Chapter 8

Disorder or Congruence?

Frances Merchant Carp, Ph.D.

Introduction to Frances Merchant Carp*

In the chronicle of her life Frances Carp portrays by allusion and inference some qualities that explain the scholarly achievements of her life. Let the record show that the book from the Texas period she quietly mentions is one of the classic works in gerontology (Carp, 1966). In this book she performed an incredibly demanding feat of combining an ethnography of the people and their milieu with hard-nosed research data analysis. Having seen her report in manuscript form, I urged her to split it into two reports, on the theory that those interested in people would not read her statistics and those interested in facts would prefer to ignore people. I was wrong. Her touch with people, facts, and words was exactly right to produce this highly readable book, which still stands as a model for evaluation research, enlightened by the best knowledge in both clinical and theoretical psychology. This incident has the elements

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of the lifetime theme and variations of Carp's work that belie any thought of "disorderliness" of career.

First and foremost, the theme in her work has remained that of people and facts. I know of no work she has done that has not begun with the needs, capabilities, or problems of human beings. All along the way, every bit of her research addressed ways of improving the well-being of persons. Her research on the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) system remains fifteen years later the exemplary attempt to probe the human experiences associated with a vast socioenvironmental system like public transit.

The early book displayed Carp's ability to discern and use the best in research methodology. I first learned the statistical method multiple regression analysis from the effective way this technique was applied in this book. Subsequently, a whole series of applications of once-esoteric analytic methods to different meat-and-potatoes problems have put readers far ahead in their knowledge of social research.

The end of this chapter alludes almost in passing to the theoretical contributions Carp has made, especially in operationalizing person-environment congruence. In many different settings her work has demonstrated that outcomes for a person are better if the person's needs and abilities are matched to what the environment can provide.

Without presuming to contribute to the substance of this book, I can still point out one way in which women did not always come in second: Were I writing about my own career I could document that virtually every major step in it was taken with scientific stimulation and personal motivation provided in one way or another by something Carp did first.

Although I feel it most important to document her scientific contributions, it should be noted that the warmth and vivaciousness that come through so clearly in this chapter are very much in evidence "in person." She has challenged and inspired colleagues, and has nurtured many young scholars, having been totally generous in encouraging their own development.

The pattern of my work—mostly unplanned, with unexpected turnings and surprising components—suggests a "disorderly career," one of the least successful patterns (Wilensky,