Theorizing in Social Psychology

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Abstract. The perpetual crisis in social psychology has several facets: the unstable balance between the social and the psychological in social psychology; the conflict between the abstract and the concrete; and the chronic gap between our aspirations and our capabilities with regard to solving social problems. A perspective for theorizing is presented which is oriented toward making social psychology more relevant to specific individuals in particular situations. The author's recent theorizing on distributive justice is summarized. It is concerned with specifying the conditions under which a given value—"equity," "equality," or "need"—will be the value underlying a group's system of distributive justice.

Comments on the "crisis" in social psychology. Al Pepitone called me up several months before the SESP meetings and said he had just read my paper in the European Journal of Social Psychology (Deutsch, 1974a), replying to Pion's attack on the social psychology of conflict. He indicated that he had been very favorably impressed with it. While I was still intoxicated by his honeyed words, he asked me if I would participate in a symposium on theory in social psychology at the SESP meetings. Before I had completely recovered my senses, I had agreed. This is how I have come to prepare this paper.

When I sat down to think about what I might say at the SESP symposium, I speculated on what might have intrigued Pepitone about my article in the European Journal, with the thought that I might perhaps use it as a springboard for my remarks at the symposium. The European Journal paper was an unusual one for me: it was rather polemical. Pion's critique of the social psychology of conflict was a very orthodox Marxist sermon, presented in the form of ex cathedra pronouncements. Since I had spent my undergraduate years engaging in Marxist polemics in the cloisters at the City College of New York, I could not resist the temptation to return to a more youthful period of my life in my rejoinder to Pion.

Perhaps Pepitone was expecting a polemical paper from me. It would be easy enough to write a paper ridiculing the current state of theory in social psychology—all of our theories in social psychology are quite vulnerable to such an attack. It might be fun to do but my feeling about current theories in social psychology is that they are more in need of tender loving care than of withering blasts. They need sympathetic attention and careful nurturing if they are to develop the root systems which will sustain them through the changing seasons.

Were I to engage in a polemic about theorizing in social psychology, my inclination would be to attack the "doom-criers," those who assert that social psychology is in a "crisis" which it must overcome if it is to survive. However, this is a temptation I can resist. Nevertheless, I would like to make a few comments about the "crisis" in 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: in the 1930's, there was much more emphasis on group dynamics, intergroup relations, and political processes. J. P. Brown's Psychology and the Social Order (1936), 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 unsteadily 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 people will behave in abstract situations but we know very little about how particular individuals will behave in particular situations. We have been deficient in characterizing the psychological properties of social situations and the social consequences of different personalities, especially 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 turn to the topic of this symposium: "new theoretical perspectives in social psychology." I plan to address this topic in two parts: first, I would like to consider a perspective for theorizing in social psychology and second, I would like to describe some
of my own theorizing.

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 homogenous, 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 "tints"--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 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 foregoing is consistent with the theorizing of the "object relations" school of psychoanalysts (Fairbairn, 1952) and of Parsons (Parsons and Bales, 1955) about the socialization process.

The second point that I wish to make is that the psychic realities underlying each person's interpersonal world are 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 his 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.

My recent theorizing. Now let me turn briefly to some of my own recent theorizing which is not necessarily a good example of what theory should be like. My only excuse for not taking the medicine I prescribe for others is that I have developed these theoretical ideas before I made the prescription.

My recent theorizing is concerned with the question: what determines which value will be used as the basis of distributive justice? I became interested in this question because of a deep dissatisfaction with "equity theory." My dissatisfaction grows out of the fact that "equity theory" is a very parochial way of looking at the psychological issues that are relevant to any broadly conceived theory of distributive justice. Equity theory, essentially, has as its implicit assumption that all interpersonal relations are to be conceived of as similar to relations between buyer and seller in a market economy. I know that the proponents of equity theory have attempted to broaden the commodities involved in such an exchange by including "esteem," "personal characteristics," "social status," etc. as "inputs" and "outputs" and thus give the theory a more general character. But, in my view, this only compounds the intrinsic difficulties of the theory by helping to spread economic values to all areas of social life: if social life does not fit the market economy conception, let us transform social life so that it does fit this conception.

In my view, there are many different kinds of values which can underlie a system of distributive justice. It is obvious that issues of justice may arise in non-economic social relations (e.g., between parent and child) and may be decided in terms of considerations which cannot be appropriately conceived of as input-output ratios.

In some recent writings, I have presented the view that "justice" as a value is concerned with fostering the conditions of effective social cooperation necessary to promote individual well-being (Deutsch, 1974b, 1975). The particular distributive values operative in a "just world" should depend upon the external circumstances confronting the group and the specific characteristics of the individuals composing it. Under some conditions distributing rewards according to individual need will be more "just" and under other conditions allocating in terms of individual productivity will be more so.

In my theorizing, I have focused on three principles of justice: "equity," "equality," and "need." There are, of course, many other principles: "winner take all" is, for example, another principle. I have tried to indicate the social functions of each principle and to develop some hypotheses about the conditions under which one principle rather than another is likely to predominate in a group or social system. I have been able to generate a lot of fruitful experimentally-testable hypotheses from a broad, crude proposition which I have found useful as a basis of organizing the research results in the area of conflict resolution.

This crude hypothesis is that the typical consequences of a given type of social relation tend to elicit that relation. As applied to conflict resolution (Deutsch, 1973), the hypothesis implies that a competitive process of conflict resolution is likely to develop (given a conflict situation that is not yet strongly determined) if the typical consequences of a competitive process can be introduced into the conflict situation. Some of the typical consequences are: enhanced perception of differences between self and other, mutual suspicion, reduced communication, use of coercive
tactics to influence the other, and an emphasis on maximizing power differences. In a parallel way, a cooperative process of conflict resolution is likely to develop if the typical consequences of a successful cooperative process can be introduced.

To relate my crude hypothesis about social relations to the three principles of justice, another hypothesis must be articulated: In cooperative relations in which economic productivity is a primary goal (characterized as an "economic orientation"), "equity" will be the dominant principle of justice; where the fostering or maintenance of enjoyable social relations is the primary goal (a "solidarity orientation"), "equality" will be the dominant principle; and in cooperative relations in which the fostering of personal development and personal welfare is the primary goal (a "caring orientation"), "need" will be the dominant principle. The crude hypothesis can be used to amplify the foregoing propositions by proliferating more specific predictions about the conditions under which one rather than another orientation is likely to predominate in a group or social system.

Thus, among the typical consequences of an economic orientation are (Diesing, 1962): (1) the development of a set of values which include maximization, a means-end schema, neutrality or impartiality with regard to means, and competition; (2) the turning of man and everything associated with him into commodities—including labor, time, land, capital, personality, social relations, ideas, art, and enjoyment; (3) the development of measurement procedures which enable the value of different amounts and types of commodities to be compared; (4) the tendency for economic activities to expand in scope and size. The crude hypothesis, which I have advanced above, would imply that if a social situation were characterized by impersonality, competition, maximization, an emphasis on comparability rather than uniqueness, largeness in size or scope, etc., then an economic orientation and the principle of equity are likely to be dominant in the group or social system. Specific experimental hypotheses could readily be elaborated: the more competitive the people are in a group, the more likely they are to use "equity" rather than "equality" or "need" as the principle of distributive justice; the more impersonal the relations of the members of a group are, the more likely they are to use "equity;" and so forth.

In the same manner, one could detail the typical consequences of a solidarity-oriented group or society. These include: (1) the development of a set of values that emphasize personal ties to other group members, group loyalty, mutual respect, personal equality, and cooperation; (2) uniqueness of attachments to people, activities, and objects associated with the group so that they are unexchangeable and therefore of absolute value; and (3) the development of integrative procedures to reduce role conflicts, misunderstanding, and other sources of interpersonal hostility within the group. With such typical consequences in mind, one could elaborate a variety of experimental hypotheses: the more face-to-face contact that members of a group have, provided none of them are considered to be in a dependent status, the more likely they are to use "equality" rather than "equity" or "need;" the greater the degree of friendship that exists within the group, the more likely they are to use "equality;" etc.

The "caring" and "solidarity" orientations have much in common and both differ in similar ways from the "economic" orientation. However, the caring orientation is characterized by a more direct and explicit responsibility for the fostering of the personal development and personal welfare of the others in the group. Additionally, the caring relationship may
involve dependents of unequal status as well as others of equal status. Typical consequences of a caring orientation include: (1) the development of a set of values which stress responsibility for the other, permissiveness toward the other's expression of his needs, heightened sensitivity to the other's needs and state of development, support and nurturance in relation to the other's legitimate needs, and non-reciprocity in relation to the other's hostility as he suffers frustrations during the caring relationship; and (2) the development of intimate ties which may reflect and express one's own early experiences in caring relationships. Thus, experimentally, one would predict that heightening the salience of the relative needs of group members, heightening the sense of responsibility in relation to the needs of the others, etc. would lead to the use of "need" rather than "equality" or "equity" as the principle of distributive justice.

Given the nature of Western society, whose characteristics predispose it to have an "economic orientation," it has been natural for social psychologists to focus on "equity" as the central principle of distributive justice. This is, however, too limited a perspective. "Equity" is only one of many possible principles. It is evident that questions of justice may arise in non-economic social relations and may be decided in terms that are unrelated to input-output ratios. To cast non-economic social relations into economic terms is not only a theoretical insensitivity, it also contributes to the spread of economic values to all areas of social life and hence, to the impersonalization of social relations.

References


Footnotes

1. This paper is a revised version of a talk given at the 1975 meetings of the Society For Experimental Social Psychology in Lafayette, Indiana, in the symposium on "New Theoretical Perspectives in Social Psychology." The author is indebted to the National Science Foundation, NSF grant G00C-74-02477, for support in preparation of this paper.

2. "Equity" as the principle of distributive justice implies that rewards ought to be proportional to contributions; "equality" implies that rewards should be distributed equally even if the contributions are unequal; and "need" implies that rewards ought to be distributed in accordance with needs rather than contributions. If the contributions of all contributors are equal, then the "equity" and "equality" principles would yield the same results; similarly, if the needs of all contributors are equal, then the "equity" and "need" principles would yield the same results.