

# Toni Wolff and the Construction of Complex Psychology: The Absence of a Reference

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## Abstract

This article aimed to make a fair historical reparation by restoring the prominent role that was denied to Toni Wolff (1888-1953) in the development of Complex Psychology. To achieve this, we drew upon acclaimed texts in the historiography of Jungian thought, such as “Jung and the Construction of Modern Psychology”, as well as writings by Toni Wolff herself. In this article, we primarily used her text titled “Fundamentals of Complex Psychology” (1935), which has never been published in Portuguese and appears in a collection of articles celebrating the 60th anniversary of C. G. Jung, titled “*Die Kulturelle Bedeutung der Komplexe Psychologie*”, edited in 1935 by Springer-Verlag. If there is one thing that the method of Psychology does, it is to organize Jungian thought, a task that Jung himself neither had the disposition nor the attitude to undertake. Therefore, the provisional answer to the rhetorical subtitle at this moment is as follows: there is no way to avoid being Complex Psychology if Jungian concepts are considered with the necessary rigor and historicity. It is important to reaffirm that this historical-methodological link is due to a great thinker, psychotherapist, and woman: Toni Wolff.

## Descriptors

analytical psychotherapy, historiography, Jung, Carl Gustav, 1875-1961.

## Conflicts of interest:

The author states no professional or personal interest that may create a conflict of interests regarding this manuscript.



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### Resumo

Este artigo teve por objetivo realizar uma justa reparação histórica ao restituir o lugar de protagonismo que foi negado a Toni Wolff (1888–1953) na construção da psicologia complexa. Para tanto, nos valem de textos aclamados na historiografia do pensamento junguiano, como “Jung e a construção da psicologia moderna” e os textos escritos pela própria Wolff. Neste trabalho, utilizou-se, sobretudo, seu texto intitulado “Fundamentos da psicologia complexa”, jamais publicado em português e que consta da coletânea de artigos “*Die Kulturelle Bedeutung der Komplexe Psychologie*”, realizada em comemoração aos 60 anos de C. G. Jung e editada em 1935 pela Springer-Verlag. Se há algo que o método da psicologia faz é organizar o pensamento junguiano, tarefa que Jung não tinha nem disposição nem atitude para fazer. Portanto, a resposta provisória ao subtítulo retórico desse momento é a seguinte: não há como não ser psicologia complexa, se a letra junguiana for pensada com o rigor e a historicidade devida. Vale reafirmar, esse elo histórico-metodológico deve-se a uma grande pensadora, psicoterapeuta e mulher: Toni Wolff.

### Descritores

psicoterapia analítica, historiografia, Jung, Carl Gustav, 1875-1961.

## Toni Wolff y la construcción de la psicología compleja: la ausencia de una referencia

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### Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo fue realizar una reparación histórica justa, al devolver el lugar de protagonismo, negado a Toni Wolff (1888–1953), en la construcción de la psicología compleja. Para eso nos basamos en textos aclamados de la historiografía del pensamiento Junguiano, como “Jung y la construcción de la psicología moderna” y los textos que la propia Wolff escribió. En este trabajo utilizamos especialmente su texto titulado “Fundamentos de la psicología compleja”, nunca publicado en portugués y que consta en la compilación de “*Die Kulturelle Bedeutung der Komplexe Psychologie*”, realizada para conmemorar los 60 años de C. G. Jung y editada en 1935 por la Springer-Verlag. Si hay algo que

logra el método de la psicología es organizar el pensamiento Junguiano, que Jung no tenía ni la disposición ni la actitud para hacer. Por eso, la respuesta provisoria al subtítulo retórico de este momento es la siguiente: no hay manera de que no sea psicología compleja, si la letra Junguiana fuera pensada con el rigor y la historicidad que corresponde. Se puede reafirmar, que le debemos este enlace histórico-metodológico a esa gran pensadora, psicoterapeuta y mujer: Toni Wolff.

### Descriptor

psicoterapia analítica, historiografía, Jung, Carl Gustav, 1875-1961.

## The missing Piece in the puzzle

**The work of an encyclopedic author** —such as C. G. Jung, who wrote for 65 years, from his first lecture at the Zofingia Society in 1896 to his final letters written in 1961, the year of his death—is a living organism that transforms over time. Thus, it is our responsibility to be fair and honest with the contemporary moment and to plunge our hands into the darkness of the present in order to respond to the theoretical aims of complex psychology in a current and relevant way. The guiding corollary throughout our journey has been the following: Toni Wolff is the missing piece in the puzzle of complex psychology.

Riccardo Bernardini, in his seminal book *Jung a Eranos: il progetto della psicologia complessa* (2011), reminds us that the term complex psychology was coined by Toni Wolff. This terminological shift occurred primarily to distinguish the analytical practice from the theoretical construction developed by Jungian psychology and to restore praxis to this field of knowledge—that is, praxis as the indivisible union of practice and theory, maintaining their antinomic tension without canceling out either side in this interplay of forces.

Let us see how Wolff herself (1935) summarizes the idea presented:

It is necessary to explain here how the term “complex psychology” applies to analytical psychology, a designation that has been more frequently used until now. The term “analytical psychology” was created by Jung, and the Zurich school founded this approach when it separated from Freudian psychoanalysis in 1913, of which Jung had previously been a member. Since then, “analytical psychology” has been understood as referring in general terms to Jungian psychology. It is called “analytical” because its general psychological viewpoint—that is, the involvement of the unconscious—implies a contrast with the psychology of conscious processes. Yet analytical psychology stands in contrast to psychoanalysis, since the latter does not analyze the soul. In more recent times, Jung has mainly used the term “complex psychology,” especially when speaking of the entire field of his psychology from a theoretical point of view. The term “analytical

psychology,” on the other hand, remains in use when referring to the practical procedure of psychological analysis. It is not insignificant to keep these two terms separate—a fact that also justifies the above methodological and theoretical explanations using the term “complex psychology” to refer to general knowledge, thus also encompassing the notion of “analytical psychology” as used in this book. (...) Psychological recognition is a category in itself. It is a synthetic judgment and includes knowledge of the method and structure of complex psychology, as well as the psychological self-criticism of recognition. The application of psychological judgment consists in the evaluation of contexts and in the demonstration of their psychological meaning. Psychological recognition is simultaneously critical and constructive. Psychological criticism, for example, elucidates the motives of the individual unconscious, the subjectivity of projective processes, and the archetypal basis of specific personal reactions. It also conveys knowledge of attitude as well as functional type and its problem, the distinction between personal and impersonal—that is, what pertains to a subjective or objective psychological content (Wolff, 1935, pp. 6–7, emphasis in the original).

What becomes evident in the cited passage is Toni Wolff’s remarkable capacity for synthesis and clarity, which she was able to condense into her writings. If this author is so important, some questions arise that we attempt to answer provisionally: why is this figure relegated to the subordinate role of having been Jung’s lover, rather than recognized as a thinker with immense theoretical depth? Two points of curiosity are worth noting here: in Jung’s *Collected Works*, she is mentioned only eight times (Forryan & Glover, 1979); furthermore, she is scarcely cited by some of the most renowned historians of Jungian psychology, such as in Shamdasani’s book (2003/2006). This leads us to the second question of this article: why not complex psychology?

## Just a Lover

According to Shamdasani (2020), the relationship that developed between C. G. Jung and Toni Wolff began in 1910, when she traveled to Zurich after the death of her father and began an analysis with Jung. The process lasted a few months and was interrupted by the Swiss psychiatrist when he realized that Wolff needed a new direction in life and a place to direct her libido following her father’s passing. Let us see how Jung described the young Toni Wolff in a letter to Sigmund Freud:

A new discovery of mine, Fräulein Antonia Wolff, a remarkable intelligence with exceptional philosophical-religious acumen (McGuire, 1974/1993, p. 503).

According to Parise (2024), a strong erotic and intellectual transference encounter took place between Jung and Toni Wolff, and in the midst of such a vertiginous experience, he invited the young Wolff to contribute to the research for his book, which would be published in 1912: *Transformations and Symbols of the Libido: Contributions to the History of Thought* (Jung, 1912). This was the beginning of a partnership that lasted approximately three decades and was gradually discontinued by Jung from the moment he gained international recognition, began his “confrontation with the world,” and became interested in the study of alchemy (Shamdasani, 2020). Let us consider how Wolff herself expressed her feelings in her journals:

What C. has now achieved is based on me. Through my faith, love, understanding, and loyalty, I held and brought him into the light. I was his mirror, as he told me. But all my feeling, imagination, mind, energy, and responsibility worked for him. I have effect, but no substance. I gave him his life. Now, he ought to give me mine and be a mirror for me (Shamdasani, 2020, p. 96).

Still according to Parise (2024), Toni Wolff’s work is little read or discussed in Jungian circles, as she is often regarded as a minor figure—just Jung’s lover. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this resounding historical erasure lies in the acknowledgments Jung makes in the fourth and final edition of his book *Symbols of Transformation* (Jung, 1950/2018), where he writes:

This book was written in 1911, when I was 36 years old. This is a critical age, for it marks the beginning of the second half of a man’s life, when a metanoia—a reorientation in life—often takes place. At the time, I was well aware of the inevitable break with Freud, both professionally and personally. I here recall with gratitude the practical and moral support I received from my dear wife during this difficult time (Jung, 1950/2018, p. 16).

How could a late Jung, at the age of 75, fail to acknowledge the research efforts undertaken by Wolff in what would become the first of his major theoretical works? The question remains unanswered to this day. And yet, people continue to refer to this author—who, for over two decades, was president of the Psychological Club of Zurich (Shamdasani, 2003), an accomplished analyst with a spontaneous capacity to facilitate unconscious processes (Chapernowne, 1980), and above all, one of the primary thinkers and theoretical architects of complex psychology, even naming the field herself (Bernardini, 2011; Shamdasani, 2003/2006)—in a univocal, reductive, and subordinate way, showing more interest in gossip than in her written work. Thus, we hear that Wolff was Jung’s lover—and feel content with that.

## **A brief historical digression on the name “complex psychology”**

Analytical psychology took its first steps at the beginning of the 20th century through associative tests and experimental studies conducted at the university clinic of the Burghölzli Hospital (Jung, 1907/2019), as well as research on dementia praecox (Jung, 1908/2011). According to Taylor (1998), even in the early stages of its clinical formulations, Jung acknowledged his roots in the constructivist-pragmatist thought of William James, the dissociationism of Pierre Janet, and the psychology of unconscious and creative processes of Théodore Flournoy.

As analytical psychology began to solidify as a distinct field of knowledge with multiple lines of research, it became necessary to develop a terminology that could adequately reflect Jungian theory. Shamasani (2003/2006, p. 27) summarizes this historical moment as follows:

Although Jung initially used the term “analytical psychology” to describe his psychology, in the 1930s he renamed it “complex psychology” in the commemorative volume for his sixtieth birthday, *The Cultural Significance of Complex Psychology*. Toni Wolff noted that in recent times, he had begun referring to his psychology as complex psychology, especially when addressing it from a theoretical point of view. In contrast, she commented that the term “analytical psychology” was appropriate when applied to the practical methods of psychological analysis (1936, 7). Thus, the terminological shift was not merely stylistic; it also marked a shift in emphasis, from practical analysis to general psychology. In 1954, Jung wrote: “Complex psychology means the psychology of ‘complexities’, that is, of complex psychic systems in contrast to relatively elementary factors.” (Shamasani, 2003/2006, p. 27, emphases in the original).

The above-cited text by Wolff (1935) is the most extensive and detailed theoretical work on the topic of complex psychology. It responds to the development of a psychology of complex systems that should, through the complementary antinomy nurtured between the generic method and the individual method—the former belonging to the natural sciences, and the latter to the cultural sciences—embrace the various fields to be approached by psychology.

We are unconscious of the subjective factor as a psychic reality, because psychology is young as an empirical science and has not yet begun to distinguish itself from its scientific parents, philosophy and natural science. It only has its own operational autonomy in its interiority and has therefore also developed its own method. That is why we can only recognize the psyche in its own activity. To recognize

means: to distinguish one object from another, that is, to define what it is and what it is not, as this also explains it in its specific interpretation and structure. Only the specific method appropriate to the subject approaches its specific nature (...). The critical category of psychological integration, that is, the method of complex psychology, is the instrument and the means by which the soul can only be recognized as a self-regulating system in itself. The method provides the principles and perspectives to recognize and evaluate psychic reality psychologically and to demonstrate them through its own activity. (Wolff, 1935, pp. 9, 11).

One of the main direct interlocutors chosen by Toni Wolff in her text on complex psychology is Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936), a German philosopher of Kantian training, who reflected on the tensions between the natural sciences and the historical-cultural sciences. His work *“Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft”* (Rickert, 1899/1926) is one of the most frequently cited references in the text *Foundations of Complex Psychology* (Wolff, 1935), and Wolff attributes to Rickert the “heterological principle,” a concept that lies at the core of complex psychology. Rickert summarizes it as follows:

To understand to what extent something can be directly recognized. A universal thought must recognize both subject and object, that is, as we would say in common terminology, both make up the matter of knowledge in the broadest sense of the word (. . .). The category of knowledge evaluates in the broadest sense of that word, affirming or denying it as well, especially when it allows itself to be known. A purely formal matter would by no means be a matter of knowledge (Rickert, 1934, p. 12).

Rickert’s (1934) heterological principle thus synthesizes one of the early axioms of Jungian thought, both in its psychotherapeutic praxis and theoretical framework: namely, that “the individual does not matter in the face of the generic, and the generic does not matter in the face of the individual” (Jung, 1935/2013, p. 17, para. 2).

## Why not complex psychology?

Complex psychology is the most accurate way to refer to the Jungian corpus of thought, as it unveils the other within analytical psychology, restoring its character of interiority. If Jung, at various points in his work, affirms that there is no Archimedean point from which to refer to the psyche (Jung, 1933/2014, p. 207, para. 384), and if he is an empiricist (Jung, 1946/2013, p. 57, para. 75), then a theoretical foundation is required—one that transcends his heuristic and hermeneutic proposals. If analytical psychology is the content, complex psychology is its container.

One of the main, if not the main merit of complex psychology was to restore the historical link with analytical psychology, since the latter places the Jungian proposal within a register of thought that must deal with the inherent paradoxes of any psychological idea. Let us consider how Wolff (1935) elaborates on the ideas presented above:

The historical events—especially those of the second decade of our century, such as the advent of Christian nations who professed the religion of love—unleashed the outrage of all wars. Since then, the Enlightenment faith in human absolutism has failed and, today, one is influenced by the other, consciously and unconsciously, either through the valorization of the natural and socio-economic sciences, or, conversely, through the radical chants of ideology which, indeed, are driven by instincts. Apart from Nietzsche, has anyone who is not a psychologist ever considered that humanity generally finds in religion or ideological conviction something that demands a conscious attitude—provided it is not a resentful reaction? For this reason, a religion or worldview cannot be conceived as an interpretation, for then it would be mere ideology and, once excluded from the unconscious, would be subject only to dogmatic rationalization. Consequently, we must apply this issue to psychology itself, which, for the first time in Western intellectual history, considers the autonomy and reality of the psyche as a scientific principle. The answer to this is easy to see: the autonomous activity of the psyche, which can only be penetrated in our appropriate cases. The self-sufficiency of consciousness, defended on one side, and biological and sociological conditions, defended on the other, are the thesis and antithesis of an antinomy that strains culture and tears the individual apart. One of the essential psychological facts is that a conflict can never be resolved through mere identification, neither with the thesis nor with the antithesis, because the conflict is not healed, but merely suppressed. The solution to dissociation does not come from suppressing the opposites, but from producing a new structure that combines both sides of the phenomenon—a mediating function in which opposites can unite, and that is compensatory. The psyche in its complexity—composed of opposing aspects—is the basis of psychic experience, which suspends such a division of antinomic principles in an intermediate zone. By including the psychological domain, neither the rational nor the instinctual principle alone can account for the explanation; a third, autonomous and indivisible, is required—emerging from a new center of consciousness from which the opposites become relative (Wolff, 1935, p. 20).

It thus becomes clear that the intellectual effort proposed by complex psychology performs a double torsion in Jungian thought, making the theory hover ahead of empiricism and vice versa. It is not possible to think



psychologically using only the generic method of the natural sciences, nor only with the singular method proposed by the cultural sciences.

Since the object of psychology must be the psyche, and since the psyche is a negative boundary concept—one that cannot be reduced to *res extensa* nor comprehended solely as *res cogitans*—we must begin from this place without external topology. If there is no external topology, only a complex method can account for something that, as a rule, is not a being that exists, but something that operates through energetic tension. It is no coincidence that Jung (1928/2013) refers to his text *Psychic Energy* as one of the foundational ones in terms of the epistemological structure of his work.

Wolff (1935, p. 124) tells us that the notion of psychic energy is fundamental to the method of complex psychology:

The psychological concept of energy is the necessary correlate to the conceptions of complex psychology regarding psychic structure. The energetic perspective places individual psychic phenomena in functional relation to one another. It therefore considers the meaning of the content of psychic phenomena, with the primary focus on the dynamic relationships in which the psychisms are involved: successive manifestations, over time, are mutually conditioned when they are understood as expressions of an underlying dynamic factor. Moreover, when one phenomenon disappears and another arises, these changes are also only different manifestations of one and the same dynamic process; it is the same “energy” that leaves one form of application and activates the new one. Thirdly, processes that occur simultaneously but are of different natures are also in dynamic relation with each other. And finally, for a dynamic process to take place, unequal conditions must be present. Energetics is, on the one hand, a methodological premise of complex psychology, but it can also be considered, with equal justification, as a structural substrate of the psyche. That the structure of the psyche has an inherently dynamic character must have been made clear from the previous expositions. However, that these dynamics are in very specific relationships with one another only becomes evident from the psychological sequence of individual phenomena—provided that the totality of the psyche is taken as the basis for the view. According to this premise, the meaning of the content of psychic phenomena can only be adequately evaluated when the energetic perspective is included (Wolff, 1935, p. 124).

Therefore, if there is something that the method of psychology does, it is to organize Jungian thought—something Jung himself neither had the disposition nor the attitude to do. Thus, the provisional answer to the rhetorical subtitle of this section is the following: there is no way not to speak of complex psychology if the Jungian text is to be considered with proper rigor and historicity. It is worth

reaffirming that this historical-methodological link is owed to a great thinker, psychotherapist, and woman: Toni Wolff. Let us remember: she was many things beyond being one of Jung's loves—he was a great thinker, but one who did not recognize her with the affection and protagonism she deserved.

## An invitation to reading

If we began by speaking of a missing piece in the puzzle of complex psychology, we close with the bold aphorism: Toni Wolff's work lacks nothing. What remains is for us to have the humility, curiosity, and reverential silence to enter the deep seas of her psychological thought, opening the space she so rightly deserves.

We end by giving the word to the one from whom it was taken (Wolff, 1935):

The knowledge of psychic reality leads the human being, honestly, to draw ethical and perceptual consequences, and thus he is confronted with his own opposite and with an insoluble conflict, where all movement is stalled, where he is crucified between his own yes and no, between his ego and the Self—and yet, this is the only path through which life is fully lived and individuality is realized. In this way, can the question be answered of what role complex psychology fulfills in the cultural problem of the individual? The question, in fact, must not be answered from the outside, but only from within—that is, by those who are confronted with the problem of experiencing psychic reality and who attempt to resolve it through knowledge. Yet even they are not fully decisive, for an attitude can only be preserved in the unfolding of life and must also remain valid in death. Moreover, when we consider culture as a whole, and especially the problematics of our culture—what significance do ordinary individuals have, or even those who may have approached their specific cultural problem more or less wisely? Therefore, perhaps the question cannot be answered in a principled way. Reality and the future must show whether and to what extent it is necessary or important for individuals to honestly and responsibly assume the task set before them by their particular psychic structure through the experience and knowledge of psychic reality (Wolff, 1935, pp. 167–168).

In the end, we hope that the knowledge of psychic reality may serve to give voice and a space of existence to all forms of life that have been deprived of it. The rest is silence.

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