

Psychotechnics, Nazi Germany, and personality: Narratives about the rise and fall of a controversial field

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ABSTRACT


This article lays out the historiographic background to the current monographic issue. It offers an overview and critical assessment of a selection of histories of psychotechnics and applied psychology. After the general historiographic overview, we discuss several interpretations of the psychotechnicians' supposed turn towards personality in the 1930s. We start with Dorsch's defensive-celebratory history that was criticized, in the 1980s, by Marxist historians who argued that psychotechnics was mainly employed in the interests of capital. A decade later, Rabinbach took a broader, historical view on the topic; and shortly after that, Geuter explored the consequences of psychotechnicians' collaboration with the military. Finally, yet another study, by Derksen, brought into question the whole talk of a supposed shift. We observe several shortcomings in these narratives. Instead of building on the previous work, each researcher approaches the topic from their specific historiographical perspective. The results are divergent and contradictory diagnoses with regard to the supposed shift in psychotechnics. Despite the differences, a comparison of the coherence of the accounts and the historians' work with sources is possible. In the final section, we present some of our key findings, which are discussed in greater depth in the remaining six articles of this volume.

Psicotecnica, la Alemania Nazi y personalidad: Narrativas acerca del auge y la caída de un campo polémico

RESUMEN

Este artículo proporciona el trasfondo historiográfico del número monográfico. Ofrece una visión general y una evaluación crítica de una selección de historias de la psicotécnica y la psicología aplicada. Tras la visión historiográfica general, analizamos diversas interpretaciones del supuesto giro de la psicotécnica, en la década de 1930, hacia el estudio de la personalidad. Comenzamos con la historia de Dorsch, cuyo planteamiento fue duramente criticada en la década de 1980 por historiadores marxistas.

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Estos argumentaban que la psicotécnica se empleaba principalmente en beneficio del capital. Una década más tarde, Rabinbach adoptó una perspectiva histórica más amplia sobre el tema, y poco después Geuter exploró las consecuencias de la colaboración de los psicotécnicos con el ejército. Finalmente, otra investigación realizada por Derksen, puso en tela de juicio todo el discurso sobre este supuesto cambio. Observamos varias deficiencias en estas narrativas. En lugar de basarse en el trabajo de los demás, cada investigador aborda el tema desde su perspectiva historiográfica particular. Como resultado tenemos diagnósticos divergentes y contradictorios sobre el supuesto cambio. A pesar de las diferencias, es posible establecer una comparación en cuanto a la coherencia de los relatos y el trabajo de los historiadores con las fuentes. En la sección final, presentamos algunos de los hallazgos clave que se analizan con mayor profundidad en los seis artículos restantes de este volumen.

Introduction

In 1961, when answering the question “What is history?”, E. H. Carr wrote that history is an unending dialogue between the present and the past. He imagined time as a procession, in which the historian—like everyone else—moves along. Situated within the society of their own lifetime and taking advantage of their position within this collective advancement, the historian gains once and again a fresh vantage point from which to look into the past. Therefore, Carr argues, each epoch needs to re-write history, leaving earlier renderings obsolete¹.

Although not many historians today would subscribe to what Carr wrote in his book back in the 1960s about historical facts, his relativist metaphor of historians' situatedness (and enclosure) within the flowing stream of time is certainly still powerful. Yet, when turning to the history of psychotechnics, it leads us to more questions than answers. Such a dialogue with the past seems manageable when dealing with a one-to-one situation—the biographer historian and their historical figure. But things get complicated when we become aware that both the present and the past are actually multiple. In other words, Carr's analogy presupposes a certain level of stability and consensus within an epoch (whatever time period that may be). It does not explain, for example, why we have competing narratives from historians who are rooted in the same timeframe. Nor does it help us deal with rival scientific projects in the past.

As a consequence, historians of psychology not only need to take into account the gap between the past and the present, but the numerous gaps surrounding them. Currently, there are a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches in vogue among historians. Labels such as “cultural”, “intellectual”, or “social” history are used as demarcations (more labels will be used in the analysis below). Similarly, current and past societies do not possess political or cultural unity (these days such clashes are again becoming more visible). As a result, as historians we must address diversity in the present and the past, a task for which we have three main tools: interest in others' perspectives, tolerance, and dialogue. Luckily, history is one of the best ways to develop and exercise such skills.

It was in this spirit that the histories in this issue were composed. They deal with different local perspectives, exposing a variety of strategies employed by psychologists in the past to forward their

professional interests. The term “psychotechnics” was used in the first half of the twentieth century to refer to a variety of “applications” of psychology, such as educational psychology, forensic psychology, and industrial psychology. Despite the disappearance of the term (“psychotechnics”), work psychology, which constituted an area within psychotechnics, is still today a specialized field within psychology. Focusing on psychotechnics in relation to work and industry, the following contributions consider vocational guidance, personnel selection, professionography, human management (in industry and business), and differential psychology (including biotypology, intelligence testing, and personality assessments), as well as the local social-political contexts in which such as psychology was thriving.

Previous publications dealing with the history of psychotechnics, as we will see, have prominently featured the polemical figure of Münsterberg, who is celebrated as the “founder” of the field of psychotechnics. His definition of “psychotechnics” has become a standard citation (e.g. Bösel & Weber, 2025; Shimmin & Van Strien, 1998; see also the following article of this issue). On recognizing a series of contradictions and shortcomings in the secondary sources (detailed below), the editors and authors contributing to this monographic issue were intrigued by the question of what happened to the field in the 1920s and 1930s (after its meteoric rise in the 1910s); especially about the entanglement of psychotechnics with laboratory research, mental testing, and holistic appraisals of personality.

Works on the history of psychotechnics often point towards a notorious change that is characterized as a sudden transition from an elementalistic ability testing (in the 1920s) to a holistic personality assessment that became the dominant tenet in the following decade. Following such a wide-spread view, the new human-centered approach engendered a broad interest in holistic personality assessments, stimulated by the emergence, in Nazi Germany, of a series of typologies² that arose in connection with the burgeoning holistic-humanistic³ approach (e.g. O'Neill, 2017; Rabinbach, 1990). Yet, we will see that not all historians would agree on this. Furthermore, the reason and the extension of this reorientation are still unclear.

² A typology is a psychological personality theory that establishes a series of human types, each representing a “typical” way of being a person. One of the most well-known examples are the four temperaments of the old Hippocratic theory and Jung's division (1921) between extroverted and introverted persons.

³ Often the original German expression “Ganzheit-geisteswissenschaftlich” is used when describing this approach.

¹ For more information on Carr's work see Cox (2000).

Thus, the aim of this monographic issue is precisely to undertake a closer examination of this development from several angles and localities. Our research shows, first, that the interest in personality preceded the 1930s, and second, that since the beginning, psychotechnicians employed a variety of approaches, typologies, and methods to assess personality. Münsterberg was certainly a leading figure and his textbook was internationally well-known, even in his own lifetime. However, repetitive, superficial citations of his definition do not do justice neither to his role⁴ nor to the fact that he did not have a monopoly on the wide variety of practices that were termed “psychotechnics”. Furthermore, by inflating his imprint on the field, former histories have occluded the contributions of others. In this sense, the articles in this issue want to decentralize the standard accounts by shedding light on new settings, known and unknown historical figures, and their negotiations with colleagues about how psychotechnics should be practiced.

To that end, the present article lays out the historiographic background that motivated us. Together with the second article, it forms the introduction to the monographic issue. We begin with an assessment of how its history has been (re-)written over the last fifty years. This has not been an easy task. After explaining, in the first section, why we think this assessment is needed and the difficulties we encountered, we start with a general historiographic overview. In the following part we present the outcome of our bibliographical research. Here we trace some prevailing historiographical trends and interpretations in the history of psychotechnics and applied psychology with regard to the supposed turn towards personality. Finally, in the last section, we summarize some the key findings that are discussed in greater depth in the last five articles of this volume.

Why are most histories of psychotechnics invisible?

After a century of historical research, there are plenty of papers on the history of psychotechnics. How do they explain the crisis and the transformation of psychotechnics in the 1920s and 1930s? To answer this question, we first needed to gain an overview of the research. The search was complicated by three factors: first, historians’ limited acknowledgment, discussion, and engagement with previous research. As a consequence, finding one source does not necessarily lead to other sources, at least not in a substantial way. We can speculate about possible reasons. It might be due to the tendency to assess a new primary source quickly (under the “publish or perish” pressure in academia), combined with the limited space available when writing an article. Furthermore, if Carr (1961) is right, histories of “another time” would automatically be obsolete.

⁴ Following the example of histories about Wundt, we could certainly diagnose also in this case a certain myth—a distorted view—that has received a wide circulation. Moreover, we could question what exactly makes a figure a “founder”. In the case of Wundt, historians point to the foundation of his laboratory, a justification that has already been questioned. In the case of Münsterberg it was not a laboratory, but a textbook he authored. A critical assessment of Münsterberg’s real role within the psychology and psychotechnics of the 1920s and 1930s remains to be written.

Second, most of the literature on the history of psychotechnics is invisible within today’s ocean of publications. Modern search engines, databases, and other technical aids are of limited assistance because “psychotechnics” does not work well as a keyword. Most authors avoid using it because it is no longer understood. Despite this, there is no other term that would act as consistent substitute. The search is further muddled by authors using “psychotechnics” to refer, more generally, to psychology, psychological measurement, or any attempt to exert influence on other people (Bösel & Weber, 2025; Dadico, 2021; Graham, 2019; Kaminski, 2010; Kappeler, 2008; Rubtsova & Lenkov, 2025). A rather funny example of the latter is Jones’s text on “Trumpian psychotechnics” (2020).

Third, the history of psychotechnics is entangled with the professionalization of psychology, the history of the work sciences, and, on a more general level, with the history of (psycho-)technology and social politics, and national economy (industry). This gives an idea of the vast range of journals and books in which relevant research could potentially appear. Because it is impossible to address the history of psychotechnics in all its geographical and temporal breadth, researchers usually limit their research to a prominent figure such as Münsterberg (e.g. Blatter, 2014, 2015; Hale, 1980; Shinogi, 2014; Spillmann & Spillmann, 1993; Stoffers, 2003) and the German or U.S. context (e.g. Hau, 2012; Killen, 2007; Meskill, 2010; Métraux, 1985; Patzel-Mattern, 2010; Napoli, 1981; Petri, 2004). But also other particular psychotechnical institutions and other national contexts have received attention such as Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Japan, Spain, Russia, Switzerland, among many others (see, for example, Carpintero, 2023; Emberland, 2024; Gundlach, 1996a; 1996b; 2019, 2022; Gundlach, Lafuente, Sinatra, Sokal & Tanucci, 2011; Haak, 1996; Hoskovec, & Brožek, 2007; Huteau, 2018; Iliescu, Ion & Matešić, 2022; Jacó-Vilela, 2007, 2021; Kirchner, 1975; Klappenbach, 1995, 2023, 2005, 2007; Klappenbach, Vázquez-Ferrero, & Gallegos, 2018; Klicperová-Baker, Hoskovcová & Heller, 2020; Le Bianic, 2008; Morgese, Lombardo, & Albani, 2016; Lescano & Talak, 2022; Luque, 2004; Ozcoidi Val & Serra i Jubal, 2001; Monteagudo Soto & Chisvert Perales, 2007; Nielsen & Bartram, 2022; Pérez Fernández, 2002; Quintana Fernández, 2010; Rügsegger, 1986; Sánchez Vázquez & Guijarro Granados, 2000; Sinatra, 2007; Sáiz & Sáiz, 1998; Spur & Klooster, 1999; Stoyukhina, 2017; Van Strien & Haas, 1992; Van Strien, 1998). As a consequence, we have a huge collection of fragmentary accounts. The present issue will surely not remedy this. Our research adds more or less particular (in the sense of national) (micro-)histories to this collection. However, an effort has been made: (a) to engage critically with a wide selection of previous research; (b) to include relatively unknown historical settings and perspectives; and (c) to connect our research to each other’s work through the theme of the shift towards personality and the timeframe under consideration.

From neglect to hot topic

Psychological theories and knowledge have long been employed in professional areas that involve the management of human beings. Psychology’s entanglement with education, medicine, and industry

goes back to the nineteenth century and beyond. Yet, Boring's well-known textbook on the history of psychology (1929) did not cover either applied psychology or psychotechnics; it only featured scientists who produced new scientific knowledge. This was not only due to Boring's personal preference for laboratory research or his "great man" perspective. It also followed an exclusivist trend in history of natural science that narrowed historical accounts to a "intellectual history" that consisted in "advances" and "discoveries". If psychology wanted to be part of the "club" of natural sciences, its history needed to follow the same pattern.

The consequence was that applied psychology and psychotechnics were often excluded from the standard narrative in history of psychology (see, for example, Greenwood, 2015; Leahey, 2012; Robinson, 1995; Sahakian, 1975). However, this did not stop a few historians from developing an interest in the topic. An early attempt to offer an international overview and an assessment of the field's development can be found in the conference proceedings edited by Franziska Baumgarten (1949) under the optimistic title "Progress of Psychotechnics I: 1939–1945". From the beginning, this first effort met with criticism. Josef Brožek's contemporary review (Brožek, 1951) called attention to the inadequate title and the devastating consequences of the Second World War on the population in general, and psychotechnicians in particular. He reminded his colleagues that this trend inhibited and, in some places, even destroyed any developments in the field. We return to this claim below.

Later, in the 1980s, the history of applied psychology was suddenly on the rise. Three factors might have contributed to this change. First, there was growing number of professionals working in the various applied fields in psychology, who likely wished to learn more about the history of their area of specialization. Second, the expanding influence after the end of the Second World War of American functionalist-pragmatist science and its focus on usefulness certainly contributed to the impetus. Third, Marxism and the sociological trend in history of science drew the attention of historians towards applications and technoscience. In all likelihood, the three developments together paved the way for an increased interest in the history of applied psychology and psychotechnics.

When searching for historical work on psychotechnics, industrial or work psychology, vocational guidance, and the history of applied psychology, we encounter the publications listed below (in the references) and the names of the historians who dedicated great effort and time to the history of applied psychology such as Horst Gundlach, Helio Carpintero, Pieter van Strien, and Hugo Klappenbach. A quick look into the uncomplete reference list at the end of this article is enough to see that since 1980 the interest in the history of psychotechnics has expanded rather than evaporated.

In the following, we will consider some early publications, that touch on our central topic, namely, how psychotechnicians became interested in personality theories. They appeared at a time when psychologists in Germany were still trying to come to terms with their difficult past. The central question for this first group of histories published before 1990 was: Were German psychotechnicians of the 1930s victims of the Nazi regime or rather guilty of contributing to its rise? By looking into this sensitive issue, we will shed light on how historians arrive at contradictory conclusions in line with their

respective historiographic approaches.

Psychotechnics' interest in personality: From defensive-celebratory history to Marxist attack

In order to see clashing views in the historiography of psychotechnics, we need only observe how historians have presented the development of psychotechnics in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany. This complex topic has attracted the attention of a considerable number of historians, precipitating fierce attacks. Our starting point is a "classic", the "History and problems of applied Psychology" (1963) published by the psychologist Friedrich Dorsch (1896–1987), who is still well-known today for his dictionary of psychology.⁵ Despite the general title, Dorsch is committed to a German perspective. This can be seen in the list of key figures and in the way how he presents the German-American psychologist, Hugo Münsterberg. He refers to him as a daring pioneer who "often displayed more boldness and vision for the future than reserved academicism" (Dorsch, 1963, p. 59⁶). With his "worldly" attitude, Münsterberg had become receptive to the problems of practical life. In Dorsch's eyes, "he had become a real American" (Dorsch, 1963, p. 58). This dismissiveness stands in sharp contrast to the laudatory manner in which Dorsch portrays his former mentor, the psychotechnician Fritz Giese (1890–1935). Giese's work takes prides of place in Dorsch's book and his thinking seems to inform Dorsch's opinions. More concerningly, Dorsch fails to reflect critically on his mentor, despite the latter's wholehearted espousal of Nazi ideology (Hinrichs & Peter, 1976; Stiegler, 2016).

Moreover, Dorsch clearly cares deeply about applied psychology's and psychotechnics' reputation. When he touches on the delicate period when psychotechnics came under fire (towards the end of the 1920s), he assigns all the blame to the global economic crisis and to "certain individuals" who abused psychotechnical testing. Thus, he argues: "The abuse perpetrated by individuals was mistakenly taken for the essence and meaningful core of psychotechnical methods" (Dorsch, 1963, p. 88), thereby damaging the image of the field. A decade later, when Germany was governed by Hitler's regime, the situation was worsened by Erich Jaensch's and his followers' "thoughtless popularization" of unscientific typologies, tainted by Nazi ideology and racism (for more information on Jaensch's typology and its influence, see Mülberger, 2020). According to Dorsch, it was only this small group—a minority within the community of German practical psychologists—who were convinced of the need to collaborate with Hitler's regime. They were isolated and dangerous, he explains, because "[t]ypology, it must be noted regarding the period under consideration, became the most visible adversary of psychotechnics" (p. 90). The result, in Dorsch's narrative, was that this kind of typology delivered the already weakened field of psychotechnics its deadly coup de grâce.

The treatment of psychotechnics and typology as enemies is a striking conclusion that would, together with Dorsch's naïve apologia, be immediately criticized. His siding with Giese makes his work resemble to what Leahey and Futomoto called a "celebratory

⁵ <https://www.testzentrale.de/thema/100-jahre-dorsch>

⁶ This and all the followings translations of non-English texts are from the authors.

history” (for information about “New History”, see Mülberger, 2023), a scholarship that would later be condemned. Someone who reacted vehemently against Dorsch’s account was the sociologist and teacher Peter Hinrichs. His book “About the worker’s soul” (1981) reflects the historiographical changes of the 1970s and 1980s, when sociologists and historians embraced Marxism and became critical of psychology’s social role. Thus, he argued that, since “[...] the liberation from fascism in 1945,” for Germans a “coming to terms with’ the past” (pp. 304–305) had become necessary.

Instead of accepting the early psychotechnicians’ views like Dorsch did, Hinrichs questions their claims. One of them is the claim that psychotechnical interventions would bring about a humanization of the work space. Using the convoluted Marxist-sociological language of his time, Hinrichs explains: “(...) the industrial- and labor-centered disciplines took over the objective social functions of domination by estranging the idea of humanization in order to safeguard the (partly openly affirmed, partly uncritically supposed) capitalist production-relations (...)” (Hinrichs, 1981, p. 304). In other words, Hinrichs criticizes past psychotechnicians for their alliance with capital, an attitude that in Germany had helped prepare the ground for the Third Reich and brought about the annihilation of the German working class. In the last pages he rounds out his attack by directly denouncing Dorsch’s uncritical celebration of the work of the “fascist” psychotechnician Giese.

Shortly after, yet another critique came in the form of “Critical Psychology” launched by psychologists Irmgard Staeuble and Siegfried Jaeger. Staeuble, together with Klaus Holzkamp, is a well-known representative of the “Critical Psychology” movement, a Marxist-oriented scientific branch of psychology that emerged in the 1960s. Staeuble and Jaeger published two accounts on the history of psychotechnics (Jaeger & Staeuble, 1981; Jaeger, 1985),⁷ the first of which became highly influential. Jaeger and Staeuble’s aim was to demonstrate the social and political embeddedness of (applied) psychology. They denounced the 1930s psychologists (and psychotechnicians) for hypocrisy. Using Münsterberg’s textbook as a case study, they (Jaeger & Staeuble, 1981) outline the latter’s strategy that they then generalize, presenting it as the characteristic way in which (applied) psychologists legitimize their work, in the past and in the present. The problem is that the legitimization is “ideological”. The authors reason as follows:

Only if the facticity of this society is blindly accepted can the varying intervention in working and living conditions, or even the creation and control of the behaviors necessary for maintaining social order, and the privileging of certain social groups for the task of domination, be legitimized as domination of social forces, and the legitimation is then an ideological one (Jaeger & Staeuble, 1981, p. 64).

In other words, given the conflict between the social classes and the fact that Münsterberg subordinates psychotechnics to the prevailing interest of the management, Jaeger and Staeuble see

psychotechnics as yet another instrument to exploit labor. Therefore, the psychotechnicians’ rhetoric about their concern for workers’ personalities and well-being was purely strategic. Workers would therefore soon see through the game. If we add to this, Jaeger and Staeuble argue, that psychotechnicians in the 1920s started using pseudo-scientific typologies, we find yet another reason why workers became suspicious. As a result, in the following decade (of the 1930s) it became clear that the psychotechnicians’ self-marketing had failed. Workers no longer trusted them, and without their collaboration, no psychotechnical work was possible.

The previous summary roughly sketches Jaeger and Staeuble’s line of argumentation. Like Hinrichs, they adopt a Marxist critique, considering psychotechnics as yet another medium used for the exploitation of workers. Furthermore, they denounce the psychotechnicians’ quick “adaptation” (*Anpassing*) to the ideological demands of fascism,⁸ although this made little difference because, as Jaeger and Staeuble conclude, “[o]verall, psychotechnics had in the Third Reich a very limited role, both theoretically and practically” (Jaeger & Staeuble, 1981, p. 91). We will see below, that their assessment would soon be proven wrong (see the section after the next).

A historian’s perspective

Let us start this part with a quick recap and summary. In the previous part we saw how, between the 1940s/1960s and the 1980s, the historical perspective had changed to such a degree that we see authors approaching the subject from opposite directions: Dorsch’s historiography was still trying to protect the prestige of past psychotechnicians and the field in general; while for Marxist histories, Münsterberg texts, in particular, and the history of psychotechnics, in general, offered an easy route to denounce psychology and psychotechnics (of the past and today) for being ideologically charged. The Marxists considered psychotechnicians’ talk about being interested in humans and their personalities as hypocritical, because the work of psychotechnicians consisted mainly of being just another capitalist tool used to oppress the proletariat.

We can see that all these histories aimed at a general judgement. In this context it is interesting to note that –in contrast to Hinrichs’ sociologist history– the question of whether typology or psychotechnics was scientifically sound is certainly key for the psychologists Dorsch, Staeuble and Jaeger. In their accounts, one specific figure from the past is again taken as representative of the whole community of psychotechnicians. In the case of Dorsch, this was Giese; in the case of Staeuble and Jaeger, it was Münsterberg. In contrast to our proposal in this monographic issue, they were not interested in breaking down the diversity of views and approaches or in studying the interaction between them.

However: returning to Carr, does this mean that our field has, in the meantime, changed following the relentless march of time? We can answer this in both the affirmative and the negative. We may answer “no”, because the three types of historiographies are still

⁷ Despite sharing a social-critical viewpoint, they barely took notice of Hinrichs’s work. Jaeger (1985) only cites in passing one of Hinrichs’s articles as a suggestion for further reading.

⁸ In this context, they also mention Rupp, Couvé, and Tramm’s call to collaborate with the regime.

with us; although sometimes adopting a slightly different form. There are still histories that are very similar to Dorsch's (although not necessarily based on Giese's view). These offer a descriptive chronology, testifying the scientific progress led by the big pioneers (e.g. Bryan & Pickren, 2020; Bryan & Vinchur, 2012; Salgado, Anderson & Hülshager, 2010; Warr & Koppers, 2007; Wilpert, 2013). Even when dealing with the developments in Germany, the delicate issue of psychotechnicians' responsibility in the Third Reich are often avoided (see e.g. Lück, 2004). Also Marxism still informs some sociological and philosophical-critical histories (see, for example, Thomas Teo's approach and his history on German Critical Psychology in Teo, 1998).

We can also answer "yes", because, as we will now see, new professionals entered the scene, bringing with them their professional ambitions, approaches and tools. One such group has been that of the historians; another, STS scholars (see the section after the next). An example of the historiography of the former group is the book "The Human Motor" written by the American historian Anson Rabinbach (1990). His narrative is centered on work science, i.e. physiological fatigue and motion studies⁹, but it also explicitly deals with the history of psychotechnics.

Overall, Rabinbach's study of historical development in the work sciences is contextualized within the economic and political settings of France and Germany. His history seems to speak a different language than the texts by the psychologist-historians. He takes psychotechnics as a sign of "the origins of modernity" (see his book's subtitle), which means that he deals with the work of certain figures (Marey, Amar, Mosso, Ioteyko and Lahy), but also with the broader social, intellectual and political context of the time. In such a setting, questions relating to internal changes, such as the shift we are dealing with here, become secondary.

Rabinbach's study (1990) shows that the topic of "personality" was already part of the debates (in the 1910s) about the downside of Taylorism. Yet the reorientation of the field towards a more personality-centered approach took place only after 1925, at a time when psychotechnics was already collapsing. Why did psychotechnics fall out of favor? "By the middle of the decade", Rabinbach explains, "the German had economy stabilized, and the need for extensive aptitude testing and vocational counselling reached saturation point. Technological and social improvements which scarcely compensated for heavy costs, were curtailed by firms and public enthusiasm for psychotechnics waned considerably" (Rabinbach, 1990, p. 279-280). Furthermore, psychotechnics was "justly accused of readily sacrificing scientific neutrality and objectivity when it came to the interest of the firm" (Rabinbach, 1990, p. 280). As a consequence, dissatisfaction with psychotechnics grew, even among its staunchest supporters.

The brief sketch is enough to see that Rabinbach's diagnosis repeats some aspects mentioned in the literature. At the same time his explanation as such does not fit with previous reasonings. To sum up, we note that a consideration of previous work on the history of psychotechnics as well as an overarching narrative and a critical view are missing in Rabinbach's book. Furthermore, despite his aspiration to

offer a broad account, the book deals with a limited selection of figures and texts, with the most well-known figures missing. The criterion for his selection is unclear and similarly vague is his explanation of the development of psychotechnics between the 1920s and 1930s.

A psychologist-historian dives into German military archives

Two years later, the psychologist Ulrich Geuter's (1992) published his extensive research on the professionalization of psychology in Nazi Germany. The book is one of the most cited contributions to the topic and it is easy to see why: he backs his claims up by linking them to an impressive wealth of archival sources about the numerous psychological and psychotechnical assessments performed within the German military in the 1930s. Geuter (1992) probably offers the most elaborate account of the shift towards personality. Following his research, the determination of suitability for work and work performance marked a **first phase** of industrial psychotechnics, up to the 1920s (Geuter, 1992). "At first, psychotechnicians were selecting individuals according to abilities" and it was only later that psychotechnicians planned to "determine work virtues and develop techniques to increase work motivation" (Geuter, 1992, p. 144).

Soon the investigation of people's attitudes toward work and their willingness became prevalent, leading to a **second phase** described by Geuter (1992) as "the psychology of the working individual". More precisely, he talks about a "change in emphasis" taking place in the period between the 1920s and the 1930s (not limited only to Germany) that was "replacing psychotechnics with characterology", "The talk", he continues, "was no longer about external performance alone, but of the importance of the "working person", although "psychotechnical selection according to performance was not abandoned" (Geuter, 1992, p. 85-86). Thus, in the second half of the 1920s: "Psychology paid increasing attention to the personality traits of workers" and argued for "the need for diagnostics of the entire personality. (...) The limits imposed by classical experimental psychology, whose concentration on basic psychological functions had been [considered] appropriate for psychotechnical diagnostics, were no longer accepted" (Geuter, 1992, p. 89).

How does Geuter explain this change? The motivation for it came from outside the field. It happened when, "a practical demand was coming from the industrial sector and the armed forces", requiring psychotechnical selection to indicate the most capable, motivated, and conscientious workers, as well as strong-willed officer cadet applicants with leadership qualities. "For this aim, (...) psychology of expression and characterology were [now viewed as] essential" (Geuter, 1992, p. 83). Such a psychology drew from Krüger's holistic psychology, Lersch's characterological model, Spranger's psychology of understanding. Thus, it was characterized by a holistic-humanistic thinking inspired by German romantic life-philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*).

With regard to German psychotechnicians' responsibility, his research contradicts the statements made by previous historians: Neither were the typologists a minority within psychotechnics, whose bad (unscientific) reputation had been interpreted by Giese and Dorsch as the reason for the crisis; nor were Staeuble, Jaeger and

⁹ Rabinbach groups the physiological studies related to work (including energy and the human body) undertaken by Kraepelin, Mosso, Lahy, Ioteyko and others under the label "the science of work".

Rabinbach correct when they claimed that towards the end of the 1920s the field had become marginal, close to disappearing. Geuter convincingly demonstrated that quite the opposite was the case: in the 1930s, psychotechnics was well alive in Germany. Applied psychologists stood up in support of their country, by aligning enthusiastically with its dominant ideology and by becoming involved in the military sphere. In that setting, psychotechnicians developed personality assessments (including typologies and characterology) in response to their clients' demands, adapting to German military virtues. This finding is in line with an early study by Metraux (1985) documenting an increase in industrial and work psychology: in 1926 it constituted a subject that was regularly taught in the psychological training at 23 German universities and 106 psychotechnical positions had been created in industrial companies. With the help of such services, around 13000 persons were tested per year. Despite this obvious success, towards the end of the 1920s a talk about a crisis could be heard however, following Geuter (1992) and Metraux's (1985) studies, this was not justified but just an echo of the crisis talks in psychology.

Overall, Geuter's account is based on extensive archival sources of the 1930s and 1940s, which leads him to a retrospective diagnosis about a shift toward personality. Nevertheless, the outcome is quite convincing. Psychologists who continued the investigation of the history of psychotechnics are systematically referring to Geuter's work. One example is Sylvia Shimmin's and Pieter van Strien's (1998) chapter on the "History of the Psychology of Work and Organization". In their text they use the following simplified formula to express the shift, describing it as a move away "from the natural science methodology" (Shimmin & Van Strien, 1998, p. 77). "The role model of the **engineer**, that had inspired the pioneers of psychotechnics, gave way around 1930 to that of the **diagnostician**, who sees separate phenomena as indicators of a deeper, underlying pattern in the way that medical practitioners view the symptoms of their patients" (Shimmin & Van Strien, 1998, p. 77, highlighted in the original). A characteristic feature of this professional switch would be the psychotechnicians' use of projection tests and their "'clinical' appraisal of candidates" (Shimmin & Van Strien, 1998, p. 78). Such a simple interpretation is certainly catchy but it is also unsatisfactory because clinical psychology (and the rise of projective tests such as Rorschach's) already existed before and independently of psychotechnics. In other words, some evidence would need to be provided.

There was no shift!

In a more recent study, the psychologist, Maarten Derksen (2014), takes a completely different stance with regard to the chapter of reorientation among psychotechnicians in the 1920s and 1930s. His approach is linked to the Science, Technology, and Society framework (abbreviated STS) that has its roots in the 1960s-1970s as an interdisciplinary field, primarily in US and UK universities. It started as a countermovement that, under the influence of Latour and others, would in the following decade become institutionalized. The group of scholars examine how social, political, and cultural values shape scientific research and technological innovation, and vice-versa.

They challenge the divide between nature and society and analyze scientific discourse and power relations (Foucault) to find out how scientific and technical advancements are constructed.

In contrast to previous researchers, Derksen worked not with German, but exclusively with American sources¹⁰. His account starts once more by pointing towards the way in which psychotechnicians promoted their own expertise, voicing demands for a more human-centered work science. Derksen (2014) considers this strategy to have been successful: "Psychologists, starting with Walter Dill Scott and Hugo Münsterberg, succeeded in positioning themselves as the experts of 'the human factor', and their instruments and expertise as the necessary complement of Taylor's psychologically flawed system" (p. 149).

However, Derksen (2014) rejects the psychologists' claim and considers it to be purely rhetorical. In other words, he argues that the demarcation between Taylorism and psychotechnics was more artificial than real: neither was Taylor so ignorant about human affairs on the shop floor, nor were the early psychotechnicians' views so different from Taylor's. With the help of a comparison between Taylor's work and Lillian Moller Gilbreth's text, Derksen concludes: "If anything, Taylor's perspective on the mind of the worker was broader than that of many early industrial psychologists and psychotechnicians" (Derksen, 2014, p. 160). Moreover: "What Moller Gilbreth writes about mind and management is not all that different from Taylor, except that she supports each claim with a reference to a psychologist's theory" (p. 160). Finally, Derksen arrives at the following conclusion: "(...) the human factor that industrial psychologists articulated, beginning with Münsterberg, was as mechanical as the core of scientific management, albeit psychologically more complex, and managing the human factor psychologically was proudly presented as a form of engineering" (p. 164).

At this point, Derksen (2014) gives his history yet another turn. He claims that the psychologists' work had the contrary effect, making the mind of the worker's seem more mechanical than Taylor:

"Rather than management becoming more psychological with the advent of psychologists like Moller Gilbreth and Münsterberg, it is more to the point to say that the mind of the worker became technologically constituted by the theories and instruments they introduced: It became a machine working according to definite laws, a machine that could be manipulated using standardized techniques, and the operating parameters of which could be determined using scientific instruments" (p. 160). Thus, "management was more like engineering in the theories of Scott, Münsterberg, and Moller Gilbreth than it was in Taylor's work" (p. 160).

Derksen's point about the psychotechnicians' misleading demarcation rhetoric is certainly interesting. Nevertheless, given the limited sources he works with, his argumentation falls short of offering a satisfying explanation. It is unclear why the Americans' texts and, more specifically, Moller Gilbreth's work, would be representative of the psychotechnicians' approach towards personality and the "human

¹⁰ See also his book "Histories of human engineering: Tact and technology" (Derksen, 2017).

factor” in the 1920s and 1930s. Especially when taking into account that psychotechnics was a highly fragmented field, characterized by clashing interests and internal disputes (see the following articles of this issue to learn more about these clashes).

Before we arrive at the monographic issue itself, let us recap the main points of this comparative analysis of the secondary sources. We could see that the issue of explaining the shift is complex. Most historians refer to it as consisting of psychotechnicians’ turn (in the late 1920s), moving from a more elementalistic testing of aptitudes toward a holistic assessment of personality. The authors usually relate the emergence of this new interest to a series of historical developments, such as the rejection of Taylorism, the economic crisis, and the rise of a holistic-humanistic approach in Nazi Germany.

More concretely, we could see how Dorsch’s defensive and celebratory history gave way, in the early 1980s, to Marxist sociological critiques by Hinrichs (1981) and Jaeger and Staeuble (1982). From their angle, psychotechnics was a bourgeois science employed in the interests of capital with the aim of subjugating and exploiting workers. A decade later, the historian Rabinbach tried to arrive at a general history about the origins of modernity, presenting several scientists and their work in the field of physiology and work science. Shortly after, the psychologist and historian Geuter (1992) conducted his extensive archival research, offering a new perspective. He documented the entanglement of psychotechnics with German military, explaining the shift as psychotechnicians’ reaction to their clients’ demands and the intellectual (humanistic) current of the time. While taking Geuter’s work as basis, Shimmin and Van Strien (1998) offer a rather different explanation. Following them, it consisted of a change from a natural-scientific model toward a clinical approach. Finally, we saw in the last section how the STS scholar Derksen calls into question the whole talk of a supposed shift.

The review of these accounts leads us to the conclusion that, to date, we have a series of rivaling narratives. There is neither a consensus, nor can a generalized advancement be detected, as Carr’s metaphor suggests. Each history seems less building on previous histories and more guided by the author’s professional background and historiographical commitment. As stated above, none of the approaches can be considered outdated (because they are still continued today). Although historians would today be more critical with the voices from the past than Dorsch, none of the frameworks can be dismissed as being wrong. They imply different perspectives, pursue divergent interests and operate on different levels.

It is only the quality of the studies that can be assessed. Our comparison distinguishes between explanations that resulted more convincing (in the sense of better informed and backed-up with sources) than others. In this sense, Geuter’s work stands out. However, even though he made a highly valuable contribution, further clarifications are still needed with regard to at least three aspects: a) we need to consider more contemporary views and b) gather more information to learn about the underlying social dynamics of the shift. Finally, c) the question whether the shift was an international phenomenon or not and, if it was, how it took place in other countries (outside Germany) still needs asks for more research.

This monographic issue

In the following pages we tackle the problem of the supposed shift, with contributions that look beyond the German context. The monographic issue is the outcome of a collaborative project that arose relatively spontaneously: the two authors of this text had the idea of arranging a session on the history of psychotechnics, together with other colleagues, at the European Society for the History of Human Sciences (ESHHS) conference in 2024. The session went ahead and worked out nicely. During those hot summer days in the historical city of Colchester, the group of psychologists and historians (of the human sciences) engaged in fruitful conversation with our colleagues and an active public. We are especially grateful to Roger Smith who encouraged us to pursue a joint publication. That was the beginning of a beneficial collaboration that would turn out to be highly stimulating.

As editors of this publication, we would like to mention that we in no way prescribed the kind of history that was to be written, nor did we impose any conceptual framework. The guiding idea was that of finding ways to make sense of the material each of us was engaging with and of presenting it in such a way that it can be understood by readers who are not familiar with the specific cultural background it stems from. Whether we succeeded or not, is for the readers to decide; but we would certainly like to thank the *Revista de Historia de la Psicología* for its unconditional support. It is the kind of journal we need to cherish: it is one of the few European journals we have in the field of history of psychology; it is a truly open access journal (free of charge on both sides, for authors and readers); it offers the guest-editors the necessary freedom with regard to the arrangement of topics and methods; and, finally, we appreciate the fact that it is multilingual.

As mentioned above, our starting point was an awareness of the complexities, contradictions, and omissions we had found in the literature on psychotechnics and our aim was to examine the shift in greater depth. Specifically, this special issue brings into focus how political developments and regimes promoted and constrained psychotechnical practices, and how to interpret the growing importance of personality within that context. To understand how such an emphasis developed, the second article in this issue by Annette Mülberger “**Psychotechnics at the start (1903-1914): Stern’s and Münsterberg’s definitions and professional practice**” offers an up-close examination of the origins of psychotechnics. By exploring what exactly those authors meant by the term “psychotechnics”, the paper highlights two early rivaling visions of this new discipline. Re-examining foundational texts in light of the later importance of personality, makes it clear that an interest in this topic was already present from the very beginning. The rise and fall of psychotechnics’ popularity, coinciding with the First and the Second World War, shows how this history is intertwined with political regimes and underscores the need to understand the discipline’s development in this light.

After establishing this starting point, the issue examines a range of national contexts, transnational connections, and international exchanges. In the third article entitled “**Psychotechnics in the 1920s: holism and personality in early ‘work psychology’**”, Mülberger analyses the first three international psychotechnical conferences

(1920, 1921, 1922), to contextualize the increasing interest in personality and holism. They constituted a forum in which national representatives of (mainly European) countries exchanged ideas and experiences with different psychotechnical diagnostic methods. Aptitudes, intelligence and, increasingly also personality constituting the main objects of study and several holistic-personal approaches were being proposed. Further, the author shows how two of these conferences took place at pivotal moments within their national political contexts, and how the proceedings reflected the participants' need to navigate political and professional tensions. The author concludes that the turn towards personality can be better understood as a gradual increase in interest, rather than a sudden radical shift.

With the understanding that in psychotechnical practice, personality was a contentious issue, and that the wide range of locally situated approaches sheds light on a variety of underlying (political) tensions, the remainder of the issue addresses a number of (trans) national cases. In many of these cases, the previous historical work on the topic is rather meager and has primarily been published in other languages. This special issue highlights, therefore, much that is absent from the English literature and we aim to stimulate a wider dialogue and exploration of these less familiar territories. Turning to the Netherlands, the fourth article in this issue on **"Psychotechnics in the Netherlands: Uncovering the deeper personality"**, signed by Rinske R. Vermeij, examines what this "turn towards personality" entailed in practice, comparing two rival psychotechnical institutes. Although they shared a common theoretical background, the manner in which they operationalized personality within their tests was very different, leading to a redefinition of the professional boundaries for practical psychologists that would have long-lasting effects. The dispute shows that the inclusion of character was deemed important but also complicated and sensitive, as it addressed "deeper" issues such as motivation, values, and morality.

The following (fifth) paper explores how psychotechnicians developed their own approaches to navigate tensions between experimental psychology and practical concerns such as personality assessment. In **"The academic psychologists' role in the rise of psychotechnics in Lithuania (1920s and 1930s)"**, Junona Almonaitienė presents the way in which psychotechnics emerged in Lithuania. The work examines the relationship between the university and the first Society for Psychotechnics and Vocational Guidance (founded in 1931). The driving force behind the Society was Jonas Vabalas-Gudaitis, a university professor who developed tests and contributed to psychotechnical conferences. The paper illustrates the difficulties such work encountered within a continuously changing political context. Nevertheless, Vabalas-Gudaitis' university institute effectively provided vocational guidance and maintained, to a certain extent, its international collaborations. Although the work at this institute laid important foundations for the later development of psychology in the country, the occupying regimes' devastation of higher education and research institutions in the following decades radically changed the course of Lithuanian psychology and left this important period in the disciplines' formation largely ignored until the start of this century.

The sixth article entitled **"History of psychotechnics in Italy: Application without theorization? (1920s-1940s)"**, by Andrea

Romano and Renato Foschi, moves to Italy where it presents the development of psychotechnics within an totalitarian regime. In contrast to the previous case, in Italy psychotechnics thrived quickly and came to dominate the psychological discipline entirely. The authors argue that by reframing their field as a non-theoretical and purely technical professional activity, psychologists adopted a fruitful survival strategy that allowed Italian psychologists to continue their work under fascism. The paper demonstrates how the political climate forced Italian psychotechnicians into relative isolation. The work details how the two leading figures at the Milan and Roman institutes, Gemelli and Ponzo, responded to these pressures in divergent ways, rooted in their respective inherited local (institutional) psychological traditions. Although the political climate was not conducive to theories of personality, both figures moved within this limited space in their distinct ways: Ponzo classifying students into characterological groups; Gemelli criticizing the exclusive focus on productivity in psychotechnics, at the expense of paying attention to the deeper aspects of personality and aspirations.

One exception to the isolation of the Italian psychologists is highlighted in the seventh and final article of this special issue. The contribution on **"Biotypology, psychotechnics, and gender in 1930s Argentina"** by Victoria Molinari, Ana María Talak and Aimé Lescano adopts a transnational perspective, analyzing how Italian frameworks were appropriated within the Argentine Association of Biotypology, Eugenics and Social Medicine (AABEMS in Spanish). The authors show how a shared background of Catholicism, "Latin" values and gender roles provided a promising basis for implementing this typological framework. However, taking these commonalities for granted created tensions and differences within the Argentinian context which meant that the practical implementation of this biotypology faced challenges and subtle resistances. Focusing on gender, this paper demonstrates how the Italian framework was not merely adopted but also adapted to fit the different roles of women in the workforce; local ideas about "vocation", and how men and women alike enforced these values within the AABEMS. Rather than identifying these contradictions as problematic, the authors argue that they were essential negotiations that allowed for the justification and institutionalization of these practices.

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