

Planes of Phenomenological Experience: The Psychology of Deafness as an Early Example of American Gestalt Psychology, 1928–1940

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When, in 1928, the Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, Massachusetts, opened a psychological research division, it was nothing unusual in a time fascinated with the sciences of education. Yet with its longstanding ties to Northampton's Smith College, the school was able to secure the collaboration of eminent Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka, who, in turn, engaged 2 more German-speaking emigrants, Margarete Eberhardt and social psychologist Fritz Heider, and Heider's American wife Grace Moore Heider. This collaboration has seen little attention from historians, who have treated Koffka's and Heider's time in Northampton as a transitory phase. I argue, however, that their research on deafness adds to the history of emigration and knowledge transfer between European and American Schools of psychology, and to historical understanding of the interrelation of Gestalt, child, and social psychology. Professionals in child studies and developmental psychology were keenly interested in the holistic and introspective approach Gestalt psychology offered. Deaf children were considered a particularly fascinating research population for exploring the relationship between thought and language, perception and development, Gestalt, and reality. At the Clarke School, Grace Moore Heider was among the first Americans to apply Gestalt principles to child psychology. In a time in which pejorative eugenic beliefs dominated professional perceptions of disability, the Heiders' groundbreaking work defined the deaf as a social and phenomenological minority. This was in opposition to dominant beliefs in deaf education, yet it points to early roots of a social model of deafness and disability, which historians usually locate in 1960s and '70s activism.

Keywords: Gestalt psychology, social psychology, Fritz Heider, Kurt Koffka, deafness

Deaf people's minds and psyches have long fascinated scientists, educators, and lay-people. Their sign languages have brought up questions about the relationships between thought, language and speech, imagination, and abstraction. Often, deaf people have served as a kind of model population for proving or disproving certain philosophical, psychological, or linguistic theories. Charles Darwin, for example, frequently referred to "deaf-mutes" to make a point about gradual evolutionary changes in the development of languages or complex emotions (e.g., Darwin, 1872). William James' writing on thought and language was influenced by his correspondence with the deaf artist and photographer Theophilus d'Estrella. D'Estrella's experiences influenced James in concluding that abstract thought was possible without language (James, 1983). Only in the 1930s, however, did psychologists begin to systematically establish the psychology of deafness as a subfield of educational and general psychology.

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This foundational research was pursued by figures familiar to historians of psychology: eminent Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka and social psychologist Fritz Heider, who held joint positions at Smith College and at the Clarke School for the Deaf, both situated in Northampton, Massachusetts. Less famous figures were also involved: the German psychologist and philosopher Margarete Eberhardt, who had studied under Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler, and Fritz Heider's wife Grace Moore Heider, a student of Koffka and later an accomplished child psychologist herself. Historians have given little attention to Koffka's and Heider's work at the Clarke School—although in Heider's case, this research spanned 17 years of his career (Ash, 1984; Laucken, 1999; Malle & Ickes, 2000; Sokal, 1984).¹ In this article, I show that their research at the Clarke School adds to the early history of Gestalt, child, and social psychology in the United States and that this is a history in which the study of deafness provided an important impetus for thinking about the relationship between sensory input, the perception of sensory or auditory figures, thought, and language. The Clarke School provided Koffka, Heider, and their colleagues with staff, funding, and resources, not to mention access to a large and interesting school-aged research population. The school was among the leading institutions of deaf education in the United States, dedicated to the scientific management of deafness.

The early history of the psychology of deafness is also a history of how Gestalt psychology came to the United States. By the early 1930s, Smith College had become the American center of Gestalt psychology, and a location of exchange between German-speaking émigré psychologists and their American colleagues. This development began with Kurt Koffka, who, in 1927, after several years of lecturing at various U.S. universities, took a well-funded professorship at Smith College. He also served as head of the psychological research division at the Clarke School for the Deaf, conveniently located just across the street from the college. His positions at Smith and Clarke allowed Koffka to introduce his American students to the principles of Gestalt theory and to offer positions to a number of European emigrants during the 1930s and '40s. In Northampton, Americans and emigrants formed a vibrant circle that brought together different psychological schools. To the emigrant group belonged, for example, Tamara Dembo and Eugenia Haffmann, both originally emigrants from Russia who had studied in Germany with Kurt Lewin and developmental psychologist Wilhelm Peters. On the American side, there were psychologists Mary Henley, J. J. Gibson (later known for his work on visual perception at Cornell), and his future wife, Eleanor Jack, a developmental psychologist concerned with perceptual learning. Several members of this Northampton circle—Tamara Dembo, Fritz and Grace Moore Heider—would later become influential in child, social, and rehabilitation psychology (Heider, 1984).

Historians have sometimes portrayed the encounter between American and German psychology in this period as one solely between German Gestalt psychology and American behaviorism, separated by stark methodological and philosophical differences. Mitchell Ash, for example, has argued that American psychologists considered Gestalt psychology an interesting concept, yet that the Germans' philosophical claims and holistic framework ultimately was foreign to an American audience steeped in behaviorist thought. Thus, Ash concludes, when Gestalt psychologists were looking to establish themselves in the United States, they were relegated to second-tier institutions, with fewer resources and fewer students (Ash, 1984). Sokal, on the other hand, has pointed out that despite the economic hardships of the Great Depression, the emigrating German psychologists were successful in securing university positions, and that by the early 1930s, they had established Gestalt psychology as a distinct psychological school of thought (Sokal,

¹ The lives and work of Koffka and Heider have been covered by a number of historians, mainly in a number of biographic sketches, or as part of a larger group, such as in Mitchell Ash's (1995) *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture* (see also Ash, 1984; Laucken, 1999; Malle & Ickes, 2000; Sokal, 1984). However, there exist no comprehensive biographies, and their personal papers remain largely unexplored.

1984). American psychology was a diverse and eclectic field, in which behaviorism was a strong and sometimes dominant influence, but by no means the only available paradigm. And there were, in fact, fields that were highly receptive to Gestalt thought. With its holistic perspective, and interest in the sensory discrimination and configuration of rhythm and sound, tone, color, and shape, Gestalt psychology was uniquely suited for the kind of psychology educators of the deaf had in mind.

More generally, American child studies and developmental psychology—a designation under which the psychological study of deafness fell until the 1950s—was strongly influenced by its German Gestalt counterpart. At Smith College and the Clarke School, for example, Grace Moore Heider was one of the first to apply Gestalt principles to American child studies (Moore Heider, 1927). As in other scientific fields, female psychologists such as Grace Moore Heider or Margarete Eberhardt were often relegated, by the prejudice of their time, to second-tier positions. Whether by preference or social pressure, women psychologists tended to research “soft” topics, such as child and educational psychology. Yet probably more than in any other type of institution during the first half of the 20th century, schools were locations of applied psychology, points of translation from psychological theory to practice, and vice versa, from observation to theory (Petrina, 2007; Zenderland, 1998). Psychological research at the Clarke School provides an excellent example of the interdependence and tensions between these dimensions.

Looking at Gestalt research at the Clarke School, this article adds to the history of the migration of Gestalt psychology to the United States and its connections to social psychology, child studies, and developmental psychology. Using the example of deafness research, I show close ties between Gestalt and social psychology in forming new ideas about perception, self, and social relations. For Fritz Heider, work with deaf people provoked reflections influencing his later theories of interpersonal relations (Heider, 1984). In 1940 and '41, he and Grace Moore Heider published the first monographs dedicated solely to the psychology of deafness, groundbreaking volumes that used Gestalt concepts to challenge established beliefs about deaf people (Moore Heider & Heider, 1940, 1941). Their conclusions were at odds with dominant educational theories about disability, identity, and social worth. Their research recognized already in the 1940s, long before this idea became fashionable among social scientists, that the deaf were a social minority, and that deafness was, predominantly, a social disability, determined by misconceptions and bias between the deaf and the hearing. In a time in which much of disability-related research—including general and educational psychology—was marked by eugenic fear-mongering and hostility toward the disabled, these were unusual conclusions.

This article thus also points to early origins of a social minority model of deafness, which is usually seen as being popularized by the Deaf² activism of the 1970s and '80s onward (e.g., Barnartt & Scotch, 2001; Christiansen & Barnartt, 2003). Since then, Deaf history has traced the rich social and cultural life of Deaf people and Deaf communities (e.g., Burch, 2004; Gannon, Butler, & Gilbert, 1981). For most of the 20th century, however, the existence of Deaf culture and Deaf communities was unknown to the hearing public, much less explored by scholars and medical professionals. Deafness was considered a debilitating disability, something to be cured or prevented by science and medicine. Deaf and disability historians have pointed to the crucial role of science and medicine in maintaining this image of deafness and disability. This is certainly true, yet it also tends to lead to a portrayal of science and medicine as monolithic entities (e.g., Branson & Miller, 2002; Davis, 1995). Avoiding this pitfall, I show through the example of psychology research at the Clarke School how a social minority model of deafness could emerge

² Since suggested by linguist James Woodward in 1972, it has become common usage to denote the condition of hearing loss with a lower letter *d* and Deaf culture and community with a capital *D*.

at an institution that maintained medical–pathological and assimilationist approaches. Here, the merger of Gestalt and early social psychology in the work of Fritz and Grace Moore Heider offered new venues for moving toward a more relativist and less pathologizing framework.

The Mind of the (Deaf) Child: Child Studies and the Psychology of Deafness

When, in 1928, the Clarke School for the Deaf established a research department, this was an ambitious move for a small school, but one keeping with the spirit of the time (Schmidt, 2016). For progressive era educators, the young science of applied psychology promised to make teaching more scientific and efficient. Yet child studies and child psychology were more than just pragmatic sciences. During the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, the emotional and intellectual development of children was a topic of much fascination for teachers, psychologists, and parents. The child was scrutinized not only as an interesting object in itself, but as a token for the study of language, thought, and consciousness, of what it meant to be human. The child was somewhat of an animalistic creature to be civilized, much like the savage, yet more pliable. In this manner, the child's path to adulthood was considered a mirror for man's evolutionary progress. The study of children thus served, as historian of education Sally Shuttleworth (2010) put it, "as an entry point for all the merging historical disciplines of evolutionary biology and psychology, anthropology, and historical philology" (p. 269). Given this ontogenetic framework, the deaf child provoked a special fascination. Deaf people's thought and language had long fascinated philosophers, linguists, educators and psychologists. As Christopher Krentz (2007) pointed out, "[h]earing Americans often viewed deaf people as mysterious, captivating figures, wondering how they thought, what they experienced, and seeing them as a way to explore what it meant to be human" (p. 4).

These beliefs and assumptions also determined the course of education and psychology at the Clarke School. Teachers' concerns about deaf children's "lonely, isolated little minds shut up in their prisons" expressed a fascination with the unknown and unexplored (Clarke School for the Deaf, 1927, p. 18). "No one," a school brochure stated in 1929, "has yet discovered in what terms they think—since they know no word—unless it is in pictures" (Clarke School for the Deaf, 1929, p. 7). Such half unsettled, half intrigued remarks cast deaf children as a strange other, an object of research whose mental life was so different as to be unimaginable. The equation of spoken language with conscious thought was closely tied to changing notions of evolution and civilization. Throughout most of the 19th century, sign languages had been accepted and admired as real languages, and had been favored in deaf education. This changed dramatically, however, from the 1860s onward, with the rise of nativist sentiment and evolutionary thought. Now, sign languages became associated with the primitive, uncivilized gesticulation of apes and savages. Consequently, the signing communities of deaf people that existed all over the United States came under suspicion. The new paradigm in deaf education was oralism, the exclusive teaching of speech and lip-reading. In 1880, the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf decided on the use of oralism, at the exclusion of sign language, which so far had been used predominantly. From then on, and for almost a century, American schools for the deaf oppressed and punished the use of sign language. At best, it was reserved for *oral failures*, a term that falsely conflated progress in lip-reading and speech with intellectual achievement (Baynton, 1993, 1998, 2011).

Eugenic and oralist thought were closely connected, and no figure presented this union more prominently than Alexander Graham Bell, usually known as the inventor of the telephone. As a young man, Bell had worked as a teacher for the deaf, promoting his father's system of "visible speech." Bell was also a eugenicist, and interested in the reproductive habits of deaf people, which he studied for years using school records. In 1883, he gave a talk to the American Academy of Sciences, titled *Memoir upon the*

Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race. Deaf people, he stated, had a dangerous tendency to marry each other, a phenomenon that increased the incidence of hearing loss and even might finally produce a deaf human subrace. For Bell, the solution lay in oralist education. If the deaf were educated in oralist day schools rather than residential schools using manual communication they would integrate into hearing society, choose hearing partners and thus avert the dangers of creating a deaf race (Bell, 1884; Greenwald, 2007).

The Clarke School was founded in Northampton in 1878 as the first American institution to solely rely on oral methods, promising the deaf child's transformation and normalization. Their semicivilized state of being a "deaf-mute" was to be only a temporary one from which the child could be saved by the uplifting effects of education and scientific philanthropy (Clarke School for the Deaf, 1927; Numbers, 1974). With such a claim, and wealthy New England donors to backup their operations, the school soon became the leading American institution of oralist education, a reputation it has maintained to the present day. The school's highly regarded teacher-education program, operating in cooperation with Smith College, influenced generations of educators (Schlesinger, 1977).

Science and medicine were crucial in this endeavor to normalize deaf children. An ever-growing range of disciplines explored the causes and sequelae of hearing loss and potential avenues to prevent or alleviate them. By the 1920s, the Clarke School set out to become a leader in deafness research as well, influenced by Bell and his close ties to the school. In 1872, as a young teacher promoting visible speech, he had visited the Clarke School. There, he fell in love with one of his private students, Mabel Hubbard, later his wife, the deaf daughter of one of the school's founders. From 1917 to 1922, Bell served as president of the school board, and in this function, he suggested in 1921 that the school should establish a research department. Bell died in 1922 and did not see his vision become reality, yet in 1928 after a major fundraising campaign, the school established the Coolidge Fund. It was named after the presidential couple, who had once resided in Northampton where Grace Goodhue Coolidge had worked as a teacher at the Clarke School. With money from this fund, the school established a research department with divisions for phonetics, heredity research, and psychology (Clarke School for the Deaf, 1929). These divisions are indicative of which sciences the school considered most promising. The phonetics division researched new methods and instruments for measuring hearing loss for more precise diagnosis or for amplifying sound to help teachers improve speech and residual hearing. Heredity research, on the other hand, aimed at long-term prevention of deafness in the next generation. For this purpose, teachers collected the students' family and medical information and provided heredity counseling. Following Bell's paradigm, the Clarke School, and more generally teachers for the deaf, pursued a policy of persuasion rather than coercion. They believed that unlike the "feeble-minded," whose reproductive habits could only be curtailed with marriage restrictions and sterilization legislation, the deaf were productive and responsible citizens who would come to the "right" reproductive decision, wishing for "normal" children and a normal family life (Burch, 2004; Robinson, 2010; Schmidt, 2016).

There was, then, underlying the oralist paradigm a profound belief in the deaf child's transformation to (the appearance of) hearing normalcy. Psychological research was to be a crucial instrument in this transformation. Indeed, school officials believed, "psychological research among the deaf [. . .] does not deal with the abnormal, but with the normal that for a time at least has been enclosed" (Wild, 1930, pp. 13–14). It thus could provide "first-hand material that can not be found anywhere else, because here alone it has been kept, up to a certain point, free from outside influences" (p. 14). In this framework, the deaf child embodied an intensification rather than a deviation from the blank slate of childhood, displaying a naïve, ignorant innocence, ready to be molded (after having been thoroughly explored) into full humanity. It was this transformation that the Clarke School hoped to achieve with their psychological research. As a school official remarked in 1930,

the “possibilities in this unexplored field” (p. 13) were most promising. Studying the “emotional development of the deaf child may well lead to discoveries from which much practical pedagogical value may be gained” (p. 13).

Gestalt psychology was exceptionally well suited for the kind of psychological studies that the school envisioned. Unlike behavioral schools of thought, Gestalt psychologists believed in gaining insight to one’s perception, thought, and mind, something that oralist educators, too, considered essential for their work. Gaining access to a child’s mind via speech was a basic tenet of oralist education. Gestalt psychologists’ interest in the sensory dimension of perception—rhythm and sound, tone, color, and shape—correlated with the desire of oralist educators to better understand the mechanisms of speech and lip-reading. Kurt Koffka, for example, had early on become interested in problems of audiological and visual perception, for example, the brightness and contrast of colors, figure-ground perception, or—the topic of his 1908 dissertation—sound and rhythm. There was also a longstanding overlap between Gestalt and developmental or child psychology; many Gestalt psychologists were themselves active in this field. For German Gestaltists, child studies provided an entry point to American psychology. Already in 1924, Robert Morris Odgen had translated Koffka’s 1921 *Einführung in die Kinderpsychologie* under the English title *The Growth of the Mind* (Ash, 1984). Here, Koffka had pursued a comparative ontogenetic and phylogenetic perspective familiar to educators in the English-speaking world (Shuttleworth, 2010).

A Lineage of German Emigrants: Establishing Gestalt Psychology at the Clarke School

Kurt Koffka, with his interest in problems of audiological and visual perception, and his influential position in Gestalt and educational psychology, was crucial for the course of the Clarke School’s psychology research. Soon after arriving at Smith College in 1927, he was pulled into the plans for establishing a psychology division at Clarke. The two institutions had long worked together and, by the 1920s, had established a close collaboration and exchange of staff and resources. Busy with his own research, Koffka agreed to be head of the psychology division only if he was given the help of both an assistant and an experienced researcher. The assistantship was filled by Grace Moore (Heider), who was among Koffka’s first students at Smith College. Deaf education was a professional and personal interest in Moore’s family. Her mother was a teacher at the Florida School for the Deaf, her deaf sister a student at the Clarke School. While earning her bachelor’s degree in psychology from Mount Holyoke College, Moore often visited her sister. In 1927, Moore began research at Koffka’s psychological laboratory at Smith College and acted as liaison to the Clarke School. Her interest in deaf education overlapped with Koffka’s interest in child development (Heider, 1983; Moore Heider, 1961).

Moore’s (1927) master’s thesis, *Thought and Perception in the Deaf Child*, is one of the first American applications of Gestalt psychology to questions of child development and (special) education. Indeed, probably owing to the novelty of Gestalt theory in the United States, she felt compelled to use an English translation, “configuration psychology,” throughout her thesis.³ As Moore was Koffka’s student, we can assume that this translation found his blessing. Through Koffka, she was initiated to Gestalt thought and philosophy, which she also appears to have read in the German original. Drawing from this canon of German Gestalt psychology, she (Moore Heider, 1927) defined it as a theory that “considers experience not as a mosaic of elements of sensation and imagery, but as

³ It is interesting to note—and indicative for the success of Gestalt psychology—that this concise English translation did not last and made way for the German “Gestalt”; although embedded in English, “Gestalt” lost the multivalence it carries in German.

a more or less clear figure upon a less clear ground” and that in “this structure each part owes its peculiar quality to its membership in the whole” (p. 26). Deaf children, Moore believed, were particularly suited for Gestalt studies, as in “children and lower animals” (the uneducated deaf, implicitly, stood somewhere in between), Gestalten were less developed and complex, and thus easier to observe. For her Clarke School research, she employed an “adaption of Köhler’s experiments with chimpanzees for the study of deaf children” (Moore Heider, 1927, p. 3). Like Köhler’s chimpanzees, the deaf and hearing children in her study were observed solving evermore complex problems for which they required insight into the experiment’s larger set-up—its Gestalt or configuration. From these observations, Moore believed, one could draw more general conclusion about deaf people’s perception and the underlying physiological–sensory processes and configurations.

Moore was particularly interested in the relationship between physiological–sensory makeup and perception. Gestalt theory, she explained (Moore Heider, 1927), assumed that the “nervous system itself functions as a dynamic unit” (p. 27) and that “relationships in the physical world are governed by the same law that controls physiological structures” (p. 28). Thus, in deafness, were one such part or element missing, a “readjustment of the whole structure” (p. 27) must be the consequence. Here, neurologist Henry Head’s study of aphasia in brain-damaged patients also served as a model for understanding the altered interplay between thought and language. Moore Heider (1927) speculated that deaf people’s “incomplete physiological equipment” might result in “respond[ing] to different, but equally ‘good’ patterns of the physical world” (p. 28). “Likeness of behavior based upon unlike perceptual data,” Moore concluded, might “be undesirable from the point of view of the individual” (p. 28). There was, then, a potential “danger” in “education toward conformity to the behavior of hearing people” (p. 28). Making deaf people pass as hearing, however, was exactly the goal of at the Clarke school, and more generally of contemporary deaf education. Here, already, a Gestalt-influenced psychology of deafness was at odds with the Clarke School’s oralist paradigm, and thus with the very institution that funded research. During the 1930s, Moore would continue to explore this approach with her future husband Fritz Heider.

First, however, Moore worked with another researcher from Germany, Margarete Eberhardt, who took the position of research associate at the Clarke School. Finding a person qualified for this position had proven difficult. He or she had to possess both teaching experience and a background in pedagogical and psychological theory. Koffka finally thought of one of his and Köhler’s former students, Margarete Eberhardt, who “was the one person in the world, as far as he knew, who had all the qualifications for this many-sided position” (Moore Heider, 1961, p. 176). Born in 1886, Eberhardt had indeed been broadly educated in pedagogy, psychology, and music, a combination of interests she shared with more prominent Gestalt psychologists. She had attended the Leipzig Conservatory and Berlin Akademie für Tonkunst, taught languages and music in Germany and the United Kingdom, and studied psychology in the hope of pursuing a career in research. For a woman in early 20th century German academics, this was a difficult path. Köhler, Koffka, influential Hamburg, Germany, psychologist William Stern, and philosopher Ernst Cassirer were impressed with her experimental work on the perception of sound, tone, and color. Yet given the difficulties in establishing herself in German academia, she accepted Koffka’s offer to join his team in Northampton (Diefenbach & Eberhardt, 1961).

Eberhardt arrived in Northampton in October 1928, like Koffka and Moore working jointly at the Clarke School and at Smith College. With her training as a psychologist and teacher, and her specialization in music, she immediately realized, as Grace Moore Heider (1961) later remarked, the “possibilities of training deaf children to use their voices in a way that would make their speech more natural and more intelligible” (p. 77). With various experiments and tests, she hoped to find “out what characteristic differences exist between deaf and hearing children as regards their intellectual and emotional

make-up, in general, and their conscious thinking in particular” (Eberhardt, 1929, p. 25). However, already in June 1929, Eberhardt was offered a position at the University of Hamburg, which she decided to take. Apart from her homesickness, she had not found much satisfaction in teaching undergraduate students at a women’s college such as Smith. Her work at the Clarke School, her “boundless energy,” “quick perception,” and openness to sharing her knowledge were warmly remembered by Grace Moore, with whom she remained connected in a lifelong close friendship (Eberhardt, 1961; Moore Heider, 1961).⁴

Koffka looked again to Germany to find a replacement, and once more, Grace Moore would bond with the newcomer—although not in a manner of which the Clarke School approved. For the 1930–1931 school year, Austrian psychologist Fritz Heider left the University of Hamburg to take a joint position at the Clarke School psychology division and Smith College psychology faculty. Heider’s path to psychology, and to Smith and Clarke, was not straightforward. Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1886, he had first studied architecture, then philosophy in Munich; Vienna, and Graz. The Graz circle of Gestalt psychology under philosopher and experimental psychologist Alexius Meinong was particularly influential for Heider’s work. Unlike the Berlin school, which placed the static psychological subject in a fixed field, the Graz school believed that the subject’s intentional acts shaped this field in first place. Under Meinong, Heider wrote his doctoral thesis, *Thing and Medium*, on the relationship between sensory perceptions and the things that they mediate. This approach was the basis for Heider’s later work on social psychology. It also is evident in his close observation and analysis of how deaf children formed their environment and social relations (Boudewijnse, 1999; Heider, 1927, 1984; Malle & Ickes, 2000; Reisenzein & Mchitarjan, 2003).

Heider did not enter academia immediately after receiving his doctorate. Instead, he spent some years wandering around Europe, working in diverse and eclectic jobs such as an electrician, school counselor, gardener and teacher. Eventually, he went to Berlin, where he attended the Gestalt group’s seminars and lectures and became part of their social circle. In 1927, he was offered a teaching position at the University of Hamburg Psychological Institute, led by William Stern, a leader in the young fields of childhood and individual psychology. It was Stern who, in 1930, recommended Heider for the position at the Clarke School and Smith College. Heider, whose professional prospects in Europe seemed limited, and whose family had already during his childhood considered emigration to the United States, took the opportunity. In August, 1930, he arrived in Northampton. As it was summer, and all school and university officials had left town, he was welcomed by Grace Moore. Feeling an immediate connection, the two fell in love, and—despite the school’s threat to fire Heider if he proceeded to pursue this union—married only a few months later, in December 1930. In Northampton, the couple worked together for the next 17 years, combining her experimental, Gestalt child studies with his phenomenological interest in perception, structures, and social environment (Heider, 1984). Like most Clarke School researchers, both also researched and taught at Smith College, where Grace Moore Heider worked under Koffka on her doctoral thesis. Titled *New Studies in Transparency, Form, and Color*, the thesis tackled the classical Gestalt topic of sensory discrimination in perception of figure parts and wholes (Moore Heider & Koffka, 1933).

The Clarke School, then, shared with the Gestalt psychologists they hired a holistic understanding of the deaf child in its surroundings. Certainly, the school’s belief in deaf children’s inherent normalcy influenced how the psychologists saw their new research

⁴ Given the political development in Germany, Eberhardt’s return proved fatal for her career. In 1935, she was banned from teaching and research because she had insisted on the freedom of speech. She was only reinstated in 1948, when she became lecturer in psychology at the University of Hamburg. Although her work on the psychology of ethics attracted a small, dedicated following, she is now mostly forgotten (Bondy, 1958; Stadler, 1985).

population. And certainly, the arrangement between the Heiders and the school was mutually beneficial for both sides: The school offered the psychologists resources and access to an interesting research population, free design of their studies, and not the least, the title of head and associate of a research division. For the school, their research department offered the prestige of involvement in research during a time fascinated with more scientific and efficient education, and promised new insight into the learning, thought, and behavior of deaf children. Yet this arrangement also betrayed the tenuous relationship between theoretical research and its application—or lack thereof—in education. There were significant differences in how school and psychologists thought about the goals of research, about deafness and deaf people. Unlike the school's teachers and staff, who taught and lived with students for years, Koffka, Eberhardt, and the Heiders were neither invested in the ideals of oralism nor in the mission to save and normalize deaf children. Although they embodied the school's psychological research division for 17 years, the Heiders remained outsiders to the Clarke School's closed pedagogical and social world. Rather, their social life centered around their work and research at Smith College, where they were part of a vibrant circle of American and emigrant scholars.

Through his own work as a teacher and with psychologist William Stern, Fritz Heider in particular had been influenced by German reform pedagogy, which broke with the older, more rigid and authoritarian model of education on which Clarke was based, and put great emphasis on fostering the child's individual personality. His first impression of the school, scribbled down in hasty, hand-written notes, was one of interested consternation. Teachers, he noted (Heider, 1930), did not consider the child "as a human being on the same level," did not "take them seriously", and treated them in a condescending manner that interrupted their natural learning process.⁵ Decades later, in his 1983 autobiography (Heider, 1983), he still remarked on the school's strict discipline that regulated every detail and moment in the students' lives. There was "perfect order in everything they did" (p. 119). This, Heider thought, "was too good to be true" (p. 119) and not a very natural state for children. Curious what would happen if left to their own devices, he once set up a classroom with a two-way mirror and asked the teacher to leave the children alone. Apparently, such lack of supervision was unheard of and puzzling to teachers and students alike. After some moments of confused silence, the children began to stir and wreaked havoc on the classroom. The teacher was "shocked at the scene of destruction" (p. 119), and Heider did not repeat his experiment. What to the teacher was a threat to their carefully established order that displayed the successful civilization of the deaf child, appeared to Heider an experiment in the (in)stability of social relations and the real (unruly, careless, playful) nature of children.

Teachers spent many years closely working with their residential students and were deeply invested in seeing them fulfill the norms of hearing society. School publications (Clarke School for the Deaf, 1927) portrayed them as mythical, heroic figures, the "knights of old" (p. 19), who would "break through the barrier of deafness" and "liberate these prisoners of silence" (p. 27), "rescu[ing] these lonely, isolated little minds shut up in their prisons" (p. 18). The psychologists, on the other hand, were not committed to the ideal of deaf people passing as hearing, or learning speech. On the contrary, that the deaf often did not pass as hearing, and that their speech and behavior retained certain differences, provided interesting insight to the psychologists. Fritz Heider's early observations of deaf children also betray a deep fascination with the relationship between thought, learning and social behavior, themes he explored at the Clarke School and in his later theories of social interactions. Interested in more general phenomenological and psychological questions, the deaf remained a somewhat distant, fascinating study popu-

⁵ In the German original, "Das Kind wird nicht genommen als Mensch auf gleichem Niveau, nicht ernst genommen."

lation, described in the terminology of experimental science rather than the often intimately sentimental language that characterized the writing of oralist educators. Consequently, as they engaged with deaf children, and later, too, deaf adults, the Heiders came to conclusions that were at odds with the oralist paradigm. In particular, they began to relativize the practice of measuring deaf people by the standards of hearing society and began to explore the social interaction between the deaf and hearing.

Planes of Phenomenological Experience: A Gestalt Theory of Sensory Difference

Psychological research at the Clarke School pursued two basic approaches. In a first phase, during the late 1920s and first half of the 1930s, Eberhardt and the Heiders explored questions of perception, personality and learning, using the classical methods of introspective and experimental psychology. Their studies relied heavily on European, and mostly German childhood psychology and child studies, referring frequently to the works of child psychologists William and Clara Stern, Karl and Charlotte Bühler, or Jean Piaget. They conducted a range of experiments with Clarke School students of various age groups, using students from nearby schools for hearing and deaf children as control groups. Children were asked to group objects or to memorize words, to talk or write about their experiences (in other words, to provide insight), or were observed in free play. By the mid 1930s, their attention shifted to the social dynamics between deaf children and between deaf and hearing people. Here, the Heiders (Heider & Moore Heider, 1941a) also used the novel medium of film to inconspicuously observe children in free play, and in a “moving picture study” (p. 49) of two deaf students, which meticulously transcribed and analyzed their behavior and communication patterns. Especially, this second research phase turned into an early sketch of Fritz Heider’s psychology of interpersonal relations and of Grace Moore Heider’s later work on child development (Escalona & Moore Heider, 1960; Heider, 1983; Moore Heider, 1959). Results were published in numerous articles, and in two American Psychological Association monographs, *Studies in the Psychology of the Deaf* (Moore Heider & Heider, 1940) and *Studies in the Psychology of the Deaf, No. 2* (Heider & Moore Heider, 1941a). During the 1930s and early 1940s, Fritz and Grace Moore Heider regularly reported their research, for example, in the school’s annual reports or in journals dedicated to deaf education (e.g., Heider & Moore Heider, 1941b; Moore Heider, 1933, 1943). These monographs on the psychosensory and psychosocial dimensions of deafness were by far the most extensive of their time and remained a regularly quoted standard into the 1970s.

For the Clarke School, these experiments provided potentially useful insights to the psychological mechanisms of how deaf children learned speech and lip-reading, and how they mastered learning and thought. Research on lip-reading in particular promised much practical use. In an oralist environment, where any kind of gestural communication was prohibited, lip-reading was the most essential and basic skill for a deaf child for learning and communication. Speech and lip-reading thus was taught first and before any other subject, usually building from syllables to simple words. It was, however, also a very difficult skill to obtain for prelingual children, and children often proceeded at very different rates. Thus, based on the results from the psychology division, the school implemented an experimental teaching program that trained eight of the school’s middle-school-aged “poorest lip-readers”—with mixed results (Heider & Moore Heider, 1941a, p. 142).

Yet these very insights and results also had the potential to undermine the school’s oralist worldview. Oralist pedagogy imagined deaf children as a kind of tabula rasa, existing without language, concepts or abstract thought. It was speech that gave the child the tools to acquire knowledge and to develop abstract thought and a mature personality. Yet the Heiders’ and Eberhardt’s studies of lip-reading, personality, and perception

contradicted this belief. Eberhardt's investigation for example negated the assumption that the deaf child came to school without any preconceived concepts. Rather, her experiments had shown that "the world of the young deaf child is already organized beyond the perceptual level and that this organization closely follows that of speaking people" (p. 5). Thus, she concluded, "language is not essential for organized conceptual thought, at least during its first stages" (Eberhardt, 1940, p. 5). This was in keeping with the tenets of Gestalt theory, which assumed a preexisting field of interrelated figures, yet contradicted basic beliefs of the oralist educator.

Fritz and Grace Moore Heider's research on communication among young deaf children confirmed this impression. Deaf children, they wrote (Heider & Moore Heider, 1941a), lived in "a social psychological environment" (p. 6). They were capable of developing "tools of social intercourse" (p. 6), such as gestures and symbols, and were just as creative and inventive in their play and interaction as hearing children. In their gestural communication, the psychologists determined, "these young deaf children use combinations of gestures which are equivalent to real phrases" (p. 14), a conclusion that ran counter to oralist beliefs. Like the great majority of their contemporaries, the Heiders, too, believed that gestural communication was eventually limited in expressing abstract concepts. This is not surprising, given that they observed preschool children who had just began their education, and who lived in an environment where any kind of gestural communication was suppressed. Had they observed signing deaf adults, their impressions might have been different.

Deaf children, they came to believe, lived in a different perceptual and social world—a thought that Grace Moore Heider had already formulated in her master thesis. Basic tenets of Gestalt psychology influenced this conclusion. Because sensory perception shaped one's experience, deaf people's speech and lip-reading must be based on particular "physiognomic characteristics of the words" (Heider & Moore Heider, 1940a, p. 27) different from those of the hearing. Studying phonetic symbolism in deaf children, the Heiders assumed that words have a certain character and quality that reflect their meaning. This theory was based on research by child psychologist Karl Bühler, Edward Sapir, and Köhler. In particular, they referred to Köhler's experiments with a pointed shape, which research subjects agreed should be named "tacketta," and round one called "baluma." (This phenomenon is now known as the bouba-kiki effect.) The Heiders tested this hypothesis by asking deaf and hearing children for their association with nonsense words and word pairs from French and German, assuming that the children were not familiar with these languages. Their research showed that with deaf people, who rely on non-aoustic sensory information, this "physiognomic character" (p. 27) differed from that of hearing people. Consequently, differences in perception and pronunciation could "be directly traced to the lack of the auditory factor in the sensory data of the deaf and to the greater significance of kinaesthetic factors" (p. 42). Thus, "some of the persistent mispronunciations of the deaf may be individual deviations toward something that feels more suitable or more satisfying than the word as it is taught" (p. 40). In other words, what seemed like a mispronunciation to the oralist teacher of the deaf, emerged for the Gestalt psychologist from a different plane of phenomenological experience, one that produced speech differences that were in fact natural in "their own aesthetic and expressive character" (Heider, 1936, p. 25). These conclusions refined Fritz Heider's theories in *Thing and Medium*. There, he had been interested in the properties of objects, or fields of objects, and the properties of the corresponding perception. Although it was things that shaped media, different sensory abilities—or dispositions—changed an object's perceivable attributes. Thus, if the medium through which the thing reached the person was different—with deaf people, the medium of sound was absent—then the thing itself must appear different, too (Malle & Ickes, 2000).

These phenomenological insights meshed well with Gestalt principles, yet in applied educational psychology, they were highly unusual. They contradicted the predominant

oralist paradigm in deaf education, which required the deaf to sound and behave as much as possible like a hearing person. The Heiders, on the other hand, were not interested in the achievement of normalcy, but in the phenomenology of difference. As they turned their attention to the social relations among deaf children and between deaf and hearing adults, these relativizing dimensions would become even more pronounced.

The Deaf as a Social Minority: The Relativizing Dimension of Social Psychology

Fritz and Grace Moore Heider further pursued the notion of a phenomenologically and socially different deaf sphere in their late 1930s research on the social adjustment of deaf adults. Their quantitative survey of alumni from five schools for the deaf, including Clarke, was the first extensive psychosocial study of deaf adults. The alumni received a questionnaire asking about their life and experiences, or were interviewed in person. Particular emphasis was put on the question of “what the deaf actually mind about being deaf and what means they use to bridge the gaps produced by deafness” (Heider & Moore Heider 1941a, p. 69) Such an approach required that one first assessed and understood the specific characteristics of this study population. Here, the Heiders (Heider & Moore Heider, 1941a) believed the hearing person could not serve as the unquestioned ideal. Just

as the doctor cannot say whether a given pulse rate is “normal” until he knows whether the patient has been sitting quietly or running to meet an appointment, so we cannot say what is normal for the deaf person until we know what tensions and problems his situation involves. (p. 55)

Consequently, their survey set out to define, in the first place, “what the ‘normal’ and expedient ways of adjusting” to deafness were (p. 66).

They presented the results in Volume II of the *Psychology of Deafness* (1941) as a collection of long quotes and narratives that retained much of the participants’ subjective, personal insights, and were only intermittently interspersed with the psychologists’ tentative summaries and analysis. Such a detailed depiction of deaf people’s lived realities were rare in a period in which professionals and lay people usually spoke about them with generalizing and often paternalistic clichés. The study’s conclusions, too, were unusual, especially considering its origin in an oralist school: Deafness, the Heiders (Heider & Moore Heider, 1941a) concluded, was a relational condition, and the deaf a “social minority” (p. 120) whose problems were caused at least as much by “the attitudes of the hearing than on the sense defect itself” (p. 130). Study participants complained, for example, about the “exclusiveness or inaccessibility of the hearing” (p. 82), and about finding themselves the target of “active hostility, teasing, making fun of the deaf by the hearing” (p. 85). Many participants reported that hearing people did not “consider the deaf full human beings” (p. 87). Struck by the frequency and uniformity of these experiences, the Heiders concluded that the “deaf are probably justified, to a large extent, in this feeling” (p. 81), which led them to form “a stereotype of the hearing” (p. 95) in turn. Analyzing deafness from the angle of interpersonal and social relations, the Heiders concluded that much of its disabling effect was a matter of social bias rather than of physiological defect. Improving deaf people’s social situation thus was a matter of social change rather than medical solutions.

Given the omnipresence of social bias and exclusion, how did deaf people react—and were some reactions psychologically healthier than others? For the Heiders, there were several equally valid possibilities that depended on individual circumstances, attitudes, and the “life tone of the individual” (p. 110). Some deaf people chose to associate with the hearing “in order to be [. . .] as ‘normal’ as possible” (p. 121). Others preferred a cautious distance, a reaction that the psychologists found perfectly reasonable given that deaf people’s “difficulties arise not so much because the deaf are deaf as because other people

hear” (p. 120). There were, they observed, “localized groups of deaf for whom” the problems of dealing with hearing society “may have been reduced to a minimum by the fact that they live almost entirely among people of their own kind” (p. 120). In these local communities, deaf people usually “communicated by some form of manual system, signs, finger spelling, or a combination of the two” (p. 120). Such signing deaf communities, with their own clubs, churches and associations, newspapers and journals, had existed in the United States since the mid-19th century. However, during the 1940s (and into the 1950s and ‘60s) they were rarely ever acknowledged in professional literature, given that they signified a failure to adhere to the oralist principle of deaf assimilation to hearing society. In fact, the Heiders’ study was the first neutral sociological assessment of the adult deaf community (Heider & Moore Heider, 1941a).

Emerging from Gestaltist research at one of the country’s leading oralist institutions, then, was a definition of deafness as an interrelational social condition, and as a sensory condition that produced its own phenomenological reality. Predominantly, the Heiders (Heider & Moore Heider, 1941a) concluded, deaf people lived

as members of a minority group within a social world in which the majority of people hear and the frustrations and difficulties involved in deafness are largely those created by the adjustment between the majority that has more and the minority which has less. (p. 120)

These were highly unusual conclusions during the first half of the 20th century, when medical and scientific appraisals of deaf or disabled people hardly ever went beyond stereotypes of disability as inferiority or tragedy, and when cultural and physical difference was often conflated with moral, social or sexual deviance. Schools for the deaf and blind and physically or intellectually disabled had been founded in the mid- and late-19th century, based upon the belief in the power of education to reform the individual, and to restore the disabled to civic participation and economic usefulness. From the 1910s onward, eugenic thought became powerful paradigm in counteracting this belief, although it affected different branches of special education at different rates. Educators and researchers in the field of intellectual disability in particular increasingly talked about their charges in the eugenic language of innate hopelessness. Psychologist Henry Herbert Goddard’s famous research on the Kallikak family is just one notorious example for the close connection between contemporary discourse on psychology, eugenics and education (or, in other words, the malleability of intellect and behavior). Goddard played a crucial role in introducing and promoting intelligence tests in the United States, and was well respected in the fields of psychology and special education (Carey, 2010; Osgood, 2008; Osgood, 2010; Zenderland, 1998). Educators of the deaf usually excluded their students from the class of the feeble-minded (with whom they were often conflated in the public mind), and defended their social and economic usefulness, yet eugenic and evolutionary thought also pervaded deaf education, engendering fears about deaf reproduction and attempts to instill in the deaf a sense of “reproductive morality,” as historian Wendy Kline has called it (Kline, 2005, p. 2; Robinson, 2010). More generally, eugenics was part of the larger progressive reform agenda with its ideals to make education more scientific and efficient. Measuring and norming children’s intellectual and emotional development, an endeavor in which psychology played a significant role, could go hand in hand with excluding those considered (eugenically) unworthy from “normal” education (for deaf education, see, e.g., Johnson, 1920).

Yet whether according to the older and persisting belief in reform through education, or to eugenic pessimism, during the first half of the 20th century, the deaf or disabled person was considered responsible for overcoming their difference by adhering to linguistic, cultural and social norms. In this framework, failure to overcome disability and difference was an individual rather than a societal problem; indicative of a person’s inability to apply oneself to the tenets of hard work, individual reform and educational uplift. The Heiders, on the other hand, pointed to bias as a factor in interpersonal relations between the deaf and the hearing, and

defined these relationships as the result of dynamic social process in which both sides had formed more or less justified responses. Their study was not the first to acknowledge bias and misunderstandings between deaf and hearing persons, yet it was unusual in pointing to its social determinants. Overcoming discrimination was not the responsibility of the individual victim, but rather was a socially interactive process, something that could only be achieved “when both the hearing and the deaf have a more rational insight into the situation.” Among the deaf, they acknowledged in a not too subtle jab toward the hearing, many “recognize this fact” (Heider & Moore Heider, 1941a, p. 96).

Conclusion

The Clarke School psychology research sheds light on a number of issues relevant to the history of psychology and the social sciences: the intermingling of European and American influences in the early history of social and Gestalt psychology in the United States, its developing ties to the empirical social sciences which gained enormous influence after World War II, and the contributions psychology made to confirming or challenging social norms. It also provides insight into the relationship between theoretical and applied psychology, between researchers and their research population, and how these relationships affected dissemination of research. At a time when institutional Gestalt psychology in the United States was in its very beginnings, the Clarke School provided to eminent and less known Gestalt psychologists an interesting research population, resources, and laboratory space, yet left decisions over the theoretical and methodological framework of research to the psychologists. They were free to turn the school into one of the first locations of theoretical and applied Gestalt psychology in the United States. Young American scholars like Grace Moore Heider studied Gestalt principles under Kurt Koffka. Moore Heider was among the first American psychologists to apply Gestalt principles to an experimental study of childhood development, using deaf children a particularly interesting research population. The influence of Gestalt thought on her later work on child psychology has not yet been explored (Moore Heider, 1959, 1966). Her later successful career as professor at the University of Kansas department of psychology and specialist on vulnerability in childhood was overshadowed by that of her more famous husband, who worked on more prestigious topics.

I have argued that Gestalt psychology and European-influenced child studies were more suitable to the psychological research envisioned by the Clarke School than the behaviorism guiding most university-based research in the United States at the time. Educators of the deaf were keenly interested in learning more about the inner lives of their students, and the behaviorist principle of dismissing introspection was of no use to them. Yet the relationship between psychologists and school was also marked by significant differences and disagreements over the goals of research, the nature of the research population, and not least over the implications gleaned from observing deaf children with a Gestalt mindset. As research progressed, results deviated more and more from oralist principles and beliefs. Based on experimental Gestalt psychology, empirical research and close observation of interpersonal behavior, Eberhardt and the Heiders described the deaf as living in a phenomenological and social world of their own. Within contemporary deaf and special education, this was a highly unusual, even revolutionary conclusion with far-reaching implications. Rather than medicalizing physical or sensory differences, as was the norm of the day, the Heiders relativized them as on a range of normal phenomena. Thus—and here Gestalt psychology became directive social psychology—deaf people should not be expected to adhere to the norms of the hearing. Such expectations could even be harmful to their psyches.

These differences in opinion and worldview between school and the psychologists may help explain why Gestalt research at the Clarke School has been overlooked. Its reception was delayed in a manner that is telling for the changing and diversifying landscape of psychological research in midcentury America. Located between applied

and theoretical psychology, the Clarke School research did not fit with Fritz Heider's other, more abstract and philosophical publications. However, his detailed observation of deaf people make visible the lines of thought leading to his theories of social and commonsense psychology and interpersonal relationships. The Heiders' two monographs on the psychology of deafness were the first in-depth psychosocial study of deaf people as a social group. In its approach and methodological set-up, their work was an early example of the empirical, sociopsychological research that became popular in the late 1940s and 1950s, not least because of the influence of European emigrants, such as Heider himself or Kurt Lewin, with whom Heider was connected in a close, lifelong friendship.

Historians of deafness and disability have rightly pointed to the 1930s and '40s as an era in which medical and scientific approaches to disability were marked by pathologization and a eugenic bias that conflated disability with physical, moral and social deviance. Yet the Heiders' research demonstrates that there were also the first inklings of a psychology that perceived disability as an interpersonal and social phenomenon, and that was sensitive toward difference, and critical of social bias. While these results were ignored at the Clarke School, they were picked up again in postwar America when the psy-sciences reached an unprecedented influence and popularity in explaining phenomena such as race and gender, bias and oppression, war and conflict. Psychologists, psychiatrists and sociologists investigated the social lives and psyches of different population groups and engaged in a variety of social reform projects (Halliwell, 2013; Kruglanski & Stroebe, 2012; Pickren & Schneider, 2005). This trend also reached rehabilitation and special education and gave the Heiders' deafness research new relevance. Increasingly, professionals began to understand disability as a socially and psychologically determined phenomenon (e.g., Barker, 1953; Pollard, 1993; Schlesinger, 1968), an insight that the Heiders had already reached in 1940. These early roots of a social and sociological model of deafness have not yet been given due attention. The history of psychological research at the Clarke School points to the ties between Gestalt and social psychology that produced a less pathologizing and more relativistic approach toward disability, and sheds light on the diverse landscape of American psychology.

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