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


Further reading


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 phenomenology 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.

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