

## Social Psychology and History: A Symposium

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Readers of this journal will not be surprised to learn that there is some unhappiness and confusion in the house of social psychology, for there have in recent years been numerous critiques of the field. Some have been disappointed by a recognition that despite the hard work of the past decades, we have not produced much in the way of practical knowledge to help in the solution of pressing social problems. Other critics have been concerned that our field may indeed have practical implications, but that they are most likely to be realized by people in positions of power, who may use our research ("pure" or otherwise) to stabilize and enhance their personal well-being at the expense of the less powerful.

In a more parochial vein, apart from the matter of applicability, some writers have focused on the dominant research trends of the times. Thus, the ethics and intellectual content of the "fun-and-games" approach to research, in which elaborate deceptions may be mounted in the interest of "scientific progress," have been widely criticized. (Can a serious intellectual enterprise be securely anchored in a methodology that leans so heavily on dramatic lies, told to college sophomores?) Other critics have worried about the disparagement of theory, the notion that "ideas are cheap," and the continued dominance of laboratory experimentation. The enlightened reader can add his or her own favorites to this litany of criticism.

Despite these and other criticisms, however, most critics have shared the researcher's vision that social interaction is patterned--the idea that through inspiration, hard work, and continued financial support, we may discern some relatively stable regularities that appear and reappear, as we study social interactions in a variety of times, places, and contexts. Professor Gergen is something of a maverick, however, for in his essay (1973) on "Social Psychology as History," he eschewed this hallowed goal, arguing instead that because of its unique subject matter, social psychology could not reasonably aspire to the stable generalizations that have traditionally served as an incentive for investigators in the "hard" sciences. Let us change our scientific goals, he urged, recognizing that our subject matter is different. According to this view, social psychology is inherently ephemeral, for the regularities that we observe here and now are likely to change in a reasonable short time; and this will always be true, since our behavior patterns may be importantly influenced (changed) by changing social conditions, and by the feedback that social scientists produce as they study our past and present behavior.

Gergen's essay, with its unmistakable challenge to the orthodox goals of social science, led to a number of reactions. Schlenker (1974) argued that the difficulties we have encountered are not, in fact, inherently different from those encountered in other fields, and might be placed in proper perspective, were we more sophisticated in matters pertaining to the philosophy of science. Manis (1975) agreed that social behavior often appears to be quite changeable. Nonetheless, he suggested the possibility that "the processes underlying social behavior may be relatively stable, although they may operate on an endless variety of social

contents as we vary the time and place of our investigations." Thorn- gate (1975) subsequently came to Gergen's defense, and others expressed an interest in joining the parade. Recognizing the potential usefulness of this debate, Clyde Hendrick was kind enough to reserve space in PSPB, and to invite several interested people to organize their views on the matter. As an eager participant himself, he invited me to serve as a guest editor (umpire) for this set of papers, and I have found it an interesting assignment; indeed, I was ultimately moved to join the band of contributors. Hopefully, our collective efforts will help us to clarify what it is that social psychology can reasonably aspire to accomplish.

#### References

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