



Contemporary Social Psychology in Historical Perspective

Author(s): Dorwin Cartwright

Source: *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Mar., 1979), pp. 82-93

Published by: [American Sociological Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3033880>

Accessed: 20/06/2014 21:09

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



American Sociological Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Psychology Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Contemporary Social Psychology in Historical Perspective*

DORWIN CARTWRIGHT
The University of Michigan

This paper presents an assessment of the current state of social psychology in the light of its historical and social context. The discipline is viewed as a social system, and an attempt is made to show how the properties of this system have influenced the research techniques, substantive content, and theories of contemporary social psychology. It is suggested that the field's basic mission should be defined as the attempt to understand how society influences the cognition, motivation, development, and behavior of individuals and, in turn, is influenced by them. It is proposed that this definition provides a basis for integrating all of social psychology, including its two main subdivisions and several areas of specialization.

The entire history of social psychology as a field of empirical research extends over a period of only approximately eighty years. And since most of its growth has occurred within the past four decades, it is largely the product of scholars who are still active in the field. In this paper, I would like to draw upon my own experience as a social psychologist over the past forty years to make some observations about the current state of the field and the problems it faces today. The data I shall be using are those of a participant observer and have the strengths and weaknesses of this method of research. Although they have the advantage of being derived from first-hand experience, they also reflect my personal biases, values, and aspirations for the field. A more detached observer would undoubtedly view this period of history from a different perspective and might very well reach different conclusions concerning its significance.

In order to understand the nature of the developments of the past forty years, it is necessary to consider not only the findings, methods, and theories produced during this period but also the institutional changes occurring within the field itself. Social psychology, like any branch of science, is a social system whose primary

objective is the production of a particular kind of empirical knowledge, and its history is more than a history of ideas and intellectual accomplishments. As I have observed the intellectual and professional activities of social psychologists over the years, I have been impressed by how much they have been influenced by such things as the policies of funding agencies, the editorial practices of journals and publishing houses, the monetary and symbolic reward system of university departments, the nature of the doctoral programs, and the demographic composition of the profession. I am not suggesting that all of these influences have been detrimental, but I do feel that it would be a mistake to underestimate the magnitude of their effects upon the problems that have been chosen for investigation, how they have been approached, the methods employed, the way research facilities have been organized, and the amount of time social psychologists have devoted to that old-fashioned activity known as scholarship.

It is true, of course, that the substantive content of the knowledge attained in any field of science is ultimately determined by the intrinsic nature of the phenomena under investigation, since empirical research is essentially a process of discovery with an internal logic of its own. But it is equally true that the knowledge attained is the product of a social system and, as such, is basically influenced by the properties of that system and by its cultural, social, and political environment. These influences are especially apparent when one attempts to understand the de-

* This paper was presented as the 1978 Katz-Newcomb Lecture at The University of Michigan, where it was my great privilege to have been associated with Professors Katz and Newcomb for thirty years. Communications should be addressed to Dorwin Cartwright, 643 Island View Drive, Santa Barbara, CA 93109.

velopments occurring within a limited period of time.

There are, I believe, certain pragmatic advantages to be gained from conceiving of a discipline as a social system. For one thing, it helps to establish realistic standards for evaluating a field's rate of progress. The production of scientific knowledge is a collective enterprise in which each contributor builds upon the work of others, and the amount of time required to produce empirical findings, to communicate them, and to permit others to assess their significance sets severe limits upon the rate of progress that can be realistically expected. Just how much time is consumed in this process has been documented by research conducted by the American Psychological Association under the supervision of Garvey and Griffith (1971). These investigators found that the average duration of a research project in psychology—from the time when someone gets a bright idea about how previous work on some topic can be extended up to the publication of an article—is approximately five years. This finding is important for any realistic evaluation of the progress made in social psychology during the past forty years, since it is obvious that the number of five-year intervals over this period is quite small.

Additional insight into the temporal constraints on scientific progress is provided by Kuhn's (1962) discussion of the history of scientific revolutions, in which he argues that truly fundamental advances in science occur as a result of rebellions staged by younger generations of scientists against older ones. Such rebellions grow out of a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the field's ability to deal with its basic intellectual problems and result in the establishment of a fundamentally new theoretical and methodological approach, or in Kuhn's words, a new paradigm. The emergence of social psychology as a distinctive field of empirical research around the turn of the century can be viewed, I believe, as a generational revolt against the arm-chair methods of social philosophy. It is possible that the so-called crisis in contemporary social psychology is the beginning of another generational rebellion, although I am more

inclined to agree with Elms (1975) that the present crisis is actually one of a lack of professional self-confidence brought about by unrealistic expectations. But in any event, it is clear that social psychology is simply not old enough to have benefited from many revolutionary advances of the sort described by Kuhn.

A second advantage of this point of view is that it suggests where efforts might best be directed to bring about improvements in the intellectual performance of the field. It has been my experience that efforts to upgrade the quality of research by attempting to persuade scholars to mend their ways have never been very successful. And if I am correct in my assessment of the importance of the social system in shaping the thinking of individual social psychologists, it follows that fundamental improvements in the intellectual performance of the discipline as a whole will require changes in the system itself and the way it operates.

The third advantage of this approach is that, if it were generally accepted, it would help to counteract an unfortunate tendency on the part of some to divide the activities of social psychologists into two separate spheres—the sacred and the profane; or, in other words, those activities concerned with the substantive content of research, and those having to do with the construction and maintenance of the social system that makes research possible. Although these two kinds of activities undoubtedly call for different sorts of skills, it is important to recognize that each depends for its success upon the other, and that both are essential for scientific progress.

In adopting a system approach to the history of social psychology, I do not intend to minimize the contributions made by individual scholars, for social psychology has had its share of great names, and the field would now be in a sorry state indeed if it had not been for the work of these creative individuals. But if we are to understand how these people came to make their particular contributions and why they were so influential, we must examine the nature of the social system in which they worked, its stage of development, and its larger social setting.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

There can be little doubt that the most important single influence on the development of social psychology up to the present came from outside the system itself. I am referring, of course, to the Second World War and the political upheaval in Europe that preceded it. If I were required to name the one person who has had the greatest impact upon the field, it would have to be Adolph Hitler. There are several reasons why these events in the world at large were so important for social psychology: They came at a critical stage in its development; they were largely responsible for the spectacular increase in its rate of growth; they basically influenced the subsequent demographic composition of the field; and they have exerted a fundamental influence upon its entire intellectual complexion right up to the present.

During the first three or four decades of its existence, social psychology had been mainly concerned with the problem of establishing itself as a legitimate field of empirical research. Social psychologists had directed their attention primarily to the task of developing basic concepts and devising appropriate methods of research. By the mid-1930's, the field was prepared to undertake research on significant substantive problems. Within a period of less than ten years, Newcomb did his important research, that became known as the Bennington study; F. H. Allport and Sherif published their basic studies on social norms and conformity; Hyman conducted his work on reference groups; Murray reported the results of an impressive program of research on human motivation; the Yale group published their seminal work on frustration and aggression, and on social learning and imitation; Whyte did his participant observation research on street-corner society; and Lewin, Lippitt, and White undertook their classic experiment on styles of leadership. It was also during this time that Dollard published his book, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, Myrdal conducted his influential analysis of race relations in the United States, and the Clarks did their work on racial identification in black chil-

dren. It was in 1936 that Gallup so dramatically demonstrated the possibility of using interviews with samples of the population to predict election results, and in 1939 that Likert began doing public opinion research for the federal government. The field was in a state of intellectual ferment, and social psychologists were well-prepared to respond to the events that followed.

It is difficult for anyone who did not experience it to appreciate the magnitude of the impact of the war upon American social psychology. The smoke had hardly cleared from Pearl Harbor before the government began recruiting social psychologists to assist in the solution of problems faced by a nation at war. As a result of this migration from the campuses, together with the military draft, academic research and the training of graduate students came to a virtual halt. The variety of topics investigated for the government almost defies description, but in a review of this work (Cartwright, 1948) undertaken immediately after the war, I was able to identify the following: Building civilian morale and combatting demoralization; domestic attitudes, needs, and information; enemy morale and psychological warfare; military administration; international relations; and psychological problems of a wartime economy.

Work on problems like these called for the sharpening of research tools only recently designed and the invention of new ones. It demonstrated the power of the sample survey as a technique of social science research. It resulted in the accumulation of a tremendous mass of new information, but I must add, not much in the way of theory. It opened up new fields of investigation such as organizational psychology, economic behavior, and political behavior. It provided concrete examples of the practical usefulness of social psychology. Most importantly, it fundamentally altered social psychologists' view of the field and its place in society, and established social psychology, once and for all, as a legitimate field of specialization worthy of public support.

When the war was over, the field was incomparably different from what it had been just three or four years before. Pros-

pects were bright, morale was high, and social psychologists set about the task of converting into reality their new vision of what social psychology might become. They established new research facilities, such as the Survey Research Center, the Research Center for Group Dynamics, and the Laboratory for Social Relations. They began submitting research proposals to governmental agencies, foundations, and business firms, and received, for the most part, a warm reception. They organized doctoral programs in most of the leading universities, and within a few years had trained more social psychologists than there had been in the entire history of the field. And they began to publish large quantities of research.

It is clear that these developments would not have taken place if it had not been for the war, and they have important implications for social psychology today. As a result of the population explosion within the field over the past thirty years, something like 90% of all social psychologists who have ever lived are alive at the present time. The entire conceptual framework of social psychology, including all of the unexamined assumptions about its proper subject-matter and acceptable methods of research and most of its empirical findings are therefore largely the product of a single generation of people who were trained by a relatively small group of teachers with a common background and a rather homogeneous point of view. And due to the social conditions of the time in which they entered the field, they are predominantly white, male, middle-class Americans, and thus reflect the interests and biases of this segment of the population. Their accomplishments are most impressive, but it is important to recognize that the field as it exists today is not God-given, nor even the best that could be devised by man.

No review of the historical forces that have shaped contemporary social psychology would be complete without consideration of another consequence of the war and the social upheaval that preceded it. The rise of Nazism in Germany, with its accompanying anti-intellectualism and vicious anti-Semitism, resulted as we all know in the migration to America of many

of Europe's leading scholars, scientists, and artists. Although this massive displacement of intellectual talent had important effects upon all branches of science and culture, it was especially critical for social psychology. One can hardly imagine what the field would be like today if such people as Lewin, Heider, Köhler, Wertheimer, Katona, Lazarsfeld, and the Brunswiks had not come to the United States when they did. They not only brought to American social psychology a fresh and stimulating point of view at a time when it was about to embark upon a period of unprecedented growth, but they also exerted a direct personal influence upon many of the individuals who were to come to play a leading role in the subsequent development of the field, and through them, an indirect influence upon the training of the present generation of social psychologists. I cannot provide a complete list of those who had close personal association with these stimulating scholars, but it includes such names as Asch, Krech, Crutchfield, Merton, Campbell, Likert, Barker, Lippitt, French, Zander, Cook, Festinger, Kelley, Thibaut, Schachter, and Deutsch.

As a result of the war and the political events that preceded it, social psychology had become almost nonexistent on the continent of Europe, or, for that matter, anywhere outside of North America, at the very time it underwent its most important developments. It had become primarily an American product, and when it was finally reestablished abroad it had a completely American flavor. This turn of events had profound implications for the field as we know it today. Social psychology, more than any other branch of science, with the possible exception of anthropology, requires a breadth of perspective that can only be achieved by a truly international community of scholars. Social psychologists are not merely students of society, they are also participants in it, and despite their best efforts to attain a detached objectivity in their research, their thinking is affected by the particular culture in which they live.

The fact that social psychology was so largely an American enterprise in its formative years means that its intellectual

content has been greatly influenced by the political ideology of American society and by the social problems confronting the United States over the past forty years. The effects of these influences upon contemporary social psychology are pervasive. American political ideology is, of course, basically democratic. It emphasizes the importance of the individual; rejects the doctrine of the immutability of human nature; places great confidence in the belief that human progress can be achieved through rational problem solving, scientific research, and technology; and holds to the optimistic view that needed social changes can be brought about by public education.

These assumptions are reflected in the heavy concentration of social psychological research on topics of public opinion, attitudes, social learning, and attitude change. They account, in part at least, for the great interest in cognitive and motivational processes within the individual, although one should not underestimate the influence here of Gestalt psychology and Freudian theory that came with the migration of psychologists from Europe, nor should one overlook the importance of the invention of the computer. These ideological premises also help to explain the dominance of environmentalism in social psychological thinking. McDougall's theory of instincts never really had a chance, not so much because it was wrong, which it may very well have been, but because it was antithetical to American culture. One cannot but be impressed by the intense emotional fervor with which social psychologists react to the proposition that intelligence has a substantial genetic component, or to the claim by Lorenz and others that aggression is instinctive.

In calling attention to these ideological influences, it is not my intention to criticize democracy, for I am convinced that social psychology by its very nature cannot perform its essential task in an authoritarian society nor under a dictatorial form of government. Lewin was undoubtedly correct in his assertion that: "To believe in reason, is to believe in democracy, because it grants to the reasoning partners

a status of equality" (1948:83). If as social psychologists we do believe in reason, it follows that we must do the best we can to distinguish between ideological assumptions and scientific evidence.

Since most social psychological research has been the product of American investigators, its substantive content has been influenced by the social problems confronting American society. These problems have not only affected the topics chosen for investigations, but have also created a willingness on the part of governmental officials and other financial gatekeepers to provide the support needed to do such research. We are all familiar with the strategic value of including in our research proposals a section on "social relevance" regardless of how irrelevant they might otherwise seem to be.

The effects of these social problems upon the content of research would be readily apparent if one were to do an archeological dig down through the accumulated literature of social psychology. One would find near the surface a concentration of material dealing with sex roles and the status of women; then a layer concerned with urban unrest, violence, and riots that was deposited during the sixties; a thick stratum of research on conformity from the heyday of McCarthyism in the fifties; and then, of course, the residues of all the work on the problems brought about by the Second World War. Running vertically through all of these artifacts, there would also be the products of research on such continuing problems as intergroup relations, prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, and social conflicts of various kinds; the inefficiencies and pathologies of social institutions; the detrimental effects of modern society on mental health; and the persistent problems of delinquency and antisocial behavior. I am not suggesting that social psychologists have done research on all of the problems actually faced by American society during this period, for some of them were not generally recognized and others were simply too hot to handle. Nor am I proposing that our research has been concerned only with social problems. But there can be little doubt that the body of knowledge

that we have today would be substantially different if it had been created in a different era or in a different social setting.

CURRENT STATE OF THE FIELD

With this general historical orientation, I would like now to present some observations of a more evaluative nature concerning the state of contemporary social psychology. Let me begin by saying that my overall evaluation is definitely positive. I do not share the gloom of those who think that the field has reached a state of crisis. Social psychology is incomparably better-equipped to achieve its basic objectives than it was some forty years ago. We have better facilities, better methods for collecting and analyzing data, a vast storehouse of well-established empirical findings, more rigorous conceptual models, and much more sophisticated theory.

It is true that the general level of excitement that characterized social psychology immediately after the war has all but disappeared. But since this decline in enthusiasm actually began in the mid-1950's, as I noted in a review of the field at that time (Cartwright, 1961), it should not be taken as evidence of deficiencies in the work of recent years but, instead, as a by-product of moving from a programmatic stage of development to one described by Kuhn as "normal science" in which the field is engaged in the less glamorous task of collecting detailed data and testing rather limited theoretical hypotheses. In view of the inherent complexity of our subject matter and the youthfulness of our discipline, I find it remarkable that so much progress has been made. I do not, of course, believe that all is well or that we can be content with what has been accomplished. For social psychology, as we know it today, does have deficiencies and does face some very difficult problems.

Research Techniques

The early social psychologists have clearly been vindicated in their claim that important social phenomena can be subjected to empirical investigation. We no longer have to rely on intuition, anecdotes, and arm-chair speculation.

The invention and refinement of techniques for conducting survey research have made it possible to obtain remarkably accurate estimates of the beliefs, attitudes, intentions, behavior, and even the quality of life, of large populations on the basis of interviews with a relatively small number of people. Advances in experimental methodology now permit us to control and systematically vary many of the more important determinants of human behavior and thus to investigate causal relationships among variables. Our research has been substantially improved by work in the field of statistics on small-sample theory, experimental design, and multivariate analysis. As a result of these methodological developments, we now have a quite respectable body of firmly based empirical findings.

But these impressive gains in technical competence and sophistication have been, I fear, something of a mixed blessing, for the fascination with technique seems all too often to have replaced a concern for substantive significance. The literature is full of studies that do little more than demonstrate the technical virtuosity of the investigator, and one might think that our journals would have to go out of business if use of the analysis of variance were to be prohibited. We tend to forget that methods are, after all, only tools and, as such, should not determine the content of research or be used simply because they are there. The motivation of research should be different from that of mountain-climbing. One would hope that the obsession with technique is a temporary phenomenon, analogous to the conspicuous consumption of the *nouveau riche*, but I suspect that change will not come quickly, since it is much easier for research review committees, editors, and departmental executive committees to evaluate methods than the quality or significance of substantive content.

The preoccupation with method has not only had a detrimental effect on the work of individual investigators, it has also had consequences for the organization of the field as a whole. The discipline has become divided along methodological lines

rather than by substantive problems. Social psychologists tend to specialize, usually in survey research or in laboratory experimentation, and to associate with others having similar skills. Although it is understandable why the field should be divided in this way, it is nonetheless regrettable. For, as Hovland (1959) showed in his comparison of the results of survey research and laboratory experiments on the topic of attitude change, research based on a single technique is especially vulnerable to methodological artifacts and theoretical preconceptions.

Over the years, social psychologists have developed a variety of other methods, such as the unobtrusive or obtrusive observation of behavior in naturalistic settings, field experiments, computer simulation, and the analysis of personal documents, case histories, and the products of the mass media. Some of these techniques have been employed rather extensively within certain subareas of social psychology. But this research has also suffered from the single-method approach. I am aware, of course, that it may not be possible, or even desirable, for every social psychologist to become proficient in all of these techniques, but I cannot believe that the discipline as a whole cannot find some better way to make use of the methods we now possess.

Substantive Content

If one examines the total body of knowledge thus far acquired in social psychology, as presented in our textbooks and other systematic reviews of the literature, it is evident that it too has certain limitations. It is, for one thing, largely based on cross-sectional as opposed to longitudinal data. We have attained a good understanding of the nature of normative behavior, but we know virtually nothing about the conditions affecting the formation and decay of social norms or the determinants of their content. We recognize the importance of social roles in social interaction, but we know little about their development or why particular roles are found in particular circumstances. And we now have quite sophisticated theories about the processes involved in choosing

among a set of alternatives with given utilities, but hardly any theory at all about the determinants of these utilities.

We have acquired considerable skill in predicting behavior in settings of our own fabrication, and a breath-taking ability to explain behavior after the fact. But we have not yet learned how to deal effectively with processes that take place over an extended period of time, and we are, I fear, no better than the intelligent layman in forecasting the course of future social developments. Although I would like to think that social psychologists should be at least as good as economists in the art of prognostication, the attainment of even this modest level of competence will require a substantial shift in our conceptual orientation and in our methods of research.

Some important progress has been made in this direction in research on voting behavior, consumer expectations, and organizational development through use of repeated measures, panel studies, and statistical procedures that employ time as a variable. And the work of Zajonc (1976) and his colleagues on the development of intellectual abilities suggests another promising approach, for even if their predictions of future trends in test scores should turn out to be incorrect, their conceptual model, unlike so many in social psychology, not only deals with time but also has the virtue that it can be proven wrong. The more extensive use and refinement of methods such as these would greatly improve the quality of our research.

The body of knowledge we now have is not only limited in its temporal depth, but is also disproportionately concerned with certain aspects of social behavior. A tabulation of how the field's intellectual and financial resources have been distributed according to substantive content would undoubtedly show that by far the largest proportion, especially in recent years, has been devoted to work on cognitive processes occurring within individuals, or on the product of these processes. We now have a large body of information about the beliefs, opinions, and attitudes of people in all walks of life and a reasonably good understanding of the ways in which indi-

viduals in various segments of society experience the social environment. The major theoretical advances in recent years have also been primarily concerned with cognitive processes within individuals. And although it would not be correct to say that other determinants of behavior have been completely ignored or that there has not been important work on social interaction, the fact remains that the central focus of attention has been on cognition.

The emphasis on subjective experience has a long tradition and cannot be attributed, as is sometimes claimed, to the popular appeal of dissonance theory and attribution theory. It can be found throughout the history of the field, as for example, in W. I. Thomas' stress on the importance of "the definition of the situation," G. H. Mead's theory of symbolic interaction, Lewin's concept of the psychological life space, and Heider's theory of naive psychology. It can be seen in such statements as that made by Newcomb when he said: "It seems to me to be a truism that no interpersonal behavior can be understood without a knowledge of how the relationship is perceived by the persons involved" (1947:74). It is also reflected in Asch's assertion that: "It is not possible, as a rule, to conduct investigation in social psychology without including a reference to the experiences of persons" (1959:374). There have, of course, been radical behaviorists who reject such statements as utter scientific nonsense, but their protests have not significantly affected the mainstream of social psychological research and theory.

If one looks more broadly at the intellectual context of the field, it is apparent that this concern with the subjective world of individuals has constituted social psychology's unique contribution to the social sciences. It is what is usually meant when one refers to the "social psychological point of view" in anthropology, economics, history, sociology, or political science, and we can be proud of the impact that social psychology has had upon these disciplines.

But having said all of this, I must admit to certain misgivings. For surely the view that human beings are merely information

processors is too narrow, even when it is broadened to include the influences of motivation. We are correct, I believe, in our claim that in order to explain a person's behavior, one must relate it to the subjective environment of that particular individual. The cognitive representations of the external world together with motivational forces arising from needs and internalized values unquestionably exert profound influences on behavior. But behavior itself is a transaction between an individual and the *objective* environment, not its cognitive representation, and the effectiveness of *social* behavior depends upon much more than beliefs and intentions. It requires social skills, social support, the utilization of resources, the exercise of power, and collaborative effort. It brings about changes in the social environment that have consequences for the individual's physical and mental well-being, his relations with others, his position in society, and the resources he can employ in future transactions.

When these consequences combine to have adverse effects upon the environment shared by others, they constitute social problems, such as pollution, energy shortages, urban decay, crime, overpopulation, the restriction of freedom, and social discrimination of various kinds. If they are to be remedied, they require changes in the behavior of large numbers of individuals. The remedies most often proposed by social psychologists tend to reflect their concern with cognition and thus to rely heavily upon programs for changing beliefs and attitudes. But if it is true that cognition is only one of the proximal determinants of behavior, it follows that such remedies, by themselves, are not likely to be very successful, and the experience of recent years would seem to support this conclusion.

Theoretical Integration

A third imperfection of our present body of knowledge is its lack of theoretical integration. For despite all of the good theoretical work that has been done, we simply do not have a comprehensive theoretical framework for the field as a whole. The early attempt to explain every-

thing of interest to social psychology by means of what Gordon Allport called a "simple and sovereign" theory has long since been abandoned. Such explanatory systems, which view all social phenomena as manifestations of something like imitation, the drive for power, enlightened self-interest, the herd instinct, or learning, now seem hopelessly naive, except perhaps to a few undaunted Skinnerians.

Big theories that merely sketch out a global orientation to the field have given way to numerous smaller but more rigorous ones, such as balance theory, congruity theory, dissonance theory, attribution theory, social comparison theory, information integration theory, decision theory, reactance theory, equity theory, exchange theory, and the like. These miniature conceptual systems have served us well, for they are concerned with important problems and have generated a large amount of quite good research. But since they deal with only limited parts of the field's subject matter and have little or no explicit relationship to one another, they do not provide theoretical integration for all of social psychology. Until we achieve a more comprehensive theoretical framework, we shall not have a firm basis for deciding which problems are most worthy of investigation.

In the absence of integrative theory, social psychologists have come to organize their intellectual activities around some specific substantive topic that happens to interest them at the time, or around some particular method of research. What is more important, they tend to identify with their own area of specialization rather than with the discipline as a whole. It is true, of course, that we all share a common tradition and that we are deeply interested in the welfare of the entire field. But even though we still use the label "social psychology" to refer to our own professional occupation, we are no longer exactly sure what this term means or where the boundaries of the field should be drawn. Research topics that were once seen as part of the central core of social psychology are now generally viewed as belonging to such specialties as organizational psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, or

group dynamics, and some have been relegated to other disciplines such as anthropology, economics, or political science. Some forty years ago, Murphy, Murphy, and Newcomb (1937) described social psychology as consisting of a number of lonely and isolated peninsulas jutting out into the sea of knowledge, and although we have broadened these peninsulas and have constructed new ones, this metaphor seems even more appropriate today.

The present theoretical disorientation of social psychology has been exacerbated by the deep cleavage within the field between what for the want of better terminology, may be called "psychological social psychology" and "sociological social psychology." Stryker (1977) and House (1977) have argued that this cleavage lies at the heart of the field's present state of malaise. And I tend to agree with this diagnosis, for even though the hostilities between proponents of these two basically different orientations have diminished, they have not been integrated to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for the discipline as a whole.

Both of these approaches have a long history, going back to the very beginning of social psychology. But it was the intention of the founders of the discipline that they should be combined to provide an understanding not simply of the individual or society but of the relationship, or interaction, between the two. Comte, who is generally recognized as the intellectual father of social psychology, viewed man as both the creature and the creator of the social world in which he lives, and identified the central problem of social psychology as that of finding an answer to the question: How can the individual be both the cause and the consequence of society? And McDougall (1926), in one of the first textbooks, formulated social psychology's central mission as that of showing "how, given the native propensities and capacities of the individual mind, all the complex mental life of societies is shaped by them and in turn reacts upon the course of their development and operation in the individual" (1926:18).

This conception of the central mission of social psychology has been under-

mined, however, by theorists who maintain that all social psychological phenomena must be explained exclusively in terms of their antecedents either within society or within the individual. Thus, for example, Durkheim formulated what was to become the sociological approach when he asserted that "the determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness" (1895/1950:110). And Floyd Allport stated the essence of the psychological approach when he said, "I believe that only within the individual can we find the behavior mechanisms and consciousness which are fundamental in the interaction between individuals . . . There is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals" (1924:vi).

Although these attempts to make social psychology a branch of one of its parent disciplines have not succeeded, they have influenced thinking up to the present time. Gordon Allport, in discussing the history of the field, observed that "with few exceptions social psychologists regard their discipline as an attempt to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others" (1968:3). This statement has often been taken as the definition of social psychology, but since it is not acceptable to those who adopt the sociological approach, we are left with two social psychologies rather than one.

Immediately after the Second World War several efforts were made to bring these two subdisciplines together by establishing doctoral programs intended to encompass all of social psychology. Although these programs produced some outstanding social psychologists and generated some important theoretical and empirical research, they did not accomplish the desired reorganization of the field. In looking back over this experience, I am now inclined to believe that it was unrealistic to hope to solve what is essentially a theoretical problem simply by having psychologists and sociologists collaborate in the training of graduate students. But whatever the reason for the

failure of these programs, we should not be deluded into thinking that the problem went away with their termination.

It would be paradoxical if social psychology were ever to abandon the very task that constituted its original *raison d'être* and were to accept either of these approaches as the sole basis for defining its proper subject matter. But if this unfortunate eventuality is to be avoided, we must have a clear conception of the discipline's basic mission, or master problem, which will provide an organizing principle for all of social psychology. We need, in other words, a definition of the field that places the study of psychological processes within a proper social context and, at the same time, recognizes the critical role of these processes in interpersonal relations, social interaction, and social structure.

As a first approximation to such a definition, I would suggest something like the following: Social psychology is that branch of the social sciences which attempts to explain how society influences the cognition, motivation, development, and behavior of individuals and, in turn, is influenced by them. This definition, by focusing on the reciprocal relations between individuals and society, could, I believe, provide an organizing principle for all of social psychology, including its two main subdivisions and its several areas of specialization. But if it is to do so, we shall have to clarify two of our basic constructs that serve to relate the individual to society. These are the concepts: *social environment* and *social behavior*.

The term *social environment* is an extension by analogy of the concept *physical environment*, and refers to all those features of the external world that influence the social behavior and development of individuals. It consists of such things as social networks, groups, organizations, social structure, roles, norms, social pressures, social support, duties, and obligations. And although it has a long history in social psychology, its conceptual properties have not yet been well defined. A good beginning has been made, however, by Barker (1968) in his work on ecological psychology, by French and his colleagues (1974) in their research on

person-environment fit, by Katz and Kahn (1978) and other theorists, such as Emery and Trist (1965), who view the individual and the social environment as an interdependent system, and by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their theoretical treatment of the social construction of reality. Research such as this has made it evident that the social environment cannot be usefully described solely in terms of its physical properties since its significance for social behavior lies in its semantic content or social meaning. It differs from the physical environment in that it is largely a social product and must therefore be conceived as both the cause and consequence of social behavior.

The term *social behavior* refers to such things as asking questions, providing information, seeking or giving help, expressing hostility or affection, joining a group, enacting a role, performing acts of leadership, exercising power, voting, or participating in a social movement. Actions of this sort are the means by which individuals adjust their relationships with the external world, and cannot properly be conceived merely as responses to stimuli. The essential theoretical problem here, as I see it, is to find an effective conceptualization of the processes by which the behavior of individuals is converted, or transformed, into "social acts" which have properties of such a nature that they can have consequences for other people, groups, and institutions, or in other words, for the social environment. A proper understanding of these processes is a prerequisite to any adequate theory of social power, leadership, group problem-solving and decision-making, social effectiveness, and collective action. Without such a theory, the results of social psychological research are bound to have limited practical value.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In introducing this discussion of the current state of the field, I indicated that my overall evaluation is definitely positive. But since I have dwelt for the most part on deficiencies and unsolved problems, one may well ask what is the basis for all the optimism. Part of it results from

the historical perspective described earlier. Social psychology is in an early stage of development and has not had time to solve all of its problems. Such defects as the susceptibility to fads and fashions, the obsession with technique, the reliance on a single method of research, and the disproportionate emphasis on cognition and other temporally proximal determinants of behavior are, I believe, symptoms of immaturity and can be expected to be remedied with the passage of time.

Most social psychologists today have come from a restricted segment of American society, and this has limited our theoretical perspective, contributed to an unfortunate degree of ethnocentrism, and greatly influenced the content of empirical research. But these, too, will be overcome as the demographic composition of the field is broadened to include more women, members of various minority groups, scholars from different cultures, and citizens of both the so-called developed and underdeveloped countries. Within the next few years, social psychology should become a truly international community of scholars, and every effort should be made to facilitate this accomplishment.

Perhaps the most important reason for optimism, however, derives from the demonstrated capacity of social psychologists to respond positively to challenge. From its very beginning, the field has confronted what must have appeared to be almost insurmountable theoretical, methodological, and institutional obstacles. But these have always served to stimulate innovation and creativity, and although the problems we face today are exceedingly difficult, I can see no reason to believe that social psychologists will not continue to respond to these challenges in the foreseeable future.

REFERENCES

- Allport, F. H.
1924 *Social Psychology*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Allport, G. W.
1968 "The historical background of modern social psychology." Pp. 1-80 in G. Lindzey and E. Aronson (eds.), *The Handbook of Social Psychology* (Vol. 1, 2nd ed.). Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

- Asch, S. E.
1959 "A perspective on social psychology." Pp. 363-383 in S. Koch (ed.), *Psychology: A Study of a Science* (Vol. 3). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Barker, R. G.
1968 *Ecological Psychology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Berger, P. L., and T. Luckmann
1966 *The Construction of Reality*. New York: Doubleday.
- Cartwright, D.
1948 "Social psychology in the United States during the Second World War." *Human Relations* 1:333-352.
1961 "A decade of social psychology." Pp. 9-30 in R. A. Patton (ed.), *Current Trends in Psychological Theory*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press.
- Durkheim, E.
1895 *The Rules of Sociological Method*. Tr. [1950] (1950) by S. S. Solvay and J. H. Mueller. New York: Free Press.
- Elms, A. C.
1975 "The crisis of confidence in social psychology." *American Psychologist* 30:967-976.
- Emery, F. E., and E. L. Trist
1965 "The causal texture of organizational environments." *Human Relations* 18:21-32.
- French, J. R. P. Jr., W. L. Rogers, and S. Cobb
1974 "Adjustment as person-environment fit." In G. Coelho, D. Hamburg, and J. Adams (eds.), *Coping and Adaptation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Garvey, W. D., and B. C. Griffith
1971 "Scientific communication: Its role in the conduct of research and creation of knowledge." *American Psychologist* 26:349-362.
- House, J. S.
1977 "The three faces of social psychology." *Sociometry* 40:161-177.
- Hovland, C. I.
1959 "Reconciling conflicting results derived from experimental and survey studies of attitude change." *American Psychologist* 14:8-17.
- Katz, D., and R. L. Kahn
1978 *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Kuhn, T.
1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lewin, K.
1948 *Resolving Social Conflicts*. New York: Harper.
- McDougall, W.
1926 *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (rev. ed.). Boston: Luce.
- Murphy, G., L. Murphy, and T. M. Newcomb
1937 *Experimental Social Psychology*. New York: Harper.
- Newcomb, T. M.
1947 "Autistic hostility and social reality." *Human Relations* 1:69-86.
- Stryker, S.
1977 "Developments in 'two social psychologies': Toward an appreciation of mutual relevance." *Sociometry* 40:145-160.
- Zajonc, R. B.
1976 "Family configuration and intelligence." *Science* 192:227-236.