

Köhler Centennial on Tenerife

Report on the XXVIII Conference of the Sociedad Española de la Historia de Psicología in Puerto de la Cruz, Tenerife, May 7th to 9th 2015.

Surely, 100 years ago Wolfgang Köhler would have been happy to be at home in Berlin in times of peace and order. While now in 2015 celebrating Köhler's striking experiments on anthropoid intelligence on the Canary island of Tenerife, we should not forget that times in 1915 were darkened by a World War which had affected the relationship between neutral Spain and continental Europe to some extent and cut off Köhler's way back to Germany, resulting in five long years of waiting and insecurity. All that, of course, could not have been foreseen when Köhler started his scientific adventure, leaving the well-organized realm of imperial Germany for an unexpected chance to take over and care for the anthropoid station of the Prussian Academy of Sciences on Tenerife in 1913. With his young family he went on an exhausting two-week boat trip in December, and Christmas saw him arrive under the warm sun of Africa. Over the course of the following weeks and months Köhler performed and documented most of his famous experiments of problem solving and started to write some remarkable reports to be published in academic journals. Köhler soon turned out to be an inventive director of field experiments and his research on "insight" in complex fields became outstanding proof of the effect of Gestalten in acting and learning. His exemplary research laid the groundwork for an appointment as head of the psychological institute of the Humboldt University in 1922, which was arranged soon after his arrival in post-war Germany.

For Spanish historians of psychology, the centennial of Köhler's path-breaking experiments was reason enough to devote their annual meeting to the starting point of Gestalt theory in Spain and to the worldwide success of Köhler's research project in psychology of the early 20th century. The opening lecture of Manuel Mas from the local university of La Laguna traced research on anthropoids back to Darwin's evolutionary program, conceptualizing human conduct as a development (and complication!) of animal behavior. From a Darwinian point of view, animal behavior is not only a prelude to human behavior, it shows a basic semantics of conduct, which here under simple conditions can be observed in his

GESTALT THEORY

© 2015 (ISSN 0170-057 X)

Vol. 37, No.2, 207-210

emergence (a point of view which Köhler explicitly referred to in his “Studies on Animal Intelligence” in 1917, translated into English in 1925).

Gabriel Ruiz from the University of Sevilla gave an outline of two national styles of experimental investigation, embodied in the American psychologist Edward Thorndike and the German scientist Wolfgang Köhler, relating them to two epistemological programs which both continued Darwin’s point of view. Thorndike followed the mechanical principles of nature which directly led to mechanical experiments. Köhler, on the other hand, followed the developmental point of view, showing the visible organization of action fields as a basic condition for an accurate way of problem solving.

Juan Carlos Gómez, a well-known primatologist, translator of Köhler’s studies into Spanish and today Professor of Psychology and Neurosciences at St Andrews University in Scotland, gave a profound overview of Köhler’s experiments and showed how Gestalt theoretical ideas emerged in Köhler’s work and language over time. Translation therefore was not easy, as Köhler gradually shifted from a descriptive to a more categorical meaning of terms like “insight”. For the audience it was amazing to see Köhler’s film sequences of 1914 once again compared with follow-up studies (and movies) of later decades, e.g. Epstein’s experiments on pigeon behavior in the 1980s.

As regards early film documentaries, Noemí Pizarroso from Madrid University widened the perspective towards the reception of insight experiments in France by Ignace Meyersson and Paul Guillaume, pioneers of psychological experiments on animals who were inspired by both Köhler’s theory of dynamic fields and Piaget’s idea of cognitive schemes of behavior. Guillaume’s work reflected Köhler’s studies which he translated into French in the late 1920s, as well as Piaget’s ideas on intelligence which formed the leading paradigm in cognitive psychology in France. In her illuminating contribution, Pizarroso showed that Piaget knew and acknowledged the Gestalt theoretical point of view, but laid the focus on the development of cognitive patterns.

The chairman of historic research in psychology in Spain, José María Gondra Rezola from Donostia (San Sebastian), gave an excellent course in the theoretical focus of Köhler’s studies, exhibiting his core motifs and outputs in working with animals on the basis of Gestalt theory: from a Gestalt theoretical point of view the conduct of animals as well as of human beings is not directed by associative mechanisms but by the “requiredness” of the field. Psychological laws therefore are not to be modeled in terms of natural sciences, but in terms of meaning and intentions. As a consequence the perspective of “forces” in a psychological field must be conceptualized in a psychological sense of “values” emerging and concurring in a sphere of rationality and ethics.



Participants and members of the Sociedad Española de la Historia de Psicología SEHP at the XXVIII Conference in Puerto de la Cruz, Tenerife, May 7th to 9th 2015. 2nd from left Herbert Fitzek, official GTA-delegate to the conference, 5th from left José María Gondra Rezola, president of the SEHP. The group is backed by Köhler's eyes, looking from the conference poster.

Not only the contributions to the symposium, but also some of the lessons held in the congress hall of Hotel Puerto de la Cruz in Tenerife related to the predecessors, contemporaries and followers of Köhler's work in Spain and Europe. The philosophical and psychological background of Köhler's concepts remained on the sidelines of the discussion – perhaps because most of the representatives of Gestalt theory were hindered from joining the conference because of the coincidence of the Gestalt theoretical conference in Parma which was also timed for May 2015. Nevertheless, the interests of contemporary Gestalt theory, manifest in an address of the GTA board to our Spanish colleagues, was answered with sympathy and respect (and actually a long and extended applause) from the audience and the organizers of the meeting. I hope the contact between Gestalt theorists and historians, now initiated, will generate some common efforts of interest and of research. Furthermore, all of us may engage ourselves in the maintaining and restoration of the “Casa Amarilla”, Köhler's house on the research station which can still be visited in Puerto de la Cruz, but – because of the owners' resistance – continues to decline. Melchor Hernández, secretary of the local “Asociación Wolfgang Köhler”, and Justo Hernández from La Laguna University are in charge of a memorandum in favor of restoring the house as a monument of the history of psychology and an early culmination point of Gestalt thinking in the 20th century.

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