

ARTICLE

Thriving in Ambiguity – A Dispositive of Self-Optimisation

On the Frenkel-Brunswik Theorem in Current Human Resource Development

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Abstract

This paper explores a discrepancy between research and application in the operationalisation of ambiguity tolerance. Observational results from the practice of human resource development raised the question: How does the umbrella term *ambiguity tolerance* relate to the Frenkel-Brunswik theorem, and has this possibly become a dispositive of self-optimisation? Methodologically, the article follows a literature-based approach. Tracing three shifts in the reception of the term, the trend around tolerance of ambiguity is linked to its theoretical construct. While by no means exhaustive, by recontextualising the Frenkel-Brunswik theorem in this way and bringing it into focus, the article aims to open up further discussion.

Keywords

authoritarian personality, entrepreneurial self, Frenkel-Brunswik-Theorem, tolerance of ambiguity, VUCA paradigm

INTRODUCTION

There is more than management jargon behind the currently fashionable term *tolerance of ambiguity*. As a phenomenon, it can be a promising avenue for research; as a competence, it has direct practical applications with far-reaching consequences. But to what extent is the operationalisation of ambiguity tolerance problematic?

Management and leadership trends are rooted in everyday working life. The zeitgeist coins them while storytelling shapes them. It requires an immense effort of translation for these approaches to work in practice while, at the same time, incorporating empirical research and theoretical assumptions. Therefore, it can become problematic when leadership and management trends rely on theoretical concepts. One such problem is illustrated by the use of the concept of ambiguity tolerance in what is known as VUCA discourse. The acronym VUCA stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity,

and ambiguity, and it attempts to describe the consequences of the changed world of work in the 21st century.

Ambiguity tolerance varies in different people. And this variance is relevant for organisational practice. Programmes and practices for dealing with ambiguity must consider the different individual expressions of ambiguity tolerance. For organisations, this means communication practices that trigger and resolve ambiguity, and equipping teams with appropriate tools for dealing with ambiguity.

A discourse currently dominating the field of management approaches identifies increasing, where possible, the ambiguity tolerance of employees as an entrepreneurial challenge, especially in the field of Human Resource Development (HRD). While the desired effect is focused on the individual and aims at self-optimisation, organisational needs also reveal information about social conditions. The current discourse in management consultancy, executive training and People & Culture development seems to be part of a dispositive of self-optimisation. The demand within HRD for a higher level of ambiguity tolerance might be read as an individual psychological response to a social and entrepreneurial challenge. Here we are reminded of the entrepreneurial self (Bröckling 2016). But how does current HRD discourse refer to the theoretical construct, and could blind spots be responsible for the dispositive?

The paper identifies three differences in the current reception of the work compared to the original reading. It assigns them to the micro, meso and macro levels and poses further questions for discussion. What insights does the Frenkel-Brunswik theorem provide today? The article presents selected results of a review of current literature and discusses working hypotheses from a diachronic conceptual analysis. The literature corpus includes prescriptive literature from the broader field of HRD. This covers practice-oriented management manuals and consulting materials as well as publications on political and vocational education, all of which deal with the concept of tolerance of ambiguity as a competence. By analysing this literature, this article makes a contribution to the problematisation of the appropriation of the concept of ambiguity tolerance. At the same time, the origins of the concept are used to reflect critically on current HRD discourse. Finally, a plea is made for a critical re-reading of Frenkel-Brunswik.

PERSONALITY TRAIT AND KEY COMPETENCE

Ambiguity is an invitation to enter the space of possibility shaped by multi-valued logic, in which the “both/and” and the “either/or” coexist in a complementary way. Individuals react to this invitation with very different levels of acceptance and it is the construct of ambiguity tolerance that can provide us with reasons for this. Ambiguity tolerance is the ability “to take note of ambiguity and uncertainty and to be able to tolerate them” (Dorsch 2004: 33).¹ According to Furnham and Ribchester (1995), ambiguity tolerance refers to the way an individual, or even a group, perceives and processes information about ambiguous situations or stimuli in the face of unfamiliar, complex, or incongruent cues.

The construct denotes the response to ambiguity and refers to the mode of dealing with the operationalisation of ambiguity. It was introduced to research as the personality trait *Ambiguity Intolerance* by the social psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswik at the end of the 1940s. She began to explore

¹ This and all following quotations were translated by the author of this article.

tolerance of ambiguity from the psychoanalytical concept of ambivalence. Within the broader framework of multi-layered and reflexive research on antisemitism, she pursued research questions on rigidity and specific references to reality that are both dependent on differently elaborated drive patterns. Frenkel-Brunswik conceptualised denial of emotional ambivalence and intolerance of cognitive ambiguity as different aspects of one and the same coherent personality trait. Her experiments revealed that this personality trait also manifests itself in different perceptual styles, among other things. Based on experimental perceptual psychology and the psychoanalytic understanding of ambivalence, she developed methodologically complex research designs that combined descriptive approaches with projective tests. Trained in psychoanalysis and aware of the dynamic dimension of psychological processes, she used the methodological tools of psychoanalysis in her research and data analysis.

Frenkel-Brunswik characterises ambiguity intolerance as a problem-solving behaviour that reveals a specific approach to and handling of reality. The central aspects of that trait are described on the basis of observable behaviour. These include the tendency towards unrestricted black-and-white and either/or solutions, over-simplified dichotomisations, and stereotyping. Furthermore, Frenkel-Brunswik emphasises stimulus-boundedness and rigidity in her explanations. The personality trait of ambiguity intolerance manifests in tendencies such as the rigid repetition of thoughts and attitudes, but also the breaking off or interruption of actions. The preferred regularity and unambiguity can be achieved through diffuse globality or an overemphasis on details. The need for security is taken into account by focusing on familiarity, avoiding new experiences, and absolutising what is worth preserving (Frenkel-Brunswik 1996: 218).

The construct of ambiguity intolerance is the result of her research, and it is a theoretical construct with which Frenkel-Brunswik succeeds in overcoming rigid categorisation and typologisation. The ambiguity of her research object—the complexity of psychodynamically and socially shaped personality traits—is taken up in a reflexive way, so to speak.

The Frenkel-Brunswik theorem of ambiguity tolerance as a personality trait was developed by using the trait approach within personality psychology. This assumes that ambiguity tolerance, as a temporally stable and enduring personality trait, determines behaviour and thus contributes to consistent reactions in different situations (Budner 1962).² The majority of studies consider tolerance of ambiguity as a fixed personality trait, i.e., the tolerance trait remains stable across tasks and situations with varying degrees of uniqueness (Furnham and Marks 2013). Humans have individual and context-dependent limits that determine how they shape or endure ambiguity.

But here practical applications seem to conflict with these theoretical findings. Where ambiguity tolerance is negotiated in practice, it is often on the basis of an empirically unresearched concept of competence. This invokes the basic assumption formulated by McClelland: it would be difficult or impossible to find a personality trait that cannot be changed through practice or experience (cf. McClelland 1973, quoted in Gelhard 2012: 61). Leadership trends seem to rely on what is needed at each moment rather than on empiricism. A psychotechnical concept of competence is applied, which

² As a trait, ambiguity tolerance is situation-dependent and measurable. Reis developed an inventory to measure ambiguity tolerance, IMA (Reis 1996). A detailed research review is provided by Furnham and Marks (2013), who also concur with the more ready critique that research overall is characterised by a lack of construct development (Herman et al. 2010; Furnham and Marks 2013; Merrotsky 2020) and weaknesses in operationalisation (Grenier et al. 2005; McLain et al. 2015). A preponderance of correlational studies and a lack of experimental design are thought to characterise research in the field (Furnham and Marks 2013). The research literature is considered “scattered and diffuse” (Furnham and Ribchester 1995: 179).

forcibly mandates learnability. Hofert, a prominent consultant, is “not of the opinion that tolerance of ambiguity is a personality trait, because that would mean it is rather predisposed”. The author is “rather convinced that it can be developed and is an evolved element of personality” (Hofert 2020: 276).

The interplay between the description of a state and the ideological demand that Gelhard diagnosed for the psychotechnics of the knowledge community is also found in the VUCA/ambiguity paradigm (Gelhard 2012: 41). This starts to resemble a classic hen-and-egg constellation. Powerful discourses interweave their own conditions so strongly that their causes and consequences are difficult to differentiate. This recalls Foucault’s concept of the dispositive (Foucault 1980) as a complex of those conditions that make the imperative of self-optimisation plausible. This includes rules, statements and practices that work on the individual to render them generally acceptable. This collective process of influence is achieved through knowledge generated in certain discourses. What is known as a dispositive promotes these discourses and controls a cycle of power relations. Not insignificant for our context is the strategic function that Foucault ascribes to the dispositive. He assumes that at a certain point in time there was a need that made the dispositive possible. The heterogeneous totality has a strategic function and is involved in power relations (Agamben 2008).³

Thus, the dispositive—as a complex ensemble of socio-cultural products and forms of practice on the micro level—forms the background to an individual’s relationship with the world and is the indissoluble connection between social power relations and the constitution of subjects. The dispositive of self-optimisation appears as a precondition for the phenomenon itself and enables the introduction of tolerance of ambiguity as an umbrella term.

The origins of the concept of tolerance of ambiguity offer perspectives that can be brought into the kind of current HRD discourse shaped by the VUCA paradigm. Gläser locates the origin of the VUCA paradigm for HRD/organisation theory in the publication by Bennis and Nanus (1997), in which the unfolding of the self is named as one of the four key principles of management (cf. Gläser 2021). In the context of an assumption of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in the world of work, there has been a powerful development of HRD discourse in a hegemonic direction.

In essence, the VUCA paradigm seeks to describe a social phenomenon that represents a social challenge and a change for organisations. Generally speaking, the paradigm combines heterogeneous elements into a chain of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe 2012) that subsumes underdetermined concepts into a paradigmatic stream of meaning. It is worth noting that the term never became established where it was founded; either in the military or in the field of security policy (Alamir 2020).

The VUCA paradigm brought about a shift in the parameters of organisational behaviour, which is now characterised by the management approach of agility in many areas. Agility in organisational theory and practice influences both organisational structure and work processes, as well as the behaviours and attitudes of the acting and interacting individuals. In its normative character—its founding document is titled a manifesto—it conveys implicit expectations and standardises messages.

In the search for the lowest common denominator in optimising ways of working in software development, American IT professionals formulated the *Agile Manifesto* in 2001. The concept cites twelve

³ Within this paper it is not possible to pursue the question of the specific function or possible historical necessity of the dispositive. It is clear that the dispositive of self-optimisation was able to establish itself in society at a certain point in time and appears to offer a problem-solving instrument.

principles and four fundamental values. These prioritise central aspects of management: “Individuals and interactions over processes and tools; Working software over comprehensive documentation; Customer collaboration over contract negotiation; Responding to change over following a plan”.⁴ This particular management concept was a value system that was not new even twenty years ago because many developers were already using it. However, it unleashed an enormous dynamic of change in management and catalysed a paradigm shift towards agile organisational management. The message of the *Agile Manifesto* has long since moved on from the field of IT and found its way into all economic sectors. The trend of agilisation has been unleashed. Agility appears to be the solution to the challenges of a VUCA paradigm.

First and foremost, the VUCA paradigm is a problem for organisations. As mentioned, critical consideration of the zeitgeist may reveal chains of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe 2012) in the hegemonic discourse of VUCA. These chains of equivalence construct a reality that is led by the demand for self-optimisation. There is an assumption that the need for agilisation arises from the challenge of dealing with ambiguity. Agility, so runs the conclusion, enables people to better cope with multiple meanings. In other words, ambiguity is to be met with ambiguity tolerance. This means that the individual adapts to accepted social and economic phenomena.

The VUCA paradigm aims at agilisation in all value creation processes, which are shifted to the level of human resources, i.e. the individual. In the course of the digitalisation process in the private sphere, an even more comprehensive “economisation of the social” (Bröckling 2016) has set in. This phenomenon sanctions behavioural expectations that hover over “the gap between unbounded aspiration and its consistently limited realisation” (ibid: 11). In the agile mindset, the solution to an organisational problem is individualised and socially sanctioned:

New habits become entrenched when they are rewarded permanently or when it becomes apparent that the new habit of agility produces a vision of success and social recognition in the community. This social recognition in the group is to be emphasised, as the discontinuation of old habits and the learning of new ones is a phase of uncertainty and is associated with fear. ... Intensive ambiguity tolerance training can stabilise this bridge from an old to a new attitude. Uncertainty must lose its anxiety-producing character and be experienced as a challenge to be overcome. (Parker and List 2021: 11)

Agility requires the whole person. In agile organisations, tolerance of ambiguity is expected alongside flexibility and creativity. The boundary between professional and private behaviour becomes blurred (cf. Baecker 2021: 179). What was a personality trait is becoming a key competence. The concept which, in its origin, described the socio-pathological finding of intolerance of ambiguity has now become the success factor of the new world of work. If intolerance of ambiguity made people aware of the limits and distortions of reality processing, an apparently identical term in today’s application aims to transgress (or negate) the limits and makes this the task of the individual. The subjectification of economic social relations transforms the individual’s ability to deal with ambiguity in a meaningful and productive way into a general norm. A norm that in the world of self-organised “New

⁴ Retrieved February 19, 2022, from www.agilemanifesto.org.

Work” has the quality of individual freedom in the sense of self-selection:

The figure of the entrepreneurial self unifies both a normative model of the human and a multitude of contemporary social and self-technologies, whose common aim is to organize life around the entrepreneurial model of behaviour. (Bröckling 2018b: 26)

This entrepreneurial self denotes

a way of addressing individuals, of altering them and causing them to alter themselves in a particular way. ... It is a highly effective process that is sustained by continual modification and self-modification of subjects through mobilisation of their desire to keep up and their fear of not being in touch with the social order that is held together by market mechanisms.” (ibid)

Support is promised by human resource development and training, which makes ambiguity tolerance a training goal. A possible risk could be that this leads to training programmes that are blind to people’s individual possibilities and limits in dealing with ambiguity, as well as to the complex interconnectedness of society. In accordance with the figure of the entrepreneurial self, the umbrella term ambiguity tolerance is incorporated into the dispositive of self-optimisation as a competence. There it loses its descriptive character. Individual dispositions and inter-individual differences disappear in the turn towards perpetual maximisation.

PROXIMITY OF EXTREMES

The previous section explained how a social paradigm is applied at the level of the individual without considering inter-individual differences and diversity. What does it mean when, in the course of this process, the descriptive and analytical construct becomes a prescriptive training tool? In the dispositive of self-optimisation, the qualitative dimension of individually differentiated perceptions of ambiguity is lost. The demand for maximising tolerance becomes intolerance towards differences in levels of tolerance.

In the quantitative dimension of extremes, tolerance of ambiguity itself is lost. Frenkel-Brunswik already described the phenomenon of opposites leaning towards each other, similar in their extremity. In the mantra-like repetition of the importance of increasing tolerance of ambiguity, a fixation appears that is reminiscent of the stimulus-boundedness described by Frenkel-Brunswik:

I have discussed in another passage the “closeness of opposites” as an essential characteristic of authoritarian personality organisations. ... A closer look at intolerance of ambiguity revealed that the two extremes—excess or lack of distance from culture, parents, or other stimulus configurations—are more closely related than either extreme is to the so-called “middle distance” from the environment. (Frenkel-Brunswik 1996: 220)⁵

Frenkel-Brunswik’s illustration of the proximity of the extreme positions simultaneously points to the space between the extremes where different meanings are perceived. Inconsistencies in all their nuances become visible where the dialectic of ambiguity and disambiguation is allowed to be. And

⁵ Translation CH. Originally published as “Environmental controls and the impoverishment of thought” in Carl J. Friedrich (Ed.) (1954) *Totalitarianism*, 171–202. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

where this creates a space in which the interplay between triggering and dissolving meanings is consciously shaped.

The horizon is the conceptualisation of nuances and an encouragement “to think in shades” (Hofert 2020: 276). The practice-oriented literature on ambiguity tolerance rarely cites such approaches, which see the resolution of ambiguity as a task for organisations rather than individuals. Such approaches might conclude that “closing options has become the critical success factor in change processes” (Volk 2019: 58) yet even in post-agile discourse, they are still the exception. At the same time, practice-oriented organisational research can develop action-based strategies for ambiguous constellations if they take ambiguity and disambiguation into account (Metzger 2021).

Tolerance of ambiguity also appears among the list of benefits for diversity management because it has the effect of promoting the organisational goal of agility (cf. Klaffke 2021: 9). Klaffke highlights the lack of empirical findings on diversity management in general and this also applies to training concepts for ambiguity tolerance. It is possible that a diverse range of didactical approaches and, in particular, differentiated methodologies might be suitable for simulating ambiguity scenarios. The training literature draws on well-known didactics such as experiential learning, learning by example, and mindfulness training. Considerations from an arts perspective take up an approach that Bauer (2018) sets out in his cultural historical treatise on ambiguity in our society. There is a need for research here because tolerance of ambiguity, especially as a competence, becomes part of a bundle of behaviours that are difficult to specify and operationalise. Training should “focus on the development of corresponding competences—e.g. tolerance of ambiguity and frustration, but also perseverance and conflict resolution skills—in educational practice with young people” (Ehnert 2021: 60). The training objective remains vague. And such vagueness can carry within it a totality of everything and nothing.

The general assumption of maximum tolerance of ambiguity entails losses. On the one hand, as has been shown, the space between the extremes narrows the space available for “shadow thinking”. The extreme positions draw closer to one another.⁶ Tolerance resembles intolerance. What is ultimately the potential for concrete negotiation practices in ambiguous situations is lost.

Another loss relates to the goal. Maximising one’s own tolerance of ambiguity is synonymous with the demand on the entrepreneurial self to continually dissolve boundaries. Herein lies a problem because the goal is not clear. Bröckling speaks of a categorical comparative (Bröckling 2018b) as the guiding norm for the entrepreneurial self. Only our comparison with others provides us with information about our own performance. The assessment lies in the relationality.

From a diagnostic point of view, the construct of ambiguity (in)tolerance describes the subjective limits of processing ambiguity. If the diagnostic tool becomes simply an end in itself, ambiguity tolerance becomes the goal, and the question arises as to when the goal has been reached. When does a person have sufficient tolerance of ambiguity? Based on a market logic of supply and demand, the expectation would be of a range of training programmes to increase tolerance of ambiguity. However, *de facto* this does not exist. Rather, concrete implementation strategies get lost amidst vague targets. Clarity of purpose thus seems to be the missing link. Clarity could be achieved by reflecting on inherent ambiguity. And an instrument that might answer this question is a theoretical construct with a qualitative dimension. It would be able to describe how individuals deal with ambiguity.

⁶ A phenomenon it is currently possible to observe in the extreme “Woke-ism” movement.

The diagnostic tool for intolerance becomes the key indicator for tolerance maximisation. An end-means reversal takes place, which initially indicates a change in the framework for action. Simultaneously, an asymptotic imperative is established; a continual approach to the ideal of maximising individual tolerance of ambiguity that never reaches that goal. As soon as ambiguity tolerance is interpreted as a key competence, it acquires the prescriptive character of an unreachable goal.

The agile mindset appears to be absolute because it contains a striking number of imperatives for expanding one's own possibilities for action. However, these do not represent concrete instructions for action. Rather they are metaphorically formulated imperatives, both in their prescriptive habitus and in their concrete linguistic form. In this respect, they provide orientation on the one hand, and invoke an imaginary authority on the other. In contrast, inscribing autonomy and maturity into the agile mindset means exploring it as a spectrum, as a space of possibility for operationalising ambiguity and recognising extremes.

FROM “AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY” TO “POST-HEROIC MANAGEMENT”

The fundamental anthropological axiom of autonomy and the political philosophical axiom of maturity are part of the theoretical context for the construct of tolerance of ambiguity. At the macro level, the topos of tolerance of ambiguity is associated with a political dimension: anti-authoritarian education. But the discourse of agilisation shows itself to be far removed from a social vision of a mature self. The pressure to adapt at the level of the individual, which is entailed by the dispositive of self-optimisation, is reflected in the figure of the entrepreneurial self.

This pressure is regulated at the meso level of the social by the asymptotic imperative, which demands continual approximation to a vague maximum and narrows the space of negotiation of meanings. In the course of this, the construct loses its descriptive, diagnostic quality.

At the macro level, the figuration of the post-heroic, agile ego is marked by the dispositive of self-optimisation: “The situation of the ego is confused: post-heroic personalities discover their inner hero and go on a hero's journey with him to arm themselves for post-heroic times” (Bröckling 2018a: 31). Today, the post-agile world requires the post-post-hero. His heroic journey, for example, looks like this⁷:

All people can do this exercise, and everyone will be able to do something with it:

When you are sitting in your chair, sit on your right sitting bone. Hold this position and think of a time in your life when you were a victim. Put yourself in the “victim” position. Really think of that time when you were hurt internally or externally, when you may not have been able to fight back, possibly as a child or teenager. Everyone in the world can remember at least one moment when he or she was a victim.

Now shift your inner position and take on a different identity. Turn your head a little, sit on your left sitting bone. Think of a time when you succeeded at something, felt good and been

⁷ Hofert 2020, referencing the hero-journey-method “Big Mind Process” by Genpo Roshi (Hofert 2020: 275f.). The training instructions will be reproduced here in the wording (translation CH).

successful. You don't have to have been Superman, it is quite enough if you made something good happen or helped someone. Now be a "heroine" for a second.

Now sit down comfortably on both sitting bones. Just relax in the here and now and feel joy. Connect with gratitude for something in your life and be joyful for a moment.

Now lean back a little deeper in your chair and breathe. Don't be a victim, don't be a hero, don't be anything ... Literally sit in the moment and just breathe.

In this example, it does not sound like an invitation to think in shades, if after "evil and good" comes nothingness. And it is obviously not (any longer) about the maturity or autonomy of the person.

Rather, the exercise could be understood as an appeal to the individual, with all that individual's increased tolerance of ambiguity, to endure the dissolution of the person: "The post-agile image is a post-post-heroic one: it is not about a person, but about the connection with ideas, about structures and design" (Hofert 2020: 253). Where is the self? In the post-heroic ego, the self seems dissolved and the individual a delimited projection surface. To what extent can a historical connection to the Frenkel-Brunswik theorem be reconstructed in this? The line of development runs from the post-post-heroic reality to the humanisation of the world of work to education for maturity.

(Post-)agilisation of the world of work is an approach from the organisational theory of "New Work", the core of which was the self. The New Work movement is characterised by the humanisation of the world of work. The concept emerged in the 1970s as a response to automation and mass layoffs in the automobile factories of the USA. This was also seen as an opportunity to align the world of work more closely with the wishes and ideas of the person. But these needs and ideas are not usually obvious, there is a "poverty of desire". The person needs careful nurturing to find their vocation, their intrinsic motivation, and "to do what one really really wants to do" (Bergmann 2019).

But the Bergmann-style vision of a humanisation of the world of work, with its focus on individual vocation, has been instrumentalised as a normative demand in the pop-cultural phenomenon of New Work (Georgi 2021). Instead of humanising the world of work, New Work is now seen as a strategy for coping with it without questioning it. "New Work has been gutted in terms of Bergmann's philosophy – as a result, a clear objective of New Work has been lost" (Schermuly and Koch 2019: 130). The New Work movement has become a system that demands tolerance of ambiguity but carries within it a refusal of ambiguity. The dispositive of self-optimisation has become second nature. For the construct of ambiguity tolerance this means not only that the analytical, descriptive quality of the construct of ambiguity tolerance was lost in the socio-economic discourse of self-optimisation, but that the political and emancipatory moment was also lost.

It is worth recalling here that Frenkel-Brunswik defines *intolerance of ambiguity* as a cognitive-perceptual personality trait. She assigns the extremes of tolerance and intolerance to human civilisation per se and describes them as fundamental social parameters (Frenkel-Brunswik 1949). This macro-level social dimension is also part of the construct of ambiguity tolerance as a personality trait. At present, this connection appears to find little consideration. But in terms of the history of science, it has shaped research.

From the beginning of 1943 at the latest, Frenkel-Brunswik devoted herself to researching antisemitism and worked together with Nevitt Sanford and Daniel Levinson (Korotin and Keintzel 2002). From 1944 onwards, Frenkel-Brunswik was significantly involved in the "Studies in Prejudice",

which researched the authoritarian character. Together with Theodor W. Adorno, Nevitt Sanford and Daniel J. Levinson, she led the study *The Authoritarian Personality*, published in New York in 1950 (Adorno et al. 1950). Originally focused on researching antisemitism, the study was expanded to include individual fascist inclinations. The result was the construction of a series of instruments to measure prejudice, including the F scale for fascist, pre-fascist or potentially fascist, alongside scales for antisemitism and political-economic conservatism.

In the course of this research, a personality variable emerged, almost as a side-effect: *intolerance of ambiguity*. As the “Frenkel-Brunswik theorem”, it found application in psychodiagnostics as well as in attitude and prejudice research. Methodologically, it was used in social psychology and in clinical differential psychology. Gordon Allport’s work *The Nature of Prejudice* (Allport 1954) was directly linked to Frenkel-Brunswik’s research results. He introduced the topic of prejudice research into social psychology and promoted its development from a normative level, as an emotionally focused subject, to an analytical level. According to Allport, the “benefit of prejudice” is its initial effect of enabling the individual to orientate themselves in their environment through categorisation.

The question of why people are prone to prejudice should not be supplanted by the requirements of human resource development under the guise of “ambiguity tolerance enhancement”. Perceiving, acknowledging, and living ambiguity is, socially, a condition for “the realisation of the generality in the reconciliation of differences” (Adorno 1998: 113f.). However, the “hatred of difference remains the constant in the authoritarian character” (Stögner 2020: 271f.). Especially in recent times, the socio-critical vanishing point in the historical socio-political context of the construct, namely “to think of the better condition as the one in which one could be different without fear” (Adorno 1998: 113f.), has been endangered in view of racist and antisemitic attacks. The rise of radical right-wing populist and nationalist parties and movements points to unresolved social problems. Resentment, discrimination, homophobia, and authoritarianism are the “easy” answers of a social personality type that cannot tolerate ambiguity.

These phenomena have made the origin of the construct of ambiguity tolerance in research on anti-semitism and prejudice relevant once again, and specifically its origin in the “Studies on the Authoritarian Character”. The aim of those studies was to find out why individuals support totalitarian ideologies and what social dynamics underlie this authoritarian personality type. After more than 70 years, this question remains relevant.⁸

CONCLUSION

This paper traces the recontextualisation of ambiguity tolerance in VUCA discourse and discusses the construct’s relevance in this context. It shows that there is more than just management jargon behind the now fashionable term of ambiguity tolerance. As has been pointed out, ambiguity tolerance is to be understood as a theoretical, descriptive construct in the sense of a perceptual-cognitive personality trait. As such, it opens a promising path for research. However, understood normatively, it can be a concept with fatal consequences for human resource development and its target individuals. In the contemporary reception of the Frenkel-Brunswik theorem, three substitutions were identified that could be responsible for the discrepancy between research and application. These are the

⁸ In 2020, a documentation and research centre for the analysis of anti-democratic and anti-human attitudes and structures, especially right-wing strategies and dynamics with authoritarian motivations, was established at the University of Leipzig and named after Else Frenkel-Brunswik. Retrieved February 19, 2022, from www.efbi.de.

shifts from trait to competence, from balanced extremes to unlimited maximisation, and from social phenomenon to individual coping strategy.

Some essential perspectives that a re-reading of the Frenkel-Brunswik theorem can have for dealing with ambiguity were summarised. With the critical distance provided by tendencies in (post)-agile discourse, non-hegemonic aspects become visible and open up new research approaches: tolerance of ambiguity as a trait that can only be changed to a limited extent, the recognition of the space between the extremes as a balanced unity of ambiguity and disambiguation strategies, and an individual's limited recognition of difference as a problem induced at societal level.

The prerequisite for these new research approaches is a fundamental conceptual demarcation between the normative umbrella term and the descriptive construct of *intolerance of ambiguity*. The Frenkel-Brunswik theorem indeed offers important insights into the operationalisation of ambiguity tolerance and the handling of ambiguity.

If one of the core values of the *Agile Manifesto*—“Individuals and interactions over processes and tools”—unpacks the concept of tolerance of ambiguity for the organisational context, then one condition would be to look at the working situations in which people find themselves. How can the world (of organisations) be shaped so that everyone can “be different without fear” (Adorno 1998)?

From the entrepreneurial self, there needs to be a path to a “self of the organisation”, which takes into account the most diverse manifestations of ambiguity tolerance. One such path might be that taken by Frenkel-Brunswik from personality psychology to social psychology, which examines the socialisation conditions of the individual critically and reflects continuously on inherent ambiguity. The Frenkel-Brunswik theorem might thus return to the research field as a starting point for current questions for the philosophy of science, for the performativity of theories, and for critical reflection in management theory.

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