



Book Review

Ebba Christina Blåvarg
*Psykologi på schemat: Formeringen
av ett skolämne, 1960–2015*

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Ebba Christina Blåvarg's dissertation *Psychology on the Schedule (Psykologi på schemat)* is the first comprehensive analysis of the psychology school subject in Swedish upper secondary schools. Today, psychology is the largest non-compulsory school subject at the upper secondary level in Sweden, measured by the number of students who receive grades in the subject. Although the subject has been part of the national upper secondary school (*gymnasieskolan*) since 1965 and has continued to be part of it through various reforms, a historical review of the psychology subject has been lacking until now.

Blåvarg's dissertation fills this gap by offering an in-depth analysis of how the psychology subject has developed and been shaped over time. By examining three different discursive practices where the discourse about the psychology subject has been present, the dissertation provides a comprehensive picture of the subject's history and its role in Swedish upper secondary schools.

Firstly, state policy documents are analyzed: various preparatory documents, investigations, steering documents, and reports. Curriculum, course, and subject plans related to the psychology subject are also included. These public documents provide insight into the subject's development over time and serve as guidelines and frameworks for

the subject. By studying these documents, we can understand how state intentions and educational policy goals have influenced the design and construction of the school subject psychology.

Secondly, teaching materials texts have been analyzed. Over 200 books from the period 1950–2020 have been studied, providing a broad overview of how the subject has been presented and conceptualized in teaching. Teaching materials play a central role in shaping students' understanding of the subject and contribute to framing what is considered important knowledge within psychology.

Thirdly, the discourse of the teaching profession about the subject has been analyzed, such as discussions about the subject within subject associations and professional journals. During the studied period, various associations and interest groups have influenced the formation of the subject. For example, the Subject Association for Philosophy and Psychology Teachers (FPF) and its journal SOPHIA have played various roles. The Continuing Education Department in Umeå and their journal *PS-aktuell* have also been central actors. These professional discussions and debates provide insight into how teachers and other educational actors have interpreted and influenced the subject's development.

The purpose of the dissertation is to highlight these three different discursive practices and examine how the school subject psychology has been formed. The research particularly focuses on the period from the preparatory work for the upper secondary school reform in 1965 to after the implementation of the upper

secondary school reform in 2011. The psychology subject has a long history in Swedish schools and has been part of the national upper secondary school since its inception in 1965. The dissertation particularly focuses on questions such as: What is the psychology subject in upper secondary school? Why should students study psychology? By analyzing these texts, the project provides an increased understanding of the subject's development and role in Swedish schools.

In her PhD thesis, Ebba Christina Blåvarg highlights discrepancies between the subject's purpose and its actual content in curricula and program plans. By bringing these discrepancies to light, the dissertation contributes to a critical discussion about how the psychology subject has developed, but also more generally how to understand and analyze the historical trajectories of school subjects for upper secondary schools.

Research on the psychology subject in Swedish upper secondary schools has been limited, and this dissertation aims to fill that knowledge gap. By using a discourse analytical perspective, the researcher has explored the subject in an unbiased manner, without relying on previously established theories or assumptions. The discourse analysis focuses on three different spaces where the discourse about the psychology subject has taken place: the bureaucratic governing space (policy documents that affect the subject); the practice-oriented space (textbooks and teaching materials used in the classroom); and the professional space (discussions within subject teacher associations and other teacher union contexts).

Blåvarg has examined who has spoken about the subject and what position these

individuals have held. Where the statements have been made and which discursive space they belong to also affect the subject's legitimacy. Politicians, researchers, and teachers have different roles in shaping the subject.

During the period that begins with the 1960 upper secondary school investigation, when psychological knowledge was highly valued in society, the psychology subject underwent several changes. During the 1970s, there was an intense shift. The subject was reformulated, and different parallel versions were created for different educational tracks in the secondary school. The textbooks during this period focused on the student's personal development and applications of psychology in professional and societal life. During the 1990s, a silence discourse around the psychology subject emerged, according to Blåvarg's analyses. This silence is complex and affects the subject through changed content and the absence of speakers and advocates. After 1979 and the new subject plan, Supplement 48, the silence becomes particularly noticeable. Towards the 2000s and 2010s, a fourth discourse order takes shape, where new actors take control of the subject. The psychology subject transforms into something that "more resembles a catalog of opinions and a subject that may need to be questioned." The spread of different theoretical directions within psychology during this period was influenced by the silence discourse, which according to Blåvarg gave the subject the freedom to take different directions. The choice of three theoretical directions within psychology (psychodynamic, humanistic, and behaviorist) and four additional additions in the curriculum of 2000 (Gy 2000) contributed to the subject's diversity and complexity.

Overall, a nuanced, well-founded, and credible picture of the subject's formation over time emerges. I would like to emphasize the rich knowledge contribution of this dissertation; it is pioneering work on the school subject psychology that is important. It is also an important approach to what a subject is at universities and how such a subject interacts with school subjects that have the same label. How should such linkages be understood? How should the "kinship" (p. 43) between academic discipline and school subject psychology be understood? (an essentialist view, a dialectical, and a post-structural etc.).

Here, the historical case study approach that Blåvarg uses is necessary. But it is also appropriate to raise some questions. What possibilities and limitations might there be in the choice of theoretical framework that Blåvarg has made? The subject historical approach combined with Foucauldian analysis would have had a different framing in, for example, a curriculum theoretical/historical perspective. The psychology subject can become a monolithic entity - for example, the dissertation refers to the subject's objective and subjective side. From a broader curriculum theoretical perspective, there is constantly a struggle between school subjects to take place in curricula and how the subject is delineated in relation to other subjects. In the chosen approach, we do not see much of such aspects of subject formation. A subject's strength may not manifest in active interaction but rather in silence. It is interesting to note that there are parallels between the formation of the subject and the scientific discipline. By studying the psychology subject, we can also increase understanding of the psychology discipline as a whole.

To conclude, Ebba Christina Blåvarg's dissertation *Psychology on the Schedule* offers a pioneering and comprehensive analysis of the psychology subject in Swedish upper secondary schools. This work not only fills a significant gap in the historical understanding of the subject but also raises critical questions about the processes and structures that have shaped its development.

One of the intriguing aspects of Blåvarg's analysis is the periodization of the psychology subject's formation. The dissertation prompts us to consider how these periods relate to curriculum reforms and the broader educational landscape. The cause-effect relationships and the potential lagging effects between reforms and the subject's evolution are complex and multifaceted. Why were there four distinct periods identified in the dissertation? Could there have been more, perhaps eight, reflecting overlapping chronologies and time sequences? These questions invite further exploration into the temporal dynamics of educational change.

The order in which Blåvarg examines the discursive spaces—first bureaucratic, then practice-oriented, and finally professional—also warrants reflection. Could the discourse have moved in the opposite direction, starting from the professional space and influencing the bureaucratic and practice-oriented spaces? This consideration opens up possibilities for understanding the fluid and dynamic nature of educational discourse and its impact on subject formation. The concept of the bureaucratic space as an authority, presumably national, raises questions about the visibility of struggles within this space. Why is the struggle not apparent here? Is it because it did not exist between subjects,

or because the analysis did not capture it? Comparing this with potential interviews of curriculum constructors could provide deeper insights into the bureaucratic processes and their influence on the psychology subject.

During the studied period, a significant shift occurred as psychology teachers took over textbook writing. This shift led the subject to look inward, focusing on critical approaches to psychological perspectives and their explanatory models. Blåvarg's analysis highlights how questioning the subject, its theories, content, and truth value became central to its identity. This introspective turn is crucial for understanding the evolving nature of the psychology subject and its role in fostering critical thinking among students.

The identification of four discourse orders raises further questions about the nature of these discourses. Are they distinct or interconnected? What are the struggles within and between these discourses? Who are the actors involved, and what are their motivations? The expansion and differentiation of the psychology subject from its parent discipline reflect broader trends in educational specialization and the inevitable consequences of growth. The notions of vacuum and silence in the discourse are particularly thought-provoking. What do these silences signify? Could they represent background ideas so strong and self-evident that they do not need articulation? Blåvarg's work invites us to consider the implications of these silences and how they shape the subject's identity and development.

In conclusion, Blåvarg's dissertation is not only a historical review but also an invaluable resource for future educational reforms and those engaged in improv-

ing psychology education. It provides a nuanced and well-founded understanding of the psychology subject's formation, highlighting the complexities and dynamics of educational discourse. This work serves as a foundation, theoretically and empirically for ongoing critical discussions and reflections on the nature and purpose of psychology education in Swedish upper secondary schools.

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