

René Zazzo (1910-1995)
and his contribution to the study of twins
Notes from a meeting

A meeting honoring the memory of the great French psychologist René Zazzo, one year after his death on 20 September 1995, was convened by the University of Turin on 15 November 1996. The meeting was attended by some of Zazzo's former students, collaborators and friends from Italy and France, as well as by Mrs Bianka Zazzo and by a number of twins and their families involved in starting a local twin club. The initiative was taken by Dr. Liana Valente Torre of the local Department of Psychology, who had already organized a meeting on "Twins and the Double" back in 1989, which had been introduced by Zazzo himself and had been largely devoted to the exploration of his perspective and contribution by scholars in a variety of areas, from psychology to psychoanalysis, philosophy and biology (see *I gemelli: il vissuto del doppio*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1989).

Interested in child psychology since the early 1930s, Zazzo played an influential role as a researcher and thinker for about half a century. He was Head of the Laboratory of Clinical Psychology at the Henri Rousselle Hospital in Paris from 1940 to 1980, Researcher at the National Research Council from 1945 to 1951, Director of the Laboratory of Child Psychobiology at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* and Professor of Psychology at the University of Paris from 1950 to 1980, and finally Professor Emeritus until 1985. He received honorary degrees from the Universities of Brussels and Sherbrooke, Canada, as well as numerous other recognitions and awards. He published some twenty books and hundreds of articles, conceived and produced research films, and was for decades the editor of the journal of child psychology *Enfance*. Mobilized during World War II, he was then a leader in the Résistance against the Nazi occupation as Secretary General of the *Front National Universitaire* and wrote influential articles in the Résistance journal.

Zazzo became widely known to twin researchers worldwide following the publication of his classic book, "Twins, the Couple and the Person" back in 1960 (*Les jumeaux, le couple et la personne*, 2 vols., Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1960, 2nd ed. 1986), to which he added, twenty-five years later, "The Paradox of Twins" (*Le paradoxe des jumeaux*, Stock/Laurence Pernoud, Paris 1984, 2nd ed. 1987).

The essence of his contribution, based on hundreds of original observations along with in-depth analyses of classic accounts of literature, culture and myth, consists in the identification and description of the so-called "couple effect". By this he meant the influence that any couple, whether of twins or of any two individuals, has on the molding of personality, the couple being seen as a structure within which each of the two partners develops his/her own roles as a function of the partner's ones. In Zazzo's perspective, the couple has thus come to constitute in a way a microenvironment, to be seen as a "third factor" with respect to the general environment and the individual genetic make

up. To him the couple effect was responsible for “the paradox of twins”, that is, for the differences that genetically identical twins may exhibit in some of their personality traits. And he therefore proposed that twins be used as a method to evaluate the differentiating influence that the couple may have, so that twins have come to be seen as a paradigm of the couple in general.

Although well known to twin researchers in general, Zazzo’s work has not had many followers in the international literature, almost totally committed to the dominant paradigms and methodology of behavior genetics, with few exceptions to be mainly found in France, Italy, and at any rate in areas more related to human studies than to biology or biomedical psychology. This lack of interest is a pity, because the implications of alternative approaches, such as Zazzo’s one, might be far reaching in the study of personality as well as in the understanding of aspects, such as those related to the archetype of the “double”, that play a relevant role not only in the history of culture but apparently also in the molding and functioning of the human mind.

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