

Comment on Gergen's
"Social Psychology as History"

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Abstract. A recent article by Gergen suggests that social psychology cannot reasonably aspire to the general time-independent laws that are characteristic of the physical sciences. Consideration of this thesis suggests that the underlying rationale may place undue reliance on the effects of psychological enlightenment, and on the individual's needs to demonstrate his behavioral freedom and uniqueness. A tentative generalization suggests that the processes underlying social behavior may be relatively stable, but that they operate on an endless variety of social contents (conditions) to yield the diverse social behaviors and relationships that we observe.

Gergen's recent article on "Social Psychology as History" (1973) raises a number of issues that warrant serious consideration. Gergen's main thesis is that social psychology cannot reasonably aspire to the sort of general time-independent laws that characterize such disciplines as physics, chemistry, and biology. Instead, he argues that social psychological laws will almost inevitably be time-bound, mainly reflecting the social norms and personality constellations that were dominant at a particular time and place.

The instability of social psychology is presumed to derive in large part from the feedback that social scientists produce for the public at large. Individuals who hear about the principles of social science are likely to be changed as a result, and may subsequently act in ways that are inconsistent with previously enunciated "laws." An important consideration here is the fact that social psychological accounts often include clearcut value-judgments regarding "good" and "bad" forms of behavior. The consumer of such information is thus likely to alter his characteristic modes of response to avoid censure. As a result of these prescriptive pressures the social scientist may well find that the publication and acceptance of his work is likely to produce a substantial weakening (or disappearance) of the phenomenon he has worked so hard to establish. A paper by Bronfenbrenner (1958) provides us with an excellent example, showing that the severe and nonpermissive socialization practices formerly associated with middle-class upbringing were substantially altered in the years following World War II. By and large, the observed changes reflected systematic shifts toward the sorts of rearing

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patterns that were advocated by experts in such publications as the U. S. Children's Bureau Bulletins.²

Gergen feels that the individual's need to see himself as a unique and freely-acting agent is another important factor that contributes to the instability of social psychological principles. The individual who learns about some behavioral "law" is thought to feel belittled by the suggestion that his actions may be predictable from an abstract, impersonal formulation; as a result, Gergen reasons, he will often reassert his freedom by acting in ways designed to invalidate the experts' theories.

Apart from these influences that derive rather directly from social research, Gergen suggests that other forms of cultural change may undermine the stability of our "laws." Many social predispositions are a consequence of learning, and individuals who are reared in different times and places are unlikely to develop the same pattern of motives, values, and propensities. Hence, Gergen reasons, they may fail to develop those characteristics that are necessary ingredients for some of our hallowed "universal" principles.

Gergen's concern with timelessness attacks what Campbell and Stanley (1963) have referred to as the external validity of social psychological research. In essence, he tells us, the relationships we have observed heretofore are likely to be altered if we repeat our investigations under somewhat different circumstances (e.g., using respondents who are more enlightened about social science, or people whose dominant values and motivations have been changed in some important way). Clearly, this is a real possibility. Contrary to Gergen's thesis, however, it does not rule out the possible discovery of stable social psychological principles. The background factors that affect social phenomena may, for example, operate in a replicable, systematic fashion. If this proves to be the case, we might ultimately develop a typology of persons and situations to serve as moderator variables, specifying the circumstances in which a given relationship is likely to be observed, and where it is unlikely to appear. A contingent generalization designed to meet such complications might look something like this: In an egalitarian society, democratic leadership yields relatively high morale; in an authoritarian society, by contrast, there is virtually no relationships between democratic leadership and group morale.

The timelessness issue is, of course, an empirical question and its proper resolution may vary from one substantive problem to the next. Nonetheless, despite the difficulties involved in predicting future developments, there are several reasons for believing that Gergen's pessimistic views may be too severe.

1. Enlightenment effects. Gergen contends that enlightenment regarding social psychology may substantially alter the individual's behavior. Having faithfully read his psychology assignment, our college sophomore may now know

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Note, however, that contrary to Gergen's "instability" thesis, the changes in child-rearing that Bronfenbrenner noted are fully consistent with a possibly timeless generalization which holds that shifts in attitude and behavior often result from the persuasive influence of those who are perceived as expert and trustworthy. This principle would seem applicable to most social changes that derive from the "prescriptive bias" of psychological theories.

about conformity effects and may respond differently than the undergraduates of an earlier day when serving as an experimental subject. Would a nonreplication of this sort invalidate the principles that relate conformity to group pressures? Probably not. It would, however, force us to recognize that the original conformity principle required further specification, to take account of the respondent's knowledge regarding conformity effects. In brief, one might contend that the timelessness of the earlier conformity findings could not logically be challenged by data obtained from respondents who differed significantly (in enlightenment) from those who had been observed in the original experiments.

Unfortunately, while this line of argument seems impeccably valid, it is of limited utility, for if it is generally true that enlightened respondents fail to show the same effects that are observed in the unenlightened, as time goes on and increasing numbers become enlightened, we may find ourselves with virtually no one to whom our original formulations apply. Thus, we would be left with a valid theory that is applicable to a shrinking (and ultimately nonexistent) population of the unenlightened.

In contrast to the scenario sketched above, however, enlightenment effects may be less critical than Gergen has assumed. Understanding of a general principle need not render it inoperative, particularly if we fail to see the manner in which a given principle might apply to the specific situation in which we find ourselves. The specialist in learning theory is probably just as susceptible to partial reinforcement effects as anyone else, particularly if he fails to notice (or recall) the contingencies associated with a particular behavioral pattern. Similarly, while Gergen suggests that behavior modification techniques are ineffective when applied to people who are conversant with its theoretical premises, it has been my understanding that these methods often work best when the individual who is being treated is made fully aware of the relevant principles and of the particular reinforcement contingencies that the therapist plans to apply (Bandura, 1969).

Related considerations apply within the realm of social psychology. Virtually everyone who has taken a course in social psychology is familiar with the principle which holds that a trustworthy, knowledgeable communicator will usually produce more attitude change than a less credible source. Nonetheless, it seems reasonably certain that this principle is applicable to both the enlightened and the unenlightened without any major modification. That is, professors of social psychology (along with practically everybody else) are more likely to be influenced by communicators they trust and regard as experts, as contrasted with those who strike them as untrustworthy and/or misinformed.

Here is another counterexample. There is substantial evidence that we typically reject those whose attitudes conflict with our own beliefs (Byrne, 1969). This principle is doubtless familiar to most students of social psychology (and perhaps to others as well). It seems unlikely, nonetheless, that once we understand the law we are thereby freed from its implications, and from that time forward evaluate others in a fashion that is unaffected by their beliefs.

As a final set of counterexamples, we might consider some of the ways in which children are affected by the behavior of their parents. The likelihood that a given child will emerge as a smoker (versus nonsmoker) is predictable in part from the smoking behavior of his parents; similarly,

political and religious affiliations tend to be transmitted across generations. While I do not know of any data in these areas that specifically address the present issue, it seems highly unlikely that these parent-child correlations would be substantially affected if the available information about cross-generational influences was more widely recognized than it is today. Similarly, the testimony of our clinical colleagues does not seem to support the view that a person who learns about the looking-glass self can, through this form of enlightenment, alleviate deep-seated feelings of inadequacy that derive from an extended pattern of parental derogation (Cooley, 1922; Mead, 1934).

2. Much of Gergen's argument seems to be based on the assumption that the average person is strongly influenced by the need to demonstrate his uniqueness and behavioral independence despite the nomothetic theorizing of social scientists. While these motives may indeed influence our actions at times, it seems unlikely that they are a pervasive and powerful determinant of behavior. Surely this type of motivation is not one of the "locked in" predispositions that Gergen accepts as the likely basis for a generally valid principle of social behavior. Moreover, even among those who have strongly developed "uniqueness motives," it is likely that these considerations are often overshadowed by other, more compelling influences. When selecting a marriage partner, casting a vote, or choosing a career, the need to confound the nomothetic theorizer must surely figure as a low priority consideration, if it is operative at all.

3. Changes due to learning. Gergen notes that while social learning approaches would seem to provide a theoretical solution to the instabilities that result from cultural change, even a doctrine as firmly established as reinforcement theory may require periodic restatement and re-examination, because the events that function as reinforcements in one time and place may prove less potent in other cultural settings. This is undeniably true, and yet the example does not seem very damaging. The investigator who is interested in reinforcement phenomena is not likely to be terribly disturbed by the discovery of a more diet-conscious society in which the behavior of school children is unaffected by the presentation of M&M candies, but can, instead, be strikingly reinforced by vitamin pills. The fact that we can systematically affect the reinforcement value of different substances and events by altering the individual's life history is surely to be expected and is not a matter of major scientific (as opposed to technological) concern. The traditional conception of a timeless law would be more severely shaken, however, by a demonstration that cultural changes can not only alter the specific events that serve as reinforcers, but that some of the classic "laws" of reinforcement can also be changed. For example, if the relationship between partial reinforcement and resistance to extinction proved to be an ephemeral phenomenon which was not applicable to children of the 1980's, then the reinforcement theorist might truly feel threatened in his timeless ivory tower. Even then, however, our hardy theorist would surely attempt to systematize these phenomena, hoping to reach some general statement regarding the social and biological factors that are critical for the demonstration of this classic relationship.

Perhaps this analysis of the timeless versus timebound aspects of reinforcement theory can provide us with a model for the sorts of things that are likely to prove stable despite cultural changes. A tentative

generalization might be that the processes underlying social behavior are probably relatively stable, although they operate on an endless variety of social contents as we vary the time and place of our investigations. For example, the process of fear conditioning may follow a fairly uniform course, even though the particular things we fear depend largely upon changing historical circumstances. Similarly, as has been suggested most forcefully by Chomsky and his followers, the cognitive processes involved in communication may be universal, even though the things we talk about may vary virtually without limit, given our diverse interests and life experiences (see, for example, Lenneberg, 1967). Piaget's work may be seen in this same light, as focusing upon certain universal processes (e.g., assimilation and accommodation) that may be engaged in an endless variety of cognitive tasks. Lastly, one might speculate about the possibility that the defense mechanisms of psychoanalytic theory reflect universal processes that may be applied to reduce a wide range of anxieties (contexts) which vary widely from one social group to the next.

Dorwin Cartwright has suggested (in an informal conversation) that the present content-process distinction may roughly parallel Lewin's distinction between phenotypic and genotypic laws. The main notion here is that despite changes in the observed phenotypic relationships between a given set of variables, diverse findings may nonetheless be consistent with a single underlying genotypic law as it affects social behavior in a variety of times and places. The changing (phenotypically inconsistent) relationship between social class and child-rearing practices that Bronfenbrenner noted (1958), may thus be encompassed within the genotypical proposition that behavior patterns are often changed through the persuasive influence of trusted experts.

Gergen contends that the "historical dependency of psychological principles is most notable in areas of focal concern to the public." This is doubtless true, since the questions of focal concern to the population at large are almost always phrased in terms of specific content-problems (e.g., drug usage, political activism, social values). In order to deal with such issues it is clear that we must understand more than the underlying processes of identification and motivation, if these are indeed the processes that are involved; we must also comprehend the particular historical circumstances (contents) that interacted with these processes to yield the problems that now confront us. And it is, of course, quite likely that changing historical circumstances may make it difficult to develop a timeless theory which can validly be applied to a particular social phenomenon as it is manifested in different times and places. Hence it is not surprising to find that the variables which were predictive of political activism in the early years of the Vietnam War were substantially different from those that proved predictive in later years (Gergen, 1973).

Does this mean that the investigator who tries to study a stable psychological process will often find that his work is of limited interest to the overwhelming majority of the public? This is indeed very likely to be the case. And is it also true that the content-oriented investigator will have a greater chance to bask in the public limelight? Yes, he will, although as Gergen suggests, the generalizations he uncovers are likely to have a limited lifespan.

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