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Standpoint of the Subject**

Ernst Schraube

Ute Osterkamp

Selected Writings of Klaus Holzkamp



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Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject

Selected Writings of Klaus Holzkamp

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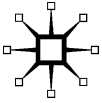
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Introduction: Klaus Holzkamp and the Development of Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject

Ute Osterkamp and Ernst Schraube

Klaus Holzkamp (1927–1995) was a professor at Free University Berlin and the founder of German Critical Psychology, which worked towards a renewal of academic psychology. His ideas inspired and mobilized generations of young researchers and practitioners who were discontented with the socio-political function of psychology and the human sciences. Although his approach has been discussed internationally, much of his work is not available in English. With this book we offer a selection of his writings in order to introduce the reader to the central ideas of Holzkamp's psychology from the standpoint of the subject.

Holzkamp first became known through his experimental research in the fields of perception, cognition and social psychology. In this context, he wrote the epistemological works "Theorie und Experiment in der Psychologie" (*Theory and Experiment in Psychology*; 1964) and "Wissenschaft als Handlung" (*Science as Action*; 1968). In these works, he is primarily concerned with the contradiction between the emphasis placed on the experiment as the authority to test theoretical developments in psychology, and the insufficient clarification of the "representation problem" – that is, the relation between experimental findings and psychological theories based upon them. Holzkamp emphasizes that this ambiguity entails tendencies towards conceptual arbitrariness, taking-concepts-as-reality, dogmatic inflexibility of theories and, in the end, a stagnation of science. In contrast to the "empiricist" orientation of psychological research which still prevails today, Holzkamp argues that reality is not perceived "as such", but is experienced through the

available concepts which, in turn, affect our view of the world and, thus, our relations to it. In this sense, scientific research does not just reflect reality, but virtually creates reality through the way it conceptualizes it. Scientific research can be seen, Holzkamp concludes, as a particular productive activity within the totality of human action, and the critical analysis of its scientific concepts should be an essential part of any systematic psychological research.

While Holzkamp originally took the view that the shortcomings of experimental psychology could be overcome within traditional psychological paradigms, the 1968 student movement critique of the socio-political function of prevailing psychology led him to fundamentally rethink psychology's notions of the human being as well as the corresponding methodology. In a "process of critical scientific reorientation" (1972, p. 7), he came to realize that his initial idea that critiques of the epistemological foundations of psychology and its socio-political function would be mutually complementary was still caught up in the prevailing understanding of science and its notion of merely being obligated to its own (methodological) norms and principles, yet not responsible for the use made of them. On the other hand, however, a critique which limited itself to the employment of psychology for inhumane purposes would also fall short. It would necessarily remain on a personalising and moralising level and, hence, ultimately prove ineffective. In contrast, an effective critique of psychology would require the development of a concept of scientific knowledge which allowed the societal relevance of psychological research and its claims to knowledge and truth to be conceived of as a unity. In this perspective, the critique of traditional psychology would be identical to contributing to its conceptual development, which, as Holzkamp puts it, would make it possible to comprehend "*the same reality* traditional psychology refers to *in a more comprehensive, less distorted, and 'more adequate' way*" (1973, p. 14f.). Such a psychology had to start from people's everyday experience and agency, and try to generalize these by explicating both their groundedness in their concrete socio-material position as well as the implicit presumptions in the "self-evident" ways of thinking and acting – thus moving from an everyday notion of the phenomena to a comprehensive conception and understanding of them.

Holzkamp's process of rethinking psychology has to be seen against the background of political conflicts within the Department of Psychology at Free University Berlin during that time. In the course of these conflicts, the department was dissolved and replaced by two new departments, one "conservative" and one "left-wing". A key role

was played here by the student neighbourhood project *Schülerladen Rote Freiheit*, an anti-authoritarian meeting point for pupils for which Holzkamp had taken on official responsibility in order to enable it to receive funding from the municipality. The discussions of sexuality held there, which reached the public by way of stolen minutes from meetings, triggered a press campaign which gave substantial support to those who were striving for such an institutionalized segregation of the two factions (see Autorenkollektiv am Psychologischen Institut der Freien Universität, 1971, especially the analysis of this press campaign by Wolf Fritz Haug). However, these processes also revealed the theoretical weakness of a practice which aimed at the *emancipation of others* by enlightening them about the restrictedness of their views and practices without systematically questioning the position from which the guidance of others appears to be a matter of course.

The establishment of a “left-wing” department, which became known as the “Holzkamp Institute”, entailed the task of developing, from one day to the next, an alternative range of courses where the problems in the traditional programme of psychology were overcome and which, at the same time, enabled students to graduate in line with the general study and examination regulations. Hence, from the start, the development of Critical Psychology was a joint venture between both students and faculty which included permanent discussions about its objectives and the best way to realize them. In this process, two approaches crystallized: on the one hand, a critique of psychology which was focused on revealing the many ways in which psychology contributed, in different areas of society, to ideologically justifying and stabilising given power constellations, and, on the other, *Critical Psychology* in the narrower sense. The latter is characterized by submitting psychological concepts themselves to a critical examination in order to analyse why they are suited for ideologically supporting inhumane purposes. This required the elaboration of new psychological concepts which comprised *a priori* the particular world-relatedness of the development of psychic functions. Following Aleksei N. Leontyev’s (1981) functional-historical analyses (together with Vygotsky, Leontyev was one of the pioneers of the *Cultural-Historical School*), Holzkamp and his colleagues reconstructed the essential developmental dimensions of the psyche on the phylogenetic level, leading to “societal nature” becoming the species-distinguishing feature of the human being. Here, “societal nature” stands for the human-specific embodiment of the capacity to create the conditions of one’s own life, implying on the individual level the subject’s capacity for developing themselves within processes of socio-historical

dimensions and thus become their bearers and transformers. In line with this orientation, the natural and socio-historical development of psychic functions such as perception, emotion and motivation was also reconstructed by conceptually incorporating the reality these functions refer to, thus overcoming the “worldlessness” of traditional psychology. Due to its focus on the scientific foundation of psychological categories, Critical Psychology is, as Holzkamp concluded, not to be seen as a particular theory, approach or school, but rather as a contribution to a scientifically substantiated conceptual-methodological foundation of a psychology that recognizes the implicit inhumanity of reducing human subjectivity to a worldless individual while simultaneously normalizing conformity to everyday living conditions.

The “dual possibility” of conforming to prevailing conditions or questioning the conditions which compelled conformity was concretized, for example, in such categorial pairs as restrictive versus generalized agency, orienting versus comprehending thinking, defensive versus expansive learning, motivation as internalized compulsion or dependent on the subjective meaning of the anticipated goal, or emotions as guiding or hampering rational world relations (see, for example, Dreier, 2003; Tolman, 1994; Tolman & Maiers, 1991). Thus, in his book “*Sinnliche Erkenntnis: Historischer Ursprung und gesellschaftliche Funktion der Wahrnehmung*” (*Sensory Knowledge: Historical Origin and Societal Function of Perception*; 1973), for example, Holzkamp contrasted, on the basis of Marxist methodology, the “organismic” curtailment of perception in traditional psychology with a concept of perception as the central life activity of societal individuals in their natural and socio-historical development and the way in which these functions are formed by capitalist society. Based on the materials and insights gained through various functional analyses of emotion, motivation, thinking, learning etc., Holzkamp then developed, in “*Grundlegung der Psychologie*” (*Foundations of Psychology*; 1983), a comprehensive system of categories for psychological research and practice which no longer disregard the topics of human subjectivity and inter-subjectivity and, precisely for that reason, can achieve scientific objectivity. Here, the concept of generalized agency, which highlights the possibility of jointly determining the conditions one is individually subjected to, is essential for grasping the particular dilemma of capitalism: being forced to confirm one’s own powerlessness and subjection to given conditions through the manifold constraints of outdoing others in competition. Only when there is a notion of this conflict can its particular

appearance in the individual's emotional dispositions and their different forms of coping with it be recognized.

A psychology from the standpoint of the subject, stressing the societal preconditions and implications of the individual's actions, requires – on a par with the concept of “meaning structures” in social theory – the introduction of the concept of “subjective reasons for action”. Human experiences, actions and emotional dispositions are neither directly conditioned by external circumstances, nor are they mere products of an attribution of meaning, but are grounded in the particular individual's concrete life situation. The “reason discourse”, focusing on “social self-understanding” on the groundedness of the individual's actions, is, as Holzkamp points out, the only adequate scientific language for a psychology from the standpoint of the subject. Acknowledging the subjectivity of others is identical to acknowledging the groundedness of their actions. Since, however, “reasons” are always “first-person”, they can only be recognized in processes of social self-understanding and not from an “external” position. The focus on clarifying the real groundedness of an individual's actions and, with it, the concrete constraints and compulsions underlying them, entails a fundamental change in research as well as in the relationship between “researcher” and “co-researcher”. The psychologist's traditional task of integrating individuals into the given order is replaced by joint efforts for realizing the subjective need for overcoming such pressures towards adaptation and clarifying the manifold forms of their normalization.

Over the next decade Holzkamp focused on the topic of learning. Applying the subject science concepts and methodology he specified in “Grundlegung der Psychologie” (*Foundations of Psychology*), his book “Lernen: Subjektwissenschaftliche Grundlegung” (*Learning: A Subject Science Foundation*; 1993) contrasted the prevailing notion of learning as imposed and controlled by others – also dominating psychological learning theories – with a concept of learning from the standpoint of the subject. Essential features of this approach are presented in the articles in the section of this volume entitled “De-subjectification of learning in psychological theory and school”.

Holzkamp's last project was dedicated to the study of the “conduct of everyday life”. He adopted the term from sociology because from the outset it points to individuals as agents of their life in a societal context. However, since the sociological research on the conduct of life is primarily concerned with studying the impact of societal conditions and cultural meaning structures on the individual, it does not really transcend

deterministic thinking, as Holzkamp notes. In contrast, subject science research would require a fundamental change in perspective. Here, the central question would be how, in view of the complexity and contradictoriness of societal conditions and their interpretations, individuals are able to determine their own decisions and actions and be reasonably certain that they are in line with their own life interests, or at least do not contradict them. In order to answer this question, a second mediating level between societal structures and individual actions is required beyond the level of “meaning structures”: the level of “subjective reasons for action”. This addresses the specific psychological question of why one adopts certain interpretations of societal reality as premises for one’s own actions. In this context, “life interest” refers to the possibility of “consciously/collectively” creating the societal conditions for a self-determined life. Since opportunities to act which are not limited to securing one’s personal position within given power relations, but are instead aimed at changing them, can only be realized on a supra-individual level, a main issue in subject science research is comprehending, in processes of social self-understanding, the manifold forms in which the realization of this possibility is hampered. For that reason, “social self-understanding” is both the essential epistemic interest as well as the central method of subject science research. It is directed towards achieving a meta-standpoint which enables the concrete groundedness of the different perspectives on the problem in question to be recognized instead of trying – in conformity with the ruling relations – to establish one’s own ways of looking at the problem as the only valid perspective.

The chapters in this book have been selected to provide a comprehensive overview of Klaus Holzkamp’s work and its theoretical foundation. They are all from the last ten years of his life, a time when the process of developing the epistemological and methodological principles of Critical Psychology was largely completed, and his objective was increasingly to substantiate them in a range of problem areas.

Part I: Basic concerns and concepts of subject science psychology

This section brings together texts where Holzkamp explains the concerns of Critical Psychology and its theoretical basis for those colleagues not directly involved in the development of Critical Psychology, but with an interest in it.

Basic Concepts of Critical Psychology is the printed version of a lecture which Holzkamp gave to members of the “Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft”, an education sector union, in 1985. In this talk, he outlined Critical Psychology’s specific interest in creating a set of basic concepts that reveal the ideological function of the usual juxtaposition of individual and society. In the process, he also shows how the dual character of human subjectivity – the subjection to given conditions and the subjective necessity of overcoming the conditions that enforce this subjection – is reflected in the psychic functions of thinking, feeling, and the individual’s motivation and action.

The Development of Critical Psychology as a Subject Science appeared in an anthology, edited by Günther Rexilius (1988), which illustrated different perspectives of critical psychological thought in Germany. Holzkamp explains how and why the development of Critical Psychology’s conceptual foundation led it to define itself as a “subject science” where the subjective need to determine one’s own life conditions is already taken into account in the theoretical and methodological tools. Based on such a broadened view, the general neglect of this need in traditional concepts can become visible and be analysed with regard to its preconditions and implications. In this respect, Holzkamp definitely sees some congruities with psychoanalysis which, though based upon a different epistemological foundation, also developed concepts and procedures for a reconstructive self-clarification of one’s everyday life under conditions of suppressed subjectivity. In this context, Holzkamp also addresses a misunderstanding over a “normative quality” ascribed to Critical Psychology where, for example, “generalized agency” is interpreted as a direct call to join the political struggle. Such a reading misses Critical Psychology’s particular aim of developing the analytical tools to recognize the manifold forms in which one is “unconsciously” instrumentalized for other-directed ends.

What Could a Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject be? is based on Holzkamp’s keynote address at the founding conference of the *Neue Gesellschaft für Psychologie* in February 1991, established as an alternative to the traditional German psychological association. Here, Holzkamp explicitly specifies Critical Psychology as an approach from the subject standpoint and contrasts it both with experimental and “subject-orientated” psychology. As he points out, the experimental–psychological postulate that scientific research can only legitimately refer to externally observable data creates precisely the “inwardness” and inaccessibility of subjective experiences which one then tries to overcome by

the introduction of “intervening variables”. On the other hand, however, “subject-orientated” approaches which explicitly underline the necessity of integrating human subjectivity into research, would also block any access to the problem of subjectivity as long as they uncritically adopt the prevailing notion of scientific objectivity as only possible from the external standpoint. In contrast, Holzkamp insists on the necessity of defining the standpoint of the subject as the standpoint of psychological research. This requires constructing scientific theories and relating them to empirical data in such a way that the subject standpoint is always maintained, and other participants are, without reservation, acknowledged as “co-researchers”. From a subject science perspective, the object of research is neither “other people” nor their “subjectivity”, but the world as it is experienced by particular individuals as the reference point for possible communication on the subjective meaning of different world aspects and the necessities of actions following from them.

Missing the Point: Variable Psychology’s Blindness to the Problem’s Inherent Coherence was an address Holzkamp gave in June 1994 the Ruhr-University Bochum at a lecture series on “Alternatives in the Production of Scientific Knowledge”. Here, he elaborated the need to develop subject-specific research methods by showing that, in principle, the variable model underlying psychological research is blind and makes one blind to the coherences and contradictions within the problem area under investigation. Even if particular coherences and contradictions had been articulated in pre-scientific everyday communication or in preceding descriptions and conceptualizations of the phenomenon, there would be nothing left from this previous knowledge after the data has been transformed into variables as required for statistical procedures, and any insight into the nexus of coherences and contradictions in the problem would be blocked. Holzkamp illustrates this by taking the example of studies on “learning climate”: by carefully fragmenting the reality of school into a multiplicity of factors which could influence this climate, the possibility of conceptualising the objective structures of the institution as an aspect of the subjective experience of school is *a priori* excluded. Hence, possible suffering as a result of the organization of learning processes could only be regarded as a dependent variable – that is, as an individual problem of the particular pupil. The necessity of “structurally generalising” subjective experience to a comprehensive knowledge about the coherences of school structures and subjective experiences – a main issue in subject science research – is systematically omitted. In contrast, Holzkamp,

informed by the work of Hugh Mehan and Jean Lave, outlines learning research from the subject standpoint.

Part II: Functional analyses of psychological concepts

As explained above, Critical Psychology is not primarily concerned with problem solving or with improving the individual's problem solving competence. Its major focus is on the concepts through which problems are conceived – that is, on the question of what possibilities for action are accentuated or excluded in order to reduce the danger of tackling problems in a way that intensifies them rather than helping to resolve them. This includes the question of the standpoint from which problems are defined. The two articles in this section convey an impression of such a “functional analysis” of psychological concepts.

Personality: A Functional Analysis of the Concept was written for a textbook on personality psychology edited by Theo Hermann and Ernst D. Lantermann (1985). Here, Holzkamp highlights the problematic implications of the standard practice of categorising people according to their supposed traits, which seems to make any question as to the reasons for their behaviour superfluous. While traditional personality psychology tends to emphasize the orientating and economic function of such an attribution of personality traits in social relations, Holzkamp points to their inherent inhumanity. As he emphasizes, in the first instance personality attributions relieve those who systematically negate the other's reasons for their behaviour from any co-responsibility for uncovering and overcoming the concrete conditions that underlie their “irrational” behaviour. Thus, on a meta-level, focusing on the supra-individual quality of the individual's capacity for determining their own life conditions, the orienting function of personality attributions proves to be disorienting. It hampers communication regarding the subjective costs of such an economising of human relations, where others are primarily seen in terms of their usefulness for one's immediate interests but not as possible allies in overcoming conditions that enforce such ultimately self-disempowering behaviour. However, since one of the main tasks of current personality theories and diagnostics is to scientifically confirm and refine common personality attributions, personality theoreticians and diagnosticians would presumably endanger their professional position if they refused to fulfil this function or regarded it only as a problem to be debated. As Holzkamp points out, the question of whether a concept of personality will be needed in a psychology from the

subject's standpoint at all, and how it will need to be defined, is open to future research.

Practice: A Functional Analysis of the Concept is a lecture Holzkamp gave in 1987 at the 4th International Summer University of Critical Psychology on "The Relationship between Theory and Practice in Psychology", which was organized by the Department of Social Work at the Fulda University of Applied Sciences. Here, his critique refers to the reciprocal isolation of theory and practice which, as Holzkamp explains, is tantamount to abandoning any attempt at theoretically analysing the concrete groundness of the problems encountered. The mutual isolation of theory and practice could be seen as a kind of truce since it protects both sides from the conflicts they would presumably encounter if they tried to voice, and thus "generalize", their contradictory situation of being systematically hampered from fulfilling the demands they are confronted with. Instead of helping practitioners to voice the real hindrances in genuinely engaging with the problems of their clients, for example, theory presents itself to practitioners as an abstract system of methodological demands which, in their abstraction from the concrete possibilities and constraints in everyday work in the field, largely serve to explain the objective insufficiencies of their work by their subjective deficiencies. Practitioners, in turn, react to the devaluation of their work by setting their practical experience as the reference point for theories and disqualifying all approaches which do not directly confirm their work as "unrealistic". Through this defensive self-containment of theory and practice in their own sphere of activities, they are unable to conceive the necessity of jointly clarifying the preconditions and implications of such mutual dissociation. Thus, the most important contribution which psychology could make to the development of critical science – the knowledge of the subjective costs of given power relations – remains excluded from public discussion. As Holzkamp points out, avoiding the central problem in this way is, in turn, pre-programmed in a concept of practice that is systematically deprived of the moral and political dimension which is immanent, in the philosophical and Marxist concept of practice.

Part III: De-subjectification of learning in psychological theory and school

The Fiction of Learning as Administratively Plannable was a talk Holzkamp gave, in advance of the publication of his book on learning, at the 6th International Summer University of Critical Psychology in Vienna 1992, which was dedicated to "Contradictions in Learning and Educational

Actions". With reference to Foucault's historical analysis of power, he shows how school can only meet its ascribed task of equitably assigning unequal chances in life if it takes the process of learning out of the hands of the pupils and, simultaneously, subjects it to a rigid evaluative system. This expropriation is buttressed by a "teaching/learning short circuit" which, as Holzkamp explicates, is also significant for psychological learning theory and is characterized by explaining successful learning by pupils as a direct effect of the teaching effort. Since, in this way, the standpoint of the learning subject is systematically excluded from scientific analysis, the contradiction between learning as an imposition and learning as the opening up of new possibilities remains invisible too, and the potential resistance of pupils to the way they are being trimmed can only be attributed to their lack of willingness or ability to learn. In contrast to the common notion of learning as needing to be externally imposed and controlled, Holzkamp develops the learning problem from the perspective of the learning subject – that is, as learning grounded in the anticipated expansion of the individual's own sphere of knowledge and space of action.

Musical Life Practice and Music Learning at School was given as a lecture at the annual conference of the Arbeitskreis musikpädagogische Forschung (*Work Group on Research in Music Education*) at the University of Potsdam in October 1993. Here, the focus is on the contradiction between music's intrinsic potential for generalizing and intensifying the subjective experience of ourselves and the world and the manifold ways in which young people's modes of musical expression and preferences tend to be commonly devalued in the adult world. In reaction to the experienced devaluation of their music, pupils, in turn, tend to distance themselves from "adult music", in particular classical music, by dismissing it as boring and having nothing to do with them, etc. In music lessons, such processes of alienation from music and, with it, from oneself and each other, do not become a subject for discussion, but are further intensified. This occurs above all, as Holzkamp illustrates, through curricula where classical music is generally seen as the only true music, and at the same time is presented to and demanded from the pupils in a form which largely hinders any access to it and the experiential possibilities it offers.

Part IV: Constructing otherness

The Concept of Anti-racist Education: A Subject Science Analysis of its Function is based on a lecture Holzkamp gave at a colloquium on the

“Basis and Conditions of Anti-Racist Practice” held by the Duisburg Institut für Sprach- und Sozialforschung (*Institute for Language and Social Research*) in November 1993. Holzkamp here questions an “anti-racist education” where racist behaviour is viewed as arising from misguided socialization processes which can – by explaining its irrationality – be directed back into acceptable channels. Holzkamp relates such ideas to the conventional “teaching/learning short circuit”: by negating the real groundedness of racist behaviour in concrete life conditions, the people themselves, the “racist” juveniles, are turned into the problem to be dealt with. With this, however, one contributes to precisely those conditions under which they have “good reasons” to elude such forms of “enlightenment”. In reference to Philip Cohen’s research, Holzkamp contrasts this with the concept of anti-racist education as a process of social self-understanding about a social reality where, in view of the possibility of becoming marginalized oneself, it seems natural to emphasize one’s own belonging to those who do – or who ought to – call the tune. In such a subject science perspective, young people would not become the object of analyses; the focus would instead be on the manifold ways one seeks to overcome one’s own powerlessness and insignificance in a form that implicitly leads one to confirm the conditions which enforce them.

In *Racism and the Unconscious as Understood by Psychoanalysis and Critical Psychology*, Holzkamp follows up on the question of the extent to which the idea that racist behaviour is a result of undesirable individual development is influenced by psychoanalytical thought. To answer this, he draws on distinct explanatory models of racist behaviour in psychoanalysis, showing that even those psychoanalytical approaches which explicitly distance themselves from “therapeutic” explanations of racist behaviour as the delayed after-effects of early childhood trauma, and which underscore its societal dimensions, ultimately remain trapped in individualist thinking. He regards the common individual–society juxtaposition as one reason for this – or, more precisely, the lack of a scientific framework for adequately conceptualizing the societal mediatedness of individual behaviour, namely the concrete forms by which societal conditions affect individual actions. To advance here, Holzkamp refers to Foucault’s concept of “state racism” and his analyses of majority–minority discourses as a particular strategy of lateralizing suppression, namely a means of involving people in their own disempowerment by mutually surveilling and controlling each other. Hence, a main subject science task would be to analyse the different levels and forms by which this participation in one’s own disempowerment takes

place. Moreover, conceptualizing human subjectivity as the possibility of consciously creating one's own life conditions, instead of only submitting to them, makes a reinterpretation of the Freudian concept of the unconscious both possible and necessary. In such a perspective, the unconscious is less constituted by the repression of offensive "instinctual desires" than by isolating oneself from any insights into the asocial and self-harming implications of all attempts at coming to terms with restrictive conditions.

Colonization of Childhood: Psychological and Psychoanalytical Explanations of Human Development was written directly after the article on *Racism and the Unconscious*. Here, Holzkamp transfers the question of how far essential insights into a problem's complexity are blocked by the way they are conceptualized in developmental psychology and, at the same time, analyses the function of drawing on concepts such as socialization and childhood in order to explain adults' behaviour or "personalities". In pursuing these issues he refers to ethnological and anthropological studies which problematize a "developmental gaze" where alternative life 'styles' are not appreciated for their own distinctiveness and particular groundedness, but are devalued and deemed to be underdeveloped when compared with one's own "normality". From this perspective, childhood could merely be seen as a preliminary stage on the way to adulthood, ending up with its integration into prevailing normality. In contrast to the one-dimensionality of the "developmental gaze" in which the biographical present is determined by the biographical past, Holzkamp emphasizes the possibility of the view of the past as being largely determined by the individual's current situation. In this "dual perspective", adult development potentialities can be seen less as having been determined by childhood experiences than – to turn it other way round – the manifold curtailments and controls experienced in childhood could be seen as a preparation for adult life. Realizing this dual perspective would open up a new horizon of insights and scopes of action hardly imaginable so long as one remains locked in one's biography.

Part V: Conduct of life

Psychology: Social Self-Understanding on the Reasons for Action in the Conduct of Everyday Life is part of a manuscript on the "conduct of life" project which Holzkamp had set himself as his next task. In spite of its incomplete character, we have decided to include it in this volume since it exemplarily illustrates how subject science research has, in principle,

an “open” character, primarily raising questions where one does not commonly see them. Moreover, it shows how emphasising the subject standpoint is opposed to the usual practice of advising others from an external standpoint, and being in the know in advance. Instead, the main issue is the question of how individuals become able to develop their own standpoint – that is, become aware of the involvement of their own actions in current power relations and the subjective requirements for action resulting from that.

One further argument for including the manuscript in this volume is that it envisions the incomplete character of the Critical Psychology project in general. With the elaboration and empirical substantiation of scientific categories allowing a comprehensive conception of human subjectivity, and thus the recognition of its “one-sidedness” in traditional psychology as well as its ideological function, a crucial step has surely been taken towards a psychology from the standpoint of the subject. The next step, however, will be to voice the objective and subjective obstacles and intimidations to be expected as soon as one starts to address and to realize the possibilities obscured in dominant interpretations of reality. Since the subjective effect of the manifold hindrances to acting in line with one’s own insights and interests can only be experienced by the specific individual, social self-understanding is necessarily a dialogical process. If, however, this statement is not to remain a mere phrase, this also demands that professional researchers fundamentally rethink their own self-certainties, especially the conviction of having a greater overview of the problems and hence the responsibility for directing and controlling the research process. However, as soon as one leaves the external standpoint and becomes actively involved in processes of social self-understanding where one’s own views as a professional researcher have no precedence and are just as fit for questioning as to their preconditions and implications as those of anyone else involved in the research process, one will experience the fears and insecurities which are to be expected when the basis from which one is reasoning and acting is questioned. In this case, the differences between professional researcher and co-researchers will – not merely notionally, but factually – be resolved in the shared interest in developing the possibility of determining the societal conditions in line with one’s common insights and interests by consciously facing up to the manifold hindrances to realizing these possibilities, instead of defensively submitting to seemingly inevitable given conditions.

Note: Besides the literature mentioned in the text, we include here all of Holzkamp’s articles already available in English.

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Part I

Basic Concerns and Concepts of Subject Science Psychology

1

Basic Concepts of Critical Psychology

The relationship between individual and society

When it comes to individuality or the human psyche, society cannot be ignored. Surely, no one doubts this. The question, however, is how society is taken into account. It is a current and widely held view that society is merely an environment that has effects upon people. This is, first of all, the case in the conditioning model of traditional psychology that, as you know, works with independent and dependent variables, conducting experiments in which conditions are set up in order to study their effects upon the individual's behaviour. Society appears here, if at all, as an independent variable, as, for example, in studies of the effects of socioeconomic status on individuals. Yet similar notions of society can be found, for instance, in sociological role theory, in which society appears as a network of expectations to which individuals are exposed, and into which they then have to integrate. There are even Marxist theorists who understand society in this way, mistakenly interpreting the *Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach* to mean that the *individual* is the ensemble of societal relations. Thus, here too the individual's behaviour is assumed to be determined by societal conditions. However, this stands in stark contradiction to the basics of Marx's theory, according to which human beings are distinguished from all other species as they produce the means and conditions of their own lives, i.e. they do not simply live under conditions, but produce the conditions under which they live.

While Marx's theory focuses on the overall societal coherences of societal production and human living conditions, we are trying to conceptualize this relationship at the level of the individual. Contrary to the prevailing understanding of individuals as solely determined by societal conditions, we are engaged in developing a concept pertinent

to the two-sided reality of individuals as not merely subject to their life conditions, but simultaneously creating them. Of course, it is clear from the start that this is a complex relationship. The way in which we here – in this lecture hall, in Berlin, in Germany, or anywhere – are subject to conditions and how we can influence them is not simply symmetrical, but mediated in very complex modes. A basic principle of Critical Psychology is that we cannot assume human beings are the producers of their life conditions at the overall societal level and yet, in terms of psychology, hold notions which totally fail to explain how they became able to participate in this process. We call this conception of traditional psychology “homunculus theory” since it implies an idea of human beings which makes it impossible to understand how they could have survived for even three minutes. If they behaved as traditional psychology suggests they would have died out long before they entered the process of natural history. To recap, we are attempting to elaborate this two-sided relation as an interrelationship, i.e. to analyse human beings as producers of the life conditions to which they are simultaneously subject, and to conceptualize the mediation between the vital necessities of sustaining the societal system as a whole and these necessities on the subjective level of the discrete individuals. This is based on the idea that human beings not only live under conditions, but also need to control the conditions of their lives. Producing the conditions under which we live means that every single individual is, in one way or another, participating in the production, transformation, affirmation, and reproduction of the circumstances under which we live. Our main task, then, is to psychologically concretize this interrelationship.

Generalised human agency

The basic category in our efforts to develop this concretisation is agency (*Handlungsfähigkeit*). Here, it is not confined to the individual, but is defined as mediating between individual and societal life-sustaining activities. It refers to the human capacity to gain, in cooperation with others, control over each individual's own life conditions. Thus, the central psychological conception we have developed and tried to substantiate in our work is the coherence of the type and degree of human agency and the subjective quality of our existential orientation (*Befindlichkeit*). Each individual's existential orientation is a subjective aspect of the type and degree of her/his agency – that is, opportunities to act and constraints on those opportunities. Human suffering or, generally, any injury, including anxiety, has the quality of being

exposed to and dependent upon other-directed circumstances, dissociated from possibilities of controlling essential, long-term conditions, i.e. constraints on possibilities to act. Correspondingly, overcoming suffering and anxiety, and the human quality of satisfaction is not obtainable merely by actual satisfaction and protection, but only by achieving control over the resources of satisfaction – that is, the conditions upon which one's possibilities for living and developing depend.

On the human level, being at the mercy of others and the immediate experience of deprivation are two sides of one and the same situation. Hence, actual privation is not surmounted simply by others' giving, by becoming satisfied and full, but only by overcoming the situation of subjection and apprehension by simultaneously gaining control over the sources of satisfaction – that is, the conditions upon which it depends whether I will suffer deprivation, or not, in future. This is an essential point. Take hunger as an example. On the one hand, hunger surely is a painful immediate experience, but this suffering is not merely grounded in direct deprivation; it results from being in a situation where one has to suffer hunger, i.e. where my satisfaction depends on the mercy of others. For instance, the fundamental inhumanity of the situation of the unemployed is not really resolved by giving them enough to eat. The pertinent point is that one is subject to conditions over which one has no influence, and dependent upon allowances that might be taken away again at any time. Dependency on current situations and the impossibility of gaining influence over my own life prospects, however, is the central moment in the injury of my subjectivity, and overcoming this dependency is virtually identical to the prospective possibility of developing my individual life quality. In other words, according to our basic concept, the psyche is not merely an individual or inner affair, but the subjective aspect of the way and the degree to which I am in control of the objective conditions of my life. My existential orientation is the experienced quality of my opportunities to act, or their restrictions. Accordingly, it cannot primarily be changed on the psychic level; a real improvement in the subjective quality of my life is synonymous with enhanced influence over my objective life conditions – that is, with my opportunities for forming alliances, i.e. uniting with others. On this basis, we have developed a differentiated criticism of various concepts in traditional psychology and simultaneously re-conceptualized the various functions of the psyche, such as thinking, emotions and motivation.

In traditional psychology *thinking* is generally reduced to problem solving in a given context which the individuals have to get along

with. In contrast, we try to conceptualize it as “developmental thinking” – that is, as thinking with reference to *real* contradictions. While in traditional psychology contradictions only seem to exist in thinking, and are regarded as being resolvable by thinking, i.e. through pure psychic processes, we try to show that thinking is essentially the possibility of reproducing real contradictions in a contradiction-free reasoning so that they can be recognized as aspects of reality and be overcome in practice. This also means that, in traditional psychology, thinking is a process which occurs from an external standpoint. The person who thinks stands outside the processes s/he is thinking about; s/he is virtually a neutral entity, beyond history, who somehow tries to comprehend reality. In contrast, we accentuate the subject standpoint of thinking, i.e. as the thinking of the subject involved in the process s/he tries to comprehend. The issue here is that we ourselves are part of the society which we have to reproduce in thinking. At first glance, this implies a kind of circle, but it is one that can be overcome by epistemic distance. By realizing such approaches we try to get beyond traditional psychology’s individualistic mental short-cuts in thinking.

In a similar way, we have tried to show that *emotionality* in its developed form – that is, as a moment of human agency – is a specific form of assessing the subjective relevance of actual possibilities of living and acting in given circumstances. From there we criticize the notion of emotions as mere inner processes, dissociated from knowledge and actions. We oppose the traditional theories on emotionality, which basically view it as interfering with a rational penetration of the problem, and instead explicate the function of emotionality in guiding the acquisition of knowledge and actions, thus characterizing it as the essential prerequisite of any adequate cognitive perception of the world. From there, it becomes possible to recognize the “internalisation” of emotionality, juxtaposed with rationality, as an aspect of the bourgeois “private” existence in which any emotional involvement in fighting inhumane living conditions is factored out.

Now to *motivation*: We have tried to show that motivation, the possibility of pursuing a goal, cannot be dissociated from the goal’s content. I can only pursue a goal in a motivated way when I can anticipate that its realisation also entails an enhancement of my life possibilities and life quality. Hence, it is not primarily a psychic matter whether I am motivated or not; rather, it is dependent upon the goal’s objective features.

The concept of restrictive agency

Up to this point I have presented our criticism of traditional psychology from the perspective of what we consider to be a more developed concept of agency. The question now is why traditional psychology conceives of the psychic in this foreshortened way and, more vitally, why this kind of mental shortcut occurs in our own perception of everyday reality so that we can hardly dismiss traditional psychology as simply wrong: evidently it reproduces something of our reality. How, then, can we explain the contradiction that a theory so substantially criticized nevertheless adequately depicts aspects of our subjective reality? To answer this question we have to realize that we do not live in an abstract society, but rather under distinct historical conditions – here, the antagonistic class conditions of capitalist society. Consequently, efforts to increase one's capacity to act, i.e. to extend control over the conditions of one's life, always entail, on every level, the risk of coming in conflict with authorities who claim control over the societal process for themselves. Hence, such expansive endeavours cannot be smoothly and easily realized, but always contain, on the one hand, the conflict between the subjective need to enhance the possibilities of determining the conditions of one's life and, on the other, the risk of clashing with given power relations which this entails. Though such power constellations primarily characterize the overall societal-political level, they also affect the most concrete situations of an individual's life. Even where one appears to be on one's own, one is subject to the curtailing, contradictions, experiences of competition, privatizing tendencies, etc. that are an inherent part of capitalist society in general.

In that case, the capacity to act can be striven for in two ways, depending on how I seek to resolve this contradiction between the subjective need to extend my influence on the condition of my life and the anticipated risk of thereby provoking further restrictions. Although in principle there is always the possibility to develop the capacity to act in trying to extend one's own influence over the conditions of one's life, there are many situations where it may seem more reasonable to content oneself with acting within given limits, i.e. to come to some arrangement with those in power to participate in, or at least to neutralize, its latent threats and so preserve some freedom of action in defined areas. This second option for accepting existing limits in complicity or arrangement (or however you wish to call it) with prevailing power relations in order to achieve a certain sphere of influence is what we call the "*restrictive*" alternative of agency.