THE ROLE OF THEORY IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

WHEN WE ASK ourselves "What is social psychology?" various images arise—a mother tenderly nursing an infant, an angry white man throwing a rock at a Negro student, two friends conversing, a candidate making a political speech at a street corner, a football game, a man writing at his desk, a teacher instructing students, a patient and his therapist. What is the common thread linking these diverse situations to social psychology? It is the social psychologist's interest in understanding how people affect one another.

The Subject Matter of Social Psychology

This very broad definition of the subject matter of social psychology is not quite satisfying, for it allows the effect of one person on another to be remote and accidental. In no way does it indicate how the relations of people differ from the relations of molecules; nor does it distinguish the relations of a person to a person from those of a person to his physical environment.

What then is distinctive about the relations of person to person? With people, as opposed to things, psychological events can take
place on both sides of a relationship. Each person in a relationship can perceive, think, feel, desire, and act. Each person can, moreover, perceive that the others can perceive and act and that their perceptions and actions can refer to him. The capacity of people to be aware of one another and to be affected by one another as psychological beings means that in a social—psychological relationship the psychological events that occur are influenced by the perceived or anticipated psychological activities of others (Asch, 1952).

If you push a stone, it cannot react to you. It cannot pursue you, following your varying path as you try to elude it. If you push a man, he may get angry and chase you, and, if he is fleet enough, he will catch you no matter how you twist and turn. The outcome of a nonpurposive system's behavior is blindly dependent upon the presence or absence of innumerable specific conditions; in contrast, a purposive system adjusts and redirects its behavior in response to information about the discrepancy between its present position and its desired outcome. The inanimate world—apart from servomechanisms, cybernetic devices, and the like—is largely made up of nonpurposive systems. Unlike a rolling stone that is readily deflected from its course, a person with sufficient "power" often overcomes quite varied distracting or interfering conditions to achieve his object by one means or another. Physical objects do not "wish" to create events that are aimed at producing a given change in a particular person, nor can they. Only people have the desire and power to determine the contents of another's psychological activities and experiences. Since the human being is from birth the terminal focus of actions of others, it is evident that the understanding of human behavior requires that he be understood in his relations with others. (This point is discussed more fully in Heider, 1958, Ch. 4.)

Person-to-person relationships are distinguished, not only by the fact that psychological events can take place on both sides of a relationship, but also by their social character, that is to say, human relationships always occur in an organized social environment—in a family, in a group, in a community, in a nation—that has developed techniques, categories, rules, and values that are relevant to human interactions. Hence the understanding of the psychological events that occur in human interactions requires comprehension of the interplay of these events with the social context in which they occur. Just as the animal psychologist who is studying the behavior of a rat in learning a maze must know the relevant physical properties of the maze to understand or predict the behavior of the rat in it, so too the social psychologist must be able to characterize the relevant features of the social environment in order to understand or predict human interaction.

Social psychology, then, is concerned with the study of actual, imagined, or anticipated person-to-person relationships in a social context as they affect the individuals involved (Allport, 1954). This broad definition spreads into many detailed concerns when the answers are sought for such general questions as these: What are the effects whose determining conditions we wish to understand? What are the conditions whose consequences we wish to understand? What are the mediating processes that link determinants and their effects? Thus social psychologists are interested in studying the conditions that lead a person to conform to another's judgment, the conditions that determine a person's attitudes, the conditions that lead to cooperative or competitive interrelations. Also, the social psychologist is interested in studying the effects of an individual's attitudes on his relations with others, the consequences of competitive or cooperative interactions, and similar relationships.

Theoretical Approaches to Social Psychology

There are a number of distinctive theoretical positions that have left their mark on the literature of social psychology and that continue to influence research in this field. The social and historical backgrounds of the differing theoretical approaches are discussed by Allport (1954), Martindale (1960), and Karpf (1932). In part, these special orientations reflect differing conceptions of the nature of man, and, in part, they direct attention to different aspects of the varied subject matter of social psychology. The diverse conceptions of man, in turn, arise out of political and religious doctrines of one sort or another and buttress them. Because of their intimate link to ideological doctrines, conceptions of man are rarely free from political controversy. While there is not space here to describe the connection between political doctrines and conceptions...
of the nature of man, the reader will note that conceptions of man influence the choice between such political alternatives as the following: racial segregation as compared with racial integration, feudalism versus democracy, military deterrence versus fostering international cooperation as a means of preventing war.

What are some of the major issues or questions about the nature of man that are reflected in the prominent theoretical orientations in social psychology? Some of the recurring issues are listed below:

1. Is man simply a more intelligent animal than other animals, with no unique psychological processes, or do social interaction, language, and man’s prolonged dependence on cooperative activities create in him unique psychological characteristics?

2. Is the behavior of man determined by egocentric motives, or may the interests of others be as basic and genuine as “self-interest”?

3. Is human behavior largely irrational and fixed by arbitrary experiences of reward and punishment, or does man comprehend and organize his behavior in the light of his experiences?

4. Is human behavior rooted in a man’s biological predispositions, or do social conditions largely determine the form and content of human action?

5. Is adult behavior primarily a reflection of experiences in childhood, or does man develop and remain responsive to his current surroundings throughout his years?

Today, most social psychologists would reject the “either-or” nature of the foregoing questions. They would assert that man is both social and biological in nature; that he has the capacity to act in egocentric, animalistic ways without rational regard for future consequences and the capacity to act in ways that are distinctively human, unselfish, and rationally concerned with the consequences for himself and for others. How he will act will be determined jointly by the various physical, biological, psychological, and social influences that have confronted him in the past and that he is confronting in his present situation.

Although the current view in social psychology is to stress the conditions that lead man to be “egocentric” or “sociocentric,” “rational” or “irrational,” rather than to consider him as being inherently one or the other, the major theoretical orientations do indeed partly reflect differing views of man’s essence. Thus, the

The Role of Theory in Social Psychology

“Gestalt” orientations assume that man is so constructed that he is principally concerned with developing an organized and meaningful view of his world. The “reinforcement” theorists, on the other hand, posit that behavior is primarily determined by its immediate consequences for pleasure or pain. For them, man’s attempt to understand his situation is a derivative of his experiences in the pursuit of pleasure. The “role” theorists start from the assumption that man is, uniquely, socially determined; in their view, the values and criteria that influence what a man will consider as pleasurable and what he will accept as meaningful are determined by his experiences in his role in a given society. The “psychoanalytic” theorists view man as a battleground between man’s animal nature and society as represented by his family. According to this view, man’s rational powers and adaptive capacities mediate between the conflicting forces and are, in part, molded and developed during the mediating process; experiences in his family during his childhood are regarded as crucial in determining his patterns in the resolution of conflicts and the strength of his adaptive capacities.

We shall consider the four major theoretical perspectives mentioned above in greater detail in the subsequent chapters of this book. But it should be made clear at the outset that none of them are “theories” in any strict sense. Rather they represent general orientations toward the phenomena of social psychology. They suggest types of variable that should be taken into account, but are not deductive systems from which clear, testable hypotheses can be derived. The major theoretical approaches in social psychology are the products of its infancy. It is characteristic of a science in its early stages to develop theories that are ambitiously inclusive and vague in respect of their details. There is, however, growing evidence that social-psychological theorizing is moving in the direction of developing “theories of the middle range,” a phrase coined by Merton (1957) to refer to “theories intermediate to the minor working hypotheses, evolved in abundance during the day-by-day routines of research, and the all-inclusive speculations, comprising a master conceptual scheme.”

Thus the theories discussed in this volume affect the working psychologist in a subtle but rather pervasive way. They guide his choice of the phenomena that he will study and his selection of the concepts that he will employ in analyzing them. To some extent they influence the choice of the techniques he uses in his re-
search, for each theoretical pattern has its own methodological tradition.

The current trend toward "theories of the middle-range" has a tendency to blur somewhat the lines dividing the different theoretical classes. Often it is not possible to categorize a given piece of research as being in the tradition, say, of Gestalt theory or reinforcement theory. It is, however, difficult to understand fully and appreciate much of the current work in social psychology without a knowledge of its historical and theoretical antecedents.

The Nature of Theory

In discussions of the nature of scientific theory, it is common to state some ideal criteria that have to be met before a theory can be properly considered "scientific." It is well to realize that in science, as in everyday life, ideals are rarely realized. In practice, science is an unidy affair in which ideals define the objectives to strive for rather than the procedures for attaining them. Theories are intellectual tools for organizing data in such a way that one can make inferences or logical transitions from one set of data to another; they serve as guides to the investigation, explanation, organization, and discovery of matters of observable fact. (For lucid discussions of the nature of theory construction see Braithwaite, 1953; Campbell, 1920; Kaplan, 1964; Margenau, 1950; and Nagel, 1961.)

Theories in the physical sciences commonly have three distinguishable components: (1) an abstract calculus that is the logical skeleton of the theoretical system and that implicitly defines the basic notions of the system; (2) theoretical constructs that supply some flesh for the skeletal structure of the abstract calculus in terms of more or less familiar conceptual or visualizable materials; and (3) rules of correspondence that link some of the theoretical constructs to the concrete data of observation and experiment.

A "calculus" is a deductive system that is represented symbolically in such a way that for each logical principle of deduction there is a corresponding rule of symbolic manipulation. (This matter is discussed more fully in Braithwaite, 1953.) A calculus has the scientific virtue of being a deductive system in which the deductions are made according to explicit and well-defined rules; being explicit, the deductions are open to public verification and even mechanization. Moreover, the deductive process can take place without reference to any specific empirical content and is thus relatively invulnerable to the biases and preconceptions that often exist with regard to scientific subject matters. In addition, the variety of existing abstract calculi together with the possibility of creating new ones allow the scientist to search for a calculus that will be particularly fruitful in organizing the particular subject matter with which he is concerned.

The theoretical orientations and theories in social psychology do not, however, typically employ abstract calculi. Rather, almost invariably, they use the rules for deduction that are implicit in the syntax of everyday language. Thus the "derivations" from most of the theories in social psychology are usually not unequivocal, or strictly logical, for they skip steps, they depend on unexpressed assumptions, and they rest on the criterion of intuitive reasonableness or plausibility rather than on formal logical criteria of consistency. The disadvantages of everyday language in formulating a scientific theory have been noted and widely commented on by many philosophers of science.

Yet everyday language is an indispensable tool for a young science. A scientific theory, unlike a mathematical or logical system, is not purely a deductive system; it has relevance to observable events in the real world. For it to be fruitful, the "grammar," or logical structure of a theory, and its "vocabulary," or set of theoretical constructs, must somehow fit with each other in such a way that empirically meaningful predictions can be made. Since the grammar of everyday language is not illogical and since its vocabulary has relevance to significant events in the real world, the vernacular is, after all, a useful tool with which to work during the process of acquiring the insights and knowledge necessary for the formulation of a theory that is unambiguous and significant in its empirical implications. The usefulness of everyday language lies in its plasticity; it can be molded into more or less precise forms to fit different circumstances. It permits one, as knowledge grows, to move gradually from implicit to explicit reasoning, from vague to well-defined concepts, while maintaining contact with a constantly enlarging intuitive understanding, which is the soil from which every science grows.

Theoretical constructs or concepts form the vocabulary of a the-
ory. A concept may be regarded as an idea that links together observations or other ideas in terms of some common property. Indeed, the development of new concepts is one of the most productive aspects of scientific theorizing. Newton’s observation that the fall of an apple from a tree and the maintenance of the moon in its orbit could both be understood in terms of the concept of gravity paved the way for revolutionary changes in physical theory. The theoretical meaning of a construct is fixed by its interrelations with the other constructs in the theoretical system of which it is a part; its empirical meaning is fixed by the rules of correspondence or by such operational definitions as link the construct to observable events. An operational definition defines a concept in terms of the procedures for making the specific observations that constitute the empirical evidence for the use of the concept; for instance, there are two kinds of length, tape-measured length and triangulated length, and these lengths are not interchangeable (unless there is a further operation for identifying them). Not all theoretical constructs have direct empirical meaning; some constructs may serve only as connecting links among other concepts that do have direct empirical reference. Defining a concept is no easy matter, since a full definition requires a statement of its interrelations in the system of concepts of which it is a part (to define such a concept as “goal,” one would have to define other such concepts as “motive,” “intention,” “success,” “failure,” “expectation,” “attraction”) as well as a statement of the procedures involved in the observation of the phenomena that refer to the concept. Thus, there is no simple way to answer such questions as “What is an electron?” or “What is an attitude?” except as one presupposes an implicit understanding of related concepts and a knowledge of the rules of correspondence linking the specified concept to observables.

Although no rules for inventing constructs can be specified, it is evident that a theory will be fruitful to the extent that it contains constructs that meet the requirements of (1) logical fertility (such constructs enable logical inferences to be made), (2) multiple connections (the constructs are not isolated from one another but, rather, are so richly interconnected that it is possible to go from one to another by various routes), and (3) empirical extensibility (some of the constructs can be related to observables in such a way that a variety of equivalent empirical definitions can be given to any specific construct). Figure 1-1 illustrates a multiply-con-

The Role of Theory in Social Psychology

nected, empirically extensible set of constructs. Such concepts as c' and c'', which are not multiply-connected, have no value in a theoretical system; the set of concepts that are not connected directly or indirectly with observables (those encircled by a dotted line) form a logical, but not a scientific, system.

![Diagram of Concepts and Systems](image)

**Figure 1-1. Concepts and Systems**

The double lines represent empirical connections between a concept and what is observed; empirical connections are established by rules of correspondence or operational definitions. The single lines represent logical connections between concepts; the logical connections reflect the abstract calculus or logical skeleton of the theoretical system. The set of concepts that are empirically linked to observables (system A) forms a scientific system; the set of concepts that have no linkages to observables (system B) forms a logical, but not a scientific, system. Such concepts as c' and c'', which are not multiply-connected, are of no value. (Suggested by Margenau, 1950.)

Without rules of correspondence to link some of the constructs in a theory to observables, there is no way of ascertaining or testing its empirical consequences. Even when observables can be coordi-
nated to constructs, however, it is rarely the case that any given observation or experiment, by itself, will be crucial in determining whether a particular hypothesis that is deduced from a theory will be rejected or accepted. If the results of an experiment are negative for a given hypothesis, one may "save" the hypothesis by rejecting as inappropriate the particular operational definition of the construct involved in the hypothesis. Whether one rejects the hypothesis or the operational definition will be determined by one's comparative investments in the operational definition and in the theory from which the hypothesis was derived and the ease or difficulty of modifying the one or the other. Thus, there is a certain arbitrariness in the empirical definition of concepts; in part, they are defined so as to enable a theory to have fruitful empirical consequences. In addition, the rules of correspondence are formulated in such a way as to enable other competent observers or experimenters to perform similar operations and get similar results; that is to say, the rules of correspondence link concepts to operations that have an objective, repeatable, and intersubjective character. Apart from the general criteria of "fruitfulness" and "objectivity," it is not possible to formalize with any precision the procedures for establishing a correspondence between constructs and observables. As Nagel (1961) has pointed out, "experimental ideas do not have the sharp contours that theoretical notions possess." The processes involved in scientific inquiry are not only or mainly those that are involved in logic; the establishment of fruitful and objective rules of correspondence is mainly an intuitive, creative affair.

Let us illustrate our discussion of the nature of theory by reference to a well-known "middle-range" theory in social psychology, the "frustration-aggression" theory (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). This theory employs four major concepts: "frustration," which is defined as "that condition which exists when a goal-response suffers interference"; "aggression," which refers to a class of acts that are designed to injure someone or something; "inhibition," which refers to the tendency to restrain acts because of the negative consequences one anticipates from engaging in them; and "displacement," which refers to the tendency to engage in acts of aggression that are directed, not against the source of frustration, but against another target. These concepts are interrelated by the following system of interlocking hypotheses:

1. The amount of frustration is a function of three factors: the strength of instigation to the frustrated goal response; the degree of interference with the frustrated goal response; and the number of goal-response sequences frustrated.

2. The strength of instigation to aggression varies directly with the amount of frustration.

3. The strongest instigation aroused by a frustration is to acts of aggression directed against the agent perceived to be the source of the frustration; progressively weaker instigations are aroused to progressively less direct acts of aggression.

4. The inhibition of any act of aggression varies directly with the strength of the punishment anticipated for its expression. Punishment includes injury to loved objects and being prevented from carrying out a desired act, as well as the usual situations that cause pain.

5. The inhibition of direct acts of aggression is an additional frustration that instigates aggression against the agent perceived to be responsible for this inhibition and increases the instigation to other forms of aggression. There is, consequently, a strong tendency for inhibited aggression to be displaced to different objects and expressed in modified forms.

6. The expression of any act of aggression is a catharsis that reduces the instigation to all other acts of aggression.

From these basic hypotheses of the theory, one can "derive" a large number of subsidiary hypotheses. The derivations are plausible inferences rather than logical deductions, because they involve unexpressed assumptions and rely on the implicit meanings of everyday terms. Thus, it is plausible to infer from the above hypotheses that a man whose boss has turned down a request for a salary increase is more likely to hit his son who disturbs him while he is reading the newspaper than is a man who has not been rebuffed by his boss. There is, however, an unexpressed assumption that the salary request was made recently. Suppose, though, it had been made five years before his son had been born? Certain unstated assumptions about the effects of time are important to the theory. Also, such key terms as "interference," "goal response," and "direct" have no precise theoretical meaning, but, rather, are defined implicitly in terms of everyday usage. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the frustration-aggression theory permits one to make plausible inferences, and it gives coherence to a variety of phenomena.

For the theory to have predictive value, it is not necessary for all
of its constructs to be operationally defined. Thus, “frustration” is theoretically defined by its linking of the constructs “interfered goal response” and “aggression,” each of which can be empirically defined. Of course, the theory would be empirically richer if “frustration” were also directly coordinated with observables, but even without this coordination the theory obviously has empirical consequences.

What rules of correspondence are to be used to give an empirical definition, for example, to the construct “aggression”? This is, as we have seen earlier, a matter of arbitrary choice. On the one hand, one does not want to confront common sense unnecessarily; yet, on the other hand, neither does one want to discard hastily a theory that is useful in some respects. Consider the proposition that frustration leads to aggression unless the aggressive response is inhibited. There is, of course, a good deal of evidence that the interference with a goal response often produces problem-solving behavior and constructive activity rather than activity that is commonly thought of as “aggressive.” One can either broaden the empirical definition of aggression to include such activity (problem-solving behavior is designed to “destroy” the problem) or one can revise the theory. One might, for example, revise the theory by distinguishing between types of frustration (as between “threat” and “deprivation”) and postulate that “threat,” but not “deprivation,” is linked to aggression (see Maslow, 1954, for a discussion of “threat” and “deprivation”). The revised theory might postulate that interference with certain types of goal response lead to “threat,” but not “deprivation,” unless the strength of deprivation exceeds a certain threshold or that specific types of interference have this result. Recent contributions to the frustration-aggression theory are contained in Berkowitz (1962) and Buss (1961).

Concluding Comment

Social psychology is in its infancy. It has only begun to identify a distinctive subject matter relating to human interaction. Being in its infancy, it is still largely dominated by theoretical approaches that are based on implicit conceptions of the nature of man. None of these approaches is sufficiently explicit in its psychological assumptions, in its mode of logical inference, nor in its empirical referents to permit unambiguous testing of its implications. In short, none of these orientations is a “theory” in the sense of theories in the physical sciences. Nevertheless, a theoretical point of view does indeed stimulate and guide research, a testimony to the human capacity to extrapolate “beyond the information given.” In subsequent chapters, we shall examine the basic ideas underlying the various approaches to social psychology and explore briefly the research that they have stimulated.