

# PSYCHOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY GERMANY

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In Germany, psychology has become a favourite subject of study. Whether this is the result of a need in West German society for psychologists, or mere fashion, or whether it is due to the assumption that psychology may supply the means for changing that society into one in which life is worthwhile will not be discussed here. But the current attempt in West Germany to decompose the paternalistic structure of the universities and to make them democratic institutions capable of coping with the problems of society has had its impact and lead to reconsideration of the principles of scientific and practical work in psychology. Before this is described in more detail, something should be said about organizations of German psychologists, how psychology is studied, and what research is current.

## **Organisation**

The main organisation in West Germany is the federation of German associations of psychologists (Federation deutscher Psychologenvereinigungen).

The purposes of the federation are:

- the representation of German psychologists in international associations,
- the representation of interests and affairs of psychologists in government and administration,
- the co-ordination of co-operation of psychologists with regard to questions of training and vocational training of psychologists, the planning of scientific projects and the vocational status of psychology.

The federation's board includes representations of the German Society of Psychology (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie, D.G.P.) and the Vocational Association of German Psychologists (Bund deutscher Psychologen, B.D.P.).

The D.G.P. is an association of German psychologists working as lecturers and researchers. Its purpose is to support and to propagate scientific psychology. It organises a conference every two years, is concerned with the position of psychology in German universities and in public affairs, and publishes journals, handbooks and general documentation. Beyond that, the D.G.P. has a regulative function with regard to the training and examination of psychologists and vocational

training of psychologists already working in industry, in clinics, and so on.

Everybody having a scientific qualification in the field of psychology or in a related field may become a member of the society.

The Vocational Association of German Psychologists (B.D.P.) is concerned mainly with the vocational interests of its members. The association organises conferences, edits psychological literature, is concerned with the exchange and organisation of test material, with informing the public with respect to psychology, with adequate employment of psychologists, and with the protection of self-employed psychologists. Anyone who obtains a Ph.D or passes his diploma examination and has worked for at least one year as a psychologist may become a member of the B.D.P.

### **The study of psychology in Germany**

In September 1970 there were 40 departments of psychology in German universities with altogether 11,956 students studying psychology as their major subject.

Psychology is studied according to the recommendations of the D.G.P.; within this framework each department of psychology is free to write its own prescriptions. The attempt to restructure the universities and to find new and more efficient teaching methods together with the attempt, mainly by students, to change the content of many lectures and seminars in order to find a more relevant psychology led to different departments adopting different ways of studying psychology which cannot be described here in full. But the framework of recommendations worked out by a D.G.P commission may be given here so that some basic differences of studying psychology in New Zealand and Germany may be noted.

The study of psychology leads to a graduate diploma. The student who passes the final diploma examination may call himself a diploma-psychologist (Diplom-Psychologe, Dipl. Psych.). According to a recommendation of the D.G.P. one has to study at least eight semesters (4 years) before one can enter the final examination, called the main diploma examination. One of the prerequisites for entering this examination is that one has passed the so-called pre-diploma examination. This can be taken after at least five semesters (2½ years), but on the average, it is entered after six semesters and the final examination after another four semesters.

In order to be admitted to the pre-diploma, the student has to pass examinations at the end of certain courses. These are courses in statistics and experimental design, laboratory classes (at least one), theory of psychological tests, at least one introductory course in general psychology, one in differential or personality psychology. The student

is free to take extra courses and lectures besides those he has to attend in order to pass the examination at the end of the semester. Furthermore, the student is usually free to decide in what semester he wants to attend what course or lectures. Most students of psychology study a further subject, for example, sociology, political science or ethnology, philosophy, or more recently, mathematics.

The freedom to choose courses at a time which suits the individual student, to choose additional courses of special interest for the student, and the freedom to change university between semesters, however, is becoming more and more restricted: the growing number of students has in many departments imposed a restriction of the study-time to eight semesters which implied a rather disciplined way of studying that in turn did not facilitate moving between universities.

A student admitted to the pre-diploma enters the examination by writing a thesis; on the average he has two months for this. If he gets a sufficient mark for his thesis he is admitted to the oral examinations. A typical list of subjects examined may be the following:

general psychology, social psychology, differential psychology, developmental psychology, depth psychology, physiology (sensory and neuro-physiology), general biology (genetics, basic histology, etc.) and philosophy.

After the pre-diploma, the student has the possibility of specializing either in experimental psychology, mathematical or theoretical psychology, clinical and/or counselling psychology. He has to produce a diploma thesis, which usually implies empirical work and takes approximately one year. Later he may enter the main-diploma examination. This examination is oral again with up to two essays which have to be written in isolation in the course of one day each. The subjects examined orally in the final examinations are:

applied psychology, educational psychology, psychological diagnosis, psychology of expression and psychopathology.

Each subject is examined for half an hour.

The training of psychologists in Germany has become oriented towards the psychology taught in Anglo-Saxon countries, and the number of students who have to prepare themselves for examinations by learning about the personality theories of Leisch and Spranger has become comparatively small. That psychology of expression is examined does not indicate too much: one has to learn all about those experiments which show that the inference from expression back to the character of person is usually not very valid. However, in the department of psychology of the University of Freiburg, courses in graphology are given. It is very likely that traditions like these will fade away rapidly in the near future.

## Research in psychology

The bulk of the research done in psychology corresponds also to the pattern of American psychology, as a survey of research projects in Germany reveals (Erke, 1970). In clinical psychology quite generally undirected counselling is becoming one of the main methods of therapy, whereas personality assessments are less frequently used (Cohen, personal communication). There are only few areas of psychology where no research is done in Germany. Two research institutions should be mentioned, which are not university departments and where psychological research of more general importance is done. One is the Institute of Psychological Research in Development Aid (Sozial psychologische Forschungsstelle für Entwicklungsplanung), which is associated with the University of Saarbrücken. Here the main topic is research in social change, and connected problems (c.f. Eckensburger, 1972 a, b). The results of the work of this institute are of importance for general social psychology. The other institute is the Centre of Educational Technology (Bildungstechnologisches Zentrum) set up by the state government of Hessen. Here psychological research centres around computer-aided instruction. This centre is divided into sub-units concentrating on specific problems, which range from the development of programming languages to basic research in problem solving, learning and memory. The centre has been recently established and interesting results are to be expected.

## Recent developments in German psychology

During recent years the way psychology had to be studied came under criticism more and more, mainly by students and younger lecturers. The student had (and still has) to learn quite a number of facts, and had to become acquainted with a number of different theories, where the relationship between empirical facts, theories and reality very often remained dubious. In particular the cheerful and unthinking generation of experimental data without a motivating theory was, in the long run, swallowed only reluctantly by students. Psychology should be relevant to urgent social problems, which should be tackled and not fatalistically taken as unavoidable so that one could go on playing with Skinner boxes and computers. In the opinion of many of the younger psychologists and students of psychology, empirical psychology was not able to cope with the relevant questions of the individual in society, but would only stabilise the system of a repressive society which takes the results of empirical psychology as its justification. Departments consequently become restructured so that students could have influence on what had to be learned. This was not possible in all universities. It may be useful to give a short account of the basic ideas advanced which have been worked out and formulated in regard to psychology by Holzkamp (1970 a, b).

Holzcamp critically summarizes the basic ideas of what may be called naive-empiricism, of neo-positivism or logical empiricism and Popper's falsificationism. The naive empiricism, though some time ago criticised by Carnap, Reichenbach and others who developed what is known under the label of neo-positivism, still seems to be the prevailing research ideology of most psychologists. That empirical observations are *not* a starting point for the development of theories became clear, to those concerned about the principles of their research, at the latest with Popper's analysis of verification. Popper showed that the principle of induction used by empiricists and neo-positivists is logically not tenable and concludes that empirical research can only lead to a falsification of a hypothesis. Holzcamp continued this line of thinking and developed, by a modification of Popper's notion of falsification, an epistemological theory which he named 'constructivism'. Holzcamp made explicit what was already implicit in Popper's theory and in neo-positivism, namely that one always has to start research with formulating a theory and that in experiments reality is produced (constructed) according to the theory. He shows that even if disturbing influences make the correspondence between produced reality and theory other than unique, theory may be kept by the scientist. Consequently, different theories referring to the same domain of reality may exist and there is no straightforward rule to decide between them. This fact, together with an insufficient concept of the human individual, characterizes, according to Holzcamp, current work in psychology which has been classified, not only by him (Smith, 1961), as being to a large extent trivial and without any relevance. Holzcamp starts to develop his alternative by observing that present day psychology looks upon the individual as something concrete and considers society as something abstract. But since the individual cannot be thought of as independent of the prevailing historical and social conditions this assumption is obviously wrong, though it enters psychology in a number of ways: for example, the notions of 'intelligence', 'personality', 'anxiety', and so on, are defined without regard to social conditions. The existence of investigations into the dependency of the degree of intelligence or of types of personality upon socio-economic conditions does not exhaust this argument, since the concepts of intelligence, personality, etc., as defined in these investigations do not take into account what Holzcamp calls the inherent antagonisms of the interests of different classes in western society: a person is intelligent or neurotic as defined by a certain class of society according to the interests and needs of this class. But definitions and theories about concepts like these are formulated in a neutral, apparently objective way, and that they are unsuitable is not made evident by empirical investigations alone, since these are constructions of reality according to the theory under consideration, and where, furthermore, the misfit of data can in principle be said to be due to disturbing influences which are thought to have nothing to do with such things as 'intelligence'. Psychology

cannot be developed by empirical observations alone and its theories and conceptualizations cannot be devaluated by empirical observations alone, which fact makes it a disguised tool for those interested in the consolidation of the given system of society. The prevailing empiricistic ideology veils these relationships, and according to Holzkamp psychology should be critical by making them transparent, and emancipatory by making them known not only to the psychologist but to a broader public. The idea of a pure, neutral science appears to be fictitious and consequently psychology should make its underlying political meaning explicit. From this aspect theoretical and practical work cannot be separated as neatly—and conveniently—as they used to be, which again is an answer to the question of relevance.

Holzkamp found an echo mainly among students and younger professionals, in part simply because he formulated what they felt. Of course, Holzkamp has been criticized with respect to his epistemological ideas and the political aspects of his theory. The discussion of these ideas will, hopefully, lead to a reconsideration of a stereotyped concept of science and lead psychology out of its present sterility.

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