Kritische Psychologie: psychology from the standpoint of the subject

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KRITISCHE PSYCHOLOGIE: PSYCHOLOGY FROM THE STANDPOINT OF THE SUBJECT

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German (or German/Scandinavian) Kritische Psychologie emerged in the context of intellectual and political struggles at the Free University in former West-Berlin during the 1960s and 1970s (see Osterkamp and Schraube 2013 for an overview; Maiers 1999; Mørck and Huniche 2006; Tolman 1994). While based on a number of topical contributions (including Dreier 1980; Haug 1987; Holzkamp 1973; Osterkamp 1976; Tolman and Maiers 1991; Schurig 1975), Klaus Holzkamp’s (1927-1995) work played a pivotal role for Kritische Psychologie. Its philosophical foundation is informed by historical dialectical materialism, and specifically builds on ideas developed in Marx’s social theory and theses on Feuerbach concerning human subjectivity and practice (coining practice research), as well as the cultural-historical activity theory of Vygotsky, and above all, Leontyev (a legacy which has been taken up in various other alternative psychologies as well, cf. Engeström 1987; Hedegaard and Chaiklin 2005; Wertch 1991). Whilst the term ‘Kritische Psychologie’ is used widely in this context, it is problematic.

First, it is too generic creating the impression this was a homogeneous approach (it was a heterogeneous and collective endeavour from the start), or indeed the only critical psychology in Germany; second, it implies that the approach as such is limited to German language context, which is not true; and third, and most importantly, the pre-fix ‘Kritische’ might suggest an anti-psychological vision which is precisely not what Klaus Holzkamp et al.
had in mind. This Kritische Psychologie is an attempt to rescue Psychology from itself by re-defining Psychology as a historically developed theory about subjects as societal beings (based on the concept of the societal nature of human existence), and to re-constitute it as a Psychology for and about these subjects. In this way it sought to overcome the problems caused by traditional psychology’s mapping of the abstract and external scientific ‘third-person’ perspective onto its object of study by establishing a ‘Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject’ (PSS This is why in this chapter we will refer to PSS instead of ‘Kritische Psychologie’ (Tolman 1989) or ‘German Critical Psychology’ (Markard and Reimer 2013).

Critical Engagements with Traditional Psychology

PSS emerged in response to the North-American functionalist model of psychology dominant in Germany and Europe after World War II (Teo 2013), outlining serious limitations and contradictions within traditional psychology (TP) (the term refers to mainstream approaches within Psychology, for example, behaviourism or cognitive psychology in its information-processing version; Holzkamp 2013b: 234ff). First, critique focused on the societal application of psychological knowledge for specific ruling interests and investigated traditional psychology’s limits in terms of social theory, ideology critique, and discourse analysis. Second, PSS noted that TP lacked explicit theoretical and epistemological foundations and highlighted the problematic way in which TP had implicitly defined its subject matter. Uniquely, and in contrast to other critical psychologies, PSS took this critique as a basis for a comprehensive reconceptualization of Psychology’s theoretical and methodological foundations (Holzkamp 1983).
PSS pointed out that the dominant post World War II psychological approaches, particularly those employing experimental-statistical methods, by emulating what they considered a natural sciences-type approach to research, ended up with a theoretical and methodological framework that implicitly conceptualized the world as a set of isolated stimuli causing effects in individuals which could only be accessed and tested from an external point of view, i.e. a third-person standpoint. Human beings in turn ended up conceptualised as if they were solely dependent on external factors, merely responding to stimuli and acting as isolated units in a vacuum. In this way TP not only established a research position of a distant judging observer (third-person perspective), but also implied a model of passive research objects, which, as PSS highlights, ultimately dissolves human subjectivity and creates a very limited idea of agency. PSS shows that by aiming for this (in effect pseudo-) scientific ideal TP lost sight of the societal and historical dimension of human subjectivity that, as PSS demonstrates, is a vital function of human life. TP conceptually creates what Holzkamp termed a ‘homunculus’, a creature with such limited capacities it would not be fit for survival (Holzkamp 2013a: 20).

Further TP establishes a ‘worldless’ psychology (Holzkamp 2013b: 233) devoid of context, unable to make sense of the complexity of the socio-historical world as enacted, experienced, debated and shaped by people. PSS highlights TP’s tendency to value methods over content, i.e. to define the object of study according to the preferred methods (here experimental-statistical methods, thus dictating an isolated stimulus cause-effect-rationale for human agency), rather than creating methods adequate to the subject under investigation, as PSS set out to do. At the core of the critical stance is the argument that TP’s scientific conception might serve specific interests of capitalist society by individualising and naturalising human activity and psychological problems, thereby making people governable
and obscuring the implications of power and oppression; for example by proposing personal work on the self as the solution to psychological problems, TP privatises them and obscures their rootedness in societal dilemmas and power structures. In this way TP construed personal compliance as ‘normal psychological functioning’, helping to obscure perspectives that could allow subjects to realize their potential for shaping their shared world, and actively engaging with and changing repressive societal conditions.

There are a series of published debates, books and articles that provide a detailed insight into PSS’s critical engagement with TP, in particular Anglo-American-European approaches. For example Holzkamp (1964) offers an early insight into critique of the experimental research set up; the Zeitschrift fuer Sozialpsychologie ran lengthy published debates between Hubert Feger (experimental), Carl F. Grauman (phenomenology), Martin Irle (experimental) and Klaus Holzkamp; Holzkamp’s core work the ‘Grundlegung der Psychologie’ (1983) details his critique and reconstruction of Psychology, and in ‘Lernen’ (1993) he examines and recategorises the concept of learning; also his later work on the conduct of everyday life presents a detailed critique of traditional as well as alternative psychological approaches (2013: 233ff). Further Osterkamp (1976) provides an indepth critique and reinterpretation of psychoanalysis, with a specific focus on the concept of ‘drive’.

**Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject**

To provide a detailed example of the analytic work PSS conducted in its reconstruction of Psychology we would like to outline some aspects of the analysis supporting the central
concept of the *societal nature of human existence* in some more detail and explore the crucial transition from *phylogenesis* to *sociogenesis*.

Based on the conceptual critique PSS recognized the importance of developing a well-founded theoretical and methodological language. For such a foundation to be truly empirical the analysis traces (inspired by Leontyev 1981) the becoming of the psyche in relation to the phylogenesis and ontogenesis of life in general while accounting for the specificity of human life in particular. A period of particular interest for the human species is what Holzkamp terms the ‘Tier-Mensch-Uebergangsfeld’ (TMU) (zone of transition between animal and human life). Previous to this zone (TMU) psychological functions exist, but they manifest as basic psychic formations; functions such as ‘learning’, ‘interest’ or ‘motivation’ can be observed but they manifest in an immediate fashion (e.g. for microbes interest is defined as the ability to be sensitive to certain stimuli, e.g. nourishment, for self-preservation, which constitutes motivation).

During evolution there are shifts in what shapes functions such as interest, motivation etc. (e.g. life forms become able to not just detect food but orient towards characteristics that indicate food, e.g. light) and shifts in the dominance of certain functions.

For the transition from phylogenesis to sociogenesis, Holzkamp identified a crucial shift in quality for all these functions at the point where primates develop into humans (TMU): while for other life forms needs like hunger require immediate attention until satisfied, during the TMU humans become able to anticipate and mediate such needs by establishing societal structures and practices to systematically cater for them. Herein humans did not just gain some control over their natural environment and thus their conditions of living and surviving, but they also created generalized meaning and thus culture; through their shape tools/artefacts, e.g. a plough, carry and express the generalized meaning of their...
purpose to future generations who use and develop them further. Further these practices established a division of labour; as societal structures for example organise the acquisition of food through traditions of farming and hunting.

As a result of this qualitative shift during the TMU human life is constituted predominatly by sociogenesis and to a lesser extent by phylogenesis (these forces are still at work). It is mediated via these socio-historical and cultural forms of development, and thus human subjectivity and agency is determined by people’s ability to participate in practices and access, through labour, the general means (tools/traditions) that allow them to further shape, transform and improve their own conditions. This is why Holzkamp speaks of the ‘societal nature of human existence’ and highlights the importance of participating in practices.

Crucially then each person’s possibilities for action are directly defined by how they themselves perceive the meanings and resources available to them at any one moment. Hence we each have reasons for our actions (they are not reactions to conditioned stimuli) and these are based in our first-person perspective; which is personal and societal at once, because structures of social meaning, i.e. the pertinent conditions, flow into the premises for each person’s subjective reasons for action.

Once PSS had elaborated the crucial role of subjective reasons for action in human subjectivity and the conduct of everyday life, it proposed a reason discourse (rather than the conditioning discourse of TP) as the discourse most adequate to the task of formulating genuinely psychological theories and methods. This necessitated a radical epistemological shift in research practice. Since reasons for actions are given in the ‘first-person’ (they are always my reasons), research needed to be conducted from the standpoint of the
generalized subject. It would be a misunderstanding however to interpret this first-person perspective as an individualistic, subjectivist concept.

On the contrary, it establishes a notion of a complete, yet communicable subjectivity (an intersubjectivity) not characterised by the inaccessible interiority the TP subject is trapped in. The argument is that, since ‘I’ experience myself and the world from my perspective, and act from my perspective and standpoint, it follows logically that the other also experiences her/himself and the world from her/his perspective and acts from her/his perspective and standpoint. And we know that they do. This means, we do not just plainly react to what others do, but we have a meta-level at our disposal: we perceive the other subjects as reflexive subjects that perceive us as reflexive subjects; if we have reasons then so must the other (even if their reasons might not be very good or indeed transparent to us); and if we negotiate such reasons with ourselves, as we act, and assess our possibilities; those reasons must also be communicable to others.

This intersubjectivity, i.e. the reciprocity of the subjects’ first-person perspectives and the premise of the intelligibility of reasons, is a prerequisite for social interaction to work at all. Hence, rather than being ‘subjectivistic’, it is precisely the systematic inclusion of the subject, and the recognition of the other as coequal centre of intentionality, that offers the foundations for a truly empirical and scientific (i.e. adequate to the subject matter) approach to understanding of human sociality and psychology (Schraube 2013).

This is why PSS proposes to root psychological research in the standpoint and perspective of the ‘I’ and ‘we’ and explore through subjective experiences what the world means for human subjects and their possibilities and necessities to act; hence, a Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject.
PSS’s analyses demonstrate that the potential of human agency is not the product of isolated individuals preserving and developing their own lives. Instead, human agency only develops its potential through individuals gaining influence over the particular societal conditions specifically relevant, in their conduct of life. Consequently, the quality of each individual’s lived experience is inherently connected to the type and degree of agency the individual can exercise and perceives to be able to exercise. Human suffering and fear originate not solely from immediate constraints, but are the result of an individual at the mercy of the societal relations/conditions they depend on due to having lost influence over them. To overcome suffering and develop a genuinely human quality of life requires the individual’s possibility for accessing and participating in the shaping of the conditions her/his conduct of life depends on.

From the perspective of the standpoint of the subject, the challenge, or momentum that drives human subjectivity and the conduct of life, is located precisely in the reciprocal relationship between individual and society: there is a constant contradiction between on the one hand, individuals being subject to the conditions under which they live, and, on the other hand, their possibility of influencing and changing these conditions to reflect their own needs and interests. To express this fundamental contradiction in human agency, PSS developed the analytical concepts restrictive agency versus generalized agency. Depending on the situation, in attempting to overcome this contradiction subjects may not only have reasons for trying to change particular conditions to improve their own life prospects (generalised agency). Equally subjects might have reasons to arrange themselves with the given restrictive conditions; for example, in cases where they consider that the attempt to intervene and change restrictive conditions carries a significant risk of conflict which could affect their existing position even more negatively. As a result they might view their existing
conditions as acceptable despite realising their restrictiveness (restrictive agency). From the subject’s standpoint, this creates the dilemma that the propensity to secure one’s own situation (in the short term), ends up undermining one’s own prospect of (and constitutive aim to strive towards) generalised agency, violating one’s own long-term interests.

The central driver for empirical research within PSS is to engage with people on an intersubjective basis and to explore such dilemmatic positions, conditions and inherent constraints in order to open up perspectives towards change and generalised agency. As PSS was taken to fields where psychological questions arose in everyday practice, it is often described as practice research (Axel 2011; Busch-Jensen 2013; Fahl and Markard 1999; Jefferson and Huniche 2009; Nissen 2000). By aiming for an involved intersubjective exchange and getting at first-person perspectives, it becomes possible to analyse how individual existence is mediated through the overall societal context.

This analysis works from the assumption that objective conditions are meaningful only in their mediatedness through both collective objectifications and through each subject’s perspective. This is why the ‘subject’ of research is defined as a ‘co-researcher’, as they are the ‘experts’ of the conditions, meanings and reasons that surround the problem at the heart of research that engages with practices they are involved in. In this sense such research is inevitably also ‘owned’ and guided by them, and the role of the researcher is defined as participatory and cooperative. The aim is to develop a collaborative understanding of the questions and problems at the heart of the research, to generalise subjective experience, as well as to open perspectives towards generalised agency.

Contemporary Discussions and Fields of Study
There is a plethora of recent theoretical and empirical research directly drawing on or rooted in PSS, often re-shaping and further developing PSS. In the following we would like to provide examples of such work.

Dreier’s work on clinical and therapeutic practice provides a detailed critique of mainstream research into therapeutic interventions, highlighting for example that it only takes the therapists or researchers’ perspective (not the clients’) and applies a technological, decontextualised rational (assuming the therapist as the sole agent with therapeutic effects occurring within therapy, overlooking clients’ agency and the importance of their everyday life). Dreier’s research sets out to capture clients as agents who are trying to make therapy work in their conduct of life. One of his central projects (Dreier 2008, 2011), an intensive case analysis, focussed on the relation between clients and therapists (himself and one colleague) in a Family Therapy setting, exploring the link between sessions and everyday life by interviewing the cooperating family at home, asking them to reflect about sessions, and holding reflexive sessions with family and therapists to ask for their feedback and to explore how they experienced sessions.

Research on children’s development in everyday life constitutes another major field of current PSS research. Here the aim is to transform common practices of classification and individualisation by systematically including the perspectives of children and by exploring child development via their participation in and across different contexts of everyday life, e.g. family life, educational institutions, recreational settings (Højholt 2006, 2012; Kousholt 2011; Røn Larsen 2012; Stanek 2013). Further research focuses on childhood, sexual abuse and children and the law and develops a methodology of ‘researching practice as process’ by expanding PSS via process theory (Motzkau 2009a, 2009b, 2011). The study of learning in and outside educational institutions represents another major field of study. Here learning is...
re-imagined as a theoretical and empirical project systematically structured from the perspective of the learning subjects (Holzkamp 1993, Haug 2003, 2009; Marvakis 2013; Langemeyer 2005). Research on social work practice and treatment of addiction advances PSS theoretically and methodologically (Nissen 2004, 2009, 2012); with most recent research in this field exploring the way standards are developed (particularly those assessing the efficacy of psychological treatment). Research into the technological dimension of human life explores the power and politics of technological artefacts and their significance in people’s everyday experience and agency by expanding PSS via Science and Technology Studies (Chimirri 2013; Huniche 2009; Papadopoulos 2010; Schraube 2009, 2013; Winner 2007). Crucially, recent work in PSS focuses on the conduct of everyday life, looking at how human beings as active sensuous subjects live their everyday life and exploring the conduct of everyday life as a basis for understanding the dilemmas and contradictions people are confronted with in contemporary society (Holzkamp 2013, Dreier 2011, Schraube and Højholt 2015).

**Internal Debates and Challenges**

PSS’s greatest accomplishment, the concept of subjectivity/agency, also presents its greatest challenge: PSS’s insight into the first-person givenness of human experience, consciousness, reasons for action, and the resulting necessity to conduct research from the standpoint of the generalized subject, can clash with an understanding of research that is engaged in broadening both the researchers and the co-researchers’ perspectives to see beyond what PSS terms restrictive agency and enable a path towards generalised agency.
From the beginning this tension has provided momentum for unique and important research for example about parenting (Markard 1985), teaching/learning (Holzkamp 1993, Haug 2009), racism and neo-nazism (Holzkamp 2013c, 2013d; Osterkamp 1996), as well as generating fierce internal debate (e.g. Fried 2002; Osterkamp, Lindemann and Wagner 2002). This tension is not unique to PSS, but the way it was unearthed and discussed openly was, and is, exemplary and inspiring. This is because the uniquely comprehensive theoretical framework PSS provides, offers an excellent backdrop against which, and analytical tools through which, to examine it.

Clearly co-researchers are free to disagree with the researchers’ aim or definition of the issue at hand; disagreement can be further negotiated or reflected in the research. But where such standpoints would in themselves be considered problematic (e.g. in the case of racism, or neo-nazism), it is difficult to formulate a genuine PSS manner of approaching such important topics while fully taking into account, and potentially having to accept, the perspectives of those who hold those views. A similar issue was at the centre of a debate that gripped PSS in the 1990 and that emerged in response to a heated debate in Germany about child sexual abuse/rape of young women, and the question whether there was an epidemic of false allegations of abuse. In this context the term ‘abuse of abuse’ was coined by Rutschky (1992) (it was mooted that many accusers were deliberately making false allegations to harm someone, and that the feminist movement was exaggerating numbers of abuse/rape to serve their agenda).

In this context Holzkamp (1994) advanced the view that, from a PSS perspective, one could only meaningfully engage with those (mostly) girls/young women concerned when starting from a position of unconditionally acknowledging their allegations, as this was their first-person perspective. Other PPS proponents of the debate argued this idea was naïve,
and that, if it meant ‘believing’ them in a forensic sense of the word, it ultimately implied generalized guilt, i.e. that all men were, by association, abusers/rapists until proven innocent, thus making a balanced discussion impossible and dismissing the standpoints of those accused. This turned into a very heated, and at times hostile, debate (Forum Kritische Psychologie, special issue 33 and 37, see also Osterkamp on the ‘abuse of abuse of abuse’) that we cannot do justice here, and unfortunately the contributions are published in German only. Nevertheless we thought it important to mention here, because it illustrates PSS’s readiness to explicitly and openly take debate to the very heart of PSS’s conceptual-transformative framework, forcing it to confront important and uncomfortable issues (such as abuse/rape, racism, neo-nazism) even if they would challenge it to the extreme.

**Conclusion**

PSS helps to overcome mainstream psychology’s one-sidedness. It highlights the fractures and self-hindrance inherent in a Psychology uncritically adopting what it considers the theoretical language and methodology of the natural and technological sciences. In contrast, it has sought to develop a set of fundamental concepts and methods that are genuinely empirical and psychological; a set of concepts capable of elucidating the complex reality of human subjectivity, including the reality of the concrete, societal and technological world in which human experience and agency is located. By taking the standpoint of the subject, which is logically the result of the first-person givenness of psychological phenomena, Psychology is freed from the impossible idea of being a science from an external perspective, and its common practices of classifying and disciplining individuals, and controlling and predicting their behaviour. Instead, by taking the standpoint of the
subject, psychology becomes a science ‘for’ people, working with concepts that are analytical and exploratory at once helping to clarify everyday experience, action and the conduct of life.

What, to us, seems particularly unique about PSS is first, the comprehensive, detailed and positive, reconstruction of Psychology as a whole; a feature that sets PSS apart from more recent critical approaches particularly those who do not see ‘foundations’ as desirable (Brown and Stenner 2009); second, the commitment to co-researchers’ perspectives and the uncompromising way in which researchers are practitioners, theoreticians and activists; third, the power of the analytical tools provided, paired with an ever prevailing scepticism towards the own insights and agendas which keeps PSS open to be re-shaped and taken into different directions as the social, personal, political and theoretical landscapes it confronts are in constant change.

It is to PSS’s credit that it has stuck with the apparently insurmountable problem of subjectivity and generalised agency, holding it in suspense, rather than dropping, dismissing or obscuring it. At the same time it has continued to seek out this very challenge as it emerges, is engendered and confronted within everyday life and (institutional) practices (this is evident in recent work that emerged from within and associated to PSS). This persistency might in part be to blame for some of the harsh internal debates in the past, and for the apparent lack of an intellectual centre or coherent network more recently, both of which might have contributed to the impression PSS had suffered an untimely decline or even demise (Teo 1998). Yet, PSS is well and alive in current research. PSS might have drifted apart as it was developed into different directions. And even though PSS as such is not anymore (or never was) a distinct ‘school’ or ‘paradigm’, the analytical depth and thoroughness, and the uncompromising attention to detail that initially drove it (as evident
in Holzkamp’s and Osterkamp’s work), provides a generalizable mode of critical thought that can inspire current critical psychologies; it reminds us to be hesitant, as well as uncompromisingly constructive, personal and political.

**Further reading**


**Website resources**

Forum Kritische Psychologie: [www.argument.de/wissenschaft/psychologie_fkp.html](http://www.argument.de/wissenschaft/psychologie_fkp.html)

Outlines: Critical Practice Studies: [www.outlines.dk](http://www.outlines.dk)

[www.kritische-psychologie.de](http://www.kritische-psychologie.de)

[www.substance.ku.dk](http://www.substance.ku.dk)

**References**


Chimirri, N. A. (2013) ‘Who do we think we (and they) are? The audience and the researcher as participants in sociomaterial practice’, *The Communication Review*, 16(1-2), 81-91.


