Some Comments on the Current Status of
American Social Psychology

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In recent years in the United States there has been much talk about a "crisis" in social psychology. One of the most common topics in social psychology journals and in symposia at social psychological meetings has to do with doubts about social psychology--doubts about its theorizing, its research emphases, its status as a science, and its social relevance. Thus, in the first part of my paper, I would like to make a few comments about the "crisis" in social psychology. In the second part, I would like to describe some other recent trends in American social psychology.

Comments on the Crisis in American Social Psychology

The crisis in social psychology is not new; we are in a perpetual crisis. The crisis has many facets. One arises from social psychology's distinctive perspective in the social sciences: its unique focus upon the interplay between psychological and social processes. This focus puts social psychology in the constant position of imbalance in which it teeters from an overemphasis on the psychological to an overemphasis on the social. Currently, Marxist critics and radical students--as well as some of our colleagues in Europe and Latin America--think American social psychology has teetered too far over to the "individual" side of the see-saw. Attribution theory and dissonance theory reflect this individual emphasis; the relative lack of discussion of "class struggle," "class consciousness," and the like reflect a deemphasis of social process. At earlier times in the history of social psychology, the balance was in the other direction: from the 1939's
to the early 50's, there was much more emphasis on group dynamics, intergroup
relations, and political processes. J. F. Brown's *Psychology and the Social
Order* (1935), a text that was widely used in social psychology in the 1930's, had
chapters dealing with the effects of "national membership," "church membership,
"social class membership," "minority group membership" as well as chapters
dealing with primary groups and the relations between groups. Social psychology
is unstably balanced between the "individual" and the "social" and it will
always feel the tension of the need for shifting its balance to maintain
even an unsteady equilibrium.

Social psychology also teeters between the abstract and the concrete,
between saying something in general and saying something in particular.
Our theorizing and research methodology in recent years has been heavily
weighted toward the abstract. 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 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 a result, our ability to understand the
behavior of specific people in their everyday situations is impaired. We
sense the gap between our knowledge of the general and of the specific
and face a crisis as we try to apply our abstractions to the concrete
realities. Again, this kind of crisis is not new but it has become more
intense as we have felt increased pressure to help cope with social problems.

The pressure to solve social problems is a central component of social
psychology's chronic crisis. Many of us are in love with social psychology.
And there is the old Jewish saying, "When you're in love, the whole world is Jewish." Despite our love for social psychology, the whole world is not social psychology. Social psychology, per se, does not and can not provide the solutions to war, poverty, racism, sexism, crime, or any social problem. This is not to say that social psychology is unable to make important contributions to the understanding of these problems. But it is to say that the gap between what we can do, even at our best, and the elimination of these problems is very large. When these problems take on an urgent character, the gap is experienced as an acute crisis but the gap is chronic—it is an inevitable frustration of being a socially concerned social psychologist. We have our role to play in helping to bring about progressive social change but it is only a small role in a complex drama with many actors. Recognition of the inherent limits of our part would not reduce the gap but it might alleviate some of our frustration.

I would like now to offer a perspective for theorizing in social psychology which might aid in overcoming some of the problems which give rise to the recurring crisis in social psychology.

A perspective for theorizing.

The perspective for theorizing that I wish to offer is not new, although it needs reemphasis. The perspective is implicit in the comments that I have already made regarding the "crisis" in social psychology. Namely, current theory is deficient in characterizing both the socially relevant properties of individual personalities and the psychologically
relevant attributes of social situations.

A. The socially relevant properties of individual personalities.

Our current theories in social psychology more or less assume that individuals are homogeneous, blank slates who uniformly accept the psychological states which our experimental manipulations are meant to induce in them. Of course, we know better than this but we theorize and do our research as though this were a reasonable assumption. Suppose we were to become more realistic and were to reject this assumption. How should we begin to characterize individuals? I am not sure that I can give more than the sketchiest of answers but I do know that we should avoid the trap that many personality theorists have fallen into. We should not characterize personality dispositions as though they operate in a vacuum. Personalities always function in situations and usually in relations with other people. Thus, to use a term from Coutu, a sociologist, personality tendencies should be conceptualized as "tensits"—tendencies to behave in particular ways in given situations. To characterize meaningful personality dispositions we must know how the individual conceptualizes his social world. To describe the individual's social world, we need to know: the major dimensions underlying his conceptualization, the types of social situations and social objects, and the types of social behavior which occur in his social world, and where these social objects and social behaviors are located in the dimensionalized space of his world. I believe we already know enough to characterize the major dimensions of the interpersonal world for people of Western culture. Research by Myron Wish
and myself (Wish, Deutsch, & Kaplan, in press) and by Harry Triandis and his associates (Triandis, 1972) provide a basis for doing this.

Let me be a bit more specific. Our research suggests that there are at least four primary dimensions in most people’s interpersonal world, even though these dimensions may have different weights for different people. The dimensions can be labelled as: (1) cooperation-competition (2) equal-unequal (3) socio-emotional-task-oriented (4) intense-superficial. Relations between oneself and one’s lover, for example, are usually seen as being highly cooperative, equal, socio-emotional, and intense: And this is true over a wide range of situations but not for all. Relations between oneself and one’s adolescent son, in contrast, are usually seen as less cooperative, less equal, but also socio-emotional and fairly intense: but this is more variable from social situation to social situation. What I am suggesting is that we conceptualize personality dispositions as tendencies to behave in a particular way toward specified social objects in particular social situations. Knowing how a person locates, in his interpersonal world, his own social relations, different social situations, and various possible behaviors, will enable us to characterize how that person will tend to behave toward a specified other in a particular situation.

I wish to make two other points about personality dispositions. The first is that they usually reflect an internalization of both sides of a relationship, i.e., there is not only a tendency to behave in a given way toward another in a particular situation but there is also the complementary expectation that the other will act toward you in a given way in that
situation. Thus, if your disposition is to act toward another in a trusting manner in a certain situation, you will expect that the other will act toward you in a given way in that situation. Thus, if your disposition is to act toward another in a trusting manner in a certain situation, you will expect that the other will behave toward you in a trustworthy manner. On the other hand, if your disposition is to act in a suspicious manner, your expectation is that the other will be untrustworthy or exploitative. This is what research we have done with the Prisoner's Dilemma game suggests (Deutsch, 1960).

The second point that I wish to make is that the psychic realities underlying each person's interpersonal world is not as flimsy as Mischel and many social psychologists appear to assume in their theorizing. These psychic realities are not so malleable as one might hope. Where an individual positions himself in his interpersonal world, how easy or difficult he finds it to move into the different regions of this world are not, I suspect, very modifiable in most adults. Thus, some men find it difficult to have intense, cooperative, intimate, and equal relations with other men; some people find it difficult to have such relations with anyone...Some people are only able to have intense relations in task-oriented situations...Some people are only able to have intense relations in unequal situations...And so on. I assume, with the psychoanalytic theorists and also with our common-sense observations, that we develop a core of personal identity from our individual life-experiences which has a large degree of stability over time.
B. The Psychologically Relevant Properties of Social Situations.

Just as we have been deficient in characterizing the socially relevant characteristics of individual personalities, so also we have failed to characterize the psychologically relevant properties of social situations. We know people behave differently in antique shops and in zoos but we haven't conceptualized the characteristics of antique shops or zoos in such a way as to enable us to understand why people act differently in various behavior settings or situations. Although Roger Barker and his colleagues and also some of the "environmental" psychologists have made initial attempts to characterize environments psychologically, I think it is fair to say that these are limited efforts by a very few people who for the most part are not considered to be in the mainstream of social psychology. My own earlier work on the socio-psychological characteristics and effects of different types of interracial housing developments was an attempt to characterize social environments psychologically. Milgram's current work on the psychological characteristics of cities is also oriented in this direction. But we must go much further if we are going to have a social psychology that has theoretical richness and social usefulness.

We must define ourselves as social psychologists in a way which enables us to ask ourselves: what kinds of social structure, social organizations, social processes will give rise to what kinds of socio-psychological consequences? What new kinds of social structures and social processes might be invented to produce specified socio-psychological consequences? We are not doing the kind of thinking which would enable us to make social
inventions that, for example, might permit large groups as well as small
groups to have the characteristics of a participatory democracy. We are
not helping architects and city planners to create urban structures which
would promote the sense of neighborhood and personal security in large
urban centers. Our theorizing in social psychology is not sufficiently
directed toward understanding the situations and places in which people
live so that we might develop the ideas necessary to conceiving new and
more personally fulfilling environments.

Current Trends in American Social Psychology

Relevance. Perhaps the most notable trend in social psychology is
its renewed search for relevance. I stress "renewed" because the father
of modern experimental social psychology, Kurt Lewin, was deeply concerned
with "relevance." Such terms as "level of aspiration," "authoritarian and
democratic leadership," "group dynamics," and "action research"—which
are associated with Lewin—reflect this interest. This early concern with
the relevance of social psychology had an enormous impact. The conceptual
apparatuses of several other disciplines—notably political science,
sociology, and administrative science—were strongly influenced. In ad-
dition, it spawned a variety of consulting and training activities in
various kinds of organizations and educational settings. These have
included "sensitivity training," "leadership training," and "organizational
development."
Although these consulting and training activities were natural (if not logical) developments from the theoretical and experimental work of Lewin and his students, a growing schism began to separate the "practitioners" of social psychology and those who were more intimately involved in research and theory-building. The academicians felt that the practitioners were too undisciplined and evangelical and that contact with them would damage the experimentalist's shaky claim to be involved in a scientific undertaking. For this, and also other reasons, the experimental social psychologist turned away from "applications" and a concern for immediate social relevance and became more deeply immersed in the laboratory. This is not to say that the laboratory experiments were insensitive to social issues: the topics of laboratory studies - group productivity, group cohesion, trust and suspicion, social pressures and conformity, attitude change, the resolution of conflict, etc. - clearly reflect many pervasive social concerns. However, many experimentalists were not concerned about making their work appear "relevant;" in fact, some even looked down upon theorists and experimentalists who were explicitly concerned about the social relevance of their work. Some experimentalists - by no means, a majority - became so immersed in the laboratory that they started doing experiments which were generated by artifacts of the laboratory: experiments which had no methodological, social, nor theoretical significance but which essentially spoke only to the inner circle of those concerned with minor talmudic disputes about a particular experimental manipulation.
Partly in reaction to a growing distaste for the endless experiments which were nothing but minor, insignificant variations on well-established themes and also partly under the pressures for relevance from the "student revolution" and the funding agencies, there has been a renewed concern with it among academic social psychologists. This concern has expressed itself in many forms. One form is to take social problems into the laboratory and attempt to "simulate" them. The studies on pro-social behavior (by Berkowitz, Darley and Latane, Hornstein, etc.), on crowding (Freedman), on the effects of television (Bandura, Berkowitz, etc.), on littering (Krauss and Freedman), on prisons (Zimbardo), on the effects of urban stress (Glass and Singer, Katz and Milgram, Irle), on obesity (Schachter), and on smoking (Janis and Schachter) are in this tradition. Another variation of this basic type is to take the "laboratory" into the field by creating experiments in which the subjects are unwitting participants - e.g., the "dropped-wallet" technique of Hornstein to study experimentally the conditions which lead people to return them or the "norm-violation" techniques of Milgram and of Abelson. In such studies, the subjects do not know they are participating in an experiment and some of the issues raised by Rosenthal and Orne about "experimenter effects" are circumvented even as new ethical and methodological ones arise.
Still another form taken by socially concerned research has been that of studying on-going social institutions. Sometimes field experiments are employed, as Lieberman and Miles have done in their studies of encounter groups, as Likert and his colleagues have done in organizations, and as Schmuck has done in classrooms. A mixture of methods - experiments, observation, questionnaires, etc. - are being employed in studies of marital conflict (Deutsch), in research on the effects of different architectural designs in student dormitories (Valins), in studies of the functioning of school systems. In addition, there has been a growing methodological interest in how to study social change so as to draw reliable conclusions about its effects. The work of Campbell and his students on the methodological issues involved in turning "reforms" into "experiments" reflect this orientation.

The renewed search for relevance has, of course, benefitted from the research and theoretical paradigms that were being developed in the experimental laboratory. Research is, in many ways, more sophisticated on applied problems than it used to be. As a consequence, the researcher no longer risks a loss of scientific status by working on such problems. Nevertheless, there are many issues that must be faced with more insight than is now apparent if the knowledge being generated by social psychology is to be socially used as well as socially useful. It is evident that there is much
useful knowledge in social psychology and the other social sciences which
is not being used. An obvious implication of the foregoing is that social
psychology should begin to take as an important topic for research and theorizing
a topic which does not appear as such in any of its textbooks—namely, the
conditions which facilitate and hamper the use of social psychological
knowledge. Although the topic has been much neglected, a growing interest
in it is reflected in C. R. U. S. K. at Michigan and in the book, Applying
Social Psychology, sponsored by the Committee on Transnational Social Psychology
of the Social Science Research Council, which I edited with Harvey Hornstein.

A further issue of importance in any discussion of a relevant social
psychology is: what is relevant? Elsewhere, in my paper "Socially Relevant
Science," I have discussed this question. Here I wish to restate Lewin's
favorite slogan: "There is nothing so relevant as a good theory." And I
add, there is nothing so irrelevant as a simulation unless one knows the
key variables in the phenomena one wishes to study. Too many social
psychologists are responding to the pressures for relevance by settling for
the pseudorelevance of surface similarities. History and everyday
experience alike testify that the appearance of relevance can be grossly
misleading. It takes hard and demanding intellectual work to get beyond
a surface understanding of the social problems confronting us.

Competence. A second trend that is characteristic of social psychological
research is an increased level of technical competence. As a reader for
several journals, I am impressed by the generally high level of methodological
skill of the investigators. Two decades ago, there were relatively few skilled
researchers; today, most of the researchers know how to do competent research. The growth in methodological competence, however, has not been paralleled by an increase in theoretical sophistication. To the contrary, I have the impression that there is less theoretical knowledge and less concern with the systemization of ideas than was true twenty years ago. Too many studies in the journals have too much methodological elaborateness for their intellectual substance.

**Diversity.** Social psychology has increasingly spread its tentacles into other fields: from physiology to economics, from animal behavior to international behavior. The range of phenomena that social psychologists are involved in studying and the diversity of research procedures which are employed have increased markedly in recent years. This has produced something akin to an "identity crisis" in several well-known social psychologists. In addition, it raises questions about the nature of social psychology. Does it have a subject-matter of its own or is it merely a connecting link between other disciplines or is it the fundamental discipline of the behavioral sciences? At the moment, the centrifugal forces induced by diversity seem stronger than the centripetal forces arising from coherent theory.

**Cognitive emphasis.** Despite the increased respect for the techniques of behavior modification, social psychology has remained under the influence of the cognitive psychologists. Several years ago "dissonance theory" was a dominant influence in research in social psychology; more recently "attribution theory" has played this role. Both "theories" are in the Heiderian or Gestalt tradition and largely attempt to explain social
behavior in terms of what goes on inside the head. The G. H. Mead tradition of explaining what goes on in the head in terms of social behavior has received, in recent years, some unexpected support from Skinner and his followers in social psychology, such as Bem. However, these latter do not seem to have benefitted by Mead's earlier, brilliant discussion of the issues with which they are concerned.

Methodology. The methodological emphases in social psychology appear to be changing substantially. More research is being done outside the laboratory and much of the field studies being done are policy-oriented and evaluation-research studies. Much of this work is non-experimental and relies heavily upon "panel designs," "time series" analysis, and the use of multiple regression techniques. Such methods as "path analysis" are becoming part of the tool-kit of social psychologists and are sometimes even employed to help understand the findings generated in more traditional laboratory experiments. The increased capacity to deal with complex phenomena has also been aided by rapid progress in the area of multidimensional scaling. The widespread availability of the computer has enormously facilitated the researcher's capacity to deal with larger-scale phenomena and with "organized complexity."

My Evaluation of the Current Status of American Social Psychology

I am very much impressed by the research ingenuity and methodological skill of the younger generation of American social psychologists. I am also impressed by the increasing success they have shown in turning their talents to the investigation of a great diversity of socially relevant topics. However, as I have stated in the first part of my paper, I believe American social
psychology has tilted much too far toward an emphasis on individual psychological processes to the neglect of the study of interpersonal and group processes: the social aspect of social psychology has not been receiving the attention it deserves and needs. I expect that the pendulum will soon start swinging back from the individual to the social side and that we shall again see some valuable research on group dynamics.