

## Topic Page: [Koffka, Kurt \(1886 - 1941\)](#)

Summary Article: **Koffka, Kurt**

From *Biographical Dictionary of Psychology*

**Born:** 1886, Berlin, Germany **Died:** 1941, Massachusetts, USA **Nat:** German-American **Ints:** Developmental, experimental psychology, philosophical and theoretical psychology and general **Educ:** PhD University of Berlin, 1909 **Appts & awards:** Professor, University of Giessen, 1911-27; Co-founder and Editor, *Psychologische Forschung*, 1921-35; Visiting Professor, Cornell University, 1924-5; Research Professor, Smith College, 1927-32; Research Fellow, USSR Government, 1932; Professor, Smith College 1932-41

### Principal publications

- 1912 Zur Analyse der Vorstellungen und ihrer Gesetze. Eine experimentelle Untersuchung. (An analysis of perceptions and their laws. An experimental investigation). Quelle and Meyer.
- 1915 Zur Grundlegung der Wahrnehmungspsychologie. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit V. Benussi. (On the basis of perception. A discourse with V. Benussi.) Zeitschrift für Psychologie, 73, 11-90.
- 1922 Perception: An introduction to the Gestalt Theory. Psychological Bulletin, 19, 531-85.
- 1924 Growth of the Human Mind. (Reprinted by Transaction Books, 1980.).
- 1935 Principles of Gestalt Psychology. Harcourt. Brace.

### Further reading

- Eisen, W. (1943) Kurt Koffka: 1886-1941. British Journal of Psychology, 33, 69-76.
- Harrower-Erickson, M. R. (1942) Kurt Koffka. American Journal of Psychology, 55, 278-81.
- Köhler, W. (1942) Kurt Koffka: 1886-1941. Psychological Review, 42 (2), 97-101.

Kurt Koffka studied philosophy at the University of Berlin. He also spent one study-year in Edinburgh which made him proficient in English and influenced him to pursue the more 'realistic' field of psychology. He wrote his dissertation under **Stumpf** on the perception of musical rhythm. Stumpf's interests in phenom enology and tonal sensations prepared Koffka to accept Wertheimer's ideas on *Gestalt* psychology when he met him later in Frankfurt. Koffka had also been influenced by Ehrenfels who had formed the concept of 'Gestaltqualität' to describe that a melody sounds different than its isolated tones and that a single tone does not possess form-quality by itself, but derives it from the other tones — the melody. Furthermore. Koffka's own protanopic weakness motivated him to investigate colour-vision, after-images and figure-ground phenomena. Since he could only differentiate between red and green under specific brightness and background conditions he became interested in the investigation of the effect of molar fields rather than in single stimuli.

Koffka's formal involvement with *Gestalt* Psychology began when he met **Köhler** in Frankfurt in 1911 and when both men served as subjects in **Wertheimer's** experiment demonstrating apparent motion — the 'Phi Phenomenon'. With great fervour Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka founded *Gestalt* Psychology to save psychology from elementarism, sensationism and associationism. Of the three men Koffka was the most vocal protagonist. From his post in Giessen he wrote the 'Beiträge zur *Gestalt* Psychologie'

(Contributions to *Gestalt* Psychology), reporting on a total of eighteen experiments in visual perception conducted by him and his students. These contributions were published intermittently in the *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* (1913-21). During the First World War Koffka worked with aphasic patients in Giessen to assess hearing losses and sound localization. In 1921 Koffka became co-founder and editor for the *Psychologische Forschung*, a journal founded explicitly for the dissemination of experimental data and theory pertaining to *Gestalt* psychology.

Koffka was largely responsible for the introduction of *Gestalt* psychology to the US. His fluency in English and his clear writing style facilitated his 1922 article in the *Psychological Bulletin*. He maintained that *Gestalt* Theory is more than just a theory of perception, but rather a new comprehensive way to understand psychology — if not all human endeavours. Koffka introduced Wertheimer's 'bundle hypothesis' to discuss sensation in relation to the 'degree of consciousness'. He also related sensation to imagery differentiating between momentary impressions and the 'residuum' — the sensations left behind to form part of our memory. Koffka also succeeded in integrating *Gestalt* concepts into developmental psychology. His book *Die Grundlagen der psychischen Entwicklung: Eine Einführung der Kinderpsychologie* was first published in German in 1921 and later in English under the title, *Growth of the Human Mind*. It had much popular appeal and was translated into French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and Japanese. The book brought educational psychology and child rearing within the scope of *Gestalt* psychology by emphasizing trial and error learning. In general, Koffka stressed the interaction between innate capacities and environmental conditions, favouring Stern's 'theory of convergence'. The text contains many practical examples while discussing children's physical development, their motor- and ideational learning, their thought processes and memory. In several chapters divergent views are criticized, especially **Watson's** behaviourism, **Thorndike's** connectionism and Karl **Bühler's** developmental stages. It is suggested that associations do not exist, but only 'configurations'.

In 1932 Koffka was invited by the USSR to undertake ethno-psychological research in Uzbekistan. He fell ill with a relapsing fever, unable to finish his work. Back in the US and still not well he began his major work *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*. It is a most thorough attempt to design a complete theoretical system of human behavior. It discusses a multitude of perceptual phenomena, categorizing them into 24 different 'Laws', such as the Law of Closure, Success, Fittingness, Good Continuation, Prägnanz, Proximity, Simplest Path, Transposition, etc. Some of these laws are used as frameworks in the discussion of reflexes, the Ego emotion, society and personality. Koffka's *Principles* has 15 chapters and over 700 pages, and has become a classic in psychology.

Frank Wesley

**APA**

Chicago

Harvard

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Wesley, F. (2002). Koffka, Kurt. In N. Sheehy, A. J. Chapman, & W. A. Conroy (Eds.), *Biographical dictionary of psychology* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Routledge. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/koffka\\_kurt\\_1886\\_1941](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/koffka_kurt_1886_1941)

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## Chicago

Wesley, Frank. "Koffka, Kurt." In *Biographical Dictionary of Psychology*, edited by Noel Sheehy, Antony J. Chapman, and Wendy A. Conroy. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2002.  
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## Harvard

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## MLA

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