

Klaus Holzkamp's contribution to the unity of psychology¹

Wolfgang Maiers

How can there be *one* science about two absolutely different kinds of phenomena, which evidently require *two* different methods, *two* different explanatory principles, etc.? After all, the unity of a science is guaranteed by unity of the viewpoint on the subject. How then can we build a science with two viewpoints? Once again a contradiction in terms corresponds to a contradiction in principles.

(L. Vygotsky, 1927/1997, p. 284)

Abstract

Down to the present day, traditional psychology is lacking a coherent categorial-methodological definition of its subject matter. Common endeavours to overcome this critical state tend to continue in the traditional dichotomy of nature versus history and in the corresponding disjunction of epistemologies, thus perpetuating psychology's foundational crisis. Starting from this critical assessment, I hold the opinion that Klaus Holzkamp's works—from his early constructivist philosophy of science studies through to his elaboration of a critical-psychological science of the subject—were committed to a coherent—materialist-monistic— solution of this fundamental problem. In this connection, the integrative power of Holzkamp's focal category of “subjectively grounded action” is being scrutinised.

¹ Restatement of my eulogy in memoriam of Klaus Holzkamp on occasion of his passing November 01, 1995 (German orig. Maiers, 1995).

Keywords

constructivist epistemology; crisis of psychology; dualism in psychology; groundedness vs. conditionality; historical-empirical analysis; nomothetic variable-psychology; definition of psychological subject matter; subject-scientific psychology; unified science; unity of psychology.

The chosen topic may come as a surprise. First, with regard to Klaus Holzkamp's many-faceted oeuvre: On the one hand, he repeatedly felt compelled as a scientist to take a stand on political issues across the most diverse fields of societal praxis. On the other hand, his basic scientific research endeavour was centred on substantiating his own conception of a unique subject-scientific psychology, for which he had laid the foundation in his magnum opus of 1983, the *Grundlegung der Psychologie*. With his last monography (Holzkamp, 1993)—and in line with this—he provided a reformulation of human learning as an enhancement of the personal horizon of experience, action ability, and enjoyment of life [Erweiterung subjektiver Erfahrungs- und Lebensmöglichkeiten].² Lastly, he concerned himself with the problematic case and the (sociological) concept of conduct of everyday life (Holzkamp, 2013). In this context he, together with Ute Osterkamp, considered to revise the traditional psychological issue of personality, which he assumed to be distorted by personalising (i.e., naturalising) objectifications [Vereigenschaften] by both common sense and the mainstream-psychological preconception. Apart from his systematic preoccupation, Klaus Holzkamp always took time to study topics on the sidelines—if he did not get involved in them involuntarily, as in the case of the subject of pain.³ I am not sure whether Klaus would have found it appropriate to rate his various matters as more or less significant desiderata of subject-scientific theorising. (In the exemplary case mentioned, this might be in doubt not only since physical pain had taken possession of him.) What I am trying to say is this: During his lifetime, many

² Contrary to the theoretical elimination of the meaningful world and human agency in the mainstream-psychological discourse of conditionality, and the consequent misapprehension of learning as externally controlled behaviour, the author conceptualised human learning as some kind of subjectively grounded action. Due to its focus on the learners' intentionality, this approach omits accidental as well as unconscious modes of learning—their well-known omnipresence in our conduct of life notwithstanding. While Klaus assumed to rectify this omission on a later occasion, the theoretical integration of the practically intertwined intentional, incidental, and implicit learning processes has remained a desideratum of critical-psychological research to this day. (See on this issue Maiers, 2019.)

³ At an advanced stage of his cancer, he delved into Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain*, and was deeply impressed by her analysis of pain's inexpressibility (personal note).

unfinished topics occupied Klaus' research agenda, and his interest in them was hardly dictated by an abstract concern about the missing *unity of psychology*.

Second, the topic may irritate also in another respect: Unity of psychology—that sounds like a dogmatic regimentation of the scientific quest for knowledge, since it immediately awakens memories of the (failed) logical-positivistic program of a (physicalistic) *unified science* and of its detrimental hegemony in the (behavioural-) psychological mainstream.

More specifically: Does unity of psychology not represent a guiding idea of scientific critique that has ultimately become discredited at least since the *postmodern deconstruction of the grand narratives* with their obsession of a rational knowledge of totality, their universalistic projects of realising truth, freedom, progress, and so forth (Lyotard, 1993)? I cannot elaborate on this issue here, but it seems to me that many an articulation of the postmodern *zeitgeist* all too easily tend to reduce the episteme of modernity to its (late-) bourgeois expression in a positivistically degraded, de-historicised and hence affirmative rationality, and to incorrectly confound with it the counter-type of a radical social criticism and critique of knowledge that adequately reflect upon their own historical genesis and conditions of validity. Be that as it may: As a matter of fact, Klaus Holzkamp, by drawing on Marx' foundation of a political subject theory, was committed to the socio-critical, emancipatory perspective in the tradition of the Enlightenment claim of rationality—that is, to substantiate the possibility of a rational appropriation of nature and an active shaping of a humane society through scientific evidence. In this spirit, Klaus Holzkamp was no doubt a *modern scholar*.

Now, what way does the problem of a lack of unity appear within psychology? The fact of a “plurality of psychological studies” (Koch, 1969) would be hardly objectionable, did it not prove to be an undecidable coexistence and rather arbitrary succession of conceptually and methodologically incompatible research programs referring to one and the same objective domain. In this sense, complaints about a defective conceptual consistency in contemporary psychology accompanied by a considerable lack of practical relevance of its issues and findings have been legion. The underlying difficulty is commonly discerned in the historical failure of psychology to develop a distinctive conception of science and scientific nature. Its scientific imitation of the (natural) sciences is said to have led psychology to its theoretical denial of the subject (human agent) and of subjectivity (agency).

In this pattern of criticism, classical controversies in the philosophy of science about the proper position of the psychological form of cognition in relation to the mathematical-experimental analytics of hard science, on the one hand, and to the hermeneutics of the human sciences, on the other, are readily

recognisable. Take, for example, the debate on Dilthey's (1894) diametrical opposition of an *explanatory-constructive psychology* and a *descriptive and analytic psychology*, which understands the nexus of meanings in mental life; likewise Bühler's (1927) renowned diagnosis of a *crisis of psychology*.

If one takes seriously the mere fact and the particular contents of perennial discussions about the crisis in psychology (cf. Maiers, 1986; 1988; 1990), one cannot avoid the conclusion that they indicate the status of a *pre-paradigmatic science* (in the sense of Kuhn's initial view of 1962). Such a precarious situation would not characterise a problem that could be resolved on the basis of a formal logic of science. Rather, and in the last analysis, it signifies the unsettled issue of the *proper subject matter of psychology as a science sui generis*. Such an assessment of the situation has not found unreserved approval (cf. Herrmann, 1990). However, does this meta-dissent for its part not confirm the very diagnosis of a crisis?

How does Klaus Holzkamp's work correspond with the delineated problematic situation? According to his opinion, the constructive solution of the foundational problem has been inescapably blocked by critical counter-projects that indiscriminately suspect any attempt at a monistic categorial-methodological definition of subject-matter of a relapse into scientism and hence into a naturalistic misconstruction of the societal-historical constitution of subjectivity. As a consequence, these alternatives remain locked in the traditional dichotomy of nature versus history and the correspondent epistemological framework of disjunctive forms of knowledge.

It is radically unjustified to retain, side by side, *two* psychological methodologies relating to *one and the same object*. Instead, there can exist *only one psychological methodology* as procedural aspect of the *conceptual analysis [Kategorialanalyse] of the psychological subject matter*. Within this methodology, which is committed to *one* claim of truth, methodical differentiations derive from different issues/objective aspects. Hence, if a new level of psychological object appropriateness is actually accomplished by the subject-scientific conceptualisation, one will next have to *put the entire psychology on a new methodological basis in the name of scientific reliability*. (Holzkamp, 1985, 60; my emphasis—emphases in the original partly removed)

This is by no means an ephemeral statement—quite the contrary: It epitomises the motif pervading Klaus' critique of the self-understanding of academic psychology, namely his intention to establish a scientific rationale for determining the psychological subject matter. Even when he changed over to Marxist positions in the course of the 1968 student movement, the concomitant

epistemological break in his work did not interfere at all with the continuity of this ambition.

Thus, his early *constructivist* studies had been a reaction to the deficiency of psychology in ascertaining the representativeness between empirical definitions and theoretical statements and to assess the epistemic value of the latter. Taking this flaw as a starting point, Holzkamp's analyses amounted to an attempt at overcoming the underlying flaws of empiricism through a new theory of science. Following non-empiricist philosophers of science, among them—and most notably—Hugo Dingler, his conception countered the sensualistic principle of an unequivocal empirical determinacy [Erfahrungsdeterminiertheit] of both the construction of scientific theory and the justification of its validity by the argument that science needs to be understood as an *active doing*—a particular manner of human productivity. Not just scientific theory, but in a certain manner also the empirical domain of science [wissenschaftliche Empirie] are generated by human action to a greater degree than commonly assumed (Holzkamp, 1967, p. 7).

It would certainly be undue to reinterpret in retrospect Klaus Holzkamp's initial constructivist epistemology in terms of the *dialectical-materialistic theory of reflection*, which he later adopted, since his earlier conception hypostatized the acting researcher as an abstract-isolated subject of cognition vis-à-vis an indeterminate reality, which by itself was conceived as a mere substrate for the practical implementation [Realisation] of subjective theoretical constructions.

By that time he had not yet reached the (self-) critical insight (cf. 1972, pp. 274ff.), that constructivism and the positivist logic of science alike miss the historical possibility conditions of human cognition, since both are equally abstract ahistorical explications of scientific methodology from an allegedly distanced standpoint [Standort außerhalb]. Hence it escaped him, that in order to overcome the aforementioned problems, one needs to determine the essential dimensions of reality that lie beyond the traditional-psychological system of individuo-centred variables—namely, to reconstruct, in an independent systematic approach, the natural- and societal-historically evolved human-world relationship, that precedes and informs any acts of (scientific) cognition. By implication, Holzkamp's positive definition of the psychological subject matter and of appropriate methods of apprehension clung to the traditional view in that it primarily addressed the *behaviour of the other ones* in their environment from a *third person* external perspective, leaving room only for *supplementary* modalities of the subject matter. Thus, the occasionally expressed realisation of the uncircumventable reflexivity of acting and the intersubjective interconnection of perspectives that underlie human communication and need to be acknowledged in scientific epistemology got bogged down halfway. His critique

of the inability of behaviourism to apply its own object theory to itself (Holzkamp, 1964, pp. 61-68) may serve as an example of such inconsistency.

And yet, Holzkamp's action theoretical view of the constitutive feature of science, connecting all its heterogeneous forms: viz., *cognition as a practical act*, provided a novel intellectual approach, capable of becoming productive in an alternative understanding of psychological science once this view became historicised.

As the elaboration of Critical Psychology as a particular approach of action research advanced, human action (and the development of agency) took centre stage in the endeavour of theoretical-methodological integration also with regard to the object-side of the epistemic subject-object relationship—now, however, fully aware of the overarching context of societal practice, which frames both everyday and scientific practice and to which the psychological understanding of the grounds and backgrounds of individual acting must be imparted again, if psychology is ever to attain practical relevance. This would imply that the level of intersubjective understanding inherent in lifeworld-social practice be sublated in the research settings of psychology—contrary to the doubts from traditional philosophy of science quarters on whether “the human active-reflexive subjectivity needs to be assumed as a background for one's psychological acting” (Herrmann, 1990, p. 30). This new conception had been preceded by epistemological and methodological studies in the years of upheaval 1967-71, during which Klaus (cf. Holzkamp, 1972) was getting things straight concerning the interdependence between the interest relatedness, the substance and epistemic value of knowledge, and the societal practical relevance of scientific research. Based upon a materialist ideology critique, traditional psychology with its dominant thought forms of privacy of individual existence in a natural environment was characterised as a *bourgeois science*. Unveiling its ideological bias entailed the conclusion that one could escape from this limited rationality only by a critical revision of the present psychological concepts, based on a “comprehending thinking” [begreifendes Denken] (Marx, 1857/1983), which transcends the pseudo-naturalness of the historical forms of alienated societal praxis (cf. Haug, 1977).

The question arose what perception, thinking, feeling, motivation, etc. may possibly mean, if understood as functional aspects of a historically produced subjectivity—a subjectivity hallmarked by its formation-specific contradictoriness of a (painful) subjection of human individuals to (restrictive) societal conditions, on the one hand, and their basic power to actively shape those circumstances, on the other? Such a “turn from a critique of bourgeois psychology to a critical psychology” (Holzkamp, 1972, p. 288), however, could not be realised without devising a procedure for concept formation as such.

Marx' logical-historical method, carried out in his *Capital* (1867/1990), offered an apt paradigm for this task—waiting to be methodically concretised for the particular historical-empirical domain of the psychological subject matter.

As is widely known, the critical-psychological *categorical definitions* [Kategorialbestimmungen], as presented since 1973, are geared towards a differentiated substantial concept of human subjectivity by use of a historical reconstruction of the connection between individual life activity and societal sustainment of life—with the inclusion of the natural history of the psychical in general (psychophylogenesis) and the evolution of the human species (anthropogenesis) in particular. In this reconstruction, the entity of *subjective grounds for action* appeared as a central mediational level: Human action is not determined (causally conditioned) by the circumstances of life, since societal meaning structures represent opportunities for action. From an individual's standpoint, actions are grounded in the circumstances as objective premises of acting in accordance with respective subjective life interests. The performance of human life activity in its specificity includes the discursive medium of giving reasons for one's acting that are *first person singular* and negotiable only from respectively my [je mein] point of view. By implication, this *standpoint of the subject* needs to be asserted as the vantage point of scientific cognition. In other words, (human) psychology must follow the pertinent *discourse of groundedness* both in its theoretical language and, practically, in its actual-empirical research [aktualempirische Forschung]. The topic of the latter is the (inter-) subjective experience of action necessities, possibilities, and restrictions, and the persons concerned, being the subjects of such experience, can in principle only appear as active *co-researchers*, not as passive objects of investigations.

If we concretise the problem of unity in psychology as the issue of the objective entity of the research and theory construction process, Klaus Holzkamp's solution lies in his focus on *subjectively grounded action as analytical unit and unifying key category*. Does, however, this angle not evoke the risk of neglecting classes of phenomena that unquestionably belong to the body of psychological topics, so that one would lapse back anew into a duplication of psychology: a *psychology of groundedness* conformable to the meaningfulness of human acting on the one hand, and a *psychology of conditionality* describing acting from a distanced observer's perspective as a causally determined occurrence? Not at all.

A properly understood concept of grounded action cannot be bound to criteria of a fully aware goal intention and pursuit, but articulates restrictive forms of coping with life, including conflicts, ambivalences, (self-imposed) denials of interests, and such. Only when it incorporates the dynamic interdependency between the volitional and conscious elements of activity and its

unintentional, unconscious aspects, as well as efficient causalities and befalling events not under one's own control, is such a concept psychologically viable. Understood in this way, the (tentative) explication of acting not just permits one to define, within the scope of action teleonomy, possible shortfalls of intentionality and objective causal effects. Taking this higher level of specificity as the point of departure also allows one to specify the interface with the legitimate domain of the non-intentional, behavioural theoretical descriptive pattern, which relates to an elementary determination level of natural lawful functioning (e.g., psycho-physiological regulation mechanisms). I cannot see how a comprehensive theory framework, admitting of a consistent, non-reductionist mediation between the different levels of specificity of acting, could be possibly established from within the unspecific discourse of conditionality. By contrast, the category of grounded action enables one to achieve theoretical unity for the core area of human psychology and, beyond that, to specify the respective applicability of the intentional and non-intentional theory languages. It constitutes therefore the more powerful category—also with regard to the quest for a monistic synthesis (cf. Maiers, 1996; 2019).

The true reason for the methodological dualism in psychology have been *solipsism* and *indeterminism* in the conceptualisation of the psychical. Both invariably provoke, in the name of scientific objectivity, a turnaround to the opposite standpoint of an *other-directedness* of acting, leading to a reification of subjectivity. Holzkamp counters this antinomy with a—decidedly *transdisciplinary*—program of a historical-empirical analysis of the development of the psychical as a subject-bound active reflection of the objective reality. This reconstruction, ranging from psychogenesis through to the reflective world- and self-experience of societally situated human agents, pulls the carpet out from under the idealistic sublimation of the immediate subjective givenness of conscious phenomena to a mere inwardness, separated from the practical mediatedness between the corporeal subjects and their outside world. As a result, the schismatic position is overcome which prompts the objectivistic disavowal of subjective relations of meaningfulness [Sinnbezüge] as an allegedly methodically inaccessible object of scientific knowledge, and at the same time tacitly informs those subject-psychological antitheses that consider the subjective as amenable to a scientific analysis only at the expense of standards of scientific objectivisation.

Consequently, one has to repudiate compromises that may concede a heuristic function to the standpoint of the subject as an epistemological standpoint prior to nomological explanation. Such compromise proposals leave the (causal) explanation and generalisation of theoretical laws to the traditional nomothetic variable-psychology (which has claimed either achievement exclusively for itself) instead of reconceptualising them in a new subject-

scientific perspective. Holzkamp's (1985, esp. pp. 58ff.) critique of the interpretive approach to psychoanalysis and its radicalisation towards a hermeneutical reflective science is quite instructive in this context. He takes this as an example of the self-contradictoriness of attempts to claim an epistemological special status as against academic psychology, which as such is left unchanged: as a factual, observational, nomological science [Fakten-, Beobachtungs- und Gesetzeswissenschaft].

Contesting the central notion of distinct psychologies thus does not mean at all to hypostatise a new universal methodology opposed to the positivistic unitary science. The assertion of a unity of the psychological science needs to be substantiated by developing a methodology in accordance with the categorially revealed nature of the object of knowledge. In the context of such an integrative methodology, methodical specialisations—not disjunctions!—are accounted for by different aspects of the subject matter and of different research concerns.

To cite once again:

Hence, if a new level of psychological object appropriateness is actually accomplished by the subject-scientific conceptualisation, one will next have to *put the entire psychology on a new methodological basis in the name of scientific reliability*. (Holzkamp, 1985, 60; emphasis in the original)

Klaus Holzkamp was taking up nothing less than this demanding challenge.

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Wolfgang Maiers (* 1950) is a Professor emeritus of General Psychology at the Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences. He is also a Supernumerary Professor (apl. Professor) of Psychology at the Free University of Berlin, where he obtained his diploma degree (1974), doctorate (1979), and post-doctoral qualification (habilitation, 1990).

The focus of his theoretically-driven research is on philosophy, history of science, theoretical psychology, subject-scientific action theory and psychology of learning. His writings in these fields have appeared in various journals and books. Publications in English include *Critical Psychology. Contributions to an Historical Science of the Subject* (Cambridge University Press 1991, with Charles Tolman). He was one of the initiators and editors of the journal *Forum Kritische Psychologie*, and is currently co-editor of Klaus Holzkamp's collected works (*Klaus Holzkamp Schriften*, Hamburg: Argument). As a founding member of the *International Society of Theoretical Psychology*, he has acted over a number of years as an executive board member and as Chairman Europe of ISTP. He is the chief editor of the ISTP Berlin conference proceedings (Maiers et al., 1999, *Challenges to Theoretical Psychology*. North York, Canada: Captus Press).