Does experience make us wise? Subject-scientific considerations on the relation between subjective experience and scientific generalization[1]

Morus Markard

Abstract

As a contrast to dogmatic assertions, "experience" has been used with an (ideology-)critical motive since the advent of modern science. But the reference to experience can also serve to discourage criticism of practice. This paper explores this problem with respect to the relation between concepts and experience and the relation between immediate und socially mediated aspects of experience. Finally, methodological aspects of a subject scientific concept of experience are discussed, with which the official discourse in nomothetic psychology is undermined and the connection of suffering and therapy to life conditions is inevitable.

Keywords
experience, critical psychology, subject science, practice research, methodology, therapy

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[1] Revised and expanded version of a conference paper; cf. Jörg Hein and Karl Otto Hentze, eds. (2007): Das Unbehagen in der (Psycho-) Therapiekultur. Sinnverstehende Traditionen – Grundlage und Perspektiven. Deutscher Psychologen Verlag.

1. Introduction

Common knowledge tells us that experience makes us wise.[2] A closer look reveals, however, that experience can also make us obtuse, stupefaction and speechlessness. To which extent one can become wise from experience depends on *which* experience is broken down *how*—and what we mean by "wise." Does "wise" refer to developing the ability to smartly get ahead through a pliable opportunism, acquiring such a smoothness that one no longer rubs anyone the wrong way? Or to humanly inspired, artful or even subversive tactics in the jungle of the institutional administration of people? Or to the analysis of the relationship between professional and political aspects of psychological work, such as in stating reasons for extending the leave to remain for "traumatized" refugee women from Bosnia (cf. Rafailovic 2006)?

Obviously, both aspects—what we take as "wise" and how one breaks down which experiences—are connected. On the linguistic level, it is already notable that the everyday expression "to *make* an experience" does not at all cast the subject of the experience as *passive*. The aspect of activity can even be found on the etymology of the German word *Erfahrung*: *ervarn* means "roaming through," "travelling through."

This is not to dispute that I can also make the experience of being befallen, in the sense of a total surrender to nature, to a societal situation or to others; but this type of experience would have to be analyzed as an extreme version in a dimension of active experiencing with attending specific emotional qualities.

Foundational science, applied science, scientifically legitimized practice and everyday life all refer to experience, usually from a *critical* perspective—in contrast to theoretical claims, dogmatic assertions, etc.—such that experience potentially tends to transport that ideology-critical motive that has been attached to it in opposition to scholasticism since the 13th century, as Pongratz (1984: 53) highlights.

While this is true, the matter is unfortunately not all that simple. Experiences, too, are highly contested: Whether the results or consequences of research in the natural sciences are at issue, where all sides argue on the basis of "experience," whether it is about the social science debate over how to properly understand empirical (i.e. based upon experience) science, or whether—as suggested above—experiences from professional practice or everyday life are concerned: at least today, it would be naïve to assume that a recourse to experience inherently pursues an ideology-critical motive. This, too, we learn from everyday life: "Experience against experience," that is, a reference to "experience" alone cannot settle a dispute.

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[2] The German phrase goes, "*Aus Erfahrung wird man klug.*"

This leads me back to my starting point: How do we break down which experiences, and how should we understand the wisdom that can result from them?

I can only address the related problems in an exemplary manner, and I will do so in five areas: the relation between concepts and experience; the relation between immediacy and mediatedness or communicability of experience; the resulting consequences for the relation between critical and affirmative practice; the methodological implications of a subject-scientific concept of experience; and the consequences for thinking about therapy.

2. On the relation between concepts and experience

The question is: What can be decided scientifically with reference to experience? One would think that, in the case of empirical studies, empirical data and results are decisive for the content and validity of concepts. Take an example from—experiential—psychology: the relation between intermittent reinforcement and resistance to extinction. As is know, this means that, if a certain behavior is not rewarded ("amplified") every time, but only intermittently, it will take longer for the behavior to stop after a stable absence of rewards. To use an illustrative example: A fisherman who catches a fish with every throw of his fishing-rod is rewarded every time, one who only makes a catch every now and then is rewarded "intermittently." We can easily imagine that if no fish are biting, the first will quit more quickly than the second (who, as we can easily understand, will remain hopeful for longer). What we can settle by experiment is whether this theoretically claimed relation exists or not. What can*not* be tested is the *relevance* of the theory's concepts for human life: "stimulus," "reaction," "reinforcement": There is no driving school where you will learn the meaning of break lights following the logic of these concepts, that is, through trial and error. This would mean that learners would only slowly, after a series of rear-end collisions, realize that flaring break lights signal that the preceding vehicle is slowing down. Driving schools do not treat break lights as "stimuli" but as societal meanings that can be imparted through language.

Put more generally: The world, objective meanings, "stimuli" must be understood as *meanings* to which the individual can and must relate; meanings that therefore do not directly determine human action, but that must be seen as opportunities to act. For the individual, opportunities to act become subjective "*premises* for action" if she has to develop intentions for action from subjective needs for solutions in given problematic life situations. Premises, therefore, are

aspects of constellations of meanings that the individual has accentuated. Actions are based on premises.

To use a simple example, an overhead luggage rack in a train compartment is a condition for getting the suitcase off my feet; it becomes a relevant premise for me if I actually want to get the luggage off my feet. Intention for action: haul the suitcase overhead. Action: I haul the suitcase overhead. A less obvious, but equally possible accentuation of premises of the condition "luggage rack" could be to use it for pull-ups, or to hang up laundry that didn't dry before the trip. What is crucial is that the luggage rack does not simply have an effect on the individual, but that the individual makes the luggage rack her premise and thereby establishes a context of sense or meaning. And in that sense, theoretical claims about actions have to be claims on *premise-reason relations*.

To guard against a frequent misunderstanding, I should highlight that "reasoned" here does not mean "rational" or "conscious," as the litmus paper example can demonstrate. Litmus paper does not consciously turn red or blue, and also not unconsciously, but under certain *conditions*, it changes color *conditionally.* This means that the unconscious only makes sense in the reason discourse. For the fishermen example above, this means: the lake or the conditions are a matter entirely inscrutable and intransparent to him, such that he is—consciously or not—reduced to trying out, under an extreme reduction of premises (I will come back to this).

Another aspect on the *relevance* of concepts: I can empirically establish that the marble David by Michelangelo in Florence is more voluminous and heavy and less conductive than the bronze thinker by Rodin in Paris. To a shipping company, these may be quite relevant aspects—but not for what we commonly associate with an artwork.

This means: With empirical methods alone, as sophisticated an organization of experience as they may be, we cannot establish the *relevance* of dimensions or concepts. This is the reason why—certainly for critical science—the level of clarifying and criticizing concepts cannot be dealt with empirically. This marks the limits of an experience-based, that is, empirical science and the necessity of adapting empirical methods to the categorial dimensions of the subject matter. Driving instructors clearly know this.

Moreover, the problem with experimental-statistical socio-scientific and psychological approaches is that, in its full sense, the concept of experience only applies to the researchers, while the experience of those researched is methodically regulated or even—to quote Adorno—"annulled" (1972: 69; my translation, M.M.); or, to use a line from Marx: reducing the "evidence of the senses … to the sensuality of geometry" (1953: 330; my translation, M.M.).

3. On the relationship between immediacy and mediatedness or communicability of experience

In the same way that, in an experiment, empirical events have to be broken down conceptually as to their origin, experiences are also being made in the light of conceptions elsewhere. But aren't *immediacy* and personal *authenticity* the central moments of self- and world experience? It is, after all, *me* who makes these experiences, and there is no-one that can make them for me; this includes spatial and temporal situatedness and the perspectivity—bodily—grounded therein. The individual experience of love, sexuality, fatherhood, toothache, musical enjoyment, physical exhaustion cannot be substituted by the reports of others. I can have to more or less passively surrender to an experience (toothache, noise, elevator music) or intentionally turn towards it (music), I can seek out experiences, try to find opportunities for them, or seek to avoid them. Learning an instrument illustrates irreplaceable individual experiences that further implicate a high share of one's own practical involvement: I can look at any number of guitarists and read any number of textbooks about playing a guitar, it will not make me a guitar player. Sensual experience and action are not separate as such, they are related to one another in a way that has to be determined case-by-case.

Despite the sensual immediacy of experience as it is given to me—and, at first, only to me—experiences of *ego* tend to involve imagining *alter*, or its possibility: We can not only share and relate experiences in the way that common phrases indicate: A problem shared is a problem halved, a pleasure shared is double pleasure—we can also learn from the experiences of others, which is a basis of generalization.

But what does it mean to learn from the experiences of others, to share problems and pleasures? What in the experiences is it that can be shared or related, when we take into account the sensual immediacy of experience, take it seriously and do not try to suspend it? The core problem seems to be whether *immediacy* can be *mediated*.

The solution seems to me to lie in the fact that experiences are made through, and can be broken down through, the medium of societal forms of thought (and therefore societal meanings): The immediate and authentic character of experiences does not mean solipsistic encapsulation, but lies in *my* individual realization of (societal) meanings, as they become premises for *me* individually. If I experience or observe myself as endowed with or suffering from certain characteristics, I experience or observe myself, firstly, in the general figure of thought of "personal characteristics" and, secondly, in the societal perception of the characteristic's psychological content (such as "polite,"

"competent" or "daft"). That individual experiences are made in the medium of societal forms of thought is also connected to the everyday experience of doubled pleasure and halved problems. Of course, this does not resolve the problems of breaking down experience; they are only formulated in a way that makes the function of the concept of and reference to experience comprehensible.

In my view, this also includes the differentiation of sociality and sociability, or between perceptible and non-perceptible aspects of what can be experienced (Holzkamp 1984). Society is a real system mediating the life support of the individual; but as such, society as a system is *not a perceptible, immediate element of experience.* Through different and (in the narrower sense) institutional subsystems, societal conditions structure the activities, ways of thinking and experiences of the members of society. This structuredness itself, however, is not perceptible but can only be determined by *reconstruction.* What needs to be reconstructed (in each case) is the mediated relation between the immediate life world or situation and the societal system that encompasses and structures it. Crucial to our enquiry, the immediate social relations that, in their life-worldly immediacy, appear to be quite perceptible are also structured - non-perceptibly - by the societal system and its institutional subsystems. "Perceptible" social relations are not fully captured by their perceptibility. How we experience men, women, children has biographical, situational and societal dimensions.

The *non-perceptibility* of societal structures does not at all mean that they cannot be *experienced,* but only that if we do not analyse experiences in relation to those moments, the analysis will be incomplete, skewed. However, we have to take into account that there are different, competing theoretical reconstructions and reflections of what society is, and what kind of society we live in. As a result, the break-down of experiences will be controversial. Whether you look at society as a social market economy, a risk society, the ambiance of postmodern flâneurs, or as vulgar capitalist barbarianism is a matter of controversy, but it is essential for breaking down experience (e.g., of unemployment or truancy), and in some cases also practically relevant.

The relevance of non-perceptible societal structures brings further complications with it: If we assume that subjective suffering relates to societal conditions, there are limits to psychology *to the extent that* it cannot or will not intervene at that level: Framing the situation of a single mother with five children in a two-bedroom apartment with running water from every wall as a problem of a woman lacking frustration tolerance would be a platitudinous psychologizing solution for a structural problem.

4. Consequences for the relationship between critical and affirmative practice

In order to introduce this, I have to come back once more to the (psychological) experiment, under the following aspect: In the experiment, the theory is devised *beforehand* and then operationalized, such that the empirical data can be generated and interpreted in that theoretical-practical framework. Conceptually, this methodic arrangement thus determines the conditions and the theory for the generation and interpretation of the participants' empirical data, organized on that basis (and, with that, the possibilities of experience regimented in that manner). Outside of such a methodic arrangement, that is, in any (research) practice that cannot or will not enforce such a regimen, the theoretical considerations cannot be deduced from a setup designed by the investigator, but they have to start from the problem of a subject. However, this action problem does not prima vista reveal the experiences enclosed in it, or the theories or forms of thought in light of which they were made. The task is, rather, to first reconstruct these and to discuss them.

In that regard, two problematic moments of referencing experience have stood out to me, especially in the analysis of psychological practice: that this reference to experience cannot be the—decisive—*end* of an argument, but only its *part* or beginning, and that under certain circumstances the appeal to experience can become immunizing to criticism and therefore affirmative.

Thus, in one of our projects (cf. Fahl & Markard 1993), a psychological caregiver of single young mothers living in a home for such women reported her "experience" that these young women projected onto her their problems with authority, which they had had with teachers and other authority figures. Upon inquiry, it turned out that one trigger of these "problems with authority" was that the women resisted the fact they did not receive their entire monthly allowance at the beginning of the month, but paid out in installments—a measure that the director and the psychologist justified with the tendency of the young women to "throw out" their money at the beginning of the month for activities considered superfluous, such as taking a taxi, and then to go empty-handed for the rest of the month.

What, then, can be said about this report of experience under the aspect of interest to us? What is referred to by the term "problems with authority" is not an empirical, observable subject matter that can be experienced immediately, but a *concept* with which the actual empirical subject matter—that is, the dispute over the payment of the allowance—is interpreted theoretically. Or, from another perspective: the concept "problems with authority" had become "second nature" to the psychologist to such an extent that she no longer separated the relevant

experience (of conflict) from the concept of a "problem with authority" in which she made that experience—a conflation that, in addition, had the pleasant side effect that the psychologist could set aside the question of whether she herself was acting in an authoritarian way, that is, whether the young women were right to oppose her. By structuring it as experience, she was able to transform this substantive conflict into a merely psychological problem, that is, it was transported into the terrain of the psychologist in a way in which the women had their potentially justified opposition psychologically wrested from them.

This experience, as we can see, could only be discussed and criticized because it was analyzed in relation to the form of thought enclosed in it, which requires keeping *description* and *interpretation* as analytically separate from one another as possible. It is therefore necessary to dissect the (in a wider sense) theoretical ideas underlying the experiences and related actions.

In that respect, we can also note that the talk of the *theory-practice relation*, in which experience is supposed to play a crucial role, has to be differentiated under one aspect. What appears as theory-practice difference is (also) a relation between different, even opposing, irreconcilable competing theories, that is, a *theory-theory relation* (cf. Holzkamp 1988:45). Since, given the anticipatory character of action, there can be no practice without "theory," there is really never a direct opposition of theory and practice, but always of theories with their individual practice references. For this reason, too, practice and arguments referring to practice (experiences) have to be interrogated as to their theoretical structuredness. The theory-practice relation is not one between psychological foundational science and the practical-professional occupation of psychologists, but pervades both areas.

5. Methodological implications of a subject-science-based concept of experience

Pretty much everything that I have said so far about experience and practice in the subject-world relation as a premises-reasons relation is incompatible with psychological mainstream research, inasmuch as that research reduces the specific relationship of an individual to the world—which, as I said, must be conceptualized as a premises-reasons relationship—to a condition-event relationship in a deterministic fashion, thereby also missing the specific character of therapeutic experience, which cannot be reduced to effect variables.

However, with Klaus Holzkamp (1986) we can show that claims framed nomothetically as condition-event relationships actually contain premises-reasons relationships, in short: hidden reasons patterns. It can be quite fun to go

through traditional theories under this aspect. This implication is revealed not only, but most obviously, by inserting into the "if-then" component of a hypothesis a "subjectively functional" or a "sensibly"—in that subjective sense, not as measured against external criteria of rationality: "If an action is rewarded, it will understandably/sensibly be repeated." Assuming that an "if-then" is mediated in this way by subjective meaning, we can no longer speak of a contingent relationship between the "if" and the "then" component. Not even if, to stick with the example, the rewarded action is not repeated, say, because the reward is seen as inappropriate, e.g., because a rewarded student does not want to be seen as teacher's pet (Brandtstädter 1984: 154). Because this, too, is a relevant context—just like the only apparently contingent relationship between intermittent reinforcement and resistance to extinction (see above), which could be clarified by an extreme reduction of premises from a reason-theoretical standpoint.

A contingent relationship, by contrast, would be: if you cuddle a bird-flu infected budgie, you catch the bird flu; you catch it or you don't, but you don't sensibly or reasonably catch it. On the other hand: If you don't want to catch the bird flu, you reasonably abstain from cuddling (unknown) budgies, if you are looking for a risk kick, you don't.

If claims officially framed as condition-event relations can be shown to contain premises-reasons relations—and this is the key point— the *official discourse* of nomothetically dominated psychology is undermined.

In my view, this has two methodological consequences that are essential for the method dispute in psychology / therapy:

First, the empirical examination of nomothetically meant theories that can be reformulated as premises-reasons relations is a misunderstanding, is *pseudo-empirical* (Brandtstädter 1982, 1984; Holzkamp 1986). That it is reasonable for some people to cuddle with budgies cannot be refuted by the fact that others do not find it reasonable—the different actions are examples of different premises-reasons relations. As said before, premises-reasons relations are contexts of senso or meaning created by the subject, they are the expression of subjectively good reasons under defined circumstances. In so far, the relationship between premises for action and life interests or intentions for action has to be understood as implicative, and therefore as neither in need of nor amenable to an empirical examination. If someone else generates a different intention for action under the same circumstances (cuddle budgies or not, use luggage racks in different ways), these different if-then relationships are not in theoretical competition, but they represent different ideas of subjective reasonableness, different accentuations of premises. In Holzkamp's words (1986: 31): "It does not depend on 'empirical' conditions to what extent the 'theoretical' proposition is 'proven,' but it depends

on the 'justification theory' as implicative structure which types of 'empirical' conditions are suitable as 'cases of application'." (

Secondly—and maybe even more importantly—this shows that assumptions on reasons for action cannot be shirked off into a hermeneutical exclave of psychology, but that essential conceptions and theories also mark the psychological mainstream, whose official discourse would thereby turn out to be theoretically and methodologically erroneous.

In opposition to the nomothetic understanding, psychological theories must be conceptualized as theories for the self-reflection of humans, and those have to be thought of and treated as co-researchers as much as possible; that is, their experiences have to be brought to bear in the full sense. Case-related as premises-reasons relations are, they do not contain statements on the incidence or prevalence of the phenomena treated by them. *Subjects exist in the plural, but not in the average* (cf. Markard 2000). Individual cases can be put in a relation to one another, but cannot "set off" against one another. It is the individual specifications that are of interest, not the leveling of an average. The individual, subjective cases are not deviations, the idea of deviation itself deviates from the idea of subjectivity. Possibilities for generalization therefore do not rest in key tendencies, but in the identification of societally mediated and societally intervening possibilities for action.

6. Consequences for thinking about therapy

This mediation by meaning is what sets apart therapy from the bird flu. And the world relationship in that mediation by meaning ("premises") is what makes it necessary to relate psychological suffering to the living conditions of the subjects (cf. Markard 2005). This raises at least two problems, which I will at least point to in conclusion:

1. If suffering, problems, disorders of subjects have to be understood from their living conditions, psychologists meet the limits of their work to the extent that these living conditions are beyond their range of intervention, or if and to the extent that their client don't expect or even actively prevent such an intervention. Nonetheless, psychologists are expected to alleviate problems while skipping over (the changeability of) problematic living conditions. The subjects themselves may also approach psychologists in the hope of delegating their own problems to experts. This harmonizes with an expectation of competence that is detached from societal relations, abstract and in the end unrealizable (Fahl & Markard 1993). Against this background, it is open and sometimes controversial what exactly is a *psychological* problem, a *psychological* disorder. Put

differently: We can certainly critically discuss when and by whom a subject matter experienced as problematic is defined as a psychological—and not a societal or institutional—problem. To use the example again, when does a single mother with five children in a wet two-bedroom apartment become the psychological problem of that mother's lacking frustration tolerance?

Under the conditions mentioned, qualifying a behavior as "irrational" means that I was unable to clarify the premises of the subject, or stopped trying: What appears as irrational is my own lack of understanding. An example:

> A woman buys a closet from IKEA that she puts together successfully in her bedroom. However, the closet only stays in place until the tramway rumbles past. Putting it up again does not survive the rumbling past of the tramway either. A friendly IKEA employee agrees to come and put it together himself. When he is done, it is agreed that he waits for the next tramway inside the closet with a flashlight, so that he can observe the potential breakdown of the closet from the inside. What happens while the woman gets the friendly IKEA guy a beer is what always happens in this kind of story: The woman's husband unexpectedly returns. He finds the new closet in the bedrooms and opens it: "What are you doing here," he asks the stranger in the closed, stunned.—"I am waiting for the tramway."

The stranger's answer—"I am waiting for the tramway—is irrational only for someone who hasn't broken down the stranger's premises, or who either cannot or does not want to do that.

2. Does this way of thinking also do justice to *insanity*? Erich Wulff (1997) discusses the problem of the world-subject relationship with reference to—schizophrenic—insanity as follows: In those affected, the most complex structures of meaning are indeed cognitively realized and realizable, but—sometimes limited to certain areas of experience—these meanings have lost their "validity," their "subjectively binding force" (159–60). Matters of course have lost their intelligibility. A rose is a rose is a rose—the fundamental recognition of being that lies in that quote by Gertrude Stein, the recognition of society, history and subject, Wulff argues, is no longer present with insanity. In this view, the "'premise character'" of the world, that is, what the rose means to us, is itself based on an actual act of recognition, renewed again and again, such as that a rose is a rose—an act of recognition that is suspended in insanity.

The question is now whether insanity as a fundamental suspension of the premise character of the world is itself amenable to justification. Put differently: the question is whether the fact that the matter of course is the unintelligible can itself still be understood or has to remain un-understood. Wulff leaves this question open. What seems to be essential to me: *If* insanity is the fundamental

non-recognition of the world, it has to be thought of as—albeit radically negative—world relation and, as such, keeps challenging us to an investigation that does not give up the question of the meaning of the world, even when the denial of the world is at issue.

It can neither be empirically proven in an unequivocal manner that every psychological disorder is related to certain conditions, nor that this is not the case. However, it is neither scientifically equally valid nor societally without consequence *which research question* we ask and with which perspective we pursue it. Against the background of the fundamental societal mediatedness of human existence, in my eyes, the—paradigmatic—insistence on the question of the relation of psychological suffering to the world and to society is the more scientifically fruitful and emancipatorily relevant one—because only in the pursuit of this question is the problem given over to our action not negated, namely how conditions can be established and what they have to be like such that humans do not despair.

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Morus Markard, Dr. phil. habil., Professor for Psychology at the Free University Berlin. Co-Founder of *Forum Kritische Psychologie*. Areas of research: Agency and subject development in capitalism, methods of subject-science research. Recent publication: *Einführung in die Kritische Psychologie* (2009, 6th ed. 2016). E-mail: mmarkard@zedat.fu-berlin.de