

## Chapter 7

### "THE LEAST DOUBTFUL PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE"? THE SHORT HISTORY OF TAJFEL'S "SOCIOPSYCHOLOGICAL" APPROACH TO LABORATORY EXPERIMENTATION

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"In science, as in other pursuits, it is not enough to point to a defect or to throw a stone at the sinner. It is foreseeable that if a concomitant work of proof and validation is not done at some time or another all those texts written in fervour will soon be forgotten." (*Moscovici, 1972 p. 23.*)

"[T]heories which can be tested experimentally contain the least doubtful promise for the future." (*Tajfel, 1972, p. 69.*)

"The tendency to use psychological experiment chiefly as a buttress to some all-embracing philosophical theory is one that has clung to experimental psychology since its earliest days, and has provided the critics of this branch of science with many of their most potent modes of attack." (*Bartlett, 1932/1995, p. 1.*)

When considering the relationship between theory and method in societal psychology, it appears almost unavoidable to start out with a reference to the "crisis" in social psychology, and to the "European critique" in particular. Of

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1 This chapter develops arguments first presented in two conference papers: "Imagining the flexibility of social identity: The role of research technologies", EAESP Small Group Meeting, Theory and Method in Societal Psychology, Pecs, Hungary, April 2001 (on which this volume is based) and, "The taming of Tajfel" (Invited address) BPS History and Philosophy of Psychology Section Annual Conference, York, England, April 2000. An enormous debt of gratitude is, of course, due to János László, not least for his tolerance with my having violated the generic norm of punctuality. Otherwise, in an essay concerning a branch of social psychology that eschews individualist accounting, it would clearly be inappropriate to identify particular individuals who, qua individuals, have contributed to the ideas presented in this chapter. It is, however, all too easy to identify particular individuals whose actions have, in various ways, impeded the progress of this work. Two especially spring to mind: Michael Billig, for his non-felicitous response to my perfectly reasonable request for information concerning the generic norm hypothesis (see note 8 below) and David McCrone, for reasons too numerous and tedious to mention.

course, thirty years after the publication of Israel and Tajfel's classic edited volume, *The Context of Social Psychology*, most of the specific concerns expressed by the various contributors have been forgotten, although a few have been retained as part of our collective disciplinary history, now increasingly represented (as Bartlett might have predicted) in a thoroughly conventionalised form. In the passage between memory and history, it is Serge Moscovici and Henri Tajfel who have emerged as especially memorable figures (cf. Sellar and Yeatman, 1930) and have since attained the status of founding fathers of two emergent schools of "European" social psychology.

It is not, of course, possible to identify any single reason why it was that these authors' work came to inspire future generations of scholars to a far greater extent than, for example, Rom Harré's advocacy of a dramaturgical approach to "social rules" or Johan Asplund's symbolic interactionist approach to "value relevance". However, it is possibly significant that both Moscovici and Tajfel differed from many of their contemporaries in so far as their critiques of mainstream psychology, and the alternatives they proposed, fell short of outright rejection of established research techniques. In fact, both argued that simple critique would become lost in the mists of disciplinary time were it not underpinned by conventionally-acceptable bodies of research evidence, and both authors went on strategically to employ standard experimental techniques to buttress their theoretical claims. (Tajfel, 1974a;b; Moscovici, 1976)

It is the relationship between method and critical meta-theory that represents the topic of this chapter. More particularly, I shall be exploring the fate of the "sociopsychological" perspective approach to laboratory experimentation originally advocated by Tajfel in *The Context of Social Psychology*. In his chapter ("Experiments in a vacuum") Tajfel presented a bold manifesto. Rather than blaming laboratory experimentation for the reductionist and reifying tendencies of mainstream social psychology, we should instead consider the affordances of laboratory research for studying "sociopsychological man" (i.e. the individual-as-member-of society<sup>2</sup>). What was needed was a radical reconceptualization of the space and place of the laboratory. Rather than treat the experimental setting as a "social vacuum" we should regard it as a microcosm of society. Reconceived in this way, the actions of experimental subjects need no longer be regarded as "artificial", nor necessarily as an indicator of basic psychological processes. On the contrary, the analysis of data obtained in the sociopsychological

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<sup>2</sup> It was not, however, always very clear exactly what Tajfel meant by the term "society".

logical laboratory could afford—or possibly might even demand— genuine interdisciplinary collaboration.

Tajfel's vision of the sociopsychological laboratory will be summarized in the next section of this chapter. I shall then go on to consider the eventual fate of this idea, assessing its actual impact on subsequent research practice, and questioning whether the continued reliance on laboratory experimentation did, in fact, serve to buttress Tajfel's all-embracing meta-theory.

#### “EXPERIMENTS IN A VACUUM”.

Tajfel's most detailed manifesto for the perspective that he termed “sociopsychology”, and his most spirited defence of experimental methodology, were presented together in the essay “Experiments in a vacuum”. In this chapter, Tajfel criticised extant perspectives in social psychology for adopting reductionist meta-theories that had, he argued, rendered them incapable of adequately explaining wide-scale social processes.<sup>3</sup> The alternative (sociopsychological) approach advocated by Tajfel took shared societal values and norms to be its core object of enquiry.<sup>4</sup> Values were defined as: “the implicit and explicit ideologies of a society —political, social, moral or religious— and of the subgroups within it” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 101.), and were regarded as the point of connection between the individual social actor and the wider social world of which he (sic) was a part. Norms were defined as shared assumptions about appropriate conduct: “an individual's expectations (shared with others) of how others expect him to behave and of how others *will* behave in any given situation” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 101., emphasis in the original). It was norms, rather than learned responses to environmental stimuli, inherited drives, or personality traits developed during the course of early childhood, that guided human action. The existence of shared values and norms explained the existence of regularities in behaviour within social groups or across societies:

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<sup>3</sup> Tajfel's two *bete noires* in this respect were personality theories (particularly psychoanalytically-based perspectives) that presented the behaviour of individuals as fixed by formative childhood experiences, and ethological perspectives, which presented the actions of human beings as limited by biological imperatives.

<sup>4</sup> The term “sociopsychology” was also used in a similar way by Moscovici (1972). As something of an aside, it is worth noting the correspondence between Tajfel's advocacy of the social (cultural) ‘norm’ as the essential object of socio-psychological theory, Moscovici's concern for ‘ideology’ and ‘communication’ (later to become in part re-formulated in the construct of ‘social representations’), and Harré's adoption of the construct of the ‘social rule’.

"[...] social conduct is to a very large extent determined by what an individual deems to be appropriate to the social situation in which he finds himself. His conceptions of what is appropriate are in turn determined by the prevailing properties of the social system in which he lives." (Tajfel, 1972, p. 100.)

For Tajfel, the constructs of values and norms underpinned a "model of man" which presented social actors as both responsive to a wider cultural context that imparted meaning to events and actions, and as capable of reflexively transforming the "situations" which constituted contexts for action:

"To behave appropriately is a powerful social motive. It is in large part responsible both for attempts to preserve or to modify one's conduct to fit a situation, and to change, reform or revolutionize a situation or systems of situations which interfere with the possibility (or the freedom) to act appropriately." (Tajfel, 1972, p. 101.)

As this quotation suggests, the existence of shared norms and values within a society or group were not seen to preclude the possibility of social change<sup>5</sup>. Quite the reverse:

"[...] to act "appropriately" is not necessarily to act in conformity with what has been. It is also to act as a rebel, an innovator, a saint, a revolutionary and —also— to be capable of genocide" (Tajfel, 1972, p. 101.)

However, "Experiments in a vacuum" did not simply present a blueprint for the meta-theoretical future of social psychology as an academic discipline. Rather, Tajfel's essay represented an attempt to achieve rapprochement between a vision of a radical (sociopsychological) meta-theoretical perspective, and a commitment to laboratory experimentation as a primary research technique. To this end, Tajfel suggested that arguments (prevalent in the "crisis" literature at the time) concerning the "artificiality" of laboratory experimentation were largely irrelevant in so far as they missed an essential point. The "problem" with extant experimental social psychology was not, Tajfel argued, reducible to the question of *method*. Rather, the root of the problem was one of *interpretation*. Specifically, Tajfel criticised the tendency of social psychologists to treat the experimental

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<sup>5</sup> Tajfel's notion that social change might be afforded by tensions arising between particular norms and values, was later exploited by the "Ideological dilemmas" approach (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton and Radley, 1988).

episode as if it were a “social vacuum”, in which the norms and values that normally guided human social behaviour no longer operated. Tajfel argued that the problems that he had identified in the discipline —biological and psychological reductionism, a neglect of widescale social processes and a tendency towards reification— resulted not from the use of laboratory experiments *per se*, but rather from a widespread failure to recognize that the behaviour of human beings (inside as well as outside of the experimental laboratory) was oriented towards societal norms and values. Sociopsychological perspectives were, hence, quite compatible with the continued use of laboratory experimentation as long as this was accompanied by an understanding that: “[o]ur experimental conditions are always ‘contaminated’ [by norms and values]; and the nature of this contamination is one of the principal objects of our study.” (p. 76.)

Although Tajfel remained a champion of experimental methodology, the extent to which he granted this primacy tended to vary. In 1977, addressing a conference on ethology, Tajfel acknowledged the importance of observational methods, and celebrated the contribution of socio-linguistics to the understanding of “the interaction ...between face-to-face infrastructure and the wider social system”<sup>6</sup>. A few years later (Tajfel, 1980/1982b) in an essay entitled “Experimental studies of intergroup behaviour”, Tajfel represented experimentation merely as a “crucial adjunct to ...field studies of intergroup processes, without in any sense being conceptually prior to field research...” (Tajfel,

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<sup>6</sup> This perspective is not generally shared by current researchers in the intergroup and social identity traditions, who tend to dismiss methods that focus on the minutiae of communication as non-“objective”. A good example may be found in Brown and Gaertner’s introduction to their edited collection *Intergroup Processes* (2001):

“...what is perhaps most noteworthy of all about the plethora or paradigms discussed or drawn upon by our authors is that they are all underpinned by a common assumption of the value of objective and quantitative research methodology. Apparently, however fashionable post-modern or discourse analytic approaches may be in some quarters in psychology, they have made little impact on the four dozen contributors to this volume.” (Brown & Gaertner, *Intergroup Processes*, 2001. p. xi).

The dismissal of any approach on the basis of its being “fashionable” is, of course, ironic in a rhetorical context in which notions of empirical progress are commonly invoked. In addition, the elision between discourse analysis and postmodernism and between objectivity and quantification rather misses the fact that discursive psychologists typically present their enterprise as *more* empirically-grounded than traditional (experimental) social identity research (e.g. Edwards, 1998). This account also overlooks the fact that socio-linguistic methods have a pedigree in European Social psychology which is at least as long as that of experimental intergroup research (e.g. Rommetveit, 1972).

