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## The development of a perspective

**1. Some personal issues**

This book is very largely based on previous publications by its author. Its appearance raises therefore the inevitable question as to why it should be published at all. There are two answers to this question, one personal and one 'academic'. The second of these is more important in the long term, but I shall start with the first.

Between the mid-1950s and now, I have become a moderately successful academic, fairly snug and secure inside the variety of ivory towers which it has been my privilege to inhabit or visit. This is a long slice of life. But together with many people of my generation, I share memories of a raging storm which – it seemed at the time – would never stop. Amongst those who died then, there were millions who formed, in the most concrete sense of the term, my 'social background': the generations of European Jews who were born in the half-century straddling the eighteen and nineteen hundreds. The minority who survived came in from very cold and very far. Some of them got back as and if they could to the normal business of living. Others sought a last refuge in a country new to them, continued to fight in other wars, and some of them died again. Some felt guilty forever because there was no sense or reason to their survival while so many disappeared. A very few – those who had the talent – tried to express and reflect what had happened to them and to others.

Sharing their experience and feelings – but not the talent – I became an academic, almost in a fit of absent-mindedness. But this did not happen immediately after the war. In May 1945, after I had been disgorged with hundreds of others from a special train arriving at the Gare d'Orsay in Paris with its crammed load of prisoners-of-war returning from camps in Germany, I soon discovered that hardly anyone I knew in 1939 – including my family – was left alive. In one way or another, this led to six years of working in various ways and in various European countries for organizations which bravely tried with insufficient means to stem the flood of misery; their task was the rehabilitation of victims of war – children and adults. This was the beginning of my interest in social

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psychology. More years had gone by when, in my final year as an over-ripe undergraduate at Birkbeck College in London, I found myself both very lucky and immensely surprised at having been awarded by the Ministry of Education one of their scarce mature student scholarships. The essay I wrote for the competition, which caused me to be selected for a terrifying interview at Curzon Street, was entitled 'Prejudice'. I still think today that the interviewers must have decided that I was exceptionally well-qualified to know what I was talking about, and this is why they gave me the scholarship.

The ivory towers, more solid then than they are now, had a way of smothering one with their benevolent warmth and comfort. Very soon, first briefly in Durham and then in Oxford, I was talking a new language, I learned a new jargon and discovered 'problems' which I never knew existed. The 'academic' psychology took full hold of me.

I thought at the time that I was deeply and irrevocably steeped in this new life. And yet, when I look back today, I know without any doubt that this has never been true. In a strange way, even my first published paper, unlikely as this would seem from its title, had a lot to do with the past. It was written under the guidance of, and together with, one of my Birkbeck teachers, Richard Peters, who had influenced me a great deal. The title was: 'Hobbes and Hull – metaphysicians of behaviour' (Peters and Tajfel, 1957). The article attempted to present a case against certain forms of reductionism in psychology. I now know what outraged me about Hull was his bland indifference to all that one knew about human society while he was weaving his web of 'hypothetico-deductive' over-simplifications, claiming at the same time that they provided the basis for insights about the complexities of human social behaviour.

And yet, much of my early work seemed far away from these complexities. Some examples of it will be found in chapters 4 and 5 of this book. The awareness of a unifying thread and of a preoccupation of which I really never let go happened as if by chance. There were three incidents. The first was an interview some years ago with a journalist who was preparing a book about psychologists (Cohen, 1977). When I read the interview as a chapter in his book, I disliked it intensely – not because of what Cohen did, but because of what I did to myself. There was obviously something important to me there that I tried to express, but it was done crudely and clumsily. The second incident came as an odd convergence. I was invited one summer to attend a colloquium in Jerusalem concerned with methods of historical research about the Holocaust. Some time later, I was participating in a symposium in Bad Homburg about 'Human ethology: the claims and limits of a new discipline'. When I started preparing my contribution to the symposium

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(Tajfel, 1979), I had no idea that the Jerusalem experience would find its way, without any planned intention, into the conclusions of a text concerned, on the face of it, with a completely unrelated theme. The third *prise de conscience* came later, when I was invited to contribute a chapter to a Festschrift for Jerome Bruner (Tajfel, 1980a). The unifying thread became clear long before I wrote the chapter. Thinking about it forced me to consider what possible significance working on such esoteric issues as ‘perceptual over-estimation’ could have had for me in the early or the mid-1950s.

Within two years of publishing theoretical and research papers on perceptual over-estimation, I was applying some of the ideas contained in them to problems of social stereotyping. It took some more years (which included several excursions in other directions) to get me back to the title of my essay for the Curzon Street interview (see chapter 6). It took even more time to move from chapter 6 to chapter 7 of this book – from a cognitive analysis of stereotypes to their treatment as an indissoluble part of our social reality; and from the first three chapters of Part II to the work described in Part IV which attempts to deal with the social psychological realities of conflict between human groups. The last chapter of the book is a full return to the theme of the third year Birkbeck essay.

This unifying thread – as I see it now – is one excuse for publishing this book. To me, it represents a consistent line of development. There is some arrogance in presenting it to the reader; but I think this is more apparent than real. We all have some kind of an intellectual history; I know now that mine has been deeply enmeshed with the traumatic events of long ago. Being what it is, I think that the book should be of some interest as a reflection of some strands in an important period of development in European social psychology.

My hesitations about producing this book continued for a long time, and I recast it several times as I was working on it. I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Jeremy Mynott of Cambridge University Press whose encouragement to continue always came when it was most wanted. Needless to say, he bears no responsibility for the result.

## **2. The social dimension**

The book is not arranged in chronological order, although chronology is roughly followed whenever it serves the purpose of clarifying the sequence of an argument. Part I on ‘Social psychology and social processes’ consists of an article which appeared in 1972 followed by a debate directly related to it which was published in 1979. The aim of part

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It is to present the widening of a perspective which took as its point of origin the study of certain aspects of perceptual judgement and ended up many years later, through several successive steps, in the conviction that the study of *social* stereotypes by social psychologists is a travesty of our reality unless the term 'social' is taken seriously as the fulcrum of our work on the subject. In following this development of a point of view, part II includes a sequence of general articles and empirical studies published between 1957 and 1980. Part III returns to work done in the sixties and presents, in a sense, a long footnote to the development of ideas reflected in the transition from part II to part IV. It is, however, a necessary footnote since it establishes a continuity of preoccupations between the fifties and the late seventies. But there is also another reason, perhaps a more important one, for including this material. The 'experience of prejudice' described in the first chapter of part III (chapter 8) and the studies on the attitudes of children summarized in the two following chapters deal with the development of ethnic and national attitudes in a variety of social and cultural contexts. Various features of this development led to the asking of many new questions – no more than implicit at the time – about the psychological processes involved in the individuals' affiliation with large-scale social groups and in the conflicts between such groups. Part IV of the book, based on some of the work done throughout the seventies, is an attempt to provide a beginning of a few answers to these questions. But it is no more than a beginning. The first three chapters of part IV (chapters 11, 12 and 13) were published in 1978; but various preliminary versions went as far back as 1972 and 1973. At present, work within this framework is done by many of my colleagues in Britain and elsewhere and plans are made for its future continuation. A list of research reports directly related to the topic and theoretical perspective of part IV of this book, which was prepared in 1978, included nearly 80 items, out of which I was the author or co-author of only a few; a list prepared today would be very considerably longer (see introduction to part IV). This is why I was able to write earlier in this chapter that this book presents 'a reflection of some strands in an important period of development in European social psychology'.

The new-found identity of European social psychology which began developing in the early sixties is inseparable from the themes discussed in part I; it is also closely interdependent with the remainder of the book. The background to the symposium from which chapter 2 was drawn is briefly outlined in the introductory section to that chapter, and therefore I shall not discuss it here. It is the more general issue of the nature of this interdependence which needs to be discussed.

The initial push for this new identity in European work happened

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almost by chance, but it would not have led to the subsequent developments had it not happened at the right time in the right place. The convergence of a visit to Europe of two American colleagues, John Lanzetta, who was spending two years in London, and John Thibaut, who was in Paris for a year, led to the creation of a small committee which, in addition to Lanzetta and Thibaut, consisted of Mauk Mulder, who was then at the University of Utrecht, Robert Pagès from the Sorbonne, and myself. After working for over a year, we managed to organize in 1963 the first ever conference of European social psychologists.<sup>1</sup> As I wrote later: 'We worked for some time, primarily to 'identify' social psychologists in Europe – a task which appears a strange one today, ten years later' (Tajfel, 1972b, p. 308). The enterprise succeeded and continued to expand. Its later developments included the formalities of the elections of executive committees and of five successive presidents, each serving for about three years. This formalization started in the mid-1960s, several years after the first informal group of people became convinced that the initiative was an important one. But the underlying validity of all that happened since the beginnings of this inevitable institutionalization still depended, as it does today, on the vitality of a need and of the response to it. They were both clearly identified at the first conference in 1963 and in the initiatives which led up to it. Accounts of the development of the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology can be found in the presidential report I presented in Louvain in 1972 (Tajfel, 1972b) and in the report (to be published) presented in Weimar in 1978 by Jos Jaspars in his capacity of Acting President. In this chapter my concern is not with this brief history, but with the nature of the need that created it and of the response to this need which took the form of a variety of theoretical and research developments.

There cannot be, and should not be, any kind of a unified European, or any other, social psychology. The acquisition of a new identity to which I referred earlier, must be understood instead in terms of two related developments. One of them was the progressive creation of an actively interacting community of people. The diversity of political, social, linguistic and administrative boundaries in Europe made this convergence of previously isolated small pockets of people in various countries as difficult as it was necessary. The channels of communication, so easily

<sup>1</sup> This conference could not have been organized without the encouragement and support of the Committee on Transnational Social Psychology of the American Social Science Research Council. Soon afterwards, the Committee co-opted to its membership several social psychologists from Europe. Until this connection with the S.S.R.C. was severed some years ago, the Committee, first under the chairmanship of Leon Festinger and then of Morton Deutsch, continued its support for European activities.

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available to our American colleagues, had to be either created or unblocked in Europe. The second development consisted of the creation of a *diversity* of communicating viewpoints, trends of interest and research initiatives. The overwhelming numbers and productivity of our American colleagues were combined with the fact that in the first ten or fifteen years after the war it was, paradoxically, much easier for a social psychologist to travel from a European country to the United States, or vice versa, than to establish contacts much nearer, across a national or a linguistic border. The results were inevitable: the scattered social psychologists in Europe were following at a distance and with due delays, the successive ebbs and flows of the mainstream of American social psychology. It would be a mistake to ascribe the desire to change this state of affairs to some grotesque outburst of a new European chauvinism. As I wrote in 1971, in the Foreword to the first volume of the series of European Monographs in Social Psychology (Carswell and Rommetveit, 1971):

*Why a European Association and a series of European Monographs in Social Psychology? These titles are not meant to reflect some new versions of a 'wider' or 'continental' nationalism – academic, intellectual or any other. The future of social psychology as a discipline and a contribution to knowledge and society is no more 'European', 'American' or 'African' than it is Basque, Welsh, Flemish, German or French . . . In the long run . . . an exclusive focus from, and on, one cultural context cannot escape being damaging to the healthy development of a discipline which is in the last analysis one of the social sciences. There was a time, not so long ago, when most of us were quite happy to accept the proposition that the social and human sciences can be 'value free' and independent of their cultural and social framework. It is undoubtedly true that, whatever the case may be, this has become today a highly controversial issue, and not only for social psychology. Even the outwardly neutral description . . . of social psychology as the 'scientific study of human social behaviour' has not managed to remain *au-dessus de la mêlée* . . . For all these reasons, and many others, we must create a social psychology which grows simultaneously in many places . . . [We] do not set out to be 'European' in explicit opposition, competition or contradistinction to anything else . . . But a discipline concerned with the analysis and understanding of human social life must, in order to acquire its full significance, be tested and measured against the intellectual and social requirements of many cultures (pp. vii–viii).*

This need for a diversity of social and cultural perspectives found its expression in the last two decades in a variety of new research developments. This book is meant to trace one of these developments, as reflected – and at first only hazily perceived – in the slow crystallization of a conviction and a perspective. A more detailed discussion of both will be found in the two succeeding chapters – this is why they were placed at

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the beginning of the book. Two additional points need to be made at this stage. The first concerns a very brief and preliminary description of the perspective. The second has to do with the conviction.

The perspective can be simply outlined. It consists of the view that social psychology *can* and *must* include in its theoretical and research preoccupations a direct concern with the relationship between human psychological functioning and the large-scale social processes and events which shape this functioning and are shaped by it. As obvious as this statement may appear to be, it will be seen later (e.g. chapters 2, 3, 7, 11, 14 and 15) that this concern with society at large has been, at best, at the fringes of the mainstream developments, since World War Two. It will also be seen (chapter 11) that connections can be made between this neglect of a *sociopsychological* integration and the social and cultural background of most of the post-war social psychology.

As to the conviction, it grew out of the experience to which I referred in the preceding section of this chapter. Today, nearly forty years later, we have seen many new massacres and also some new holocausts. In the face of all this, my belief in a 'value-free' social psychology rapidly grew shaky. At the same time, the sixties and the seventies brought a revival of many semi- or pseudo-scientific attempts, quickly popularized, to provide crude and simplistic 'explanations' of the mayhem that human groups can inflict upon each other, physically, economically and socially (for some of the discussions of these views or of the use made of them, see e.g. Billig, 1978; Bodmer and Cavalli-Sforza, 1970; Cohn, 1967; Crook, 1978; Kamin, 1977; Ludmerer, 1972; Montagu, 1968; Tajfel, 1976). As will be seen in several chapters of this book, I do not believe that 'explanations' of social conflicts and social injustice can be mainly or primarily psychological. At the same time, a *modest* contribution can be made to what I called elsewhere in this book the unravelling of a tangled web of issues. This is closely related to my conviction that a 'neutral' social psychology is hardly possible (neutrality in the social sciences often amounting to the implicit taking of a position) and that, at the same time it is possible and necessary *to attempt* to understand in one's job as a social psychologist the integration of individual interactions with their wider social settings. This integration can take many forms. The selection of those which are discussed in this book cannot be divorced from the background of personal experience described earlier in this chapter. This is why I must plead guilty to not being a 'neutral' social psychologist despite the respectably aseptic idiom that will be found in some of the chapters to follow.

The discussion about 'social psychology and social processes' to which part I of this book (chapters 2 and 3) is devoted was one only of many

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debates which engaged social psychologists in the seventies (see e.g. Armistead, 1974; Harré, 1977, a and b; Harré and Secord, 1972; Israel and Tajfel, 1972; Poitou, 1978; Schlenker, 1977; Strickland *et al.*, 1976; Stroebe, 1979). It differed, however, from many other debates in that it was explicitly concerned with the failure of the 'traditional' social psychology to build a bridge between its preoccupation with interacting *individuals*, and the wider social framework of these interactions which was largely neglected. At first sight, the two opening chapters of part II, based on work done between the mid-fifties and the early sixties, hardly seem to do anything much to fill this gap. Chapter 4 starts from a discussion of a half-forgotten issue – perceptual over-estimation – which was very much alive at the time, when controversies concerning the validity of the 'New Look' approach to the study of perceptual phenomena filled many pages of psychological journals. The description of this over-estimation and of some of the debate related to it is not relevant at this point; it will be found in the first section of chapter 4. But despite the apparent incongruity between what has been said earlier in the present chapter and this return to the neutrality of a fairly technical issue, the study of perceptual judgement, its inclusion in this book appeared indispensable. The technical problems remained technical for a time, but very soon they acquired a direct relevance to the study of those aspects of social perception which had to do with the divisions of people into social categories and the values associated with these divisions. This progression is reflected in some ways in the formal hypotheses to be found in the last section of chapter 4. It continues with the variety of studies described in chapter 5 which range from an analysis of the effects of classifications on simple judgements of length of lines to a discussion of the effects that intergroup competition and the status of a group as a disadvantaged minority are found to have on the mutual perceptions of two ethnic groups.

But despite this progression, chapters 4 and 5 still remain very much within the tradition of a cognitive analysis of these intergroup phenomena. More than that, in presenting a theoretical and empirical progression from the analysis of the judgements of sizes of coins and of length of lines to inter-group stereotypes, they imply that – as social psychologists – we need go no further. This cognitive perspective is widened in chapter 6. It is then *included* in chapter 7, but only as a necessary requirement which is now by no means seen as *sufficient* for the psychological study of social stereotypes. A part of chapter 7 is devoted to a critique of these 'sufficiency' premises, and uses as examples both the earlier work described in the preceding chapters and some very similar recent work which is still continued by a number of people. The latter parts of the



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chapter widen the scope to consider the *social* functions of stereotypes, the study of which is seen as an indispensable part of the social psychologist's job. In this way, chapter 7 rejoins directly the issues raised in part I of the book and provides an example of the way they relate to one aspect of the social realities of intergroup conflict.

Part III of the book is derived from work done in the sixties. It is included to provide an empirical counterpart to some of the abstractions of part II, but it also leads directly to part IV through the questions it raises about the development of group identity. Chapter 8 is based on anecdotal evidence about how it felt to be a coloured student in Britain just before the period of the great waves of immigration from the Commonwealth. Chapters 9 and 10 summarize several of the facets of a larger research project, conducted in a number of European countries, about the development of ethnic and national attitudes in children. The 'insiders' and 'outsiders' of the title of part III are shown to play their respective roles early in their lives – with the exception of the outsiders of chapter 8 who describe the strange experience of suddenly *becoming* outsiders.

Part IV of the book represents again, as does chapter 7, a return to the problems of a *social* social psychology raised in part I. The concern of chapter 7 ('Social stereotypes and social groups') was to combine the earlier sequence of a cognitive analysis of stereotypes with the consideration of the functions they serve in the social contexts from which they derive. The first four chapters of part IV take up, in a wider perspective, the relevance to the development of group identity of 'the experience of prejudice' described in chapter 8 and of other forms of intergroup conflict and social divisions. The concluding chapter of the book applies this perspective to the psychological problems thrust upon groups of people who are members of disadvantaged minorities and attempts to describe the finite number of psychological solutions to these problems which appear as being available to them.

This book tries to achieve three aims. The first of these is to reflect a slow convergence of the experiences confronted in the upheavals of the not-so-distant past with the directions taken by some of my academic work, even those directions which appeared, for a time, to have nothing much to do with these experiences. I felt it was important not only to know that this convergence existed, that the work made more sense in relation to the experience, but also to let it be known. This has nothing to do with any inflated view of the importance of what I am, who I am and, most of all, of my academic work. On the contrary, when I look back today at the variety of things I have done between 1945 and 1980, it often appears to me that I have never been as useful again as I was in the few

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short years immediately after the war, when I had an opportunity of helping to bring back to the surface a few dozen young people, hardly younger than I was myself at the time. But I strongly suspect that many social psychologists and others also reflect in the drift of their work and the selection of their problems the *Weltanschauung* based on the experience which made them what they are. I think this is the case with much of the stubbornly 'non-social' social psychology which dominates the field. As I wrote in concluding chapter 3 of this book:

as social psychologists, we have a duty to attend to these processes [of dehumanization and depersonalization of others]. And even if many of us who wish to ignore them are entirely free to do so, we do *not* have the right to imply through the conclusions we draw from our work that our cosy and equitable inter-individuality can reach beyond the blinkered vision of social reality which we have selected for our special consideration.

I think (but cannot prove it) that this 'inter-individuality' pursued to the exclusion of most other issues has a lot to do with the social background of those who pursue it and the social myths inherent in that background (see chapter 11). I also think the same to be true of some psychologists who, in the name of a presumed scientific objectivity, take strong positions about contentious social and political issues, and in doing so revive some hoary traditions of an earlier period of eugenics and genetics. I have just pleaded guilty not only to having become clearly aware of a connection between my work and my past, but also to aiming at making this connection public. It is my hope (but not a very solid one) that clear-cut statements of *background* positions will become more common in all those fields of our work which relate directly to public issues or public policies. For the time being, the clear *engagement* of some psychologists in some of those issues remains cloaked in a thick fog of claims of objectivity.

The second and third aims of this book have already been mentioned. One of them consists of drawing together the dispersed links of work done over a period of twenty-five years in the hope that the emerging unity and widening of perspective may be of some use to others interested in similar problems. The third aim was to place this slow progression alongside parallel developments in European social psychology which took off in the sixties. The work described in this book can be seen as one of the strands in this wider texture; it has contributed to it while at the same time drawing from it a clearer sense of its own direction.