

Do ‘Sacred Cows’ Make an Academic Culture Bovine? A comment on Jovchelovitch.

RAGINI SEN
Centre for Policy Research
Delhi, India

Reading this paper made me traverse a fuzzy memory lane and for a while I was a young student at LSE listening to Rob Farr once again. Jovchelovitch encapsulates Farr’s ideas and communicates them with great precision. I will comment on some aspects, which I think are in sync with the ideas presented and whose origin was similar to the author’s formative years, the lectures of Rob Farr.

Three main issues were underscored:

- The need for situating the research hence the use of a, socio-cultural, historical analyses.
- Transcending boundaries of individual and the collective.
- Grounding laboratories and decoding them as social artifacts.

I add the fourth: Critiquing over generalizations in the form of a western, white yardstick.

Conceptual Space of Social Psychology

Jovchelovitch argues that 'cultural travellers' were rare in the discipline of social psychology, which was burdened with the sacred cow of quasi science where the assumption was that researchers enter 'the lab as neutral scientists seeking to reveal truth of phenomena'. This is a social representation, which over time had become almost hegemonic but later became controversial. It was sufficiently relevant for the members of the community to initiate an oppositional discourse and on the basis of this explicitly *societal* discourse a new space of accepted psychological research emerged. In communication theory this process is called *cultivation* of an issue (Wagner, 2011). Farr in his paper 'cultivated' the issue of labs as 'a field of representations', which similar to communities and collective imagery have beliefs, norms, expectations and outcomes. The sacred cow had been challenged and the hope was that 'moral maturation' within the community would help in re-socialising social psychology.

Moral Maturation

Habermas (2005) suggests that a 'reflective form' of communicative action is essential for dialogue. By default this requires a communicative space that is free from diktats and leaves scope for one's own interpretations. Habermas called this moral maturation: the developing ability to integrate interpersonal perspectives. His argument was that the "encrypted semantic potentialities" and "cognitive contents be liberated from their original dogmatic encapsulation in the melting pot of argumentative speech" (Harrington, 2007, 47). The endpoint of this process may result in mutual perspective taking required by the 'Other'. This anthropological line

of argument focuses on identity formation, drawing on the social psychology of George H. Mead who argued that the individual's development of a stable sense of self was only possible through processes of interaction, socialization and dialogue that are dependent on taking the perspective of the other in relationships of mutual recognition (Mead, 1962). Mead's concepts were central in Farr's views and can be extended to incorporate moral maturation. This is a departure and an alternative representation of morality; which in everyday life is often associated with being judgmental and passing verdict (Sen, Wagner, Howarth & Paker, working paper). Such moral maturation enriches social psychology.

Sacred cows and false dichotomies

The dichotomy of psychology as an experimental science and *Volkerpsychologie* can be challenged since, "the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse" (Marx, 1857-61, *Grundrisse*, 7). If we are to understand complex psychological processes accurately and in depth, then we need to complex methodologies. But that is not all. We also have to reveal the abstract determinations, which explain the concrete. If we disregard this necessary dialectic of the abstract and the concrete, one of two kinds of errors is likely to result (Linden, 2010). Either we remain entrapped in a descriptive narrative of a mass of empirical details and fail to analyze the abstract theoretical determinations that identify and convincingly explain the real nature of psychological processes. Or, we superimpose forced abstractions, which are not grounded in a thorough analysis of the concrete, and therefore, remain subjective preferences. In social psychology serious, comprehensive attempts to integrate the concrete and the abstract are, quite simply,

scarce.

Changing the paradigm

What is needed is a shift to a more nuanced and multifaceted analysis, which takes as a starting point that psychology's content is a lived, and situated, social experience. An approach bereft of socio-cultural and historical analyses suppresses the dynamics of the subject it sets out to analyze (Sen & Wagner, 2005). In the guise of academic neutrality an over-generalizing tendency exists, in social debates, the media and even academia. This leads to the construction of a stable, a-historical analyses, which is often prescribed from a Western, most often white, yardstick which codes and represents cultural 'Others' from a position of dominance and superiority (Wagner, Sen, Permandeli & Howarth). These terms of reference need to be changed. Farr's views were, a firm step, in that direction.

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RAGINI SEN is affiliated with the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, Institute for Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, Mumbai and Logistics India. She is presently in the USA as a Fulbright Scholar in Residence and has been a visiting Fellow at Johannes Kepler University, Austria, University of Amiens, France and Maison des Science de l'homme, Paris.

Dr. Sen's main areas of interest are social and peace psychology and she has published her research on ethnic conflict, group processes, identity politics, secularism and fundamentalism in various international journals and is the author of 'We the Billion', Sage 2003. Dr Sen is also one of the senior researchers in the area of socio-political analysis and has been a consultant on various political strategy related issues. She read psychology at the University of Delhi and earned her doctoral degree from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Contact: raginisen2011@gmail.com.