

CRISIS OR QUANDARY IN SOCIAL
PSYCHOLOGY: WARRANTING THE
ETHNOMETHOD APPROACH

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CRISIS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

The "crisis" in social psychology has recently been the subject of considerable attention in psychology and sociology, but the precise nature of the crisis is somewhat elusive (Liska 1977). Elms (1975) described it as a crisis of confidence. Some call it a paradigmatic crisis in the Kuhnian sense, and others say it is characteristic of a new science in search of its first paradigm (Tedeschi & Bonoma 1972). Some positivistic participants contend that the basic principles of normal science still hold in social psychology, and that there is no real crisis (Schlenker 1974). Miriam Lewin (1977) suggests that the crisis stems from a basic split between those approaches in psychology which take Kant as their foundation, and those which look to Locke and Hume. Thus, the current crisis may appear as a more fundamental split in the philosophy of the social sciences between critical humanism and logical empiricism (Radnitzky 1968).

These three aspects of the crisis related to "the social psychology as history" debate are as much quandaries for the proponents of this position as they are for the logical empiricists who are criticized. These quandaries consist of three issues, which reflect different metatheoretical problems. These issues concern: 1) the nature of social reality and the possibility of a social psychology based on the methods of natural science; 2) the status of social psychological propositions as trans-historical theory; and 3) the objectivity of social psychology propositions.

Gergen (1973) argued that social reality is so fundamentally different from that studied by the

natural sciences that the methods employed in natural science research are inappropriate as applied to the social world. This part of the argument has been de-emphasized (Manis 1976), but its resolution is important for the resolution of other aspects of the dispute (Godow 1976). Gottlieb said: "... the most serious implication of Gergen's challenge is the necessity to develop a social psychology that can deal with the fact that its subject matter is people who interact with each other." (1977 208) One must consider the current debate as it treats the problem of a scientific study of human action. This entails two major issues: 1) the psychology of enlightenment effects, and 2) the problem of endurables.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ENLIGHTENED
EFFECTS

The social world, according to Gergen, differs from physical reality. Because human action is reflexive, the interaction between the activity of developing social psychology theory and the phenomena it studies differs fundamentally from the interaction between natural science theory and the natural world. Gergen argues that individuals react to social psychology findings and theories and alter their behavior accordingly. The necessity that subjects remain unaware of the nature of the experiments in which they participate illustrates the importance of lay ignorance for the success of experiments in social psychology. This would require that social psychology theories be hidden from public view. "To preserve the transhistorical validity of (social) psychological principles, the science could be removed from the public domain and scientific understanding reserved for the selected elite." (Gergen 314) He calls the reflexive response of individuals to social psychology theories as the psychology of enlightened effects.

Logical empiricists respond that enlightened effects may themselves

be taken into account by general theory (Manis 1976; Schlenker 1974 1976). The effect that a proposition has on the phenomena it purports to explain can be accounted for by a conditional proposition which considers enlightenment effects. Gergen (1976) and Hendrick (1976) differ with their more positivist counterparts on this point. The debate on the psychology of enlightened effects raises the idea that social action is reflexive, which becomes a generic concern in the crisis of social psychology.

THE PROBLEM OF ENDURABLES

The second way social phenomena differ from natural phenomena concerns the relative stability of the discovered patterns in the two domains. This is the problem of "endurables." Gergen argues that the regularities of social life change faster and are more erratic than natural phenomena. Social patterns, moreover, are tied to specific historic circumstances. "If we scan the most prominent lines of research during the past decade, we soon realize that the observed regularities, and thus, the major theoretical principles, are firmly wedded to historical circumstances." (Gergen 1973 315) He argues that variables that predicted protest activity during the early stages of the Vietnam War differ sharply from predictors of protest activity during the latter stages of the War, as evidence of the temporal tentativeness of propositions in social psychology.

Gergen's critics claim that these examples are chosen at the wrong level of abstraction (Schlenker 1976). They are not theories, but specific findings which one would expect to vary. Such variations are the subject of scientific investigation. Schlenker contends that regularities are evident in social phenomena (1974 1976). Social comparison processes, the principles of exchange theory, and ethological patterns characterizing human and animal behavior are cited as examples of trans-his-

torical regularities. Gergen and Thorngate reply that such regularities are too abstract to have any predictive value, and thus can hardly be the foundation for a general theory (1976; 1976).

The resolution of the problem of endurables as a matter of principle is insoluble when taken in the context of the social psychology as history critique (Thorngate 1976; Godow 1976). However many invariant processes are presented, none can demonstrate that such processes might not vary under some unforeseen circumstances. Conversely, however much variation is observed will not prove that order may not underlie such variation.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY PROPOSITIONS AS TRANS-HISTORICAL THEORIES

The argument has thus far concerned the subject matter of social psychology research and the circumstances under which the subject matter may reveal some order or regularity which is not historically contingent, and which will not be affected by the process of research itself. Advocates of the social psychology as history position maintain that the interaction between the research and theory making processes and the subject matter requires that the discipline become a kind of history. Propositions would have the status of a report about circumstances at a particular time. The logical empiricists respond that order is observable, and that general theory can account for variation in such order over time. Concerning the psychology of enlightened effects, social psychology theory would have to control or account for the impact of its findings on the subjects who may later attend to those findings.

This entails questions concerning the viability of theories which contain conditional statements on the problem of enlightened effects. Schlenker suggests that general theory should contain an "if/then" character, and that

historical circumstances should be incorporated. Although this may appear a reasonable solution, difficulties arise if one takes the problem seriously, and considers the difficulty of treating "historical conditions" as equivalent to conventional social psychology variables. The enlightened effects argument and the contention that social psychological propositions are historically situated, confounds validation of the proposition in a manner which the "if/then" solution could not resolve.

Consider a hypothetical case. In 1965 we find that education is negatively related to authoritarianism. In 1985 we find that this relation disappears. The "if/then" construct might suggest that the historical circumstances which produced the findings are no longer present, and that this could be incorporated in our theory, which would now look something like this: "Given historical condition X (1965), education reduces authoritarianism. Given historical circumstance Y (1985) this relation disappears." Historical circumstance Y may even be said to include an enlightenment effect, produced by the fact that uneducated people are not necessarily stupid, and having been appraised of the social psychological findings that they are authoritarian, see in this an implicit moral evaluation, and like their more educated counterparts, alter their responses accordingly.

The "if/then" solution rests on the assumption that the propositions at both points in time were valid. The relation between education and authoritarianism in 1965 is presumed to be correct even though it can no longer be found in 1985. However, this solution would leave us with the possibility that every time subsequent research invalidated a previous finding, the "invalidation" could be treated as a result of a change in historical conditions. In the example, we would not be able to determine whether the

negative correlation between authoritarianism and education was a truly valid finding for that historical period, or whether it was a spurious finding, with historical circumstances masking the true determinants of authoritarianism.

Similarly, with respect to 1985, we would not know if the lack of a relation between these variables is a valid finding, or whether "historical conditions" are acting as a suppressor variable, hiding an actual correlation between the variables.

History does not operate in equations in the same manner as other variables. The term "historical conditions" is not the equivalent of conventional social psychology variables such as authoritarianism, age, and education. Historical circumstances encompass and engender such variables.

If social psychology findings are tied to specific historical circumstances, important issues arise for advocates of the social psychology as history position, as well as for the logical empiricists. If knowledge is historically situated, how are they to know that their conceptions of historically situated knowledge are not themselves similarly and historically situated, and thus biased? Where the problem of history raises questions of validity for the logical empiricists, it raises concerns about the reliability of generalizations for advocates of the social psychology of history position, even if these generalizations are taken with the warning that they are peculiar to specific historical circumstances.

OBJECTIVITY OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY PROPOSITIONS A third aspect of the social psychology as history debate concerns whether social psychology propositions are objective. Are they free of value contents which would bias them? Social psychology as history advocates argue that social science propositions cannot be objective. Although Gergen has not specified

how it is that social psychology propositions are value laden, one may discern from such examples, three types of value implication.

First, such propositions may reflect cultural bias. Similarities and contradictions between the F-scale and the J-scale are cited as an example of such cultural biases (Brown 1965; Gergen 1973). Social psychology propositions may also be biased in that the variables which make them up reflect the professional values of social psychologists. Constructs such as self-esteem and approval-seeking behavior have implicit values, according to Gergen. The focus of education as an explanation of prejudice reflects the positive value attributed by social psychologists to education.

The final source of bias is that propositions in social psychology come from tacit understandings which social psychologists share as members of society. These propositions in social psychology are not explicitly tested in demonstrations of those propositions.

The importance of tacit assumptions can be seen in the cognitive dissonance theory. Gergen argues that the requirement of consonance is an artifact imposed on the phenomena by social psychologists. Further it is only because social psychologists hold certain background assumptions of how consistency is supposed to operate that they are able to generate notions of dissonance. Dissonance is therefore a function of the social psychologist's implicit notion of coherence. There are not explicit criteria which tell us when a disjunction between two cognitions is inconsistent. The lack of such criteria has been acknowledged by dissonance theorists, such as Aronson (1969) and siezed upon by critics (Harre & Secord 1972).

The significance of this appears in a classic example of dissonance producing cognitions. A person maintains the cognitions that 1) cigarette smoking produces cancer; and 2) I smoke cigarettes.

An individual who maintains these two cognitions would, according to the theory, experience considerable dissonance, which could be reduced through certain dissonance reducing cognitions, such as "Harry smokes, so it can't be all that bad," or "The evidence on smoking and cancer is purely correlational." The person may even admit that smoking causes cancer, but contend that smoking is enjoyable; that he'd rather have a short life with smoking than a long life without it.

By what standards are two original cognitions dissonant? Festinger (1957) explains that contradictions between two cognitions become dissonant when the obverse of one follows from the implications of the other. But "follows from" is not as strong as logical entailment, and exactly what the criteria are for asserting that one cognition follows from another is admittedly ambiguous. The criteria for determining inconsistency are "open-textured" and embedded in the particular context in which the "cognition" was evoked. Thus, in the example, the cognition that "cigarette smoking produces cancer," if taken as a description of the effects of cigarette smoking, may not necessarily conflict with the cognition that "I smoke cigarettes," taken as an assertion of an individual's right to ignore the question of health. The establishment of these cognitions as dissonant rests on the moral that one ought not engage in unhealthy or cancer producing activity, and this moral, regardless of its validity, is imported by the social psychologist. It need not come from the subject.

The importance of the contextual embeddedness of "cognitions" in different types of language games or speech acts may be clarified by a hypothetical case in the study of judicial authority. (See Searle 1969) Cognitive dissonance would suggest that individuals who express respect for judicial authority would also agree

with edicts from that authority, and would comply with such edicts. Assume that we have a large number of individuals who say they respect judicial authority, but who do not agree with a particular court order, and are not willing to comply with it. Or we have a large class of individuals who disagree with the order, and do not comply. It may be that these are all highly dissonance producing situations for these people, or it may be that different frames of reference define issues concerning respect for judicial authority, agreement with a particular court order, and obedience of that order. Indeed, speech act theory, and presupposition analysis would suggest that different criteria attach to such different linguistic acts as respect, agreement, and obedience. The tacit knowledge required for determining "dissonance" is in some form already present in ordinary discourse as it is conducted by logical empiricists as well as by advocates of social psychology as history.

This aspect of the crisis in social psychology reflects the meta-theoretical difficulty of developing a meaningful set of terms to describe social reality that is not rooted in the vernacular of that reality. The resolution of this problem warrants investigation of that vernacular. One may come to treat value laden and theory impregnated statements of both ordinary and scientific discourse as an essential feature of social life which warrants study in its own right.

WARRANTABILITY OF ETHNOMETHOD

We have identified three quandaries in social psychology, and certain meta-theoretical problems that underlie these quandaries. Reformulation of these problems in accordance with the principles that guide ethnomethodological analysis could provide a well-grounded basis for social psychology research. The argument is

not that ethnomethodology provides a body of principles that proscriptively resolve the difficulties in social psychology. Rather, the ethnomethod approach provides an orientation for research that incorporates as part of its program, constraints and directives that arise from and address theoretical difficulties in social psychology.

The first problem concerned the nature of social reality and the possibility of a social science based on methods used in the natural sciences. The reflexive nature of human action creates a difficulty for social psychology in that individuals may orient toward social psychological findings, and alter their behavior in consequence. This has led advocates of the social psychology as history approach to reject the attempt to find trans-historical patterns or laws. Social psychologists in the logical empiricist tradition have responded that the problem of endureables is a "red herring," and continue to assert that there are such trans-historical patterns available in social phenomena. Where social psychology as history advocates use the problem of reflexivity to defeat the possibility of a science of social psychology, social psychologists in the logical empiricist tradition continue the attempt to build a science of social psychology by denying the relevance of the issues which the problem of reflexivity raises.

The warrantability of the ethnomethod approach rests in its ability to provide grounds for scientific study of social interaction which incorporates a model of social action as reflexive in nature. Phenomenological sociologists like Schutz (1967), and ethnomethodologists like Cicourel and Garfinkel (1973; 1967) have outlined the theoretical principles and constraints in terms of which such research may take place. The ethnomethod directive to treat social reality as an achievement accomplished in and through sensible practices of actors in a context,

provides a framework in which reflexive social action becomes part of the subject matter of scientific research.

The second quandary concerned the status of social psychology propositions as trans-historical theory. This quandary is underpinned by meta-theoretical issues concerning the nature of time and history. The ethnomethod approach does not provide a stipulated solution. Rather, it raises the question of how social reality is constructed through a temporal course of interpretive work by actors in context. It provides a view of the actor operating in an optional system. The system consists of generative rules which provide certain potential options (Cicourel). Ethnomethodology focuses on the way options provided through such systems can be prospectively and retrospectively managed by actors. The rules which constitute these systems are not regulative or statistical, but conditionally relevant (Drew 1978).

Conversational analysis shows how members operate with reference to a system that provides both constraints and possibilities in the production of social order. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson demonstrate how turn taking sequences in ordinary conversation can be explained by a two-component model of the turn unit and two generative rules. This model accounts for a wide variety of observable features of turn taking in everyday conversation, and in specialized conversational interaction. Such an analysis directs attention to the processual and emergent nature of social order, and thereby raises the problem of how what happened in past conditions and what may happen in the present from a spectre that mysteriously haunts our analysis, to a subject of investigation itself.

The third quandary in social psychology concerns the objectivity of social psychology propositions. This quandary entails the dilemma that such propositions, to

be meaningful, are necessarily value laden. There is no proscriptive solution to this problem. The dilemma, however, poses the question of the conventional bases on which any person constructs and attributes value and meaning in social life.

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one consequence. Historically, undergraduate social work education programs have had to balance professional education with liberal arts education. CSWE has emphasized the inclusion of broad liberal arts content in the degree program for the social work major. Recently however, CSWE has been sanctioning the efforts directed to specifying the nature of the liberal arts content felt to be most relevant for the social work major preparing for advanced training or social work practice (Baer & Federico 1978). The issue for many social work educators now becomes: When does professional education with a liberal arts base leave off, and when does the technical training and vocationalism begin? The answer to this question may determine the nature of the alliances among social work, sociology, and other social sciences.

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