Understanding
Learning past lessons
Critical understanding

Different reasons need different histories

“(For some) history is just one damned thing after another”. (Arnold Toynbee)

Dimensions of Historical Analysis

Many different ways of ‘doing’ history, leading to different kinds of history

We can identify a range of dimensions on which forms of history vary:

Presentist vs historicist

- Presentist: Contemporary perspective seen as ‘true’ state of affairs, historical work judged in terms of contribution to that
- Historicist: Interprets developments in terms of valued and knowledge extant at the time
  - E.g. how we we evaluate early work in IQ?

Internalist vs contextualist

- Internalist theories ignore the wider context in which work is conducted
- Contextualist histories see work as resulting from the interplay of multiple factors
  - E.g. IQ testing shaped by economic and political factors

Personalistic vs naturalistic

- Personalistic: (or ‘great man’) histories emphasise efforts of particular individuals, ignoring the influence of others and of context
- Naturalistic: emphasises the importance of context in influencing individuals
  - E.g. how do we characterise Yerkes’ work?

Realism vs constructionism

- Realist: histories assume theories reflect some true state of affairs, and judge development in terms of getting better at understanding the true picture
- Constructivist: see ideas as deemed acceptable at particular points in time, but not necessarily ‘true’.
  - E.g. is there really a single factor for intelligence?

Approaches to History

Different broad approaches, including ‘old style’ revisionist/anti-revisionist, and ‘new style’.

Revisionist histories attempt to re-interpret the past to challenge the mainstream

- E.g. The mismeasure of Man. Contextual constructivist, maybe naturalistic
- It is also useful in politics C.P., but often presentist, judging others by contemporary standards