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Excerpt

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Introduction

What Happened to the “Social” in Social Psychology?

In this work I document the historical abandonment of the distinctive conception of the social dimensions of cognition, emotion, and behavior, and of the discipline of social psychology itself,¹ that was recognized in the early decades of twentieth century American social psychology.² This conception was progressively neglected from the 1930s onward, to the extent that scarcely a trace of the original conception of the social remains in contemporary American “social” psychology. I also suggest some explanations, albeit partial and tentative, of this historical neglect and eventual abandonment.

On the face of it, this is a remarkable and surprising claim to make. American social psychology is a well-established discipline with an almost hundred-year history and a present professional membership in the thousands. However, the fact that a discipline calls itself social psychology does not guarantee the social nature of whatever is considered to be its subject matter. In this work, I argue that contemporary American social psychology has virtually abandoned the study of the social dimensions of psychological states and behavior.

Of course, whether one is inclined to accept this claim will largely depend upon one’s conception of the social. Those who embrace a different conception of the social from the one advocated in this work might very

¹ By a distinctive conception of the social dimensions of cognition, emotion, and behavior, I mean a conception that distinguishes between socially and individually engaged psychological states and behavior and that treats their distinction as the justification for recognizing social psychology as a discipline distinct from individual psychology. The distinction is explicated in the following chapters (especially Chapter 1).

² By early decades of the twentieth century, I mean the first three decades.

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well hold that American social psychology has never been more social than it is today. For better or worse, most contemporary American social psychologists do in fact embrace a different conception of the social. It is to the historical explanation of this peculiar fact that the present work is directed.

I

The founding fathers of scientific psychology in Germany and the United States and the early American pioneers of social psychology held a distinctive conception of the social dimensions of cognition, emotion, and behavior and of the discipline of social psychology itself. They recognized psychological states and behavior grounded in the membership of social groups, or social “collectivities” or “communities.” Social psychology, or “group” or “collective” psychology, as it was sometimes called, was identified as that branch of psychological science concerned with the study of psychological states and behavior oriented to the represented psychology and behavior of members of social groups. Individual psychology, by contrast, was held to be concerned with the study of psychological states engaged independently of the represented psychology and behavior of members of social groups, e.g., those grounded in genetic endowment or nonsocial forms of learning.

Wilhelm Wundt is generally acknowledged as the institutional founding father of academic scientific psychology. Wundt founded the discipline of scientific psychology at the University of Leipzig in Germany in the 1880s by appropriating the experimental methods of the newly developed discipline of physiology and applying them to the study of conscious experience. However, Wundt also thought that the experimental study of conscious experience ought to be supplemented by the comparative-historical study of socially embedded psychological states and behavior, and he spent his later years developing this form of psychology in the ten-volume *Völkerpsychologie* (1900–1920), variously translated as “social psychology,” “folk psychology,” or “cultural psychology.”³

That is, Wundt clearly acknowledged forms of cognition, emotion, and behavior grounded in the membership of social groups: “All such mental products of a general character presuppose as a condition the existence of a mental *community* composed of many individuals” (Wundt,

³ There is some dispute about how the term “*Völkerpsychologie*” is best translated. The issue is discussed in Chapter 2.

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1897/1902, p. 23). Wundt also distinguished “social” from “individual” or “experimental” psychology on the grounds that the objects of “social” as opposed to “individual” or “experimental” psychology are grounded in the membership of social groups:

Because of this dependence on the community, in particular the social community, this whole department of psychological investigation is designated as *social psychology*, and distinguished from individual, or as it may be called because of its predominating method, *experimental psychology*. (Wundt, 1897/1902, p. 23)

Similarly, Wundt’s student Oswald Külpe, despite his later disagreements with his former teacher over the experimental analysis of thought processes, maintained that “social psychology treats of the mental phenomena dependent upon a community of individuals; it is already a special department of study, if not a fully developed science” (Külpe, 1895, p. 7).

Although Wundt had many American doctoral students who returned to found the first psychology departments and laboratories in the United States and Canada, few returned to enthusiastically promote the study of *Völkerpsychologie*. Nonetheless, many early American scientific psychologists, including both so-called structuralist psychologists such as Edward B. Titchener and functionalist psychologists such as James R. Angell, followed Wundt in recognizing the distinct identity as well as the value of social psychology conceived as a discipline concerned with those psychological states and behavior that are grounded in the membership of social groups:⁴

Just as the scope of psychology extends beyond man to the animals, so does it extend from the individual man to groups of men, to societies. The subject-matter of psychology is human experience considered as dependent upon the individual. But since the individuals of the same race and epoch are organized in much the same way, and since they live together in a society where their conduct affects and is affected by the conduct of others, their view of experience under its dependent aspect naturally becomes, in certain main features, a common or general view;

⁴ The same conception of social psychological phenomena is also to be found in some early European psychologists, such as Jean Piaget (1932) and Frederic K. Bartlett (1932). For example, Bartlett (1932) maintained that cognitive processes such as memory are frequently grounded in socially engaged beliefs and attitudes:

Several of the factors influencing the individual observer are social in origin and character... many of the transformations which took place as a result of the repeated reproductions of prose passages were directly due to the influence of social conventions and beliefs current in the group to which the individual subject belonged. (p. 118)

Discussion of the development of social psychology in Europe is, however, beyond the scope of the present work.

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and this common view is embodied in those social institutions to which we have referred above, – in language, religion, law and custom. (Titchener, 1910, p. 28)⁵

Social psychology, in its broadest sense, has to do mainly with the psychological principles involved in those expressions of mental life which take form in social relations, organizations, and practices. (Angell, 1908, p. 4)

This conception of social psychological phenomena and of the province of social psychology is clearly evident in the early textbooks on social psychology, such as Edward Ross's *Social Psychology* (1908):

Social psychology, as the writer conceives it, studies the psychic planes and currents that come into existence among men in consequence of their association. . . . The aligning power of association triumphs over diversity of temperament and experience. . . . The individuality that each has received from the hand of nature is largely effaced, and we find people gathered into great planes of uniformity. (p. 1)⁶

Analogously, William McDougall (1920) maintained that “social” or “group” mentality is the proper subject matter of “social” or “group” psychology, the aim of which is to “display the general principles of collective mental life which are incapable of being deduced from the laws of the mental life of isolated individuals” (pp. 7–8).

Yet by the late 1920s and 1930s, this distinctive conception of the social dimensions of psychological states and behavior and of the discipline of social psychology was beginning to be abandoned by American social psychologists. Floyd Allport (1924a) was vigorous in his rejection of “social” or “group” forms of cognition, emotion, and behavior as the subject matter of a distinctive social psychology, and indeed he famously denied that social psychology forms a separate discipline distinct from individual psychology:

There is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals. Social psychology must not be placed in contradistinction to the

⁵ Titchener is often portrayed by historians as a dismissive critic of Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie*, largely on the basis of negative comments about its role in Wundt's system that he made in his obituary on Wundt (Titchener, 1921). Yet Titchener retained an active and critical interest in the project of a *Völkerpsychologie* and was an astute commentator on the methodological problems of any form of comparative-historical psychology that dealt with different social and cultural communities. See, for example, his critical commentary on the psychological findings of the Torres Straits expedition (Titchener, 1916), whose intellectual goals he nonetheless clearly supported.

⁶ Although Ross himself claimed (1908, p. 2) that *Social Psychology* omitted the “psychology of groups” (which he held to be closely tied to the “morphology” of groups, the subject matter of “psychological sociology”), his detailed discussions of fashion, conventionality, and custom generally relate these phenomena to specific social groups.

psychology of the individual; *it is part of the psychology of the individual*, whose behavior it studies in relation to that sector of his environment comprised by his fellows. (p. 4)

From the 1930s onward, the social dimensions of psychological states and behavior came to be increasingly neglected by American social psychologists.

There were lots of exceptions, such as Asch (1951, 1952), Asch, Block, and Hertzman (1938), Cantril (1941), Charters and Newcomb (1952), Converse and Campbell (1953), Festinger (1947), Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956), Festinger, Schachter, and Back (1950), French (1944), Kelley (1955), Kelley and Volkart (1952), Kelley and Woodruff (1956), Lewin (1947a), Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939), Newcomb (1943), Sherif (1935, 1936, 1948), Sherif and Cantril (1947), Siegel and Siegel (1957), Stouffer, Lunsdame, et al. (1949), and Stouffer, Suchman, De Vinney, Star, and Williams (1949). The original conception of the subject matter of social psychology can still be identified in some works published in the 1950s and 1960s, and some of the clearest theoretical statements of this conception were in fact advanced during the 1950s (e.g., Asch, 1952). However, these works appear to have represented the vestiges of the earlier social tradition, not the increasingly asocial tradition that developed from the 1930s onward.

Trying to establish the exact date of the abandonment of the original conception of the subject matter of social psychology is of course a fruitless and arbitrary exercise – and one that I don't attempt in this work. What I suggest is that, although the original conception was developed and sustained in the first four decades of the twentieth century, by the late 1920s and 1930s it was being abandoned by many social psychologists in favor of Floyd Allport's alternative asocial vision. While the original conception continued to be represented in articles and books in the 1950s and 1960s and arguably reached a high-water mark in the 1950s, it was rapidly displaced by the narrow experimental paradigm that came to dominate American social psychology in the 1950s and 1960s.

Whenever exactly the original conception was abandoned, it is very clear that it is no longer maintained by contemporary American social psychology. In early American studies of social beliefs and attitudes, for example, beliefs and attitudes were held to be social by virtue of their orientation to the represented beliefs and attitudes of members of social groups, irrespective of the types of objects to which they were directed (i.e., the adjective "social" was employed to qualify beliefs and attitudes themselves). In contrast, in contemporary American social psychology, cognition is

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characterized as social merely by virtue of the objects to which it is directed, namely, other persons or social groups, not by virtue of its orientation to the represented cognition of members of social groups (i.e., the adjective “social” is employed to qualify only the objects of cognition, not cognition itself): “The study of social cognition concerns how people make sense of other people and themselves” (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 17).⁷

Early American social psychologists maintained that the causal dynamics of social cognition (and emotion and behavior) are different from the causal dynamics of individual cognition (and emotion and behavior). As McDougall (1920) put it, “the thinking and acting of each man, insofar as he thinks and acts as a member of a society, are very different from his thinking or acting as an isolated individual” (pp. 9–10).⁸ However, it is a general presumption of contemporary studies of social cognition that the basic cognitive processes engaged in the perception and cognition of nonsocial objects, such as tables, trees, and tarantulas, are also engaged in the perception and cognition of social objects, such as other persons and social groups. In consequence, the contemporary study of social cognition is essentially the application of the principles of individual cognitive psychology to the domain of “social objects,” namely, other persons and social groups:

As one reviews research on social cognition, the analogy between the perception of things and the perception of people becomes increasingly clear. The argument is made repeatedly: the principles that describe how people think in general also describe how people think about people. (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 18)⁹

⁷ Compare the various definitions of social cognition offered in Devine, Hamilton, and Ostrom (1994), Higgins, Ruble, and Hartup (1983), Ross and Nisbett (1991), and Wegner and Vallacher (1977).

⁸ This passage was quoted by McDougall from his earlier work *Psychology: The Science of Behavior* (1912).

⁹ Although it is often recognized that cognitive processes relating to persons are likely to differ from cognitive processes relating to things, these differences are generally conceived in terms of modifications of individual cognitive processing to fit distinctive features of the human objects of cognition, not in terms of any fundamental distinction between individual as opposed to social *forms of cognition*:

Social cognition, of course, differs from the general principles of cognition in some ways. Compared to objects, people are more likely to be causal agents, to perceive as well as being perceived, and intimately to involve the observer’s self. They are difficult targets of cognition; because they adjust themselves upon being perceived, many of their important attributes (e.g., traits) must be inferred, and the accuracy of observations is hard to determine. People frequently change, and are unavoidably complex as targets of cognition. Hence those who study social cognition must adapt the ideas of cognitive psychology to suit the special features of cognitions about people. (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 20)

Similar sorts of points can be made about contemporary American social psychological research on social behavior and social groups. Social behavior, for example, was originally conceived as behavior oriented to the represented behavior of members of social groups, irrespective of the objects to which it is directed, which might include trees, rivers, rubbish bins, domestic animals, or fellow humans. However, from the 1930s onward social behavior came to be characterized as behavior directed toward other persons or groups, independently of whether such behavior is oriented to the represented behavior of members of social groups (F. H. Allport, 1924a, 1933; G. W. Allport, 1954; Aronson, 1972; Krech & Crutchfield, 1948; Murphy & Murphy, 1931; Murphy, Murphy, & Newcomb, 1937; Smith, 1945; Znaniecki, 1925, 1936). Most social psychologists came to adopt Floyd Allport's (1924a) *interpersonal*¹⁰ definition of social behavior:

Behavior in general may be regarded as the interplay of stimulation and reaction between the individual and his environment. Social behavior comprises the stimulations and reactions arising between an individual and the *social* portion of his environment; that is, between the individual and his fellows. Examples of such behavior would be the reactions to language, gestures and other movements of our fellow men, in contrast with our reactions towards non-social objects, such as plants, minerals, tools, and inclement weather. (pp. 3–4)

In general, it may be said that the domain of contemporary social psychology remains the same restricted and fundamentally asocial domain defined (or, strictly speaking, redefined) by Floyd Allport in the 1920s and reaffirmed by Gordon Allport's oft-quoted definition from the 1950s:

Social psychology is the science which studies the behavior of the individual in so far as his behavior stimulates other individuals, or is itself a reaction to their behavior; and which describes the consciousness of the individuals insofar as it is a consciousness of social objects and social reactions. (F. H. Allport, 1924a, p. 12)

With few exceptions, social psychologists regard their discipline as *an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings*. (G. W. Allport, 1954, p. 5)

Why was the original conception of social psychological phenomena and of the discipline of social psychology abandoned by later generations

¹⁰ Many social behaviors are of course also interpersonal, but the two categories are not equivalent. The distinction between social and interpersonal behavior is discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

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of American social psychologists? In this work I suggest a number of explanations. In part the abandonment appears to have been a product of the unfortunate association of theories of the social dimensions of psychological states and behavior with theories about the emergent properties of supraindividual “group minds,” which were anathema to those social psychologists who were committed empiricists and experimentalists. In part it appears to have been a product of the apparent threat posed by the social dimensions of psychological states and behavior to cherished principles of autonomy and rationality, which were integral to the special form of moral and political individualism embraced by many American social psychologists. And in part it appears to have been a product of the impoverished concept of the social that some American social psychologists inherited from European “crowd” theorists such as Gabriel Tarde (1890/1903) and Gustav Le Bon (1895/1896), which provided the asocial paradigm for the experimental analysis of “social groups” developed by Floyd Allport, Dashiell (1930, 1935), and Murphy and Murphy (1931; Murphy, Murphy, & Newcomb 1937). While the original conception of social psychological phenomena was retained until the 1960s, it was beginning to be replaced by the asocial experimental paradigm in the late 1920s and 1930s. It was displaced almost completely by the increasingly narrow conception of experimentation in social psychology that developed in the 1950s and 1960s, which was itself a development of the asocial experimental tradition initiated by Floyd Allport in the 1920s.

A number of historians of the social sciences have recently argued that the formative years for American social science were the decades between 1870 and 1930 (Manicas, 1987; Ross, 1991). In this book, I suggest that much the same is true of American social psychology, in a number of significant ways. It was during this period that social psychology came to be recognized as a distinct discipline, and it was during this period that the original conception of the social dimensions of psychological states and behavior was formulated. It was also during this period that the alternative asocial theoretical and experimental paradigm in social psychology was developed by Floyd Allport.

While the two positions retained their advocates during the 1930s and 1940s, and while the original conception of the social enjoyed a brief postwar renaissance in the 1950s, the asocial theoretical and experimental paradigm quickly displaced the original conception of the social in the postwar years. Although American social psychology expanded dramatically as a scientific discipline after World War II (Cartwright, 1979; Farr, 1996), and in an institutional sense only came to full maturity after the

war (with the development of independent departments of social psychology, graduate programs in social psychology, and so forth), this amounted to the expansion of an essentially asocial theoretical and methodological paradigm that was already securely in place by the late 1930s. Or so I argue in this work.

II

It is perhaps worth stressing at the outset that this work does not aim to provide a comprehensive history of twentieth century American social psychology. Franz Samelson (1974) has claimed that an adequate history of social psychology still remains to be written. I agree that it does, and this work makes no pretense of offering such a general history. The aim is much more narrowly focused: to chart the historical neglect of the original conception of social psychological phenomena¹¹ to be found in early American social psychology and suggest some explanations of this neglect.

It is perhaps also worth stressing that this work does not attempt to develop a detailed critique of the theoretical and empirical achievements of twentieth century American social psychology. It is not hard to discern an (at least implicit) condemnation of the theoretical and empirical achievements of late twentieth century social psychology in the work of some recent historians and social constructionist critics who complain about the asocial nature of contemporary social psychology. No such condemnation is intended by the present work, the aim of which is simply to argue that, whatever the merits of the post-1930 tradition of theoretical and empirical work that came to dominate American social psychology (which I believe to have been considerable),¹² this tradition no longer constitutes a tradition of distinctively *social* psychology. That said, this work

¹¹ Throughout the rest of this work I use the term “social psychological phenomena” as shorthand for social (i.e., socially engaged) forms of cognition, emotion, and behavior, and “individual psychological phenomena” as shorthand for individual (i.e., individually engaged) forms of cognition, emotion, and behavior. The use of the term “phenomena” is not intended to suggest that there is anything esoteric (or especially phenomenal) about social and individual psychological states and behavior. The term is just preferred over more theoretically loaded cognates such as “factors,” “components,” “elements,” and the like.

¹² Although I believe these achievements to have been considerable, I also recognize the special epistemological and methodological problems of the discipline, especially the special problems of laboratory experimentation in social psychology. I have discussed these issues in detail elsewhere (Greenwood, 1989).

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makes no pretence at theoretical neutrality. I believe the original conception of social psychological states and behavior shared by early American social psychologists had much to recommend it and consequently believe that something important was lost when the original conception of the social was abandoned.

The focus of this work is restricted to American “psychological” social psychology, defined as the form of social psychology practiced within departments of psychology at academic institutions in North America (the United States and Canada). This is because, although academic social psychology did develop in a somewhat different fashion in other countries, the American paradigm has come to dominate social psychology worldwide.¹³ The question of whether the original conception of social psychological phenomena was retained within American “sociological” psychology, defined as social psychology practiced within departments of sociology at academic institutions in North America, is left largely open.¹⁴ For whatever vestiges of the original conception of social psychological phenomena can be discovered in American departments of sociology, it is certainly the case that academic psychologists have come to dominate the journal, handbook, and textbook markets in social psychology, and significantly outnumber sociological social psychologists at both the faculty and student levels (Burgess, 1977; Collier, Minton, & Reynolds, 1991; E. E. Jones, 1985, 1998; Liska, 1977).¹⁵

I don’t pretend to be the first person to complain about the neglect of the social in American social psychology or the first to offer putative explanations of it. A number of other critics have complained about the neglect of the social in American social psychology (Farr, 1996; Graumann, 1986; Moscovici, 1972; Pepitone, 1976, 1981; Post, 1980; Stroebe, 1979) and have offered historical accounts of the “individualization” of

¹³ Even the so-called European alternative looks increasingly American, and the new “third-force” Asian vision of social psychology (“Editor’s, Preface,” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 1998) appears to simply appropriate the North American paradigm to the study of Asian peoples.

¹⁴ With the exception of the “symbolic interactionist” tradition, which is discussed at length in Chapter 4.

¹⁵ Nonetheless, it is worth acknowledging that many of the early American social psychologists who recognized the social dimensions of psychological states and behavior were institutionally located in departments of sociology rather than departments of psychology. These include Luther Bernard (1926a, 1931), Emory Bogardus (1918, 1924a, 1924b), Charles Ellwood (1917, 1924, 1925), Franklin Giddings (1896, 1924), Robert Park (1902; Park & Burgess, 1921), Edward Ross (1906, 1908), William I. Thomas (1904; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918), and Kimball Young (1925, 1930, 1931).