

Crisis Debates in Psychology: Causes, Contexts, and Consequences

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Organizers: Ludmila Hyman & Thomas Sturm
(Max Planck Institute for the History of Science)

ABSTRACTS

Annette Mülberger (UAB, Barcelona):

Psychologists on Psychology: Controversies on Crisis in Crescendo (1897-1933)

When psychologists reflect upon the status and situation of their own field, time and again, a state of crisis is diagnosed. The first author who in 1897 raised an alarm was Rudolf Willy. Other texts stating a crisis in psychology followed, such as Kostyleff's (1911). In the late twenties of the last century the discussions about crisis reached a first peak defined by a notable increase of frequency and intensity.

The questions I will pursue are twofold. First, what do the actors mean by "crisis"? Secondly, what arguments do they propose for or against a diagnosis of crisis in psychology? The examination of arguments will lead to the necessity of taking into account basic issues raised in relation with the crisis diagnoses in psychology. Furthermore, the discussion and historical analysis of arguments requires the inclusion of voices from both sides, the defenders of crisis diagnosis and their opponents, and in connection with general reflections made by psychologists about their discipline at that time. On the whole, my interest in the discussions about crisis is historical and historiographical, always referring to how the evolution and present status of psychology is *perceived* by psychologists themselves at a certain time.

John Carson (University of Michigan):

What is Human about the Human Sciences? Cries of "Crisis" in Turn-of-the-Century French Psychology

By the turn of the twentieth century, French high culture in general and French psychology in specific seemed to many to be in turmoil. Celebration of the positivistic and scientific attitude that had characterized the early Third Republic was now strongly criticized by those proclaiming the "bankruptcy of science" and promoting reliance instead on the personal and arational. From Paul Bourget's *Le Disciple* (1889) to Maurice Blondel's *L'Action* (1893) to Ferdinand Brunetière's *La Science et la religion* (1895), alternative approaches to knowledge, society, and mind challenging the primacy of cold reason and objective science in favor of action, faith, and the spiritual flourished. It was in this context that Nikolai Kostyleff announced in 1911 that there was a crisis in French experimental psychology. In his *La crise de la psychologie expérimentale*, Kostyleff attacked much of the work in French experimental psychology for the previous thirty years

as fragmentary and overly concerned with individual capacities at the expense of mental phenomena themselves. After the interruption of scientific research occasioned by World War I, the shift in direction to which Kostyleff pointed became clearly visible within a number of areas of French experimental psychology during the postwar period. In this paper I examine what it was about French experimental psychology that seemed so troubling, both to Kostyleff and to numerous other psychologists. How had the laboratory, which at one point was deemed the guarantor of objective scientific knowledge, especially within psychology, become a suspect site for the understanding of human mental processes?

Christian Allesch (Universität Salzburg):

Hans Driesch and the problems of „normal psychology“: Rereading his *Crisis in Psychology* (1925)

In 1925, the German biologist and philosopher Hans DRIESCH published a booklet entitled *The Crisis in Psychology*. It was originally published in English and was based on lectures given at various universities in China, Japan and the USA. The “crisis” in psychology of that time, in Driesch’s opinion, lies in the necessity to decide about “the road which psychology is to follow in the future”. This necessity refers to five “critical points”, namely (1) to develop the theory of psychic elements to a theory of meaning by phenomenological analysis, (2) the overcoming of association theory, (3) to acknowledge that the unconscious is a fact and a “normal” aspect of mental life, (4) to reject “psychomechanical parallelism” or any other epiphenomenalistic solution of the mind-body problem, and (5) the extension of psychical research to new facts as described by parapsychology, for instance. Driesch saw close parallels between the development of modern psychology and that of biology, namely in a theoretical shift from “sum-concepts” like association and mechanics, to “totality-concepts” like soul and entelechy.

The German translation of 1926 was entitled *Grundprobleme der Psychologie* (*Fundamental Problems of Psychology*) while “the crisis in psychology” forms just the subtitle of this book. This underlines that Driesch’s argumentation – in contrast to that of Buehler – dealt with epistemological questions rather than with paradigms.

Gary Hatfield (University of Pennsylvania):

Köhler, Koffka, and the “Crisis” in Psychology

During the 1920s and 1930s, Koehler and Koffka each responded to the perception of a “crisis” in psychology. In reviewing Driesch’s 1926 book, Koffka affirmed a crisis in psychology’s handling of meaning. He rejected Driesch’s solution based in vitalism and reanalyzed the problem in familiar Gestalt terms: previous psychology was caught up in “machine theory” that construed the primary data of psychology as meaningless “sensory elements,” whereas the Gestaltists recognized as basic phenomena of human experience organized wholes imbued with meaning. Koffka and Koehler emphasized that any psychological solution to the problem of meaning must come through natural scientific

methods and theories, and they insisted that meaning and value could be objects of natural scientific psychology.

Koffka, who had moved to the US in 1927, later explained that in introducing Gestalt psychology to an American audience he portrayed a different “crisis” than he would have for a European audience. In America, he emphasized basic scientific failings in previous psychological theory; in Europe, he would have emphasized the problems of meaning, value, and culture -- or meaning writ large. In making their scientific case, the Gestaltists focused on sensory organization and on meaning or functional categorization in problem solving. They presented cogent arguments that entered the mainstream of experimental psychology. On meaning writ large, they plumped for including value and significance in any theory of human experience that was adequate to that experience.

They were less effective in explaining how this might be done by scientific psychology. The Gestalt legacy in the latter area stems largely from Kurt Lewin's influence on social psychology. But unlike the cases of sensory organization and, to a lesser extent, functional categorization, there is no Gestalt result on meaning-writ-large that has become an entrenched product of scientific psychology.

Perrine Marthelot (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne): Bühler's Theory of Language as a Solution to the Crisis in Psychology

How can an analysis of language give the concepts that will lead to a resolution of the crisis in psychology? In his book *Die Krise der Psychologie* (1927) Karl Bühler tries to constitute the object of psychology in its specificity, in order to overcome the crisis. To do so, Bühler concentrates his attention on language as a theory of signs. Just as the three elements of psychology (*Erlebnis*, *Benahmen*, *Werk*) are to be conceived as the three sides of one complex object, the three functions of language (expression, appeal, representation) are to be conceived as three related dimensions of the same activity.

Firstly, I will examine Bühler's methodological analysis of the object of both psychology and language, and show to what extent a language theory as a solution for the crisis implies to develop a particular concept of unity. Secondly, I will show that this question of unity leads to a new concept of meaning. This concept allows Bühler to understand the unity of psychology from the very first stages of perception and behaviour to the complex stage of symbolic representation. Those two points are also part of the strong criticism Bühler addresses to the Gestalt theory and to its general concept of structure. Finally, I will examine the impact of Bühler's model of language in a later linguistic model.

Thomas Sturm (MPIWG, Berlin): Bühler's *Krise der Psychologie* and the Prehistory of Popper's Critical Rationalism

How did the debate about a “crisis in psychology”, and the diagnoses and therapies proposed in it, affect a neighboring discipline such as philosophy? An interesting case here is Karl Popper's critical rationalism in the philosophy of science. As is well known, Popper

had studied at Vienna with Karl and Charlotte Bühler. His 1928 dissertation, originally planned as an empirical work concerning memory, was ultimately devoted to methodological problems, as shown by the title, *Zur Methodenfrage der Denkpsychologie*. It mainly discusses the ontological and methodological views of his two supervisors: Schlick's *Allgemeine Erkenntnislehre* (1918) and Bühler's *Zur Krise der Psychologie* (1927). Popper defends Bühler's complex methodology against physicalistic approaches to psychology that had been advanced by Schlick and others.

The relation between Popper's later philosophical falsificationism and Bühler's "Denkpsychologie" has been found problematic in different ways. On the one hand, it has been claimed that Popper's 1928 dissertation was not yet really a methodological work, or that it did at least not yet address the central methodological problem of induction (Hacohen, 2001; Gattei, 2004). On the other hand, it has been argued that Popper later downplayed too much the influence of the *Denkpsychologen* Bühler, Oswald Külpe and Otto Selz upon his philosophy of science (ter Hark 1993, 2003, 2004). I undermine these interpretations in two ways. Firstly, I examine the complex Kantian background of the psychologists who influenced him, showing thereby that the allegation of a suppressed psychologism in Popper is questionable. Secondly, I highlight that Popper's critical rationalism has nevertheless one of its origins in Bühler's specific proposal for overcoming the crisis in psychology: namely, Popper developed Bühler's linguistic theory further by arguing that to the three essential functions of language – expression, representation, and appeal – a fourth has to be added: namely, argument or criticism, which for Popper would become essential for the possibility of the growth of objective knowledge.

Uljana Feest (TU Berlin): Husserl's *Crisis* as a Crisis of Psychology

In 1936, the philosopher Edmund Husserl published his article, "The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology". The article was based on several lectures that he had given the previous year, one of which was entitled, "The Crisis of European Sciences and Psychology", another "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Mankind". In this work, he laid out what he took to be the crisis of science, i.e., that its progress relies on the elimination of subjectivity, thereby failing to be relevant to human life. My paper has several aims: (1) to use Husserl's analysis of crisis to throw light on the works of other authors concerned about the crisis of psychology; (2) to place both Husserl's and other authors' analyses within the broader context of early 20th century discourse of crisis and reconstruction; and (3) to show that while Husserl's diagnosis of the state of philosophy and the sciences remains unchanged from 1900 to the mid 1930s, the word "crisis" only appears in the 1930s. I argue that while Husserl early on viewed philosophy as having taken a wrong turn (failing to provide an adequate treatment of human subjectivity, science, and rationality), this conviction reached a climax towards the end of his life, when his own life became deeply affected by the rise of Nazism. I conclude with a discussion of the relationship between crisis as an actor's term, and the historical circumstances in which it was employed.

Horst Gundlach (Universität Passau/Würzburg):
Bühler Revisited in Times of War: P. R. Hofstätter's *Crisis of Psychology* (1941)

In November 1941, the journal *Deutschlands Erneuerung* published an article by P. R. Hofstätter with the title *Die Krise der Psychologie, Beobachtungen über den Standort einer Wissenschaft im Volksganzen* (*The crisis of psychology, Observations of the position of the science of psychology in the whole of the people/nation*). After introducing the author and characterising the journal he published in, the situation of the science and the discipline of psychology in Germany during the Second World War is illuminated, the message the paper might convey delineated, and placed it into context. Hofstätter's paper which criticises Karl Bühler's celebrated *Crisis*-publication (1926/1927) is embarrassingly tarnished with *völkisch* und Nazi jargon, but strangely clair-sighted in sketching the future of psychology.

Ludmila Hyman (MPIWG, Berlin):
Vygotsky's *Historical Significance of the Crisis in Psychology: Then and Now*

In *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology* (1926-1927), L.S. Vygotsky argued for the integration of all research efforts that could be qualified as "materialist," natural scientific investigation of consciousness and behavior. Such integration, he argued, could only succeed if it rested on a solid methodology that would facilitate the synthesis of knowledge. Vygotsky developed the basic principles of such a methodology, based on the philosophy of dialectical materialism. In Section 1, I summarize Vygotsky's analysis of the "crisis" in psychology and his proposed solution.

In Section 2, I demonstrate that Vygotsky's understanding of scientific psychology was rooted in his social and ethical thinking. By using historical and biographical sources as well as Vygotsky's other texts, I discuss the concrete practical exigencies that informed his reflection about a new psychology. Vygotsky shared the enthusiasm, widespread among Russian leftist intelligentsia in the 1920s, that Soviet society had launched an unprecedented social experiment: The socialist revolution opened the way for establishing social conditions that would let the individual flourish. For Vygotsky it meant that "a new man" of the future would become "the first and only species in biology that would create itself." He conceived of psychology as a science that would serve this humanist teleology.

In Section 3, I discuss the relevance of Vygotsky's "Crisis" to contemporary psychology. Of principal importance is Vygotsky's model of methodological analysis, which can be used for critiquing and designing contemporary research programs.

**Ekaterina Zavershneva (Moscow State University of Dental Medicine):
Vygotsky's Intellectual Evolution in Response to the Crisis**

The problem of the crisis in contemporary psychology was central to Vygotsky's work. He defined the crisis as follows: Contemporary psychology lacked (1) a unified theoretical basis, (2) a sound methodology, and (3) a strong connection between theory and practice. In this paper I discuss Vygotsky's intellectual evolution as a series of responses to the crisis.

Vygotsky produced three scientific research programs in the course of his short career. With each he endeavored to unify psychology on the basis of the emerging cultural-historical approach. I demonstrate that beside proposing a general psychological theory, Vygotsky developed an account of what the human is—a being capable of free action, language, and thought. Vygotsky tried to identify units of analysis that would allow psychologists to study consciousness and behavior from this perspective. For example, he suggested a focus on the psychological meaning of the word (the synthesis of language and thought) and “experience,” or *perezhivanie* (the synthesis of intellect and emotion).

I discuss Vygotsky's theoretical innovations in the context of his polemics with his contemporaries, such as Gestalt psychologists, psychoanalysts, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget. He incorporated elements of their theories in his own theoretical approach and developed experiments to test and extend their theoretical propositions.

**Cathy Faye (York University):
A Chronic Crisis? The Historical Roots of the Crisis in Social Psychology**

Although the 1970s crisis in American social psychology has been portrayed as a sudden and unexpected occurrence in an otherwise stable and established discipline, it may be more accurately viewed as part of an ongoing struggle to comprehend the relationship between the individual and society. In this paper, I examine the issues involved in the 1970s crisis, focusing on the tension between individualistic versus collectivistic approaches to the study of social life. I then examine these issues historically. First, I examine the debate in late nineteenth-century France between Gabriel Tarde and Emile Durkheim. Second, I look at the movement of this debate from France to North America. Finally, I outline the 1920s debate between American social psychologists and sociologists. These debates differed in some ways, but they all centered on the same theoretical issues. For example, what is the relationship between the individual and society? Are individuals the products or producers of their social surroundings? How “social” or “psychological” should social psychology be? The historical nature of these debates suggests that the “crisis” may better be conceptualized as the latest manifestation of an ongoing struggle that has consumed social psychologists and sociologists since social-psychological thought began to crystallize in the nineteenth-century.