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SOCIAL COGNITION.
THE CONSTRUCTION
OF THE SELF
IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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SOCIAL COGNITION AS A SUB-TOPIC OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

THE PLACE AND ROLE OF SOCIAL COGNITION WITHIN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY. BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Considered *a science of man in society*, with a territory of knowledge in continuous conceptual and methodological expansion, *social psychology can be defined, in a sense of maximal generality, as the scientific study of the real or imaginary interaction between social actors (individuals, groups) within a determined social, cultural and historical context*. Although many of the intellectual roots and first insights are European, social psychology remains, nevertheless, a creation of the North American cultural space, especially in the process of its institutionalization as an autonomous science. *Born in Western Europe at the end of the last century, it will know the full affirmation of its destiny after its transfer to the United States, and then register a fertile return, in the middle of the twentieth century, to the territory of Europe. Today, there is a real phenomenon of "scientific acculturation" of social psychology, which has become a cultural and scientific asset of the whole world* (Moscovici & Marková, 2011; Neculau, 2003; Chelcea, 2008b; Baumeister, & Bushman, 2020; Crisp & Turner, 2020). Despite the challenges imposed by the phenomenon of globalization, confronting different cultural traditions and unique social

problems can only lead to a diversification of perspectives for knowledge and methodological nuance that will rebuild the disciplinary canon. New themes are constantly emerging, old intuitions are deepening, precisely because of the encounter with an increasingly feverish global world. The return in force of generalized approaches to social identities illustrates, for example, precisely the need for social psychologists to respond to identity reconstructions marked by the changes of recent decades, including in geographical areas that had only marginally entered the focus of contemporary epistemological transformations (from Eastern Europe to Latin America), as research on particular social phenomena, such as aggression, terrorism, prosocial behavior, environmental psycho-sociology or the impact of territoriality on the subjective qualification of “psychological well-being”, the study of identities articulated within virtual social networks are also the expression of a search generated by the exacerbation of social phenomena of the present, such as the explosion of deviant social behaviors or imposed by the need to balance psycho-socio-ecological factors in front of the aggressions of a city environment increasingly burdensome or the emergence of new forms of communication and solidarity, such as those shaped in the virtual environment.

Social psychology knows many alternative definitions, just like the intellectual traditions from which it is claimed are different. The most numerous, but also the most influential definitions of the discipline, propose as main theme *the study of individual behavior in a social context*. The above definition, also shared by Romanian authors (Radu, Ilut & Matei, 1994, p. 4; Neculau, 1996a, p. 17; Boncu, 2000a, 1, p. 1; Ilut, 2000, p. 24; Chelcea & Ilut, 2003, p. 10; Neculau, 2003, p. 20; Chelcea, 2008b), fits into a tradition inaugurated in the third decade of the twentieth century by Floyd Allport, called *psychological social psychology*, in which the decisive role is played by *the individual in the group*, around whom

interpersonal relationships are interwoven and the social context is specified. We are facing the dominant current of the discipline, which will confront *sociological social psychology*, centered on *groups and group processes* (crowds, masses and massification, imitation processes, collective hypnosis, suggestion, social irrationality), and which claims itself from the perspective built by Edward Ross in the first decade of the twentieth century. S. Moscovici, the most important authority who is also an exponent of this branch of social psychology, argues that the central object of study of social psychology is the research of phenomena related to *communication and ideology*, the latter *understood as a system of representations and attitudes*, as well as the understanding of their creation, structuring and functionality (Moscovici, 1970, p. 62).

Despite numerous counterexamples, we can appreciate that the European tradition, especially the francophone side, encourages reading of wide generality, which has as reference the sociological pole – which is why it has sometimes been called *psychosociology* –, and leaves room for interpretation and qualitative methodological exercise, while the American one privileges the individual pole and the experimental method, is rigorous and quantitative (Chelcea, 2008b, pp. 35-44).

Thus, in the treatise that knows a wide academic circulation in the English-speaking space, Nyla R. Branscombe and Robert A. Baron (2017, pp. 8-9) define social psychology as *the field of science that studies the manner in which the behavior, feelings or thinking of a subject are influenced by the behavior and characteristics of other people with whom the subject is related*. Presence can be unmediated, direct, but also mediated, imaginary, infiltrated through relational matrices acquired through socialization, with the help of which the subject relates to different social objects.

We also benefit in the specialized literature in Romania from a course of evolution of the discipline (Radu, Ilut, & Matei, 1994, pp. 1-17; Boncu, 1999a; Ilutz, 2000, pp. 24-59;

Chelcea, Ilut, 2003, pp. 279–294; Gavreliuc, 2019, pp. 20–26; Chelcea, 2008b, pp. 35–52), as several reference summaries have already been written in the English-speaking literature (Cartwright, 1979; Farr, 1991; Graumann, 1996; Ross, Lepper & Ward, 2010; Baumeister, & Bushman, 2020). There are several periodizations used to present this evolution. S. Chelcea (2008b, pp. 35–43) proposes the following sequence:

- *prehistory of social psychology* (sixth century B.C. – nineteenth century), where it is worth mentioning the psychosocial perspectives assumed from Plato and Aristotle to Machiavelli, Montesquieu or Tocqueville;
- *the founders' period* (1880 – 1934), in which we must mention the two experimental landmarks that will anticipate future systematic psychosociological research: the experiment of the French agronomist Max Ringelmann, who in 1880 observed how individual performance in the group diminishes, describing the phenomenon later called *social loafing* and Norman Triplett, who in 1898 published a study highlighting the opposite phenomenon of activating performance in a group condition called *social facilitation*. It is also the period in which the study of social attitudes undergoes an unprecedented development, proving how so subtle and difficult to access internal states can be evaluated, just as L. Thurstone (1928) and R. Likert (1932) argued in a famous article at the time.
- *the classical period* (1935 – 1960) is marked, in its early part, by the appearance of a first synthetic reference manual, edited in two volumes by C. Murchinson (1935). It is the period of institutionalization of social psychology, of recognition of its leading social role, but also of the affirmation of the two dominant thematic areas for the years to come: *social cognition*, inaugurated by the studies of Fritz Heider (1944, 1958), with its theory of attribution, and *social influence*,

with the first research on normalization, conducted by M. Sherif (1935). The study of attitudes and their change is undergoing a new revival, especially through Yale professor C. Hovland's research on persuasion (Hovland *et al.*, 1953). At the appearance of the next referential manual, which brings together the most remarkable contributions of the time, edited in two volumes by G. Lindzey in 1954, resumed and enlarged thematically and methodologically in the 5 volumes of the 1968 edition, coordinated by the same author together with E. Aronson, and renewed in 1985, one can capture the exceptional development reached by the discipline in the several effective decades of evolution.

- *the modern period* (1961 – 1989) is characterized both by thematic expansion and by the confrontation with the first major epistemological and ethical crises (especially deontological). The experiment is questioned as a type of approach, denying it exclusivity, without questioning its legitimacy, just as studies on obedience led to adopting the first deontological codes of research in social psychology.
- *the contemporary period* (1989 – present) opens an “era of pluralism” (Chelcea, 2008b, pp. 43-44), in which we no longer look almost exclusively at “what people think” — the cognitivist perspective — but *also* at what our peers feel, what expectations our fellow human beings have in the context of an increasingly dynamic world, with an ever-accelerating pace of change.

In sketching the history of social psychology we will prefer to follow an evolution similar to the ontogenetic one, adding to the already mentioned landmarks other important moments of the growth of the discipline that we believe adequately describe the mutations that have occurred and which start from the realization that today we are in a period of full maturation of psychosociological reflection and research.

The childhood of social psychology brings together the contributions of the initiators of collective psychology, German linguists and philosophers of culture H. Steinthal and M. Lazarus, who in 1860 laid the foundations of an extensive project to study the “psychology of peoples” through the journal “*Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*”, through which they studied the “soul of the people” hypostatized in facts of language, myths, customs, traditions. The direction of study was to know a remarkable destiny in Germany, especially due to the contribution of W. Wundt — founder of the first laboratory of experimental psychology in Leipzig, in 1879 —, who at the beginning of the century (1900 – 1920) published ten impressive volumes (through the vast material they brought together) of *Psychology of Peoples* and inaugurated an important “culturological” tradition in the field of social psychology — *ethnopsychology*.

The studies by sociologists will also constitute an ever-fertile conceptual reserve for future psychosociological research. It is worth mentioning the name of G. Le Bon, author of a *Psychology of Crowds* (Le Bon, 1895/1990), where the *state of crowding* is described, leading, by suggestion, to the diminishing of individual identity, through a process similar to a collective hypnosis; G. Tarde, with his studies on *imitation*, written in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and, of course, E. Durkheim, considered the father of sociology, theorized a powerful concept such as collective consciousness, which would return to the forefront of social psychology research with the theory of social representations proposed by S. Moscovici (1961).

Although many of the themes frequented by contemporary social psychology have seen an early treatment, either within the openings offered by philosophical reflection, especially by philosophers of history and politics, the launch of the new approach in a systematic form, which asserts its independence, is linked to the first decade of the twentieth century. The year

1908 represents a founding milestone, as two influential volumes appear simultaneously, volumes which echoed at the time, and which bear the phrase “social psychology” in their title: we are referring to the scientific works of William McDougall and Edward Ross. Symbolically, the first evoked appearance is a European one, the other is a North American one, illustrating the two branches of growth of the discipline that will be fully found only in the middle of the twentieth century. W. McDougall’s approach (1908) provided a first explanatory grid for intrapsychic phenomena in social settings, appealing to a *theory of instincts*, understood as internal tendencies, with biological substrate, mobilizing social behaviors. Such a perspective, called *hormic psychology*, was only partially shared at the time, despite the record number of editions that W. McDougall’s book had (over 30), but it was a first attempt to explain the subjects’ behaviors by appealing to psychological concepts. However, his vision was static, in which the subject had a limited margin of assumed freedom. Such an explanatory perspective could only be reluctantly accepted by the American audience — the main target of its scientific discourse — which fostered the myth of the “free actor in the situation,” capable of fulfilling the “American dream.” At the same time, W. McDougall would go to the United States, becoming a professor at Harvard in 1921, inaugurating a long journey of European social psychology, especially in its institutional register, overseas. Also significant was the impact of the volume published by E. Ross (1908), mentioned above, in which the author, a sociologist by training, proposed a re-reading of classical texts on *group phenomena*, studied in the preceding decades by É. Durkheim, G. Le Bon or G. Tarde.

The reference moment, which is considered by most authors (Cartwright, 1979; Ross, Lepper & Ward, 2010; Branscombe & Baron, 2017; Crisp & Turner, 2020), the birth act of social psychology, is the appearance of the volume edited by Floyd Allport (1924), which will establish a true

canon of modern social psychology. First of all, it emphasizes the foreground role that the experimental method must play in constructing any postulate, it emphasizes the *individual in the situation*, who becomes the privileged object of study of social psychology. Also, F. Allport's inaugural book proposes some new topics that will be often frequented in the decades to come: conformity, non-verbal behavior as a revelator of emotions, the role of audience on task performance.

In the '30s and '40s we record an important rise of social psychology in the field of social sciences. The most important names are those of other naturalized American Europeans: Muzafer Sherif and Kurt Lewin. M. Sherif (1935) organized a series of experiments that would become classic, and which highlighted the *process of normalization*, by which subjects, under the pressure of conformity, rallied to the collective norm. A German scholar of Jewish origin, K. Lewin emigrated to the United States due to the climate of terror instituted by the Nazi regime on the Jewish population and had an overwhelming role in affirming the applicative dimension of social psychology. Together with K. Lewin, P. Lazarsfeld or F. Heider, he followed a similar professional destiny, contributing to strengthening the American vein of modern social psychology. Studying *group dynamics*, K. Lewin built an explanatory theory of individual conduct in a social context, based on mathematical topology by analogy with physical forces: *field theory*, and also proposed an operational *leadership* typology, establishing *leadership styles* in an organization and their resources: *autocratic*, *laissez-faire* and *democratic style* (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). K. Lewin strongly influenced the development of American social psychology also through his qualities as a teacher, building a master-disciple relationship that would practically form the entire elite of the next generation of social psychologists in the United States. Thus, L. Festinger, J. Tibaut, S. Schachter, M. Deutch, H. Kelley, R. Lippitt, D. Cartwright were all students of K. Lewin and will dominate

the disciplinary epistemological discourse in the '50s and '70s. K. Lewin's plea for democratic *leadership* is not only a conclusion of his experimental analyses, but also an implicit support for a mental and attitudinal model proper to a world (that of Western democracies) that saw itself confronted with the autocratic regimes of Germany or Japan. The war was also an adequate opportunity to prove the applicative virtues of social psychology in areas such as propaganda and persuasion, control of public opinion, management of collective emotions, selection of personnel, management of communication problems in newly administered territories, as well as attracting numerous resources, from private or public-governmental funds, the discipline becoming, through its exponents, a skilled ally in the war effort. Having emerged consolidated after the world war, social psychology will occupy an increasingly important role in the academic environment.

The first influential research institutes with government support would be established, such as the *Center for Research on Group Dynamics* at the *Institute for Technology* in Boston, as early as 1944, where K. Lewin and his collaborators developed the concepts and means necessary for *social engineering*, harnessing the potential of individual and collective subjects to achieve social efficiency. Immediately after the war, in 1946, a *Department of Social Relations* was founded at Harvard, coordinated by one of the most reforming sociologists of the time, Talcott Parsons, but also Columbia, Yale and Michigan universities hosted social psychology departments. In particular, the center in Michigan, where important names of the discipline, such as Th. Newcomb, D. Katz and R. Lickert, will become, after the disappearance of K. Lewin, the primary catalyst for projects in the field, by creating an *Institute for Social Research* in which most of the Lewinian team will work.

Therefore, the immediate postwar years are years of strong affirmation and epistemological recognition of social

psychology. It is *the period of youth of the discipline*, as suggested by n. Branscombe and R. Baron (2017, pp. 8-9). The landmark of the period is the volume of S. Asch (1952) – another scholar emigrated from Europe since childhood –, that will also provide a first critical approach to the discipline, through a retrospective vision of the most important themes frequented until then. S. Asch's criticisms aimed at the "objectivist" excess of a psychology which, reading such complex interhuman phenomena only in a behaviorist key, induced a "systematic partiality of current ideas in psychology", hiding an "even more inflexible dogmatism" (Asch, 1952, I). S. Asch's plea was for *the rehumanization of psychology* by understanding the personal universe of subjects beyond mechanistic and reductionist schemes, by rediscovering ideas of freedom, justice and dignity (*apud* Amerio, 1999, p. 8). Follower of *Gestalt-ism* — which in the field of social psychology would translate into understanding society as a whole, with a new quality, superior to its component elements (groups, individuals) and establishing a series of relationships between groups and institutions that influence individual behaviors —, S. Asch will conduct a series of experiments on conformism, which will become classic, in which he will emphasize the sensitivity of the actor to the social context, and the power of context over one's own decisions. At the same time, S. Asch will inaugurate a research direction that will experience an impressive development in the years to come: social perception, organizing a set of experiences regarding the role of first impressions in perceiving people and the centrality of certain features in organizing perception.

Thus, the '50s are years in which the influence of groups and belonging on individual behaviors is mainly investigated and links are established between personality traits and social behavior, such as the study focused on revealing the *authoritarian personality* (Adorno *et al.*, 1950), which identified a sum of traits that predispose the subject to accept