Social Psychology a Century Ago

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America's dual interest in social welfare and practical science fueled the emergence of social psychology in the late 19th century. By that century's end, psychologists had presented diverse and sometimes contesting models of social psychology. These varied conceptualizations, however, were challenged by the discipline's growing dedication to the scientific method and experimentation, as well as the profession's need to produce knowledge that could be readily used to address current social problems and regulate social institutions. An appreciation of this late-19th-century moment of intellectual generativity and constraint affords an opportunity to reflect on the potentials and constraints of social psychology at the end of the 20th century.

A query into social psychology as it existed a century ago raises a perennial question of origins: Was there a social psychology then? According to the field's first historian, F. B. Karpf, the answer is affirmative: The social turbulence surrounding the Civil War motivated development of the field. Quoting sociologist Albion Small, Karpf noted that social psychology emerged when Americans "whose thought-world had been stirred to its depths by the war found themselves in 1895, star-gazing in social heavens that had never looked so confused nor so mysterious" (quoted in Karpf, 1932, p. 213).

Other chroniclers identify different cultural moments as motivational forces for the development of social psychology. In his history chapter in the *Handbook of Social Psychology,* for instance, Allport (1954) identified the origins of social psychology with the disruptions of World War I followed by the Great Depression and the dynamics of World War II. Other scholars understand social psychology as arising from the aftermath of World War II, particularly as a response to global struggles and local intergroup conflicts (Cartwright, 1979; Jones, 1985). Despite the chronological discrepancies in these and other "origin myths" (Harris, 1983; Samelson, 1974), these scholars all locate various arrangements in the "social heavens" to account for the appearance of social psychology. One constant in the field is an appreciation of its immediate connectedness with pulsing social conditions—crises, dysfunctions, or tensions. Perhaps it is in this spirit that Allport revised his history of social psychology with the opening claim that "social psychology is an ancient discipline. It is also modern—ultramodern and exciting" (1985, p. 1).

Beyond origin myths, one can find a rich array of social psychological thought in the last decade of the 19th century. A most distinctive and exciting feature of this time is the vibrant variation in the idea of the *social* and its specific manifestations as psychological phenomena—whether as characteristics of human nature, mental functions, or desired states of social practice. Configuring this variation were different notions of the individual and the individual's relation to the cultural, or the social. Only a cursory account of the punctuated variations in theorizing is possible in this review.

However, the variety was not unlimited: Although a diverse and even pluralist vision of the social existed at the end of the 19th century, this period also contained the rudiments of the field's constriction. The discourses on the social from that time thereby intimated the introduction of methodological orthodoxy along with proclamations of the social utility, if not the urgent need, of social psychological thought. The modernity of social consciousness or of the social self thus was set with both the comparably modern glue of aggregate experimental techniques and an accordant positivism that measured visible features of the social world, which were to be the means to make social psychology (and psychology generally) a genuinely useful science. With that decade's imagination of rich possibilities for comprehending social life and its accompanying gestures of methodological and cultural constraint, the 20th century appears to have commenced with a realization that the immense power of the social ultimately demanded the monitored controls of science. In summarizing major events at 19th century's end, then, this review encourages reflection on the intriguing concurrence of enablement and constraint, of power and its limitations.

What Allport (1985) referred to as the modern roots of social psychology are often rehearsed in historical textbooks: Comte's positivist approach to the study of society, French social theorists' conceptions of groups and other social aggregates, Darwin's and Spencer's evolutionary approach to social life, and German thinkers' explorations of language and culture. Given such a European focus, the American work of the late 19th century has often been underplayed or even omitted. Yet, during the 1890s, Amer-

Editor's note. Almost two dozen of the leading historians of psychology agreed to write "snapshots" of various aspects of psychology circa 1900. The articles appear in serial form throughout Volume 55. The series was edited by Donald A. Dewsbury.

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ican psychologists made several significant ventures that vibrantly expanded psychological thinking into *social psychology,* as it would soon be called.

William James's (1890) landmark textbook, *The Principles of Psychology,* contained a provocative treatise on the social. His chapter on the self contains a section entitled "A Man's Social Self." Here James introduced the notion that human gregariousness includes "an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favorably by our kind" (James, 1890, p. 293). Although evolutionary theorists had proposed similar biological bases of sociality, James posed a radical addendum that the social self is not a singular self but plural selves: "Properly speaking, a *man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind" (p. 294, italics in original). He immediately continued, adding "To wound any one of these his images is to wound him" (p. 294). James's social self, illuminated through examples that are highly charged with moral matters, is one that can be split by divergent circumstances. From the many individuals who know a person,

> there results what practically is a division of the man into several selves; and this may be a discordant splitting, as where one is afraid to let one set of his acquaintances know him as he is elsewhere; or it may be a perfectly harmonious division of labor, as where one tender to his children is stern to the soldiers or prisoners under his command. (p. 294)

This social self, then, is at once complex and fragile. James viewed the self not as ego or soul, but as "a *Thought,* at each moment different from that of the last moment, but *appropriative* of the latter, together with all that the latter called its own" (p. 401, italics in original).

For James, the sociality of psychic life involves a fluid, changing, and oftentimes apparently contradictory psychological actor, one more appropriately fitting Allport's (1985) term *ultramodern* than *modern.* Writing in the same decade, James Mark Baldwin offered another conception of the social, one that situated social psychology as the foundation for understanding all human cognitive development and personality. In *Social and Ethical Interpretations in Mental Development: A Study in Social Psychology,* Baldwin (1897) posited that the psychological could be explained only in relation to society and the social. He proposed a dialectic thesis of mental development of the self that is intrinsically social: Through his dialectic of personal growth the self develops as a response to or through imitation of other persons. In his words,

> Very many of the particular marks which I now call mine, when I think of myself, have had just this origin. I have first found them in my social environment and by reason of my social and imitative disposition have transferred them to myself by trying to act as if they were true of me, and so coming to find out that they are true of me. (Baldwin, 1897, p. 11)

This led Baldwin to state that

> *a man is a social outcome rather than a social unit.* He is always, in his greatest part, also some one else. Social acts of his—that is, acts which may not prove anti-social—are his *because they are society's first;* otherwise he would not have learned them nor have had any tendency to do them. (Baldwin, 1897, p. 91, italics in original)

Baldwin's (1897) thesis led him to examine the fundamental ethical nature of social life, the necessary moral basis of determining social progress. With that postulate, Baldwin thus acknowledged the potential ethical conflicts between the individual and society. Given this expansive comprehension of the social, he also argued that the study of social psychology required multiple methods: historical and anthropological, sociological and statistical, and genetic (psychological and biological). For Baldwin, the study of individual psychology was social psychology precisely because the individual was a social product. Every aspect of society, from the historical to institutional structures to ethical systems, therefore necessitated consideration in psychology. The societal utility of this social psychology, then, was not a matter of designing techniques of social regulation but rather was a matter of ethics. Baldwin's theoretical and methodological expansiveness resembles the grander Darwinian theorizing more than the emerging methodological orthodoxy of the newly formed psychology community.

In addition to ventures such as James's and Baldwin's—theories that challenged the essential notions of social and self—other psychologists advanced more modest treatises on the social in general and on social psychology in particular. Among the ideas found in the journal literature of the last decade of the 19th century are numerous proposals that social psychology was needed by society; further, such proposals argued that a systematic social psychology should be based on the likes of evolutionary theory, anthropological views, or the mechanical philosophy of science.

An 1897 study by J. O. Quantz in the *American Journal of Psychology* illustrates the incorporation of evolutionary and anthropological bases to guide the development of a social psychology. Quantz's examination of humans' relations to trees provides an extensive review of the historical and anthropological records, detailing dozens of myths and cultural practices regarding trees. His description project had a theoretical objective: to demonstrate a social evolutionary explanation of customs and beliefs and ultimately of the individual psyche. Through this vast review of social practices across the millennia, Quantz argued that human psyches have evolved to use reason but that under certain social circumstances, regression to lower social stages of evolution is possible: "The last to be acquired is the first to be lost" (Quantz, 1897, p. 460). Such a historical or backward-appraising social psychological science is a necessity for modern social life: Our social evolution is recapitulated in individual development, and therefore, "an education which crowds out such feelings, or allows them to atrophy from disuse, is to be seriously questioned" (Quantz, 1897, p. 500). Social life in general and social development in particular, therefore, must be guided with knowledge of history, of evolution, and of the attendant possibilities for regression.

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In contrast to Quantz's (1897) descriptive and historical approach, concurrently published studies advocated a mechanistic philosophy of social life, notably a determinist and empirically precise approach. In an essay on Hobbes's psychology, Moore (1900) used the epistemology of Hobbes and Bacon to assert that all psychology, including social psychology, generates a mechanical and deterministic accounting of human nature. Moore stated that social psychology, for instance, must proceed with "scientific accuracy" (p. 59) to realize Bacon's mandate that psychologists interrogate "what are the common and simple elements in mental life, and how these are modified by age, sex, region of country, disease, deformity, station in life, wealth, poverty, prosperity, adversity, and so on" (Moore, 1900, p. 59). This is the epistemology of the so-called natural sciences, the mechanistic philosophy underlying the discovery of the laws of nature and the interventions in nature that should be applied to human life.

Whereas Moore (1900) resurrected the ideas of prominent classical philosophers, other researchers extended these existing epistemologies directly to the study of social life. Sheldon (1897), for example, conducted a study of the social activities of children that bridged social evolutionary theory and a mechanical philosophy. His careful empirical assessment realized the Baconian project of classifying types of people (boys and girls, different social classes) and labeling forms of sociality (altruism, gang behavior, and so on). Drawing on a mechanistic philosophy of control and the resources of an evolutionary perspective, Sheldon detected the risks of social psychological regression to earlier social forms and consequently asserted the importance of social regulation based on scientific findings (p. 442). Studies such as Sheldon's (along with the experimental approaches described below) aligned social psychology with social-scientific aspirations, honed in the 19th century, that saw in quantification, especially statistics, the means to overcome the unpredictability of social action and to successfully regulate human performances (Porter, 1994, 1995).

Another empirical project completed in the 1890s, one of the few projects not forgotten, was Triplett's (1897) experimental study of competition. Triplett's study appears to have nearly entirely dispensed with theoretical speculation: The published account exemplifies the modern experiment with its deterministic view of social behavior and its precise control, manipulation, and measurement of social variables. This experiment and its conclusion presented no visible theoretical appreciation of the social or of the relation of the individual to the social or to society. Rather, what is social was simply operationalized: It is the residual effect when all other aspects of an action are factored out. In other words, as Triplett concluded, "From the above facts regarding the laboratory races we infer that the bodily presence of another contestant participating simultaneously in the race serves to liberate latent energy not ordinarily available" (Triplett, 1897, p. 533). However ironic the fact, the one study of the decade that evaded theorizing about the social and deleted society, history, and culture has become "the celebrated event" (Jones, 1985, p. 47) in the history of social psychology and has been singled out as "the only problem studied in the first three decades of experimental research" (Allport, 1985, p. 38).

These case illustrations reveal how social psychology at the turn of the century afforded broad-based opportunities and forged an opening in the imagination of psychology generally. Almost at once, however, the social psychology project introduced constraint and orthodoxy of method and subject matter. James's (1890) conception of the multifaceted, split, and sometimes morally complicated social self, Baldwin's (1897) idea of dynamic social causality—a dialectic—between the person and others and the individual and society, along with other historically and culturally rich explorations constituted prolegomena for one possible form that an ultramodern social psychology could take. However, Sheldon's (1897) evolutionary and socially inclusive view of children's sociality gleaned through a determined set of measurable variables and, more importantly, his model for identifying so-called social problems to be regulated or reformed established a safer undertaking for social psychology. Likewise, Triplett's (1897) experimental formulation and control of the very stuff that is taken as social—his evacuation of its plurality and complexity—represented a calculable if more conservative investigative program, one that triumphed in the century that followed.

The path of social psychology has both contained method and subject matter and incorporated a specific model of the relation between science and social life. The determinist, theory-invisible, individual-centered program that came to dominate social psychology held assumptions that social psychology should produce technical knowledge that would be applied to the necessary regulation of individuals in the social world. Such technical knowledge was taken to be an accurate and sufficient conception of social and individual well-being. Engaging an engineering attitude and a spirit of social reform, social psychologists also adopted confined notions of the social and social life, ones that reflected then-dominant values and politics (Morawski, 1986; Pepitone, 1981; Rose, 1990; Sampson, 1977). This selectivity and its consequences were not lost on some psychological researchers of the 1890s. In his APA presidential address, John Dewey (1900) warned the psychological community about such a move by describing the dangers of an efficient application of psychology.

> While he [the psychologist] is gaining apparent efficacy in some superficial part of the mechanism, he is disarranging, dislocating and disintegrating much more fundamental factors in it. In a word he is operating not as a psychologist, but as a poor psychologist, and the one cure for a partial psychology is a fuller one. (Dewey, 1900, p. 115–116)

A century ago, social psychology pulsed with possibilities for understanding the social features of psychological experiences. The ensuing century realized one version of that understanding and produced an abundance of knowledge about a certain conception of the social. Even the eventual formation of two social psychologies, the so-called psychological and sociological, respectively, did not transform or

derail this narrow project. At the end of this century, we have the opportunity and indeed the responsibility to reflect on what Dewey (1900) called "partial psychology" (p. 116) and to ask whether social psychology is modern or ultramodern. We might well pose again the question of what we want social psychology to be in the century that lies before us.

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