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Abstract

A growing body of evidence suggests that many aspects of psychology have evolved culturally over historical time. A combination of approaches, including experimental data collected over the last 75 years, cross-cultural comparisons and studies of immigrants, points to systematic changes in psychological domains as diverse as conformity, attention, emotion, morality and olfaction. However, these approaches can only go back in time for a few decades and typically fail to provide continuous measures of cultural change, posing a challenge for testing deeper historical psychological processes. To tackle this challenge most directly, computational methods emerging from natural language processing can be adapted to extract psychological information from large-scale historical corpora. Here, we first review the benefits of psychology as a historical science, and then present three useful classes of text-analytic techniques for historical psychological inquiry: dictionary-based methods, distributed-representational methods, and human-annotation-based methods. These represent an excellent suite of methodologies that can be used to examine the record of dead minds. Finally, we discuss the importance of going beyond English-centric text analysis in historical psychology to foster a more generalizable and inclusive science of human behavior. We propose that historical psychology should incorporate and further develop a variety of text-analytic approaches to reliably quantify the historical processes that gave rise to contemporary social, political, and psychological phenomena.

Keywords: historical psychology, historical text analysis, historical corpora, manual annotation, cross-cultur

Full text

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