

LOS PSICOLOGOS DE LA GESTALT EN LA AMERICA CONDUCTISTA

MICHAEL SOKAL

Worcester Polytechnic Institute

RESUMEN

Aunque muchos de los que han escrito acerca de la introducción de la psicología de la Gestalt en Estados Unidos antes de la II Guerra Mundial han afirmado que los psicólogos norteamericanos rechazaron enérgicamente las ideas y la visión del mundo de la Gestalt, un examen detallado del pasado muestra claramente lo contrario. Se pone de manifiesto que muchos psicólogos americanos estudiaron activamente las ideas de la Gestalt antes de 1930 e invitaron a los psicólogos de la Gestalt a compartir sus ideas con ellos y sus estudiantes. Incluso organizaron estancias temporales como profesores visitantes y puestos permanentes para los psicólogos de la Gestalt en institutos y universidades norteamericanas. Los psicólogos norteamericanos recibieron afectuosamente el punto de vista gestáltico, a pesar de reaccionar en contra de los que se conocía en los años veinte como "movimiento de la Gestalt". Finalmente la personalidad de los principales individuos involucrados en la difusión de la Psicología de la Gestalt en Estados Unidos tuvieron una enorme influencia en el transcurso de la misma aunque no determinaron el producto final.

ABSTRACT

Although many who have written on the transmission of Gestalt psychology from Germany to the United States before World War Two have claimed that most North American psychologists actively rejected Gestalt ideas and ways of looking at the world, a detailed examination of the relevant record of the past provides strong evidence for a contrary view. Indeed, it reveals that before 1930, many American psychologists actively studied Gestalt ideas, invited the Gestalt psychologists to share their views with them and their students, and even arranged both visiting and permanent positions for the Gestalt psychologists in American colleges and universities. If anything, American psychologists warmly welcomed the Gestalt viewpoint, even as they resisted what was known even in the 1920s

as The Gestalt Movement» Finally, the personalities of the primary individuals involved in the transmission of Gestalt psychology had a significant impact on the course — though not the ultimate outcome — of this transmission.

I am honored to have been asked to address this audience, on this occasion, and on this particular topic. I of course wish to thank my hosts for inviting me to speak, and especially to thank Dr. Annette Mülberger, who kindly translated my remarks, originally prepared in English, into Castillian. I studied Spanish in my North American High School over 35 years ago, and though I have, unfortunately, not often used the language since then, I can still read and comprehend at least some of what I read, and I can (as you can hear) still read it aloud without too harsh an accent. (Or so I hope!). Unfortunately, I still cannot converse comfortably in Castillian, and I also must admit that I understand no Catalan. I thus hope you will all understand if I must ask you, if at all possible, to talk with me in English. I greatly appreciate the effort on your part that I know doing so represents. Thank you very much!

That being said, one of the reasons I'm especially pleased to speak here today is that I know that you all know much about Gestalt psychology, and about the work of Max Wertheimer, and Wolfgang Kohler, and Kurt Koffka, and Kurt Lewin. For that reason, I know that, to approach my topic — «*The Gestalt Psychologists in Behaviorist America*» — I do not have to review all that these men accomplished as they developed their ideas in Germany before 1920. I also know you are all well acquainted with the behaviorist ideas of John B. Watson that just-about dominated North American psychology through the same period, and realize just how much these ideas differed from those of the Gestalt theorists. You all thus well understand why many observers have therefore concluded that American psychology in the 1920s had no use for the ideas of the Gestalt psychologists, and why many claim that American psychologists actively opposed the introduction of Gestalt psychology into their country during this period.

My claim in this presentation, however, is that throughout the 1920s American psychologists went out of their way to welcome the ideas of the Gestalt psychologists, and to study them, and by the end of the decade many of these American psychologists had accepted at least significant components of Gestalt psychology in their own work. The dissatisfaction of many Americans with the extremes of behaviorism led some to an interest in Gestalt ideas. But, equally important, Americans who had studied in Europe during the early years of this century already knew the Gestalt psychologists personally and considered them as friends. Herbert S. Langfeld of Princeton studied in Berlin from 1904 to 1909, where he met and befriended Koffka. In 1912, Langfeld (then at Harvard) sent one of his students, Edward C. Tolman, to Giessen, where Koffka taught, and the American served as a subject in some early Gestalt experiments. After the war, when next he could, Tolman returned to Giessen and Koffka for a few

months. By 1919, Tolman had «*conceived that a rat in running a maze must be learning a lay-out pattern*», and thus reinterpreted a standard behaviorist experiment in Gestalt terms. In addition, at the 1923 Oxford International Congress of Psychology, both Langfeld and Tolman met privately with Koffka and Kohler to discuss Gestalt psychology. Significantly, Tolman kept in continual contact with Koffka for the two decades after the Congress, and his «*purposive behaviorism*,» which stressed «*cognitive maps*» quite like the Gestalt perceptual fields, was one of the leading approaches to psychology in the 1930s.

Robert M. Ogden of Cornell studied with Oswald Kulpe at Wurzburg from 1901 to 1903 and during the summer of 1909. He met and grew friendly with Koffka during these visits and later included Gestalt ideas in some of his own work. In 1922, Ogden delivered a paper on Gestalt theory at a meeting of the American Psychological Association and solicited Koffka's first American paper, «*Perception: An Introduction to the Gestalt-Theorize*,» for the *Psychological Bulletin*. In the early 1920s, Gordon Allport used a Harvard Traveling Fellowship to spend a year in Germany, where was taken by «*the high quality of experimental studies by the Gestalt school*.» In 1923, he reported on the latest currents in German psychological thought in the *American Journal of Psychology* and in the following year, in Cambridge, England, he met and became impressed with Koffka, and in 1924 reported on «*The Standpoint of Gestalt Psychology*» for the English journal *Psyche*. None of these four Americans (Langfeld, Tolman, Ogden, and Allport) ever explicitly identified himself as a Gestalt psychologist. But they all played a major role in its transmission to the United States.

By 1924, other Americans were studying and becoming excited by the writings of the Gestalt psychologists; even Watson «*struggle[d] with Kohler's presentation of Gestalt-Psychologie*.» In that year, English translations of two Gestalt books appeared: Koffka's *The Growth of the Mind* (translated and titled by Ogden) and Kohler's *The Mentality of Apes*. They did much to make Gestalt ideas more readily available to Americans. American psychologists received both well, and reviews in popular journals praised their «*freshness of treatment, and [their] inventiveness and fertility of method that produce an effect very much like the opening of a window*.»

In the Harvard psychological laboratory, then part of a joint department of philosophy and psychology, interest in Gestalt ideas began slowly but soon grew. In 1923 a young graduate student named Harry Nelson argued long with his professor before he was allowed to submit a survey of Gestalt psychology as his dissertation. When published a few years later in a series of articles in the *American Journal of Psychology*, Nelson's thesis did much to acquaint American psychologists with the richness and complexity of Gestalt theory. Meanwhile, his professor, Edwin G. Boring, Harvard's leading experimental psychologist, began having second thoughts about his opposition to Gestalt psychology. In the mid-1920s, he was open to many different views of psychology, demanding only that they be scientific—preferably experimental—and rigorous. He had read Allport's earlier report on «*Gestalt Theorize*» quite carefully and in 1924 he wrote to Watson of Gestalt psychology's «*power to stimulate the great deal of research*

which I call good research and which I find very interesting.» In the middle of 1925, after a summer at Harvard, a student from Vassar reported to her professor that Boring had become «*a configurationalist.*» Boring denied the charge — «*so I am a contortionist, or whatever the word is.*» But two months later, reporting to Koffka that «*rumor is beginning to drift in that I am a Gestalt psychologist,*» he seemed quite impressed with the German professor's ideas. «*Very well, so be it. At least what I get from Kohler, added to the little I get from you, seems to be eminently good scientific sense.*» But strong as this statement was, it was not as strong as one he had made more than six months earlier in a letter to Kohler. «*I have decided that I am not a Gestalt psychologist but merely a scientist. Gestalt psychology seems to me to be nothing more than the introduction of science into psychology.*»

In the mid-1920s some of the Gestalt psychologists began to visit the United States, and Americans could hear at first hand the ideas that excited them. In 1924, for example, Ogden arranged a visiting appointment for Koffka at Cornell, which was followed by visiting professorships at Chicago and Wisconsin. In 1925, «*on the invitation of the program committee,*» he spoke before the American Psychological Association and took part in a well-attended «*Round Table Conference on the 'Gestalt-Psychologie.'*» During the next three years he gave at least thirty lectures on Gestalt psychology before various groups around the country, including the Philosophical Club at Harvard, and Boring tried to arrange for Koffka to take his place in Cambridge while he was on a sabbatical leave. By late 1926 it became clear that Koffka would settle in America and rumors began to circulate about the salary offers he was receiving from various universities. Many, indeed, competed for him in what can only be called a bidding war and, by February 1927, he had a professorship at Wisconsin with a salary of \$7,500, at a time when Boring, at Harvard, was being paid \$5,500. But within three months, Koffka had accepted a research professorship at Smith College, with a salary reported to be in the neighborhood of \$10,000.

Several writers have complained that Smith College did not give Koffka the institutional base in American psychology that a man of his stature deserved. But in many ways a professorship at Northampton was a step up from Koffka's status at Giessen. He had no teaching obligations, a commitment (soon fulfilled) for a laboratory to be built to his specifications, an adequate budget, and his own assistants. He also had easier access to New York and Boston at Smith than he would have had at Wisconsin. And if the rumors about his salary are correct, he had a financial incentive to go to Smith. There he continued to publish and lecture extensively, and his *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, written in English and published in the mid-1930s, was especially influential. At Smith he even developed a small graduate program and played a major role in training such distinguished psychologists as Molly Harrower and Eleanor J. Gibson. Much later, Boring noted that Koffka «*had great influence.*»

The Ninth International Congress of Psychology, held in September 1929, at Yale, marked a watershed in the migration of Gestalt psychology to the United States. It set the theoretical perspective that attracted most attention at New

Haven. Even Karl Lashley, the distinguished American neuropsychologist, made extensive use of the Gestalt point of view in his APA Presidential Address, «*Basic Neural Mechanisms in Behavior*.» This talk buoyed the spirits of younger Americans interested in Gestalt ideas, since he demonstrated that «*it was possible to be a scientist and hold Gestalt views because even a jellyfish seemed to have gradients that made configurations real and tangible*.» Other papers that explicitly took—or challenged—a systematic point of view also concerned themselves with Gestalt psychology. Many, of course, were by Europeans, and the American congress committee had tried to attract as many Germans—and Gestalt psychologists—to the conference as possible, often by arranging summer school positions for them to defray the costs of their visit. Furthermore, the Gestalt psychologists were given important positions on the program. For example, only two speakers addressed the major plenary session: Ivan Pavlov and Wolfgang Kohler. spoke «*Über einige Gestaltprobleme*,» and accounts of the congress published in various psychological journals stressed his talk and the attendance of the Gestalt psychologists.

Kurt Lewin, however, was the most influential Gestalt theorist at the congress, and one of his leading students stated that the congress did more to bring Lewin's topological approach to America than Hitler ever did. At New Haven, his presentations were great successes. For example, he showed films with titles such as «*The Child and Force Fields*» and «*Walking Upstairs for the First Time*,» which illustrated the use of his field theory to analyze children's behavior. Lewin's English, unlike Koffka's, was poor, but he plunged ahead, using gestures and slang expressions to communicate. His listeners, on both formal and informal occasions, always seemed to understand him. After immigrating to the United States, his addiction to American slang—evidence of his desire to assimilate, as was the way he began to pronounce his name, Lao instead of Liven—exposed him to student pranks. At a meeting of psychologists, Lewin was heard to compliment speakers for «*slobbering a bib full*,» because he had been told the expression meant «*to give an excellent talk*.» His personality, so different from Koffka's or Kohler's, was a major reason why Americans found him attractive. But they also appreciated his psychological work. Within two months after the international congress, several American universities wanted to offer him visiting positions, but it was not until 1931 that Stanford arranged one for the following year. Meanwhile, he was being described as «*the man of the hour*» and «*the young dynamo*» of Berlin, and during the summer of 1931, when a group of six New England psychologists met for dinner, Lewin's psychology was the principal topic of conversation.

Despite Lewin's scholarly reputation, finding a permanent American position for him remained difficult until the early 1930s, when Ogden finally arranged one in Cornell's School of Home Economics. There he resumed his studies of child development, which he later continued at the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station. Those who have previously overstated the problems the Gestalt psychologists encountered in America have complained that Lewin never held a permanent position in a traditional academic psychology department. Lewin, however, was

able to carry out his research wherever he found himself, and at least as well as he had at the Berlin Psychological Institute. It is doubtful that Lewin worried about issues of status. In any event, it is hard to overstate his influence on American psychology.

To many in America, however, Gestalt psychology in the 1920s and 1930s meant the work of Wolfgang Kohler, who had intensive interactions with American psychologists as early as 1914, when he began his chimpanzee studies on Tenerife. Early that year, Robert M. Yerkes, then a young assistant professor at Harvard, wrote to Kohler to express interest in his work, to ask for further information about it, and ask about joining the German professor on the island. The outbreak of the European war and Kohler's internment ended Yerkes's travel plans. But the two psychologists soon began to exchange off prints, and the American even asked John Watson to send Kohler a set of his articles. Yerkes also had Kohler's motion picture films of his chimpanzee experiments processed in the United States when this became impossible on the island. But this friendly and mutually profitable exchange was marred a few years later, when Kohler was hurt by what he thought were «unnecessary and unkind» statements about his work in Yerkes' *The Mental Life of Monkeys and Apes*, published in 1916. Yerkes tried to apologize, citing the difficulties they faced in communicating with each other. But American entry into the war in 1917 brought their relationship to a temporary close.

Shortly after the war, Yerkes resumed his contact with Kohler, and soon the two psychologists exchanged books, off prints, and congratulations on each other's appointments: Kohler's at Berlin and Yerkes' at Yale. Yerkes even offered to send money to Kohler to cover the cost of the books and off prints, in view of the deterioration of the economic situation in Germany and «*the unfairness of the exchange situation,*» but Kohler would not accept. By 1923, the two men were again learning much from a correspondence they both apparently enjoyed. And in 1924, Yerkes reviewed Kohler's *Mentality of Apes* most positively, writing that both its «*observations and conclusions ... are important*» and hoping «*that it may also achieve wide influence.*»

Later in 1924 Carl Murchison of Clark University arranged for Kohler to serve as visiting professor at the Worcester institution during 1925, and the reaction of many American psychologists was enthusiastic. Lewis M. Terman, a Clark alumnus who had been bemoaning the condition of psychology at his alma mater, wrote to a Clark trustee that «*It was a splendid stroke to get Dr. Kohler to come over.*» Boring and Yerkes congratulated Kohler on his appointment and were among the first to welcome him to America. Boring, of course, had been studying Gestalt psychology at the time, and his welcome was particularly enthusiastic. «*The psychological stock of America took a jump upward as soon as I heard you were safely on shore.*»

Once Kohler was at Worcester, Boring and Yerkes saw him regularly, and the visitor spoke at least once at both Harvard and Yale. Boring even traveled regularly to Clark to attend Kohler's weekly seminars, which he described as «*great fun.*» These seminars and his public lectures led in turn to Kohler's

influential chapters in *Psychologies of 1925*, published by Clark University Press. In addition, Clark awarded a fellowship for graduate study to Karl Dunker, one of Kohler's students. At Worcester, Kohler wholeheartedly entered into the social and intellectual life of the department, and even the students of Waller S. Hunter, a staunch behaviorist, found Kohler's ideas exciting.

Meanwhile, Kohler met and impressed other American psychologists. He and Koffka attended a meeting of the Society of Experimental Psychologists as guests, two of the few ever so honored. During a visit to Stanford, Kohler impressed Terman as «*an intellectually active man*» with «*youth and vigor.*» Yerkes also recommended Kohler and Koffka to the National Academy of Sciences as «*two of the foremost German psychologists*» in an effort to get for them a place on the academy's programs. In 1926 Ogden sought the translation and publication in English of other books by Kohler. Although unsuccessful, the attempt shows how important to American psychology Kohler's ideas had become.

Soon after Kohler started teaching at Clark in January 1925, Boring and some of his colleagues proposed inviting Kohler to Harvard the following fall as visiting professor. Kohler seemed interested, and negotiations went well until late April, when Boring heard a talk by Kohler that he later described as full of general theoretical analogies [and] unformulated psychological events [with] not [one] bit of experimentation.» From then on, Boring opposed his colleagues' continued attempts to bring Kohler to Harvard, and in 1933, even after Kohler had given Harvard's distinguished William James Lectures, Boring finally vetoed the idea of a permanent Harvard professorship for Kohler.

As I have argued elsewhere, Boring's opposition embodied a mixture of scientific and personal motives. But many derived from his animosity —shared by many other Americans— toward those aspects of the Gestalt psychologists' attitudes that reflected their deep commitment to the ultimate validity of their ideas and their at times barely-hidden impatience with and denigration of the ideas of others. At the time, contemporary observers (including Boring) differentiated between «*Gestalt Psychology*» (which they often praised) and «*the Gestalt Movement*» (which they actively resented). Despite this opposition, by the mid 1930s Kohler had established himself in America with a professorship at Swarthmore College. But even earlier, when Edna Heidebreder included Gestalt Psychology as one of the Seven Psychologies in her classic survey of American schools of psychology, it had clearly become a significant part of the American psychological scene.

The transmission of Gestalt psychology to North America was a complicated affair, but several points are especially striking. One major conclusion is that this diffusion of Gestalt psychology from Germany began long before Hitler came to power. Americans were too interested in German ideas and Germans too interested in American opportunities to wait until political events forced them into contact. By 1930 Gestalt psychology was firmly established in the United States as a psychological school, and graduate students interested in a Gestalt-focused education in psychology knew where to study. The rise of the Nazis certainly contributed to the completion of the migration, but it did not determine the direction in which American psychology developed.

Another point worth noting is that Americans found that they had to react to at least three different factors – Gestalt psychology, the Gestalt movement, and the Gestalt psychologists themselves. They responded differently to each. Some, like Boring, were attracted by Gestalt experimental work but reacted negatively to Gestalt theory. And clearly, despite some disclaimers, the protagonists of Gestalt theory constituted a movement that tried to convert Americans to their view of the world. Americans quite naturally resented their missionary efforts.

The personalities of the psychologists involved—both German and American—also helped shape the course of the migration. As I have argued elsewhere, Kohler's formality, Boring's over-sensitivity, and the concern for status that both men shared certainly affected their interactions. And yet, despite the dominance of behaviorism, as early as 1920 North American psychology was open to Gestalt ideas, and today many Gestalt interpretations of psychological phenomena have joined the mainstream of modern American psychology.

Finally, I think we can conclude that the Gestalt psychologists themselves were well received in the United States. To be sure, the few who still define themselves as Gestalt psychologists argue that America did not give their teachers what it should have. But in many ways, this attitude is reminiscent of the situation of the 1920s and early 1930s when Koffka and Kohler allowed their movement to get their better of their ideas and preached to the Americans, trying to convert the heathen to the true gospel. But all major Gestalt psychologists found positions in America in the middle of the depression and were able to carry on with the work they had started in Germany. This work enriched American psychology greatly and did much to counter the attractions of extreme behaviorism. If Gestalt psychology has today lost its identity as a school of thought—and very few of Koffka's, Kohler's, Wertheimer's, or Lewin's students call themselves Gestalt psychologists—it is not because the mainstream of American psychology has swamped their ideas. Rather, their work has done much to redirect this mainstream, which adopted many of their points of view. Few other migrating scientific schools have been as successful.