THE WANDERING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST: A RESPONSE TO JAHODA*

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Reflecting on the contributions of such a versatile and eminent psychologist such as Marie Jahoda in the light of Fryer's interview makes one aware of a prominent feature of her biography, summarized in her playful closing sentence: "Oh I'm just a rootless refugee." This, to my mind, carries considerable weight in understanding her unique contribution not only to psychology but to the understanding of central social problems in contemporary society. I also think that behind this particular biographical feature lies a whole perspective on how to approach psychology creatively.

One of the peculiar features of social psychology is that it is a relatively bounded discipline, historically, culturally, and even socially. What I am referring to can be best illustrated with a quote from Dorwin Cartwright (1979):

The entire conceptual framework of social psychology, including all the unexamined assumptions about its proper subject-matter and acceptable methods of research and most of its empirical findings are ... largely the product of a single generation of people who were trained by a relatively small group of teachers with a common background and a rather homogeneous point of view. And due to the social conditions of the time in which they entered the field, they are predominantly white, male, middle class Americans, and thus reflect the interests and biases of this segment of the population (p. 85).

It is difficult to decide what is more striking, the statement by Cartwright or the contents of the interview that highlights a social psychologist whose work and existence contradicts all the points made by Cartwright, however correct he might be in general terms. This contrast, however, underlines the difference between two types of social psychology. One is ethno-, socio- and gender-centric and typified by an excess of commitment to some special and constituting idea that is highly localized. The other, which would appear to be only in the makings, is a social psychology that is characterized by a growing awareness of the unity of the endeavour called human sciences and attempting to escape the narrow confines of a disciplinary vision contained within a very particular socio-historic location as well as specific traditionalized "science-making conventions," such as the prevailing methodological imagination.

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that Marie Jahoda, as a tradition in her own right, suggests that "there is relatively little good social psychology

available.” Her autobiographical comment, of being a rootless refugee, is also an existential stance to doing social psychology in particular, and social science in general. Good social psychology, which she refers to as “truly illuminating the functioning of people in their social context” is a social psychology for which a substantial amount of distancing from a uni-disciplinary, ethno- and socio-centric perspective is necessary. This is possible through exploring the implications of disciplinary imaginations other than psychology, as well as of life forms other than those found within one particular culture. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that she mentions her paper “A social-psychological approach to the study of culture” (1961) as her favorite one. This is a paper in which she is attempting to answer the question of “how (one can) arrive at an understanding and reasonably objective description of the total culture of a group or institution” (Jahoda, 1961, p. 23), and in which she develops a highly ingenious social psychological index to measure the “Concept of Fit”. This is in part inspired by the social anthropologist Beattie’s (1959) work about how to represent the dominant beliefs and values of a society from a social anthropological perspective. Since her aim is to deal with a social psychological problem, and since the social anthropological perspective is relevant to this problem, she engages in a most original translation of the anthropological perspective for the social psychological needs of her research problem and thus creates an innovative index of cultural fit into communities.

It is not the example as such, but the approach to the problem which is at the root of the new idea, namely one which is not bounded by one disciplinary imagination alone. This is coupled in her case with the intellectual and existential travels through the travesties and wealth of three different cultures and generations with the attendant realities of the diverse socio-political, intellectual, and cultural traditions that she embodies in her thinking and work.

As I mentioned earlier, it is only recently that examples of such work are in their modest making (e.g. Miller, 1984; Shweder & Levine, 1985; Sampson, 1983, 1985, inter alia). These developments, which cross disciplinary and cultural boundaries, are generating ideas with far reaching consequences not only for social psychology but also for psychology. Indeed, an important case at hand is Eleanor Rosch’s classic work on categorization and prototypes (Rosch, 1978) which, typically, finds its origins in an anthropological work (Berlin & Kay, 1969) and is based on cross-cultural research on colour categorization.

Essentially, my comments on the content of this interview are based on the lesson I personally have learned from the contributions that Marie Jahoda has made to psychology and the social sciences. This is that an essential ingredient of grasping the nature of social and psychological problems is to be able to view the problem from a diversity of perspectives and traditions, which cannot be conveyed by a simple teaching of the methods and procedures of a discipline or for that matter by an ethnocentric appreciation of disciplinary problems, irrespective of whether these are basic or applied ones. An appreciation of human social existence can only proceed through exposure to the different manifestations of the diverse complexities of human life forms. In that sense, the emergence of new ideas, particularly in social psychology, where one is inevitably
confronted with different socio-historic manifestations of conduct, rituals, conventions, and social problems requires the social psychologist to bring a very specific "existential stance" to bear upon one's science. This involves being a naturalized refugee who is at home with the world—to be part of a culture and a citizen, and yet to be detached from it, both historically and culturally.

REFERENCES


