

# BEWUSSTSEINSLAGE

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## BEWUSSTSEINSLAGE

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Experimental Psychology, History of Psychology, Cognitive Psychology

### 1. Core Definition of Bewusstseinslage

The German term **Bewusstseinslage**, often translated as "conscious attitude," "conscious set," or "conscious state," refers to those mental experiences or states of consciousness that cannot be analyzed, reduced, or associated with specific, identifiable sensory components or mental images. This concept emerged fundamentally from the research program of the Würzburg School in the early 20th century. While classical psychology, particularly Structuralism, maintained that all conscious content must ultimately be composed of elementary components--sensations (from external stimuli) or images (reproduced sensations)--the Würzburg researchers found experiences that defied this reductionist schema.

A **Bewusstseinslage** functions as a qualitative, transient state accompanying higher mental processes such as judgment, doubt, recognition, affirmation, certainty, or effort. It is not the outcome of the thought process itself, nor is it merely a peripheral feeling derived from bodily changes; rather, it represents the specific, irreducible quality of the mental act while it is occurring. For example, when a subject is asked to solve a complex problem and reports a sudden "feeling of certainty" or "a sense of knowing" the answer, yet reports no specific visual or auditory image accompanying that feeling, this non-sensory, non-imagistic state is classified as a **Bewusstseinslage**.

This concept was revolutionary because it directly challenged the elementalism and strict reductionism that dominated experimental psychology established by Wilhelm Wundt. The existence of these non-sensory mental states suggested that consciousness was richer and more complex than a simple mosaic of discrete sensations and images. Consequently, **Bewusstseinslagen** served as crucial evidence supporting the broader theory of imageless thought, which held that complex intellectual processes, such as thinking and reasoning, could occur entirely independently of sensory or imaginal content.

### 2. Etymology and Translation

The term **Bewusstseinslage** is a composite German noun. **Bewusstsein** translates directly to "consciousness" or "awareness," while **Lage** means "position," "situation," "state," or "attitude." Therefore, the literal translation is "consciousness-situation" or "conscious state." The adoption of "conscious attitude" as the primary English translation by many scholars, particularly those interacting directly with the Würzburg findings, attempts to capture the functional nature of the

state--that it is a disposition or orientation of the mind toward a specific mental task or object, rather than a passive reception of sensory input.

The nuances inherent in **Lage** are critical to understanding the concept's importance. Unlike a fixed sensation (which is a content of consciousness), a **Bewusstseinslage** denotes a qualitative condition or an active stance taken by the conscious mind. It describes \*how\* the mind is engaged in a task--whether it is affirming, doubting, striving, or hesitating--rather than \*what\* specific sensory information is being processed. This semantic distinction underscores the Würzburg School's focus on mental acts and processes, moving away from Wundt's focus on mental elements and structure.

The challenge of translating the term accurately highlights the difficulty early psychologists faced in classifying non-sensory mental phenomena. Terms like "set" (or \*Einstellung\*) emerged later to describe the preparatory state of the mind, which is related but not identical to **Bewusstseinslage**. While a "set" is often an unconscious predisposition, the **Bewusstseinslage** is explicitly a consciously experienced state, even if it lacks analyzable sensory correlates. The commitment of the Würzburg researchers to documenting these elusive states forced a reevaluation of the linguistic and conceptual tools available for describing conscious experience.

### 3. Historical Context: The Würzburg School

The concept of **Bewusstseinslage** is inextricably linked to the work conducted at the University of Würzburg, primarily under the guidance of Oswald Külpe, a former student of Wilhelm Wundt. Külpe and his collaborators, including Narziß Ach, Karl Bühler, and Henry Watt, sought to expand the domain of experimental psychology beyond the simple elements studied by Wundt (sensation, simple reaction time). They aimed to bring higher mental processes--such as volition, thinking, judging, and doubting--into the laboratory, processes Wundt had explicitly declared inaccessible to strict experimental methods due to their ephemeral and complex nature.

To study these complex processes, the Würzburg School developed a unique methodology known as systematic experimental introspection, or the \*Ausfragemethode\* (questioning method). Unlike Wundt's introspection, which demanded subjects give immediate reports on simple sensory experiences, the Würzburg technique involved giving subjects complex tasks (e.g., association tasks, comparing concepts, solving complex logical problems) and then asking them to retrospectively analyze and report on the entire mental process they went through, particularly the steps \*between\* stimulus presentation and final response.

It was through these detailed, retrospective analyses of thinking processes that the existence of non-sensory conscious states became evident. Subjects consistently reported crucial transition phases in their thought processes--moments of doubt, moments of sudden insight, or the internal feeling of the required direction of thought--which were vital to the solution, yet which they could

not describe using the structuralist lexicon of sensations and images. These irreducible, functional states were subsequently categorized as **Bewusstseinslagen**, forming the backbone of the Würzburg challenge to established psychological theory.

#### 4. Relationship to Imageless Thought (Denkpsychologie)

The concept of **Bewusstseinslage** serves as the empirical evidence for the broader theoretical movement of \*Denkpsychologie\*, or the psychology of thought, specifically the doctrine of imageless thought. Imageless thought posits that abstract thinking, comprehension, and reasoning can proceed without the explicit mediation of mental imagery. The Würzburg researchers argued that if structuralism were correct, every phase of a complex thought process should be traceable to a specific image or sensation; however, their experiments revealed critical gaps.

For instance, in studies of directed association, a subject might be given a word and asked to provide a response related in a specific way (e.g., provide a subordinate term). The subject would report that the \*instruction\* or \*determining tendency\* (another Würzburg concept) governed the search process, but the experience of understanding the instruction or the feeling of searching the correct mental category was not itself a picture or a sound. It was an active, consciously felt state-- a **Bewusstseinslage**--that directed the mental machinery toward the goal.

Therefore, **Bewusstseinslagen** are not merely accidental byproducts but are essential components of imageless thought, representing the conscious awareness of the mind's operational states. They are the subjective side of the internal, goal-directed processes, such as the feeling of intellectual tension, the realization of error, or the recognition of similarity, that guide the thinking process when sensory images fail to account for the content of the conscious moment. This distinction shifted the focus of psychological research from the static \*content\* of consciousness to the dynamic \*acts\* of consciousness.

#### 5. Examples and Classification of Bewusstseinslagen

The Würzburg researchers meticulously cataloged numerous examples of **Bewusstseinslagen** based on the consistent reports from their subjects. These states often defy precise classification but generally fall into categories related to cognitive orientation, affective judgment, and conative (will-related) direction. Examples frequently cited include the "consciousness of relation" (the awareness that two concepts are related without picturing the relation itself), the "feeling of conviction or certainty," "doubt," "hesitation," and the "will to solve" or mental preparation (\*Vorsatz\*).

Consider the conscious experience of affirming a mathematical truth. A structuralist would demand that the experience of affirmation must be reduced to a specific sensation, perhaps a faint muscular tension or visceral change. The Würzburg data, however, indicated that the conscious

state of affirmation was a unified, irreducible attitude (a **Bewusstseinslage**) that lacked these sensory components. Subjects reported simply "knowing" or "being certain," and the defining feature of the experience was its relationship to the intellectual task, not its physical manifestation.

Furthermore, Narziß Ach's work on volition provided critical examples of **Bewusstseinslagen** related to effort and task completion. He described the "conscious realization of the necessity to act" or the "feeling of striving" toward a goal. These volitional attitudes are crucial for initiating and sustaining complex behavior, yet they exist as purely mental determinations, irreducible to the simple muscle sensations that were often hypothesized by sensory reductionists. The inability of classical introspection to capture these common, yet analytically elusive, states served as powerful validation for the Würzburg findings.

## 6. Conflict with Structuralism and Titchener

The introduction of the **Bewusstseinslage** concept sparked one of the most intense methodological and theoretical disputes in early 20th-century psychology, primarily opposing the Würzburg School and the American Structuralist movement led by E.B. Titchener, Wundt's most prominent student in the United States. Titchener maintained a stringent definition of consciousness, insisting that all mental contents must be reducible to one of three elements: sensations, images, or affections (simple feelings). The existence of a non-sensory, non-imagistic state was, for Titchener, a logical impossibility.

Titchener and his colleagues at Cornell University attempted to replicate the Würzburg experiments, but their findings consistently refuted the existence of imageless thought and **Bewusstseinslagen**. Titchener argued that the Würzburg researchers were committing the "stimulus error"--confusing the objective meaning of the stimulus (the intellectual attitude) with the actual conscious content (the elusive sensations). He contended that what the Würzburg subjects reported as **Bewusstseinslagen** were merely extremely fleeting, weak, or peripheral sensations, particularly obscure kinaesthetic sensations (muscle feelings from the throat or eyes) or faint organic sensations that the subjects simply failed to notice or analyze properly.

This debate was more than a technical disagreement; it represented a fundamental schism regarding the scope and methodology of psychology. If **Bewusstseinslagen** existed, it meant that the classical method of introspection was fundamentally limited, and that consciousness possessed qualities--such as organization, direction, and abstract attitude--that were holistic and emergent, rather than purely additive. The ensuing inability of either camp to definitively validate or refute the other's introspective reports ultimately contributed to the rise of Behaviorism, which sought to abandon introspection entirely due to its subjective and contradictory nature.

## 7. Significance and Legacy

Despite the methodological controversies it generated, the concept of **Bewusstseinslage** proved immensely significant in the historical transition of psychological thought. By demonstrating that vital components of conscious experience could not be reduced to simple sensory elements, the Würzburg School provided the intellectual ammunition necessary to dismantle the dominance of structuralism and elementalism. The work on **Bewusstseinslagen** helped pave the way for approaches that emphasized function, context, and wholeness, such as Gestalt psychology and, eventually, modern cognitive psychology.

The legacy of **Bewusstseinslage** can be seen in modern research on metacognition, cognitive control, and the "feeling of knowing" (a state where an individual is certain they know information they cannot currently retrieve). These concepts describe subjective, non-contentful states that guide cognitive processing, mirroring the functional description of **Bewusstseinslagen**. The Würzburg notion that an internal, conscious attitude can direct complex behavior without sensory images is now accepted practice in cognitive models, which utilize constructs like goals, schema, and working memory directives that function outside the domain of simple visual or auditory imagery.

Ultimately, the research into **Bewusstseinslagen** established the legitimacy of studying complex, dynamic mental processes in the laboratory, proving that thinking was not just a stream of images but a goal-directed activity involving abstract, irreducible mental attitudes. This shift from analyzing the structure of consciousness to understanding its function and operational states was a decisive step toward the modern science of cognition.

### Further Reading

[Würzburg School \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Imageless thought \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Structuralism \(psychology\) \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Oswald Külpe \(Wikipedia\)](#)