On Making Social Psychology More Useful

by Morton Deutsch

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the appearance of socially relevant research and in the utilization of consultants who have their intellectual roots in social psychology. In part, this increase reflects the pressures generated by the student rebellions of the 1960s and, in part, the widespread social malaise and unrest that has been produced by the accelerating pace of sociotechnological change, the war in Vietnam, and the ecological and resource crises.

Interest in developing a "socially useful" social psychology is hardly new. Modern social psychology was in its birth concerned with developing knowledge that had immediate social relevance. This is so whether one dates its origin to the early studies by Lewin and his students of authoritarian and democratic group leaders, or to the even earlier comparisons of individual and group productivity by such people as Bechterev, Goodwin Watson, and F. H. Allport, or to the work on stereotypes and attitudes by such scholars as Lippmann, Likert, Murphy, and Sherif. However, this early interest in developing and applying a socially useful psychology largely disappeared from the mainstream of American academic social psychology for about 15 to 20 years—the period of the 1950s to the late 1960s. An analysis of why this interest disappeared might be useful in preventing the current resurgence of interest in social usefulness from suffering a similar fate. Some of the reasons were internal to the discipline of social psychology, some related to the internal arrangements of universities and funding agencies, and some reflected broader societal influences.

Factors internal to the discipline

Post-World War II American social psychology has been largely dominated, until very recently, by Lewin and his students. Lewin himself thoroughly integrated the two orientations of social psychology: the theoretical-research orientation which is imbued with the traditional normative concerns of the scientist—formal elegance, logical rigor, an intersubjective objectivity, and robustness of empirical verification—and the problem-centered orientation of the socially concerned practitioner. He combined this integration with a sense of the necessity to provide knowledge that could be useful in bringing about change and an awareness of the

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importance of creating the conditions which would encourage the actual use of such knowledge by those in the position to act upon it. Unfortunately, this fusion of orientations was less true of his students. More characteristically, a split developed which widened into a chasm after Lewin's sudden and premature death. Lewin's unifying presence had been able to hold the diverging tendencies together and, in his absence, the bifurcating dispositions became dominant.

Feeling a need to establish himself as a "real" scientist—and fully aware of the weaknesses of his theories and the imperfections of his methodologies—the theory-oriented research social psychologist had to be "pure" and "tough minded." He could ill afford to be identified with evangelical movements led by social psychologist practitioners nor could he be associated with the sloppy make-do research which was initially characteristic of that on complex social problems. Hence, it is not surprising or remarkable that the laboratory became his workplace and that he proudly identified himself as an "experimental social psychologist." This workplace identity provided a base of security as he reached out and tried to stake a scientific claim on phenomena which the more established sciences had viewed as too value-laden or insubstantial for scientific study. The laboratory provided more than security; it was an exciting place to be as experimental social psychologists in one ingenious experiment after another demonstrated that important social phenomena can be captured and investigated in the laboratory, phenomena such as leadership, group cohesion, group productivity, conformity, trust and suspicion, social influence, cooperation and communication networks, cognitive dissonance, interpersonal conflict, interpersonal attraction, and so forth.

It is difficult to say why the social practitioners of social psychology—represented initially by the same group movement developed at New Britain and then Bethel—took on such an evangelical tone. The personalities and backgrounds of its early leaders undoubtedly contributed to this evangelism. But more importantly, the small group movement fed into and fed upon a widespread social need and, itself, became captured by and a servant of that need. [See Kurt Back's insightful analysis of sensitivity training and the encounter movement in his book, Beyond Words (1972).] Whatever its cause, the major mode of social psychological practice was zealous in tone and was unduly sensitive to critiques by researchers. Thus, it could not tolerate or be tolerated by those social psychologists who were trying to create a scientific social psychology.

Paradoxically, the origin of the sensitivity training movement can be traced to a summer workshop on intergroup relations held in New Britain, Connecticut in 1946, which failed to develop a productive relationship between the two groups—the practitioners and the researchers. This failure was repeated on a larger and grander scale in the summer of 1947 at the first of the world-known Bethel workshops. Here the researchers and practitioners formed two openly antagonistic groups—the researchers were aghast at how the aura and trappings of "science" were being employed for propagating the "gospel" of sensitivity training, and the practitioners were embittered by the unappreciative, critical, "purier than thou" attitudes of the researchers. The resulting chasm between the two orientations contributed to the neglect of applied social psychology by academic programs in social psychology and to the development of a field of applications that was not being tested and guided by research.

The universities and the funding agencies

The universities and the funding agencies have also contributed to the neglect of applications of academic social psychology through their structural arrangements and their reward systems. This contribution is evident if we consider four themes... (1) social problems rarely can be understood, diagnosed, solved, and acted upon in the perspective of one theory or even of one social science discipline such as social psychology; (2) the meaningful application of scientific generalizations and methodology to particular situations requires detailed knowledge of the specific situations; (3) the time span of work on applied problems is typically different from that of most academic research; and (4) the resources required for problem-oriented research are much larger than those for laboratory research.

The organization of most universities is such that it provides continuous regular funding to faculty members who are discipline centered rather than to those who are problem centered or generalists. It is obvious that such conditions permit only the foolhardy or those who are already well established in a discipline to develop the broadly based orientations required for fruitful work on important social problems. The situation is even worse than the preceding statement suggests. Within the discipline of social psychology (as well as many others), the reward systems—the conditions that affect appointment, promotion, tenure, and esteem of one's colleagues—enhance the tendency toward work on specialized topics within the discipline rather than on problems generated by pressing social concerns. The desire to have a faculty to cover the various subareas of social psychology leads to even greater specialization; the desire for promotion and tenure leads to pressure for research and scholarship that can lead to frequent publication, i.e., to small-scale research extending over short time periods.
on currently fashionable topics in the field. The funding practices of government agencies and foundations often have much the same consequences.

In addition to the foregoing, the separation—and the usual invidious distinctions—between the graduate schools of liberal arts and sciences and the professional schools has the parallel tendency to separate practice from research and theory. Consider the separation between psychologists and schools of education. Even where [social] psychologists are included in such schools, they are often seen to be on the fringes of their disciplines and are looked down upon by their colleagues in the more traditional departments of psychology unless they have otherwise established their credentials as research social psychologists. The result has been that the professional schools have, until the recent shortage of academic positions, found it difficult to recruit the most talented young social psychologists to their faculty.

**Broader societal influences**

Political conditions have also played a role in encouraging and discouraging the applications of social psychology. Paradoxically, when funding agencies under the edicts of conservative federal administrations have pressured for relevance, the effect has often been just the opposite from that which was intended—an increase occurred only in pseudorelevance, and much rewriting of project proposals to use the “relevance” terminology took place. The retreat from real relevance in the 1950s partially paralleled the McCarthy (Joseph, not Eugene) era. Social psychologists, as individuals, are often on the left side of the political spectrum, and they are reluctant to allow themselves to be employed as technicians in the service of policies which they view with disfavor. The opportunity to do applied work and the financial support for such work is obviously more apt to come from those who have political–administrative power and financial resources at their disposal than those who do not. The realities of the lives of social psychologists, their entrapment in a middle-class standard of living, and also their training provide them with little skill in doing applied work without ample resources and they have little potential for sustaining such work without compensation: neither resources nor compensation in ample amounts are likely to be available from low power groups.

The reluctance of many socially concerned social psychologists to do work directly for an “establishment” they viewed with disfavor (a government waging a barbaric war in Vietnam, an industry having little social conscience, a school system not concerned with fostering democratic values), of course, led many to shun applied work since the perceived opportunities for such work were usually in settings controlled by the establishment. They were not interested in using social psychology to promote more harmonious and productive management—worker relations in a factory manufacturing napalm bombs or some other destructive or useless product.

The plight of the radical social psychologist in a society which currently has no viable radical social movements is an especially difficult one. There is little that he can do professionally that he is apt to regard as of immediate social significance apart from engaging in research to demystify and delegitimize the workings of the system. But since it is already sufficiently demystified and delegitimized for him, he is likely to view such work as routine rather than intellectually rewarding. Perhaps the only way out of this plight for the radical social psychologist is for him to recognize that there is a need to develop an adequate theory of social change, a theory of how to move from where we are to where he wants us to be. Such a theory is a prerequisite for intelligent social action. Although not having the excitement and bravura of manning the barricades against the establishment, intellectual work to contribute to the development of a theory to guide social action may be the only socially useful, professional activity in which a radical social psychologist can engage with integrity. How much of the work necessary for forging such a theory will have to be done in the library, in the laboratory, or in the field is difficult to prejudge. Karl Marx spent a good deal of his time in the library, Sigmund Freud spent many of his hours interacting with his patients, and Jean Piaget observed his children systematically over a period of years. Each of these productive theorists also spent a great deal of time thinking and writing.

The social psychologist who believes he can work with the system or within the system to do applied work which is meaningful has a much easier task than his radical counterpart. There are many different projects he can undertake which will receive ample support.

**A common value framework**

Despite the diversity of applied work done by social psychologists, it seems reasonable to say that much of it is imbued with a common value framework that is partly derived from the Lewinian emphasis on participatory democracy and the psychotherapeutic stress on openness, spontaneity, closeness, warmth, expression of feelings, and authenticity. The framework presupposes that man is preeminently a group animal and that he fulfills himself through active, responsible, cooperative participation in the affairs of his group as an equal with other members, participation which is characterized by openness, warmth, spontaneity, etc. It further posits that groups (organizations, communities, etc.) which are con-
controlled democratically through the active, responsible participation of their members are likely to be more productive and more gratifying to their members than groups which are not so controlled. It also assumes that the basic interests of the different members of a given group are more concordant than opposed.

Paradoxically, this value framework has struck responsive chords in radical as well as conservative social circles. Social psychology consultants operating within this framework have worked effectively with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and black militant groups as well as with the United States State Department and large multinational industries. How is it possible for a social psychologist to serve groups with such different ideologies? Some might assert that it is a delusion to think that social psychology can serve such different interests equally well; that the value framework of social psychology merely perpetuates the myth of democracy and common interests, a myth which serves conservative rather than radical interests. Perhaps this is so and it must be recognized that in practice the framework is sometimes implemented to make a mockery of such concepts as participatory democracy, authenticity, and spontaneity: witness the many astute criticisms of sensitivity training and organizational development (e.g., Bonner, 1959; Odiorne, 1963; Pages, 1971). Nevertheless, there are social psychologists of considerable personal integrity who, operating within the value orientation specified above, have helped groups within the establishment as well as those opposed to it to function more effectively.

It seems possible to help such diverse groups if one maintains a compartmentalized view, focusing only upon the subsystem with which one is working and neglecting the broader system of which it is a component. Within this restricted focus, the assumption of concordance of interests is often a reasonable one even though it may be invalid in the broader perspective. By restricting his value framework to the setting in which he is operating, a social psychologist may, for example, help free the members of a management group within a firm with the consequence that it has more effective power to manufacture and merchandise an essentially worthless or fraudulent product. The position of consumers may have been damaged even as the situation of the firm has been improved.

Without a theory of broader societal processes which enables him to consider the interdependence among different components of the society, it may well be that the social psychologist can only do applied work if he operates under the assumption that the successful implementation of the value framework anywhere in a system is good in and of itself and that the broader societal consequences of so doing may be disregarded because they are impossible to predict or assess. However, this assumption is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain in the face of widespread criticism of the social sciences as biased in support of preserving the status quo. We are in need of a profound self-examination of our work as social psychologists to understand its social consequences.

What must be done

All of the preceding discussion is meant to suggest that if we wish to develop a social psychology that is continually rather than sporadically interested in being socially useful, we must do several things.

1. We must institutionalize the conditions which will reduce the barriers and help to sustain the motivation to do socially useful research. This will obviously require changes in the criteria for faculty appointment, promotion, and tenure that would seek to provide more encouragement and reward for work that deviates from traditional academic scholarship. It will also require a parallel rethinking of our criteria for selecting, training, and rewarding our graduate students. In addition to this, at least in the United States, it will require extensive restructuring of the relationship between graduate schools of liberal arts and sciences and the professional schools. Despite Thorndike and his glorious career at Teachers College, the relationship between psychology and schools of education remains a scandal—and what more natural domain for the application of psychology is there than education?

2. We must also develop a social psychology that is useful. This development would require us to remain aware of the unique character of social psychology. Although social psychology is clearly insufficient, in itself, to provide solutions to many social problems and must be fused with such other disciplines as sociology, economics, political science, personality psychology, and physiological psychology, it nevertheless has a distinctive perspective to offer to the fusion. This perspective arises from the unique focus of social psychology upon the interplay between psychological and social processes. More than any other discipline, it is concerned with both the person and his society, the individual and his group. It is concerned with how the individual's motivations, attitudes, cognitions, and perceptions affect his relations to his group and also how his interaction with his group affects these various psychological processes. Social psychology is more apt to pay attention to the conditions which promote discrepancy as well as convergence between psychological and social realities.

Several key notions in the social psychological approach are (Deutsch, 1978):
1. Each participant in a social interaction responds to the other in terms of his perceptions and cognitions of the other; these may or may not correspond to the other's actualities.

2. Each participant in a social interaction, being cognizant of the other's capacity for awareness, is influenced by his own expectations concerning the other's actions as well as by his perceptions of the other's conduct. These expectations may or may not be accurate; the ability to take the role of the other and to predict the other's behavior is not notable in either interpersonal or intergroup crises.

3. Social interaction is not only initiated by motives but also generates new motives and alters old ones. It is not only determined but also determining. In the process of rationalizing and justifying actions that have been taken and effects that have produced, new values and motives emerge. Moreover, social interaction exposes one to models and exemplars which may be identified with and imitated. Thus, a child's personality is shaped largely by the interactions he has with his parents and peers and by the people with whom he identifies.

4. Social interaction takes place in a social environment—in a family, a group, a community, a nation, a civilization—that has developed techniques, symbols, categories, rules, and values that are relevant to human interactions. Hence, to understand the events that occur in social interactions one must comprehend the interplay of these events with the broader social context in which they occur.

5. Even though each participant in a social interaction, whether an individual or a group, is a complex unit composed of many interacting subsystems, the participant can act in a unified way toward some aspect of his environment. Decision-making within the individual as within the nation can entail a struggle among different interests and values for control over action. Internal structure and internal process, while less observable in individuals than in groups, are characteristic of all social units.

Oddly enough, social psychology has been most deficient in living up to its own distinctive perspective in its failure to consider in detail the specific properties of the individual and the social as they relate to one another. Social psychology, as it now exists, is a peculiar discipline: it has much to say in general but little to say in particular. Many of us believe we know a good deal about how abstract man will behave in abstract situations but we know very little about how particular men will behave in particular situations. We know little about how different sorts of people behave in the different kinds of situations that populate their everyday lives.

We have been deficient in characterizing the psychological properties of social situations and the social consequences of different personalities, particularly as they interact with one another. As social psychologists, we know that environments (the nonsocial as well as the social) profoundly influence the individual and his behavior, yet we have paid little attention to the work of the psychological ecologists (such as Barker and his colleagues), the structural anthropologists (such as Lévi-Strauss), or the environmental psychologists. For social psychology to be useful, it will have to know more about existing behavior settings—from antique shops to zoos—and how they are modified by the broader social context in which they appear. It will also have to develop an interest in constructing and altering, as well as inventing, settings in order to acquire a deep understanding of the psychological properties of different environments.

Despite its ancestry in individual psychology, social psychology has been too much a depersonalized psychology of homogeneous individuals. The individuality of people is frequently ignored in social psychological theorizing and research. Yet if we are to be socially useful, we cannot continue to ignore the obvious fact that people differ in their physical and psychological, as well as social, characteristics and that these differences reflect their individual past experiences as well as their genetic makeups.

3. We must also develop a theory about the utilisation of social psychology and institutionalize a set of ethical guidelines to enhance the likelihood that social psychology will be used for rather than against the well-being of mankind. Social psychology has little tradition of theorizing or of empirical research on the utilization of social psychology. Lewin's (1946) preliminary attempt to articulate the concept of "action research," and the implicit theory of utilization underlying this concept, have been neglected for so long that Nevitt Sanford (1970) entitled his Lewin Memorial Address, "Whatever Happened to Action Research?" But even more sadly, we have hardly yet begun to develop a conceptual schema to help us think about utilization so that, as a first step, we might be able to categorize meaningfully such things as: the kinds of activities social psychologists engage in which relate to utilization; the types of utilizers or client systems; the sorts of problems for which social psychologists are used and the problem stages in which utilization occurs; the nature of the relationship between the social psychologist and the potential utilizer; the kinds of difficulties, failures, and successes which occur during a utilization process; and the kinds of criteria and procedures which are used in evaluating a social psychological intervention. The object of such a conceptual schema would be to develop hypotheses about the conditions under which a given kind of social psychological intervention would lead to a given type of effect. For example, one might be interested in hypothesizing about the conditions under which outside consultants rather than consultants employed within an organization would be more or less likely to influence the functioning of the organization's board of directors.

An attempt to develop a theory of utilization would serve an important "consciousness raising" function for social psychology practitioners. Many practitioners work
with unarticulated, implicit theories which, being implicit, are often difficult to revise in light of experience. An explicit articulation of one's assumptions opens them to examination and thus permits progress in one's conceptions as faulty ideas are weeded out by testing. Thus, improvement in the field of practice of social psychology will largely be conditional on the attempt to develop a systematic theory of practice.

Any theory of utilization will inevitably raise many fundamental ethical issues about the interrelations between the social psychologist, his client system, and other relevant third parties. These ethical issues center about the question of under what conditions does one party have the right to influence another? For example, does the social psychologist have any moral responsibilities with respect to how his client uses the research information he (the social psychologist) has collected? Should he allow a client's public distortion of the research findings to go unchallenged? Should he permit the client to use the information to influence third parties (without the consent of the third parties), e.g., to influence voters, consumers, employees?

Many other questions can be raised. The answers are by no means obvious. Many other disciplines—including medicine, law, clinical psychology, and sociology—have faced similar questions and have discussed these issues extensively. Social psychology could undoubtedly profit from familiarity with the thinking and experience of other disciplines. This is not to say that the practice of social psychology should be as socially irresponsible as that of such professions as law and medicine. Rather, it is to say that if social psychology is to be a socially responsible profession, it must consider these issues thoroughly and develop ethical guidelines to serve as a normative framework for its practitioners.

4. We must also train social psychologists to use social psychological theory, findings, and techniques competently and ethically as they deal with social problems. Earlier in this Introduction, it has been asserted that social problems do not shape themselves to fit academic disciplines and that social psychology as a discipline has its own unique perspective to contribute to applied work. In combination, these assertions—if true—pose a dilemma for training if we are to stimulate the effective socialization of social psychology. Is it necessary to train a "Renaissance" social psychologist who is well versed in physiology, economics, sociology, anthropology, learning theory, skills of public relations, journalism, lobbying, expediting, group leadership, and the like? But can such a Renaissance social psychologist be deeply knowledgeable in his own special area of competence? Is this dilemma of training—to train the generalist or the specialist—a false one? Do the social psychology practitioners practice primarily in interdisciplinary teams—but, if so, how are the disciplines forged into a unified relatedness to the problem? Or do practitioners of social psychology limit their practice to the kinds of problems that social psychology, by itself, seems competent to handle? Or is the dilemma escapeable by recognizing that there are needs for different types of roles for social psychologists—generalist as well as specialist roles? If so, one can ask more generally what are the other meaningful role distinctions in applied social psychological work and how can one develop suitable training for them?

As an academic discipline, social psychology has emphasized theory and research. How can students be trained to draw out the socially useful implications of the theorizing and research which they and others do? How, in actual instances, has social psychological theory or research been used in relation to practical problems? What are the difficulties that have been experienced in so doing? What are the differences in intellectual approach when doing research that has been generated by a practical problem and research generated by a theoretical issue? What are the differences in ways of thinking about a practical problem (e.g., in diagnosing it and developing proposed solutions) as contrasted to a theoretical one? What personality dispositions and what intellectual skills favor effective work in each type of thinking?

As a practicing profession, social psychology has emphasized training and social engineering in addition to research. What are the skills required in consultation and other forms of practice? What are the kinds of problems that typically arise and how are they dealt with successfully? What types of substantive knowledge seems particularly useful? How does the practitioner utilize the theorizing and research findings of social psychology in his work? How can these be made more useful to him?

References