Discussion of Kelley's Article

John R.P. French, Jr.
University of Michigan

I share Hal Kelley's dissatisfaction with the research in social psychology during the last thirty years. The topics do indeed read more like a Sears and Roebuck catalogue than like a novel with a coherent plot. Furthermore, most of the items in the catalogue, though statistically significant in themselves, are insignificant for progress toward an integrated social psychology.

In contrast, fifty years ago we enjoyed schools of psychology such as behaviorism, gestalt psychology and Freudian psychology, each of which presented a comprehensive and systematic theory covering most of the domain of psychology. Nowadays most psychologists have despaired of seeing an integrated theory of psychology in their lifetime. Even the areas of psychology such as clinical psychology, social psychology, and developmental psychology are becoming more fragmented and less integrated. At most, we aspire to produce a "mini-theory" that encompasses only a small bit of only one of these areas.

I have another dissatisfaction with current social psychology, which Kelley did not mention: the well-known failure of personality theory and measures to account for much of the variance in behavior. Rarely do such measures account for more than 10% of the variance in our dependent variables. I point out this weakness because, as we shall see, Kelley's theory should provide a substantial improvement.

So I admire and applaud the *breadth* and the *integrative character* of the programmatic approach that Kelley has presented. It remains to be seen whether and how soon such a program of research can be carried out, but I have confidence that this article (or should I say this book, which has been outlined for us) will stimulate many social psychologists to change their theoretical orientations and their research methods, following Hal Kelley's lead.

Why will this theory have a significant impact on the development of social psychology during the next decade? First, it provides a fundamental way of deriving *new concepts* of adult tendencies. These tendencies differ from our usual concepts of motives, needs, attitudes, and traits because they incorporate the cognitive structures of the types of situations in which they operate. It is interesting to compare Kelley's theory with Kurt Lewin's concept of the life space. Lewin defined the life space as all those factors that determine behavior at a given moment. He divided these factors into two interdependent sets: the person and the environment. For Lewin, the person consisted of a structure of

34

needs and traits, which he represented by the use of topology. The psychological environment consisted of a structure of goals and various possible behaviors, which were structured into possible paths to these goals. Behavioral tendencies were conceptualized as force fields in the psychological environment. Kelley keeps the Lewinian emphasis on the structure of the momentary environmental situation, but he also incorporates into the *person* tendencies that reflect the structure of past situations from which they were derived. These tendencies represent preferences for one structure over another, which lead persons to seek out and to create preferred structures. Thus, the tendency within a person is a learned, functionally autonomous action pattern for coping with complex environmental situations, which often include the nature of other people and their relationships to the actor. Thus, Kelley's theory has two important advantages over the Lewinian formulation: First, it provides a more systematic way of conceptualizing and predicting how past experience will influence future behavior in new but similar situations; second, the complex tendencies that influence behavior are more multidimensional, and they often contain polar opposites that can influence behavior in one direction or in the opposite direction, depending on the sturcture of the environmental situation at the moment. For example, the usual trait theory predicts that in a particular situation one person will cooperate because he is cooperative, while another person will compete because she is competitive. Both predictions may be wrong, because the theory fails to specify the contingencies in each person's tendencies. In principle, Kelley's theory would not make these mistakes.

Another perspective from which to view Kelley's theory is Gordon Allport's discussion of idiographic and nomothetic ways of studying personality. The idiographic approach (as in a biography or novel) aims to portray the uniqueness of a single individual, whereas the nomothetic approach (typically taken by social psychology) aims to compare a sample of people with respect to a single carefully measured variable. I think Kelley's developmental approach will yield a more idiographic and less unidimensional approach to the conceptualization and measurement of adult human tendencies. These adult tendencies grow out of a series of experiences in complex environmental situations. These situations and their structures will be different for each individual. Consequently, the tendencies will have complex structures that vary greatly from one individual to another. It follows that the *methods* for measuring tendencies and traits will have to become more idiographic. Perhaps these methods will contain some of the features of the life-history methods, about which Doc Cartwright and I wrote in 1939. Once adequate methods are developed for measuring tendencies as conceived by Kelley, we should greatly improve our ability to understand and to predict adult human behavior and adjustment in complex situations.

In order to assess Kelley's belief that a systematic functional analysis of situational structures will provide a coherent understanding of human tendencies and behavior in social situations (point 17 in his lecture), I have tried to

apply his theory to the topic of social support. Will a systematic application of his theory provide new insights and fundamentally different approaches to the study of social support? A careful review of each point in his lecture revealed many implications that should have significant impact on research into the causes and effects of social support. Space permits only a brief description of three of these implications.

First, it is clear that the concept of social support must be fundamentally revised. It is usually conceived as a behavior directed toward the recipient of support, but Kelley's point 8 and Table 2 convince me that tendencies to support others, to seek support, to accept support, and so on, develop in situations where the two parties are in a relation of *mutual interdependence.* Support often flows in both directions between them, and its effects will depend on the *mutuality* of the support.

Second, current concepts and measures of social support are always unipolar; they vary from zero social support up to some maximum positive value. Kelley's theory suggests (point 13) that human tendencies often exist in polarities. We can expect that social support will vary, and should be measured, from high positive social support down through zero social support to high negative social support. So far as I know, no one has used such bipolar concepts and measures of social support.

Third, tendencies with respect to social support develop in complex social situations. Kelley points out that the multidimensionality of these situations implies that the tendencies learned in these situations are also multidimensional (point 16). Therefore, tendencies to seek and to give social support will be part of a more complex structure involving tendencies toward dependence and independence, toward reciprocal obligations, and the like. The particular structures will vary greatly from one domain to another, depending on the role structure of the situation in which they developed. Thus, social support between parent and child, between doctor and patient, between husband and wife will each have particular dimensions and structures.

I conclude that Kelley's generative theory will have fundamental and important implications for the study of human tendencies, for social support, and (more broadly) for the study of relations among people.

John R.P. French, Jr., is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Michigan and Research Scientist Emeritus in the Research Center for Group Dynamics. His research during the past decade has centered on a theory of person-environment fit as a conceptual model of adjustment to stress, strain, and health in working life. Currently he is focusing on the role of social support in stress and health.