

Discussion - Diskussion

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Does a Society for Gestalt Theory and Its Applications Still Fit in Our Time?*

Since I am a long-standing member of this society and have been quite an active one over a considerable time span, it might not come as a big surprise to you that I will answer this question in the affirmative. But let us see which arguments speak in favor and which against such a »yes«. First, let us see why the question stands.

There is a widespread belief in the academic world—above all in the United States and in the scientific communities around the world accepting U.S. mainstream science as their standard—that »schools« have lost their grounds and their legitimacy in psychology and other sciences.

»Schools of thought« are seen as hampering freedom of thought and research, progress in science would have a better chance when free of such affiliations, and »objectivity« in science is seen to be best granted by some sort of disinterested eclecticism.

If you agree with such a premise, it is clear that it would not make much sense to run an international scientific society like the GTA, which explicitly feels committed to such a »school«. I am not the first one to object to such a view, more meritorious people have done so before me.¹ So, let me refer to the arguments that have been put forward against such a belief. There are mainly two arguments:

The *first* argument is that what is called »disinterested eclecticism« is a school in itself and its claim of leaving all schools behind may well be seen as nothing other than the claim of hegemony and monopoly for this very own school.

The *second* argument is that schools do not only still exist, but that they continue to have legitimate reasons for their existence because their potential—when handled correctly—is capable of outweighing the problems that might be connected to them.

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¹ e.g.: Metzger, 1969, 1972, Kanizsa, 1971, Guss, 1977, Zanforlin, 2002.

1. The Concept of »School«

Before I discuss these two arguments, let me first say a few words about the concept of »school«. I shall use the term »school« here in the sense of *scientific system of thought*. Doing so, I follow the thoughts of Edna Heidbreder (1890–1985), who is not well known here in Europe, but in my opinion, she is one of the most outstanding women in US-American cognition and systematic psychology. Nearly 80 years ago—so you see how old this debate already is—Heidbreder said in her famous book »Seven Psychologies« (1933), in which she presented seven systems that were then prominent in the United States, such as Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis, and functionalism:

»Why does not psychology turn from its systems and devote itself to collecting the facts it so sorely needs? The answer to this question is the justification of systems: that without the systems few facts would be forthcoming. For scientific knowledge does not merely accumulate; it is far more likely to grow about hypotheses that put definite questions and which act as centers of organization in the quest of knowledge. As a matter of historical fact, science has not grown by following the method [Francis] Bacon described – that is, by the steady amassing of data and the emergence of generalizations More often than not, the insight precedes the systematic evidence; is tested rather than suggested by it; is, indeed, the occasion for the acquisition of the evidence«.²

Mary Henle, the doyenne of Gestalt psychology in the United States, has often made affirmative references to Heidbreder's definition of such a scientific system as an »attempt to survey the field of psychology from a definite point of view and to organize the facts from that standpoint«.³

2. Do Schools Still Exist?

An attempt to survey the field of science from a definite point of view and to organize the facts from that standpoint—this view is in full concordance with the standpoint from which Wolfgang Metzger four decades later, in 1972, in a lecture at Osaka University,⁴ tried to answer the question »Do schools of psychology still exist?«

In his analysis, Metzger used as an example orthodox behaviorism »built up of about a dozen principles conceived by the prominent representatives of the school as axioms or articles of faith« and demonstrated that these principles are still very influential in modern mainstream psychology, not explicitly so but implicitly,

² Heidbreder 1933, 15.

³ *ibid.*, 19; cf. Henle & Sullivan 1974.

⁴ Metzger (1972): Do Schools of Psychology Still Exist? Special lecture at the 36th Congress of the Japanese Psychological Association. Osaka University 1972, 1-20. [www: http://www.gestalttheory.net/archive/metz_school.html](http://www.gestalttheory.net/archive/metz_school.html)

underground, clad in new terms and notions. Metzger denied that these principles could claim to be axioms, that is, necessary presumptions of any psychology. He demonstrated that in fact, they were just hypotheses, which—in the given state of science—would have to permit the existence of other hypotheses—like those of the Gestalt theory—and eventually give way to them. This is a state of affairs where you have to acknowledge that opposite schools in psychology and more generally in science are not only *possible* but also *necessary* for the progress of science.

My time here does not allow me to present the key points of this essay by Metzger, but I highly recommend it to anyone who wants to approach the analysis of hidden meta-theoretical assumptions in modern concepts.

3. The Gestalt Psychology System

On another occasion, Wolfgang Metzger has named four parts of the Gestalt psychology system of thought⁵:

»Gestalt psychology consists of four parts, more or less sharply distinguishable, which can each be discussed separately«.

These four parts are as follows: Gestalt psychology as a methodology, Gestalt psychology as a phenomenology, Gestalt psychology as a theory of dynamics, and Gestalt psychology as a psychophysical approach.

The *methodological part* is that of »holistic observation«, partnered with experimental orientation: »Holistic observation means that one tries to see the situation in question in its embedding, in its environment, in its role and meaning in more comprehensive contexts ...«

The second is *phenomenology*, meaning the »wealth of knowledge backed up by a wealth of findings« of Gestalt phenomena in a wide array of fields, from perception to social life.

The third, dynamic part of Gestalt psychology, is the theory of *self-organization of living systems*.

The fourth part of Gestalt psychology is the *psychophysical approach*—including the working hypothesis of isomorphism.

Paul Tholey has pointed out that these four parts of the Gestalt theory system imply a further one, permeating all four, a specific epistemological position, the *critical realism* of Gestalt psychology.⁶

⁵ Grundbegriffe der Gestaltpsychologie (1954). In: Metzger (1986), *Gestalt-Psychologie. Ausgewählte Werke*, 132, my translation.

⁶ Tholey, 1980, in Tholey, 2018, 236f

Not all Gestalt psychologists did share this view in its entirety. Kurt Lewin thought that Gestalt psychology did not really need the psychophysical concepts to understand human behavior. Some decades later, several of our Italian friends, one of them Paolo Bozzi, took a similar stance for their field, the phenomenology of perception. I do have my doubts about this position, but it formulates an important question, particularly relevant today, given the discussion about the so-called four E's of cognition: Enactive, Embodied, Extended, and Embedded.

Talking About »Legacies«

Since we from the GTA refer to a long-standing tradition, let us talk a bit about the so-called »legacies« of the Gestalt theory.

In 1990, for example, Rock and Palmer published an article titled »The Legacy of Gestalt Psychology«. Also Gestalt psychologists, like Riccardo Luccio, used this expression, who published a special issue of *Humana Mente* under the same title in 2011.

Some Gestalt psychologists are not happy with this talk of legacies because they think it suggests that the Gestalt theory is dead and buried, while in fact, it is very much alive. Personally, I have no problem speaking about the legacy of Gestalt theory: it is a fact that Gestalt theory now has a history of more than 100 years, and that current Gestalt theorists are already the fourth and fifth generation in this tradition. Each of these generations has inherited from the previous development of the Gestalt theory, and also today's Gestalt theorists can and actually should draw on that rich heritage.

How to handle such an inheritance adequately is clearly shown by an anecdote told by Lukas Teuber about Wolfgang Köhler:

»The only thing I'm afraid of', Köhler sometimes said in meetings with his students, 'is that you want to be true Gestalt psychologists, I'm not really one myself.' He meant of course that he did not want dogma. Instead, he was concerned that others should make original and independent observations«.⁷

However, the legacy of the Gestalt theory is also a legacy of misinterpretations and refutations.

From its very beginnings, the Gestalt theory has attracted great interest, often accompanied by misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Fiorenza Toccafondi has written a highly commendable treatise on some of these misinterpretations

⁷ Teuber 1967, XI.

by eminent figures in science like Hanson and Kuhn, Piaget, Merleau-Ponty, Popper, and Gregory.⁸ Of course, some of these misrepresentations are annoying for a Gestalt theorist because they project a distorted image that prevents people from taking Gestalt theory seriously. But that is just one side. We can also see these misinterpretations as a helpful indication of where the previous formulations of the Gestalt theory are perhaps still unclear, ambiguous or self-contradictory.

However, there were not only *misinterpretations*; there was also an *empirical refutation* of important assumptions of the Gestalt theory. These have contributed much to the myth in some areas of science that the Gestalt theory is dead and buried.

I mention only two of these rebuttals here, which were particularly weighty in their time:

The first was the experimental refutation of Wolfgang Köhler's electrical field theory of brain functioning and its underlying postulate of isomorphism by the American neurophysiologists Lashley and Sperry in the 1950s.⁹ The second was the refutation of the Gestalt notion of holistic functioning of the brain by the discovery of the properties of single cells by Hubel and Wiesel in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰

Both of these experimental rebuttals were, at their time, really devastating judgments about important positions in the Gestalt theory. But today, 70 years later, at least parts of the professional community seem to assess these issues in a new and much more positive and still promising light, as new reviews on neurophysiological research suggest.¹¹

But why bother at all with such scientific legacies? There are two arguments:

The first one: Not to know your legacy means to be historically blind and this leads to a situation where the questions answered before are asked again; this has recently been the argument of Aaro Toomela from Tallinn University, and this has been the constant argument of Mary Henle before.

The second one: If Gestalt theoretical hypotheses prove to be heuristically fruitful as they constantly do in so many areas, they should be revisited for further insights they might still yield. This has recently been the argument of Morris Eagle and Jerome Wakefield.

⁸ Toccafondi 2002.

⁹ Lashley, Chow, & Semmes, 1951: An Examination of the Electric Field Theory of Cerebral Integration. Sperry & Miner, 1955: Pattern Perception Following Insertion of Mica Plates into the Visual Cortex.

¹⁰ Wiesel & Hubel, 1963: Single Cell Responses in Striate Cortex of Kittens Deprived of Vision in One Eye. Hubel & Wiesel, 1968: Receptive fields and functional architecture of monkey striate cortex.

¹¹ Cf. Spillmann, 2001, Ehrenstein, Spillmann & Sarris, 2003, and Jan Wagemans et al., 2012.

Toomela has analyzed the »new discoveries« claimed by a number of eminent US-American scholars in their autobiographies, concluding:

»Many of the 'major psychological developments of the past 50 years' turn out to be much less 'major' in the context of the pre-WWII continental European psychology, ... Many fundamental principles discovered by continental European psychologists were completely ignored by North American psychology of that time. If these principles had been acknowledged, the same 'new' and important discoveries would not seem so substantial. «...» Historical blindness must lead to a situation where the questions answered before are asked again ...«¹²

In 2007, US-American psychoanalyst Morris Eagle and psychiatrist Jerome Wakefield analyzed the relationship between the so-called mirror-neuron discovery and earlier ideas in Gestalt psychology. I can not discuss this topic here but just cite the two reasons they give why it makes sense for them to revisit the »old« theories. The first is »historical excavation can direct credit for prescience where it is due«, the second is »It can also reveal the surprising predictive power of earlier theories, even suggesting that they are revisited for the insights they might still yield«.¹³

4. On Possible Merits of »Schools«

Nowadays, we see science-driven and dominated widely by an international finance system of a few powerful oligopolies of science publishers, a system unknown before, and an enormous pressure on academia, increasingly dependent on this system; we have even predatory publishers, exploiting this situation (sometimes it is hard to distinguish between these predatory publishers and the Big Commerce publishers).

This system has also replaced older structures in academia which are related to our topic of scientific schools. We all know that the Gestalt theory of the Berlin school has ceased to exist in the institutionalized form of earlier times, when psychology institutes in Berlin, Frankfurt and other places in Germany, in Trieste, Padova, Bologna, and others in Italy were governed by Gestalt psychology in some sort of scientific monoculture. This system had its obvious drawbacks as we know, but let us hear a thought about it from a scholar acquainted both with the US-American system (now internationalized) and this earlier system at Italian universities:

¹² Toomela, 2010, 129.

¹³ Eagle & Wakefield, 2007, 59.

It is Ian Verstegen who in his article on Gestalt psychology in Italy pointed out that in this old system

»a degree of partisanship and patriarchy shielded these schools. While these ideas seem antithetical to scientific achievement to many Americans, it must be admitted that gestalt there permitted another kind of achievement, one that by being one-sided allowed for even greater results«. ¹⁴

I consider this thought really important. Incidentally, it coincides with the plea of the Gestalt psychologists of the first generation that *every* school, also those whose ideas and approach they did not share, such as behaviorism, necessarily should have the *chance* and the *duty* to formulate their approach to full maturity, to really think it through and to put it to test in every aspect.

Of course, such an approach demands time and continuity— both an all-too-rare currency today in many areas of academia. By contrast, what dominates today widely is a kind of »homo interruptus« forced to jump from one topic and one theory fragment to the next, never gaining firm ground anywhere. It is exactly for this reason that communities like the GTA are so important. Under today's modern conditions of international communication, such societies can, in the favorable case, provide a continuity that is no longer guaranteed in academia elsewhere. And it is in this way they can replace the old institutionalized schools to some extent.

Let me close with a final remark: In my opinion, all this is not only an abstract question of science but also one of man's deeper needs. Living as a »homo interruptus« violates the needs of man for a certain continuity and consistency in life and thinking, for a chance to work things through in a meaningful way, to bring things in life to a certain maturity and to share these activities and accomplishments with a community of like-minded people.

Thank you so much for your attention.

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¹⁴ Verstegen, 2000, 40; cf. also Zanforlin, 2004.

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