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REFLECTING ON DISPARITIES IN RESEARCH METHODS

Emily Wight is graduating in May 2011 with a B.A. in history. Emily hopes to move on to a career in educational outreach.

Over the course of this past semester, I began to have a disorienting feeling. It became particularly apparent this past spring break when I was catching up on schoolwork. I was doing reading for the Micro-history class I was taking, while working on a presentation for my psychology research lab, when I noticed my brain would have trouble shifting between the two projects. My mind, cluttered with information and ideas, knew no disciplinary boundaries. Instead of conceiving of the projects separately, I felt I was working on one, huge, research project. Partly induced by sleep deprivation perhaps, but as I reflected on my work for the two subjects, I began to compare them, or more accurately, recognize the similarities between the two. It seemed to me both subjects shared the same research problems, despite their obvious methodological differences, and that an analysis of the different issues each discipline faced could shed light on how best to approach these challenges.

Both psychology and history are very conscious of their role in the social sciences and seem to feel the need to legitimate their place in comparison with the more experimental sciences. The advent of computers and technology revolutionized history and psychology's ability to apply statistics to human behavior, to quantify as a means of validating their hypotheses. Micro-history is not so much a backlash, as a challenge to the reality created by the homogenizing effect of ignoring statistical outliers. The quantitative approach does not take into account an individual's agency, their ability to negotiate with the world and thus create their own reality. Meaning, the statistical approach does not enable historians to understand how, the Industrial Revolution for example, was actually experienced by workers, it distorts the image.

Psychology has also been consumed by statistics, an issue that seems to threaten its readership outside the discipline. Pages of syntax and the emphasis on more complex statistical methods alienate readers unfamiliar with the nuances of psychological methodology. This is not a concern only of history and psychology, but is an issue prevalent throughout academia as researches and their research become more divorced from the public. However, one could argue, human behavior is complex and complex methods are necessary in order to analyze it. But where is the balance? How can researches connect with the public again? Which methods are most fruitful in understanding human behavior? I am reminded of how anthropology influenced history and produced a form of micro-history, a self-reflection within the field, and wonder about the benefits of interdisciplinary research. And while I am cognizant of the differences between fields in the liberal arts and sciences, these differences should not inhibit productive communication, communication which could challenge and improve our research.