

**Jana Plichtová: Methods of Social Psychology – A Close-Up.**  
**Qualitative and quantitative research of social representations.**  
Bratislava, Media 2002, 350 p.

*“One of the indicators of an unsatisfactory state of science is the poor scientific language, which reduces all the finest points and subtleties of human behaviour and thinking to relations between variables. The discussion about the complexity of human subjectivity has changed into a discussion about individual differences and deliberate actions disappeared behind a list of motives and external incentives.” (p. 25)*

If you agree with the author's opinion, it is likely that reading her book will be a pleasant experience for you and will provide you with rich supply of encouraging information. In case you belong to fans or even promoters of cognitive science, you might appreciate the challenge to some high-quality confrontation. After all, it is thanks to such opportunities that knowledge can progress.

The author has set herself rather difficult objectives, which she aims to achieve through this work. It is her intention to present such research methods and techniques of post-modern psychology, which have yet to be fully established and accepted by experts in the field. In particular she wants to pay attention to those techniques, which are being applied successfully in “socially oriented social psychology” – oriented towards the society.

That is also the reason why on several occasions in the book she criticises those products of research work, which reduce science to manipulation with variables, to measurements and tests of statistical relations within an artificial laboratorial environment. Her critical objection is that researchers who think in this way only perceive a person as a passive product of internal and external powers. She presumes that if we transform social psychology into a social science about the thinking of a contemporary human being – this problem could be solved by applying an exploratory way of research – other psychological disciplines such as clinical, labour or pedagogical psychology could profit from it, too. The book's ambition is not to directly discuss the problems from psychological practice. However, the author recommends that psychologists get an inspiration from ethnographic observation when they work with their clients as well as in their experimental surveys, as this will enable to reflect human subjectivity in a delicate way.

Jana Plichtová principally rejects the positivistic narrowing of human experience to merely a sensory experience. She also refuses the assumption that language is an objective means to describe the reality observed. The positivistic approach, which eliminates the subjectivity of the observer as well as of the observed, turns the observer into a mechanism for registration and evaluation of facts. She argues that the observer does not reflect the facts – he produces them. Knowledge is a representation of the world, not the world itself. It is not a collection of facts and the relations between them, it is the conceptualisation of the observed facts. In her argumentation she mentions surveys which prove the human tendency to conceptualise our experience in a way, which makes it comply with our previous knowledge. Our concepts /pre-understanding/ organise and structure the observed reality. *To think differently means to produce new concepts, to move away from the knowledge of others – this requires intellectual creativity as well as courage. (p. 238)*

The author's approach to the dichotomy of qualitative and quantitative methodology is rather radical. According to her the differences between the two research strategies stem from the understanding the subject and purpose of knowledge itself. Quantitative approach only considers such knowledge trustworthy, which originates from a set of measurable variables, among which we can assume causal relations. The sense of knowledge is in this case prediction and control of human behaviour.

Qualitative approach which does not agree with the reduction of a person to a reacting mechanism uses research strategies which take into account the fact that *man is an active being, following certain intentions, a semiotic being, creating and understanding the meaning, socio-cultural being, the adaptation of which has a mediated – social character*. The author criticises efforts to increase the “scientificness” of psychology by the implementation of mathematical methods. In this way, research is limited to those aspects of human being, which can be objectified and quantified. Data of narrative

biographical character, data exploring the meaning of experience, the way of its representation and interpretation, self-perception and understanding of the social world serve merely as an “attachment”.

Plichtová certainly does not reject the quantification of data in research. But she warns that psychological research should not conform to one type of mathematical formalisation. She recommends to create such tools of numerical formalisation, which would correspond with the nature and complexity of the problem surveyed. Such formalisation should be preceded by a thorough and long-term exploration, categorisation, analysis and comparison. Basing her opinion on her own long research practice, the author warns of early formalisation of researched areas without sufficient empirical research. She also mentions the risks of using inadequate formalisation, which leads to a deformation of the subject of the study. She lists several examples of use of inadequate formalisation tools – ranges as elements of structured questionnaires or personal and intelligence tests. The best prevention of early and inadequate formalisations is, according to Jana Plichtová, the acceptance of the specifics of methodology of social sciences as well as respecting the historical course of knowledge. She also suggests that a critical dialogue be kept between social and natural sciences. She urges scientists to get inspired by progress in anthropology, sociology, linguistics, history, art and humanities.

Thus, the author considers these two views on the mission of psychology conflicting: either psychologists aim to understand man in his complex bio-socio-cultural being (qualitative research strategies), or they aim for cultural explanation and prediction of human being behaviour (quantitative research strategies).

The subject of her work is to document and analyse research methods within a system, approach towards studying social representations. Why did the author choose research of social representations ?

Several clear answers to this question can be found in the text. First of all the research concerned is explorative and combines qualitative and quantitative data. The researchers are not restrained to the traditional repertoire of social psychology methods – they also work with methods applied in historical sciences, ethnography, sociology or linguistics. The attention of social representation researchers concentrates on a social phenomenon or an event with which the social actors are confronted. Apart from that, they are interested in social and historical context of the phenomenon concerned. They also observe the representations created toward the phenomenon by different groups of social actors.

The specifics of social representations research is the fact that it surveys social phenomena and their representations while they are taking place, in their dynamic form. This kind of research is attractive in that it crosses the boundaries of its own scientific discipline – because of this, it is ideally carried out by interdisciplinary teams.

Unlike positivistic science, social representation research assumes and proves the auto-determination of human behaviour through acquired knowledge, information, assessments, rules and practices.

Theory of social representations assumes adaptation through jointly created knowledge, which the author claims is a considerably faster and more flexible way of adaptation than the biological adaptation. Common knowledge is considered the basis of culture according to this theory – it is regarded as a space and way for emancipating man from the primal need to survive.

It is likely that the individualistic thinkers among readers will reject Plichtová's quote that *in order to participate in social manner of existence, human dispositions need to be cultivated from the early age – a long-lasting, systematic training* (p. 293).

Leading figures from the theory and research of social representations (Moscovici, Abric, Flament, Doise) claim to belong to the classical concept of science. Nevertheless the author finds in their work signs of influence of Husserl's phenomenology, structuralism, symbolical interactionism, semiology, sociology of everyday life or structural anthropology. She regards the approach to analysis and synthesis of empirical data as holistic. Her interpretation of the basis of social representations theory is thoroughly anchored by rich argumentation stemming from author's study of original works by representatives of individual psychological schools. This is a remarkable intellectual achievement of the author with respect to the volume of material she must have studied, as well as in terms of a systematic processing of this volume of knowledge. There is no doubt that the text contains many interesting impulses for constructive and heuristic discussion or polemics on an interdisciplinary level. For the author herself such a discussion among experts would probably be not just a satisfaction for

the efforts put in the book, but also a proof that her *message* had been heard. That her seed fell on fertile ground and is sprouting.

Jana Plichtová presents in her book those qualitative and quantitative methods, which are used by theory of social representations in the research program. They are: method of free associations and alternatives of their analysis, text analysis and analysis of media communication (including hermeneutical text analysis), computerised text analysis, qualitative interview, focus and discussion group or ethnographic observation. She does not mention Q methodology, semantic differential, method of semantic selection and other qualitative methods, as they are well elaborated in special literature. On the other hand she is very thoroughly describing methods, which explore the semiotic world of actors (particularly the method of group free associations). Her enthusiasm for ethnographic observation cannot be overlooked.

The author familiarises readers with many social representation surveys which had been carried out and at the same time serve to illustrate the individual methods she is describing, their use in specific research (for example research of students' movement of protest, democracy, cultural differences, labour, national identity, individual rights and others). Plichtová meticulously and in an interesting way describes four classical and well-known surveys: survey of social representations of psychoanalysis, of health and disease, British nationalism and mental illnesses. This makes the book attractive and well organised.

Towards the end of her book Jana Plichtová warns of an uncritical attitude towards scientific knowledge if scientists do not oppose their colleagues within the discipline or research outputs from other specialisations. The author does not consider such trust appropriate. Above all, she mentions the lack of criticism in social scientists' perception of natural sciences. She compares the knowledge of natural sciences to a rock, which is obscuring man's subjectivity and his socio-cultural dimension. The author conveys this attitude appropriately by putting a photograph on the book's cover depicting a huge boulder and tiny human figures in its shadow. (Although I personally thought of altogether different associations concerning the beauty of coexistence of man and nature and the adventure of getting to know our world). Can the variety of worldviews be harmful and dangerous if all scientists have a passion for uncovering the truth? Is external control necessary? Will it help to prevent the abuse of scientific knowledge against humanity? These questions concern scientists' personal morale, which is expressed in the way he/she handles his/her own autonomy and freedom. Responsible approach of a person towards his/her work is not determined by his/her affiliation with a certain scientific discipline. Rather we should redirect our attention towards the problem of ways of increasing researchers' responsibility towards others, assist them on the way to responsible self-management.

Author puts forward the question whether human behaviour and actions are imaginable outside of a framework of social rules and restrictions. According to her, psychology cannot be just a science about the way our brain works; it needs to be a historical and social science, too. It needs to be concerned with the individualisation and emancipation of individual conscience as part of cultural humanisation of man (p. 305).

This makes me think of the issue of alienation of man, which can be observed in individuals as well as groups. The feeling of estrangement increases in direct proportion with the individual's efforts to be flexible and comply with socio-cultural requirements. More important than an authentic way of existence is to have the characteristics of a labour force capable of competing in today's labour market, and being able to keep a stable position within the society. Those of you who do not doubt that man is a basically trustworthy and (provided the condition of self-leadership is fulfilled) does not harm others will probably agree with the quote "all that is good for the individual is in long-term good for the society, too". This book, however, supports the thesis that society is in fact more than just a set of individuals and its contents provoke many meaningful questions. I hope that the answers will be sought by readers from the psychological circles, as well as students of various social science disciplines.

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