2012) book, by contrast, is an explicit collaboration between an historian and a psychologist which does not claim to belong to, or rely on any recognized tradition of psychological thinking. Their approach relies on a much looser and more eclectic set of psychological concepts and theories. Furthermore, while Reicher et al.'s (2006) study was published in a psychology journal, and speaks mainly to an audience of psychologists, *Soldaten* is fist and foremost a work of historiography, aimed at historians of the Third Reich and the Holocaust.

And yet, we argue that the two studies warrant examination side by side. This is, first, because both are explicitly set up (and are, indeed, seen by others) as social psychological analyses of historical material and therefore as important attempts at interdisciplinary crossover. Second, they are illustrative of the two different faces of borrowing outlined above: Reicher et al. (2006) treat an episode from history as the testing ground for laboratory-based empirical findings, while Neitzel and Welzer (2012) approach psychology as a necessary resource for the interpretation of a unique kind of archival material. Third, both studies recognise the role of textual analysis of written or oral communication in psychological research; they engage explicitly with archival material to examine issues such as persuasion and identity construction (Reicher et al., 2006) or accounts of everyday experience and soldier 'mentality'

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, HISTORY AND THE STUDY OF THE HOLOCAUST

(Neitzel and Welzer, 2012). Thus, both raise issues about when and how archival material becomes psychologically relevant *data*.

In what follows we examine each study as an example of borrowing, highlighting some of the epistemological and conceptual tensions implicit in this form of interdisciplinarity. These include the role of narrative and emplotment in historical reconstruction, the relationship between texts, discourse and interpretation, and the issue of universalism vs particularism. We then proceed to consider the different ways in which some of these challenges could be overcome in future research, and how one might take the interdisciplinary study of the Holocaust, but also other instances of mass crimes and genocide, beyond 'borrowing'.

THE SURVIVAL OF BULGARIAN JEWS: A CASE OF 'BYSTANDER INTERVENTION'?

The first example of borrowing which we consider is Reicher et al.'s (2006) social psychological examination of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews from deportation to Nazi concentration camps in March 1943. The central premise of Reicher et al.'s (2006) study is that the survival of Bulgarian Jews was a case of successful bystander intervention, and one of the rare cases in the history of the Holocaust where non-Jewish bystanders prevented the destruction of their Jewish neighbours. In fact, Bulgaria is described by Reicher et al. (2006, p. 53) as the venue of 'perhaps the most remarkable case of rescue', not just because the majority of the country's Jewish population survived the war, but because this resulted from a *collective* effort by bystanders: a 'social movement' against the persecution of Jews is said to have 'stopped deportation in its tracks'. The specific focus of the study are arguments

which opinion makers in Bulgaria used to mobilise the wider community against various antisemitic measures initiated by the country's pro-Nazi government. By analysing a collection of translated archival documents published in a volume edited by the Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov (2001), Reicher et al. (2006) conclude that the successful mobilisation of opposition to anti-Jewish measures involved three types of argument. The first was to present Jews as fellow 'Bulgarians' and therefore as part of the national 'ingroup', the second was to construct Jews as an 'outgroup', but one that should be protected because solidarity towards victims of injustice is a key component of the Bulgarian national identity and character, while the third stipulated that not protecting the Jewish 'outgroup' would be potentially harmful to Bulgaria's interests on the international stage.

Reicher et al. (2006) examined the Bulgarian case in the context of the emerging empirical and theoretical work on the social identity model of bystander intervention which views helping behaviour as a function of group relations. Experimental research has shown that bystanders are more likely to intervene in a crisis situation if the person in need is perceived as a fellow member of a salient 'ingroup' (e.g. Levine, Prosser, Evans & Reicher, 2005) or when normative behaviour within the 'ingroup' includes an obligation to attend those in need regardless of group membership (see Hopkins, Harrison, Levine & Cassidy, 2004). The Bulgarian case study is seen as extending this research by showing how social identity-related determinants of bystander intervention can be incorporated into efforts to mobilise potential helpers into collective action. Also, the divergent categorisation of Jews in relation to the national 'ingroup' and 'outgroup' is noted as an example of the rhetorical nature of categorisation which Steven Reicher in particular has highlighted in his work (e.g. Reicher and Hopkins, 2001). Boundaries between groups (in this

case 'Bulgarians' and 'Jews') are seen neither as fixed in empirical reality nor as a function of cognitive and perceptual processes, but as situationally contingent rhetorical accomplishments which are produced in the argumentative context surrounding social mobilisation and the construction of national identity.

As well as being a study of the social identity aspects of bystander behaviour, Reicher et al.'s (2006) article is framed as an enquiry into a historical event, one that makes a direct contribution to Holocaust scholarship. By explaining the success of the mobilisation efforts in Bulgaria, a 'rhetorical social identity perspective' is said to offer a new angle in the study of rescue during the Holocaust, one which looks beyond the 'structural and political conditions of rescue' or the personality traits underpinning individual acts of altruism towards Jews (Reicher et al.,2006, p. 53). Since its publication, the study has been cited in numerous works on helping behaviour and group processes as a pertinent demonstration of the importance of social identity in the mobilisation of helping behaviour (e.g. Klein, Spears & Reicher, 2007; Levine, Cassidy& Jentzsch, 2010; Morton, Homsey & Postmes, 2009; Passini & Morselli, 2009; Rooyackers & Verkuyten, 2012;Thomas & McGarty, 2009). What is more, the study's *historical* focus has been noted as its particularly valuable dimension, one that demonstrates that social identity model of helping operates in 'real life and not just in laboratory settings (Hopkins et al., 2007; Šubašić, Reynolds & Turner, 2008). Thus, within this specific area of social psychological research, the story of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews is gradually becoming one of those illustrative examples which help connect 'the catalogues of experimental and empirical material with the world of the known', thus enabling psychologists to 'integrate psychological research with the social world' (Manning, Levine and Collins, 2007, p. 559).

10

In social psychological writing on bystander intervention, when attempts are made to take research into the 'real world'– whether in order to verify experimental findings or to generate new hypotheses – the spotlight tends to fall on those 'real life events' which are already seen, discussed and remembered in public discourse as involving bystander behaviour. The murder of Kitty Genovese in New York in 1964 (Latane and Darley, 1970), or the abduction and murder of James Bulger in Merseyside, UK in 1993 (Levine, 1999) came under scrutiny from psychologists interested in bystander behaviour, precisely because they were already perceived as instances where bystanders could and should have made a difference. The same can be said to apply to Reicher et al.'s (2006) study. Their choice of example was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that in Holocaust literature and public memory the survival of Bulgarian Jews is commonly construed as an instance of bystander intervention, an example of collective humanity and selflessness (see Arendt, 1970; Bejski, 1986; Boyadjieff, 1989; Goldhagen, 1997; Paunovski & Illel, 2000). The notion of collective rescue is also entrenched in Bulgarian national memory, where it survives as a potent myth that reinforces positive national self-presentation. In the words of the Bulgarian anthropologist Ivaylo Ditchev, the idea of collective rescue has become, over the years, a powerful 'screen memory behind which a new national pride can be constructed in times of crisis' (cited in Secor, 2001, p. 34).

However, in setting up the relevant 'historical context' of their study, Reicher et al. (2006) recognise that the survival of Bulgarian Jews has been the topic of considerable public and scholarly debate. The reader is warned that available historical literature 'must be handled with care' given that 'accounts of Jewish survival [in Bulgaria] are coloured by ideological bias, with differing sources wishing to allocate credit to different actors' (p. 54). This is an allusion, first and foremost, to

the fierce debate, which raged for the duration of the communist era, between on the one hand regime historians who attributed the survival of Bulgaria's Jews to the activism of the country's workers' movement and its leadership, and on the other hand royalist circles in the diaspora who saw King Boris as the key figure in the rescue (see Oren, 1968; Todorov, 2001). Since the end of the Cold War the focus shifted away from the involvement in the rescue of the communist party, although the relative contribution of the King, individuals from within the country's political establishment, the Bulgarian elite, or 'the Bulgarian people' as a whole are still widely debated.

Contested history of this kind presents a challenge for social psychologists. As was mentioned in the introduction, because much of social psychology focuses on behaviour in the present, psychologists can claim to have a direct and unmediated access to their object of study. In the context of experimental research in particular, psychologists are involved in the design and creation of the data they analyse. The only available and therefore authoritative description of 'events' and the conduct of the protagonists within an experimental situation is that supplied by the researcher who has direct access to 'what happened' (see Edwards, 1992). Historians do not have that luxury: they deal with 'data' that, because its locus is in the past, is always imperfect, incomplete, contingent on interpretation, mediated through sources (Jordanova, 2006, p. 170).

In an attempt to resolve the inconsistency between different historical interpretations, Reicher et al. (2006, p. 54) opted for a strategy that involved focusing on 'what is agreed between a number of texts'. Rather than engaging with the contrasting viewpoints and seeking to establish the relative merits of the different sources (not all of which are equally tarnished by 'ideological bias') the authors rely

on what they argue is 'considerable consensus…as to what happened and who was involved in the rescue'. To many historians this might seem like a curious methodological approach. It implies that all the sources consulted – which range from a commemorative volume endorsed by the former Bulgarian dictator Todor Zhivkov (Cohen & Assa, 1977), through various encyclopaedic entries and relatively brief reflections on the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews (Arendt, 1970; Ben Yakov, 1990; Genov & Baeva, 2003), to a number of lengthier and more comprehensive examinations of this topic (Bar-Zohar, 1998; Boyadjieff, 1989; Chary, 1972; Todorov, 2001) – deserve to be treated as equally credible. It also assumes that the extraction of the common denominator among the different versions eliminates 'bias' and renders the variability in historical interpretation immaterial.

While unusual in the context of historical scholarship, in a piece of *psychological* research this approach is perhaps less unexpected. The appeal to consensus is a common feature of what Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) refer to as 'empiricist repertoire' which permeates experimental psychology (see also Potter, 1996). The empiricist repertoire paints a picture of a stable, empirically knowable, 'out-there', world. The task of the psychologist is to describe this world as a collection of agreements on knowable and uncontroversial 'facts'. The appeal to consensus is manifested, for example, in the emphasis on inter-rater, or inter-observer reliability, which, in the absence of more 'objective' criteria for establishing 'what is going on' in the context of a study, treats agreement as a marker of objectivity and positions a concurred upon version of events as unproblematic and value-free. Thus, Reicher et al. (2006) employ the tools of their own discipline to create – or *borrow* - a single, usable account, one that can be presented as containing a dispassionate and widely accepted historical verity.

However, a closer scrutiny of Reicher et al.'s (2006) study reveals important limitations of this approach to historical reconstruction. The outcome is a rather distorted, simplistic account of the 'historical context', one that is neither factually correct, nor free from 'ideological bias'. In fact, most of the relevant historical sources on the survival of Bulgarian Jews, including some of the works consulted by Reicher et al. (2006), casts doubt on the essential premise of their study: these sources view the rescue of Bulgarian Jews as anything but a clear-cut instance of 'bystander behaviour'. While acknowledging the reality of public protests, most historians fall short of attributing the cancellation of the deportations in March 1943 to their effectiveness. On the contrary, they argue that the 'bystanders' involved in the protests were not instrumental to the rescue of Bulgarian Jews, and that those who 'ultimately' did save them can hardly be described as 'bystanders'.

For example, in his influential early account of the survival of Bulgarian Jews, Frederic Chary (1972) points out that public protests, whose rhetoric Reicher et al. (2006) analyse in detail, had very little consequence: they were something that the Bulgarian king and his government had to live with, but it was not something that they necessarily took great notice of. This is because the pro-German government enjoyed widespread support from the Bulgarian public, largely due to the fact that through collaboration with Nazi Germany, it fulfilled the nationalist dream of territorial expansion in Dobrudja, Macedonia and Thrace (see also Oren, 1968). Thus, for much of the war 'the philo-Semites in the opposition protested, but the government carried on its work' (Chary, 1972, p. 191, see also Todorov, 2001). Rather than placing public protest at the centre of the 'rescue', historical literature emphasises that in the spring of 1943 factors above and beyond the protests made a critical contribution to the change in government policy: Germany's military setbacks

14

in Africa and the Eastern Front, pressure from the allied governments to facilitate the evacuation of its Jewish population to Turkey and Palestine, and so on (Bar Zohar, 1998; Chary, 1972; Feingold, 1970; Oren, 1968; Todorov, 2001). Therefore, the decisions about whether or not to deport Jews to the Nazi camps were the result of complex political calculations.

Moreover, if there is a single act of public protest that did influence the last minute decision to cancel the deportations, it was the petition to the Prime Minister Bogdan Filov, initiated in March 1943 by Dimitar Peshev, the vice-president of the Bulgarian parliament. To describe this as an instance of 'bystander behaviour' would be misleading. The petition was signed *not* by public figures and church leaders who led the largely ineffective dissent in previous years, but by 42 members of the Bulgarian parliament from the government benches. This means that, contrary to the way in which it is presented by Reicher et al. (2006), this crucial petition was not part of the long-standing public campaign against antisemitic measures. On the contrary, the main reason why it was successful is because it signalled the emergence of dissent *within* the ruling elite, among members of the same the 'rubber stamp parliament' which in previous years passed the antisemitic laws that provoked public opposition (Chary, 1972, p.189). In other words, Peshev was able to stop the 'deportations in its tracks' (as Reicher et al. put it) not because he was a caring 'bystander', but because he was part of the pro-German political regime which Raul Hilberg's book *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders* (1993) categorises firmly among the 'perpetrators'.

This interpretation casts the events of 1943 in a completely different light to that found in Reicher et al. (2006). It suggests that the topic which warrants exploration is not what made bystanders effective, but how 'those who planned to place Bulgarian Jews in a situation which would have required their rescue [...] never

completed their plans?' (Bar-Zohar, 1998, p. 198, see Oren, 1968 for a similar argument). Also, Ilel (2000) criticised the popular narratives of 'rescue' for their tendency to portray Jews, at least implicitly, as a passive community reliant on the compassion of the munificent Bulgarian 'bystanders' who protested on their behalf. For the duration of the war, Bulgarian Jews themselves consistently sought to mobilise public opinion against anti-Semitic measures, and to influence individuals close to the government. In fact, one such intervention, in the town of Kyustendil played a crucial role in the dramatic events that preceded the cancellation of the deportations in March 1943 (Bar Zohar, 1998; Chary, 1972; Todorov, 2001).

This broader and more complex political dynamic behind the survival of Bulgarian Jews suggests that 'rescuers' were not a clearly identifiable category and source of political agency, distinct from (intended) victims or perpetrators (Chary, 1972). This is an important point because the whole tradition of psychological research on bystander behaviour is predicated on the assumption that there is a triangle of clearly demarcated roles: the victim, the perpetrator and the bystander. In experimental research on bystander behaviour, including that which draws on social identity theory, the boundaries between the three categories are treated as fixed. In an experiment, the 'emergency situation' is set up, by design, as an interaction between the 'bystander' (the participant) and a person requiring help. The distribution of roles is unambiguous and the course of events carefully managed.

Beyond the laboratory, however, this division is not clear-cut. In fact, the debates about the 'rescue', which Reicher et al. (2006) simply cast aside by focusing on points of 'consensus' are *in fact* debates about the categories of 'perpetrator', 'victim', 'rescuer', about their meaning and their inherently pliable boundaries. As Victoria Barnet (1999, p.11) put it, during the Holocaust, 'psychologically and

historically, bystanders, perpetrators and rescuers stood at different points along the same continuum. Some individuals who began as bystanders later became actively involved in the genocide. A minority of people moved in the opposite direction, and became rescuers or members of resistance groups' (for a comparable argument see also Hilberg, 1993; Marrus, 1987; Niewyk & Nikosia, 2000). Reicher et al. (2006), by implying that the roles were distinct and mutually exclusive, fail to recognise the 'infinite gradations of moral responsibility' (Cohen, 2001, p.143) and the way in which rescue always involved 'a complex social configuration' (Andrieu, 2010, p. 506).

The fact that Reicher et al. (2006) do not engage with the malleable, and political, nature of the term 'bystander', is the outcome of interdisciplinary borrowing: they read history through the prism of psychology and re-presented, or re-versioned it in a way that made it as well-matched as possible to what happens in a piece of psychological research. Condor (2003, p.176) noted this as a more general feature of research within the tradition of social identity theory, especially when it comes to the 'vexing problem of generalisation from the experimental laboratory to the "real world". She points to the 'straightforward strategy' whereby researchers 'adjust [their] vision of the "real world" until it coincides with the parameters of the laboratory'.

However, what makes this approach surprising in the case of Reicher et al.'s (2006) study is that one of their fundamental assumptions is that social categories are inherently rhetorical, and constructed through argument. The analysis of historical documents pertaining to the survival of Bulgarian Jews explores the possibility that the division between categories - 'ingroup' and 'outgroup', Bulgarians and Jews - are contestable and fluid and that the boundaries between them are negotiated in the

course of social interaction (see also Billig, 1987, Billig, et al. 1988, Edwards, 1997, Wetherell & Potter, 1992). And yet, the tools of constructionist, rhetorical analysis are never applied to the analytical categories that the authors themselves use: the fact that labels 'perpetrators', 'bystanders' and 'victims' are also rhetorical, used to forge identities, justify ideological positions, make accusations or defend against them is overlooked. This might be seen as an example of what Woolgar and Pawluch (1985, p. 216) termed 'ontological gerrymandering': categories chosen for analysis are treated as rhetorical constructions, without engaging with the possibility that the same can be said of the categories upon which the analysis depends. Potter (1996, p.40), refers to the same phenomenon as 'selective reification'. Thus, in the Reicher et al.'s (2006) study, the 'classic triangle of roles' (Bauman, 2003) not only remains unproblematized, but it guides the reading of historical material and the subsequent analysis of archival documents.

A further limitation of Reicher et al.'s argument, which can be seen as another symptom of interdisciplinary borrowing is the attempt to partial out, or separate the rhetorical analysis of the documents from the process of historical reconstruction, that is, from determining 'what happened and who was involved'. Only after the story of survival had been 'emplotted' as one of rescue, do the authors proceed to analyse a selection of archival texts. In some ways, this approach is consistent with what goes in psychological research: running the experiment (including describing what went on in the experimental situation) and the analysis of the data are two distinct, sequentially ordered processes. But, when dealing with historical material, a different approach is necessary: the selection and analysis of documents must always guide, and simultaneously be guided by the practice of historical reconstruction. The two processes are constituted within, and inseparable from, each other. The Reicher et

al.'s (2006) study illustrates why this is so: both the choice of documents, and the focus of the analysis, were (pre)determined by the narrative to which they subscribed. It is the narrative of 'rescue' and 'bystander intervention' that made the documents collected by Todorov (2001) – and not other historical material, including that pertaining to the structural and political factors – relevant 'data'.

The various limitations of the Reicher et al.'s (2006) study which we examined here illustrate what happens when an attempt is made to assimilate history within psychology's investigative apparatus; an apparatus does not tolerate historical controversy, contingency or ambiguity. As we have seen, a lot gets lost in the course of interdisciplinary translation implicit in this form of borrowing. What is required instead is a more integrated approach, one that ensures two-directional traffic between psychology and history, and which, rather than seeking to tame the inherent 'messiness' of history, turns it into an object of enquiry. This is an issue that we will return to in the conclusion.

WAR AS WORK? RECONSTRUCTING THE MIND-SET OF THE WERMACHT SOLDIER

In much of the literature on the social psychological aspects of the Holocaust engagement with history tends to be confined to secondary sources (e.g. Baum,2008; Miller, 2004; Newman & Erber, 2001; Staub, 1996, 2003). Just like in the case of Reicher et al. (2006), rather than delving into the archives and becoming engrossed in the complexities involved in the reconstruction of the past, writers have tended to rely on published accounts and used them as the basis of a psychological interpretation.

The second example considered in this article takes a very different approach. The book *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing and Dying* was co-authored by two German scholars, the historian Sönke Neitzel and social psychologist Harald Welzer. The focus of this joint project was the conduct of perpetrators and the 'mentality' of German soldiers and high ranking officers, explored through the analysis of secret recordings of conversations among German POWs collected by the British intelligence services between 1942 and 1945. This is, therefore, a kind of interdisciplinary engagement where a historian and a psychologist come together and apply their diverse expertise to solve problems, and shed light on motivations, feelings and behaviour of a group of people at a particular point in history.

In the years preceding the publication of *Soldaten,* Sönke Neitzel, the historian of the two authors, had published a small number of articles on the secret recordings (which he uncovered in 2001, shortly after they were declassified), as well as a book containing a selection of the transcripts (Nietzel, 2007). However, as he reveals in the 'Prologue' to *Soldaten*, up until his collaboration with a psychologist he made only 'scant progress in evaluating and interpreting this source material' (Neitzel, 2012, p. viii). The reason was not just the sheer quantity of the archival data (tens of thousands of pages of transcripts) but also its nature. To make sense of the recordings, it was necessary to go beyond the scope of a single discipline. As his co-author explains:

> 'as a social psychologist without a profound knowledge of the Wehrmacht, I would never be able to interpret the material historically. Conversely, someone with a purely historical perspective would never be able to decode all the communicative and psychological aspects of the protocols […] Only by combining our disciplines, social psychology and history, would we be able to do justice to the material as a source for reconstructing a particular mentality

and arrive at a revised perspective on soldiers' behaviour' (Weltzer, 2012, p. ix)

What made the material especially appealing to the authors is that it promised a unique insight into the mind, the 'mentality' of the German military. In the authors' view, the protocols were not yet another historical source, to be considered alongside documents, diaries and post-war testimonies in the attempt to shed light on the motives of those who killed and died for the Third Reich. According to Weltzer, sources that had been previously available to historians were inherently 'problematic'. 'Official investigations, letters from the field, eyewitness reports, and memoirs' share the same shortcoming: 'they were consciously composed and addressed to someone specific: a prosecutor, a wife at home or an audience the authors wanted to win over' (p. ix). The secret recordings, referred to as the 'protocols', on the other hand, appeared devoid of an 'agenda': 'men were talking live, in real time about the war and their attitudes towards it' (p.ix). In the surveillance protocols 'the speakers do not address their statements to any external moral arena' (Neitzel & Welzer, 2012, p. 150). This is routine talk, in 'real time' (a phrase frequently used to describe the data), among people who inhabit the 'one and the same world' (p.4). Captured on tape and later transcribed, these conversations are believed to cut through the uncertainties inherent in conventional historical sources, and offer a glimpse into the perpetrators' inner world and 'the relationship between individuals and their actions' (p.6).

The protocols, however, do not speak for themselves: their understanding, the authors argue, requires an explanatory framework (in this case, a psychological one) that can elucidate what 'goes on' in Wehrmacht soldiers' minds. In the quest for this framework, and in providing a *psychological* insight into the conduct of German soldiers, the authors pay only a fleeting reference to the tradition of experimental

social psychology. The classics of psychological research that over the years had been routinely used to account for the conduct of the different protagonists of the Holocaust - the Stanford prison experiments or Milgram's work on obedience - are mentioned in passing. Instead, the central analytic concept is that of 'frames of reference'. Drawing loosely on the work of Goffman (1986), Nietzel and Weltzer (2012) describe 'frames' as anything that might 'influence, guide and even steer' a person's perceptions and interpretations of, and orientations to, the world around them. Frames are said to underpin people's 'routines, habits and certainties' and provide 'preprogrammed and accessible' answers to the question 'what is going on here?' (Nietzel & Welzer, 2012, p. 9). Vaguely defined in this way, frames resemble both the traditional psychological notion of schema (Fiske & Linville, 1980), and Moscovici's (1984) social representations. Like schemas they are said to provide cognitive efficiency: frames are shortcuts that 'save individual human beings a colossal amount of work' (Nietzel & Welzer, 2012, p. 9); like social representations they are inherently social, in that they draw on 'a corpus of cultural orientation and knowledge' (p.9). Also, frames are said to be hierarchically structured: they range from 'frames of the *first order*' that include 'the broader sociohistorical backdrop against which people in a given time operate', all the way down to those that function at the 'level of psychology' and include 'personal dispositions and individual decision making' (p.10).

And yet, throughout the book these 'frames of reference' remain vaguely defined, and there is no theoretical elaboration of what they are or how they operate *psychologically*. There is, similarly, no attempt to illuminate the interplay between different frames, or look at how the sociohistorical context might, for example, influence the individual psychological functioning of perpetrators, or vice versa. This

is surprising because the idea that individual beliefs, motivations and behaviour cannot be understood outside the micro and macro socio-political contexts is one that one finds in both in psychology and historiography (Browning, 1992), and is therefore an obvious candidate topic for interdisciplinary scholarship. And yet, Neitzel and Weltzer's (2012) book does not venture that far. We would like to suggest that this is a feature of interdisciplinary borrowing. *Soldaten* is first and foremost a work of historiography, and psychological insights are brought in, selectively, to buttress a specific historical argument. For this purpose, concepts borrowed from psychology needed to be made quite basic and straightforward; they needed to be diluted, and administered to the readership in manageable doses.

At the same time, engagement with psychology left an important mark on the book. Nietzel and Weltzer's (2012) most wide-ranging conclusion is that the *situation* in which soldiers had found themselves had a profound influence on their conduct and way of thinking: the demands of armed conflict and the immediate context of war affected their actions and 'mentality'. This is a leaf straight from the book of traditional, experimental social psychology, where interpretations of human behaviour had traditionally focused on the power of the situation – social roles, presence of authority, social influence, propaganda, etc.

The situationalism underpinning Nietzel and Weltzer's (2012) argument is especially apparent in the idea of 'war as work' which permeates the book and which overshadows any discussion of the 'frames of reference' which are specifically related to the historical context of the Holocaust, the broader military project of Nazi Germany and the ideology of National Socialism, or indeed those that relate to 'personal disposition' of individual soldiers. The suggestion here is that war itself imposes a world view and pattern of behaviour (a 'frame of reference') that makes

violence possible, and in some sense inevitable. Soldiers, it is claimed, kill because 'fighting is their job' (pp.6, 339, 343) because violence and destruction are demanded by the 'customs of war' (p.75). The authors take this argument one step further to argue that ideology played a minor role in the conduct of the Wermacht soldiers, and that its effect is often overemphasised: 'ideology may provide reasons for war, but it does not explain why soldiers kill or commit war crimes' (pp. 319-320). Also, they argue that the same 'frame of reference of war', defines the conduct of soldiers in any war. It is therefore 'timeless' and universal (Nietzel, 2013, p.12). War, according to Nietzel and Weltzer (2012) brutalises those how take part in it, distorts their sense of perspective and makes acts of violence, whether those inflicted by them, or against them, as normal. The frame of reference 'war as work' makes people commit acts that 'in civilian life, we would interpret as revolting, horrible, even criminal'. In the conclusion to the *Soldaten* the same explanation is offered for the conduct of soldiers serving in Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan.

These conclusions are, of course, highly simplistic, especially in the light of the numerous works on the Holocaust which, even though they relied on what Nietzel and Welzer (2012) called 'imperfect sources', have yielded much more nuanced analyses, and have shown that perpetrator behaviour is the outcome of a complex interplay of factors in which 'war' was a necessary, but not sufficient condition, and where National Socialist ideology and indoctrination certainly played a part in the normalisation of violence. But as Michael Billig has noted, when history is explored through the eyes of social psychology, the particularities of the world are often ignored, in favour of universal conclusions (Billig, 2014). In the hands of psychologists, Billig argues, 'general concepts become greedy concepts, devouring the individual, unique features of the social world' (p. 236). The 'frame of reference

of war' is precisely one such 'greedy', universalising concept. Of course, we don't know if it was the engagement with psychology that led Nietzel and Weltzer (2012) to a universalist and situationalist conclusion, or whether their hunches about the importance of 'war as work' led them to seek confirmation in a psychological interpretation. Either way, the interdisciplinary engagement in evidence here bears the hallmarks of interdisciplinary borrowing.

In the case of *Soldaten*, however, the perils of borrowing are not apparent just in the way in which authors use the concept of 'frames of reference' to make sense of, and draw conclusions from, the protocols. They are also to be found in the treatment of the protocols themselves. As was already noted, the authors treat the archival material – which Sönke Neitzel (2012, p. vii) refers to on one occasion as his 'buried treasure' – as a 'quasi-magical time machine' (Ashmore, MacMillan & Brown, 2004: p.355) that provides an unmediated evidentiary record of the German soldiers' motivations and mentality. This stance towards the data warrants further scrutiny. For one thing, it treats the protocols ahistorically: it omits the fact that the transcripts are themselves an artefact with its own history, mediated by the specific institutional, social, legal and political dynamic of surveillance work in Allied prisons during the Second World War. For example, not all the conversations among prisoners of war were recorded and transcribed, but only those that were of interest to those doing the surveillance. Thus, the protocols include material selected by individuals whose agenda at the time was different to that of scholars revisiting the data more than half a century later. Similarly, many of the soldiers knew, or at least suspected that they were being recoded, and the authors of *Soldaten* simply assume that this made no difference to the content of their conversations. Perhaps most importantly, the protocols do not offer a unique key to the soldier's 'mentality' in time of war: they

offer access to the way in which captured combatants *spoke to each other* about war, and how they *remembered* their life prior to capture. In that sense, this data is not any less 'mediated' than post war interrogations, memoirs, war-time letters and diaries, etc. It is just that they are mediated by different things, namely a different interactional and social context. The soldiers descriptions of their experiences were, just like any account, a form of *social action*, a means of doing something in the present – negotiating a particular identity position, positioning a view or action in relation to prevailing cultural norms, managing accountability, both their own and that of fellow soldiers. And yet the protocols were never analysed as such. This exposes a further shortcoming of interdisciplinary borrowing: as historical documents are prepared for psychological examination, they are stripped of their own history, of the dynamic underpinning their own production. They are promoted into a static snapshot of a 'mentality', to which analytical tools borrowed from psychology could be unproblematically applied and from which generalised conclusions about conduct in war could be drawn.

CONCLUSION

Over the past half century, a number of leading figures in social psychology have argued that their discipline is in needs of a historical and cultural 'turn'. Keneth Gergen (1973, p.319) argued that psychology ought to be concerned with the 'systematic study of social history', while Moscovici (1987, p.514) called for psychology to become a form of 'anthropology of modern culture'. Implicit in both arguments is the still often ignored recognition that the human condition is socially and historically bounded and that psychology can benefit greatly from a closer engagement with other disciplines, including history. However, as we argued in this

article, for the collaboration between psychology and history to be productive, the engagement needs to overcome the perils inherent in the today all-too-common practice of interdisciplinary 'borrowing'.

Before we proceed to consider some of the broader issues raised in the article, it is important to note that our aim here is not to provide coherent and definitive recommendations about how to overcome the shortcomings of borrowing, or to propose a set of guidelines about how to 'do interdisciplinarity'. Interdisciplinarity, after all, is a dynamic, evolving and multifaceted process. Instead, we shall simply point out some broader themes and areas of concern brought to light by our exploration of 'borrowing', that could be seen as starting points for closer engagement between social psychology and history,

First, a frequently noted tension between psychology and history lies in their different preoccupation with, and emphasis on, the universal and the particular. Some historians will argue convincingly that history is a discipline of the particular; that it is the story of a specific historical context, an account or interpretation of an event played out by actors in a particular time and place. Many psychologists, on the other hand, regard psychology as a discipline of the general and the universal, one that aspires to uncover generic laws of human behaviour that transcend specific historical conditions and the unique, context-dependent experience and behaviour of individuals. It might therefore be argued that interdisciplinarity is predicated on finding a way of *doing* history and psychology in a way that transcends this difference. The two studies on the Holocaust examined in this article illustrate why borrowing, as a common form of interdisciplinary engagement, can sometimes fail to meet this goal. In both examples, behind the proclaimed interest in a specific historical event - the Holocaust - lurks an aspiration for generalisation and universal

application. Just as in *Soldaten* the generic 'frame of reference of war' is deemed to account equally well for the conduct of soldiers in any war, so in the Reicher at al. (2006, p.53) study, the specific case of Bulgarian Jews is said to offer broader lessons about the social identity model of helping and how it could be used to 'avoid atrocities in the future'. This penchant for general, universalist conclusions is part of the intellectual baggage that, in the context of borrowing, psychology brings to interdisciplinary enquiry. It is as if psychological insights must contain a universal message in order to be recognised as *psychologically* valid or relevant. The tendency towards universalism has been especially prominent in research on mass crimes and genocide, probably because of the imperative to draw lessons from history. Yet as Michael Billig (2014, p. 236), points out, the emphasis on the universal message often results in 'bland generalities' rather than genuine interdisciplinary understanding of history. Therefore, while drawing parallels across historical examples might be possible and potentially useful, treating extrapolation and generalisation as key aims of psychological analysis have shown themselves to be a barrier to the study of historical phenomena.

Second, an important consequence of borrowing which we identified is *simplification*, and perhaps trivialisation, of both of psychology and of history. Reicher et al.'s (2006) engagement with Holocaust historiography resulted in a simplified version of the story of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews, which smoothed over the disagreements that have divided opinion over the past half century. The authors of *Soldaten*, on the other hand, simplified psychology: they borrowed a basic concept of 'frames of reference', stripped it of its ontological and epistemological complexity, and applied it, in a matter of fact way, to historical material. The central issue here is that interdisciplinarity, if it is to offer genuine insights, must strive to *complicate*

rather than *simplify* things. A researcher's incursion into a different field of enquiry must invite questions about their own discipline's theoretical scaffolding, its underlining assumptions, choice of data, and methods of analysis. The question, therefore, should not be whether a historical example validates existing models and theories, or how a psychological concept can be selectively utilised in the context of historical interpretation. Engagement with history must lead psychologists to reassess some of their own conceptual apparatus, for example by considering the negotiated and conditional nature of categories used in psychology, in this instance, that of 'bystander'. The controversy about the rescue of Bulgarian Jews, rather than being side-lined, could have been made an integral part of analysis in a way that would generate conclusions of relevance to both psychology and history. For instance, how are protagonists of the Holocaust constituted as 'bystanders' or 'perpetrators'? How are these different labels and descriptions negotiated both at the time and in subsequent accounts? What are the possible implications of the rhetorical nature of categories for the current ways of thinking about bystander behaviour in psychology? Put differently, the notion of 'bystander' is inherently historical, and as such it stands at the core, rather than outside, the purview of interdisciplinary analysis.

Equally, adding psychological texture to historical enquiry ought to push historians to reassess some of their own assumptions about the way in which psychological topics - mentalities, social representations, stereotypes, inner conflicts, memories, habits, and so on – precisely *because* they are inherently historical, can be made a central part of their investigations. The analysis in *Soldaten* should therefore have gone beyond superimposing the 'frame of reference' analytic framework on the data, and embraced a more reflexive approach to the protocols as a cultural artefact, recognising its interactional and situated dimensions, and considering the implications

of this for psycho-historical analysis of the materials and conclusions that can be drawn from it.

All this is important also because borrowing, which is inherently selective, invites researchers to focus on historical examples, or psychological insights, which are most likely to confirm a predetermined interpretation. It is presumably comforting for psychologists to 'discover' that their theoretical hunches, models, theories have ecological validity, that the real world maps onto, or organizes itself in a way that is predicted by psychological theory. And yet, as we have seen, this can have the unintended consequence of limiting, rather than expanding, the range of questions that psychologists are asking about their object of study. It is similarly comforting for historians to 'discover' that their intuitions regarding people's motives can be clarified or corroborated by a piece of psychological research or conceptual framework. Yet they need to be aware of psychology's own limitations when it comes to describing experience. The vocabulary of psychological sciences can lure the historian into a false sense of confidence about the depth and reach of his or her interpretations.

The main point here is that interdisciplinary analysis, if it is to transcend some of the problems of borrowing, needs to be *transformative* rather than *confirmatory*: its objective ought to be to reshape both psychological and historical ways of thinking, shifting each discipline's centre of gravity in the direction of closer engagement with each other. Interdisciplinarity, therefore, requires a level of *conceptual reflexivity* that will ensure that the human condition is recognised, at all times, as both psychological and historical (Tileagă & Byford, 2014b). This will place, at the centre of the enquiry, the question about how historical conditions, ideologies and cultural traditions

produce and sustain, while at the same time being constituted in, particular forms of individual and collective thought and action.

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SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, HISTORY AND THE STUDY OF THE HOLOCAUST

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