

Abstract and Concrete Behaviour: Kurt Goldsteins (1878-1965) Holistic Approach to Neuropsychology and the Problem of Mental Retardation

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In his theoretical main work, *The Organism* (1934), the German-American neurologist Kurt Goldstein developed a new and unique methodology for studying organismic behaviour [1, 2]. His total, holistic approach connects the empirical knowledge of explanatory, natural science with philosophical concepts of understanding man as mind and body [3]. Goldsteins unifying view of the organism as the object *and* subject of biology was an important step to a homogenous, anti-Cartesian theory of human behaviour, beyond dualisms such as „higher“ or „lower“ psychological functions, normal psychology and psychopathology, biological and social life. Problems, like the relationship between normality, health and disease, emotion and cognition, knowledge and action, which seem to be divergent, and were treated in different ways, could now be understood as correlated and similar phenomena, which follow the same general laws of organismic life. According to Goldstein's concepts there is no bifurcation or antagonism between mind and body. Their distinction depends on the observers point of view. The mind is a part of the life process as a whole. A brain lesion immediately affects the mind. But its actual impact on the behaviour of a person depends on the situation as a whole, which includes biological, psychological and social aspects.

A number of theories of mental retardation in the first half of the 20th century [4, 5, 6] were deeply affected by Goldsteins distinction between the so-called „concrete“ and „abstract“ attitude in human behaviour [7]. One of his main thesis about the effect of neurological disorders on mental development was the idea, that the abstract attitude was essential for the normal functioning of intelligence [8] and that this attitude was impaired in children with brain lesions and other neuropsychological syndroms: The primary disturbance leads to a number of secondary symptoms, which don't arise directly from the underlying processes, but depend on the role, a certain function plays in the mental development of the child, on the moment, when the given disturbance occurred, the social reaction of the environment and the individual abilities of adaption and compensation [6]. As Goldstein stressed, „no damage of a separate function can be made responsible for a certain behaviour, only from the structure of personality as a whole“ [9]. From this point of view, mental retardation appears not as a biological or familial caused deviation from the norm, but rather as a special case of „defective responsiveness“ [1]: as a discrepancy between the demands of the environment and the capacities of the individual. In this sense mental retardation was no longer considered to be merely

a problem of inferior mentality, but to be a relational phenomenon, that consists in the relation between the concrete attitude of a neuropsychological impaired person, the abstract demands of culture and society and the support of the people around this person to employ the abstract attitude.

The paper attempts to show the contribution of Goldstein to a dynamic, relational and systemic theory of mental retardation and their implications for education, therapy and empirical research on this field, especially with regard to the phenomenological approach of neuropsychological syndrome analysis and to the meaning of „detours“ in the mental development of children with disabilities.

Bibliography

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[This abstract is intended for a paper at the Mind and Body Workshop of the Banff part of the meeting.]