

#### MOTE-BEAM MECHANISM

To analyze and clarify this final mechanism, I compare it with the mechanism of projection with which it is often confused. Both mechanisms have in common that their operation results in a distortion of self-perception and perception of other people, and the two (as Socrates knew) are always closely interrelated. However, the lack of an adequate conceptual distinction makes us overlook a significant difference between the two types of false social perception.

The first of the two, projection in the specific, psychiatric sense, consists in attributing to other people certain characteristics which we do, but they actually do not, possess.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See the definition of *projection* in *Psychiatric Dictionary* (1940): "Projection. As used by psychiatrists, this means the process of throwing out upon another ideas and impulses that belong to oneself. It is the act of giving objective and seeming reality to what is subjective. . . . The person who blames another for his own mistakes is using the projection mechanism."

The second consists in perceiving certain characteristics in others which we do not perceive in ourselves and thus perceiving those characteristics as if they were peculiar traits of the others.

Projection can be, or easily become, pathological in nature and is one of the sources of paranoid developments. The second type is, unfortunately, by no means pathological but rather, individually and collectively, almost a universal feature of human nature. We all tend, therefore, to perceive (and to denounce) in others certain characteristics, for example, prejudices, or blind spots, or ideologies, or ethnocentrism, or aggressiveness, which, strangely enough, we ignore in ourselves. This lack of insight is obviously so widespread that its counterpart, namely, the ability to perceive in ourselves those characteristics which we notice and disapprove in others, must be considered as a sign of an unusual detachment and almost "abnormally" keen insight.

Although in both cases we are dealing with types of false social perception, the distortion, as mentioned above, is in the two cases significantly different. In case of projection, in the specified narrow sense, the resulting falsification refers to the content of the perception. If A, being suspicious himself, instead of being aware of it, believes that it is he who is suspected (observed, persecuted) by B, this means that he misperceives certain characteristics in B as well as in himself, for actually it is A who is suspicious and not B. The projection consists, therefore, in falsely attributing certain characteristics to another person which this person actually does not possess.

In the case of the second mechanism with which we are dealing, the content of the perception, that is, the perception of certain characteristics in other persons, is correct. The prejudice, the ideology, the ethnocentrism, are not "projected" by us but are actually there in the other person who is the object of the given perception. And the falsification consists only in the silent assumption that those characteristics are particular to the other person or persons and that we ourselves are free of them.

Now, it might be argued that the second type of false perception does not involve a distorted perception of other people but only a distorted self-perception. However, such an interpretation would not be correct and would miss an essential element in our

distinction. Actually, the distortion involves not only the self-perception but also the perception of others, and it is just this falsification of social perception in which we are at present mainly interested.

If a member of a certain group declares that the members of a second group are prejudiced, and overlooks or ignores that the members of other similar groups, including his own, have the same characteristics, this means that he ascribes to the members of the second group "being prejudiced" as their particular characteristic. Thus, even though the content of his perception is correct in so far as this characteristic is actually there in the members of the second group, the implied interpretation is false. If we use here the conceptual framework of the sociology of knowledge, we would say that in such a case the members of the first group perceive certain characteristics of the members of the second group in a "false perspective."

Consequently, if the members of the first group would (and could) be made aware of the nature of their false perception, the change would involve not only a transformation of the self-perception but also a transformation of the perception of the members of the second group. On the verbal level this change would reveal itself in replacing the statement, "Look how prejudiced they are" by, "Look, they are as prejudiced as all other people including ourselves, although the content of their prejudices seems to be somewhat different."

Once the distinction between projection and this second type of false social perception is made explicit, it must become clear that in terms of interpersonal and intergroup relations of everyday life this second type plays a role incomparably more important than the mechanism of projection in the specific sense of this word. Especially in times as confused as ours, the tendency to perceive in others as something peculiar to them certain characteristics which we are unable (or unwilling) to perceive in ourselves assumes truly gigantic proportions. I am under the impression that research and theory of interhuman antagonisms tend at present to exaggerate the role of such mechanisms as projection, displacement, and frustration-aggression and to neglect or even to ignore the highly dis-

turbing role of the mechanism discussed in this section. In order to have a name for it, let us call it the *mote-beam mechanism*.

It follows from what we have said that projection in the specific sense of throwing out upon another the ideas and impulses that belong to oneself is mainly a problem of abnormal psychology. The mote-beam mechanism, on the other hand, is a problem of social psychology and sociology of knowledge. Since the mechanism of projection, under the predominant influence of psychoanalysis, is actually at present in the focus of scientific attention, the mote-beam mechanism is the main victim of the lack of an adequate conceptual distinction. This means that we either ignore its operation in many cases where it actually occurs or misinterpret its nature in terms of projective (or other) mechanisms.

The approach of psychological and sociological research and theory to such collective phenomena as stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, aggressiveness, is seriously vitiated by the fact that the personal and social conditions of perceiving those phenomena are, naïvely, not taken into account. And, still, this is actually the crux of the problem. Not only the common man but also the social scientist is not enough aware that, as a rule, he notices only those stereotypes, prejudices, and so on, which, by one reason or another, he does not share and that he does not see those stereotypes, prejudices, and so on, in which he himself is deeply involved. The more deep-seated they are, the more does he take them for granted. It would be better for theory as well as for practice if we were more aware of this fact than we usually are and would realize more keenly than we frequently do that this kind of sociopsychological blindness is one of the most important causes of the intellectual and moral confusion of our age.

I wish to conclude this chapter by presenting a new classification of personality characteristics. Even though I am fully aware that this classification has its shortcomings, I believe that it will be helpful in disentangling a conceptual confusion which prevents us from developing an adequate and realistic conception about total personality.

In place of the vague, confused, undifferentiated concept of personality "traits," or personality "characteristics," which con-

sciously or unconsciously is applied both by popular and by scientific psychology, I am introducing this new classification. It is made from a sociopsychological point of view and distinguishes three categories which, taken together, compose total personality. These categories are designated as the real, the pseudo, and the sham personality characteristics.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I wish to make clear at once that in designating certain characteristics as real, others as pseudo and sham, I do not mean to imply that the real play a more effective and more important role in the formation or functioning of personality than do the others. Rather, the distinction is something very different. I call certain personality characteristics real not because they are more effective or more important than others but because, by and large, they are perceived as what they really are. On the other hand, I call certain characteristics pseudo or sham not because they are necessarily less effective or less important than the real ones but because they are perceived and interpreted not as what they really are but as "something else." The following analysis will make the somewhat mysterious meaning of these statements clear.

The real characteristics, according to the classification offered, are those personality characteristics which belong to the intrinsic equipment of the individual independently, or nearly independently, of the situation in which he is placed. Of course, this does not mean either that they are unchangeable or that their actualization is not conditioned by opportunities or lack of opportunities. It means only that, as a psychological disposition, they exist in a way which is (nearly) independent of any definite situation.

Here are some examples. Consider musical or mathematical capacities. The development of these capacities depends, of course, on environmental opportunities. However, these capacities as intrinsic potentialities, or the form and degree they have reached, are not related dynamically to any specific situation. Again, certain urges and needs, as, for example, the urge to dominate, are intrinsically part of an individual's makeup. The actualization or gratification of such urges is, of course, conditioned, or related, to different environmental factors. However, the urges and needs as

dispositions are there as intrinsic characteristics of the given personality. They are more or less at the general disposal of the individual under many and various sets of circumstances and are not simply correlated to certain fairly definite situations. This situational independence of the real personality characteristics will become clearer after the two other groups of characteristics have been identified. The main contribution of this classification is not the defining of the nature of the real characteristics as such. It is, rather, the clarifying of a certain basic confusion that makes us consider the pseudo and sham characteristics as if they were real, that is, as if they, too, were a part of the intrinsic personality makeup rather than closely related to the structure of particular situations.

Even though the pseudo characteristics are functionally closer to the real than the sham characteristics—for they, too, are in a way at the disposal of the individual—we shall consider first not the pseudo but the sham characteristics. These, in their very nature, are the opposite of the real ones. I choose this procedure not only because the striking difference between the two facilitates the clarification of the respective distinction, but also because it then becomes easier to discover the pseudo characteristics which operate, as it were, between these two groups. As a matter of fact, the discovery and definition of the pseudo characteristics is a chief purpose in offering this threefold classification.

The sham characteristics are those which are attributed to an individual from the point of view of other people. They might, or might not, reflect themselves in his own conception about himself. They can originate entirely through misinterpretations by others without his participation, or he can directly or indirectly share the responsibility for their development through pretending to have the characteristics. The given individual does not possess these sham characteristics but only seems to possess them. Hence, their name.

If, according to this definition, the sham characteristics do not belong to the real, intrinsic makeup of a given personality but only seem to belong to it, why include them in a classification of personality characteristics? Would it not be logical, having defined the true nature of sham characteristics, to exclude them once and for all from any such valid classification? No, because there

are very important reasons for considering sham characteristics, in spite of being sham, as essential parts in the makeup of the total personality.

Even though the sham characteristics exist primarily only in the minds of other people, they are bound to play an extremely important role in the personality structure. They will have some effect no matter whether the individual adjusts himself to the image of his own personality in the minds of other people, whether he interiorizes this image in his own mind, whether he revolts against the image as a distortion and falsification of his true self, or whether he succeeds in developing more subtle mechanisms of self-defense (like irony, for instance). In any case the sham characteristics, in spite of being sham, must be taken into account as part of the makeup of the total personality, even though, admittedly, they might belong to it only indirectly and in a highly peculiar way.

What we call personality is actually a construction. Now, obviously, the "sham" characteristics are an integral and functioning part of this construction as it occurs in everyday life. Until they are demonstrated as sham or false, they are considered and reacted to as parts of the particular personality. Even when discovered, they leave an effect on the nature of the ensuing image of the personality. Hence they must be included in any adequate analysis of total personality.

Sham characteristics, or at least most of them, even though they are sham, do not arise by chance. They arise inevitably because certain misinterpretations are operating within the social perception. Since these misinterpretations giving meaning to what we termed "raw material of social perception" function automatically in a definite way, they have a certain sociopsychological reality of their own. Some sort of "raw material" is there and gets interpreted as these characteristics. Sham characteristics are, thus again, a part of personality and cannot be ignored. It is necessary to include them in the classificatory scheme.

The contrast between real and sham characteristics is sufficiently clear and extreme so that there is little danger of confusing these two groups. As a matter of fact, we are applying constantly in everyday life this conceptual dichotomy, when we say about

other people that they seem to be this but they actually are that! While identifying the real and sham characteristics is relatively easy, it is much more difficult to distinguish the third group of personality characteristics. As mentioned already above, the discovery of the pseudo characteristics constitutes the main contribution of our classification. It is to this third, psychologically most "mysterious," group that we now turn our attention.

The pseudo characteristics differ, on the one hand, from the real characteristics in this respect, that they do not, as the real do, exist and function independently of the situations in which the individual is placed; on the contrary, they are definitely related to certain situations. They are, as it were, only "lent" to the individual by the society, and they disintegrate, or simply disappear, as soon as the social "power station" with which they are connected is exhausted, or ceases to function, for one reason or another.

On the other hand, pseudo characteristics cannot be identified with sham characteristics, for they do not exist only, or chiefly, in the minds of other people but are actually at the disposal of the individual to whom they belong. This means that, as long as this individual is actually connected with the respective "power station," they function as if they were real characteristics. Hence, to repeat it once more, the peculiar nature of pseudo characteristics is best defined by stressing the fact that they are borrowed characteristics. Let us make clear through an example what we mean by this statement.

An individual is able to do certain things because of the position he holds or the money he possesses. He is powerful, thanks to certain personality characteristics which have been lent to him by particular social arrangements and can be taken away from him at any time by other arrangements. I call these characteristics pseudo and not real because they are only correlates of certain definite social situations. Yet, for the time being, they function as if they were real. As a matter of fact, the functional effectiveness of pseudo characteristics is often much greater than that of the real characteristics. To realize this, we need only to remember how much wider is the range of a man's potentialities for action which he owes to his position or money than the usually modest range of another



man who has nothing but his real characteristics like intelligence, abilities, and so on, at his disposal.<sup>12</sup>

However, not only from the point of view of their functional effectiveness but also in terms of our self-perception, the pseudo characteristics are experienced often, strangely enough, as if they were real, and even as if they were much more real than the real ones. In other words, the individual misperceives his pseudo characteristics as if they were intrinsically part of his personality structure. He tends to become aware of their borrowed nature only when, in consequence of a sudden loss of the respective situations (position, status, money, power) on which they depend, these pseudo characteristics literally melt away from him, thereby revealing their true nature. This means that for the ordinary person the discovery of the pseudo characteristics for what they are takes place only in case of their being lost. Here is another example of the fact that for the most part we tend explicitly to notice the significance of only those things which we do not now possess but either have possessed or, at least, would like to possess.

With our identification of real, sham, and pseudo characteristics made, the following sketch of a personality will illustrate their differences and also give an opportunity for examining briefly their interdependence. "A professor of mathematics who is a well-to-do man enjoys not only a high professional reputation but also the reputation of moral integrity. Secretly, however, he is addicted to gambling. He has a run of bad luck, loses his money, and signs a check which is not covered. The truth comes to light. He is asked to resign and is not successful in securing another appointment in his scientific specialty."

It is apparent that the relationship went something like this: After our man lost his money (pseudo characteristics), he had to sign an uncovered check hoping that with this money (pseudo-pseudo characteristics) he would, by gambling again, regain his situation. However, his action comes to light, and he loses his reputation for moral integrity, that is, his sham characteristics. In consequence of this loss of his sham characteristics he loses also his

<sup>12</sup> It is significant to note that in French *pouvoir* means both "to be able" and "to have power"; in German *Vermögen* means both "ability" ("faculty") and "wealth" ("property").

position as professor of mathematics and thus the related pseudo characteristics which are rooted in his position. And, finally, ironically, even his real characteristics—knowledge and skill—are in danger, by lack of opportunity, of deteriorating. The important role which this man's pseudo and sham characteristics were playing in the image his associates got of him, and the drastic effects their loss had, further demonstrates our contention that these characteristics are indeed part of total personality. Hence, their identification and differentiation seem to us essential steps in comprehending any given personality.

In conclusion, then, we consider that the main value of our threefold classification consists in the fact that it explodes the mythological conception of a self-contained personality, allegedly equipped with certain characteristics inherent in its structure, and that it replaces it by a more realistic, sociopsychological, and in some respects even sociological conception of human personality.

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# Publisher's

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## Note

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A prophet is not without honor, goes the proverb, except in his own land, in his own time. Only with hindsight do our sluggish minds begin to value the words of wise and perceptive men when at last, and most often too late, we discover their works, and in those works recognize the sound of truth. In the works of Gustav Ichheiser, this sense of recognition is strong. When we read his ideas we feel a kind of I-told-you-so smugness—and then realize that many of those ideas, current today, were simmering in Ichheiser's mind a generation ago.

For Gustav Ichheiser, fortune was a most difficult mistress; his courtship of her never met with much success. The loss is as much ours as his; all his life he knew the value of his ideas and frankly lamented the blindness of a world that withheld recognition. Today we can retrieve a portion of that loss, but he will never hear our thanks. Gustav Ichheiser died in November, 1969, while this book was being prepared for print. He never saw even the proofs.

During his seventy-two-year lifespan, Ichheiser turned his mind to an analysis of some significant social and psychological issues of both current and long-standing relevance. In the essays

presented here, he examines hero and everyman with the same penetrating analysis—seeing Freud's idiosyncrasies and blind spots, examining universal misperceptions in ordinary affairs, dissecting our images of success and failure, our images of self and other. He sees beyond appearances, yet weighs appearances in the same scale with reality as an inseparable manifestation of reality. He examines our biases and judgments, our fears and complacencies, our masks and our skeletons. The attitude of mind that Ichheiser brought to these issues will be sorely missed today, when the overriding question on every issue is which side are you on.

Gustav Ichheiser was born in Poland. He received his education in Vienna among a group whose names are more familiar than his: Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Paul Lazarsfeld, Marie Jahoda. His work reflects an early awareness of the phenomenology of Husserl and shows an intellectual logic that somewhat overlaps the logic of George Herbert Mead, W. I. Thomas, and C. H. Cooley. But his thinking—and he would insist on this, not ever being noted for his shyness—is profoundly original and adamantly individual, as these essays show.

He often speculated on what happens when one meets in person the author of a great book. One has an image of the man that soars on that heroic level of his lofty thought; then this great author turns out to be a little man in a shabby room spilling cigar ashes on his lapels and uttering banalities. Gustav Ichheiser was, to be sure, a little man in a shabby room—but he never uttered banalities. He was always—in his speech and in his writing—in character, sometimes to his own cost. Many persons no doubt found his keenness and frankness intolerable and thereby missed his immense brilliance. As his publisher, we can only hope to redeem some measure of that brilliance. It is with much pride and not a little chagrin that we present the following essays.