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Gjergji, Iside

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Herta Herzog (1910–2010)

The Real Inventor of the Focus Group and a Pioneer for Qualitative Research in Communication Studies



Herta Herzog, Zeichnung von Nicole Holzhauser

Biography

Herta Herzog was born on August 14, 1910, in Vienna to a family of Jewish origin (although converted to Catholicism¹) profoundly affected by the events of the First World War. During her secondary studies she developed a passion for ancient languages and enrolled at the University of Vienna. While there, she serendipitously attended a lecture given by Karl Bühler, a German leading scholar of linguistics and director (along with his wife, Charlotte Bühler) of the Institute of Psychology in Vienna; a lecture which sparked her interest in psychology.²

The Institute of Psychology – within which the *Viennese School of Applied Social Research* was set up and developed – had a strong impact on Herta Herzog's life as a rich source of

intellectual and personal development. It was in this context that she crossed paths with several prominent female scholars, such as Charlotte Bühler, Else Frenkel, Käte Wolf, and Marie Jahoda, who introduced her to the radical movement *Das Rote Wien*.³ Although there were few female scholars at that time, the “Bühler Institute was one of the most fertile environments supporting women in their academic efforts early on”.⁴ Herzog also collaborated with Egon Brunswick and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, who supervised her PhD thesis, titled *Stimme und Persönlichkeit* [Voice and Personality]. Yet, one true mentor remained, Karl Bühler,⁵ as attested in the dedication statement of her doctoral thesis.

In Vienna, Herzog initiated her first sociological studies (on communication), pioneering new theoretical paradigms and acquiring new methods, which she later applied in her research in the United States, where she was forced to emigrate in 1935 to avoid Nazi persecution. Here, she reunited with Lazarsfeld – who had fled Austria two years earlier – and married him in 1936. Their marriage lasted until 1945.

In the US, Herzog became research assistant to Robert Lynd and in 1937 transitioned into a senior researcher role at the Office of Radio Research at Princeton University – later renamed Bureau of Applied Social Research as part of Columbia University, where Herzog collaborated with renowned scholars from both the United States and Europe: Theodor W. Adorno, Hadley Cantril, Robert K. Merton, and many others. Her studies in the United States cemented her place in the history of sociological thought and laid the foundations for qualitative research in Communication Studies.

In 1943, Herzog parted ways with academia (branding it an “Ivory Tower”) to pursue a career as marketing researcher and advertiser at McCann Erickson, a global advertising agency, where Herzog achieved great success over many years. In 1986, her name was added to the Market Research Council’s Hall of Fame.

In 1976, Herzog and her second husband Paul Massing (a former student of Max Horkheimer and a Soviet spy⁶) relocated back to Europe. They initially settled in Germany but after Massing died in 1979 Herzog chose to return to Austria. In the 1980s, she rediscovered her passion for qualitative research in the realm of mass media, while also returning to teaching at the University of Tübingen and Vienna. In her last research endeavor, published in 1994, she explored racism and xenophobia in Austria.⁷ Herta Herzog died on February 25, 2010, in Leutasch, Tyrol, Austria.

Works and Methods

Herzog's oeuvre is situated within the history of sociology of communication, not only as a research model but also as a theoretical and methodological turning point for the entire discipline, raising fundamental questions about the relevance of psychological motivations in audience behavior. Her research extensively explored the radio and its listeners. She was the first female scholar to investigate the social impact of the radio, recognizing its unique ability to penetrate listeners' minds and elicit various responses.

Since her doctoral thesis, published in *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* (1933), Herzog started to analyze the relationship between the speaker's personality and voice when communicated through radio, thereby pioneering the evaluation of mass media's impact from a sociological perspective. Through her empirical research, she provided extensive support for Bühler's theory of language and expression, while creatively combining it with Lazarsfeld's empiricism. It was out of this fruitful synthesis that Herzog developed her own theoretical framework. Furthermore, this work allowed her to relate the analysis of new media to audience's unconscious motivations and behavior, successfully merging the sociology of communication and psychoanalysis.

From 1935 onwards, Herzog's studies mainly centered on audience's reception of mass media communication. These include: *Professor Quiz: A Gratification Study*;⁸ *On Borrowed Experience. An Analysis of Listening to Daytime Sketches*;⁹ *What Do We Really Know About Daytime Serial Listeners*;¹⁰ *Radio: The First Post-War Year*;¹¹ *Psychological Gratifications in Daytime Radio Listening*;¹² *Motivations and Gratifications of Daily Serial Listeners*;¹³ *Why Did People Believe in the "Invasion from Mars"?*¹⁴

All these texts are nowadays considered canonical in Communication Studies,¹⁵ as they established the theoretical and methodological foundations of the uses and gratifications approach in qualitative audience analysis, also presenting the very first structured study of serial programs as a specific genre. In these works, Herzog examined the motivations behind radio program listening, the gratifications that listeners derive, and above all, how they use these programs. During the same period, Herzog studied, albeit to a lesser extent, other topics, such as the relationship between children and radio¹⁶ and voter behavior.¹⁷

Despite moving to the marketing agency McCann Erickson, Herzog's theoretical contributions did not wane; rather, they concentrated on topics related to marketing research. Even in this field, her work today is considered quintessential. The most notable texts of this period include: *Behavioral Science Concepts for Analyzing the Consumer*;¹⁸ *What Is a Consumer?*;¹⁹ *What Is a Product?*²⁰; *What Is a Brand?*²¹

In the 1980s, Herzog shifted her focus to examining the TV series' reception, with a specific emphasis on analyzing the German audience's reaction to the US-American soap opera *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. Her accomplishment culminated in three concise, yet dense, articles: *Decoding Dallas*;²² *Dallas in Deutschland: Eine Pilotstudie*;²³ *Der Stich ins Böse. Dallas und Denver Clan, garantiert anders als der Alltag*.²⁴

Herzog's methodological approach was highly eclectic and not easily classifiable. She excelled at optimizing the collection and analysis of verbal data, including open-ended questions, individual interviews, projective tests, and the use of eye-tracking cameras in her research. Additionally, she made extensive use of experimental methods developed by Lazarsfeld, first in Vienna, later in the United States (with the aid of Frank N. Stanton), such as "Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer". She was able to mix seemingly distant tools and had no methodological taboos. To Herzog, research, method, and theory were indivisible, as she was "interested in understanding people in their social context".²⁵

Empirical Research and Psychoanalysis

Modern sociology owes much to the group of researchers trained at the Institute of Psychology in Vienna in the early decades of the 20th century. The study on Marienthal's unemployed, conducted by Marie Jahoda, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and Hans Zeisel,²⁶ is iconic in the sociology of labor and an important groundbreaking contribution to the use of mixed methods in sociological analysis. Else Frenkel, Egon Brunswick, and Marie Jahoda are among the most influential authors of *The Authoritarian Personality*,²⁷ which is now considered a classic of critical sociology and social psychology. The founders' list leading the discipline of the sociology of communication is much longer. Among them, Paul F. Lazarsfeld undoubtedly remains the most prominent.

All these scholars shared a psychoanalytic approach to observing social phenomena. It was not just a matter of recognizing the complementarity between sociology and psychoanalysis²⁸, but rather of developing a qualitative and interpretative methodology inspired by psychoanalysis, which they consistently combined with quantitative data. Herzog's studies are the most representative of this *Viennese group of scholars* which taught her how to overcome "epistemological obstacles".²⁹ In her PhD thesis, psychoanalytic tools are evident in the construction and interpretation of questionnaires. In other studies, those tools are incorporated into the way she conducted interviews, using listening techniques commonly applied in psychoanalytical sessions. According to Herzog, the interviewer, like psychoanalysts, should be interested in capturing everything – words, voice, context,

biographical and social backgrounds – to understand not only what interviewees say but also what they do not:

Herzog's methodology combines the interpretation of words with psychodynamic exploration of respondents to obtain a coherent syndromic set. In *On Borrowed Experience*, for instance, Herzog comments on the interviewees' answers while simultaneously capturing and revealing their projected aggressiveness:

How closely the aggressiveness against the radio characters is tied up with the listener's desire to find compensation for her own troubles is demonstrated in the following remark of a listener. She has had a hard time bringing up her children after her husband's death. She chooses programs which have as their heroine a self-sacrificing woman. Her comment about one of them is: *'I like Hilltop House. The woman there is always doing things for children... I wonder whether she will ever get married. Perhaps it isn't right for her to do it and give up the orphanage. She is doing such a wonderful thing. I really don't think she would get married'*. This listener compensates for her resented fate by wishing a slightly worse one upon her favorite radio character. In return for the death of her own husband she wants the heroine to have no husband at all. She expects her to sacrifice herself for orphan children, whereas she herself is sacrificing herself for her own.³¹

Psychoanalysis not only shaped Herzog's methodological approach, but also guided her theoretical inclination towards *totality*. By totality is not meant here a top-down perspective that encompasses everything visible in the analysis, but rather a tendency to explore the hidden, *i.e.* unconscious desires and behaviors. This deep exploration incorporates individual perspectives to decipher and explain social phenomena. Undoubtedly, Herzog was committed to including this perspective into her research endeavors.

In the light of these considerations, arguments portraying Herzog as an 'external' member of the Frankfurt School³² do not seem convincing.³³ This is not only because she had studied Freud in Vienna without going through Frankfurt but mainly because there was a substantial difference between the *Vienna School of Applied Social Research* and the *Frankfurt School*. This difference is manifest in their methodological approaches and, mostly, in their idea of communication.³⁴ The Viennese scholars embraced Bühler's notion of communication (which was understood only within a relational context) and measured its impact through the audience's behavior. The Frankfurt School, on the other hand, focused exclusively on analyzing the communication's content, thereby disregarding the relevance of the audience's reactions.

Academia, Patriarchal Structures, and Individual Wishes

Recounting Herzog's intellectual odyssey sheds light on the accomplishments and legacy of a distinguished and groundbreaking scholar, whose academic trajectory was regrettably hindered. The abrupt interruption of her academic career can be primarily attributed to the discriminatory attitudes that pervaded the academic structures in the early 20th century, culminating in her ousting from university and leading to the obfuscation of her considerable contributions. However, as Christian Fleck highlights, "in order to analyze female careers it is necessary to simultaneously look at the opportunity structures and the formation of individual wishes and goals".³⁵ Upon close examination of Herzog's life, it becomes evident that she had minimal interest in playing the academic "reputation game".³⁶ Her focus was more on venturing into uncharted territories of research rather than placing her name in front of audiences or recruiting admirers. This attitude might have facilitated, to some extent, the predatory approach towards her work. Nevertheless, it is crucial not to downplay the deeply male-centric structure of academia in those days and the significant influence it had on the careers of female scholars, Herzog included. On the contrary, Herzog's academic biography serves as an emblematic example of how the history of social sciences is much broader and more complex than what is commonly presented in relevant textbooks.³⁷ At times, due to this inadequate knowledge, what we know might be false and incomplete.

Who Invented the Focus Group?

For instance, to believe that Robert K. Merton is the inventor of the focus group – one of the most widely-used research methods of qualitative sociology – is quite a mistake. In fact, it was Herzog who invented and first implemented it, yet Merton continues to be considered its 'father', as evidenced by the *New York Times*:

His adoption of the focused interview to elicit the responses of groups to texts, radio programs and films led to the 'focus groups' that politicians, their handlers, marketers and hucksters now find indispensable. Long after he had helped devise the methodology, Mr. Merton deplored its abuse and misuse but added, 'I wish I'd get a royalty on it.'³⁸

To understand how Merton took credit for Herzog's invention, it is necessary to thoroughly trace a series of clues that extend back in time. The first one is provided by the 1946 article by Merton and Kendall published in the prestigious *American Journal of Sociology*, titled

The Focused Interview.³⁹ In the article, Herzog's name is mentioned twice to publicly acknowledge her merit for being the first scholar to use the focused interview:

The focused interview was initially developed to meet certain problems growing out of communications research and propaganda analysis. The outlines of such problems appear in detailed case studies by Dr. Herta Herzog, dealing with the gratification found by listeners in such radio programs as daytime serials and quiz competitions. With the sharpening of objectives, research interest centered on the analysis of responses to particular pamphlets, radio programs, and motion pictures. During the war Dr. Herzog and the senior author of the present paper were assigned by several war agencies to study the psychological effects of specific morale-building devices. In the course of this work the focused interview was progressively developed to a relatively standardized form.⁴⁰

The second clue can be found in the 1956 manual authored by Merton, Kendall, and Fiske, also titled *The Focused Interview*,⁴¹ where Herzog's name is mentioned three times (once in the preface and twice in the introductory paragraph, where the sentences of the first article are merely repeated). However, the tone appears somewhat different from that of the 1946 article. In the preface Herzog is thanked for her valuable assistance while working with the manual's authors: "We are indebted also to Herta Herzog for her considerable help while she was working with us on studies of mass communications."⁴²

The acknowledgment presented an unconventional aspect: While Herzog was publicly credited for her generic "help", although "considerable", she was simultaneously portrayed as an external member of the research group involved in the development of the focus group method. This implicitly ruled out the possibility of considering her as the originator of the focus group.

The third and final clue, which concludes the 'roadmap' and attempts to erase the traces of the focus group's origin, is found in an article published by Merton in 1987, titled *The Focused Interview and Focus Groups: Continuities and Discontinuities*.⁴³ This time, Merton claimed that the invention of the famous qualitative method began by chance on a fateful evening when he encountered Lazarsfeld:

It all started in my first inadvertent work session – a thoroughly unplanned work session – with Paul Lazarsfeld back in November 1941. That story has been told in print several times [...], but never in tracing the seedbed of the focused interview. I retell it here in that new context.⁴⁴

The message was clear: The focus group emerged from the extraordinary chemistry between two alpha sociologists – the “double giant star”⁴⁵ of Columbia University. This article was later used as an introduction to the new edition of the manual *The Focused Interview*,⁴⁶ published in 1990, thereby leading to a decrease in the acknowledgment originally granted to Herzog in the 1946 article.

To corroborate Fleck’s assertions in his article *Lazarsfeld’s wives, or: what happened to women sociologists in the twentieth century*, it is worth noting that Herzog’s conduct might have facilitated the erasure of her name as the originator of the focus group. This could be attributed in part to her detached stance concerning academic ‘intrigues’ or, as Fleck puts it, the academic “reputation game”. Notably, she never explicitly claimed the role of the focus group’s creator until a few months before she passed away, when Gerhard Kleining asked her about the contentious matter during an interview. Her words were unequivocal:

When explicitly questioned about Merton, she said: “He was interested in the program analyzer that Paul [Lazarsfeld] invented, and he was mainly interested in theory.”⁴⁸ Hence, Robert K. Merton’s reputation progressively overshadowed Herzog’s merits, ultimately causing them to disappear. If Merton had not been the protagonist of this sad story, it is likely he would have used this case to effectively demonstrate what the “Mathew effect” is, as well defined in other circumstances.⁴⁹ However, given the many denials of Herzog’s merits throughout her academic career, it would be more appropriate to rename it “Herta effect”.

Who Wrote “The Invasion from Mars”?

The history behind the book *The Invasion from Mars. A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (1940) – one of the most relevant works in Communication Studies and Social Psychology – also requires revision in order to grant adequate credit to Herta Herzog, having made significant contributions to it. This revision calls for a thorough search through both FBI⁵⁰ and academic archives.⁵¹ It has recently come to light that the book’s author, Hadley Cantril, was under FBI surveillance as well as an informant for the agency.⁵² Additional findings from the FBI files uncover a heated conflict between Cantril and Lazarsfeld, who was referred to by the FBI as “Viennese Romeo”⁵³. This dispute arose when Cantril accused Lazarsfeld of sexually harassing his wife, Mavis L. Cantril, as documented by Stefan Schwarzkopf in his study on the FBI’s interactions with American sociologists:

The underlying conflict produced a sort of ‘academic divorce’ between the two male

scholars. At the same time, Herzog – having conducted the initial exploratory research and many interviews that formed the basis of the book – was inexplicably removed as a co-author of *The Invasion from Mars*. Further findings from academic archives, as reported by Peter Simonson, suggest that Cantril extensively utilized Herzog's reports to shape the entire structure of the book:

While it is not known what Herzog's reaction to such intellectual ostracism was, we do know that Lazarsfeld expressed his disagreement with Cantril.⁵⁶ In fact, years later Lazarsfeld wrote that he had hoped that Dr. Herzog would have received a significant credit for the study that culminated in the book *The Invasion from Mars*.⁵⁷ According to Jefferson D. Pooley and Michael J. Socolow, the book was produced at the peak of an already-bitter dispute between the two men [*Cantril and Lazarsfeld*]. Archival evidence suggest that the pair reached a negotiated settlement in 1939: Lazarsfeld dropped his and Herzog's claims to IFM [*The Invasion from Mars*] credit, and Cantril agreed to the PRRP [*Princeton Radio Research Project*] move to Columbia University. In the scholarly equivalent of divorce proceedings, Cantril got the book, and Lazarsfeld the research institute.⁵⁸

Considering all these elements, it is difficult not to see in Cantril's behavior an act of 'revenge' against Lazarsfeld. Yet again, Herzog's scientific merits appear to have been sacrificed in this retaliation carried out within a male-dominated sociology.

How Much Was Herzog Paid?

Other studies have highlighted how Herzog – despite having one of the most important scientific productions within the Princeton Radio Research Project and the Bureau of Applied Social Research – was not considered a prominent member. This is evident in her level of compensation.

Christian Fleck's calculations reveal that the best-paid member of the research group was Frank N. Stanton, receiving \$100 per page. Theodor W. Adorno and Hadley Cantril followed with \$42 per page, while Paul F. Lazarsfeld received \$25 per page. At the bottom of the list was Herta Herzog, receiving only \$1.39 per page.⁵⁹ The economic discrimination Herzog endured is further highlighted in the job offer Cantril sent to Lazarsfeld via telegram in 1937, offering him a salary of \$7.000 plus additional \$1.000 for Herzog.⁶⁰ According to Fleck, who has catalogued the immense production of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, at least thirteen other texts written by Herzog, composed of 457 pages, remain unpublished.

Herta, the Non-Feminist, and the Lessons Ahead

From the 1990s onward, Herzog emerged as a key author in feminist theory and, notably, in Feminist Communication Studies.⁶¹ This recognition stems not just from her role as a trailblazer in Communication Studies, but also from the consistent prominence of women as central figures in her research. Choosing the realm of women, particularly that of housewives, as her fieldwork was not an easy task for Herzog, given the subaltern position they held in society. Herzog clearly aimed to challenge the sociology of her time; selecting simple and uneducated housewives as her study subjects also served to highlight the neglect of sociologists towards them. Herzog's perspective on these women was highly respectful. She analyzed and commented on their words, which became a valuable resource for her research. She drew from this resource to establish a fresh conceptual framework for analyzing gratifications and to craft impactful paragraph titles. She unequivocally showed that her female interviewees were not as unintelligent as many (sociologists of her time) assumed. On the contrary, Herzog described that they possessed the vocabulary to articulate their own problems, even in a scientific manner.

Nevertheless, Herzog rejected the label of being a feminist. In a letter she sent to Elisabeth M. Perse she wrote:

This declaration should not come as a surprise when considering her life story. Although she was aware of the difficulties she encountered as a female scholar, her foremost desire was to establish herself as an independent thinker. She appeared hesitant to accept recognition that overlooked her unique subjectivity, perhaps fearing that the bigger picture might obscure the finer details. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the emancipatory impact of her writings and biography.

The brief and partial reconstruction of the discriminations outlined above highlights a gender crisis within the field of sociology that requires attention. Herzog's decision to withdraw from academic research cannot be considered personal, it was not an individual wish, but rather the consequence of a hidden scandal that must no longer remain ignored. The issue was a male-dominated academic structure that excluded women – one that has permeated the community of sociologists since the pre- and -post-war periods.

Herzog's example serves as a learning curve for the present day by helping us to identify other situations in which women's achievements have been or are still being overlooked or undervalued in the field of sociology. At least, we can make this our duty to atone for past

discrimination and prevent future cases of unjust gender oppression within the discipline.

Endnoten

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Iside Gjergji

Dr. Iside Gjergji is sociologist at the Centre for Social Studies, Coimbra University, Portugal. Her major interests lie in the sociology of cultural processes and communication, the sociology of migration as well as social theory. She also worked as criminal lawyer and has

longstanding interests in philosophy and computer science.

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