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Some Personal Reflections on the APA Centennial

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In this the centennial year [1992] of the American Psychological Association one should expect that the celebration would emphasize psychology's contributions to knowledge of the human psyche. This paper suggests that there are considerations tempering the view that in the future, as in the past, psychology's onward and upward course will continue. One of these considerations is the fact that in the post World War II era those who have entered the field have little or no sense of intellectual identification with psychology's past, especially in regard to some great psychologists whose work should have but still does not have a place in the so-called current mainstream. Another consideration is the inability of American psychology to confront the fact that it is just that: an *American* psychology. Not until that fact is directly confronted will we do justice to the relationships between the characteristics of any psychology and the cultural–national–societal context from which it emerged.

In the course of our lives we experience the anniversary of our birth in changing ways. As very young children our birth dates are not occasions for personal review, nor are they stimuli for trying to glimpse our futures. Slowly and subtly with the passage of years our birth date becomes an occasion when, like it or not, our past and future are not, so to speak, "independent variables" but rather connected arenas of thought. So, as some wit has said, nothing focusses the mind more than the knowledge that you will die tomorrow. A poet once said that life takes its final meaning in chosen death, by which he meant, I assume, that that choice was an expression of judgment both about choices made in the past and the ones which will govern the future.

The developmental history of the experience of anniversaries has not caught the interest of psychologists, a fact of which I was unaware until I found myself intrigued with the daunting thought that I wanted to write my professional autobiography. That I knew my years were numbered goes with-

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out saying but that knowledge hardly justified writing an autobiography which would inevitably have to be personal and professional. Nor could I justify it as an indulgence of chutzpah, an attribute I did not lack. If I knew that I did not lack that attribute, I also correctly knew that the professional world of psychology neither needed or called for my autobiography. Chutzpah and reality testing need not be uncorrelated. So, granted that personal decisions are multiply determined, on what reasonable grounds could I justify writing the autobiography? Those grounds began to become clear when I told a colleague what I was planning, ending with the statement, "Psychology needs my autobiography like it needs a hole in its head." And when I said that I realized that I had long felt that American psychology had more than one hole in its head. But now I knew it with a saliency derived from the knowledge that my days were numbered. So what? Why not write another article or a sequel to my book *Psychology Misdirected* (1981)? Long being a theater goer, I knew that playwrights tend to run downhill after the first act which in no way means that the first act was all that good. And how many sequels to successful movies have passed muster?

The fog of indecision began to dissipate as a result of two things which were in the nature of insights. The first was that if my critiques of American psychology had any validity I should be able to demonstrate it in my personal–professional history, i.e., go beyond (or beneath) discussion of theory and research, the merits of this or that direction or point of view. For example, I have written a fair amount about psychology's inability, or unwillingness, or blindness to other than a conception of *social* in dyadic or small group contexts. How many times have I said that American psychology is an asocial, individual psychology from which you get the most narrow, distorted conception of the American society the citizens of which that psychology purports to understand? How many times must I plead that psychology should take seriously such works as J.F. Brown's *Psychology and the Social Order* written in 1936, John Dollard's *Criteria for the Life History* also written in 1935, and De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* written in the early nineteenth century? The answer to the last question was clear. Shortly before I began to write my autobiography *The Making of an American Psychologist* (1988) the *American Psychologist* rejected what I regard as one of my favorite papers, *The Lack of an Overarching Conception in American Psychology* (1989). In that paper I discuss in detail Dollard's scathing and unanswered criticisms of social psychology's tendency to trivial pursuit, this from a man who was originally a sociologist, and then became a psychoanalyst, an anthropologist, and finally a psychologist. Dollard's *Criteria for the Life History* and his *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937) I consider as classics—which are regarded as nonbooks in American psychology.

A larger portion of that paper was on De Tocqueville. On what basis, on what kind of psychology, was this young Frenchman able to portray the psy-

chology of Americans so that when we read him a hundred and fifty years later we see ourselves? And he was only in this country for nine months! I tried to spell out the ingredients of his implicit psychology and, needless to say, American psychology does not come up smelling roses. The editor of and the three reviewers for the *American Psychologist* saw no merit in what I had written. I put the paper in my file-but-do-not-forget drawer. When, several years later, the editor of *Mind and Behavior*, on whose editorial board I serve, asked if I had a paper for the journal, I sent him that paper which he decided on his own to accept. To me, at least, and for obvious reasons, it is reassuring that there is at least one journal editor secure enough to make an independent decision. But I have already said that I do not lack chutzpah.

For my present purposes the quality of that paper is irrelevant. I presented the anecdote in order to make the point that the rejection of the paper encouraged me to cease, for a while at least, writing articles and to use my autobiography to illustrate how I, as person and as psychologist, was not understandable by the regnant conceptions of American psychology. This, I should hasten to add, does not mean that I view American psychology as bankrupt. Let us remember that when you go into bankruptcy, you have assets. You just do not have enough assets to accomplish your purposes, which is how I regard American psychology, as did Brown and Dollard and as more than a few today do. But there is no bankruptcy law or court for academic disciplines. Unlike generals, they do not die or fade away.

Deciding to write my autobiography (1988) was infinitely easier than figuring out how to organize my past to demonstrate that neither as person or psychologist was I understandable except in terms of American history, living at a particular time in that history, being a first generation Jew, experiencing the rites of passage into a profession, learning that luck has no role in conventional theory, being passionately partisan to a political ideology and to a certain psychological theory, and the process of unlearning both. Could I make a compelling case that current psychological theories of the personality and social type either singly or collectively could never explain me, that how I explained myself would make sense to a reader?

Again I have to say that the merits of my autobiography are irrelevant to my present purposes. What is relevant is that once I decided to write I had a second insight: during the last ten years as an active member of my department I had not allowed myself to face up to my disappointment and even anger at what seemed to be an unbridgeable gulf between me and graduate students. Put in another way, students not only had little or no sense of the history of the field, they were not very interested. To them I went to graduate school somewhat after the battle of Gettysburg. I retired in 1989. In one of my seminars I asked first year students: How many of you have heard of John Dewey? One student had heard of Dewey but it turned out that he had taken

a philosophy course and had no idea that Dewey indeed had been a psychologist, let alone president of the APA in 1899. When I suggested that he read Dewey's 1896 paper on the concept of the reflex arc in psychology if he wanted to understand modern psychology, I had the distinct impression that he thought I ought to take early retirement. Why ask these questions? Because in 1987, and for reasons I cannot now recall, I asked the class what of William James they had read? Four or five heard of William James. None had read anything by him.

Yale graduate students are as a group bright, eager, likeable, ambitious, sharp characters. Whatever their virtues are when they come to Yale, they do not include a sense of historical identity. Of course they want to believe that by the time they finish their graduate education they will feel they have an identity as a psychologist. But that identity will be rooted in a near past and a near future. That is not because there is a universal law that says that young people are incapable of a sense of identity based on a much longer perspective on the past or that they have a built-in resistance to acceptance of a continuity with a distant past. In these days when psychologists, psychiatrists, and the mass media regale us with biological–genetic explanations of psychological characteristics—from altruism to shyness to alcoholism and much more—I await an article discussing the biological basis for ignoring and/or rejecting the past. When I would say that to graduate students, they would listen respectfully but quite skeptically, unaware as they were about the history of reductionism in psychology. Indeed, just as these students had never read Barker, Dewey, James, Brown, Dollard, and De Tocqueville, they had never been exposed to the concept of reductionism, i.e., its temptations, dangers, and uses in the history of psychology. Nor was their skepticism dented by my saying: "I also came into psychology when biological explanations were frequent. Then the pendulum swung to very complicated psychological explanations. And today we are back to the biological, secure in the feeling that we will not repeat the mistakes of the past, that the pendulum swings are due only to the fruits of scientific research independent of what is happening in the social world. Or is it that pendulum swings are themselves a reflection of human biology?"

I can assure you that I was not blaming the students who, I made clear, were victims of an undergraduate preparation which was ahistorical in the extreme. And, to add insult to injury, it was likely that their graduate education would not repair the damage. Graduate education in psychology does not rest on what I would call a "classical sense," a recognition, a search for the threads of continuity with those in the near and distant past. The past is something we have overcome, not a past any features of which are in our present.

It used to be that no one could get a doctorate in psychology without having taken a course, or being examined, on the history of psychology. That requirement was no token gesture to icons of the past. It was a requirement by three or four generations of senior psychologists who lived through the divorce of psychology from philosophy and the remarriage of psychology to science. The history of that divorce and remarriage was still part of the present. That history was a quest for understanding, justification, and identity. By the time World War II started the motives for such a quest had noticeably weakened. My exposure to history during my graduate years 1939–42 at Clark University left me with three clear conclusions and one inchoate question. The three conclusions were: the history of psychology was the history of *ideas*, it was also a history of *individuals*, and it was a history in which psychology differed remarkably from one country to another. The inchoate question was: How do we account for these differences among countries? At the time I did not pose the question that clearly. It was more a feeling that something was missing, that there was more to the story than memorizing the ideas and roles of Wundt, Stumpf, Kulpe, Ebbinghaus, Bartlett, Hume, Berkeley and others in the pantheon of greats. And nothing in what I was taught explained why Periclean Athens gave rise to individuals with whom some of us still deal in psychology. What we were given was a history of an individually oriented psychology devoid of a social context. There was one exception which stuck in my mind. Somewhere in William James I read something like this: given their jawbreaking language and their devotion to detail, order, and system, only German psychologists could devise the mind-numbing experiments they did. Being Jewish in those days of Hitler does not wholly explain why I cottoned to James' observation. In a truly inchoate way I sensed that James was putting his finger on an important problem in psychology.

The history to which I was exposed conveyed a subliminal message as potent as it was unverbalized: granted that American psychology had roots in the "old world," American psychology was developing a distinctive and superior psychology, one that gave much greater promise for exposing and illuminating the workings of the human psyche. The obvious did not have to be put into words. It could not occur to me that the message said something, indeed spoke volumes, about Americans and America. I am in no way suggesting that the message was devoid of merit, although that is an arguable point. What I am saying is that the message totally ignored the principle that whatever we mean by human behavior is inexplicable in any comprehensive way apart from contexts within contexts, ranging from the local to the national to the international. The one person, as I said earlier, who clearly posed and studied the problem was the young Frenchman who early in the nineteenth century spent nine months in young America and then wrote a book that continues to startle us, indeed to teach us, about the *American indi-*

vidual in American society. I am aware of no history of American psychology, no history of social psychological theory, that asks the question: What was the "psychology" this man employed that enabled him to reveal us to ourselves? When I am asked what I mean by contexts within contexts, I refer the questioner to his book. Political science regards that book as one of its classics. Unfortunately, that book has no status in asocial, ahistorical American psychology.

That the book has no status is cause for regret; that the central problems it deals with have little status in mainstream psychology I regard as inexcusable, especially in light of the ways World War II transformed the world and America's place in it. Put in another way, World War II and its aftermath plunged the United States into a role in which it had to deal with peoples and society truly alien to it. How well were we prepared to understand what would confront us, what were the predictable problems in understanding foreign peoples and their societies? How well did we understand *our* psychology and how might that help or hinder us in our new role? What did the *discipline* of psychology have to contribute to how we should think and act? The last question in no way assumes that the field of psychology was or could be in a position to influence our foreign relations. But it does assume that no less than other fields of inquiry and knowledge, and I would argue more, the transformed world would impact on the questions *psychologists as psychologists* would ask or become interested in. How would a psychology that riveted on the individual be affected by what was truly a new world? As citizens, the world view of every psychologist was changed, more or less. It was inevitable that those changes would seep into and influence how they saw the role and direction of their field. How, if at all, would psychology change in regard to how it conceived of the relationships between the individual and his or her society? The change has been the opposite of dramatic.

I am not calling for a greater emphasis in graduate education on the history of psychology. Such an emphasis, I have no doubt, would take place in courses which would have the counterproductive effect of proving to students that history is about isolated ideas, problems, individuals, and, of course, dates. Anyone familiar with what I have written about curriculum reform in our public schools will know why those efforts end up confirming that the more things change the more they remain the same (e.g., Sarason, 1990b). So, for example, the curricula reforms of the turbulent sixties—the new math, the new physics, the new biology, the new social studies—turned out, as I predicted, to be disasters. The effects were not harmless, they were iatrogenic.

All that I have thus far said entered into my decision to write my autobiography as a way of saying to students:

> "Here is what I think you have to take into account if you want to explain me as person and psychologist. Psychoanalytic theory is relevant—but far from sufficient—and the same is true for those personality, social, developmental, cognitive theorists who have earned deserved status in the field. In telling my story I aimed to see things whole knowing full well that I would fall far short of that ideal mark. Of one thing I can assure you, if and when *you* finish *your* story, you will have put flesh on the bones of the abstraction that you contain and reflect a near and far distant past absent in our theories. Our genes go back a long way. That we know. The stuff of our minds, of our psyches, also goes back a long way. The ways you as students have been socialized into our field have not been helpful in this regard. You and I are American psychologists. But when we use that adjective to describe ourselves we are using it in the most narrow, geographical sense, not in the sense that we are products of a distinctive national history that put its stamp on us and our field, a history containing a world view we are not schooled either to articulate and examine, a stance that in the perverse ways of the dialectic is both freeing and imprisoning."

Somewhere in my autobiography I found myself suggesting that anyone entering graduate school in psychology should be encouraged to write his or her autobiography. I made that suggestion almost as an aside. The more I have pondered that suggestion the more I like it, not an unusual fate for our pet ideas. I am reminded here of those early days after World War II when modern clinical psychology was, so to speak, born. Those were also the days when psychoanalysis became legitimated in the university, not only in psychiatry and psychology but in the other social sciences and in the humanities as well. There were some in psychology who took seriously Freud's dictum that if you were going to accept the responsibility to help others with their personal problems, you should experience the role of patient, i.e., submit yourself and problems to the scrutiny of an experienced analyst. It is to Freud's everlasting credit that he insisted that there were not two theories: one for patients and for therapists. There was one theory and anyone who wanted to be an analyst had the moral and professional responsibility to understand that theory in the most personal ways. So, it was not surprising that some psychologists recommended that those who were to become clinical psychologists should experience some form and degree of psychotherapy. There were some who recommended that it be a requirement, a strange view of productive learning. Although I was opposed to such a mandate, I accepted the principle that having the experience of being a patient could be helpful in one's role as therapist.

I learned a great deal about myself in the course of being psychoanalyzed. But as the years went on I became increasingly aware that what I had been and was both as person and psychologist was by no means explainable by what I had learned in the analysis. It could be argued that psychoanalytic theory is not intended to be an encompassing framework of human development and behavior, valid regardless of where the development occurred and the behavior patterns which it shaped. And it could be argued that Freud was quite aware that psychoanalytic theory was not sociology, political science,

or any other conventional discipline but rather a set of principles and processes which undergirded those disciplines. Absent that undergirding, these disciplines will remain superficial and fruitless.

There are some who would argue both points today but that would be an example of reading the present into the past. In those earlier days psychoanalytic theory was presented as encompassing and, therefore, in a "successful" analysis the patient knew why and how he or she had become the person he or she was. The possibility that the origins, substance, and development of psychoanalysis were themselves unexplainable by the theory—that religion, ethnicity, national history, national politics, for example, were parts of an explanation—could not be considered by partisans of the theory.

For example, why did Freud dislike America and, I think, Americans? That question intrigued and bothered me. It reminded me of a letter Freud wrote to Saul Rosenzweig who was my dissertation advisor at Clark University. Rosenzweig had written Freud about his experimental studies of repression. It was a relatively brief letter in which Freud expressed something akin to disdain for Rosenzweig's misdirected efforts. It was not a cordial letter. If the history of psychology I learned at Clark never explained national differences, that letter hanging in Rosenzweig's office was further evidence that national origin was a very important variable. How important it was became compellingly clear when in my first position after leaving Clark I developed a friendship with Henry Schaefer-Simmern, a political refugee who was an artist, art historian, art theorist, and art educator. I wrote about him in my autobiography and in my recent book *The Challenge of Art to Psychology* (1990a). The chasm between his European and my American mind was indeed wide. Whatever psychoanalytic theory could demonstrate about our kinship as two humans was more than rivalled by the differences in our world view. It was Schaefer who subtly and indirectly forced me to confront the fact that I was not *a* psychologist but an *American* one.

Let us return to my suggestion that graduate students be encouraged to write their autobiography. And let us impose the restriction that the student not be asked to write a personal confessional, i.e., a hell diving expedition into the unconscious. What we would be after would be those variables or concepts or characteristics purported to play a role in shaping American lives. Not necessarily American lives only. For example, to labor the obvious, it is a difference that makes a difference if the student is male or female. On one occasion I discussed the task with several graduate students, requesting only that they list what they regarded as crucial variables. Of the four male students none listed gender as fateful for their lives. The two female students did list it. When I pressed the male students to explain the omission, they had difficulty doing so. When I further pressed them to explain why the two female students listed gender, it took them a couple of minutes to explain it

in terms of how the women's liberation movement had made gender so salient for females. The female students agreed with them.

I then asked this question: "Assuming that as men and women you are representative of graduate students in general, are you suggesting or implying that differences in listing would hold for similarly aged men and women who are not graduate students?" Although they almost immediately said no, they had difficulty explaining their answer. It took a rather long and somewhat torturous discussion for them to implicate social class, religious affiliation, ethnicity, rural–urban, and political ideology as variables. Although I did not inquire, I am secure in two conclusions. The first is that if I had asked them to list the factors that shaped their personalities, they would have had no difficulty referring to parents, family relationships, schooling, and certain individuals, e.g., a teacher, a friend. The second is that they would have not have mentioned that they were Americans. They see themselves as unique individuals explainable by intrapsychic, interpersonal, individual–developmental variables. They are in no doubt that in a most narrow and restricted sense their private, psychological world has a psychological history, one that they more or less examine. What they almost totally lack is an awareness of what the gestaltists emphasized: figure always has a ground and we ignore ground until conditions cause us to reverse figure and ground. In that sense every personality theory I know about either ignores ground or pays lip service to its existence.

When I went to graduate school in 1939–42, I knew no one who had been outside the country. That changed dramatically after World War II. In recent decades I asked students who had been abroad: What, if anything, surprised you in your travels? Their answers fell in three categories. The first can be put this way: "I was not prepared for how *old* everything looked. For the first time I knew what was meant by the New and Old worlds." The second category can be put this way: "In France you only saw Frenchmen and you could only eat French food. The same in Italy. I never realized how heterogeneous the United States was in terms of people and food." The third category is summed up in the first sentence of a tour book on Italy I read before our first trip abroad: "Remember, every Italian is two thousand years old." Categories aside, what I found so interesting about the reactions of the students (as well as of my own) was that they knew in some inchoate way that if they wanted to comprehend the "psychology" of the French or the Italians they had to take account of factors not contained in our American theories of human behavior. That, of course, is what they would have to do if they wanted to comprehend themselves as Americans.

For a few years after World War II there were major points of intersection between American psychology and anthropology. The area of culture and personality took on a significance that gave promise to achieving an overar-

ching conception of human behavior. It was not fortuitous that Harvard's short lived Department of Social Relations was formed then to include psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. A similar, more ambitious predecessor was Yale's Institute of Human Relations which flourished in the thirties and forties. It housed the departments of psychology, psychiatry, and part of anthropology. Edward Sapir was brought there from the University of Chicago, and he brought John Dollard with him. No one more than Sapir pursued the goal of integrating the social sciences. By the fifties it was clear that that pursuit was losing steam as each field retreated to more parochial concerns. That retreat is not explainable, except in small measure, by personality and organizational factors. It was a retreat, a renewed schism, between two very different conceptions of the primary mission of the social sciences. Psychology has never felt at home with conceptions that went far beyond the individual organism.

Centennials are occasions for celebrations. Voltaire said that history is written by the victors. And it is the victors that our graduate students read. Psychology does have cause for celebration and it is well that our students know that. But, and there always is a but, what our students need to know is that precisely because it is an *American* celebration there is a built-in source of error and distortion in what the victors write. If there is anything we do well in graduate education, it is to sensitize students to the crucial importance of eliminating personal bias in conducting research. But, again the but, we do an extraordinarily poor job of sensitizing students to the possibility that our theories of human behavior have a distinctively American bias which, far from seeking to eliminate, we should seek to uncover, if only to understand ourselves better. Psychology's theories are reflections of a particular world view which, like all other world views, rests on axioms which we do not think about or verbalize because they are to us so natural, right, and proper. Axioms are not kin to Freud's unconscious. They are the distillates of a powerful socialization process which tells us what people are, what the world is, and why we are who and what we are. Axioms are not rationally achieved distillates. They are, so to speak, given to us and we take them. That is reason enough for us in *American* psychology to retain skepticism about self-serving centennials. May I conclude by suggesting that psychology has two related missions: to understand America and Americans. If we do that well, we are on the road to understanding people generally.

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