

Refiguring Self and Psychology

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Toward Generative Theory

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Much contemporary theory appears to lack generative potency, that is, the capacity to challenge prevailing assumptions regarding the nature of social life and to offer fresh alternatives to contemporary patterns of conduct. This deficit may be traced primarily to the commitment of the field to traditional positivist assumptions that (a) give preeminent weight to "the fact," (b) demand verification of theoretical ideas, (c) encourage disregard for the temporal dependency of social pattern, and (d) recommend dispassionate comportment in scientific affairs. Shortcomings are demonstrated in each of these cases, and the groundwork is laid for developing generative theory, liberated both from the press of immediate fact and the necessity for verification. Such theory may properly function to sustain value commitments and to restructure the character of social life.

When inquiry is made into the function of social theory, the typical response points to its essential contribution to "understanding, prediction, and control." If one were to inquire further into what is meant by "understanding" in this case, the answer might well be framed in terms of the scientist's role in "apprehending clearly the character, nature or subtleties" of social life (Urdang, 1968). From this standpoint, social conduct is granted a preeminent ontological status: It furnishes the essential mysteries for the scientist to unlock. Yet, there is a contrasting sense in which one may understand, a sense that does not take nature for granted. Understanding may also entail "assigning a meaning" to something, thus creating its status through the employment of concepts. Whereas the former sense of meaning finds its roots in empiricist philosophy, the latter may be traced primarily to the rationalist writings of Kant & Hegel. The rationalist orientation, while long entrenched in European

intellectual life, has gradually given way in the social sciences to the positivist-empiricist approach so central to present-day activities.

This distinction in orientations furnishes important insight into the ironic discrepancy between the seminal theoretical contributions emerging within the recent European, as opposed to the contemporary American, context. In spite of the relatively vast professional ranks and supporting resources within the latter context, theoretical contributions have generally been far less provocative in their effects. Few American contemporaries have been able to match the intellectual ferment furnished by such figures as Freud, Durkheim, Marx, Mannheim, Piaget, Levi-Strauss, Weber, Köhler, Veblen, and Keynes, among others. American social psychology appears to suffer the same malady. Most general treatments of theory in the field typically devote primary attention to Freud and Lewin; for many, Fritz Heider's richly suggestive work is deserving of equal status. Role theory has played a historically important part in the development of American social psychology, yet its roots may properly be traced to the early contributions of Durkheim. Similarly, the symbolic interactionist perspective may be traced to the early European training of its initial spokesmen (Jones & Day, 1977). In

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terms of general perspectives, only learning theory may be indigenous to American scientific soil. In effect, the strength of contemporary social psychology does not seem to lie in its capacity for engendering theory of major scope and challenge. More generally, it would appear that correspondent with the hegemony of the positivist-empiricist orientation has been a diminution in catalytic theorizing.

This is hardly to say that social psychology has been devoid of significant theoretical work. Although occasionally conjoined, two major forms of endeavor may be distinguished: (a) the *construction of minimal models* and (b) the *isolation of significant theoretical variables*. In the former case, theorists have attempted to account for a delimited range of phenomena with a minimal set of theoretical assumptions.¹ Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance may be paradigmatic in this respect; its simple set of pivotal assumptions has engendered well over a thousand empirical inquiries during the past 20 years. Similar with respect to their parsimonious construction and limited explanatory ends are Brehm's (1966) theory of psychological reactance; Schachter's (1964) two-factor theory of emotion; Osgood and Tannenbaum's (1955) congruity model; Kelley's (1972) three-factor theory of causal attribution; Jones and Davis's (1965) theory of correspondent inference; Walster, Walster, and Berscheid's (1978) equity formulation; Byrne's (1971) similarity-attraction hypothesis; Anderson's (1974) integration model; Duval and Wicklund's (1972) self-awareness theory; and Ajzen and Fishbein's (1972) attitude-behavior theory, to name but a few. The second major theoretical endeavor has been that of isolating variables thought to be vital in their effects on a circumscribed range of social activity.² Paradigmatic in this case is perhaps the work of the Hovland school of attitude change, in which investigators differentiated among source, message, medium, and recipient factors believed to influence attitude change (cf. McGuire's 1969 review). Schachter's (1959) attempt to isolate key processes responsible for affiliative activity furnishes a second classic example. More recently, variables such as physical attractiveness (Ber-

scheid & Walster, 1974); actor versus observer differences in causal attribution (Jones & Nisbett, 1971); internal versus external control (Phares, 1976); and "mere exposure" (Zajonc, 1968) have all received similar attention.

Yet, there is one vital difference separating such theoretical endeavors from those of "pre-scientific" European origin. Whereas the central thrust of American social psychology theory has been that of stimulating research within an elite, professional circle, the theories of Freud, Marx, Durkheim, and others often challenged the assumptive bases of social life, with profound catalytic effects both within the profession and without. The primary debates emerging from contemporary social psychological theory are generally limited to questions of alternative explanation (cf. Bem, 1972; Cartwright, 1971).³ In contrast, the earlier offerings have often fostered colloquy among scientists of diverse origin along with philosophers, historians, theologians, politicians, and so on. As Asch wrote in 1952,

It has to be admitted that social psychology lives today in the shadow of great doctrines of man that were formulated long before it appeared, that it has borrowed its leading ideas from neighboring regions of scientific thought and from the social philosophies of the modern period. It is paradoxical but true that social psychology . . . has as yet not significantly affected the conceptions it has borrowed. (p. viii)

And, as Tajfel (1972) has more recently commented, "Social psychology has certainly not succeeded in creating an intellectual revolution in the sense of deeply affecting our views of human nature" (p. 106). One may wish to defend contemporary theory by pointing to its superior testability and its related capacity to

¹ Such models correspond to Hendrick's (1977) "miniature theories."

² This form of endeavor corresponds with Moscovici's (1972) concept of "taxonomic" theorizing.

³ As Silverman (1977) has commented, "Apparently we have nothing to offer in terms of general theoretical or empirical evolutions or revolutions; nothing to discuss that would represent the basic issues or questions of our field and the paths taken toward their resolution" (p. 354). In effect, substantive debate appears largely eclipsed by methodological quarreling.

yield reliable bodies of social knowledge. Yet, it is difficult to fault the earlier theories for the lack of research that they have generated (cf. Blum's 1964 summary of empirical research on psychoanalytic theory), nor can one distill from the immense contemporary effort at hypothesis testing a body of highly reliable propositions (cf. Cartwright, 1971; Gergen, in press-a; Greenwald, 1975). In effect, the contemporary alternatives are not demonstrably superior in other respects.

It may be useful, then, to consider competing theoretical accounts in terms of their *generative capacity*, that is, *the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is "taken for granted," and thereby to furnish new alternatives for social action.*⁴ It is the generative theory that can provoke debate, transform social reality, and ultimately serve to reorder social conduct. It is the contention of the present article that the generative weaknesses of contemporary social psychological theory may be traced primarily to the discipline's steadfast commitment to the traditional positivist-empiricist paradigm.⁵ Although the paradigm has furnished a guiding rationale for many decades, it is essential to monitor continuously the paths along which it has led, as well as those which have been foreclosed. Four fundamental deterrents inherent in the positivist paradigm will be singled out for attention, and in each case serious weaknesses will be elucidated. Further, the critical rationale will be employed in each instance to lay the groundwork for generative theoretical pursuits.

The Preeminence of Objective Fact

From the traditional positivist standpoint, it is the scientist's initial task to observe the state of nature and to document with accuracy the systematic relationship among observables. On the basis of such preliminary observation, it is said, the scientist may build inductively toward general theoretical statements describing and explaining the phenomena in question. Progress from the level of particulars to that of theoretical generalization is to be made by employing canons of inductive logic, such as

those proposed by John Stuart Mill in 1846. Classical astronomy is often considered exemplary in this respect. The science commenced, it is said, when serious individuals began to record systematically the movements of the heavenly bodies. On the basis of such records, theoretical descriptions and explanations could be formulated and subsequently tested against continuing observation. In effect, observable fact is of preeminent concern.

The general acceptance of the traditional position within contemporary social psychology seems widely evident. As Shaw and Costanzo (1970) state the case,

Modern social psychology has largely been empirical in nature, basing its propositions and conclusions upon observations in controlled situations. . . . As a result of the empirical approach, a considerable amount of data about social behavior has accumulated. To be useful, such data must be organized in a systematic way so that the meaning and implications of these data can be understood. Such systematic organization is the function of theory. (p. 3)

In keeping with this orientation, graduate training is commonly centered on the process of systematic observation. Extensive knowledge of methodology and statistics is normally required, and the thesis typically insures that the candidate has mastered the skills of sound observation. Training in the process of theory construction is a rarity. The primary journals of the field are also devoted almost exclusively to the establishment of fact. Freedman's (Note 1) recent comment on the state of the art appears to capture the modal thinking of the discipline,

⁴ The generative criterion may be contrasted with the traditional concept of "heuristic." The latter typically refers to the capacity of a theory to generate research or solutions to practical problems. In these senses, generative theory may or may not be heuristically valuable, and vice versa. Whether generative theory need be contrary to common assumptions may also be questioned. However, it would appear that the formulation of new alternatives is inevitably counterposed to some set of existing agreements. Creativity and conflict may be inseparable.

⁵ Clearly, not all social psychologists wholly ascribe to all four of the assumptions here set forth. Yet, a family of congenial assumptions can be discerned in the public documents of the field, and it is to this "metatheoretical representation" that the present arguments are directed.

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Since research [on crowding] has only been going on for a few years, and since the findings are rather inconsistent and confused, it seems that people should be doing research rather than worrying about theories. The idea that there would already be a review of the theories in the field is certainly depressing. It is perfectly all right for people to offer hunches or tentative explanation or what might be called mini-theories of any area of social psychology, but to start presenting theories when we don't even know what the facts are is an exercise in futility.

Yet, the common belief that social theory should ideally be premised on sound fact seems to have continued undaunted by significant misgivings within the philosophic realm. It has first become apparent that the scientist cannot approach nature as an unsophisticated or unbiased observer of the facts. Rather, he or she must already harbor conceptions of "what there is to be studied" in order to carry out the task of systematic observation. From this perspective, scientific astronomy did not begin with the process of documenting existing fact. Required were preliminary conceptual distinctions between the earth and the heavens and among entities existing within the heavens. In effect, scientists must share certain theoretical assumptions in order to carry out meaningful investigation. Or, to put it more formally, "It is the theory that determines what is to count as a fact and how facts are to be distinguished from one another" (Unger, 1975, p. 32).

It has further been recognized that canons of inductive logic are inadequate to describe the process by which the scientist typically moves from the concrete to the conceptual level. The most careful observation and cataloguing of all the stone formations on earth, combined with the most assiduous employment of inductive logic, would not yield contemporary geological theory (cf. Medawar, 1969). Neither the facts nor the logic can furnish the questions to be asked of the data or a metaphor for conceptual organization. Concepts such as "the ice age" or "geosynclinal stage" appear to require some form of creative or intuitive act that is as yet poorly understood. Again, it appears that a premium is to be placed on theoretical imagination and that a preeminent commitment to establishing "the facts" is inimical to such investments.

The case is particularly potent with respect to generative theory. If "commonsense assumptions" concerning, for example, the units of behavior, their labels, or their relationships are allowed unconsciously to guide one's observations and hypotheses, then the resulting theoretical models are very likely to reflect those assumptions. Resulting theory will approximate "commonsense," a problem with which social psychologists have been struggling for several decades. When one "begins with the facts" one has already incorporated an implicit theory, and the potential for a generative outcome may thereby be reduced. Or, as Moscovici (1972) has more forcefully concluded, "social psychologists have done no more than to operationalize questions and answers which were imagined elsewhere. And thus the work in which they are engaged—in which we are all engaged—is not the work of scientific analysis but that of engineering" (p. 32).

Psychological Theory and the Shaping of Social Phenomena

Although early astronomical investigation was surely guided by preformal theoretical conceptions, it is difficult to argue that such preconceptions have operated at an obvious disadvantage in this domain. If such is the case, one may well ask why social investigation cannot proceed along similar lines; what problems are incurred by allowing "normative preconceptions" to channel social psychological investigations? The answer to this query lies in the far greater potential for such preconceptions to shape the phenomena for study in the social, as opposed to the natural, sciences. That is, the social scientist appears to be in a far more precarious position with respect to generating theory that serves to fulfill itself. There are two important respects in which social theory actively creates the phenomena to be investigated, neither of which appears as germane to most investigation in the natural sciences.

In the initial case, social theory may *determine the investigatory scanning process*, thus focusing attention on particular patterns while obscuring others. In determining the investigator's focus of attention, the theory estab-

lishes in advance the form of observation. To appreciate this point we must return to the earlier argument, that in order to recognize "the facts" one must already possess some form of conceptual knowledge. Such preliminary knowledge is required in order for a discrimination to be made between "facts" and "nonfacts" or events and their surrounding context. Yet, it may be further asked, what is the basis of the preliminary conceptual orientation? While the possibility for a priori conceptual structure awaits thorough study, it does appear that sensory inputs must frequently play some part in shaping these preliminary conceptual schemata. At the same time, the extent of their impact may depend on the character of these inputs as related to the physiology of the organism. At one extreme we may consider experiential inputs which readily lend themselves to "natural categorization" (Rosch, 1977). In particular, stimulation that significantly disturbs the nervous system may frequently give rise to conceptual distinctions. For example, the difference between the size and luminosity of the star against the background of the night sky, the sound of thunder versus the preceding quiet, the shape of fish as opposed to fowl may prompt the development of conceptual distinctions in virtually all cultures. These categories might later come to fix the range of preconceptions operating within the relevant branches of the natural sciences.

In contrast, we may consider a range of experiences dominated by continuous movement and ambiguous repetition. In observing the ocean waves, for example, it is exceedingly difficult to discriminate one wave from another or to form more than the roughest of category schemata (e.g., "wave height"). In this case, natural categories may not be readily forthcoming, and "what sorts of waves" one sees may largely be determined by one's visual focus. Such focus could be directed toward the wave slope, the amount of emerald green, the amount of foam, and so on. With each new focus, one's experience of pattern may be altered. The "pattern of study" thus depends very importantly on the cognitive set of the observer (cf. Neisser, 1976; Posner & Snyder, 1975; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977). In this

case, the category system serves to direct attention and, in doing so, "creates" the phenomenon for observation. It may further be argued that the great abundance of human social activity is of this second order.⁶ That is, such activity appears in a state of near continuous motion, its forms are infinitely variable, and fresh patterns may emerge at any point. Under such conditions, the conceptual standpoint of the observer may become an extremely powerful determinant of what is perceived. Preliminary understandings of "what there is" may well prove self-supportive. It is in just such conditions that competing conceptual perspectives are most required. Each perspective may operate as a lens through which experience is served up in differing form. With each new lens one increases sensitivity to the whole.

In addition to determining the scanning process through which social experience is fashioned, the social theorist may create his or her subject matter by actively *changing its composition*. Such alterations may be effected in a variety of ways, one of which may be singled out for its special importance. It would appear that people do not generally respond to social stimuli on a purely sensory basis. Intervening between the impinging stimulus and subsequent action is a conceptual or symbolic reconstruction of the stimulus, and it is to this "world as symbolically translated" that one's actions most typically correspond. Thus, unlike structurally undifferentiated organisms such as protozoa, echinoderms, and flatworms, the human being is not "stimulus bound." Little in the way of response reliability can be anticipated. The same proximal stimulus may engender a virtual infinity of reactions depending on its

⁶ It would be cavalier to assert that what the natural scientist senses is not frequently influenced by preliminary conceptions. One must learn "what to see," for example, through the aperture of a microscope, and this learning is typically conceptual in character. The present argument must thus be considered one of degree. It is also possible that as a natural science exhausts the gains to be made on the basis of "natural categories," it becomes increasingly dependent on social agreement within the field for specifying "what there is to be studied."

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"meaning" for the recipient. This line of reasoning is, of course, consistent with major assumptions underlying much contemporary research in social psychology. However, virtually unexamined by the field is the potential of the science to shape the meaning systems of the society and thus the common activities of the culture. Following the traditional positivist model, the social psychologist has remained primarily concerned with the tasks of reliable description and explanation. However, unlike the natural scientist, the social psychologist uses descriptive and explanatory terms that have the capacity to shape the character of social activities about which accounts are fashioned.

In the case of Freudian theory, such shaping effects already seem broadly apparent. In previous times, aberrant, exotic, or deviant activity was frequently viewed as an expression of "witchcraft," "inferior character," or "lack of willpower." Resulting reaction patterns were often punitive. With the advent of psychoanalytic theory, the same activities came to be seen as products of personality dynamics over which the individual had little control. From this perspective, the actor is deserving of "treatment" or "cure." In effect, the development and dissemination of psychoanalytic theory succeeded in altering widespread patterns of social activity (Moscovici, 1961). Similar effects may be traced to social psychologists' attempts to explain such phenomena as prejudice, obedience, social protest, and ghetto revolution. To elaborate, it appears from the broad literature on causal attribution that the culture frequently distinguishes between behavior that is under the individual's control ("internally caused") and behavior that is under environmental control ("externally caused"). Further, the literature makes it clear that patterns of blame and praise are often related to the locus of causal attribution (cf. Kelman & Lawrence, 1972; Newton, 1974). In particular, for devalued behavior (e.g., murder) we may assign increasing amounts of blame or punishment to the extent that action seems internally, as opposed to externally, caused. Similarly, for valued acts (e.g., heroism in battle) we typically assign lesser amounts of praise or

reward to the extent that the act seems externally, as opposed to internally, caused. Thus, as the common explanation for a given action shifts from one causal locus to another, behavioral reactions may shift as well.

In this light, we see that the social psychologist's choice of explanation for a given action may either sustain or alter the common attribution patterns of the culture and thus the common patterns of blame and praise. For example, when prejudice is explained in terms of authoritarian personality dynamics (Adorno et al., 1950), the prejudiced person is treated as the causal source of his or her own actions. Person blame is enhanced through such explanation, and one may feel justified antipathy toward the prejudiced person. A similar argument may be made in the case of obedient behavior, as described by Milgram (1974). When such behavior is traced, as it is, to the subject's divesting him- or herself of responsibility, to primitive thought patterns, to narrowing of moral concerns, and to lack of inner resources, then public scorn for the obedient individual can be justified. On the other side of the ledger, social protest is generally viewed in a positive light by the liberal wing of the profession. When such behavior is explained in terms of the individual's conscience, personal values, or intelligence (cf. Flacks, 1969; Keniston, 1968), it gains increasing value. In the case of ghetto riots, scientific explanation has frequently centered on society's oppression of the ghetto black. Such explanation functionally shifts blame from the rioter to the society. In all such instances social psychological theory has operated much like instructions in a reattribution experiment (cf. Dienstbier, 1972; Storms & Nisbett, 1970). They shift the attributed locus of causality for a given range of activity and, in doing so, alter common reactions to such activity.

From the positivist perspective, one might view such shaping effects with dismay. They constitute inappropriate violations of the traditional roles assigned to the scientist, namely those of observation, description, and explanation. Yet, from the present standpoint we find that in the process of description and

explanation, the scientist is inevitably engaged in the creation of social phenomena, both in the fashioning of the theoretical lenses through which social action is observed and in the reconstitution of the culture's systems of meaning. Theoretical terms, the range of activities to which they are applied, and the form of explanation may all enter the common systems of constructed reality and, in doing so, may determine "what there is" and the appropriate manner of responses. Yet, rather than viewing such effects as nettlesome "incidents de parcours," we may appropriately consider them among the foremost of our assets. The capacity of the discipline to effect social change need not depend on quixotic alliances with the public official or professional change agent. Rather, the theorist may directly alter patterns of social action as his or her mode of conceptualization is incorporated into the common understandings of the culture. This possibility stands as a major challenge to generative theorizing. Not only is the theorist urged to free him- or herself from the shackles of prevailing conceptual agreements, but is asked to consider alternative social forms that may be created through theory.

The Demand for Theoretical Verification

From the traditional scientific perspective, a close relationship should ideally be maintained between theory and data. Not only should theories emerge from initial observation, but once developed, they should be subjected to thorough and systematic empirical test. Through empirical assessment, theories of high predictive validity may be sustained and those which fail to correspond with fact excluded from the corpus of "acceptable knowledge." This general line of argument forms the basis of the traditional hypothetico-deductive system for advancing scientific understanding (cf. Koch, 1959) and serves as the underlying rationale for the major line of scholarly work in the discipline, namely, hypothesis testing. The demand for verification has not remained unchallenged over the years. For example, Popper (1959) has argued that there is little to be gained from increasing the amount of empirical support for a given the-

ory. It is primarily failures of verification that push understanding forward in significant degree. Popper's protégé, Thomas Kuhn (1962) has further argued that shifts in theoretical paradigm do not generally depend on the empirical status of the relevant conceptual systems. Yet, Kuhn's thesis is not generally viewed as prescriptive in implication. There are more damaging arguments at stake, and it is to these we must now attend. There are at least three major reasons for believing that the goal of verification in social science is largely a chimerical one.

The Negotiated Character of Social Fact

Social actions appear to carry little in the way of intrinsic meaning; the conceptual categories or meaning systems into which they are placed appear primarily to be products of social negotiation. The fact that a given stimulus pattern falls into the category of "humor," "aggression," "dominance," or "manipulativeness," for example, depends not on the intrinsic properties of the relevant pattern but on the development of a community of agreement. As a result, the labeling of any given action is forever open to negotiation among interested parties, and the legitimacy of any observation statement is continuously open to challenge. "What is the case" in social life may thus be viewed largely as a matter of social influence.

In the natural sciences, this potential for challenging the existing meaning systems does not appear to pose serious threat. Two important reasons for this relatively sanguine state will concern us here. First, the major proportion of the theoretical terms in the natural sciences are tied rather closely to specific empirical operations or measurements. Such terms as *temperature*, *weight*, *velocity*, and *electrical energy* may often be defined in terms of empirical operations about which broad agreement can easily be reached. Second, the theoretical terms employed in the natural sciences are developed within a relatively closed social system, the constituents of which are typically confronted by similar functional problems. Conflict of interest is not the general rule.

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In contrast to this relatively optimistic state of affairs, theoretical terms in the social sciences are only loosely connected to specific operations. As Katz and Stotland (1959) put it,

In physics the concept of atmospheric pressure is fairly close to its operational measure. In physiological psychology many concepts are similarly tied to their operational measurement. In personality theory and social psychology, however, concepts like ego strength, defense mechanisms, role systems and role conflict are so remote from their measurement that we have no single, clearly required set of operational measures. (p. 471)

Although it might appear that this problem is only symptomatic of the youthfulness of the field, closer examination suggests that it may be intrinsic to the language of social interaction. Any given behavior or concrete action may be defined in numerous ways, depending on its function within a given social context. Thus, there is no one transcontextual operation to which the investigator can afford to tie a given theoretical term. The pointing of a finger, for example, may signify aggression in certain contexts, but in others may be used to indicate an altruistic giving of information, a positive or negative attitude, egocentrism, or high achievement motivation. In short, any behavior might, on a given occasion, serve as the operational definition for virtually any general term. On no occasion can one be certain what theoretical categories are relevant (cf. Wilson, 1970). Second, for the social scientist, the mode of theoretical description and explanation is intimately related to the common meaning systems within the culture. For the scientist to "make sense" about human behavior, he or she must do so in ways that are ultimately intelligible to members of the culture (or a subculture). Thus, a continuous, dialectical interplay may take place between the meaning of specific theoretical terms within the sciences and the culture more generally, such that the meaning of specific theoretical terms may evolve over time (e.g., the scientist may borrow a term such as *aggression* from the vernacular, alter its meaning through theoretical and empirical analysis, and in turn, alter the resulting meaning system of the culture). As a result, the range of particulars to which any theoretical term

applies may be in a state of continuous emergence. What "counts" as aggression, for example, may vary from one individual to another and for the same individual over time.

Because of the ambiguous and continuously negotiated meaning of social actions, an immense impediment is placed in the way of theoretical verification. If all stimulus conditions and all subject actions are open to multiple interpretation, then a given hypothesis may be sustained only so long as other investigators refrain from challenging the meaning of the data base. For example, much empirical support has been generated for the simple proposition that people are attracted to those whose opinions are similar to their own (cf. Byrne, 1971). Yet, in any given experimental situation, what the investigator takes to be a "similar" opinion may be viewed by a subject or another investigator as a "correct opinion," "brave opinion," "judicious opinion," "helpful opinion," "moral opinion," "appropriate opinion," and so on. The hypothesis thus retains a patina of verification because the discipline has generally allowed the independent variable to be negotiated as a manipulation of similarity. At any time one wishes to renegotiate such meaning, the support drops into obscurity.

It is also for this reason that attempts to solve debates among competing theories in social psychology so often end in an impasse. Freudian theory, for example, has been able to maintain a brisk following in spite of the legions of studies that have attempted to discredit it. It may continue to do so as long as there are intelligent defenders who can demonstrate the "misleading" character of the many operations used to its detriment. Similarly, the hundreds of careful experimental studies that have attempted to solve the riddle of the risky shift (cf. Cartwright, 1971) or that have pitted dissonance theory against a phalanx of challengers (cf. Elms, 1969)

⁷ Relevant here is Quine's (1969) surmise that most attributive terms of daily discourse belong to a "dim domain" of meaning, not worthy of science. One might hope for a social science terminology free of person language (Ossorio & Davis, 1968), but it is difficult to envision such an accomplishment.

have left us with no abiding answers. Nor, from the present standpoint, would an indefinite continuation of such efforts. Multiple alternatives in interpretation may be located for virtually any set of empirical findings, as no observation can be unambiguously linked to a general conceptual term.

The Self-Fulfilling Character of Hypothesis Testing

A second major impediment to theoretical verification is closely related to the first. To the extent that the relationship between theoretical terms and empirical operations is an ambiguous one, the investigator's latitude of choice for testing any given hypothesis is increased. Given a broad latitude of choice in selecting how a given hypothesis is to be tested, the investigator seeking to sustain a given hypothesis can scarcely select a set of empirical operations in a way that is not likely to render support for the hypothesis. For example, much common thinking relates stress with a variety of negative consequences (cf. Glass & Singer, 1972; McGrath, 1970). At the same time, given the intrinsic ambiguity of a term such as *stress*, the number of operational possibilities is virtually infinite. The investigator attempting to demonstrate a negative reaction to stress may thus choose to induce stress by exposing subjects to a threat to their physical well-being, as opposed to a challenging sports event or the presence of a superior. The choice is based neither on theoretical considerations nor on guile, but on the fact that the investigator is aware, by virtue of his or her immersion in the culture, that threat to physical well-being often produces a negative reaction. The alternative means of inducing stress may be avoided because the common experience suggests that many people respond positively in such situations. From this standpoint, securing anticipated results speaks far less to the empirical status of the hypothesis than it does to the investigator's familiarity with the shared meanings and mores of the subjects under test. With sufficient cultural knowledge it should be possible to generate support for any reasonable hypothesis, along with its antithesis.

The A Priori Truth of Sensible Theory

To the extent that people's behavior does conform to their common conceptions of the world, then theories that are intelligible within the framework of such conceptual systems may be endowed with truth value without regard to empirical test. If people generally maintain themselves within normally accepted limits of sensibility and avoid acting nonsensically, then any theory that reflects common conceptions of what is sensible may be supported by at least a portion of the population at some time. To draw from Ossorio and Davis (1968), setting out to test the balance theory hypothesis that people will be attracted to those who express liking toward them is equivalent to testing the hypothesis that twice two is four. In the same way that people generally accept this particular conception of numbers and their relations as correct, they also believe that liking is an appropriate reaction to another's regard. Of course, one need not employ this particular arithmetic system, and there are numerous instances in which people do not. Similarly, one need not conform to the particular balance conception of relations, and on any occasion may select other intelligible ways of responding to positive regard. The major point is that so long as one's theory "makes sense" within the culture, it may be assumed without test that its conceptual basis will, on occasion, be put to use in everyday life.

Given the substantial if not insuperable problems underlying the traditional demand for theoretical verification, the chief efforts of the discipline, namely those of testing hypotheses, are thrown into severe question.⁸ The immense resources presently directed toward testing formal hypotheses may be rechanneled. The responsible scholar need not hesitate to develop and disseminate his or her ideas for lack of empirical test; the massive hours absorbed in the process of executing such tests

⁸ This is not in the least to argue that empirical research has no place in the science. As argued elsewhere (Gergen, in press-a) such work may play a number of vital roles (e.g., social prediction, catalytic illustration, evaluation) other than the traditional one of verification.

may be reinvested in significant intellectual work. The discipline may thereby more fully realize its potential contribution to the history of thought.

The Assumption of Temporal Irrelevance

From the traditional positivist standpoint, the scientist's task is one of developing theory of transhistoric validity. Thus, in developing limited theoretical models and isolating major variables, social psychologists normally assume the transtemporal applicability of their formulations. Dissonance theory, balance theory, integration theory, the two-factor theory of emotional experience, attribution theory, and so on are not generally viewed as mere reflections of contemporary life styles. As many have argued (cf. Manis, 1976; Schlenker, 1974; Triandis, 1978), such formulations should be valid across time. From this perspective, one need not be concerned with the transient peculiarities of contemporary life; all may ultimately be subsumed by more basic theoretical principles.

As argued elsewhere (Gergen, 1976), the case for cross-time applicability of social theory is largely limited to matters of *post hoc interpretation*. Given the complexity of most social activity, a theorist may typically look back and discern some manner in which his or her theory may apply. General theoretical formulations can almost never be threatened by past history. However, when one turns to the problem of *prediction*, the case for cross-time applicability of social theory seems far less convincing. Either by choice or good fortune, the natural sciences have largely concerned themselves with a subject matter that is relatively stable or replicable (cf. Scriven, 1956). Astronomical theory continues to provide reasonably accurate predictions over time because the movements of the specified entities are relatively reliable. In contrast, the social scientist is confronted with an organism that is both sensitive to wide-ranging influences and capable of immense variations in behavior. Further, because of the individual's symbolic capacities, the range and type of inputs to which he or she may be responsive, along with the resulting forms of conduct, may all

be rapidly altered over time. In effect, patterns of human activity may be in a continuous state of emergence, *aleatoric* in the sense that they may largely reflect contemporary contingencies (Gergen, 1977). Such capacities place severe restrictions over the social scientist's efforts at predicting ongoing interaction.

In part, this line of argument suggests that traditional social psychology has suffered from a historical myopia. This possibility is well dramatized by recent investigation into life-span development. Developmentalists have become increasingly aware that patterns of childhood development may vary from one historical period to another. For example, as van den Berg (1961) has demonstrated, from the 15th to the 17th century, the child was viewed as an adult in miniature, fully developed in terms of mental capacities and lacking only in experience. Thus, a child in the wealthy classes might be expected to master four separate languages, to translate Plato from the original, and to hold serious discussions on death, sex, and ethics before the 7th year. More recently, however, research employing cohort methodology (cf. Buss, 1974) has greatly strengthened the case. Such techniques have enabled investigators to trace developmental trajectories in intelligence, mental and physical skills, personality traits, and other variables within contrasting historical periods (Baltes & Nesselroade, 1973; Baltes & Reinert, 1969; Schaie & Strother, 1968; Woodruff & Birren, 1972). As these analyses typically demonstrate, developmental trajectories appear highly dependent on historical circumstance; any given pattern of development may be limited to a particular period. As Looft (1972) has concluded from such work, "no longer should developmental psychologists focus so exclusively on ontogenetic age functions; each new generation will manifest age trends that are different from those that preceded it" (p. 51).⁹

⁹ Such work does not suggest that there are no transhistorically reliable patterns of development. The genetically programmed pattern of physiological maturation, for example, should insure a limited degree of reliable change. Parallels to the arguments made within the life-span arena may also be found in the fields of cognition (Jenkins, 1974) and personality theory (Sarbin, 1976).

This line of argument harbors two important implications for the development of generative theory. First, we find that the theorist may be liberated from the press of contemporary events. If the theorist considers current social pattern as fragile, temporary, and capable of alteration, theoretical analysis need not be circumscribed by a consideration of "what now exists." Rather, the theorist may be freed to consider alternatives, the advantages and disadvantages of relationships as yet unseen. To illustrate, traditional theory of aggression has confined itself largely to making sense of existing patterns of aggression. The effects of such factors as frustration, modeling, generalized arousal, the presence of models, the presence of weapons, and so on have all been explored (cf. Bandura's 1973 review). Yet, if we view all such accounts as relevant primarily to contemporary sociohistorical circumstances and take seriously the individual's capacity for wide-ranging change, then we may begin to consider alternative patterns and to evaluate their comparative assets. It seems clear that many reactions other than aggression may be adopted in frustrating circumstances or in response to aggressive models or weapons. One may choose to relax oneself, to divert one's attention, to behave altruistically, and so on, and each such reaction may have certain specifiable advantages and shortcomings. In exploring such alternatives, the theorist operates generatively to undermine common assumptions about social life. The theorist thus breaks the stranglehold of what people accept as "human nature" and paves the way to alternative social arrangements.

In addition to liberating the theorist from the press of contemporary pattern, the present thesis buttresses the initial line of argument regarding the shaping of social phenomena through theory. To the extent that observed patterns of behavior are historically limited, the invitation for generative theorizing is intensified. The theorist may view him- or herself as a potential contributor to the historical situation and thus as capable of altering it in such a way as to engender change. If the theorist is faced with virtually infinite possibilities for human change, then he or she may challenge the desirability of contem-

porary patterns as against envisioned alternatives and consider theoretical vehicles for reaching desired ends.

The Dispassionate Bystander Versus the Participant Theorist

In confronting the potential for transforming society through generative theory, the question of functional endpoint rapidly comes to the fore. What forms of action are to be shaped or supported through theory? Who is to make such decisions? From the traditional perspective, this issue is all but obscured from attention: The scientist's task is chiefly that of *description*, while matters of *prescription* are not within the purview of the scientist *qua* scientist. As commonly claimed, the scientist is concerned with *what is*, and there is no way of deriving "ought propositions" from the results of such activities. Further, when the scientist harbors vested interests in the endpoint of his or her investigation, one cannot trust the results. Passionate involvement may bias the ultimate product. Theorists in social psychology have thus tended to remain remote and aloof from what may be seen as the "squalid bickering over matters of the good."

The extent to which value investments shape scientific knowledge has long been the subject of debate (cf. Nagel, 1961; Rudner, 1953; Weber, 1949; Lacey, Note 2). While the range of implications remains unclear, such debate does indicate that the scientist's values are almost inevitably linked to the phenomena selected for study, the labels attached to those phenomena, the manner of interpreting new findings, the amount of confirming evidence required for a conclusion, and the manner of applying social theory. For present purposes, the most significant implication of such debate is that all such *valuational influences serve as "ought expressions" for the recipient of knowledge*. As such, they have the potential to shape the society; they may favor certain forms of social conduct at the expense of potential alternatives. As its implications and applications are borne out, every theory becomes an ethical or ideological advocate.

Perhaps the first social scientists to take seriously such valuational shaping effects were

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those forming the Frankfurt School (cf. Jay, 1973). In the 1930s, Max Horkheimer began his attack on the negative social effects of the more general positivist paradigm (see Horkheimer, 1972). On the one hand, he argued, the scientific paradigm treats the individual solely as an object to be acted upon, thus denying him his subjecthood or status as a free agent. Further, general scientific description of society is one that justifies by implicit assumption the hierarchical organization of society; such theory thus supports the continued oppression of certain classes by others. It was this latter line of argument that Jürgen Habermas (1971) elaborated with special force. As Habermas argued, in their underlying epistemology, positivist formulations obliterate the critical issues of social ethics; such formulations appear to be nonevaluative and, as such, resist questioning on ethical or ideological grounds. Thus, with fundamental questions of value obscured, the critical problem of ends is replaced with the relatively superficial concern with means; society is left primarily with problems of technical application. For reasons of social utility, both the scientist and the technician also tend to be absorbed by the decision-making institutions of the state. Thus, the scientific institution as a whole contributes to the maintenance of the existing power structure. The power structure, in turn, operates to the disadvantage of many people, primarily those occupying the lower classes. In short, positivist social science contributes to the continued oppression of the "have-nots." Such concerns have been echoed more recently in American sociology by Alvin Gouldner (1970). As Gouldner has demonstrated, even such seemingly dispassionate analyses as Parsonian functionalism provide a rationale for maintaining the status quo and, in doing so, serve the advantaged strata in society.

Within social psychology, concern with the valuational implications of normative theory has been relatively late in developing. Perhaps the earliest cries of alarm were European in origin. As Moscovici, Israel, and others pointed out (cf. Israel & Tajfel, 1972), by one means or another, American social psychological theory renders implicit support to ideolog-

ical commitments of an indigenous character. This theme is reflected again in Apfelbaum and Lubek's (1977) attack on normative theories of conflict; as they contend, such theories do not take sufficient account of conflict from the standpoint of the "have-nots" in society and, in failing to incorporate their concerns into mainstream theory, render such groups "invisible." Sampson's (1977) recent analysis of social psychological theory represents perhaps the boldest statement to emerge within the American context. As he argued, much contemporary theory places strong implicit value on "self-contained individualism" and thus stands opposed to a collectivist or interdependent mode of orientation. As he points out,

Psychology plays an important role, even more so as it has become the new popular ideology, religion, and justifier for a variety of social programs. That role can continue to serve an isolating, atomizing, individualizing, and alienating function, or it can help refocus us on the fundamental interdependencies that need nurturance as well. (p. 779)

For present purposes it is largely irrelevant whether one agrees with the thrust of these various critiques; it is sufficient that ethical or ideological objection is publicly expressed over theory ostensibly lacking in valuational investment. It is also unimportant whether the majority of those exposed to such theories find their values either supported or questioned; precisely *how many* people are influenced at any given time is largely of historical concern and may reflect such practical exigencies as packaging and dissemination. The important point is that regardless of the traditional attempt to remain ethically neutral, the social theorist is inevitably favoring certain forms of social activity over others, certain strata of society as opposed to others, and certain values over their antitheses.

The answer to our initial query concerning the functional endpoint of generative theory is now apparent. Heretofore, the social psychologist has largely avoided questions of value by hiding behind the mask of "dispassionate observer." Yet, in spite of such attempts, we find that the fruits of neutrality are passionate in their consequences. This fact stands as an active challenge for the scientist to throw off

the mask of neutrality and to confront more directly and honestly the valuational implications of his or her work. It would appear far more desirable for the theorist to give self-conscious consideration to matters of value in the development of theory than to stumble upon them some time after dissemination. The theorist need not fear the expression of values in a given formulation; they are inevitable. The major problem is to avoid expressions of value that, upon reflection, are disagreeable to the theorist. In effect, personal values or ideology may properly serve as a major motivational source for generative theorizing. In this way, the theorist becomes a full participant in the culture, fundamentally engaged in the struggle of competing values so central to the human venture.¹⁰

Continuing Controversy

To recapitulate the central thesis, it appears that in the commitment to traditional positivist assumptions, social psychology has substantially curtailed its capacity for generative theorizing. The attempt to build theory inductively from "what is known," the demand for verification of theoretical ideas, the disregard for the temporally situated character of social events, and the avoidance of valuational entanglements all prove detrimental to the kind of catalytic theorizing that throws into question the commonly shared assumptions of the culture and points to fresh alternatives for action. Further analysis reveals significant weaknesses in each of the traditional assumptions, thus paving the way for a liberalization of future theory. Yet, this analysis raises a variety of additional questions concerning the aims and potential for generative theorizing. Two of these deserve continuing attention.

The Desirability of Generative Theory

One major assumption underlying the present analysis is that undermining confidence in commonly shared assumptions represents a positive goal for scientific theory. In its departure from traditional aims, this goal is surely moot. Other than for reasons of intellectual zest, why should the scientist strive to create altered forms of social reality? In some

measure the present argument rests on the constricting character of the traditional scientific perspective. As we have seen, the traditional role of the scientist as an accurate reflector of social events is gravely misleading; scientific reflection inevitably lends support to certain assumptions about social life while denigrating others. As assumptions are sustained or rejected, social life may be altered in ways that may be judged "good" or "bad" from some standpoint. Given the choice of whether one's theoretical work will support the common assumptions of the society or not, there are important reasons for building toward contranormative theory.

On the most pragmatic level, it is not clear that the field may sustain itself if its major theoretical outcomes primarily perpetuate the commonsense understandings of the culture. Neither will the intellectual issues be sufficiently engaging to capture the interests of intelligent professionals, nor will the research fruits appear of sufficient importance to merit public funding. The field may wither out of ennui, and its efforts may be curtailed because it offers few new insights. Such problems are hardly new ones in social psychology. The lament that the field too often duplicates common sense has long been echoed, and from the present standpoint, it may continue, so long as the traditional mold for "doing science" prevails.¹¹ With the loosening of such strictures and the development of generative theory, the long-standing lament may recede.

There are additional reasons for favoring generative theory that are based on the potential of the discipline for broad social bene-

¹⁰ Many may question the "right" of the psychologist to speak to matters of moral good. As we see from the present arguments, the scientist does so whether he or she wishes it or not. Further, as Brewster Smith (Note 3) has pointed out, the psychologist possesses a "privileged window on human experience," which may enable him or her to make a distinct contribution to such controversies.

¹¹ It has been argued elsewhere (Gergen, in press-b) that positivist metatheory dictates in large measure the components of substantive theory in social psychology. In adopting the metatheory, one simultaneously accepts a particular image of human functioning. Thus, a full liberation of theoretical options will depend on the search for alternative metatheory.

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fit. In the act of theorizing, one translates experience into symbol, and the conceptual replica is inevitably a distortion of such experience. By nature a concept treats separate entities as equivalent, entities that may vary in numerous ways unrecognized by the concepts in question; any conceptual system is by nature incomplete. In addition, concepts are ill fitted to continuous motion or to stimuli of extreme complexity. Concepts do not adequately account for the complicated and continuous movements of a ballet dancer or a tumbler in action. Because of such inherent shortcomings, one may justifiably remain suspicious of any conceptual system. All theories remain partial, distorted, and biased. Thus a special premium is to be placed on generative theories, that is, theories that have the capacity to unseat the comfortable truths of wide acceptance. Such theories may generate controversy and doubt and, in doing so, reduce the strangling biases imbedded in any particular conceptual system. In effect, generative theory engenders a flexibility that may enhance the adaptive capacity of the society.

Such concerns have been linked to ideological ends by members of the Frankfurt School. The concept of "critical theory" was elaborated by Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas, and others as a form of undermining the conceptual basis for the contemporary social order, an order that they viewed as inimical to the interests of the laboring classes. The critical orientation would isolate inconsistencies in the prevailing system of beliefs (scientific and otherwise), problems within the social structure, as well as discrepancies between prevailing beliefs and relevant fact. In this way, critical theory was to serve *emancipatory* interests (Rommetveit, 1977). Although such critiques of knowledge may seem uncongenial to those committed to the traditional maxim "no criticism without alternatives," critical theorists maintained that through criticism, choice was restored. Through critical appraisal, a given course of action (or manner of doing science) was no longer taken for granted, adopted without reflection. Rather, the critical awareness gave one the choice of doing other than treading time-worn paths. Although the ultimate aims

of the critical school were to see the capitalist structure of the society give way to a Marxist form, it becomes apparent that the central thrust of their argument is relevant to anyone concerned with changing any aspect of the prevailing order.

The Quicksand of Committed Theorizing

Serious pragmatic questions may also be raised with the present arguments for valuational advocacy in theorizing. It may well be maintained that such activity equates the scientist with the political ideologue or religious proselytizer and will eventually create widespread public suspicion. If theories become conscious expressions of value, then whatever trust has accrued to the field by virtue of its attempts at objectivity may be lost. These are grave issues indeed and should be subject to continued study. However, it is important in this case to distinguish between problems of prediction versus explanation, on the one hand, and the principles versus the practices of valuational expression, on the other. In the case of scientific explanation, it seems clear that scientific theory may well lose its status as an essentially objective enterprise. However, as we see, this status was ill acquired at the outset, and it is far preferable that the discipline revitalize its aims on an indigenous basis than remain vulnerable to attack over its duplicity or self-deception. At the same time, important distinctions must be made between the task of theorizing and that of predicting (Toulmin, 1961). Prescriptive investments at the theoretical level do not prevent the science from offering useful predictive services. The objectivity of predictive formulae need be no less suspect than those of the insurance actuarial. A similar case may be made for contemporary economic theory. Although macroeconomic theory is inevitably value based and prescriptive in implication, the economic forecaster may offer reasonably reliable predictions of certain economic activities.

Turning to the problem of principle versus practice, we find that the present arguments do suggest that social psychological theory is inevitably biased on ideological grounds, even

in its most ardent attempts at "realistic description." However, this fact need not have adverse practical consequences. The impact of Marxist theory has been diminished in no obvious way by virtue of its ideological commitments; one might even argue the contrary. It is simply not clear that the society searches for dispassionate theoretical accounts, especially when such accounts appear to have personally beneficial consequences. The question is deserving of continued exploration.

Other issues remain. For example, certain forms of theoretical work in contemporary social psychology may have generative potential as yet unexplored. Consistency theories contain strong valuational implications, that remain to be fully elaborated; the two-factor theory of emotion contains the seeds for a major challenge to the liberal political tradition (Unger, 1975); should attribution theory be extended, it could unseat the epistemological basis for contemporary social science. In effect, we have too frequently stopped short of realizing the generative potential of present pursuits. At the same time, we have little encouraged creative theorizing and have scarcely begun to take advantage of theory as a means to social reconstruction.

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