

# Holzkamp's Critical Psychology as a Science from the Standpoint of the Human Subject

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**ABSTRACT.** An introduction is given to Klaus Holzkamp's notion of Critical Psychology as a science from the standpoint of the subject. A brief history of the idea is presented with a summary of its theoretical and methodological context. The crux of the matter is that the object of psychological science is no mere object but also a subject that acts on reasons and makes choices among real possibilities for action. This puts the psychologist and the subject on an equal footing that turns research into a cooperative enterprise intended to enhance the understandings of both.

**KEY WORDS:** agency, Critical Psychology, reasons, subjectivity

Klaus Holzkamp (1927–1995), whose work is celebrated in this issue, thought of the end product of his labors as *Subjektwissenschaft*, that is, subject science. Indeed, if there is any single notion that summarizes his work and embraces all its other aspects, it is that of a scientific psychology from the standpoint of the subject. I wish briefly to explain here what that means.

Behaviorism appeared to many in the 20th century—and with some justification—to be the perfect scientific psychology. It was objective. Its laws claimed to be universal, even across species. It was quantitative and experimental. It generated some rather elegant theories. And there was no phenomenon such as would count as psychological that lay beyond its grasp.

Yet a recognition grew throughout the century that something was missing. Generally speaking, this was identified as the subjective side of experience. For some, psychoanalysis appeared to hold the answer, but the behaviorists were quick to show that there was nothing that psychoanalysis dealt with in its theories that could not be translated into the language of stimulus, response,

and reinforcement. Anything left over appeared to lie outside the boundaries of science. The allusive subjectivity was, in short, considered epiphenomenal.

Humanistic psychology, phenomenological psychology, hermeneutic psychology, qualitative psychology, cognitive psychology, and many more oppositional positions persisted, however, in asserting the need to take subjectivity seriously. But owing largely to the fact that this assertion was seldom if ever accompanied by a convincing critique of behaviorism, the end result was invariably some kind of dualism with the opposition laying claim to a special territory separate from that of behaviorism. This of course left behaviorism intact and created the impression that one had a choice of one or the other. And since the assertion of subjectivity as subject matter neglected a thorough critique of behaviorism, the relationship between its method of statistical analysis of variables and its substance often went unrecognized or ignored. One consequence of this has been that the opponents of behaviorism, often lacking methods of their own, adopted its methods, thus recreating it as a kind of translation into the language of subjectivity.

What was needed was a thorough critique of psychology that attempted to identify the specific nature of the subject and then to identify methods that reflect that nature. Moreover, a dualist solution was really no solution at all. The only way to avoid this is to attempt to derive the subject historically and developmentally. This is what Klaus Holzkamp undertook to do, and in the eyes of many he succeeded.

### **A Little History**

The origins of German Critical Psychology are found in the student protest movements of the 1960s. There were many catalysts that precipitated the collective actions of a highly politicized post-war generation. These included restrictions on free speech by governments and university officials. For many there was a lack of relevance of the material taught at universities. Moreover, the irrelevance appeared to stem from the universities' authoritarian approach to the curriculum. In the end, however, the complaint that had by far the greatest impact on subsequent developments concerned the ideological nature of the subject matter, particularly in philosophy and the social sciences. Concerns of this sort led to two debates that were particularly crucial to the later development of Critical Psychology in Germany.

The first debate took place in 1967 and had to do with the relevance of psychological or any other kind of scientific knowledge. The traditional view, one defended by the "liberal" wing of the Psychology Institute at the Free University of Berlin, was that knowledge was essentially neutral and that its relevance was created in the link between that knowledge and its application or use. The link was thought to be the individual psychologist or scientist. It was, in short, a matter of individual conscience as to how knowledge was used outside the academy.

The “left” wing of the Institute argued in opposition to this view. They maintained that all knowledge and practice originated in and were carried out under one interest or another. Moreover, there was a seamless web of relations in which philosophy, science, ideology, and society were necessarily interconnected. The universities, their priorities, and the knowledge they produced and propagated were all currently serving the interests of those with the power to influence them. And that power was not in the hands of students or workers but in those of the state and the capitalists it served. One of the student participants, Irmingard Staeuble, provided a list of psychology’s involvement with ruling interests. There was research directed at improving the effectiveness of the military and psychological warfare, all in the service of imperialism; there was research in marketing and advertising, all in the service of the capitalist economy; work on communications and opinion sampling served bourgeois ideology; work on personnel selection, industrial psychology, and occupational counseling was concerned only with efficiency of capitalist production; and all sorts of counseling and psychotherapy were contributing to conformity. This list could easily be expanded (Staeuble, 1968). For example, the theoretical reduction of learning and performance to deprivation states and reinforcement revealed little about the learners but did serve to justify wage slavery in the workplace. In short, psychology was necessarily partial, and this partiality needed to be made the focus of attention.

Klaus Holzkamp, a professor of social psychology at the Psychological Institute of the Free University of Berlin, widely renowned for his work in psychological theory and methodology (1964, 1968), entered the discussion with a paper elaborating on the relevance of scientific knowledge for societal practice (1970). Among other things, he emphasized the distinction between technical and emancipatory relevance. All knowledge was relevant; it was really a matter of the parties to whom it was relevant. Behavioral psychology had proved highly relevant to those whose interest it was to control others. It offered little, however, to those who were being controlled. It would be possible, Holzkamp claimed, to develop knowledge that would serve the interests of individuals in their efforts to improve the quality of their lives.

The second debate was initiated by a group of students who intervened in a meeting of the German Society for Psychology in Tübingen in September 1968. The students challenged the presumed political neutrality of the usual contributions to such meetings. How, for instance, they asked, could psychologists sit around talking about the technical details of a personality inventory while ignoring the political misuses to which such inventories were being put? The students insisted that it was just these misuses that needed to be discussed. The result of the intervention was not to resolve any of the related issues at this meeting; rather, it was resolved to organize a meeting in Hanover in May the following year where precisely these issues would be examined.

Most of the attending students came from Berlin. There was a group from the Free University (FU) and one from the Technical University (TU). The thrust of the arguments put forward by the TU delegates was that psychology

was inherently in the service of the ruling ideology, which all present agreed was oppressive. There could therefore be no such thing as a critical or oppositional psychology. Psychology itself must be opposed, not only in the universities but in all areas of practice. It was suggested, for example, that copies of intelligence and other tests used for selection be given wide public distribution so as to undermine their use in schools and industry.

Countering this argument, the FU delegates maintained that the problem was not with psychology as science in principle, but with the powers that, as a discipline, it blindly served. They granted that the prevailing psychology was shaped by and in thrall to an oppressive and exploitive ideology, but just as a psychology had been formed to serve oppressive interests, a genuinely critical psychology could be developed to serve more broadly human, emancipatory interests. At the very least it should be possible for such a psychology to clarify just what constitutes a liberated existence and to identify the psychological processes that mediate domination.

Over the next few years a group, mainly from the FU Berlin and led by Holzkamp, undertook to lay the groundwork for a genuinely critical and emancipatory psychology. This involved a thorough critique of existing mainstream psychologies in order to identify their deficiencies from an emancipatory standpoint. It was immediately clear that a psychology serving the interests of ordinary people would have to be based on a sound theoretical understanding of the relation of individuals to society. Such an understanding appeared to be totally lacking in established psychologies. Moreover, a critical psychology would have to be clear on what it meant to be a specifically human subject.

The established psychologies of the time had, in their attempt to achieve the status of science, set generality as a goal, and they had attained it in the form of theories, such as the theory of reinforcement, that appeared to apply to all organisms, regardless of where they stood on the phylogenetic scale. But this had the consequence of obscuring the specifically human character of their subject matter. Generality would still have to be a goal, but a distinction would have to be made between the abstract kind that eliminated specifics and the concrete kind that preserved and explained them.

## **Reconstruction**

Only a method that was developmental and historical could achieve the concrete generality required of a critical psychology. Categories and concepts would necessarily remain indeterminate unless they could be conclusively deduced or derived from more certain categories. As long, for example, as concepts were operationally defined, the psychologist would only be able to pick and choose according to the particular demands of the moment. For instance, behaviorists insisted that motivation could be conceived as drives and incentives, while others spoke of cognitive dissonance, and still others

appealed to purposes. Such definitions obviously have something in common, but in the end it will be impossible to reconcile them because they are not based on any shared understanding of just what motivation is, and this can only be deduced from a study of other life processes.

Marx's *Capital*, which was based on the logic of Hegel, provided the clue to the kind of analysis that was needed. It was, however, not simply a matter of replacing political-economic categories and concepts with psychological ones. A fresh analysis on the basis of biological evolution and cultural history would have to be undertaken; fortunately Marx had shown how it might be done and he had provided a valuable account of the societal formations in which the human subject had developed. In fact, the extension of this kind of analysis to human psychology had already been given a substantial start by A.N. Leont'ev (1959/1975). The focus of such an analysis would be specifically human subjectivity.

Leont'ev's work on categorial reconstruction was carried further by Klaus Holzkamp and Volker Schurig, and was eventually published in four books (Holzkamp, 1973; Schurig, 1975a, 1975b, 1976), with the full theoretical implications appearing in a fifth book, the monumental *Grundlegung der Psychologie* (Holzkamp, 1983). An important extension of this work was undertaken by Ute Osterkamp, focusing on emotion and motivation (Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1975, 1976). The overall result is more complex than can be fairly treated here (see Tolman, 1994). Suffice it to say that an evolutionary history of psychological categories was elaborated, beginning with irritability and running through sensibility, orientation, meaning, emotionality, communication, motivation, and learning (to name a few of the essential categories), to the characteristics of the fully developed human psyche.

The evolutionary analysis revealed that the human subject had arrived on the scene in two stages. The first of these was associated with the systematic manufacture and use of tools. Doubtless for a very long time early hominids made and used tools to mediate their relations to objects in the world around them, much as many animals, especially primates, still do. The significant change came, however, when our ancestors began to keep their tools for future use and to make them in the absence of their intended object. This had enormous implications for cognition. The tool maker had to be able to represent the object to him- or herself and prepare the tool according to that representation. This was the beginning of the ability to think things through independent of the circumstances themselves. The tool can be said to have become an end in itself, rather than just a means linked directly to an immediate end. This inversion of means and ends in tool making and using also had significant implications for social relations. It meant that the maker and user of the tool no longer needed to be the same person. Thus not only the intended object of the tool's use had to be mentally represented to the tool maker, his or her relations to others had also to be represented. This also meant a need to communicate, so the representations of the tool and its object took forms

that could be passed back and forth among participants, that is, they assumed the form of words and language, verbal now rather than gestural because the hands were occupied by the tool itself.

Under this analysis all the emerging traits that are distinctively human can be identified: conscious social organization, division of labor, meaning, language, intention, and thought; all of which have their precursors in animal species but are clearly and qualitatively more highly developed among human beings.

The second major step was when this new societal mode of existence came to dominate the biological. The individual could no longer live outside society, and human biology itself became an object of intentional action. As a consequence, the governing process is no longer that of evolution but of history. The individual's relation to the world is now predominantly mediated by societal meaning structures, including not only those related to physical objects but also traditions, beliefs, attitudes, and so on. Our relation to the world is no longer natural. Even something as apparently natural as a tree is now confronted as an object with a name that carries with it an understanding of its taxonomy, history, function, value to us, and so forth. This condition of being mediated by meaning is all the more obvious with objects like hammers, airplanes, houses, and computers. There is simply no aspect of our world that is not mediated for us by societally constructed meanings. Moreover, our actions with respect to these aspects are also mediated. A person would not know what to do with a computer unless he or she commanded the relevant meanings. Moreover, these meanings must be appropriated by the person from social practices; indeed, he or she commands them only as a participant in such practice. Our individuality, in short, is attained only in society; it is not something that is set off against society. All the things we are able to do are made possible by our individual relations to the societal structures of which we are parts. But the intervention of meaning also changes the very nature of the individual's relation to the objects of the world; individual action, being now mediated by societal meanings, becomes related to its object as a *possibility*. That is, objects no longer evoke responses but offer *possibilities for action*. This is of course what we commonly mean by "free will": every action implies a choice to act, depending on the possibilities offered. This essentially human characteristic is totally obscured by most traditional psychology, but especially by behaviorism and brain-based forms of cognitivism.

The subject, then, is an actor with certain powers made possible by his or her position in society. The "problem" of subjectivity can thus be seen as hinging on that position. Whether or not a person can utilize the possibilities offered by an object or situation will depend on his or her power to do so. Holzkamp called this power *Handlungsfähigkeit*, which has been rendered as "action potency," but is more understandably translated as "agency."

Agency is first concerned with the fulfillment of needs: we must feed ourselves, clothe ourselves, and house ourselves. These are some of the possibilities created by the society of which we are a part. What particular possibilities exist

for each of us depend on the stage of historical development of our particular society. It is obvious that we have possibilities for need fulfillment and personal development now that never existed before. The basic needs of our ancestors were met in very different ways than our needs are for us today. But as individuals we do not all have equal access to the possibilities created by the current stage of historical development. This brings us back to the problem of "position." In the current global economy the issue of position is more obvious than it has ever been. We are capable of producing a global surplus in food supply, yet there are many who have only the most restricted possibilities of satisfying their hunger, and indeed an embarrassingly great many are literally starving to death.

The position thus arrived at by Critical Psychology's reconstruction of its understanding of the human subject is decidedly non-causal, not because of metaphysical opposition to determinism or an extra-scientific concern to champion free will, but because it is precisely this more malleable connection between the human subject and its world that is revealed in the analysis of evolution, history, and culture. To the human subject the world presents not determinants but possibilities. The subject is free to relate to the world. Meaning and language create an "epistemic distance" between the subject and the world that makes this possible. This, in turn, is the product of a societal existence that is qualitatively distinct from the social existence of any other animal. Societies have history; social groups, in any strict sense of the word, do not. The actions of subjects are thus said to be grounded in the premises for action made available by their particular societal-historical contexts. Grounds for action are therefore ultimately objective, but more immediately they are always subjective. The choice of action from among possible actions is guided by what Holzkamp regarded as the sole material *a priori* and fundamental axiom of human intersubjectivity, namely, that no one acts contrary to his or her own interests as he or she understands them. We are always guided by what we imagine will contribute most to the subjective quality of our lives. In the end, then, though it may not always be clear to acting subjects, there is no contradiction between the individual and common interests. Our capacity for what is specifically human arises out of the common societal life, and its ultimate "good" is necessarily also found there.

### **The Standpoint of the Subject**

This conception of the human subject contrasts starkly with the "subject" of traditional psychological research. The latter is really an object that is presumably understood, like other objects, in terms of the factors that determine it. But the subject of Critical Psychology makes real choices from among possibilities; its action is subjectively as well as objectively grounded. The causal methodology of traditional scientific psychology not only cannot comprehend this; it serves in fact to obscure it. The standpoint of the subject demands a new methodology.

Does this mean that Critical Psychology advocates a dualism of theory and method, of “hard” and “soft” versions of psychology in which analytical, quantitative, statistical analysis of variables characterize the former and qualitative, clinical, interpretive methods characterize the latter? Holzkamp’s answer to that was an emphatic no, especially if it is understood to mean that we somehow have a choice as to which method to apply when we are focused on the human subject. It should be noted in this connection that traditional psychology, while tolerating soft approaches to its subject matter, has generally taken the view that there is no phenomenon of human subjectivity that cannot yield to analytical, quantitative methods. Holzkamp (1986) examined this claim in an article about “mistaking reasons for empirical (if–then) connections” (p. 216). He examined numerous examples from the research literature in social psychology and applied two tests. First, he framed the research hypothesis as an if–then statement and then inserted the phrase “it is reasonable” between the if-component and the then-component to ascertain whether the hypothesis was a contingent causal connection or rather an implicitly defined reasoned action taken against a particular pattern of premises. The second test was to insert a “not” into the then-component as a “counter-test.” The idea here was that if the hypothesis was really an empirical one, its negation should be just as possible as its affirmation.

To begin to see how these tests work, we can apply them to a clearly causal connection. For example, if your patellar tendon is tapped, your knee will jerk. The first test yields: “if your patellar tendon is tapped, it is reasonable that your knee will jerk.” That is clearly absurd. No one gives or is expected to give reasons for knee-jerk. What satisfies here is the physical cause that stretches the patellar tendon, and that is hardly a person’s reason. The second test yields: “if your patellar tendon is tapped, your knee will not jerk.” Now knowing about the patellar reflex, we might be concerned if the knee does not jerk, but we know it is possible; otherwise it would not form part of the neurologist’s diagnostic testing procedures. And if we did not know about the reflex but were investigating whether or not the tap would produce a jerk, clearly either outcome would be possible.

Now contrast this with a social psychological hypothesis. As an example Holzkamp examines the work of Crott (1979), who claimed from his experiments on bargaining behavior that when rewards are available, subjects tend to seek solutions that bring them the greatest gains. This is, of course, the fundamental claim of all behaviorist psychology and even of much of social psychology that claims no explicit link to behaviorism. The implication is that the solutions sought by subjects are governed by the relative size of rewards. Certainly, we would agree that it is sensible to say that “it is reasonable for subjects to seek solutions that bring them the greatest gains.” A person who obviously did not do so would raise eyebrows and his or her reasonableness would be questioned. That we are dealing here with reasonableness rather than cause becomes even clearer when we add the “not”: “when rewards are available, subjects tend not to seek solutions that bring them the greatest

gains." If they did, again, we would question their reasons for doing so: that is, we would assume that the person has such reasons.

An important implication of this is that where psychological hypotheses are formulated in terms of good reasons, they can be neither empirically nor experimentally tested or refuted. Such hypotheses consist of linguistic, implicative statements that will always conform to the empirical facts providing that the particular premises are given. Research, experimental or otherwise, conducted on such hypotheses thus cannot prove anything; it merely reveals a relation that may be considered an example, an instance, or a demonstration of an individual's good reasons.

This state of affairs has been noted by others (e.g., Brandstädter, 1984; Calder, 1977; Vollmer, 1982), but the most radical implication was drawn by Smedslund (1988), who concluded that psychological theory is mainly constituted by self-evident, common-sense claims that can be neither tested nor refuted. Psychological experimentation, in his view, is "pseudo-empirical." Proper psychology would be a formal discipline in which everyday theoretical notions are investigated simply for their logical structures, assumptions, definitions, and so on.

Holzkamp did not want to go quite so far as Smedslund. How, then, does he propose to transform his insights on psychology as a science from the subject's standpoint into a positive program of research? First, it is necessary to clarify the subject matter. For over a century, psychology has been under the sway of a dualism in which it asserts as its scientific subject matter the objective and observable as opposed to the merely internal and private, which is at best indirectly inferable. Indeed the founders of 20th-century psychology did not deny subjective experience; they merely ruled it out as inaccessible to the strict demands of science. This created at least two problems. First, it effectively reaffirmed the subjectivism that it had set out to overcome. Second, it was paradoxical in that it could not apply to the experience of the researcher, who was necessarily guided by his or her own inner experience of the so-called "objective" data. The problems are overcome only with the full recognition of the mutually constitutive relationship between the subject and the world. A person is always a subject only in relation to the world, especially including other subjects. The subject matter is thus not mere object or mere subject, but the world experienced from each person's own standpoint and perspective. "Psychological research becomes the conceptual and empirical analysis of the levels and dimensions in which an individual's experience of the world and self is a particular mediated instance of the world in which we all live" (Holzkamp, 1991, p. 13).

A psychology from the standpoint of the subject requires some special methodological considerations. Only a few of these can be described here. The first is that if the subjectivity of the subject is to be preserved, the subject obviously cannot be treated as an object. Subjectivity is not private but shared. We share our subjectivity every time we sit down for a conversation with a friend or acquaintance. On this principle, the subjects participating in a research project

must be treated as co-researchers. As psychologists, our aim is to have them share with us their subjective point of view. This puts the psychologist and the co-researchers on more or less the same footing, but there are, at least initially, some important differences. The psychologist comes to the problem with a background of theory and method not shared by the research participants. This means that an important function of the psychologist is to overcome this difference by sharing his or her knowledge with the participants. In a sense, the project becomes an exchange: the psychologist's knowledge for the subject's experience. This also means that the theory must be one that makes sense to the subject and will prove beneficial and useful in his or her life. If a psychological theory can't do this, then it can't be worth much.

The second point follows from the first. The problem investigated must be the subject's problem. Why else should someone be expected to participate in a research project, if they did not sense the problem as real and in need of solving? In this regard, the research project of Critical Psychology is similar to that of psychoanalysis. The initiating problem is the subject's problem; the subject and the psychologist have equal interests in learning about or solving the problem; and the process is facilitated by a theoretical structure containing categories intended to reveal the nature of the problem and its solution. Of course it is crucial here that the theory of Critical Psychology is different from that of psychoanalysis. The most important distinction is that the theory of the former is grounded in an extensive evolutionary and historical reassessment of psychological categories and, as a result of this, it also gives the necessary weight to the intersubjective—the societal and historical—aspects of subjectivity. Problems of subjectivity rarely, if ever, are confined to the subject; they exist in the relations of the subject to other subjects and the world; they involve understandings of the objective premises for action and the reasons of others for their actions.

But how can the objectivity required of science be achieved in a psychology grounded in the discourse of good reasons for action? If the relations between reasons and premises are implicative and thus not subject to empirical tests of the traditional kind, how can the theory possibly founder on reality, that is, how can it be tested and by what criterion? The answer lies in the concept of action potency or agency, which is concerned with utilizing available possibilities and creating further possibilities for controlling and improving the quality of the subjects' lives. As Holzkamp (1991) writes, "The external criterion is thus the real development of the individual's ability to master his or her own life" (p. 15). Our understanding of and enhancing of human agency, societal and individual, lies at the heart of Critical Psychology.

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