On the Very Idea of Social Psychology

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Given the centennial of the publication of the first two textbooks in social psychology, the one by William McDougall and the other by Edward Alsworth Ross, it is an auspicious time for reflection. It is a time to reconsider the movements into which these volumes were secreted, and the resulting trajectories of scholarship. We should also consider the ruptures developing over the decades among those calling themselves social psychologists and the possibilities now before us. In my view, while both these classics attempted to link psychological process with social behavior, neither proved successful. The currently dominant form of social psychology, largely issuing from the discipline of psychology, struggles to relate psychological process to social life; nor have sociological accounts of human behavior compellingly demonstrated the significance of psychological underpinnings. In effect, the early visions of relating mind to social process have not fully flourished. In my view, there are fundamental impediments to their ability to ever do so.

As I propose in what follows, when the problem of forging a social psychology is examined in terms of discursive traditions, we find the attempts of both McDougall and Ross to be fundamentally misconceived. There is no legitimate means of establishing a social psychology that links mental process to social activity. The compelling promise of such an enterprise was, and continues to be, the result of a linguistic confusion. This confusion also inhabits the many empirical demonstrations of what appear to be realizations of the early vision. At the same time, I do believe there is at least one highly promising means at hand of establishing an account of social activity that can simultaneously incorporate psychological discourse. A brief account of this alternative will close the present offering.

To set the stage for this analysis, let us consider briefly the challenge confronting these early authors. Both McDougall and Ross were essentially setting out to write grounding texts for a newly emerging science, one that could bring together the study of both mind and social behavior. In terms of the mind, the works of Wundt, Titchner, James, and Freud—among others—had already given way to an active and rapidly growing science. In effect, a world of psychological phenomena was already in place. On the side of the social world, Tarde, LeBon, and Durkheim—among others—had established a strong case for a science of social life. In this sense a discipline of social psychology could be viewed as an intellectual *tour de force*—uniting these otherwise separate enterprises. Yet, the differing emphasis of these early works is instructive. Both were working within a scientific tradition in which the concept of efficient causation was prominent. Thus, one of the most significant questions confronted by McDougall and Ross was the causal status to be accorded to mind on the one hand, and the social world on the other. The contrasting answers to this question furnish the basis for a conflict that has persisted until the present. For McDougall, mental activity is fundamentally grounded in the biological makeup of the person, in his terms the force of *instinct*. For example, McDougall proposes that the vast share of social life is governed by inherent instincts, such as reproduction, parenting, pugnacity, gregariousness, acquisition, and habit. The social surrounds are given far less of a role, and whatever their influence, it is largely seen to result from a more primary, instinctual basis. In contrast, for Ross, "Social psychology . . . studies the psychic planes and currents that come into existence among men in consequence of their association"(1908:1). Thus, Ross focuses his major attention on the effects of crowds, fashions, and conventions on the

individual. Whatever the role of biologically based psychology, it is of marginal significance. In effect, the two volumes established a fault-line that ultimately gave rise to what are commonly identified as "the two social psychologies," a psychological social psychology (PSP) on the one hand and a sociological social psychology (SSP) on the other.

EARLY EQUANIMITY: FAITH IN FACT

In the early years these differences were of no major consequence. Indeed, one could well imagine vistas of research in social behavior traced to psychological wellsprings, and in which mental process would bear the stamp of the social milieu. Speaking personally, by the time I was in graduate school in social psychology at Duke University in the early 1960s, the anticipation of a bi-directional social psychology was pervasive and energizing. A mutually supportive relationship flourished between social psychologists in psychology and in sociology. My mentor, Edward E. Jones, was an experimental social psychologist with a cognitive orientation, but enamored with Erving Goffman's work. He was also a close friend of Kurt Back, a Lewinian with a keen interest in macrosocial process. They, in turn, had a close relationship with John Thibaut, a social psychologist at the University of North Carolina, who was working in synchrony with sociologist George Homans's theory of social exchange. At that time and place, the visions of McDougall (who had been a professor at Duke) and Ross did not represent competing traditions. As a graduate student I could shuttle across these contexts of inquiry, with advisors in each domain welcoming anything I might bring from the camps of their colleagues. The individual/relationships, mind/society, micro/macro, experimentation/correlation—it was one grand world, replete with mutual respect and appreciation.

What did unite these endeavors was a collective commitment to empirical research, whether in the form of laboratory experiments, survey research, participant observation, or case studies. The common belief was that the systematic observation of social phenomena—coupled with precise measures of psychological process—would ultimately clarify the importance of social as opposed to psychological determinants. The question of relative emphasis, and the possibility of complex interactions, could be settled empirically. In terms of research opportunities, these were rich, uncomplicated, and productive years.

THE GROWING DIVIDE

As these halcyon years drew to a close, a more ominous cloud emerged on the horizon. Jones and Thibaut joined many other highly visible social psychologists to establish what was subsequently to become the elite Society for Experimental Social Psychology. The society was to function as the wave of the future, establishing social psychology as an empirically based discipline. And, because laboratory experimentation was viewed as the most rigorous means of testing hypotheses, lending itself most fully to tracing cause/effect relations, the experiment was to be the chief means of solidifying scientific status. Slowly, method began to take precedence over content. The impact was subtly divisive: the rigorous experiment necessarily confined itself to the behavior of the single, self-contained subject. In effect, social life could only be defined in terms of the summation of individual actions. There was no social process in itself, and it was only a decade later that Ivan Steiner (1983) lamented, "Whatever happened to the group in social psychology?" By 1999 Rodrigues and Levine defined a century old, free-standing discipline of "experimental social psychology." And by 2003, one of the most prominent wings of the field devoted its efforts to linking social behavior with evolution and brain functioning. Psychological social psychology (PSP) had become autonomous.[1]

This closing of the ranks also reflected a national trend toward the disciplining of knowledge making. As the social sciences expanded in numbers, and the number of sub-

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[1] For more on the significance of the experimental method in the splitting of the social psychologies, see Brannigan 2002.

divisions began to grow exponentially, it was no longer possible to read effectively across the social sciences. Because of the sheer volume of material to be mastered, expert knowledge was becoming parochial. And as the divisions in knowledge communities increased, so did the publication outlets, reputations, and research funding become more specialized. The result of such forces meant that a degree in psychology largely restricted the student's education to a view of human behavior in which biologically based universals were more or less presumed. In effect, there was no viable alternative to the McDougall orientation, and no particular reason to search beyond the perimeters of the discipline. Nor, for most of my colleagues in the experimental domain, did this loss seem particularly important. As one glanced at one's potential relatives in sociology (SSP), all that seemed to remain of the Ross tradition in social psychology were somewhat isolated camps of symbolic interactionists, labeling theorists, dramaturgists, and ethnomethodologists. And in many of these domains, the chief interest was not so much on mind/world relations as the relationship between microsocial behavior and social structure. Invitations from sociologists such as Sheldon Stryker (1977) for mutual appreciation between SSP and PSP seemed largely unheeded.

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY SCHISM: DISCOURSE AS DESTINY

Of course, one may lament the loss of the "good old days" in which there was little to separate the more social from the psychological scholar. However, in my view the schism was virtually inevitable, and there is no innocent return. Further, when more carefully considered, the very idea of a social psychology in which social and psychological life interact was misconceived at the outset. Although a radical proposal on the surface, it is far less so when we consider the case in terms of discursive traditions. As emphasized by social constructionists from Thomas Kuhn (1962) to the present, our disparate descriptions and explanations of the world are lodged within differing discursive communities. The world as con-

structed by the physicist differs dramatically from that of the psychologist, the economist, or the spiritualist. These contrasting ontologies are accompanied, supported, and sustained by differing practices and values. Empirical research cannot be employed to determine the comparative truth or falsity of propositions embraced in differing traditions, because such research is already committed to the assumptions embraced within a particular tradition.

In the case of social psychology we have, then, an attempt to unite two disparate communities of discourse, each with its own ontology. We essentially have "mind talk" on the one hand and "social talk" on the other. In the former case we may speak at length on psychodynamics, cognitive structure, attitudes, dissonance reduction, and so on; in the latter we may intelligibly describe processes of conformity, reciprocity, negotiation, and the like. These ontological orientations can fill the space of description for participants within the communities. Thus, in describing and explaining the vicissitudes of psychological process, talk of the social world is not essential. One may describe the process of repression, priming, expectancy confirmation, and the like without recourse to a discussion of social life. Similarly, descriptions of social life—of self-presentation, conformity, and labeling—can proceed quite adequately without reference to psychological process. The social investigator has no inherent need for a world of mental process.

Indeed, it is this potential insularity of discursive domains that has lead many critics to question the social relevance of contemporary social psychology (PSP). McDougal's biologically based orientation was subsequently replaced in significance by Floyd Allport's 1924 volume, *Social Psychology.* This work succeeded not only in integrating the behaviorist orientation of the day, but simultaneously replacing McDougall's unpopular instinctivism with the more widely accepted view of brain physiology.[2] This latter commitment

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[2] For an account of the way in which Allport's volume signaled a terminating concern in PSP with social life, *sui generis,* see Greenwood 2003.

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continues today, as evidenced in the first section of the Higgins and Kruglanski's (1996) mammoth, *Social Psychology, Handbook of Basic Principles,* devoted as it is to the "Biological System." Thus, with notable exceptions contemporary research takes as its focus of concern some form of psychological process—cognitive, affective, motivational, and so on—with the assumption of a universal, biological basis. It is, for example, the nature of cognitive accessibility, ego-enhancement, self-regulation, and the like that one is attempting to illuminate in such undertakings. The context of study may indeed be social. The "stimulus conditions" may include others—either actual or implied. And the behavior under observation may be social in its implications (e.g., aggression, altruism, prejudicial behavior). However, in the vast majority of the cases, neither the social nature of the surrounds nor the social potential of the behavior are focal to the research, no more relevant to the process under study than they would be for a neuro- or cognitive psychologist. In the main, we have a psychology that may have implications for social life, but is not centrally concerned with illuminating the social world.

We may ask, then, why should the early vision of a united, social psychology be so widely appealing? And why should social psychologists (PSP) retain a commitment to the idea, even in their insularity? In my view the plausibility of such a vision rests largely on a *fallacy of misplaced concreteness.* That is, both conventions of discourse—the psychological and the social—had become so fully compelling that practitioners came to presume the existence of the reality they constructed. Because of the broad cultural sharing of psychological discourse—of thought, motives, needs, and emotion—we are seduced into taking for granted the world of existence to which such terms putatively refer. Similarly, because of longstanding traditions we are accustomed in Western culture to see the world in terms of groups, communities, friendships, and so on. Given the presumption that both a psychological and a social world exist, we are drawn into asking questions about their interaction. Because both discourses refer to human con-

duct, we misleadingly begin to ask, how does the social world alter, transform, or affect our thoughts, feelings, values and so on; and how do psychological processes determine the character of social life?

To be sure, the research purportedly demonstrating such interactions is vast. From early research on attitude formation and change to more recent investigations of prejudice and group identity, research indicates two-way causal relations between the mind and the social world. However, on the present account, such causal linkages are conceptually precluded. Rather, the plausibility of this account is largely achieved in research through a discursive sleight of hand. First consider the conceptual problem we encounter in attempting to link the individual mind with the social world: As proposed, we have at hand two universes of discourse, each offering a rich ontology of existents. The question, however, is how the existents in one realm causally affect those in the other? How do events in the social realm make their way into the psychological world; how do psychological events cause social behavior? No more than a modicum of background in philosophy is needed to recognize these questions as variants on two of the most perennially vexing problems in philosophy: the problem of epistemology in the first case, and the mind/body problem in the second.

In the case of epistemology—the question of how we know—recent centuries of Western philosophy have served up what may roughly be viewed as two major schools of thought. One school—the empiricist—views individual knowledge largely in terms of the impact of the world on the mind. John Locke and David Hume typically figure as exemplars of empiricist philosophy. The contrasting school —often termed rationalist—views knowledge largely in terms of inherent ("psychological") processes. Both Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant are typically identified with this orientation. Over the centuries, battles between these traditions have continued unabated and without resolution. Within the twentieth century, however, the very foundations of this perplexing problem came under attack. As philosophers such as Wittgenstein,

Austen, and Ryle began to demonstrate, the very presumption of a mind within a body—"the ghost in the machine"—lead to philosophical impasse. In what may be viewed as a summary conclusion, Richard Rorty (1979) proposed that the way in which the problem of epistemology had been conceived was essentially a by-product of a Western language game. That the problem of individual knowledge could not be solved was not a function of insufficient analysis, but of obfuscating discursive traditions.

Much the same may be said of the problem of how mental process activates social behavior. Descartes proposed that the mind and body intersected within the pineal gland. And, while long abandoned, no viable alternative has emerged. Even today, as psychologists demonstrate the cognitive optimality of a given behavior, they can offer no means of understanding how the psychological decision ("This is the optimal choice") is subsequently transformed into action. For neuropsychologists, the problem of how "material stuff" affects "mind stuff" is typically abandoned by reducing mind to brain. As we may conclude, the problem of relating mind to action can also be viewed as a by-product of linguistic tradition.

If the presumption of mind/world dualism ultimately leads us into a conceptual cul-de-sac, what are we to make of the enormous body of social psychological research that seems to demonstrate the significance of such relations? To be sure, such research does furnish a sense of causal relationships, but in my view this effect is achieved through a discursive artifice. Consider first research on the effects of the social world on psychological process. Here the tradition of attitude-change literature provides an illuminating illustration. For decades such research has consistently demonstrated the effects of various stimulus conditions (the communicator, message, context, etc.) on individual attitudes. Thus we have two forms of discourse, the one public ("out there") and the other referring to a psychological state ("in here"). Yet, when examined more closely, we find that the word "attitude" actually refers to a public form of social behavior (e.g., words communicated to the researcher via responses to a scale). To pre-sume that the social behavior is actually related to an underlying state of some kind is wholly gratuitous. And, as we have seen, given the problems of dualism, we have no way of understanding how a mental state such as an attitude could actually propel the physical movement of the individual's hand as he or she completes the scale. In effect, coherent sense can be made of such findings only by remaining within a singular ontology, in this case a social one.

By the same token, one could also render such effects intelligible within the singular ontology of the mind. For example, anything designated as an event in the social world (the stimulus conditions) can be understood as a mental state. In traditional attitude-change research, for example, one may legitimately argue that "communicator credibility" or a "one-sided message" is not publicly observable, but is defined by the person psychologically. Likewise, there are no frustrating or reinforcing situations in the world; rather, what we call "situations" actually index psychological conditions. And, remaining consistent with the psychological ontology, we may say that there is no social behavior other than what the individual privately defines as social. For example, social psychologists have worried for decades about the study of aggression, for if aggression can be defined differentially by the perpetrator and the "victim," then there can be no empirical study of aggression in itself. If aggression exists only "in the mind of the beholder," the entire psychology of aggression collapses.

TOWARD A VIABLE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

As I have argued, social psychology as a composite discipline—uniting the study of mind and the social world—leads to a conceptual impasse. And too, ostensible demonstrations of causal linkages between these two realms are wholly misleading. In effect, I see little promise in sustaining the longstanding vision of unity, or indeed any form of social psychology relying on a dualistic distinction between mind and social world. However, there is another possibility of far greater promise. This would entail incorporating both

mind and social life within a single or monistic ontology. We might generate a coherent vision of social psychology *either* by reducing the social world to the discursive ontology of the mind, *or* of incorporating the mind within an ontology of social life. The second choice is by far the more compelling. If we attempt to build a social psychology on the premise that the social world is a mental construction, we ultimately enter the cul-de-sac of solipsism. We would have to conclude that each individual lives within his or her subjective world, unable to communicate, unable to comprehend the other, unable to take action. In philosophic terms, we take on the notorious and insoluble problem of "other minds."

In contrast, if we embrace the ontology of social life we can generate a coherent account of relationships and effective communication. Most importantly, we can successfully incorporate the discourse of the mind.[3] Further, if we examine the contours of recent intellectual history, we see that such a view is already flourishing. In my view, the same philosophical works that helped to undermine mind/body dualism in the twentieth century also harbored premises for realizing this vision of social psychology. Wittgenstein's (1953) concept of the language game was pivotal, in its demonstration of the dependence of word meaning on the social coordination of people engaged in a form of practice. Thus, for example, "pitch" and "home run" gain their significance from the way these terms are traditionally used in what we call the game of baseball. It is but a short jump to realize that the discourse of the mind gains its' meaning not because it reflects the nature of mind itself, but from language use within particular kinds of situations. Thus, we see that such words as love, anger, and sadness do not acquire their significance by virtue of their reflecting mental states (or conditions of the neurons), but because they have enormous "use value" in our daily lives. The intelligible "doing of

love," "anger" or "sadness" is the hallmark of one's effective participation in society.

Rudiments of this view may indeed be found in early work in labeling theory and ethnomethodology. The works of Cicourel (1974) and Coulter (1979) were singularly significant. It is against this background that a number of psychologists have begun to illuminate the social contexts and usages of psychological discourse. For example, Potter and Wetherell (1987) have pointed to the advantages of viewing attitudes as positions taken in conversations; Billig (1996) has illuminated the way in which reason functions as a form of social rhetoric; Gergen (1994) locates the function of emotional expressions in relational scenarios; Lutz (1988) describes the social function of emotion talk within non-Western cultures; and Middleton and Brown (2005) demonstrate the way in which both experience and memory are quintessentially social activities. There are numerous additional inquiries of a similar nature. Many of these I incorporate and extend in a forthcoming work, *Relational Being: Beyond the Individual and the Community.*

Such a view is congenial as well with much current research in such areas as interaction ritual, situated identity, identity politics, gender construction, social positioning, meaning making, and social norms. All tend to focus primarily on social process in itself, with scant reference to psychological processes. Finally, this microsocial view of social psychology is congenial with the burgeoning dialogues on the social construction of knowledge (see Gergen 1994; Hacking 1999; Holstein and Gubrium 2007). Should this marriage take place, we will find that the empiricism presumed by both PSP and SSP will become transformed. With scores of scholars from the history of science, the social studies of science, and the sociology of knowledge, we will come to understand that the realities realized within research are circumscribed by the conventions of understanding shared by particular social groups. This will scarcely mean the end of what we take to be empirical research. However, it will require a certain humility in what is claimed for such research, and encourage critical reflection on

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[3] One might conclude that this gives final sway to the tradition of social sociological psychology (SSP), but this is misleading. The early tradition was based on a dualism. In the present proposal, we have a monastic account of social life, in effect, an MSSP.

the cultural and subcultural values with which such research is freighted. More significantly, it will invite dialogue on the political and moral significance of our research practices, and furnish a rationale for the liberalization of such practices and forms of representation (see for example Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Reason and Bradbury 2008). This will be a science in which prediction and control become secondary, and the uses of research for collaborative transformation of society will flourish. It will be a science centrally concerned with pressing issues of the day, and offering creative options for more viable forms of life.

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