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Dialogische Introspektion. Ein gruppengestütztes Verfahren zur Erforschung des Erlebens

[**Dialogic Introspection.** A group-based method to explore personal experience by self-observation]

With contributions by

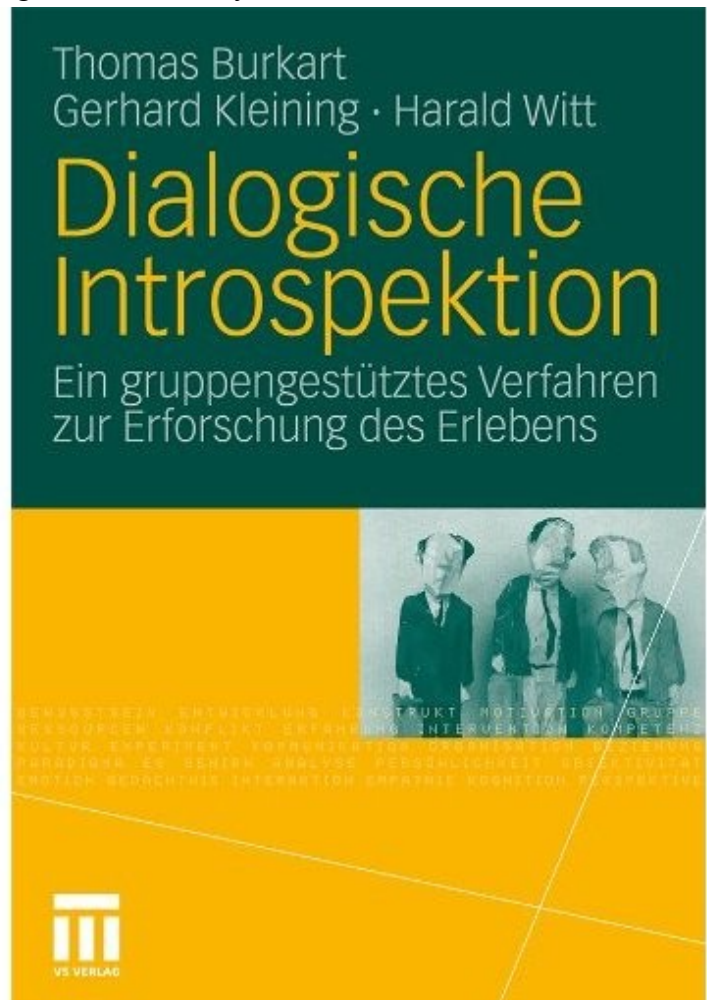
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Summary

Described in this volume and suggested for psychological research is a research technique to investigate personal experience by using a new form of personal introspection in groups. *Self-observation (Selbstbeobachtung)*, *self-perception (Selbstwahrnehmung)* and *self-experiments (Selbstexperimente)* or lat. *introspection* formed the main methods used by psychology at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century, as it established itself as an independent science. The German *erleben* refers here to the spontaneous mental reaction toward an event, (*perceived experience* or *self-experience*) as opposed to accumulated and organized experience over time (*Erfahrung*). It was taken as the basis for investigating emotional events. A range of different processes were introduced and tested. Self-observation already has a long tradition. During the Age of Romanticism it was seen as the highest form of psychological recognition.¹



Over the course of the twentieth century the method of introspection clashed with “Objective Psychology” and Behaviourism (Watson, 1913) and then became discredited and for the most part forgotten. This was mainly due to internal scientific reasons, in particular the accusation from Behavioural Psychology that introspection was subjective and that its results could not be validated and were therefore unscientific. In Germany, expulsion, war, and the Holocaust under Nazism prevented further scientific development, including in introspective techniques, such as psychoanalysis. Education and research after 1945 built on earlier developments only in isolated cases. Today only the technique of “thinking aloud” (*lautes Denken*) is accepted in academic psychology as it appears to take place mechanically, although it is not completely free from the accusation of being subjective.

A research workshop at the University of Hamburg² has developed a method for *group-based dialogic introspection* intended to fill the methodological gaps which arose due to the caesura in the development of classic introspection. In doing so, the current requirements of scientific methods had to be met, in particular the repeatability and replicability of the method, the intersubjectivity of the results and the representation of its validity. We therefore propose using not an isolated method for collecting data but a process, which should be understood as part of a comprehensive research strategy, namely a *qualitative-heristic methodology* (<http://heureka-hamburg.de>).

¹“Here begins the truth of knowledge into human nature, as he who knows himself (*der Selbstkenner*) will be able to deploy his abilities and conjecture best, namely from within himself (*aus sich selbst*).” (Carus, 1808, p 59)

²An informal and interdisciplinary group for psychology and social sciences at the University of Hamburg has been developing and testing introspective methods since 1996. For more information about their activities, see <http://www.introspektion.net>

The method of dialogic introspection is based on “face-to-face” groups of 4–12 people guided by an instructor, where a certain research subject is tested, e.g. a film. The participants are encouraged to explore their own reactions, i.e. to explore their own minds and inner processes while watching the film. During the session they may record their own personal experiences, their notes remain private. Subsequently, participants are invited to report, one after another, on their own introspection. Comments or evaluations of other people’s reactions are not allowed. There is no discussion whatsoever of the reports and all information is welcomed. A second round of responses provides opportunities for the participants to add to their introspection report. Hearing the response+ of other participants to the same material provides stimulation to add further detail to their own report. The reports are tape recorded, transcribed and then analysed away from the group.

The analysis is based on “qualitative heuristic methodology” – a general methodology of discovery. It is compressed into 4 “rules” guiding the research process.

Basically the methodology intends (1) to make the research person more open to new experiences, (2) to retain flexibility in defining the research object (3) to provide variability in the selection of research positions and samples, requesting *maximal structural variation of perspectives* and (4) to apply *analysis of homologies*, in order to discover structures in the data. It provides a methodological basis for the rules and combines them in a process of discovery, which is led *dialogically* and therefore stimulates *active* as well as *receptive* behaviour by the participants.³

Dialogic introspection differs from other techniques for group-based research, e.g. *Focus Groups*, *Group Interviews* or *Group Discussions*, which currently dominate commercial qualitative research (Merton, Fiske & Kendall 1956, pp 135-169; Kleining, 2007, p 203). Focus Groups are not really suitable for investigating inner personal experiences, as group structure strongly influences and distorts individual statements. In contrast, dialogic introspection avoids group dynamics and provides the means for perception and recall of individual responses. In this respect, it is an improvement on the Focus Group method. Dialogic introspection reproduces experience; we were therefore redirected towards “Experience Psychology” (*Erlebnispsychologie*) – the subject of the Würzburg School’s introspective thought experiments (Bühler, 1927/1965, p 13 f.), which is also expressed in the Philosophy of Life (*Lebensphilosophie*).

Experiences in the sense of spontaneous “perceived“ or “felt“ experience (*Erlebnisse*) are very complex and variable entities that may be fleeting or long lasting. In the widest sense, they include collected experiences (*Erfahrungen*) as well as summarized and stored recollections (*Erinnerungen*). Together, they form a differentiated unit, which is a combination of the inner and the external, of actual and previous experiences.⁴

They form the subject in a structured manner with its own dynamic and effect. Some areas of experience can be accessed directly by the consciousness, e.g. thought or perception, other areas are difficult to recall, e.g. inner conflicts, aversive experiences or experiences that have been suppressed by the subconscious. Actual experiences are generally mixed with elements from previous experiences, conscious perception or introspection is combined with retrospection. Other areas can only be accessed retrospectively, e.g. those containing distinct individual reflections. This doesn’t necessarily weaken the presence and vitality of their contents. The processing of “perceived or felt” experiences (*Erlebnisse*) enables the subject to orientate themselves in a constantly changing environment, to assert themselves and to react in an appropriate manner under the corresponding conditions.

Introspection is a genuine psychological method, whose subject is the individual psyche. Group-based dialogic introspection can also be used to investigate particular social-psychological, sociological or ethnographical issues, where “perceived experience” (*Erleben*) plays a role. As few things take place in human society without production and reproduction in the psyche, through reception, processing, evaluation and planning of experiences and perceived experiences (*Erlebnisse and Erfahrungen*). Numerous research topics may be investigated by this method, actually everything which may be perceived (*erlebt*). In our opinion, the technique is also suitable, at least experimentally, for investigating issues from the field of social sciences or cultural studies and humanities. The fact that each method can only provide access to a particular and therefore limited view, and as a result should always be used together with other techniques, demonstrates how variation is one of the key requirements of the explorative discovery methods (heuristic methodology) applied here (Kleining, 1982b). The book demonstrates the methods of group-based dialogic introspection and presents some results.

□ Chapter 1 explains the *method itself* and its implementation from planning to analysis. In addition, its place within qualitative heuristics is outlined and further reflections on the characteristics of the qualitative research strategy are discussed. Interested research persons are requested to test this method to develop, conduct and analyse introspections.

□ Chapter 2 provides *examples* of studies and different types of experience (*Erlebnisin-halte*) and forms of experience (*Erlebnisformen*). It is intended to demonstrate how a wide range of research topics can be investigated using introspection. At the same time, it illustrates the different ways that the method can be applied, how different types of application vary and how the data analysis can be handled.

□ Chapter 3 discusses *possibilities* for the method in neighbouring scientific fields and is intended to stimulate debate about its application in other areas of research. There are some practical examples from these fields; however concrete plans for using the

³ Explained in more detail at <http://www.introspektion.net>.

⁴ According to Piaget & Inhelder (1966/1972, p 158) the psychological aspects form a unit, “the affective and cognitive aspect can neither be separated from nor attributed to one another.”

techniques are outlined to enable experts in these areas to apply them.

□ Chapter 4 looks at dialogic introspection within the context of the *history* of introspection. In doing this, we base our development on the experimental designs and methodologies of empirical investigations conducted and cross-reference and discuss critical objections to “classic” methods and our own method and illustrate alternative approaches.

□ Chapter 5 discusses some aspects of the relationship between introspection and *Erleben*, shows different ways to study it. It locates dialogic introspection within its relationship to particular areas of practice in *philosophy, psychiatry* and (analytical) *psychology* that use introspective techniques and examines connections to the *sociological* theory of symbolic interactionism, as a theory capable of contributing to a reciprocal cross-fertilisation.

Experience has shown itself to be a process that can be thoroughly investigated using dialogic introspection, which has unjustly lost the recognition within theoretical and applied psychology, which it enjoyed in Europe during the first decades of the twentieth century. One of the reasons for this might be the fact that the concept has no proper linguistic equivalent in the Anglo-American Sprachraum – where “experience” is the standard translation. Experience signifies practical experience (which would be *Erfahrung*) with a pragmatic background. Experience in the sense of “perceiving” or “feeling” (*Erleben*) is a spontaneous inner, mental process, which does not necessarily have to be converted into action.⁵

Our research using dialogic introspection has brought to light the following benefits:⁶

□ Research objects can be anything that can be “experienced”, from concrete events such as anger, fear or a television programme to more abstract experiences, which can be summarized, for example by describing the term „blackboard“ or the concept of “confidence”.

□ Once the group has been established and the process has been explained, detailed and normally very personal responses can be collected in reports about the research subject, within at most one hour, including time for individual introspection.

□ Responses within the group are free from any disturbing group dynamics (this is not the case with Focus Groups, where priority is given to discussion and argumentation).

□ The method normally provides fresh insights into the topics investigated, providing a range of personal and very individual experiences, all based on the corresponding individual biographies of the participants involved.

□ Dialogic introspection is a method firmly grounded in explorative or heuristic psychology, which works with open verbal or “qualitative” data. Its methodology is well documented.⁷

□ It builds on the methodological attempts of earlier research attempts into psychic processes that date back to the Würzburg School at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through the introduction of the group-based method it has been methodologically improved, systemised and subjected to a methodology which has been debated and documented.

Limits of the method or reservations towards it are as follows:

□ Application of the method is based on the willingness of the participants and their ability to look “inside themselves” and report back about this. Good communication skills make matters easier. As with all interview techniques, interesting the participants in the subject and encouraging participation is the responsibility of the person leading the group.

□ There may well be social barriers to overcome. We have conducted research with intellectuals, scientists and students, but also with housewives. When working with the latter group, it proved useful to explain in advance what was meant by introspection, i.e. one’s own experience of the research object and not for example one’s evaluation according to specific criteria. There were no difficulties after this. Cultural norms can also affect or complicate reporting of one’s own experience within a group, e.g. for the Inuit people it is not usual to talk about inner emotions. Attention should be paid to the cultural limits of the method.

⁵ For example, a baby might have “strong feelings” about its surroundings and certainly “experience” them (*Erleben*) but not yet be an experienced expert (*Erfahrung*).

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⁷ <http://www.heureka-hamburg.de>