Introduction

Future of the History of the Human Sciences

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Abstract

This special issue is the product of a conference, 'The Future of the History of the Human Sciences', which was held at the University of York in April 2016. The meeting brought together scholars from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds and at various stages of their careers to reflect on what were identified as major challenges and opportunities for the research that the journal History of the Human Sciences publishes. The articles published here are a sample of the responses that were generated and contain reflections on not only the boundaries of history of the human sciences research but also the methods used within it. As this introduction explains, the overall aim of the conference was to explore these questions in order to think about both future directions for research and how to ensure the field remains dynamic and vital.

Keywords

conference proceedings, future research, History of the Human Sciences, human, humanities

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The articles featured in this special issue are the product of a two-day conference, 'The Future of the History of the Human Sciences', which was held at the University of York in April 2016. The meeting brought together scholars from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds and at various stages of their careers to reflect on what were identified as major challenges and opportunities for the research that *History of the Human Sciences* publishes. What follows is a sample of the ideas that were generated in response to a request for participants to consider the 'changes wrought in the broad interdisciplinary field of the history of the human sciences by new developments in the medical humanities, biological sciences, and literary/cultural theory' (Future of the History of the Human Sciences, 2016).

There were numerous reasons for holding a conference of this kind. It is, of course, never a bad time to take stock of developments that are impacting on a scholarly community. But, in this case, the moment seemed particularly opportune. In late 2015, after more than 15 years of service, James Good stood down as editor of *History of the Human Sciences*, and handed over to a new team: Felicity Callard, the new and current editor-in-chief, Rhodri Hayward, and Angus Nicholls, whom I would join as an additional editor not long after the conference. Indeed, with Chris Millard, another participant, taking over from Angus Nicholls in late 2018 and Amanda Rees, a contributor to this special issue, due to join the editorial team in the summer of 2019, the conference has proven to be a continuing site of renewal for the journal.

James Good's editorship was celebrated at the conference. The distinguished historian Roger Smith, for example, delivered a speech in which he reflected on the landmark work that had been published in *History of the Human Sciences* during the previous two decades, as well as the often-hidden work Good had done through the journal, such as supporting the research

of early career scholars. At the same time, however, and with the new editorial team outlining their intentions for the journal's future (Callard, Hayward, and Nicholls 2016), the conference was an appropriate moment to talk about where the field of history of the human sciences might be going and why.

The seven papers included in this special issue capture some, but not all, of the debate that took place. Yet thanks to www.HistHum.com, the *History of the Human Sciences'* website, readers can access even more of the discussion via the presentations that were recorded and the reports submitted by some of the graduate students who participated (Damjanovicova 2016a, 2016b; Saunders 2016). Indeed, with work by scholars who presented papers at the conference published elsewhere in *History of the Human Sciences* (Meloni 2018[1]; Brenninkmeijer 2015; Sommer 2015), the journal, in its various physical and virtual forms, offers a wide array of material to supplement the articles that are published here. Together, they convey the findings of original research, tackle old questions and pose new ones, and outline research agendas, all in an effort to ask what the kinds of interdisciplinary research that is published in *History of the Human Sciences* might look like in the years to come.

Touching on psychology, sociology, anthropology, the neurosciences, biology, history, literary theory, and digital humanities, the articles that follow take us through a range of intersecting debates and problems, from the theological roots of thinking about the human to whether technology, most obviously the internet, is transforming what we can know about the subjects we work on and how we can know about them. These papers are wide ranging, both collectively and individually. There are a set of general themes that it would serve us well to outline, though.

The first is that any reflection on the interdisciplinary field of history of the human sciences – whether we are concerned with its past, present, or future – requires us to think about

[1] See also the rest of the symposium on Meloni's *Political Biology* that Meloni's paper is a part of.

the concept at its heart: the human. As one would expect, all the articles in this special issue address this concept in one way or another. However, Roger Smith and Steve Fuller bring the matter into the sharpest focus when they reflect, albeit it in very different ways, on the question of whether we stand at a unique point in history, when we are on the verge of rewiring or reconfiguring the human, as the most enthusiastic advocates of the neurosciences suggest we are. As Smith points out, there are, of course, intersecting institutional, technological, intellectual, and cultural contexts that have encouraged such ideas. One of the most important issues for us to consider, Smith argues, is the role played by research funders, whose immense power goes some way to explaining both the sudden rush to equate the human with the brain and the nervousness of scholars engaged with more obviously interpretative projects about their future fortunes.

Yet, as Smith also argues, identifying the causes of an enthusiasm for the neuro sciences or genetics, does not explain away the belief that something profound is happening to our understanding of the human. There are always lessons to be learned and changes that we may need to make to our analytic toolkits. Exploring his own formative experiences in the field, Fuller considers what these changes might involve. One of his tentative suggestions is that we might broaden our understanding of the human as a category for both historical and contemporary analysis, in particular by considering a figure called the 'cishuman', which is based on the concept that features in discussions of transgender. Cishuman is a category that is intended to suggest that we have traditionally constructed the concept of the human too narrowly, building on theological foundations that have seen us draw distinct boundaries between ourselves and other species and entities. To what extent, the question follows, has the concept of the human been not just unstable but exclusionary? And what might such a reorientation do to the field?

A second common theme is practice – a concept that will be more than familiar to readers with Science and Technology Studies and History of Science backgrounds. Practice is explored here in two ways, often simultaneously, as scholars consider not only the kinds of research we produce but the way we produce it. The first involves thinking about the way we conceptualise our historical subjects as embodied in time and space and engaged in processes that link and shape both the material and intellectual spheres. Alexandra Bacopoulos-Viau, for instance, offers a revisionist take on a topic that has been central to history of the human sciences scholarship since the field's inception – the development of the talking cure in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France. Arguing that we need to take seriously the idea that other technologies and practices, in this case automatic writing, played significant parts in histories we think we already know, Bacopoulos-Viau makes a compelling case for broadening our field of vision when it comes to understanding knowledge production.

This theme is also developed by Peter Mandler, who locates his argument in a set of observations – a complex relationship with mainstream social and cultural history, the dominance of theoretical schemes provided by the likes of Michel Foucault, and a focus on expert archives – about the character of most work on the history of the human sciences during the past half century. Calling for the ethnographic turn that has been promised for almost 25 years, not only in history of the human sciences but history of science more generally, Mandler uses a sample of strangely underutilised source materials, including mass-market paperback social science books, to challenge diffusionist models of social science knowledge, in which expert ideas filter downwards through a social hierarchy. Instead, Mandler provides suggestions for thinking about the co-construction of social scientific knowledge, with the use of social science language in everyday life not simply tracked but also its various and changing meanings recovered.

The second sense of practice relates to the tools we use to carry out that research. Elizabeth Toon addresses this topic most directly when drawing our attention to the potential opportunities and consequences of digital humanities for our work. As Toon explains, digital tools offer us a seemingly powerful tool kit that could be used to answer some of the questions raised in other papers. Text mining, for instance, seems to offer a way of connecting with social science language in the popular sphere. However, as Toon outlines, building on points Mandler has made elsewhere, it is all too easy to overlook the limitations that such tools have vis-à-vis humanities and social science scholars' aims – in particular, how a greater capacity to track the incidences of specific words in the past does not help us to understand what they meant to the people who used and read them. Yet as anyone who has followed news about organisations such as Facebook and Cambridge Analytica recently will know, the problems that are associated with these tools make it no less urgent for us to think about what the proliferation of data of this kind is doing to the human as a subject.

The final general theme, and one that I have no doubt emphasised because of my own disciplinary background, is the significance of history in history of the human sciences. This might seem an obvious point. As a number of scholars explain here, though, history serves a multitude of important roles. There is, of course, a sense in which history is important in helping us make sense of claims that are made about the consequences of both biological and neuroscience in the present. As both Amanda Rees and Roger Smith point out, ambitious claims were made about the implications of developments in the sciences of life and the brain for the human sciences throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Understanding the aims and ambitions of those who have believed that the material fundamentally challenges more humanistic approaches to the human, for example, is an important part of understanding the present moment. In doing so, we can approach the matter in different ways. We might see in the past resources for thinking about what counts as good practice or strategies for thinking

about the challenges the field faces, as Rees urges us to. For example, we might see the greatest value in the 'history' in 'history of the human sciences' as the capacity to engage robustly with the idea that the biological and neuro sciences are somehow value free, without political implications or agendas baked in.

Alternatively, as Smith suggests, we might see the long and fraught history of the complex relationships between different approaches to understanding the human as the basis for changing the questions we ask about it. Rather than ask why the biological and neuro sciences frequently challenge humanistic approaches to the self and human identity, why not ask why humanistic approaches have been so resilient, not simply enduring or overcoming them but learning and adapting at every turn? In this respect, Des Fitzgerald, in his exploration of crisis talk in the social sciences and his alternative 'limit sociology', offers us a set of probing speculations that join together a number of the themes that run throughout these papers. As he points out, crises in social science are often rooted in obsessions with disciplinary reproduction, with challenges from other fields, tools or methods making it seemingly more difficult to transmit a specific set of practices from one generation to the next. But, as Fitzgerald argues, there is no need for things to be like this. What is important, surely, is that a field or discipline is vital, in the sense of being animated and having limits at which its participants can push? Rather than focus on a life-less process of reproduction, why not think about the possibilities that might come through an energetic process of change? It is in questions such as these, as much as the answers that are offered, however tentative they might be, that the greatest value lies in the papers that follow.

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