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Latrogenic Insecurity: A Legacy of Marie Jahoda

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Abstract. This article describes the security relevance of an article published 45 years ago by the recently deceased social psychologist, Marie Jahoda.

Marie Jahoda, the great social psychologist, recently passed away at the age of 94. Her research centered on the elucidation of social issues and featured a rare combination of both political import and scientific rigor. One article that was published in 1956 within the pages of the *American Psychologist* still provides unusually rich heuristic value in the context of personnel security and counterintelligence programs within political organizations.

Jahoda's article, "Psychological Issues in civil liberties," was written in an era of political witch hunts, coercive loyalty oaths, and seeming paranoia about the scope of a communist threat to the United States (US). This era was all the more problematic in that there was a very significant espionage threat to the US from the Soviet Union, yet some of the very counterespionage interventions employed by the US seemed to nurture the Soviet threat. "Psychological Issues" described threats to US civil liberties from these interventions, analyzed conformism as these interventions' main consequence, and further identified four processes of conformism--viz., consentience, conformance, convergence, and compliance--that could be either compatible or incompatible with sound security behavior.

The focus on conformism is of special note. Conformism can serve as a cover for the violation of security and weaken the very security for which a government seeks it. In the former case, the kind of security most successfully obtained through coercive loyalty oaths and a seemingly paranoid attitude towards a communist espionage threat is a restricted tolerance for deviation from mean, median, and modal behavior. Once one exhibits behavior within the range of tolerance, one ceases to be perceived as a significant threat, regardless of how much a threat one may pose. In this regard, it is ironic that many personnel security documents counsel personnel security adjudicators to approve people whose behavior suggests honesty, good character, integrity, and the like. Appearing to possess these traits, characteristics, or tendencies certainly facilitates the commission of espionage, and the appearance is strongly facilitated by behaving within a restricted range of tolerance.

In the latter case, remaining within a restricted range of tolerance also may impede stellar accomplishment via unusually intense labor, a singular focus on an area of endeavor wherever that area may lead, and great determination to succeed. One becomes security worthy through the avoidance of excellence and through the approach of the mundane. The political organization suffers as a result.

The notions that the same psychological construct could suggest security strengths and weaknesses and that a political organization could unknowingly weaken its security in its very zeal for security remain launching points for personnel security and counterintelligence researchers and practitioners today. Ironically, Marie Jahoda--in her quest to fight threats to civil liberties--simultaneously provided insight that could increase and decrease these threats to the political organization that was itself threatened. (See Handlon, B.J., & Squier, L.H. (1955). Attitudes toward specialty loyalty oaths at the University of California. *American Psychologist*, 10, 121-127; Jahoda, M. (1956). Psychological Issues in civil liberties.

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