# Theory in Applied Social Psychology

## Past Mistakes and Future Hopes

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ABSTRACT. Across the last four decades, applied social psychology has sought to apply theories to 'real world' social problems, hoping for some insight into intractable social issues. This paper reviews applied social psychology discourse on the application of theory in the resolution of social problems, with a focus on the 'post-crisis' literature. This analysis suggests that much of applied social psychology lacks serious theoretical analysis and has yet to use the kind of theory needed to understand social problems. While exceptions to these trends are noted and discussed, current mainstream applied social psychology, as exemplified by a survey of recent texts, seems highly individualistic, rarely focused on important social issues, and generally atheoretical. Two themes, which run counter to these trends—the emergence of critical psychology and renewed attention to the limits of generalizability, along with the importance of knowing contexts—may set the agenda for further theoretical efforts in applied social psychology.

KEY WORDS: application, applied social psychology, history, theory

Worrying about the lack of theory in 1960s social psychology, Gordon Allport (1968) strikes a note of optimism with this hope: 'Interest in broad theory may again have its day. If so, investigators who are familiar with the history of social psychology will be able to strike out with firm assurance' (p. 69). These were admirable sentiments about social psychology in general, but what is it that history tells us about the relationship between 'broad' theory and *applied* social psychology? This analysis of discourse on theory in applied social psychology over the last four decades suggests that there have been persistent proponents of the view that theories are needed for a sophisticated understanding of social problems, yet there has been a consistent avoidance of theory. A history of the ways theory has been used in applied social psychology, in fact, sensitizes us to the kinds of theories needed for such a task and to the pitfalls and the potentials involved in the application of these social theories. While the majority of applied social

psychologists have yet to utilize the kind of theory need to truly understand social problems, some have become increasingly enchanted with broader social theory amid heightened concern for the influence of context and the importance of external validity. This paper seeks to come to a fuller understanding of the kind of theory needed in applied social psychology and whether current applied efforts are using substantive theory. The ideal kinds of theory and ways of application are rarely realized, leaving applied social psychology with much to do in the future.

Before leveling a critique at applied social psychology, it should be noted that the author is an alumnus of two applied social psychology graduate programs. Thus, this is an 'insider's critique'. Although my argument is that serious theoretical analysis is often missing in applied social psychology, there are obviously those in the discipline who are sensitive to theoretical analysis. Yet this is a concern still not shared by most students, professors or colleagues. Therefore, it seems that my concerns are not with all of applied social psychology or all applied social psychologists, but I believe that what follows is an accurate characterization of the field in general. Moreover, the field of applied social psychology, like all disciplines, is neither univocal nor static; it is a field in transition, and some colleagues are moving in directions fully supported by this paper's analysis, a point elaborated upon in the last section.

This following analysis begins with a preface on the kind of theory needed and the nature of application in applied social psychology. Then I examine debates during the crisis in social psychology and afterwards, emphasizing rarely analyzed post-crisis discourse from the perspective of critical social psychology.

## What Kind of Theory?

In an applied social psychology oriented to solving social problems, what kinds of theories are needed? In one of social psychology's classics, Deutsch and Krauss's *Theories of Social Psychology* (1965), the authors discuss what is meant by theory. They define theories as 'intellectual tools for organizing data in such a way that one can make inferences or logical transitions from one set of data to another', and 'they [theories] serve as guides to the investigation, explanation, organization, and discovery of matters of observable fact' (p. 6). As such, theories define the basic elements of concern and the rules of relation among the elements.

The picture, however, gets much more complex when considering exactly what is meant by theory and what kinds of theory are needed in applied social psychology. For instance, some distinguish theories from principles. Oskamp and Schultz (1998) propose that a principle is 'a statement of an underlying cause for a psychological event' (p. 23), whereas a theory is 'an

integrated set of principles that describes, explains, and predicts observed events' (p. 23; see also Higgins & Kruglanski, 1996). Theories, therefore, are often clusters of related principles. So, for example, the self-fulfilling prophecy is a principle, since it addresses a fairly simple process, but the theory of planned behavior is closer to a theory because it consolidates several principles about how humans act (i.e. social norms, connections between attitudes and behaviors, etc.).

Stevens (1998) reminds us that social psychological theories can also vary in both the focus and range of convenience (i.e. breadth and depth). That is, attribution theory has limited ability to explain human experience in much depth or breadth, but social constructionism is applicable to a wide range of human experience.

Theories also vary in their explicitness. Explicit theories usually express all the central concepts, relations between them, as well as any overarching assumptions. In contrast, implicit theories often rely on unexpressed assumptions or are simply under-specified. For example, many psychological theories are implicit with respect to macro-social factors such as class and race because they are simply not accounted for in their theories. Indeed, in a relatively young science such as social psychology, implicit theories are quite typical. However, if it is important to know exactly what is going on with a social phenomenon (or any phenomenon, for that matter), the most broad and explicit theory will be the best. That is, theories that attempt to explain more complex social behaviors should be explicit, especially in terms of social influences and, ideally, interactions among the influences.

It also seems reasonable, therefore, that when seeking to explain social problems, theories should explicitly address macro-social factors and the interactions among them. The often-cited Merton (1957) introduced social psychology to the notion of low-, middle- and high-range social theories. It is widely held that most theories in social psychology aspire to be middle-range theories that tie together both psychological (low-range) and societal forces (high-range). But there are also 'mini-theories' that deal with limited circumstances and events (Oskamp, 1984), such as the diffusion of responsibility among bystanders. Kruglanski (2001) observes that contemporary social psychology seems averse to high-range theories and increasingly interested in smaller levels of analyses. This is a concern for theoretical psychologists, such as Slife and Williams (1997), who observe that psychology in general is dominated by 'models, techniques, and microtheories' (p. 118), in which models—typical in experimental psychology—make 'delimited explanations that involve only a circumscribed field of endeavor' (p. 118) and techniques govern the 'practical applications of the various theories of the subdisciplines' (p. 118). Some, like Merton (1957), argue that this avoidance of higher-range theories is due to the fact that higher-level theories are difficult to verify; thus psychology needs to work out the basics before it gets to more complex questions. This is echoed by Sarason (1978),

who says science works like building bridges: you have to solve basic problems first, then you can build better and bigger bridges. However, philosophers of science, like Popper (1934/1959), point out that it is often easier to test and falsify more general theories.

Thus, applied social psychology needs middle-range theories that clearly articulate the reciprocal influences of macro-social structures and micro-social processes. If applied social psychology seeks understanding and resolution of complex social problems, it also needs theories that make explicit connections between various levels of phenomenon, perhaps even specifying and accounting for multiple levels of human experience simultaneously (Fisher, Grant, & Callahan, 1986). The idea here is that social problems can rarely be understood by one theory or discipline, especially a theory that addresses only one level of experience. These are, however, ideal expectations, which are rarely realized in applied social psychology, for many reasons, evident when examining how theory is used in applied social psychology.

One reason why applied social psychology rarely addresses macro-social processes, or even more than one simple level of analysis, may be due to realistic limits on the boundaries of theories. Dubin (1976) suggests that few endeavors in theory building can exist without some boundaries placed on the range of a theory. Each theory can only be expected to explain a part of our complex worlds; theories usually work in limited contexts. Theories cannot account for all dimensions (i.e. have no boundaries), yet the boundaries of any theory should be stated by the theorist. Moreover, in social psychology, it is perfectly reasonable to expect that both social and psychological dimensions are accounted for, or at least if they are not, why they are not. The assumption here is that a social psychological theory should at the very least refer to some element of social human action *and* psychological experience, and offer a way to connect the two. Thus, elements of the context are likely relevant to any knowledge proposed in social psychology. Ideally, theories should have few boundaries, or at least the potential to connect with dimensions outside the theory's boundary. In practice, however, there is a multitude of dimensions that social psychological theory needs to address, so most theories will not be able to specify all relevant dimensions.

Readers may find the above treatment of theory too crisp and clear. Indeed, each of the dimensions of theory discussed above is highly problematic. Surely some models are like principles, some principles border on theory, the differences between broad and narrow, explicit and implicit, micro and macro, low, middle and high ranges are all a matter of degree, with no clear borders. The preceding analysis reflects the straightforward manner in which theory has been discussed in social psychology, illustrating an overall tendency towards highly simplistic theoretical analysis.

## What is Application?

How does applied social psychology use theory? This is an important question since ideally it is *theory* that is being *applied*. Danziger's (1990) history of research in psychology offers a framework to understand the nature of application. In a basic sense, the issue of applicability is whether psychological knowledge can generalize beyond the situation in which it is generated. In this sense, the better the match between the 'investigative context' and the 'context of application', the better the generalizability. Historically, psychology researchers often ignore the unique qualities of the experimental context, claiming that their knowledge is trans-situational and trans-historical, justifying their laboratory work through its applicability, appearing untroubled by how scientific procedures often interfere with the applicability of knowledge, rather than acknowledging the special and unusual context of the research setting. In this sense, the rhetoric of science ensures that scientific knowledge is different from applicable knowledge. In other words, psychology researchers need to craft knowledge in experimental settings that are highly controlled so that they can arrive at valid statements of cause and effect; yet, as research settings become increasingly controlled, and therefore artificial, it is increasingly difficult to generalize the results beyond laboratories. Social problems, then, are a way to test theories and justify research efforts (Danziger, 1990). If research can be 'applied', in a very loose and general sense, then it has some value to society at large.

In applied social psychology, application is often used in a more specific sense. Typically, application refers to the use of theory to guide practices and research in the resolution of social problems. Fisher (1982a) considers two main forms of application: applied social psychology and applying social psychology. Applying social psychology means taking a model developed in laboratories with undergraduate student populations and testing it with non-student populations in real-world settings. In this 'taking-theory-out-for-a-walk' approach, applying social psychology is simply one more test of a model developed in laboratories, a method of assessing the generalizability (external validity) of a theory.

The other way in which Fisher suggests application occurs is in applied social psychology. From Fisher's perspective, this means research and practice originating in real-world settings directed at resolving social problems. Research begins in the outside world with a specific social problem. Either theory emerges through the research or theories are brought to bear on the findings of these studies as a way of explanation. The aim here is not necessarily to establish the validity of a theory but rather to resolve some social problem and develop a theoretical understanding of that problem.

Historically, debates about applying social psychology have centered on tensions between basic psychology—often equated with laboratory or experimental psychology seeking theory in the form of generalizable laws or

principles of human experiences derived from data—and applied psychology—usually characterized as problem-oriented, using theory to develop solutions to specific issues. Across the 20th century, debates on how theory fits into applied social psychology's quest to understand social problems regularly surfaced. This is a seemingly intractable problem, but there are some valuable insights along the way. Some answers to this issue have been explored in the crisis period of social psychology and the 'post-crisis' literature, which reveals some previously unexplored insights.

## Application and Theory during the Crisis

Sometimes it seems as if histories of social psychology are histories of the wars of the world, as they often link social psychology's origin to the US Civil War and important developments in the field to either of the World Wars (e.g. Morawski, 2000). One gets the sense from these analyses that since its inception, social psychology has been connected to social upheavals like war, economic crises and social revolution. Reich (1981) observes that throughout the history of social psychology, both theoretical and applied concerns have been present, although application has traditionally been less of a concern, at least until the last three decades of the 20th century. That said, Cartwright (1979) and Murphy (1998) document quite a range of applied activities in American psychology prior to 1930, including contributions to advertising, business, industry, the mental hygiene movement, mental testing, Taylorism, consumer psychology and jury selection. Some of the first studies on the 1930s Depression demonstrated a social interest, as did the founding of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) in 1936 and the National Training Laboratories and the Institute for Social Research in the 1940s. For many, it was rising fascism in Europe and World War II that led to an interest in 'real world' social issues (Pepitone, 1981) as social psychology began directly studying military concerns such as psychological warfare (Cartwright, 1979).

Following the war, in the 1950s, resistance to the application of social psychology arose, largely due to worries that the applied focus detracted from scientific objectivity (see Collier, Minton, & Reynolds, 1991, for a discussion of this). Basic research remained at the forefront. While some of social psychology's earliest works had high social relevance (e.g. authoritarianism and democratic leadership, prejudice and stereotypes, etc.), most focused instead on developing theory through experimental research, and concerns about application largely disappeared during the 1950s to late 1960s (Deutsch, 1975).

By the 1950s, social psychology was primarily concerned with 'pure science', a direction reflecting the movement in psychology towards the logical positivist model of science, which sought data first, theory later, and

application, perhaps, eventually. By the late 1960s, disenchantment with the pure science approach increased to a fever pitch during the crisis in social psychology. There are other, far more extensive, histories of that period and debate (e.g. Collier et al., 1991), but suffice it to say that a concern with a 'fun and games' approach to experimentation, combined with little concern for the key social issues of the day, or basic external validity, led many to call for a return to a more relevant and humanistic psychology.

Consider Allport's (1968) history of social psychology in the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (from which the quote at the beginning of this paper is drawn). In this revision of his original 1954 contribution to the *Handbook*, Allport changes his conclusion, seemingly in response to the crisis debate. He is critical of experimental social psychology for its triviality and lack of generalizability, and describes most studies as 'snippets of empiricism, but nothing more' (p. 68). He wonders if objective scientific methods *can* 'serve broad theory and practical application' (p. 69) and if 'the present preoccupation with method, with miniature models, will in the near future lead to a new emphasis on theory and application' (p. 69), or if social psychology's non-theoretical positivism will ever be concerned with the kind of theory necessary to comprehend social concerns.

A few years after the publication of Allport's revised chapter, there was reason for optimism. By 1971, the discipline had a flagship journal, the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, which was, as claimed in its masthead, 'devoted to applications of experimental behavioral science research to problems of society', by seeking to 'bridge the theoretical and applied areas of social research'. Nevertheless, there were detractors. Deutsch (1975), for instance, writes of concern that universities and funding agencies encourage the neglect of application in social psychology, such that 'only the foolhardy or those who are already well established in a discipline' can 'develop the broadly based orientations required for fruitful work on important social problems' (p. 3). Sarason (1978) is also pessimistic: he worries that the positivist model of science may not be able to resolve complex social problems. And Cartwright (1979) complains that there is a move away from larger theories in favor of narrower but more rigorous theories (e.g. the theory of cognitive dissonance). None of these theories, however, was connected to a larger integrative framework—the elusive middle-range theories.

## Application and Theory in the Post-crisis Period

The crisis in social psychology provided the context for an extended debate on the role of theory in applied social psychology. A rarely examined debate in applied social psychology early in the post-crisis period really set the tone for the 1980s and beyond. Up to this point, some historians of social

psychology were fairly pessimistic about the capacity of social psychological theory to capture the complexity of social behavior. In the early 1980s, two short-lived but valuable edited series on applied social psychology, *Advances in Applied Social Psychology* and the *Applied Social Psychology Annual*, offered a unique forum for leaders in the field to present their opinions on these matters. These papers on the 'applied' question in social psychology provide an excellent look into how one might use—and not use—theory to better comprehend social issues.

In the first volume of the *Annual*, Cialdini (1980) discusses his model for a 'full-cycle social psychology'. He compares the role of the experimenter to a trapper, using science to 'trap' truth. Experimenters, he contends, begin with naturalistic observations of social phenomena, then draw on relevant theory as a map for where to look for 'effects', laying experimental 'traps' hoping to snare the prey. In this positivist model, once experimentation begins, theory is less important than the evidence collected by the trap. Where is the 'full-cycle' in this psychology? Cialdini believes that ultimately researchers need to use observations of real-world social behavior to ensure that laboratory findings are valid.

Cialdini's model is weak, for several reasons. For one, it often leads to the study of phenomenon without concern for meaningfulness, but rather just the application of scientific technique. For example, 'discovering' the low-ball technique and writing about it could actually increase the exploitation of unknowing consumers. Cialdini appears to admit this when he writes: 'there is little suggestion of how to apply the discipline of social psychology to the real world for the sake of society' (p. 44). As a result, his model of applied social psychology is more interested in scientifically valid theories (in this case, theories of social influence) than solving social problems.

Another model proposed during this period is cyclical like Cialdini's model, but includes many other important dimensions relevant to solving problems. Seeking to end the split between application and experimentation, Mayo and LaFrance (1980) propose a model for an 'applicable' social psychology. They propose that there are three overarching concerns governing investigations: concern with improving the quality of life; commitment to knowledge building; and active involvement in intervention (see Figure 1). Moreover, each of these domains is linked by 'adapters' (e.g. problem definition) which emphasize the active role that psychologists must take as they move from one domain of inquiry to another. Contrary to Cialdini's uni-directional (i.e. observation to theory, experimentation, theory and back to observation) model, Mayo and LaFrance's model includes a negative feedback loop that is bi-directional. This suggests that understanding social problems can be used to change conditions which lead to the problem; it also suggests that changing conditions related to the problem might result in theories that could be used to explain the problem.

A third model is even more sophisticated. Fisher (1981) argues that
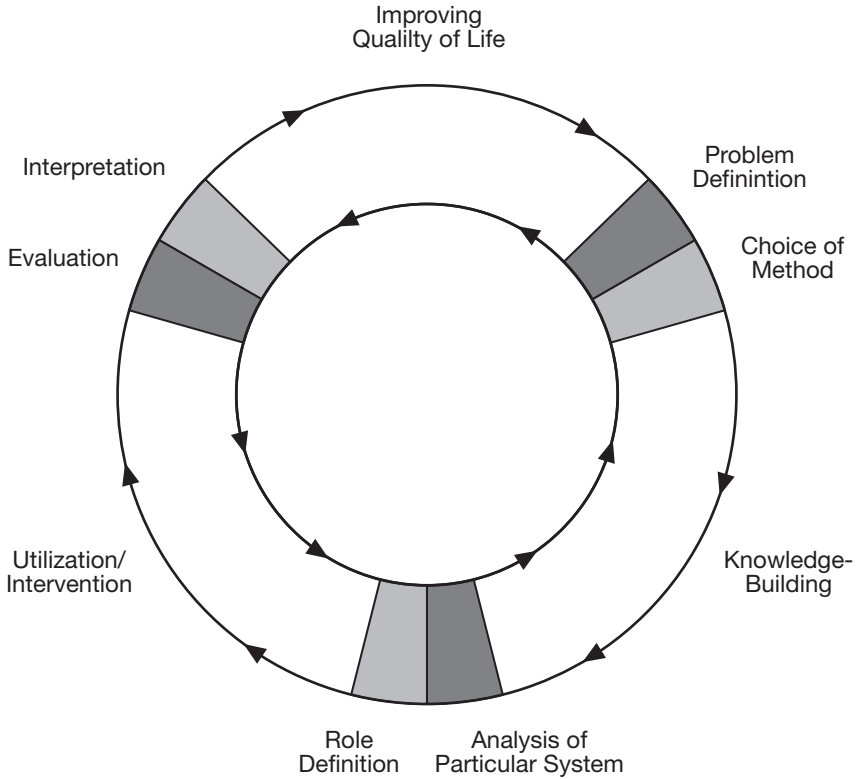
FIGURE 1. Model for an applicable social psychology. From 'Toward an applicable social psychology', by C. Mayo & M. LaFrance, 1980, in R.F. Kidd & M.J. Saks (Eds.), *Advances in applied social psychology* (Vol. 1), p. 83. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates. Copyright 1980 by Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates. Printed with permission.

having field studies replicate experimental findings, as suggested by Cialdini, is only the first step in a more comprehensive applied social psychology. Fisher's vision for the role of theory in applied social psychology includes other dimensions necessary for the resolution of social problems, such as the development of programs to solve the concern, evaluation research to study the implementation and outcomes of such interventions, and action research to clarify the problem. A key dimension of Fisher's model is the interrelatedness of theory, research and practice at all levels of analysis (see Figure 2). Fisher (1982b) conceives of it as a 'scientific tricycle' (p. 28) with three wheels (theory, research, practice), held in balance:

> Theory guides both research and practice and is reciprocally informed by
> them. Research evaluates and redirects theory and practice. Practice
> provides essential contact with social reality and clearly connects the
> discipline to the improvement of human welfare. Without practice, theory
> and research can become a mutually reinforcing and insulated system
> divorced from substantive issues. (p. 28)

Fisher et al. (1986) expand further:

> . . . theory would be used to guide research and practice, which would
> further develop theory. Thus, research would help to evaluate and redirect
> theoretical development and, at the same time, be relevant to practice.
> Practice, in the form of applied research, training, and consultation (e.g.,
> program policy, development, evaluation), would provide the essential
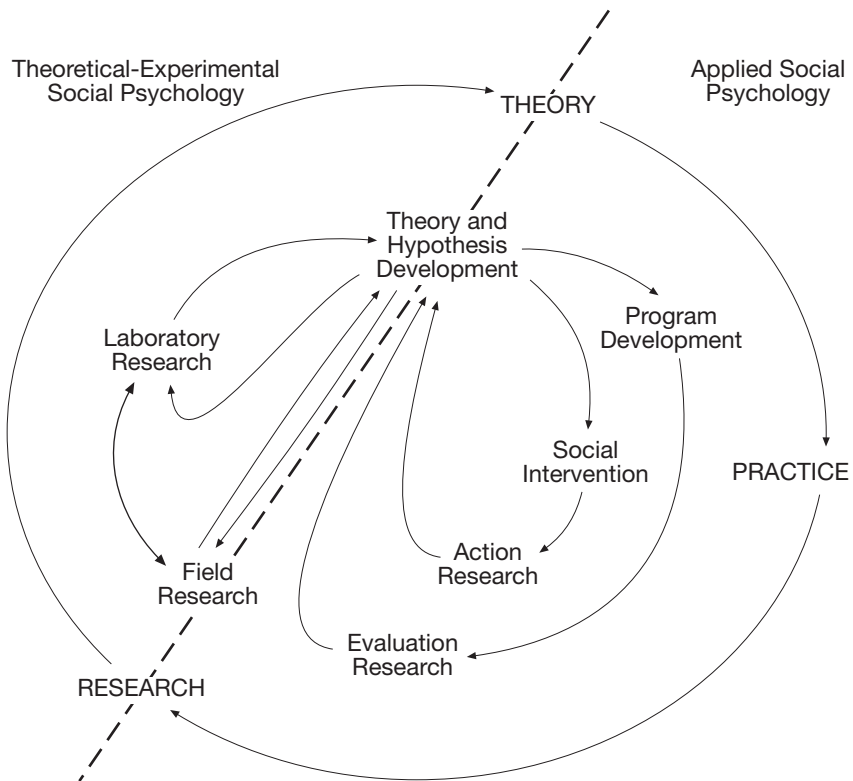> contact with social reality. (p. 233)



FIGURE 2. Theory, research and practice in social psychology. From
'Training in applied social psychology: Rationale and core experi-
ences', by R.J. Fisher, 1981, *Canadian Psychology*, *22*, p. 253.
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Moreover, Fisher (1981) argues that we need to 'find ways of applying our theories to social problems, or develop theories that are applicable' (p. 258).

Thus, for Fisher (1982a), theory is important, but the crucial issues are relevance, such that we should address our energies toward significant social problems, as well as validity, in the sense that we must build theories that reflect 'behavior in the real world' (p. 13). Later, Fisher (1987) becomes increasingly critical about social psychology in general. He bemoans 'the almost total reliance in the discipline on simplistic and artificial laboratory experimentation for gathering data on social behavior' (p. 299), and exclaims that 'laboratory experimentation is so contrived, so artificial and so trivial that one can only assume that logical reasoning must be the primary vehicle to carry the work forward!' (p. 299); and not, it seems, social relevance. Pepitone (1981) is equally critical: after reviewing the history of social psychology, he concludes that 'its theories cannot adequately deal with the influences on personality and social behavior that originate in the objective environment, including especially the social structures and normative systems in which individuals are embedded and psychologically subscribed' (p. 983).

One of the more substantive contributions to the debate on the role of theory in applied social psychology is Proshansky's (1981) chapter 'Uses and Abuses of Theory in Applied Research'. He observes that social psychology has failed to identify universal laws or principles derived from the laboratory, largely due to a lack of generalizability. Thus, social psychology has produced very little meaningful or useful theory and, as a result, fails to capture the complexity and integrity of human experience. Why is it, he asks, that social psychologists get more training in method than theory and that method always overshadows theory? He offers several possible answers. He proposes that applied social psychologists often fail to fully explicate their theories and consequently neglect the complexity of human experience. When theory is used, often broad theoretical constructs are invoked by researchers but operationalized in specific procedures, which often vary across experimental laboratories and methods, weakening explicit theory with inconsistent methods. Moreover, the experimental methods often used in applied social psychology corrupt theories with unstated assumptions and methodological artifacts. When we apply these same methods to the outside world, they fail because variables cannot be either controlled or specified by the model. Social psychologists also confuse 'levels of analysis', applying constructs developed in individual psychology to social settings such as groups, communities and organizations. Moreover, there is little attempt to integrate multiple levels of analysis into a coherent multi-level explanation.

As a solution to the above wide-ranging critique, Proshansky (1981) proposes a radical solution: that 'theoretical analysis' become one of the

main activities of applied social psychologists. He defines theoretical analy-
sis as 'the analytic process of exploring ideas, formulating and developing
concepts, making explicit the implicit assumptions involved in problem
formulation, and finally, seeking the logical and data-based relationships
between empirical phenomena and their relevant concepts' (p. 102). He
wants us to 'blueprint' theoretical connections in investigations, especially
linking to constructs developed in other disciplines. He believes that
exploring different methods of inquiry, or at least considering biases
inherent in the method used, will lead to fewer limits on our understandings
of social problems. Lastly, he urges applied social psychologists to consider
limits to the generalizability of their theories across time and place.

From the post-crisis debate on theory in applied social psychology, then,
there are a few lessons about how theory is, and should be, used in applied
social psychology. From a traditional positivist perspective, theories guide
the phenomenon studied and concepts used to study them (Deutsch &
Krauss, 1965). Theories guide research, help us to organize, understand and
interpret the findings of research, to predict what might happen (thus we can
test hypotheses), and control events in order to intervene in social problems.
In models from applied social psychology, however, theory is used to help
comprehend multiple levels of influences in a social problem, the inter-
relation between the levels, making explicit as much as possible, especially
connections between low- and high-range phenomena. Moreover, this is
an iterative process, where activities like program and public policy devel-
opment and evaluation in applied settings contribute to theories of
social problems.

The 1970s crisis led many social psychologists to wonder about the goals
of their work. That is, there were increasing concerns about *how* theory was
being used by applied social psychologists. For instance, Deutsch (1975)
noted that many researchers were becoming increasingly uncomfortable
applying their theories to politically questionable ends. Deutsch suggested
that we need a set of ethical guidelines specifying how to improve, and not
harm, the well-being of humanity. But, as noted above, it generally seems as
if the debate over theory and resolution of social problems fell off the
agenda. Most certainly, there are sprinkles of concern, and a few notable
contributions (documented here), but by and large, traditional social psy-
chology is dominated by empirical approaches with lesser attention to theory
building or testing, and even less concern with broad social issues.

Concern about how theory is being used came fairly late to applied social
psychology. Fisher et al. (1986) survey the post-crisis discourse and are
dissatisfied with the state of theory. They surmise that theories 'often lack
generative potential', support 'an undesirable status quo', and are frequently
irrelevant to social change (p. 232). Fisher et al. are no doubt using
'generative' in the sense that Gergen (1978) used it to refer to theories that
'can provoke debate, transform social reality, and ultimately serve to reorder

social conduct' (p. 1346). That is, theory possesses generative capacity if it has 'the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is "taken for granted," and thereby to furnish new alternatives for social action' (p. 1346). Fisher (1987) claims that applied social psychology takes a status quo orientation because it 'ignores what *should* be in terms of an identified and articulated value base' (p. 300), which he believes is a humanistic concern for human welfare (Fisher, 1982a).

## A Critical Response

By the end of the 20th century, applied social psychology was too focused on the cycle of verification through testing, ignoring other criteria by which to evaluate theory, such as its potential to resolve problems or ultimate impact. The question is now whether theory can withstand non-empirical criticism. What if a theory is empirically valid, but is trivial, does nothing to resolve social problems, and, in fact, oppresses people? Moreover, if applied social psychology is directed at the improvement of the quality of life, questions still remain. If social, cultural and political values permeate psychological theories and practices, what values govern applied social psychology?

   Growing dissent from social psychology's apparent role in perpetuating the status quo, which had begun in the 1970s, has led an ever-increasing number of psychologists to question the goals of the field (e.g. Ibáñez & Íñiguez, 1997; Pancer, 1997; Stainton Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson, & Stainton Rogers, 1995). These 'critical' psychologists seek to re-emphasize social psychology's emancipatory potential. They call for discussions on how theory is being used and whether to support an oppressive status quo or to change existing social conditions for marginalized people. Reflecting the concerns of critical psychology in general, such as that of Prilleltensky (e.g. Prilleltensky, 1994; Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997), this is a social justice psychology concerned with oppressed and vulnerable individuals and groups. It is a political psychology based on the values of empowerment, participation, and social change. Thus, for future generations of applied social psychologists, the question becomes: how is the theory and the application of that theory going to contribute to, or challenge, oppressive social conditions?

   Critical social psychology also asks of its practitioners a very different model of application. In critical social psychology, the point of application is an extensive challenge to existing practices. Hepburn (2003) proposes that application in critical social psychology can occur in several different ways. For starters, application could involve an in-depth exploration of the limits

of theory, specifically psychology's individualistic basis, for use in social interventions and changes in public policy. A critical social psychology, additionally, could show through application the prevailing ideology and rhetorical strategies used to justify oppressive social conditions. Most importantly, Hepburn identifies those strategies that are practical, in the sense that the application of theory can be used to identify the limits of psychology's ability to help oppressed and marginalized groups, the way psychology constructs reality and produces subjectivity, ultimately using theory to develop strategies to empower those disenfranchised by psychological practices.

   Is it possible that a hangover continues from the 1970s crisis in social psychology? Have things changed, and if so, how? In the 1970s, critics accused social psychology of being atheoretical and unscientific, lacking any relevant knowledge about the social issues of the day. It appears, sadly, that not much has changed. Indeed, there seems to be little difference between applied and experimental psychology. For instance, Pancer (1997) claims that mainstream social psychology continues to be extremely individualistic. The current focus on 'individuals acting in isolation in academic, laboratory settings' (p. 161), typical of cognitive social psychology, puts the 'social' in social psychology into question. Pancer argues that traditional social psychology theory and research are 'frequently unrelated to social concerns, or even to social behavior' (p. 163). He points to the flagship *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, which, with few exceptions, rarely publishes papers on theories developed in 'real world settings' on social issues. In fact, it almost never publishes papers based on theory alone (i.e. papers that do not have a method or results section): between 1999 and 2001, only three papers (i.e. Blass, 1999; Gump & Matthews, 1999; Page, 2000) out of more than 200 articles in the journal contained extended theoretical discussions. Compare the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* to either the *Journal of Social Issues* or the new journal *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*. Although neither attracts a large audience of mainstream applied social psychologists, both tend to present extensive theoretical discussions and empirical analyses grounded in important social issues.

   The field is dominated by a hegemony that sees concern for theory and application to social problems as a lesser priority, preferring empirical experimentation on models and micro-theories in laboratory settings. This is also obvious in the field's most recent survey textbooks, handbooks and journals. For example, Semin and Fiedler's textbook *Applied Social Psychology* (1996) ignores the question of theory application and relies almost exclusively on micro-range models, theories and research in specific domains. Michela's (1996) contribution to this collection on organizational psychology uses micro-level individualistic theories such as attribution theory to understand the macro-social world of organizations, a classic

failure to recognize the boundaries of a theory. In this sense, cognitive theories provide heuristic value to explain much more complex social organizations. This means, however, that Michela is unable to account for multiple levels of social factors that impact organizational behaviors, an obvious and serious failing.

It might seem that social psychology is not producing any appropriate theory, but this is not the case. Lubek and his colleagues (2001) explore this idea of a lack of theory in social psychology's 'mainstream' journals and suggest that social psychologists are producing interesting theoretical work, but they are just not publishing it in mainstream journals. They call this 'invisibilization', which occurs when authors might not consider a theory paper appropriate for mainstream journals or may have had prior negative responses to such submissions, and thus publish their work elsewhere. Indeed, social psychologists who wish to say theoretical things often do it in theoretical journals and edited books. This gives the impression that theory is no longer useful in today's social psychology.

In a rare 'non-empirical' paper in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Kruglanski (2001) points to an increase in the number of theoretical articles authored by social and personality psychologists in the 1980s, but argues that theory is now all but dead in social psychology. In support of this idea, he cites the lesser role of theory in social and personality psychology, the paucity of books on social psychological theories, and the well-known 'Princeton Rule' (i.e. a successful job talk 'gets to the data within the first 10 min [*sic*] of the presentation else all is lost', p. 871). He suggests that this 'theory shyness' (p. 872) leads us away from bold general theories and toward conceptual weaknesses. Moreover, theories lack cross-domain connections and are often isolated from relevant social issues. Kruglanski's points are well taken, but, ironically, the publication of his paper (a theoretical paper in a mainstream empirical journal) is an encouraging sign. At least, he encourages us to train students in different modes of theorizing, how to theorize, and how to evaluate theories (beyond mere verification through empirical methods), clearly a minority position in mainstream social psychology.

Kruglanski's commitment to 'better' theory in social psychology is further demonstrated by Higgins and Kruglanski's *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles* (1996). This is not, however, applied social psychology; it is positivist experimental social psychology, with little concern for social issues. Higgins and Kruglanksi argue that, in contrast to other books—which had focused on the application of social psychology to social phenomena—they would establish the 'specific principles underlying many different social-psychological phenomena' (p. vii). Their positivism is premised on the assumptions that a fundamental goal of science is the 'discovery of lawful principles governing a realm of phenomena' (p. vii)

and their role as scientists is 'discovering and understanding the true laws of
nature as they manifest themselves through empirical observations' (p. vii).
While such explicit theory is laudable, and desperately needed in social
psychology, the chapters in this volume strain to be relevant to current
social problems, often seemingly taking the 'leave-the-application-to-others'
approach. For instance, Buss (1996), in his chapter on 'evolutionary social
psychology', observes that even though social psychology has collected
many 'empirical generalizations of considerable importance' (p. 4), it has
not developed a theory that can make connections amongst these findings.
For Buss, the answer is evolutionary theory, a troubling approach since it
proposes principles in direct opposition to social change (barring genetic
mutation or adaptation). What helpful links could we make between evolu-
tionary social psychology, public policies and the development of social
programs aimed at child poverty?

   The work by Higgins and Kruglanski (1996) is typical. By the late 1990s,
the pendulum had swung toward atheoretical experimentation, and much in
traditional applied social psychology strains to be relevant to larger social
issues and problems. One example illustrates this point. The recent popu-
larity of research on factors that influence restaurant tipping (Rind &
Strohmetz, 1999, 2001; Rogelberg, Ployhart, Balzer, & Yonker,
1999; Strohmetz, Rind, Fisher, & Lynn, 2002) in the *Journal of Applied
Social Psychology* demonstrates the most callous and irrelevant use of
resources, a dismaying return to the fun-and-games research of the 1950s.
Doesn't applied social psychology wish to be relevant to the depletion of
natural resources, widespread violations of human rights, politically moti-
vated violence like terrorism, massive health problems like AIDS and
poverty due to the concentration of world wealth in a few countries? Or is it
more important to study what factors control tips given to waiters?

   Clearly, the tensions between application and theory were still evident in
the discipline at the end of the 20th century. One example of this is the
fourth edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology*, wherein the editors
ousted Allport's classic chapter on the history of social psychology. In the
replacement chapter, Jones (1998) addresses the theory issue in social
psychology. He proposes that one of the reasons why theoretical work
comes and goes is that theories themselves ebb and flow, depending on
social and political contexts, interests and concerns of researchers, funding
priorities and the problems of the day. He observes that social psychologists
might be waiting for reliable data before they explain and integrate the data
with theory. Ironically, this stance may hinder social psychology's progress
because, without theory, it will be hard to generalize experimental results to
applied contexts. Taking a relatively soft approach, Jones argues that the
distinction between theory and application in social psychology is very
blurry. He believes that 'Social psychology has always straddled the line

between theory and application' (p. 43), and whatever is labeled 'applied' and 'basic' depends on the 'observer's orientation', such that the same research can often be viewed as either applied or basic. He then asserts a fairly controversial claim: 'problem-driven research has itself grown substantially in the past fifteen years' (Jones, 1998, p. 44). Readers might look for specific examples, but find none cited.

Increasingly, social psychologists take an approach hinted at by Jones: the issue of whether to use theory in social psychology is irrelevant because of the overlap between basic and applied research. Sadava (1997) begins his textbook by questioning the distinction between applied and basic/pure science, noting that social psychology textbooks always draw on applied topics and social psychology has 'always been a hybrid, at once theory/research-based and problem-driven' (p. 3). So Sadava chooses to note the importance of theory, but leaves open many questions. How does one develop theory? What counts as theory? How can theory be applied? Unfortunately, the laissez-faire attitude implied by hybridity—'it just happens'—may not be suitable if we're searching for explicit theory, especially if most work cannot be connected back to any substantive theory.

Oskamp and Schultz (1998) provide probably the most thorough treatment of theory in applied social psychology amongst contemporary texts. Their model suggests a back-and-forth movement between basic and applied work, where theories 'provide the ideas that guide our steps in research', 'help us understand the findings of research' (p. 9), and 'give us a basis for predicting what will happen' (p. 10). Amid this traditional positivist model are signs of greater optimism. Commenting on the theory/application split of the 1980s, they observe:

> . . . there are some signs of greater integration of these two aspects of the field, for instance in large-scale multivariate research that captures more of the complexity of the natural world, and in the tendency for major researchers to work in both theoretical and applied areas. (p. 14)

Specific examples were not forthcoming and, while these studies no doubt exist, they are certainly not dominant in the field as of yet.

Critical psychology, then, interrogates applied social psychology, reflecting a growing dissatisfaction that social psychology is once again failing in its quest for empowerment and social change. Moreover, the field is dominated by little theoretical analysis in favor of experimental models and micro-theories. There are those who don't suffer from 'theory shyness', but they fail to find a venue for their work in mainstream applied social psychology journals. Key sources in the field, including its major texts, rely on positivist distinctions between applied and basic science, yet there may be a move in a more hopeful direction.

**Future Hopes?**

Is it possible that applied social psychology is finally moving in the direction of more sophisticated theoretical analyses? Two book series in the last decade of the 20th century and efforts of European social psychologists promise to seriously address the role of theory in understanding social problems. There are, however, also remnants of the old way of doing applied social psychology.

The collections of the *Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology* focus on the application of social psychological knowledge in the resolution of social problems, ultimately hoping to integrate theory and research. The series began in 1990 with Oskamp and Spacapan's analysis of how people interact with technology in the workplace and continues with books that address community problems (Arriaga & Oskamp, 1998), cross-cultural psychology (Granrose & Oskamp, 1997), organizational psychology (Chemers, Oskamp, & Costanzo, 1995), gender issues (Oskamp & Costanzo, 1993), HIV risk behaviors (Oskamp & Thompson, 1996) and prejudice and discrimination (Oskamp, 2000). These volumes seek to address a wide range of contemporary social problems, reviewing current research, theory and, in some cases, policy.

Typical of this series, Oskamp and Costanzo (1993) focus on an issue not usually addressed by applied social psychologists—gender—promising that 'applied social psychologists have useful knowledge for citizens and practical advice for practitioners and policymakers who deal with complex personal and societal problems' (p. viii). Yet they deliver a fairly traditional overview of the methods and findings of laboratory research, using fairly simplistic models (and not theories). For instance, Jacklin and Baker (1993) argue for a 'comprehensive interactionist model' that takes into account both biological and social influences on the development of gender, a simplistic approach obvious even then. While theoretically limited, some contributions to the collection do take gender psychology into the realm of work and family life, as well as policy concerns, so there may be hope.

Oskamp's *Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination* (2000), by comparison, is much stronger in several respects. As with other volumes, there is an emphasis on very simplistic models and theoretical constructs such as intergroup contact theory, interdependence theory and ingroup bias. One 'theoretical' chapter by Stephan and Stephan (2000) presents a simple model of the causes of prejudice—it is based on the idea that intergroup threats and fears underlie prejudice and discrimination. Compare this to the chapter by Sidanius and Veniegas (2000), who argue for an evolutionary account of intergroup conflict, claiming that outgroup hostility is a universal human process, which may take a very long time to overcome. The third part of the book, however, begins to address questions of prejudice and discrimination in applied settings, with an eye on both interventions and the evaluations of

those interventions. Although they use theories developed in laboratory research, the authors take them into the field and evaluate their successes in terms both of their strength for intervention and their dissemination to policy makers. Aboud and Levy (2000) are even critical of interventions for not being theoretically based enough, and suggest that the theories upon which interventions are based need to be rethought.

The second major series on applied social psychology is a collaboration of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues and the Loyola University of Chicago Applied Social Psychology Graduate Program. In the first volume of this series, an intended continuation of the early 1980s series reviewed earlier, Edwards, Tindale, Heath, and Posavac (1990) focus on theories of social influence. Remarkably, Edwards (1990) encourages researchers to consider all the relevant social psychological concepts and processes (e.g. social cognition, social learning, etc.) across many substantive topic areas (e.g. education, law and justice, health, work, etc.) which may bear on any social issue. This is a distinctly welcome contribution because it reinforces the idea that applied social psychologists should bring many different theoretical perspectives to bear on problems. Critics might observe, however, that social influence is not one of our most troubling social problems, so the collection is hampered by its unclear importance to pernicious social problems.

The second volume in the Loyola series, by Bryant and colleagues (1992), examines methods in applied social psychology, especially problems that emerge when studying social problems in field settings and advances in methods in response to these difficulties. Disappointingly, they seem not at all concerned with theory, or even with the theoretical assumptions underlying methods they use. The third volume, by Heath and colleagues (1994), seeks to determine if the theories of heuristics and cognitive biases can explain some common social phenomena. But is this not exactly what Proshansky (1981) warned against: using micro-level processes to understand macro-level phenomena? While these earlier projects are limited, the last two compilations are more promising. Tindale and colleagues (1998) bring small group theory to bear on social issues like education, community empowerment and international conflict. Ottati and his colleagues (2002), meanwhile, promise to articulate the cognitive processes involved in political decision making in natural settings. Both utilize varying degrees of application, and their willingness to concentrate on relevant social issues is encouraging.

Interestingly, some of the more potent contributions in the debate come from European social psychology, which often offers the strongest theoretical analysis in the field. For instance, Howitt (1991) tackles head-on the question of applying psychology to social issues. He contends that psychology lacks 'systemic discussions of the nature, theory and practice of applied psychology', especially 'theory-oriented accounts of the process

of applying psychology' (p. 4). In his analysis, he believes that many factors contribute to this lack of theory application, including the characterization of applied and pure science as opposites, minimizing the impact of applied research, and the positivist ideology underlying modern psychology. While Howitt is clearly in favor of applied work, he identifies many obstacles to the application of psychological knowledge. He suggests that we may not even have proper theories to apply, or when we do, we misapply the theory or submit it to unfair tests. Moreover, by conducting research on contentious social issues, a researcher may attract a fair bit of unwanted negative publicity, whereas cautious extensions of existing research might not. More pointedly, Howitt observes that attempts to apply psychology are sometimes met with resistance amongst consumers of that knowledge. Program developers and managers, for example, with vested interests in established programs, may resist program evaluations that challenge these programs' basic assumptions. Moreover, applied research, especially relevant to policies, may not include psychological variables or might rely on too few utilizable variables to be useful to policy makers. And sometimes the community may just reject research because of anti-intellectual biases.

Another example of European social psychology making an interesting contribution to the issue is Murphy's (1998) chapter 'Using Social Psychology' in the collection *Theory and Social Psychology*. She makes the point that British social psychological theory is enjoying an increasing commitment to social problems, using Billig's work on fascism and ideology as an example. However, if social problems are socially constructed, the application of social psychology can be tricky. Murphy invokes Sarason's (1978) characterization of social psychology having to solve problems over and over as conditions change. She notes that 'Social constructionism reminds us that it is not just the social problems themselves that change from one era or generation to another, but our perception of the issues, how we frame them, also changes' (1998, p. 187). Thus the task now becomes to 'understand the *story* behind the problem . . . and the *story* behind the research' (p. 187). Thus, we need to look at the history of theory on a social problem and how the researchers come to study the issue.

There is a sophistication in how European social psychologists talk about theory in social psychology in the late 1990s, a quality once absent, but increasingly present in American applied social psychology. Stevens (1998) discusses ten different ways in which theories of social psychology might differ (e.g. their basic assumptions, concepts, methods, etc.). But examining theories with such intensive scrutiny reveals some very basic obstacles to theorists in social psychology. For instance, Stevens warns us that concepts might sound similar, but they may be explained in quite different theoretical languages or might have been developed in different experimental contexts, such that 'even the same word may be given a rather different meaning in the context of different theories' (p. 49). Moreover, theories vary in how

precisely they define concepts operationally. For Stevens, one of the central theoretical issues is finding a balance between differentiation and testability. Differentiation refers to 'the power of a theory to encompass the detail, subtleties and nuances of human behaviour and experience' (p. 53). Thus, theories high in differentiation are those that can give us the most detail about what is going on, but 'more meaningfully differentiated descriptions about social behaviour tend to be less likely to be potentially testable in a rigorous way' (p. 55). Thus, there is a trade-off between concepts that can be experimentally evaluated and those that capture subtle human experience. However, if the goal is to understand complex social behavior or social change, then 'a theory with a higher power of differentiation but less rigorous empirical support may prove more useful than one with greater experimental support but with propositions of limited applicability' (p. 57).

There are trends towards a heightened sensitivity to theory and more concern evident with the critical impact of theory in applied social psychology, but mainly in isolated pockets of activity. Tensions between traditional and new uses of theory are evident in more recent work, with European social psychologists often leading the way. The way of the future lies in a greater sensitivity of the importance of generalizability and the boundaries of theory, or, in other words, the contexts of knowing.

## Generalizability and Knowing Contexts

Overall, the expectations for theories in applied social psychology are, if nothing else, becoming increasingly complex and specific. In answer to the question 'What do we do with theory?', it seems that the dominant response might still be 'not a great deal'. Early on in social psychology, theory had been used to help summarize research on applied topics, but the vast majority of positivist-inspired experimental research fails to develop the kind of theory required by a social problem orientation. The post-crisis literature, in particular, gave applied social psychology excellent models for the integration of theory, research and practice in the study of social issues. The post-crisis crisis, however, suggests that much recent applied social psychology appears not to have received the message. There are no shortages of justifications for such 'theoretical shyness', and when work gets theoretical, it tends to lose its applied edge and social relevance. There have been a few exemplary efforts in the United States that set the bar higher for future efforts. That is, if the cautions of European applied social psychologists are taken seriously, obstacles to the application of theory to the understanding of social issues can be overcome. However, it seems clear that much more effort should be dedicated to theoretical analysis in our field.

One main challenge to the application of theory in applied social psychology centers on debates on *what kind of theory* applied social psychologists use. This concern emerges out of previous concerns over the importance of generalizability, the absence of middle-range theory connecting micro- and macro-psychological processes, neglect of theoretical boundaries, the failure of theories to generalize beyond their specific contexts, and the ultimate failure in the search for universal laws and principles. That is, if every finding has a caveat or qualifier, then maybe it is a failure of the kind of theory being used, or, perhaps, the very kind of science used to identify those principles. Researchers are left either to ignore external validity or to specify contexts as a limit to generalizability. But by admitting the importance of context, these researchers admit that the positivist model is not valid for the conceptualization of social problems because the search for general principles may be fruitless.

Historians of psychology know that challenges to the positivist model of science have long been raised, beginning with 19th-century counterenlightenment historians and philosophers, such as Vico, Herder and Dilthey (Leahey, 2001). Dilthey, for example, proposed that a natural science (*Naturwissenschaft*) sought laws, prediction, control, and a 'human' science (*Geisteswissenschaft*) sought understanding of a specific culture of people. These philosophers believed that psychology might not be best served by a natural science approach because the social and moral influences on human action cannot be modeled by natural science. That is, the phenomena of social psychology are hard to circumscribe experimentally. For many, Gergen's paper 'Social Psychology as History' (1973) was a fundamental challenge to the idea of transhistorical principles or theories of human action because of his assertion that human action is dependent on historical circumstances. Thus, the positivist dream of accumulating knowledge over the years of inquiry could never be realized. In support of this idea, Gergen notes that the findings of science may make their way back to ordinary people, encouraging them to alter their actions. For example, educating group members about the symptoms and dangers of groupthink might change how a group operates. Thus, the principles of groupthink may no longer explain group dynamics. Gergen also notes that some phenomena are more durable than others. So, historical conditions might influence theories. Unfortunately, Gergen (1978) notes: 'We have little theory dealing with the interrelation of events over extended periods of time' (p. 319). What this suggests to many is that generalizability is a vain hope, and a more realistic enterprise might be to circumscribe limitations due to social, historical and cultural contexts.

Gergen's insights extend into discussions about how the social context influences what we do as applied social psychologists. Cartwright (1979), for example, notes that research topics in early social psychology read like an social history of the American 20th century: from worry about the impact

of rapid modernization to concerns over armed conflict, race and gender in the 1960s. Thus, what we choose to study, how we conceptualize these topics, the methods we use, are all influenced by context. Sarason (1978) puts the above thoughts into a social problems perspective. He suggests that societies define social problems and solutions to problems. So as societies change, so do social problems and their solutions. For example, even though homelessness in the 1970s shares some characteristics with homelessness in the 21st century, one must take into account the historical dynamic when conceptualizing and intervening in social problems.

Rather than searching for universal features of social life, many social psychologists are now looking at the limits of generalizability and studying definable contexts for their own insights. These researchers go beyond the immediate theory and research and examine the context in which both exist. In this sense, the focus often becomes the context of the study. In these investigations, the theory and practice of the social psychology interact in a 'knowing context' such as the background assumptions governing the study of a problem (Hill & Morf, 2000). The issue is now that 'Theories and practices exist within, and are bound by, a knowledge context' (Hill & Morf, 2000, p. 221). The task of the applied social psychologist working under this reality, then, is to consider the ways knowledge functions in particular social contexts, as well as in historical and cultural contexts (Hill & Kral, 2003).

## Conclusion

Early social psychology interested in the application of theory to resolve basic social problems quickly abandoned this goal. The crisis in mainstream social psychology brought relevancy back to the agenda, and subsequent debates in applied social psychology raised questions about how to use theory, what kinds of theory to use, and where to develop theory. While these early theorists valued theory, it seems as if applied social psychology still mostly avoids broader social theory, evaluations of theory in applied contexts, and theory directed toward understanding troubling social concerns.

Perhaps problem-oriented research has grown, as Jones (1998) asserts, but if it has, it surely remains dwarfed by non-theoretical empirical laboratory research. This has led many to question the values underlying applied social psychology amid growing broader concerns about the role of psychology in improving the quality of life for oppressed and marginalized people. Similarly, early concerns about the external validity of laboratory research have led today's social psychologists to contend that if applied social psychology is to be generalizable, researchers must account for the 'knowing contexts' of their investigations, sometimes in ways largely inconceivable given today's social psychological theory. These two concerns extend the

earlier debates about the goals of applied social psychology and links between low- and high-range theories. There are two key challenges to applying social psychological theory in the future: the integration of 'critical' concerns into practice and the consideration of knowing contexts and limits to the generalizability of research.

The above review and critique of the history of applying social psychological theory to social problems identifies some specific obstacles that can be expected and some exact concerns at this point. It is possible to have an applied social psychology that is both theoretical and socially relevant, but as a young discipline, there is much left to do. If nothing else, much more attention must be given to the kinds of theory used in applied social psychology and whether that theory is being used to improve human welfare. Adequate theory should at least connect micro- and macro-social psychological processes developed or tested in 'real world' settings. Theory must also have explicit emancipatory potential. Finally, when connecting theory back to macro-social levels, theorists need to situate their research findings in the historical, social and cultural contexts in which they are developed, specifying limitations for those wishing to generalize the results beyond the immediate contexts.

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