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Psychology and management of the workforce in post-Stalinist Hungary

Over recent years, there has been a growing interest in the history of psychological disciplines and mental health in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.¹ The peculiarities of the Soviet and Russian experience have been at the forefront of a lot of this research: for example, Susanne Cohen's research on Soviet social-psychological "trainings" in the 1970s and 1980s and Benjamin Zajicek's studies on Russian and Soviet psychiatry.² Concerning other countries of the socialist bloc, Sarah Marks has studied the aetiologies of mental disorders in Czechoslovakia, while Mat Savelli has examined Yugoslav social psychiatrists and their social-political roles in preventing various forms of deviance and maladjustment.³ There is also a growing body of individual works that approach the history of psychological disciplines in post-war Eastern Europe as being both a symptom and a cause of the peculiar social and political conditions of state socialism.⁴

This article sets out to explore psychological sciences and social planning in post-Stalinist Hungary after 1956. The focus is on the psychology of work as a socially and historically situated discourse. I demonstrate how psychologists started to promote their expertise to reform the practices of management and to 'humanize' the conditions of work.

¹ Eugene Raikhel & Dörte Bemme, "Postsocialism, the psy-ences and mental health," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 63, no. 2 (2016); Cf. Marius Turda, "History of Medicine in Eastern Europe, including Russia," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine*, ed. Mark Jackson (UK, 2011).

² Susanne Cohen, "Humanizing Soviet Communication: Social-Psychological Training in the Late Socialist Period," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (Fall 2015); Benjamin Zajicek, "Banning the Soviet Lobotomy: Psychiatry, Ethics, and Professional Politics during Late Stalinism," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 91, no. 1 (2017).

³ Sarah Marks, "Ecology, Humanism and Mental Health in Communist Czechoslovakia," in *Psychiatry in Communist Europe*, eds. Mat Savelli and Sarah Marks (New York, 2015); Mat Savelli, "Blame George Harrison: Drug Use and Psychiatry in Communist Yugoslavia," in *Psychiatry in Communist Europe*.

⁴ See, for example: Agita Lüse (2011), "From social pathologies to individual psyches: psychiatry navigating socio-political currents in 20th century Latvia," *History of Psychiatry* 22, no. 1 (2011); Ana Antić, "Heroes and Hysterics: 'Partisan Hysteria' and Communist State-Building in Yugoslavia after 1945," *Social History of Medicine* 27, no. 2 (2014); Tuomas Laine-Frigren, *Searching for the Human Factor* (University of Jyväskylä, 2016), <https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/48507>; Melinda Kovai, *Lélektan és politika. Pszichotudományok a magyarországi államszocializmusban 1945–1970* (Budapest, 2016).

They suggested practical remedies for every-day problems of worker motivation and social adjustment and introduced social psychological concepts to improve the state of interpersonal relations at the workplace. These efforts carried complex meanings, and they are studied in the context of ideological, political, and social changes in Socialist Eastern Europe after 1956.

By now numerous studies have shown how ‘governing minds’ across a variety of 20th century political regimes were heeding psychological expertise to decide how best to promote social well-being and fight back maladjustment.⁵ As argued by Greg Eghigian (et.al.), there were similar trends under 20th century communist (and fascist) regimes that have also been detected in the liberal west, i.e., a growing prominence of psychological sciences in various public endeavours, and a concurrent search for psychological explanations of human conduct. In the background, there was a strong vision that human beings in their various societies could be “known, changed, and managed”.⁶ While the case of Hungary was linked to this general development, the introduction of psychological discourses also testified a particular state socialist experience, reflecting profound changes in society, ideology, and political culture in this corner of East Central Europe behind the iron curtain.

After the communist takeover (1948/1949) in Hungary, the politicians in power, almost simulating the Soviet model of the late 1930s, suppressed most of psychology for ideological and political reasons. This turn of events was demoralizing for many professionals who had been genuinely excited about the glowing prospects that state-led social planning had held out for mental and social health in the immediate post-war years. Indeed, many of them, perhaps

⁵ Harry Oosterhuis, “Mental health, citizenship, and the memory of World War II in the Netherlands (1945–1985),” *History of Psychiatry* 25, no. 1 (2014); Greg Eghigian, “Care and Control in a Communist State,” in *Psychiatric Cultures Compared. Psychiatry and Mental Health Care in the Twentieth Century. Comparisons and Approaches*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra et.al. (Amsterdam, 2005); Joy Damousi & Mariano Ben Plotkin, eds., *Psychoanalysis and Politics: Histories of Psychoanalysis under Conditions of Restricted Political Freedom* (New York, 2012); Helen Laurenson & Sally Swartz, “The Professionalization of Psychology within the Apartheid State 1948–1978,” *History of Psychology* 14, no. 3 (2011); Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul. Shaping of the Private Self* (London, 1999).

⁶ Greg Eghigian, Andreas Killen, and Christine Leuenberger, eds., *The Self as Project*. Osiris 22 (Chicago, 2007), introduction.

most paradigmatically the social psychologist Ferenc Mérei, cherished the idea that the human condition could be altered through the careful administration of psychological expertise.⁷ In hindsight, there were promising developments also in the study of working life (e.g., Gyula Rézler's research⁸), which were moving beyond the traditional Central European psychotechnics towards a more sociological and social psychological approach.⁹ But ideological dogmatism soon won the day, and the need for a visibly quick socio-economic transformation meant that the 'psychologization' of an issue was deemed as a self-indulgent sign of a bourgeois, reactionary mentality that was actually holding back socialist progress more than helping matters.¹⁰

The public discourse on work, in turn, portrayed it as a distinctive form of service, which demanded discipline and loyalty to the collective. Indeed, the Stalinist work culture was characterized by the daily presence of politics, ideology and related disciplinary campaigns within factories.¹¹ Furthermore, in 1950 the system of obligatory work was introduced to state work legislation, and the concept of socialist competition at work was encoded into law. Thus, for example, the worker who did not show up at the workplace, or was regularly late, could be punished with up to six months in prison. Following the terms commonly used back then, those

⁷ See, for example Judit Mészáros, "Progress and Persecution in the Psychoanalytic Heartland: Anti-Semitism, Communism and the Fate of Hungarian Psychoanalysis," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 20, no. 5 (2010): 608–611. On Mérei, see Anna Borgos, György Litván & Ferenc Erős, eds., *Mérei élet-mű. Tanulmányok* (Budapest, 2006). See also Laine-Frigren, *Searching for the Human Factor*, 288–295.

⁸ Eszter Bartha, "Bridging Historical periods. A selection from the writings of Gyula Rézler," *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 3, no. 2 (2012): 107–112

⁹ Psychotechnic approach to workers' mental and physical efficiency dominated the regional scene before the IIWW. See Jirí Hoskovec, "Czech Republic," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Psychology: Global Perspectives* (Oxford, 2012), 141–142; Karel Paulík, "The History of the Psychology of Work and Organization in Czech and Slovak Industry," *European Psychologist* 9, no. 3 (2004): 171–172; György Kiss, "Révész Géza és Erdélyi Mihály: Két Fejezet a Német-Magyar Kapcsolatok történetéből a pszichológiában," *Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle* LIV, no. 2 (1999): 150–152.

¹⁰ Csaba Pléh, *A lélektan története* (Budapest, 2010), 542–543; Imre Knausz, "A magyar "pedológia" pere – 1948–1950," in *Mérei élet-mű*, 161–180. For more on Soviet trials against childhood studies and psychological tests at the end of the 1930s, see David Joravsky, *Russian Psychology: a Critical History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 345–353. See also Alexander Etkind, *Eros of the Impossible. The History of Psychoanalysis in Russia* (Boulder & Oxford, 1997), 259–285.

¹¹ Márton Szabó, *Diszkurzív térben: Tanulmányok a politika nyelvéről és a politikai tudásról* (Budapest, 1998), 44–45; Mark Pittaway, *The Workers' State: Industrial Labor and The Making of Socialist Hungary, 1944–1958* (Pittsburg, 2012), 230–270.

who left the workplace were labelled “migrant birds” (*vándormadár*) and were seen as being motivated by selfish economic interests only.¹²

However, the experience of political upheaval and violence in Hungary in 1956 – and the central role of the workers’ councils in the revolution – strongly influenced the communist mind-set.¹³ As part of the more general drive towards anti-Stalinism in the Soviet Bloc, the new general secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party, János Kádár (1912–1989), aimed at building the legitimacy of the regime by not only improving living standards for the whole (working) population, but also by actively showing that the system wanted to separate itself from the Stalinist work culture of the past. From the ashes of the 1956 revolution, a paternalist regime arose which increasingly supported sociological and psychological research and expertise in trying to build its legitimacy and future viability. By focusing on essentially human factors, psychologists were also trying to incorporate into this system the discourse surrounding ‘the individual’.¹⁴

I argue that the workplace was a particular context in which a post-Stalinist reassessment of the government’s ideology was acted out. To elaborate this more fully, I analyze both published texts and archival materials in the framework of the ‘governmentality’ thesis, as

¹² See László Varga, *Az elhagyott tömeg* (Budapest, 1994), 50, 61–62; Eszter Zsófia Tóth, “’Ennyi idő egy férjből is elég, hát még egy gyárból’ – A gyári identitás munkásnők és munkások életút-elbeszéléseiben,” *Múltunk* 48, no. 3 (2003): 78. The case of the psychiatrist Pál Santha at the turn of the ‘50s illustrates the constraints posed by the environment. Santha expressed critical opinions about Stakhanovism by arguing that it put the human personality under a lot of psychological strain. He even went so far as to say that the competitive spirit it encouraged was actually unhealthy and wrong. This was because Santha had encountered a Stakhanovite woman in his clinic suffering from a unilateral paralysis. He drew the conclusion that this woman had been exposed to a work situation she could not cope with, and as a result had shown hysteric symptoms because sickness seemed the only possible route of escape. This of course did not sit kindly with the authorities and, as Santha had already talked openly about other issues too, he was forced out of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and his professorship terminated in 1951. See Péter Bákonny, *Téboły, Terápia, Stigma* (Budapest, 1983), 84–85.

¹³ See Csaba Békés, Malcolm Byrne & János Rainer, eds., *The 1956 Revolution: a History in Documents*. Budapest, 2002), 191–216, 211. For more on workers’ councils, see Pittaway, *The Workers’ State*, 205–252.

¹⁴ Lynne A. Haney, *Inventing the Needy. Gender and the Politics of Welfare in Hungary* (Berkeley, 2002), 99–101. Haney importantly challenges the commonly held view that the Kádár regime withdrew from the private life of its citizens. Namely, she argues that Hungarian welfare state policies actually became closely allied with professional forms of expertise (e.g., psychology) from the 1960s onwards. As a result, new paternalist forms of control and intervention in families were introduced; and in the process, women especially became the targets of “control and care”. See also Sándor Horváth, *Két emelet boldogság. Mindennapi szociálpolitika Budapesten a Kádár-korban* (Budapest, 2012), 21–29.

developed by Nikolas Rose. According to Rose, the historical evolution of the psychological sciences was closely related to a *liberal* form of governmentality, which favours ‘working on’ subjectivities instead of open forms of oppression.¹⁵ Psychiatry and psychology, claims Rose, provided the means for the “translation of human subjectivity” into the new languages used to govern schools, prisons, and factories, the various spheres of a modernizing society.¹⁶ The everyday field of work also became increasingly conceptualized as a territory to be “explored, understood, and regulated” in order to advance the efficiency of the nation and to harmonize the wishes and needs of the individual with those of the work organization. As Rose points out, the more ‘humanist’ variant of this project was especially suitable for promoting the legitimacy of the management by making it appear more democratic and thus giving it a more rational basis.¹⁷

In the 1960s and 1970s, the questions of management and human relations in the work place were topical with varying emphases, not only in western industrial and organizational psychology, but also in East Central European countries, perhaps most notably in Poland and Czechoslovakia, which were among the earliest states to industrialize in the region.¹⁸ In fact, the psychological problems associated with poor conditions at work had been studied by Czechoslovakian psychiatrists and clinical psychologists already in the 1950s.¹⁹ In this article, the Hungarian case is used to illustrate how these popular concepts and ideas were used to serve particular national and local ends; and how psychologists became to promote the idea

¹⁵ For a critical view, see: Adrian C. Brock, “Psychology and liberal democracy: A spurious connection?,” in *Internationalizing the History of Psychology*, ed. Adrian C. Brock, (New York, 2006).

¹⁶ Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge, 1998), 101–102.

¹⁷ Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 56–59.

¹⁸ Laura K. Koppes (ed.), *Historical Perspectives in Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, esp. chapters 3 and 4 (New Jersey, 2007); Sandrine Kott, “The Social Engineering Project. Exportation of Capitalist Management,” in *Planning in Cold War Europe. Competition, Cooperation, Circulations*, eds. Michel Christian, Sandrine Kott & Ondrej Matejka (de Gruyter, 2018); Sarah Marks, “Ecology, Humanism and Mental Health”, 138; Vítězslav Sommer, “Managing Socialist Industrialism: Czechoslovak Management Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, in *Planning in Cold War Europe*; Małgorzata Mazurek, “Between Sociology and Ideology. Perception of Work and Sociologist Advisors in Communist Poland, 1956–1970”, *Revue d'histoire en sciences humaines* 16, no. 1 (2007).

¹⁹ Marks, “Ecology, Humanism and Mental Health Marks”, 138.

that if the socialist worker was to be rationally managed and his/her behaviour channelled to efficient, healthy and politically ‘safe’ directions, psychology-based solutions were needed. But there was also a disjunction between individual-based psychological discourses and the political-ideological interests of the governing Communist party. As this article shows, some of the ideas and practices promoted by psychologists in the 1970s were clearly anti-bureaucratic and anti-authoritarian. Therefore, I tentatively approach the late-Socialist factories and work communities as sites of *competing* governmentalities.

Psychology and politics after 1956

Alejandro Dagfal points out in his research on psychoanalysis under Peronism and anti-Peronism (in Argentina) that commonly used political categories, such as “authoritarianism”, “democratic government”, or “dictatorship”, have to be carefully put into the local context to find out how these notions relate to the status of psychological forms of knowledge and expertise.²⁰ In Hungary, the 1960s saw the psychological sciences gaining social status and political impetus in the conditions of the ‘soft dictatorship’. One significant aspect related to this change, which also affected psychologists’ room for manoeuvre, was the intricate system of the “three Ts” (*tiltott, tűrt, támogatott*), which designated whether statements, activities or events and representations of these were either forbidden, tolerated, or supported. In this system, introduced by the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP) soon after 1956, and particularly related to the name of the most powerful cultural politician of the period, György Aczél (1917–1991), slightly unorthodox cultural or scientific representations were allowed to be made public after informal negotiations.²¹

²⁰ Alejandro Dagfal, “Psychoanalysis in Argentina under Peronism and Anti-Peronism (1943–1963),” in *Psychoanalysis and Politics*, 135–136.

²¹ Sándor Révész, *Aczél és korunk* (Budapest, 1997), 82–86.

In those fields of scholarship that had recently been rehabilitated (e.g., sociology and psychology), the post-1956 situation called for careful consideration and control.²² For the influential players in the re-emerging academic field of psychology, the first years of institution building were characterized by ideological control on the one hand and a search for professional niches on the other. Both of these functions were carried out by the so-called Psychology Committee (est. 1958). It was set up to promote the cultivation of psychological sciences within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and in many ways it represented the revival of psychology in the post-Stalinist era. Within the (negotiable) boundaries of communist science policy and ideology, psychology now became a valid career path and a public form of knowledge.²³

In previous research on the relationship between the Party and the intellectuals during the Kádár era, there has been a somewhat one-sided tendency to focus on either ideology and political control, or dissidence. As the political system was based on the seemingly all-invasive power of the party, the interest of historians has been to show the limited and controlled space of intellectual action, the nature of (self-) censorship, the lack of freedom of expression, and different disciplinary techniques used by the party-state.²⁴ Presuppositions about the

²² It is significant that the basic academic institutions for psychology were set up either during or immediately after the political purges related to the revolution of 1956. After carefully constructed investigations, certain psychologists were also put on trial and convicted in April 1959 for political crimes presumed to have been committed after the Soviet invasion. Social psychologist Ferenc Mérei (1909–1986) was perhaps the best known of these. They were deemed dangerous and labelled by the secret police as either “nationalists”, “revisionists”, or “national communists”. See János M. Rainer, *Ötvenhat után* (Budapest, 2003), 76; Éva Gál, *Lejáratás és bomlasztás. Tudósok, tanárok a titkosrendőrség látókörében* (Budapest, 2013), 17–127; On political and ideological control after 1956, see: György Péteri, “Tisztogatás és patronálás: Kádár ellenforradalma és a közgazdaságtudományi kutatások Magyarországon, 1957–1958,” *Aetas* 21, no. 1 (2006).

²³ Agnes Szokolszky, “Hungarian psychology in context,” *Hungarian studies* 30, no. 1 (2016): 21–22; Kovai, *Lélektan és politika*, 324–334. Greg Eghigian, “The Psychologization of the Socialist Self: East German Forensic Psychology and its Deviants, 1945–1975,” *German History* 22, no.2 (April 2004); Hoskovec, “Czech Republic”, 143.

²⁴ See, for example, Éva Ständeisky, “Bomlás. A hatalom és a kulturális elit,” in *Hatvanas évek Magyarországon*, ed. János M. Rainer (Budapest, 2004).

totalitarian character of one-party dictatorships may have overshadowed the role of 'soft' techniques and "mundane" practices in producing consent and creating political legitimacy.²⁵

The gradual opening of the intellectual sphere, from the early 1960s onwards (followed by repeated political backlashes), has been also discussed mainly from the angle of political control, as a 'compromise' between the authorities and intellectuals, or as a system of negotiation at different levels of society.²⁶ This narrative thus ascribes the birth of new disciplines such as sociology and psychology, and their integration into the existing context of cultural and political control, as part of a 'liberalization' of the regime, during which the political loyalty of intellectuals was accepted in exchange for a loosening of the state's ideological grip. However, this kind of approach does not fully take into account the various expectations that were also imposed on the newly accepted social sciences after 1956.

With the passing of Stalinism, more objective sociological research began to emerge. To begin with, the priority was to revise the Stalinist ideological model by looking at social stratification in a new manner.²⁷ The next phase was to gradually make the science less about ideological criticism and more about exploring and understanding 'real' social conditions.²⁸ At the start of the 1970s, MSZMP actually began to allocate more resources to the social sciences.²⁹ Attila Becskeházi has even argued that sociological discourse became, in many ways, the dominant language of late socialism.³⁰ In addition, research has shown how the status

²⁵ On totalitarian narrative and its critique, see: Barbara J. Falk, "Resistance and Dissent in Central and Eastern Europe: an Emerging Historiography," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 2 (2011): 320–322; Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was forever, until it was no more: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton & Oxford, 2005), 4–6. Cf. Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Present* (Polity Press, 2008), 32.

²⁶ Ervin Csizmadia, *Magyar Demokratikus Ellenzék (1968–1988). Monográfia* (Budapest, 1995), 17–37; Révész, *Aczél és Korunk*, 99–101.

²⁷ György Majtényi, "Az értelmezés hatalma és a hatalom értelmezése. Az 1945 utáni társadalomtörténet fogalmi nyelvéről," *Korall* 19–20 (2005): 39–40.

²⁸ Zsolt K. Horváth, "The Metapolitics of Reality: Documentary Film, Social Science Research and Cognitive Realism in Twentieth Century Hungary," *Hungarian Historical Review* 3, no. 2 (2014).

²⁹ Ervin Csizmadia, *Diskurzus és Diktatúra* (Budapest, 2001), 112–113.

³⁰ Attila Becskeházi, "Szociológia és Társadalomdiskurzus," in *Valóság '70* (Budapest, 1992), 115–116.

of *economists* changed with the Hungarian economic reform policies of the 1960s.³¹ By the 1970s, the Party wanted to know more about what actually happened in the so-called ‘second economy’ – at the fringes of the state sector and beyond it.³² The significance of regional influences (notably from Poland) to these developments in Hungarian social sciences remains to be studied. However, the earlier success of Polish sociology in influencing policy was probably an important reference point for those young Hungarian sociologists who were trained in Poland in the 1960s.³³ In what follows, I examine more closely what political expectations influenced the orientation of Hungarian psychology after 1956, and just how psychologists answered this call.

Keeping the workers happy

In 1960, psychologist Imre Molnár published a review on the current state and future tasks of work psychology in Hungary. Molnár started by defining the field of inquiry in terms of the classic problem of how to harmonize the individual interests with the needs of the “collective” – and vice versa. Then he set out to determine the agenda for an up-to-date socialist psychology of work. According to Molnár, the crucial aim of this psychology would be to “protect the working man”.³⁴ Whereas the early 20th century psychotechnics had focused one-sidedly on rationalizing the work process³⁵, the time was now ripe for a “human-oriented” (*emberközpontú*) science of working life. It would focus on the human personality as a whole

³¹ Johanna Bockman, *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Socialism* (Stanford, 2011); György Péteri, “Purge and Patronage: Kádár’s Counter-revolution and the Field of Economic Research in Hungary, 1957–1958,” *Contemporary European History* 11, vol. 1 (2002).

³² Pál Germuska, “’De hát eszerint a szocializmus bedobhatja a törülközőt’. Második gazdaság a Kádár-korszakban,” in *Közelítések a Kádárizmushoz*, eds., Pál Germuska & Janos M. Rainer (Budapest, 2008), 71.

³³ I thank my reviewer for raising up this question.

³⁴ Imre Molnár, “Munkalélektan mai feladatai,” *Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle* 17, no. 1 (1960): 30–32.

³⁵ Frederick Winslow Taylor, the ‘father’ of scientific management, was characterized by Molnár as representing redundant and inhumane western forms of knowledge, although he must have been well aware of the great impact of Taylorism in the early Soviet Union. See, for example, Thomas P. Hughes, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870–1970* (Chicago and London, 1989), 256–258.

and pay serious attention to human relations – not only at the work place, but also in the wider field of social and personal life – including the life-goals, values and needs of the individual. Molnár's discourse fused ideological and pragmatic elements. Whereas the foremost aim of psychology was to increase the “welfare and happiness” (*boldogulás*) of workers, the more tangible output would be their enhanced motivation and productivity. To illustrate this, Molnár used the classic ‘Hawthorne-studies’ by Elton Mayo (1880–1949) as an example of increasing motivation by positive means. As pointed out by Molnár, Mayo had shown that it was actually the feelings of self-respect owing to the possibility of contributing to the production process that made the worker more efficient.³⁶

Clearly, these psychological formulations signaled a new language of productivity, and, as such, they represented a break with the Stalinist culture of work characterized by open discipline and surveillance. But they also carried other kinds of political meanings. The political crisis of 1956 saw *workers' councils* rise as an alternative political force. With some of them still active even in the spring of 1957, they represented a living experience of grass-roots enthusiasm toward worker participation. After this critical experience it was crucial (and challenging) for the Party to show itself as *the* representative of the working class against ‘counter-revolutionary’ workers’ councils.³⁷ As noted by Małgorzata Mazurek, the experience of local industrial activism (e.g., in Poznań) caused dilemmas also in Poland: how to increase motivation and participation without losing political control?³⁸ Perhaps a bit of ‘Human Relations’ would help to balance the volatile situation and help build legitimacy for the system?³⁹

³⁶ Molnár, “Munkalélektan mai feladatai,” 32–34.

³⁷ Márkus Keller, “A gyár és a munkás. A Május 1. Ruhagyár munkástanácsa 1956–1957-ben,” in *Évkönyv* 8 (2000), 274.

³⁸ Mazurek, “Between Sociology and Ideology,” 15–16.

³⁹ For a critical view on Mayo's research, see Kyle Bruce & Chris Nyland, “Elton Mayo and the Deification of Human Relations,” *Organization Studies* 32, no. 3 (2011). Bruce and Nyland argue that the Human Relations school was essentially an “undemocratic” response to the demand from organized labour that workers should be given a more active role in management decision making. See also Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 96–98.

Indeed, the factory workers formed a crucial target of Kádár's reconciliatory policies after 1956. With the “Resolution on the working class” (1958), wages went up, a continuous improvement of living standards was promised for the population, an ambitious housing program was launched, and working-class education and culture was championed. Furthermore, national surveys were to be conducted at regular intervals to make sure the program was being implemented as planned.⁴⁰ In the new political constellation after 1956, it was deemed essential to keep the workers happy. As well as the immediate solutions of satisfying material needs and loosening the reins of administrative discipline, the reforms also involved the launch of further sociological studies into the workers’ socioeconomic and working conditions. As noted in the introduction of one early study of its kind, the MSZMP had brought forward a resolution in 1958 on “Improving the living conditions of workers”. This was what spurred the research into action at the Lenin Metallurgy Works, and the reasons given were that the “evolution of social life” had brought certain changes to the lives of workers.⁴¹ Interestingly, the Lenin Metallurgy Works was also one of the first sites in which work psychology research was made in Hungary. A full-time psychologist was sent there to carry out research at the turn of the 1960s.⁴²

In another sociological study, carried out at the Diosgyőr Machine Factory in Miskolc, the resolution of 1958 was also referred to, and the authors investigated whether working conditions had “really improved in accordance with the wishes of the Party”. If they had not, then the reasons for existing “negative tendencies” were explored together with potential ways for eliminating them in the future. It was noted that over 2000 workers were involved in the

⁴⁰ Eszter Bartha, *Alienating Labour. Workers on the Road from Socialism to Capitalism in East-Germany and Hungary* (New York, 2013), 5–6.

⁴¹ HU-MNL MK-S Társadalomtudományi intézet 904 f./2 cs./56 ö.e. Üzemszociológiai jellegű vizsgálat a Lenin Kohászati Művekben, 1965.

⁴² HU MNL MK-S 288 f. 904 /Agitáció és Propaganda Osztály. Társadalomtudományi intézet. 2 cs./56 ö.e. Rövid áttekintés a munkásosztály helyzetével kapcsolatos üzemi pszichológiai vizsgálatokról, 26.

research, an impressive achievement in itself.⁴³ Indeed, as also indicated by the social scientist György Kerekes who came to witness these policies first-hand at the factory-level, the Party was quick to find out more about the interests of the workers very soon after 1956, thus introducing at least a semblance of dialogue between the political elite and the working masses – regime’s crucial basis of legitimation. According to Kerekes, already in 1957 special working groups were established in some factories in order to receive information on workers’ moods and to listen to their opinions.⁴⁴ In fact, the Party started regularly gathering so-called “mood reports” (*hangulatjelentés*) to assess the situation of the workers as early as the late 1940s.⁴⁵ Although this practice continued during the Kádár period, the Party was using the assembled information in a more communicative manner, which opened new spaces and possibilities for sociological and psychological experts as well.

Many of the issues in the so-called “Discussion on Work” – the 6 month-long (and carefully controlled) sharing of opinions started by the sociologist Ferenc Erdei in the journal *Life and Literature* in 1965 – were later followed up by further studies into work psychology. The discussion was explicitly contextualized with the imminent introduction of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) approaching, especially as it was related to the planned system of rewards based on the quality of work, and thus work motivation.⁴⁶ One psychologist argued that workers would receive proper working conditions, if only the weak management practices could be changed. He called for “constructive dissatisfaction” to be used as a resource for improvements. This implied a need for sociological and psychological research, in the same vein as Dr. József Kéri’s comment that too little had been discussed, until now, about work

⁴³ HU-MNL MK-S Társadalomtudományi intézet 904 f./2 cs./56 ö.e. Üzemszociológiai Vizsgálat a Diósgyőri Gépgyárban, 1964.

⁴⁴ The interview with György Kerekes. April 14 2012.

⁴⁵ See Mark Pittaway, “The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture, and the State in Early Socialist Hungary,” *The Journal of Modern History* 74, no. 4 (2002): 760, 764, *passim*.

⁴⁶ HU-MNL-MKS. MSZMP Agitáció és Propaganda Osztály. 904 f. /12 cs. /72 ö.e. “Vita a munkáról” az Élet és Irodalom című irodalmi és politikai hetilapban.

psychology and biology. Dr. Kéri was a leading researcher at the Institute for Enterprise Management within the Ministry of Heavy Industry – and a former 56'er who had served three years in prison.⁴⁷ Now he emphasized that “comfortable” conditions would actually increase productivity, as “work without rest was inhuman”, and the workers “would eventually always find ways to slack off”. It was neither acceptable nor rational to lead the workers with a “desire for control” because this would only breed “revulsion and defiance” among them.⁴⁸

Dr. Kéri also wrote about basic issues which had been left unnoticed for far too long, such as the temperature, lighting, noise levels, and overall monotony of some workplaces (in assembly lines, for instance), which all too often caused “inhibitions” and feelings of “dullness, emptiness, and drowsiness” in the workforce. Kéri's humanist, and optimistic, view of human nature was that “the majority of men, due to their nature, always aspire for the better. But this human instinct (*ösztön*) is only ever realized in a suitable environment”.⁴⁹ The discussion was understandably far from free of ideological and moralist overtones. Indeed, several standpoints seemed to be quite out of touch with reality. The prevalent practice of having more than one job, for instance, was judged morally without due attention to the socioeconomic realities.⁵⁰ All the same, the topics of the NEM and its potential implications for work did eventually allow for a surprisingly large variety of voices.

Much of the “Discussion on Work” therefore actually revolved around topics that could be addressed by research in psychology of work. For instance, the psychologist Tibor Frank in his article “Organizational studies, psychology, and work-norms” called for psychologically oriented management studies to be developed, so that the atmosphere in workplaces could be more harmonious. For Frank, the simple but telling reason for this was that the prevailing work

⁴⁷ <http://mek.oszk.hu/01900/01937/html/szerviz/kislex/biograf/kerigyor.htm>

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21–22.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23–25.

culture and legislation did not allow workers a moment of rest: “Those places are rare where they can sit and rest for a while amidst their work, because it is considered malingering.”⁵¹

The question of alienation in socialism was also raised – a controversial topic, indeed, because one discussant had allegedly even claimed it was a phenomenon to be found only (!) in socialism.⁵² But in this discussion alienation, understood as “constructive dissatisfaction”, was also treated as a relevant starting point for the proposed reforms. Hence, some of the contributors were plainly of the opinion that psychology and sociology should be regarded as the principal means for rationalizing and humanizing the organization and management of work to prevent the feelings of dissatisfaction from escalating into unmanageable proportions.

At the same time, the Radio Free Europe correspondent Andrzej Czechowicz offered his own political explanation for the relative flourishing of management education in Poland. As he argued, the apparent decision to concentrate more on merits and professionalism than political preferences and class background in choosing the leaders was based on a political trauma: in both Poland and Hungary, incompetent factory directors and foremen had been “put in wheelbarrows and wheeled out of the factory premises” during the revolutionary fervor of 1956.⁵³ Indeed, one important motive for the politicization of work in the revolutionary process – especially among skilled workers and technicians – had been the frustrations caused by arbitrary discipline, lack of autonomy, and the lack of professionalism among factory managers.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 26.

⁵² Ibid., 7–8.

⁵³ Andrzej Czechowicz HU OSA 300-8-3-4574, RFE Background Report. “Training of Management Cadres in Poland.” [Electronic Record], <http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:df24b7d2-078b-403b-b8d9-125d448fa5e1>. See also Mazurek, “Between Sociology and Ideology,” 15–16.

⁵⁴ Gábor Gyáni, “A forradalom társadalomtörténeti paradoxonjai,” *Forrás* 10 (2006): 33–34, *passim*.

Psychology and management of the workforce

Partly due to the liberalization of Hungarian economic policies (NEM), both legal and illegal forms of private economic initiative started to feature more prominently in the country during the '60s. Nigel Swain has noted that the umbrella term 'second economy' first began to be used with the discovery of commuting "worker-peasants". Indeed, already in 1956 the Hungarian Statistical Office produced a survey of those people who regularly travelled between home and the workplace, finding that they numbered approximately 216,000.⁵⁵

Hybrid forms of work emerged as people were most often tied to an official state job while having some kind of business on the side. It soon also became clear that workers were taking time off to earn money elsewhere (e.g., in their private plots or businesses). So it was that in 1968 the local paper *Fejér Megyei Hírlap* reported that the managers of the state-run "Harmony Farm" had hired a sick leave inspector to regularly check if workers were genuinely sick, or actually working in their second job while being paid for being sick.⁵⁶ Conflicts and contradictions in state enterprises and workplaces also grew as some could take more advantage of the existing resources than others.⁵⁷ As pointed out by sociologist István Kemény in 1980, the Hungarian worker had metamorphosed into a "strange, centaur-like creature" whose strategies of life were increasingly characterized by an "entrepreneurial mentality".⁵⁸ But the common practice of having two or even three jobs at the same time (in both state and private sectors) very probably also had consequences for the psychological well-being of people.⁵⁹

The NEM aimed at decentralizing economic decision-making. For example, the reform gave companies more power to hire and fire employees, and a more efficient use of labor was

⁵⁵ Nigel Swain, *Hungary. The Rise of Feasible Socialism* (London, 1992), 171.

⁵⁶ Martha Lampland, *The Object of Labor. Commodification in Socialist Hungary* (Chicago, 1995), 216.

⁵⁷ Tibor Valuch, "Csepel bicikli, Caesar konyak, Symphonia, Trapper farmer. A fogyasztás és a fogyasztói magatartás változásai a szocialista korszakban," *Múltunk* 53, no. 3 (2008): 94.

⁵⁸ István Kemény, "Szabad vállalkozók országa," *Magyar Füzetek* 6 (Paris, 1980): 94.

⁵⁹ Tibor Valuch, *Magyarország társadalomtörténete XX. Században* (Budapest, 2005), 357–359.

now encouraged. However, one consequence was that unemployment was now a very real possibility, and ultimately threatening for a system whose legitimacy was based on maintaining full employment.⁶⁰ In light of these concerns, psychological research on job instability and questions of management and leadership became increasingly relevant.⁶¹ According to a report on the state of Hungarian research in industrial psychology at the turn of the '70s, the question of job instability was still a major concern, also because of the social problems commuting was causing. The report's solution to the problem of workers quitting their jobs too easily was straight-forward. If the workers were satisfied, they were more likely to stay – the implication being that they generally were not.⁶²

As regards the social repercussions of commuting (*ingázás*), the report referred to psychologist Péter Gelléri's studies. Gelléri had suggested, for example, that commuting had turned into a genuine lifestyle for a great number of people. Psychologists warned that this could have negative consequences for social cohesion. Namely, it seemed that the commuters, who most often were men, could become "too independent" of family bonds. Although the authors recognized that economic reasons were the main motor behind commuting, they also claimed that for some men it was an almost conscious decision. A commuter lifestyle was also a solution to difficult situations in one's personal life. As the writer of the report suggested, this way of life might lead to new forms of deviant subcultures.

The improvement of management and leadership practices was acknowledged to be an economically and politically important condition for the success of the NEM by the Party. On 10 May 1966, during the NEM planning stage, the political committee of the MSZMP brought

⁶⁰ Haney, *Inventing the Needy*, 94; Roger Gough, *A Good Comrade: János Kádár, Communism, and Hungary* (London, 2006), 54.

⁶¹ See, for example, Pál Rókusfalvy, "Fluktuáció mint munkapszichológiai probléma," *Gazdaság- és jogtudomány* 4, no. 3–4 (1970): 326–332; Péter Gelléri, "Személyiség-lélektani tényezők szerepe a gyakran munkahelyet változtatók magatartásában," in *Gazdaság- és jogtudomány* 4, no. 3–4 (1970), 367–372; Tibor Engländer, ed., *Üzempszichológia: válogatott tanulmányok* (Budapest, 1974).

⁶² Rövid áttekintés a munkásosztály helyzetével..., 22–23.

forward a resolution on the “Training and further training of firm managers”.⁶³ The first courses would start the following winter (1967), and, as suggested by Rezső Nyers, one of the main architects of the reform, the first course should focus on the political and economic “essence” of the NEM. This should be supplemented with practical knowledge on organization, management, and planning, and so it was also vital to find high-quality experts (teachers) who could properly convey and “implement one of the main political projects of the party”.⁶⁴ With sociological and psychological tools the manager, i.e., the “organizer of work communities”, would be able to recognize and resolve the problems he faced at work. Psychology would not offer the leadership the tools for not only selecting the proper workers, but also for shaping or even “transforming” the “objective and subjective” conditions of the workplace.⁶⁵

According to the course plan from November 1967, these courses covered a wide variety of topics related to management, leadership, decision-making, and organization. One of the themes was social relationships at work, i.e., both between workers, and between individuals and the work organization itself. Furthermore, the “social, psychological, and human conditions for optimal decision-making” was taught. For example, in one of the lessons organized in December 1967, different styles of leadership (“authoritarian”, “democratic”, and “indifferent”) were taught to allow managers to be more psychologically sensitive with employees. Interestingly, the phenomenon of “non-organized”, informal groups was also studied, especially with regard to how people were “reacting” to decisions.⁶⁶

Hungarian knowledge interests were supported by a regional trend. Indeed, the ‘human factor’, especially in relation to the need to increase productivity, was becoming a popular

⁶³ HU-MNL MK-S 288 f. 5/395 ő.e. Jegyzőkönyv a Politikai Bizottság 1966. Május 10-én tartott üléséről, 2. Előterjesztés a vállalatok vezetőinek tovább képzésére – Az új gazdaságirányítási rendszer követelményeiből fakadóan, 2.

⁶⁴ HU-MNL MK-S 288 f., MSZMP Központi Bizottsága Agitációs és Propaganda Bizottságának (APB) iratai. Jegyzőkönyv 1966. augusztus 3-i üléséről, 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid. Javaslat a KB Agitációs és Propaganda Bizottság részére a gazdasági vezetők továbbképzésének alapjául szolgáló tematikára, 8.

⁶⁶ HU-MNL M-KS 228 f. 904/2 állag/39 ő.e /1967/Társadalomtudományi intézet. Feljegyzés Lakos Elvtárs részére. Megjegyzések a “Vezetési, szervezési ismeretek” c. előadássorozat programjához.

discourse in the Eastern Bloc during the '60s.⁶⁷ So it was that, in 1972, the 24th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party exhorted psychologists to improve labour efficiency by focusing on the “human factor [and] role played by people” in production (i.e., both workers and leaders). Social psychologists, in particular, were expected to contribute to proper methods of leadership and “principled comradely relations” within the collective and to foster a “sense of teamwork” in the factory. The measure of success for such initiatives would be a proper “psychological climate”, which would encourage pride in one’s trade and foster a “striving for professional perfection”.⁶⁸

A question can be posed: did the drive towards rationalizing management stem from internal reformist and self-critical considerations within the Eastern Bloc, or was it part of a more global trend? Riska-Campbell, in her research on transnational social science and American policies of bridge-building, has noted that the modern problems of governing and managing large-scale social processes were high on the agenda in the US-led field of transnational social science.⁶⁹ In this context, there was a recurring discussion of the “management gap” between advanced and developing nations, with the result that management education was actively exported to East European socialist regimes too.⁷⁰

Radio Free Europe’s Polish correspondent Czechowicz had also noticed this. In a background report on the training of management cadres in Poland (1965), he mentioned that a special National Management Development Centre had been established there as early as

⁶⁷ For example, In 1967 a Hungarian delegation returning from the GDR reported on the introduction of a “human factor” in the way work was now being planned there. The delegation was convinced that East German achievements in the field of management education were promising, and they suggested that Hungarians should also take heed. See HU-MNL MK-S 288 f., MSZMP Központi Bizottsága Agitációs és Propaganda Osztályának (APO) iratai. 1967, 20. őe. Jelentés az NDK-ban járt pártküldöttség útjáról.

⁶⁸ “The 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Tasks of Soviet Psychology, *Soviet Psychology* X (4), summer 1972, 324–325.

⁶⁹ Leena Riska-Campbell, *Bridging East and West. The Establishment of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in the United States Foreign Policy of Bridge Building, 1964–1972* (Helsinki, 2011), 29–89.

⁷⁰ These exports probably had an ideological and political subtext of promoting Western methods in order to undermine socialist institutions. However, this article is not the place for that discussion. See Kott, “The Social Engineering Project,” 137.

1958.⁷¹ Czechowicz also noted that the Polish centre currently received substantial help from the United Nations. In fact, Poland had been cooperating with the International Labour Organization (ILO) for several years.⁷² As he wrote, the need for competent managers had thus been acknowledged quite early on in Eastern Bloc countries. This was particularly the case in Poland, which served as a model for others because of the prominence of sociology there. Indeed, the ongoing transnational discussions on reforming management methods also found their way into Hungarian work psychology guidebooks of the time. For example, in writing one such guide for managers in 1973, Mihály Murányi and István Bálint critically applied the much-cited work of Douglas McGregor (1906–1964) and Frederic Herzberg (1923–2000) to reform the socialist vocabulary.⁷³

But how did these reform visions influence the everyday life in the factories and other workplaces? According to an internal report on the current state of work psychology research in Hungary in the early '70s, the research had begun rapidly after 1956. The consensus after a new wealth of knowledge was that the “human factor” would be a significant dimension for increasing the productivity of work. Thus, work psychology laboratories had been established in some major factory complexes.⁷⁴ However, it was acknowledged that the development of research in the field had nonetheless been very uneven and that it had suffered from a lack of coordination and the “burden of old ideas”. Very often, for example, these laboratories had just one psychologist, and might not be located anywhere near the factory management’s offices, but rather in the personnel departments. Furthermore, among other issues, the research was often focused on very local and practical problems, so it was “campaign-based”, and it certainly

⁷¹ Czechowicz, “Training of Management Cadres in Poland,” 14.

⁷² ILO had also been instrumental in getting six-month scholarships for 43 Polish experts, which permitted them to study the art of modern management in the west.

⁷³ István Bálint & Mihály Murányi, *Munkalélektan műszaki és gazdasági vezetők számára* (Budapest, 1973), 1–20. Indeed, there was a real need for management books in Hungarian. As noted by Sandrine Kott, In Hungary between 1969 and 1971, 1 454 individuals attended the courses offered by the Management Centre in Budapest. See Kott, “The Social Engineering Project”, 136.

⁷⁴ Rövid áttekintés a munkásosztály helyzetével..., 26, 33. According to the report, there were 500 large state enterprises in the country. At the turn of the '70s, there were psychological laboratories in only 30 of them.

did not treat the general problems of the “whole working class”.⁷⁵ Thus, there were major discrepancies between the high-flown declarations of humanizing work and the real circumstances in countless localities, where the preferences often were quite far removed from the abstract notions of a ‘scientific and technological revolution’. As the sociologist Zoltán Zsille wrote in his sharply ironic article on “Psychology in industry” in 1971, what factory directors who encountered psychologists really wanted to see was concrete evidence of what the latter could actually “bring to the table”.⁷⁶

According to the report, there had been work psychology research on the psychological background of workers’ “job instability” (*munkaerővándorlás*) – in other words their levels of “satisfaction” at work⁷⁷; but the major emphasis at the end of the 1960s was on objectively improving working conditions and “work hygiene”. Nevertheless, the number of workplace accidents had not been sufficiently reduced and the management were held responsible in many cases. Although resources allegedly had been allocated to improving conditions, the factory managers had not paid sufficient attention to work safety; instead, they often only referred to “economic interests”, or blamed workers for the accidents.⁷⁸ They only seemed to be trying to solve minor individual problems, rather than to improve the “general comfort of work”. For example, according to the statistics compiled from factory physicians, it was estimated that there were between 50,000 and 100,000 workers who suffered from “occupational deafness” in Hungary. Factories that were equipped with more modern technology usually fared better in these statistics, but it was still often the case that while the technology was modern, old tools would continue to be used alongside the new ones.⁷⁹ One minor issue that could have quickly been taken care of was the lighting – had factory managers listened to psychologists more

⁷⁵ Ibid, 3–4, 27, 33. Testifying to the “atomized” nature of work, in 25 of these laboratories psychologists worked alone.

⁷⁶ Zoltán Zsille, “Pszichológia az iparban,” *Valóság* 14, no. 7 (1971): 45.

⁷⁷ Rövid áttekintés a munkásosztály helyzetével..., 2–4.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 6–8. Only the cases of silicosis and lead poisoning had really decreased in number.

readily. Indeed, psychologists were saying to them that even the smallest positive alterations in working conditions would be considered by the workers as a sign that the “management was looking after them”.

Self-knowledge groups and “hidden” communities

In 1976, the social psychology research group at the Institute for Psychology published an overview of Hungarian research that had taken place in the field between the mid-’60s and early ’70s. The anthology was mainly based on papers presented at the first Hungarian national conference of social psychologists in 1972. Debates were held on topics of contemporary importance, such as the social psychology of the workplace, communication studies, public opinion, management and leadership, social attitudes, group psychology, clinical social psychology, and socialization.⁸⁰ As the conference was the first big academic event for social psychology in the country, it aimed to be comprehensive in scale. Furthermore, its significance was increased by the presence of Ferenc Mérei (1909–1986), a versatile researcher and a charismatic educator.⁸¹ This was the first public conference he attended after his release from prison in 1963.⁸²

Two of the cases presented at the conference focused particularly on questions of work and community. In the first, social psychologist Sándor Erdősi offered tools for rationalizing management ideologies, with a focus on mid-level management and the decision-making environment on the factory floor. Erdősi’s suggestions were based on empirical social psychology data gathered from an unnamed factory outside Budapest. He claimed that the

⁸⁰ György Hunyady, Ferenc Pataki & Ibolya Váriné Szilágyi, eds., *Szociálpszichológiai kutatások Magyarországon* (Budapest, 1976).

⁸¹ Social psychologist Ferenc Mérei was a pioneer of social psychology and socially oriented (*társas*) child psychology, but his professional activities extended also to clinical psychology, psychodrama and the psychology of art. He also had a background in Communist politics and infighting after the war, which culminated in a prison sentence and academic marginalization in 1959.

⁸² Interview with Ferenc Pataki. September 27, 2013.

formal organizational hierarchy in the factory did not take into account the social dynamics that really mattered at the informal level on the factory floor.⁸³ This was basically what social psychologist Mérei had taught in his book “Hidden Network of Communities” (1972), in which he incorporated the ideas of his French teachers Henri Wallon and René Zazzo to expand the possibilities of sociometrics. As Mérei stressed in the introduction to this book, planning (work communities) entailed, above all, psychological sensitivity and more “conscious” management. It was an ability to anticipate the development of the group’s inner life in light of the information that was gathered from it with the tools of social psychology.⁸⁴

The other case, presented by István Fehér, looked into the psychological elements of democratic leadership and presented some group therapy techniques that could be used to increase social cohesion in the workplace, which Fehér had developed while leading “self-knowledge groups” together with his colleague Sándor Szepessy in 1970–1972.⁸⁵ The expressed aim of this particular psychological technology was to “democratize” management more effectively through enabling managers to know more about themselves and the various members of their teams. Discussions of authoritarian and democratic leaders were common in the social psychology of the time in the United States as well as in the socialist east.⁸⁶ Therapeutic self-knowledge groups (“T-Groups”), in turn, were becoming increasingly popular in different working communities, especially in the Anglophone countries.⁸⁷ In the final part of this article, I look a bit more closely at Hungarian self-knowledge groups, asking what was their meaning, and what kinds of interests did they serve?

⁸³ Sándor Erdősi, “A vezetés néhány szociálpszichológiai feltételének vizsgálati módszere egy vidéki nagyvállalatnál”, in *Szociálpszichológiai kutatások Magyarországon*.

⁸⁴ Ferenc Mérei, *Közösségek rejtett hálózata* (Budapest, 1988/1971), 5.

⁸⁵ István Fehér, “A demokratikus vezetés pszichológiai elemei,” in *Szociálpszichológiai kutatások Magyarországon*.

⁸⁶ See, for example, “The Fourth Congress of the Psychological Society of the USSR”, *Soviet Psychology* X, no. 4 (1972), 398–399.

⁸⁷ Poppy Lauretta Mcleod and Richard Kettner-Polley, “Psychodynamic Perspectives on Small Groups,” in *Theories of Small Groups. Interdisciplinary perspectives*, eds. Marshall Scott Poole & Andrea B. Hollingshead (Thousand Oaks, Ca., 2005), 72–77; Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 100–102.

The first of Fehér's self-knowledge groups (*kör*) had been organized at the Zrínyi Printing Press in Budapest for twelve trained workers who were all members of the Communist Youth Organization (KISZ) and aged between 20 and 28. The second *kör* formed part of a further education course for plant managers, financial officers, mid-level managers and local party leaders. Its members were all affiliated with the printing industry, and fairly advanced in their careers. The practice in both these self-knowledge sessions was based on international as well as Hungarian theories of group therapy, especially on Mérei's work, such as sosiometrics, the non-directive psychotechnics, and the therapeutic 'marathon session' Mérei had taught with psychiatrist Miklós Kun⁸⁸ at the Semmelweis University Clinic.⁸⁹ Mérei had told his eager students that this "non-directive" practice crucially depended on whether therapists were sensitive enough to remain in the background and yet somehow able to pull the right strings so as to contribute to the positive development of the group. In a considerate yet nevertheless spontaneous manner, the group therapist could thereby show his trust in the group's ability to lead itself, while at the same time giving a good example of those leadership skills. Like Mérei, Fehér made it clear that this would *not* lead to "laissez-faire anarchy", as some might have feared. The end result would instead be that group members would participate as active agents in the therapeutic process.⁹⁰ One concrete way that Fehér recommended for the therapist to take an active role while still remaining non-directive was via "confrontation". In creating emotionally loaded situations and mirroring the reactions of others, the therapist taught the group members to "stand face to face" with their own behavior.⁹¹

The first self-knowledge group met once every two weeks, over 2½ years. Its members had all volunteered to participate because of various "challenges" they had met in their

⁸⁸ Miklós Kun was oriented towards social psychiatry at the Lipotmező Hospital in Budapest.

⁸⁹ This was first tested out by a "methodological committee" at the Iron and Steel Workers' Sports Club in the Angyalföld workers' district. In this therapy session, group members included a sports school director, teachers, coaches, and assistant coaches.

⁹⁰ Fehér, "A demokratikus vezetés," 218.

⁹¹ Ibid.

everyday work within KISZ. The group included white-collar workers, engineers, technicians, and one chemist from the Faculty of Natural Sciences at ELTE University. The participants were hoping that the course on psychological leadership would help them do their jobs more efficiently. With the social background of each participant firmly in mind, the psychologists set out to give those present the means to recognize and reflect on their group's behavior, and to learn about the unconscious motives that affected it. The clearly expressed aim was to help these young leaders understand the psychological issues related to the aforementioned "democratic style of leadership".⁹² The meetings were not always of the same length, with the marathon sessions sometimes lasting for up to ten hours, and during the first few meetings of the group, the psychologists found that the background of the participants often made it difficult to adopt a non-directive approach. Fehér soon realized that the members of the group were so accustomed to the social and political hierarchies of youth organizations that they always "wanted to be informed about the opinion of their superiors", or were expecting to receive "silent instructions for action", as Fehér put it.

Eventually, however, Fehér's method paid off, and the democratic nature of the group-sessions managed to induce a surprising openness among the participants, especially during the marathon sessions (organized three times). In these sessions, the members of the group really seemed to throw themselves wholeheartedly into the project. For example, some members openly confessed "their sexual feelings towards each other" and learned to recognize the situations that "sparked emotional reactions".⁹³ Furthermore, the participants became more open about their political and religious affiliations, even confessing their stands on certain "ideological questions". Allegedly, even "extremist, anti-Semitic and nationalist" opinions were heard, but because of the "democratic atmosphere", the group members "proved

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 221.

themselves tolerant” and listened carefully to the opinions of others before expressing their own. In the end, the personalities that were sincere and open also won the respect of others, as they were able to reveal their innermost feelings or, as Fehér put it, “problems in their instinctual lives (*ösztönélet*)”. In short, according to the sociometric measurements carried out after the session to unravel the inner relations of “sympathy and antipathy”, it was revealed that these open and sincere people were in fact “the stars of the group”.⁹⁴

As the group continued to meet regularly for the next two and a half years, it grew stronger. Fehér noticed that the participants were really experiencing the “security offered by the collective” and that they had undergone a “process” of transformation in which they had turned themselves from a loose group of individuals, unconscious of their identities within a community, into a tightly knit “reference group”.⁹⁵ The concepts used in this description testify to an eclectic combination of intellectual sources. “Reference group” was a term popularized by the American sociologist Robert K. Merton (1910-2003);⁹⁶ but the “process” of transformation made a clear reference to socialist discourses on the nature of ‘true communities’ - which was a significant theme in both Hungarian and Soviet social psychology at the time. According to Fehér, the tightness of these bonds was highlighted by the fact that those members who had changed their working place (*Zrínyi*), or even moved to another city, visited the meetings.⁹⁷ For the social psychologists, who naturally wanted to show the practical efficiency of their method, all this proved that these members of the factory youth organization had genuinely internalized the meaning of the psychologically sensitive, democratic, and non-directive management.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 223.

⁹⁶ Reference group referred to the group of people by which the individuals measured and evaluated their own behavior and thinking; and Fehér noted that the participants were actually starting to think “what would I do, if I were they?”

⁹⁷ Fehér, “A demokratikus vezetés,” 223

The second self-knowledge group described by Fehér started off quite badly. It turned out that these middle-aged executives mostly wanted psychological advice from Fehér and Szepessy concerning only very practical problems of management. Fehér confessed that his first mistake had been to ask a fellow psychologist to come in and help ‘teach’ the participants the basics of spontaneity. Perhaps too soon, this colleague proceeded to tell his life-story and to share the most intimate issues in his life, such as marriage-conflicts, problems at work, and his relationship with his boss. This was only the first session, and after that the colleague did not return, so the rest were suspicious as to the real reasons for the visit. Was it just to make them reveal ‘incriminating’ evidence about their own real opinions? The self-reflective Fehér concluded that this technique had failed because it smacked too much of “manipulation”.⁹⁸ Perhaps the Rákosi era was still too fresh in people’s memories, so there followed an impasse for the group, where no progress in group psychology was made for months.

Yet eventually, after some time of lecturing more conventionally on the basic social psychology facts related to management that the group had originally wanted, the participants were eventually “won over”.

They became friendly, helpful, and got closer to each other [...] previously aloof, distant and austere financial officers soon forgot their titles and addressed each other with first names.⁹⁹

For Fehér this was yet more proof that otherwise atomistic individuals (judging from their initial distrust of the group) could develop into more rational and conscious units as a result of the social psychology techniques the participants had learnt in the self-knowledge sessions. One could argue, of course, that these people had simply got used to each other after months of sessions, but, then again, they could equally have become more dysfunctional in that time.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 225.

As it was, the groups led by Fehér and Szepessy had transformed into genuine small communities that could now control their emotions and feelings more effectively for the purposes of working towards common aims. Because of the “safety” offered by the reference group, the members of this newly modernized collective seemed to become more capable of taking initiatives too, which was a crucial breakthrough. The conclusion was that this particular form of group therapy had functioned as a kind of “pre-school for democratic and social leadership”.¹⁰⁰ Of course, this could have simply been a piece of popular political jargon used with the intention of convincing science policy authorities of the relevance of these techniques; then again, it might also have been part of the wider changes in the management of social groups (such as workers in factories), aimed at developing more effective leadership skills within socialism.

One way or another, whether the authorities really were convinced or not, self-knowledge groups and other forms of group therapy did nevertheless become more popular in Hungary as the early '70s wore on.¹⁰¹ The example of Fehér was a case of psychology-based practice, which aimed to increase social cohesion by creating an ‘authentic’ experience of belonging to a group in an emotionally open atmosphere. By utilizing Mérei’s concept of “collective experience” (*együttes élmény*), his followers cherished the notions of the emotional surplus that emerged as a powerful experience (*Erlebnis*) in the midst of living, concrete relationships between individuals in a group. Mérei’s indirect influence on these experiments (and on others) could also be observed in the way “informal social dynamics” had been embraced. As we have seen, Erdősi for one had noticed how useful it was for mid-level management to know more about informal group dynamics, so they could make use of these kinds of spontaneous group

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 227.

¹⁰¹ Interview with János László. April 19, 2012. Cf. János Füredi & Ferenc Szakács, “Csoporthoz tartozás pszichoterápiás kettős vezetésével,” *Orvosi Hetilap* (November 16 1969); György Hidas & Gábor Szőnyi, “Pszichoterápiás hétvégekről és a nagycsoportról (hozzászólás Szerdahelyi Szabolcs dr. vitacikkéhez),” *Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle* 34, no. 3 (1977), 285–289.

structures in the community. The group therapy sessions conducted at Zrínyi thus had important and useful ramifications for the Hungarian government too.

Fehér's experiment also gets quite close to the "socio-psychological training" described by Susanne Cohen,¹⁰² which had been developed by Soviet psychologists in the 1970s and 1980s (*sotsial'no psikhologicheskii trening*) and was very much influenced by the "T-groups" popularized globally by Carl Rogers.¹⁰³ However, as Cohen argues, far from being mere copies of their American counterparts, these training sessions were carefully developed "in relation to the concerns and traditions of the Soviet environment".¹⁰⁴ Besides rationalizing social relations and humanizing communication in the workplace, the aim of these group therapy practices was to teach socialist skills of citizenship that could be used outside the factory and office premises as well. Hence, the idea was to produce "citizens and workers who interacted in a manner that was less egocentric and more attuned towards others".¹⁰⁵ This was congruent with the socialist idea strongly present in Hungarian public discourse on work too. The workplace should be seen as the "second home", so on top of their day-to-day workloads, workers were also expected to internalize the behavioural codes and lifestyle of the socialist worker, no matter how idealistic this particular view of reality was.¹⁰⁶ As the case of Fehér and Szepessy shows, the discourse in social psychology also resonated with the reform socialism of the time. Reformist discourse, in turn, seemed to offer a good channel for social psychologists to promote their studies and knowledge claims and to build a professional career in a field that was, after all, financed and controlled by the party-state.

¹⁰² Susanne Cohen, *Communicating Change in a Transforming State: Globalization and the Politics of Office Communication in Urban Russia*. Ann Arbor, 2010, 180–181.

¹⁰³ Ibid. T-groups, often in remote locations, flourished in the US especially from the '50s to '70s. Carl Rogers himself argued that they were a radical invention. As the group demanded emotional honesty from its members, they were often forcefully encouraged to tear down all 'masks'.

¹⁰⁴ Susanne Cohen, *Communicating Change*, 183.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 178.

¹⁰⁶ Eszter Zsófia Tóth "'Mindenki... úgy ment oda, hogy ez a világesúcs.' Munkásnő országgyűlési képviselők megéléstörténetei a szocialista időszokról," *Aetas* 22, no. 2 (2007): 59. For a sharply critical analysis of 'piece-work' in Hungarian factories, see Miklós Haraszti (1977), *Worker in a Workers' State* (Pelican Books, 1977).

However, these psychology-based techniques and ideas of social planning also had critical implications. As Mérei wrote in his seminal book on “hidden” communities, the manager should see human beings as “active creators of social structures”, not passive receivers of commands.¹⁰⁷ In his opinion, the monopolizing of decision-making was dangerous for the community. He warned that if individuals just carried out decisions made far above their heads something essential to their individuality was being removed, which would otherwise be developing and “unfolding” in an immediate relationship with their social group. In this situation, their community would be threatened by conflicts, work efficiency would deteriorate, and their human personalities would become diluted and insecure.¹⁰⁸ Instead, Mérei suggested that leaders and managers should endorse an “active” view of their respective community members. In doing this, they would develop positive leadership qualities, as they could adopt and control the norms, traditions, and values developed at the “pre-institutional” level of the group. What Mérei proposed was an alternative form of (self)-government, which would overcome the dead ends of the prevailing top-down approach – and emancipate the individual in the process.

Conclusion

Nikolas Rose has argued that, in the Anglo-American world from the 1930s onwards, group psychology was in many ways a response to the challenge posed by the “soulless” organizations of the corporate industrial world of work. Thus, for example, the ‘human relations’ school popularized by the likes of Elton Mayo also examined the experience of belonging to a group. In a liberal state, Rose notes, the promise of social psychology, and

¹⁰⁷ Mérei, *Közösségek rejtett hálózata*, 5. Mérei’s book is also remembered for its symbolic value to his follower’s at the time. Indeed, using the word “hidden” in the title, the book implied the legitimacy of small social circles, which were presumably not being controlled by the regime.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 204.

psychology in general, was related to the need to create greater social cohesion and the building-blocs of social identity via small groups. The workplace and family, for example, served in this reading as a foundation for democratic citizenship and positive identification, because the ideas of democracy and the state were otherwise too abstract.¹⁰⁹

Meanwhile, in the context of post-Stalinist Hungary, the need to build systemic viability after the political crisis of 1956 meant committing more resources to improving workers' living standards via paternalist institutions of welfare. In the field of work, the daily 'political culture' in the factories changed, as open expressions of ideological affiliation and identification to the communist cause were no longer obligatory. As this article suggests, there were also efforts to increase the motivation and social adjustment of workers in state factories by positive means. The introduction of a new psychological discourse on humanizing work to prevent any further physical and mental ailments arising from modern socialist working conditions – and its implicit critique of the culture of punishment and discipline characteristic of the Stalinist era – is one example of this change in political culture in the early 1960s. Psychologists also set out to elaborate better practices of management and leadership¹¹⁰, a topic that became increasingly relevant due to the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1968. The rise of social psychology toward the end of the decade introduced new ways to conceptualize group dynamics and interpersonal relationships.¹¹¹

At the same time, the concept of the 'human factor' crystallized different but reconcilable interests between psychology experts and party politicians. If the workers' happiness and welfare could be combined with enhanced levels of productivity and a positive attitude toward the party-state, all the better. There may have been a very real concern that workers did not

¹⁰⁹ Rose, *Inventing Our Selves*, 136–140

¹¹⁰ See also the psychological guidebook for the managers by Bálint & Murányi 1973, 296–297. The authors enumerate over two dozen personality features suitable for a leader, such as enthusiasm, entrepreneurship, ambition, originality, ability to overcome obstacles, and self-control, but also friendliness, politeness, sense of humor, knowledge of human nature, and “phlegmatic blood temperature” (cool-headedness).

¹¹¹ See Laine-Frigren, *Searching for the Human Factor*, 254–294.

really identify with the abstract notion of a workers' state. Maybe social psychology, and specifically psychological studies on small groups, would render existing working groups (and those of the future) not only more effective, but also stronger and more self-assured, and contribute to feelings of identification with socialism at the local level.¹¹² However, individual-based psychological discourses could also be critical towards real-existing party-state hierarchies. Especially the idea of an *active* and self-realizing individual – translated to the post-Stalinist language of management by social psychologist Ferenc Mérei – seemed to propose the framework for an alternative form of governmentality within the confines of one-party dictatorship.

Even if the political atmosphere became more liberal in the 1960s, Hungary was still a one-party dictatorship, which had its own ways of “working with” the human being.¹¹³ Indeed, notwithstanding the ‘democratic’ needs the group psychological methods might have served, they were also potentially manipulative, because they provided the means to find out about hidden beliefs, forbidden agendas and ideological disagreements.¹¹⁴ To conclude, perhaps we should ask if the dichotomy between the apparently staid official practices and the ‘spontaneous’ self-knowledge groups is a somewhat overly ‘cut and dried’ way to describe the socialist era in all its complexity. Rather, I would suggest that we dig deeper into the contexts where these various discourses met and (usually) intertwined each other.

¹¹² Cf. Csaba Pléh, *History and theories of the mind*. (Budapest, 2008), 190.

¹¹³ Thomas Lindenberger, “Creating State Socialist Governance”, in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR*, ed., Konrad H. Jarausch, (New York, 1999), 139.

¹¹⁴ Ferenc Erős, “Élmény és hálózat. Mérei Ferenc a Magyar szociálpszichológia történetében,” in *Mérei Életmű*, 146–147.