

## COMMENTARY

# Psychology's Path Towards a Mature Science: An Examination of the Myths

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This article is an invited comment on the article by George Mandler in the same issue.<sup>1</sup> It is suggested that the latter contains a series of myths that are popular among psychologists. These are that psychology was fragmented into “schools” in the 1920s and 30s and that this led several writers to declare that it was in a state of crisis. It is said to have overcome this crisis by becoming more eclectic and incorporating the best aspects of the various schools. The author suggests that the reality is very different; there is no evidence to suggest that modern psychology has incorporated different aspects of the various schools. It is just as fragmented as it was in the early part of the 20th century, and the crisis literature has continued to the present day. It is suggested that the myths serve the quasi-religious function of keeping faith in the progress of psychology toward “mature science” alive.

*Keywords:* psychology, science, crisis, myths

The paper begins with the claim that psychology is like an energetic youth who has already passed through childhood and is on course for the maturity of adulthood. The author does not explain the term *mature science*, but I take it to mean that psychology will increasingly resemble the natural sciences, and I think that most people would understand it in this way.

The childhood through which psychology has passed was characterized by the fragmentation of the discipline into a variety of theoretical orientations. This particular period of psychology's history is often characterized as “the age of schools.” It was this situation that led several authors to declare that psychology was in crisis. We are told that the crisis has now been overcome. Psychology is no longer fragmented in this way, having taken on board what was best from every school. The author then goes on to tell us that although the discipline is no longer in crisis, it still faces problems which it must overcome.

The basic story is familiar to me. I remember hearing it in my classes as an undergraduate and I am sure that it continues to be heard in undergraduate classes today. I regard it as historically inaccurate and in the following pages I will explain why.

### The Crisis Literature Did Not End in the 1920s

The crisis literature of the 1920s is well known but it is by no means unique. As far as I am aware, the first publication to declare that psychology was in a state of crisis was *Die Krisis in der Psychologie* [The Crisis in Psychology] by Rudolf Willy from 1899 (Willy, 1899). There is also a work in French titled, *La crise de la psychologie expérimentale* [The Crisis of Experimental Psychology] by Nikolai Kostyleff from 1911 (Kostyleff, 1911).

After these come the well-known works of the 1920s. The first to be published was *The Crisis in Psychology* by Hans Driesch and it

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<sup>1</sup> The revised version of Mandler's article that was sent to me was titled, “Psychology's path towards a mature science: The resolution of old crises and the new challenges,” and I wrote my Commentary on the understanding that this would be the title of the work. Unfortunately, it was changed.

originally appeared in English in 1925 and in German translation the following year (Driesch, 1925, 1926). The Gestalt psychologist, Kurt Koffka published a review of this work titled, "Zur Krise der Psychologie" [On the Crisis of Psychology] in 1926 (Koffka, 1926). Karl Bühler also published an article with the title, "Die Krise der Psychologie" [The Crisis of Psychology] in 1926 and it was expanded and republished as a book with the same title in 1927 (Bühler, 1926a, 1927). Vygotsky also wrote on this topic in 1927, but his work was not published until 1982 and it only appeared in English translation for the first time in 1997 (Vygotsky, 1997). It did not, therefore, play any part in the contemporary discussion surrounding this presumed crisis of psychology.

Just as there was literature declaring psychology to be in a state of crisis from before the 1920s, so there was literature which gave the same diagnosis after that time. Edmund Husserl referred to a "crisis of the European sciences" in 1936 and psychology played a prominent role in the discussion (Husserl, 1970). In 1941, P. F. Hofstätter published a journal article with the title, "Die Krise zur Psychologie" [The Crisis of Psychology] (Hofstätter, 1941).

All this literature was discussed in a symposium that was held at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin from October 10–12, 2008, and I believe that the papers from the symposium will be published in a special issue of the journal *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*. It will be a significant contribution to our understanding of this literature when that issue is published. For the moment, the abstracts are available on the Internet and they make some interesting points. One of them is that the authors from the 1920s did not declare psychology to be in crisis for the same reasons. The main problem for Bühler was the existence of many different "paradigms" of psychology while Driesch was concerned with more fundamental philosophical issues, hence the German title of his book, *Grundprobleme der Psychologie* [Fundamental Problems of Psychology] (Allesch, 2008). Koffka, it seems, outlined two completely different "crises", one for an American audience and one for a European audience (Hatfield, 2008).

As interesting as this literature might be, it is important to note that it did not stop there. If

some authors are to be believed, social psychology has been in a semi-permanent state of crisis. The literature on this topic runs from the 1960s to at least the 1980s (e.g., Parker, 1989). There is also an interesting book by Gordon Westland from 1978 with the title, *Current Crises of Psychology* (Westland, 1978). Here the author diagnosed not one crisis of psychology but nine. This point should serve as reminder that crises in psychology have been declared by different authors for different reasons. A recurring theme, however, is the existence of several theoretical approaches, and this can be seen in the well-known work of Arthur Staats from 1983 with the title, *The Crisis of Disunity in Psychology* (Staats, 1983).

As recently as 1995, there was a symposium at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association with the title, "Is there a crisis in psychology?" The papers from this symposium were published in the following year, and David Bakan unequivocally answered the question in the affirmative (Bakan, 1996). The organizer of the symposium was Robert Rieber, and he subsequently referred to "the crisis of psychology" in an article from 2001 (Rieber, 2001). More recent still is an article from 2008 in which my co-commentator, Jason Goertzen, argues that the crisis in psychology is alive and well (Goertzen, 2008).

Mandler tells us that psychology is not in a state of crisis, and so he clearly disagrees with the authors listed above. If he wishes to make such an argument, it would make sense to discuss the work of these psychologists and tell us why he thinks they are wrong. It is easy to give the impression that psychology was once in a state of crisis and no longer is by restricting oneself to the literature of the early part of the 20th century and pretending that the more recent literature does not exist. I am happy to acknowledge that there is more literature from the 1920s in which a presumed crisis of psychology is discussed than at any other time in psychology's history, but this is simply a matter of quantity. The important point is that the 1920s are by no means unique in this respect.

My job has been made harder in writing this commentary by the fact that I reviewed the original manuscript that was submitted to the journal. One of the consequences of this situation is that the author is already familiar with my views and has had an opportunity to make

changes to the manuscript in response to them. He now makes reference to the work of Rudolf Willy, which he did not do before, but he has still chosen to leave out all the crisis literature that came after the 1920s. His justification for this decision is to be found in a footnote which was added to the revised version:

I mention only the "crises" in experimental psychology. The crisis notion proliferated in philosophical and general psychological circles.

This hardly an adequate response. With the exception of the book by Kostyleff (1911), which is specifically titled *The Crisis of Experimental Psychology*, there is no literature that specifically addresses a crisis of experimental psychology. The vast majority of the literature, including the book by Karl Bühler that Mandler gives such a prominent role, is about psychology in general, and consequently includes a discussion of psychoanalysis. It also seems strange to consider "experimental psychology" and "general psychology" as two separate fields. The term, "general psychology" is usually understood to include the whole of psychology. This is how it is used in Division 1 (General Psychology) of the American Psychological Association, whose members often see it as having an integrative role.

### **Early Paradigms Have Not Been Incorporated Into Contemporary Psychology**

If Mandler's account of the crisis literature is selective with regard to the historical period it covers, it is equally selective in its account of the crisis literature of the 1920s and even of Karl Bühler's contribution to that literature. I recognize of course that every account is of necessity selective but, as with the omission of a significant body of the crisis literature, it is always possible to leave out any evidence that might conflict with the author's views.

The only work from the 1920s that the author discusses in any detail is Karl Bühler's *Die Krise der Psychologie* (1927). The justification for this decision is that it is said to have been the most influential work on this subject, and the evidence offered is that the book was repeatedly reissued, with the most recent edition appearing in 1978. Something that the author does not mention is that all these editions are in German.

In his review of the third edition from 1965, Gordon Allport expressed regret that the book had never been translated into English and added that he had heard rumors that this situation was about to change (Allport, 1966). Unfortunately it did not. The book still has not been translated into English.

This situation must surely cast doubt on the claim that it was the most influential of the crisis literature. The United States already had more psychologists than any other country at this time and only a small minority of them were like Allport in being able to read German. We can contrast this situation with that of the book by Hans Driesch, which, in spite of the author's nationality, was originally published in English by Princeton University Press (Driesch, 1925). A German translation of the book appeared in the following year (Driesch, 1926). Given that this book was available in English and German, it was widely reviewed and discussed on both sides of the Atlantic, unlike Bühler's book, which was less well-known outside the German-speaking countries of Central Europe.

Further evidence of Bühler's book not being particularly influential is the fact that it is never mentioned in American textbooks on the history of psychology (Brock, 1994, in press). Weimer (1974) went as far as to suggest that Boring (1950) wrote Bühler out of the second edition of his monumental history of experimental psychology in a fit of pique after Bühler turned down Boring's offer of a position at Harvard University. There is no need for us to accept such an uncharitable explanation. It is equally possible that Boring did not consider the work to be of sufficient importance. As with many other aspects of the history of psychology, Boring's textbook provided the pattern for the other textbooks that followed it.

I am not sure why this work was singled out for discussion. Perhaps it was chosen because it helps to reinforce the popular view that the "crisis" of the 1920s was based on the existence of several theoretical approaches to psychology. This was undoubtedly one of the factors that led to a crisis being declared, but it was by no means the only one. As already mentioned, the book by Driesch was centered on philosophical problems rather than the existence of different "paradigms" (Driesch, 1925, 1926).

If the choice of Bühler's book is idiosyncratic, the author's discussion of it is equally so.

We are told that Bühler singled out four approaches to psychology for discussion:

1. Classical association theory
2. *Denkpsychologie* ["thought psychology", particularly associated with the Würzburg School of which Bühler had been an important member (Brock, 1991)]
3. Behaviorism
4. Psychoanalysis

Mandler goes on to say that he will not discuss Bühler's arguments, but will contrast the modern situation with that of 1927. It is not exactly clear from this account how classical association theory is supposed to have influenced modern psychology. It is not exactly clear how the German *Denkpsychologie* of the early 20th century has influenced modern psychology either but Mandler rescues the situation with an interesting substitution: *Denkpsychologie* is said to have been the precursor of Gestalt psychology and the basic principles of the latter are said to have been incorporated into modern psychology. Behaviorism is said to have emphasized the "obvious" advantages of reliable intersubjective observation, while psychoanalysis has taught us that many important aspects of the mind are unconscious. This is the standard view that psychology has overcome the age of schools by incorporating what was best about each one of them.

There is clearly some overlap between *Denkpsychologie* and Gestalt psychology, and Bühler went as far as to claim that Koffka had incorporated aspects of this work into his own without properly acknowledging it (Bühler, 1926b). In spite of this, no one would seriously suggest that *Denkpsychologie* and Gestalt psychology are exactly the same. Bühler (1927) was very critical of the Gestalt approach (see also Ash, 1995). We therefore have to face up to the issue of a lack of continuity between *Denkpsychologie* and contemporary psychology.

An even bigger problem for this account is that Bühler discussed five approaches to psychology in his book, not four. The fifth approach is *geisteswissenschaftliche* psychology. There is no direct equivalent for this term in English but it is based on the contrast between the *Naturwissenschaften*, which translates as the natural sciences, and the *Geisteswissenschaften*, which is usually translated as human or cultural

sciences. *Geisteswissenschaftliche* psychology had features in common with some versions of humanistic psychology in that it had no pretensions to being a natural science and adopted a more humanities-oriented approach. It is particularly associated with the name of Wilhelm Dilthey and its most prominent representative at the time that Bühler was writing was Dilthey's former student, Eduard Spranger (e.g., Spranger, 1914). Perhaps the curious omission of Bühler's discussion of this approach to psychology can be explained by the fact that it died out in Germany as a result of the Americanization of German psychology after World War II (Teo, 2000). It does not, therefore, fit in so easily with the claim that modern psychology has absorbed all the earlier schools. It is unlikely to be due to an exclusive focus on experimental approaches to psychology since Bühler's discussion of psychoanalysis was not left out.

History is often a complex and messy affair, and the standard view that psychology has absorbed the earlier schools can only be accomplished through distortion and omission. Bühler's book is relatively simple in that he restricts himself to five approaches to psychology. Some of his contemporaries included more. Edna Heidebreder, for example, published a book titled, *Seven Psychologies* and she makes it clear in the book that there were many more than seven psychologies at the time (Heidebreder, 1933). Robert Woodworth's *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* included even more (Woodworth, 1931). As with *Denkpsychologie* and *geisteswissenschaftliche* psychology, approaches like "structuralism" or "hormic psychology" have not had a lasting impact and are now of purely historical interest.

### **Psychology Is Just as Fragmented as It Was in 1927**

Mandler refers to psychology as being in an "interregnum" period. It is this view which informs his metaphor of psychology as a youth who has left childhood behind but has not yet attained the status of adulthood. It is very clear that psychology is no more unified theoretically than it was at the time that Bühler was writing, and Mandler specifically states that theoretical unification has not occurred. The standard view here would be that psychologists no longer

identify with schools and are now more eclectic in their views, hence the claim that psychology has taken on board what is best from all the schools.

The problem here is that eclecticism is itself a point of view. It rests on the belief that different approaches to psychology have certain aspects that are of value but, of course, not everyone who shares this view will agree on what those aspects of value are. Karl Jaspers (1951) famously wrote: "There is no escape from philosophy. . . . Anyone who rejects philosophy is himself unconsciously practicing a philosophy" (p. 12). I would say the same thing about theory. A radical empiricist may claim to be operating without theory but radical empiricism is itself a theory. If we accept that theory is an integral part of science, there are only two possibilities and these are that a discipline is unified theoretically or it is not. There are, of course, degrees of disunity, but this does not alter the basic situation that an absence of unity means disunity.

These are purely logical considerations. The fact of the matter is that the various schools of psychology are by no means dead. There are active divisions in the American Psychological Association that are devoted to psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, and behaviorism, and they continue to have their own specialist journals. It is most certainly true that not all the schools of psychology that have existed in the past are still alive today. On the other hand, approaches to psychology that did not exist in the 1920s and 30s have taken their place. Cognitive psychology is the most obvious example but there are others, such as evolutionary psychology and social constructionism. Psychology is not immune to historical change. However, one thing that has remained constant throughout its history is that different systems of psychology have existed at the same time.

I am not alone in this view. The field of history of psychology is frequently described as "history and systems" in the United States, and it is clear that many of the systems in the history texts are now of purely historical interest. At the same time, there are several works on systems and theories of psychology, and it is clear that the authors of these works consider these systems to be of contemporary relevance (e.g., Robinson, 1979; Lundin, 1996). Lundin, for example, tells us that "Behaviorism still has

many disciples and will continue to be a force in psychology" (p. 397) and "the various forms of psychoanalytic thinking are still alive" (p. 397). In more general terms, he writes: "Today, psychology is as fragmented as it was during the early years of structuralism, Act psychology, functionalism and behaviorism" (p. 393).

### Methods Are Not a Source of Unity

Although Mandler is willing to concede that psychology is not unified theoretically, he claims it is unified around method and quotes a paper by Hank Stam in support of this view:

Stam and others have argued that not theory but method has exerted a unifying influence on scientific psychology, that "unification of psychology is largely a disciplinary maneuver and not primarily an epistemological act" and "the discipline has been unified for some time around a series of methodological and functional categories" (Stam, 2004). In other words, what unites us is how we do our research, not the way we organize our knowledge. Bühler's recommendation that we adopt a plurality of methods has been accepted.

I am not sure that Mandler has understood what Stam (2004) meant by this distinction between "an epistemological act" and "a disciplinary maneuver." In calling the attempts at unification "a disciplinary maneuver," he is referring specifically to what he calls "institutional psychology" but Mandler has replaced these words with "the discipline" in the quotation above:

Institutional psychology has, by default, been unified for some time around a series of methodological and functional categories that have served to support its institutional projects, while disallowing an inquiry into those problems it might otherwise pursue. In other words, methodology plays an important gate-keeping function that acts as a de facto unifying presence (p. 1260).

Stam (2004) goes on to suggest that no genuine science has been united in this way:

Genuine scientific activities will always follow problems, not dictates or disciplines, even though the latter exert considerable authority in the modern academy (p. 1260).

What Stam is referring to here is policing tactics that result not in a plurality of methods but restrictions on the kind of methods that are allowed. Dictators are usually able to bring about unity by imprisoning or executing anyone who disagrees with them. In such circum-

stances, people who think differently will often leave the country or keep their mouths shut. This is the kind of unity that psychology once “enjoyed”. Using anything other than the narrow range of methods that were permitted would not result in imprisonment or death, but it would lead to problems in finding employment, getting research grants, publishing one’s work, and so forth.

Stam’s remarks were made in a different context and I suspect that he was exaggerating the degree of unity that exists in psychology in order to make his point. Some of the crises that Westland (1978) outlines in his book, *Current Crises of Psychology* are centered on method. One of them is “the laboratory crisis.” This refers to the debates that took place over many years over whether the results of laboratory research could be generalized to “real life” and the debates were not just in the “softer” end of psychology but also in traditional areas of experimental psychology, such as memory research. Westland also discusses “the statistical crisis.” This refers to the disputes that have taken place over the ways in which statistics are used or abused by psychologists, depending on one’s point of view. Some examples are the widespread tendency to ignore the rule that samples must be representative of the population that they seek to address and, in particular, the widespread tendency to use college students in research. Other criticisms concern the use of the significance test, which is only valid if the same results can be *repeatedly* obtained. The fact that one set of results are highly improbable tells us nothing and I assume that most psychologists are implicitly aware of this since they have been prepared to dismiss the highly improbable results that have been produced by parapsychologists. Westland even refers to “the science crisis.” Not all psychologists subscribe to the view that psychology should be exclusively scientific, but even among those who do, there has been no agreement on what “science” is. The issue of whether psychoanalysis is a science or whether introspection can be scientific are cases in point.

It is perhaps unsurprising that there has been such resistance to these methodological restrictions. Theory and method are closely intertwined. It would no more make sense for a humanistic psychologist to conduct experiments using laboratory rats than it would for a behaviorist to ask people about their childhoods. This

is why the experimental testing of Freudian theory made no sense. In order to adapt it to the laboratory situation, the meaning of the concepts had to be changed to such an extent that they were no longer the same concepts.

It is certainly true that what little unity psychology has experienced during its brief history has been based on method. However, given that there has been no agreement on theory and given that theory and method are closely intertwined, it was inevitably based on power rather than consensus. Largely as a result of the opposition to the narrow range of methods that psychology allowed, even that kind of unity has broken down and “qualitative” methods that would have been previously considered beyond the pale are now widely used.

### Conclusion

I was specifically asked to comment on this paper as a historian of psychology, and so I will not discuss Mandler’s diagnosis of the current problems of psychology, except to say that the problems he outlines—the relationship between psychology and physiology, the failure to take cultural differences into account, and the reluctance to relate different areas of research—are not insignificant matters. I am sure that other psychologists would look at the same problems and come to the conclusion that a crisis exists.

This has happened throughout psychology’s history. Bühler (1927) and Vygotsky (1997) could look at the different schools of psychology in the early part of the 20th century and declare the discipline to be in crisis, while Woodworth (1931) and Heidebreder (1933) could describe the same situation without using this type of language. Similar differences can be seen in the more recent literature. Gruber and Gruber (1996) agree with everything that Bakan (1996) has said about psychology but they do not share his view that it constitutes a crisis. Meanwhile, O’Connell (1996) prefers to use the term *malaise*.

The language of crisis is a rhetorical device. It acts as a call to arms. If we accept that something is in a state of crisis, we accept that there are problems that need to be addressed. Quite apart from the issue of whether a different state of affairs would be desirable, it also embodies the assumption that a different state of affairs is possible.

Different authors have claimed that psychology is in crisis for different reasons, and it would be impossible to discuss every claim here. However, the most common problem that has been associated with the term is a lack of theoretical unity. This is the problem that concerned Bühler and Vygotsky and more recently authors like Staats. Whether or not the situation can be any different is an open question. Subjects like economics, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics, which might be seen as more closely related to psychology than the natural sciences, are also characterized by multiple perspectives.

We know that vigorous youths are likely to turn into adults because we have seen it happen in the past. We have yet to see a human or social science achieve the kind of theoretical consensus that is usually associated with “mature science.” The belief that such a transformation can take place rests on faith and, as with the religious institutions that are more commonly associated with belief, historical myths are used to keep the faith alive.

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