DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 279 912   CG 019 720

AUTHOR   Shaw, Jerry I.; Woodward, Carol
TITLE   Working with Versus Working on Theories in Social
              Psychology.
PUB DATE   [80]
NOTE   38p.
PUB TYPE   Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   *Research; *Research Methodology; *Social Psychology;
              *Social Theories

ABSTRACT
              In recent years there have been a few systematic
attempts to restructure social psychology in which all have concurred
that there is a dearth of provocative and meaningful theoretical
contributions in contemporary social psychology. Current theories are
unnecessarily limited in scope. These theories are fragmented, have
limited implications, lack a common framework, and fail to explicate
underlying assumptive bases. Contemporary social psychological
theorizing is dominated by the practice of working with theories
(verification) instead of working on theories (explanation). Whereas
the former practice casts theory in a role secondary to data
collection by neglecting extrascientific influences, the latter
incorporates sociohistorical determinants thereby elevating theory to
a position of fundamental importance in the description of social
life. Consequences of continued allegiance to working with theories
include lack of applicability to everyday life, an overemphasis on
variables, and the neglect of meaning. The solution is not to end
experiments or the hypothetico-deductive method, but to offset the
relative inattention paid to theoretical endeavors. Working on
theories will require a major shift in the primary activities of many
persons engaged in social psychological research which will engender
a flexibility that will contribute to an enriched understanding of
social life. (An extensive reference list is included.)
(Author/ABL)

Working With Versus Working On Theories in Social Psychology

Jerry I. Shaw and Carol Woodward

California State University, Northridge

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

● Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

2

Abstract

The contemporary trend to use social psychological theory in the service of verification (working with theories) is contrasted to theory utilized in the service of explanation (working on theories). Whereas the former practice casts theory in a role secondary to data collection by neglecting extrascientific influences, the latter incorporates sociohistorical determinants thereby elevating theory to a position of fundamental importance in the description of social life. Consequences of continued allegiance to working with theories include lack of applicability to everyday life, an overemphasis on variables and the neglect of meaning.

Working With Versus Working On Theories in Social Psychology

In recent years social psychologists have initiated a critical

scrutiny of their own scholarly activities. Among concerns expressed

have been the relationship between science and history (Gergen, 1973;

1976), the effects of society on knowledge (Buss, 1975), and the role of

underlying epistemological assumptions (Rappoport, 1977). A related yet

different issue emerging from this self-analysis is the sentiment that a

higher priority has been placed on matters of technique and methodology

than on developing rich, integrative theory. A precursor of this viewpoint

can be found in Ring's (1967) lament about the "fun and games" approach

that has dominated research in social psychology. More recently,

Moscovici (1972) argues that social psychology has relied too heavily on

the predictive function of theories at the expense of developing explana-

tory systems. In a similar vein, Sherif (1977) contends that we have

"put the cart before the horse" by reversing priorities such that matters

of technique take precedence over matters of substance. Tapp (1980)

criticizes the contemporary literature on social problems as consisting

of simplistic, fragmented and atheoretical studies that have advanced

technology at the expense of theory. More generally, Silverman (1977)

characterizes contemporary debates among social psychologists as focused

on procedural technicalities rather than on substantive issues of either

a theoretical or practical nature. Finally, Gergen (1978b) has depicted

much of our research efforts as being preoccupied with hypothesis testing

in lieu of theory building.

In recent years there have been a few systematic attempts to re-
structure social psychology (cf., Armistead, 1974; Ginsburg, 1979a;
Harré & Secord, 1972; Strickland, Aboud, & Gergen, 1976) and, despite
differences in perspective, all have concurred that there is a dearth of
provocative and meaningful theoretical contributions in contemporary
social psychology. Given this growing consensus, the purpose of the
present paper will be to explicate more thoroughly the imbalance between
method and theory that currently marks the discipline.

Before developing our thesis further, we wish to make two preliminary
observations. First, the contention that there is too little theoretical
work is not meant to characterize the contributions of all social psy-
chologists. However, evidence available in the public documents that con-
stitute the field reveals the low priority placed on theoretical matters
and it is to this state of affairs that the present arguments are directed.
Second, the assertion that there has been insufficient attention paid to
theory does not mean that there are few theories in social psychology.
Indeed, there are many theories. However, current theories are unneces-
sarily limited in scope in that they are either parsimonious sets of a
few simple principles addressed to a small range of phenomena, or they are
focused on specific variables that pertain to a particular behavior.
Examples of the former include McGuire's (1964) innoculation theory,
Brehm's (1966) reactance theory, and Lerner's (1970) just world theory
and have been variously referred to as theories of the middle range

(Merton, 1957), microtheories (McGuire, 1966) or miniature theories (Hendrick, 1977). Instances of the latter include Hovland, Janis, and Kelley's (1953) persuasion theory, Berscheid and Walster's (1974) physical attractiveness theory, and Zajonc's (1965) social facilitation theory. Moscovici (1972) has termed this procedure taxonomic theorizing.

Although each of these approaches has been useful in stimulating research and providing alternative interpretations of social phenomena, one cannot help but be aware of their fragmented state, limited implications, lack of common framework or orientation, and failure to explicate under- lying assumptive bases. It is our contention that the sterility of much social psychological theorizing stems from the fact that most of the creative thinking regarding theories has been dominated by concerns about data and procedures that surround the data collection process. To clarify this viewpoint we propose a distinction between "working with" theories, whereby the primary objective is verification of hypotheses, and "working on" theories, in which major emphasis is placed on the explana- tion of phenomena. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to arti- culating the differences between these two approaches and considering the implications of each.

"Working With" Theories

Contemporary social psychological theorizing is dominated by the practice of "working with" theories within the context of the traditional hypothetico-deductive method. The process begins with the observation of facts that suggest a theoretical principle to serve as an explanation.

Following this, a hypothesis is deduced that would be logically ex-
pected were the theory true. This hypothesis is submitted to one or more
of several verification procedures, typically the laboratory experiment,
to determine if the newly obtained facts corroborate the original hypothe-
sis. If not, the hypothesis is rejected and the theory is falsified.
This is, of course, ideal and seldom obtains in practice. Nonetheless,
our point is that theory used in this manner is most often treated as a
means to a particular end, viz, verification, instead of as a vehicle
intended to serve multiple goals with verification being only one of them.

Rather than working directly on theory, such as considering how a
theory may be implied by a prior social context, creative investment is
diverted to adjuncts to theory such as operationalization of variables,
choosing a verification procedure, and eliminating confounds. Those few
cases where the theory itself is addressed typically occur indirectly,
that is, when the data do not support the hypothesis. In such instances
the theory is usually amended in light of the new findings. Ironically
these theoretical endeavors may render the theory useless since if all
positive outcomes are taken as support and all negative outcomes lead to
revisions of the theory, the theory is unfalsifiable. Continued allegiance
to these procedures sacrifices the potential richness of theoretical
controversy insofar as debates in this context hinge on questions of
alternative explanation and serve primarily as an impetus to stimulate new
research to establish new facts and thus initiate a new round of the
hypothetico-deductive cycle.

Consequences of "Working With" Theories

Inapplicability to Everyday Life

Numerous consequences of the tendency to "work with" theories merit consideration. First, this practice has contributed to the sentiment that social psychology has failed to say much that is meaningful about everyday life. In large measure this is so because social psychologists have relied too often on common sense as the basis for social theories. This trend has produced what Moscovici (1972) has termed, "the social psychology of aphorisms." As a result, the literature is filled with experiments whose purpose is to shed light on something akin to whether "birds of a feather flock together," or "opposites attract." To the extent social psychologists conduct numerous such experiments, they open themselves to the criticism of banality and, more importantly, focus attention on the discovery of situational factors that facilitate or inhibit the occurrence of common sense phenomena. As Moscovici (1972) reminds us it is a misuse of experimental methods when we apply them repeatedly only to rediscover what is obvious or, at best, to catalogue when what is obvious will or will not occur.

A related point is made by Gergen (1978a, 1978b) who contends that there is an a priori truth to most social hypotheses, insofar as theories that are derived from people's common conceptions of the world may be endowed with truth value without regard to empirical test. That is, if we assume that people's conduct reflects the common sense concepts prevalent in their cultures, then theories that are inspired by these

concepts are obviously verifiable. Thus, the dependence on common sense eviscerates the experiment to little more than a demonstration of culturally accepted truths, thereby undermining its potential usefulness in the discovery of new knowledge.

Ironically, by focusing on the eliciting conditions of common sense a social psychology emerges that is largely inapplicable to everyday life. Concepts of fundamental concern in daily life have been, for the most part, neglected by social psychology. These include notions such as justice, volition, trust, morality and the like. To be sure, we have specific theories that incorporate these or related concepts such as Lerner's (1970, 1975) well-known work on justice, Walster and her colleagues' formulation of equity theory (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973; Walster, Walster, and Berscheid, 1977), Deutsch's (1962, 1977) work on trust and the literature on responsibility attribution (e.g., Shaw & Sulzer, 1964; Walster, 1966), but in each case the focus is not on understanding these concepts but rather on collecting data to verify hypotheses that incorporate these concepts. As an example, dissonance theory incorporates volition as a necessary condition for the arrousal of dissonance, but this fails to inform us about volition so much as it enables us to predict more reliably certain consequences alleged to follow from the arousal of dissonance. In a like fashion, most of the work on attribution of responsibility has neglected the problem of what is meant by responsibility and has instead focused on a range of independent variables that are thought to affect judgments of responsibility.

This type of research tells us nothing about what people mean by responsibility assignment and how they use it in everyday life to affect their outcomes. Indeed, most criticisms of this literature point out this lack of concern with meaning (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1973; Vidmar & Crinklaw, 1974). It seems apparent that the primary concern of research conducted in the foregoing manner is to verify hypotheses rather than to understand phenomena. Unfortunately, this preoccupation with predictive utility comes at the expense of in-depth analyses whereby links among socio-psychological processes can be established and consequences of the theory for a model of humankind can be examined.

Overemphasis on Variables

A second consequence of "working with" theories has been an inclination to overemphasize variables per se, insofar as the researchers' foremost concerns have centered on operationalization, manipulation, measurement and control of relevant variables. As a result, much research has been preoccupied with determining what combination of variables needs to be present or controlled to obtain the phenomenon predicted by a theory. An example is the reverse incentive effect deduced from dissonance theory, whereby subjects who are paid little to lie may be expected to believe their own lie more than subjects who are paid a lot. During the 1960's and into the 1970's, a sizable literature emerged attempting to pin down the exact combination of variables necessary to produce such an effect. In following this type of procedure, the focus of research shifted away from the theory itself and toward the phenomenon predicted

by the theory. As this example shows, a tendency arises to evaluate theories primarily in terms of their predictive utility and by the many experiments they suggest. Thus, much of the work in designing experiments that ensues from thinking about variables has the effect of extending the range of a theory's application without adding much to the depth of its explanatory power. Returning to the example of dissonance theory, a plethora of experiments did not reveal so much about how dissonance works and why it does as they confirmed what people will do after eating fried grasshoppers, not playing with an attractive toy, or succeeding on a test they expected to fail. Rather than inform us as to why people are motivated by dissonance, as to whether dissonance reduction is socially valued or not, or as to the nature of society that may be anticipated among persons widely concerned with this motivation, these experiments were primarily involved in an attempt to catalogue the situations in which dissonance theory enables the prediction of certain outcomes. As Moscovici (1972) has cautioned, this activity serves a potentially useful archival function, but at the same time, diverts attention away from understanding the theory and its interrelationship with social life.

Neglect of Meaning

A final consequence of "working with" theories is a tendency to ignore the meaning of behavior. This comes about partly because in the service of rigorous methodology, we typically truncate the range of possible responses so that they can be more reliably measured. For example, in

experiments using the prisoner's dilemma game, only a "cooperative" or a "competitive" response is possible; in most attitude change studies, subjects respond by checking a point along a single rating scale; in verbal learning research the experimenter is primarily interested in a narrow class of verbal responses. Other behaviors that might reasonably be expected in such situations are virtually excluded. A consequence is that we may often obtain the predicted behaviors simply because there are no other reasonable options available to the subject. Put differently, by restricting responses a meaning is imposed on the experiment that is the investigator's (operational) meaning and it is assumed that by engaging in the predicted behavior, the subject intends the same meaning. In fact, specifically because responses are so restricted, it is safe to assume that different subjects or even the same subject over trials will mean different things by a given response. It is well known, for example, that the "cooperative" response in a prisoner's dilemma game can be used to mean many things including a desire to cooperate, a need to communicate, an attempt to set up the opponent for subsequent exploitation, and so forth (cf., Apfelbaum, 1974; McClintock, 1972).

Another example is Deutsch and Krauss' (1960, 1962) classic experiments using the trucking game wherein it was found that threats are detrimental to conflict resolution. In a critical analysis of this work, Kelley (1966) pointed out that the response used to indicate threat (lowering a gate) was simultaneously one that delivered punishment. Shomer, Davis, and Kelley (1966) increased the range of possible responses by

separating threats and punishments and found that threats can actually

enhance conflict resolution. More recently, Tedeschi, Smith, and Brown

(1974) have argued that the frequent practice of operationalizing aggres-

sion in terms of shocking a stooge or deprecating a former tormenter

ignores the possibility that by engaging in these behaviors, subjects may

be reacting to reciprocity or equity norms rather than be expressing

harmful intent per se. Hence, by limiting the number of possible res-

ponses many different shades of meaning masquerade under one response

category that is all too often taken to reflect the operationalized

meaning.

"Working On" Theories

By way of summary, the practice of "working with" theories and the

attendant premium placed on experimental verification imposes unnecessary

constraints that yield an impoverished view of human conduct. In con-

trast, another approach termed "working on" theories is recommended whereby

the theories themselves become the central focus with verification being

only one of several goals. In particular, theories are viewed in terms

of their relationship to society with primary effort directed toward

understanding the sociohistorical context in which the theories became

invested with truth. By adopting the procedure of "working on" theories,

theories are no longer treated as though they were transhistorical or

universally applicable. Rather, they are viewed as the particular truths

of a particular sociohistorical viewpoint. They are bounded by historical

limits and by the prevalence of certain cultural assumptions. Consequently,

they are embedded in a constantly evolving network of beliefs, values
and practices.

Sensitivity to the manner in which theories are shaped by cultural
assumptions was first evident in the work of European social psycholo-
gists (Armistead, 1974; Israel & Tajfel, 1972) and has become a matter
of increasing concern more recently among American investigators
(Strickland, 1979; Strickland, Aboud, & Gergen, 1976). Recognizing the
importance of this issue, Buss (1975) has called for a "sociology of
psychological knowledge," the goal of which would be to explore the
political, social, economic and philosophical bases of psychological
theories. Similar notions have been advanced by Coan (1973) who recom-
mended the establishment of a "psychology of psychology," and Atwood and
Tomkins (1976) who proposed a "psychology of knowledge." Given the
widespread acknowledgement of the cultural and historical boundedness of
psychological theories, it is suggested that human behavior can be mean-
ingfully understood only to the extent that the origins and consequences
of the interrelationship between society and science are explicated.

Awareness of Embeddedness

"Working on" theories involves several related steps. First, is
simple awareness of the embeddedness problem. While this may not seem to
be a difficult step there nonetheless appears to be considerable resistance
to such recognition inasmuch as Buss (1975) has noted that important
theoretical issues are commonly debated without acknowledging their under-
lying social bases. Insensitivity to the embeddedness problem may be

14

explained partly by the trappings of a scientific career, the goal of expediency in getting grants awarded and research published, as well as by other extrascientific considerations that divert attention from analysis of the underlying foundation of scientific practices. However, much of the neglect arises from the prominence of a neo-positivist epistemology that argues that the facts of scientific observation are insulated from cultural intrusions.

While many psychologists still adhere to this notion, Glass and Ellett (1980) point out that most modern social philosophers have abandoned the belief as naive that facts can be independent of values. For example, in discussing the value controversy in contemporary sociology, Foss (1977) indicates that the dominant position of value neutrality has been challenged by several reorientations including a naturalistic-evolutionary view that maintains that scientific facts are determined by values that contribute to both evolution and survival. Within social psychology, the group of British psychologists organized by Nigel Armistead (1974) provide numerous illustrations of the interdependencies among social values and scientific facts.

Analysis of Sociohistorical Context

The second step requires analysis of the determining sociohistorical context. Two approaches have been taken in this regard. The first, advanced most recently by Gergen (1973, 1976) is to analyze the reasons why contemporary theories are affected by sociohistorical context. Gergen argues that social theories are perishable insofar as they are primarily

based on historically changing facts. These facts change because
enlightened persons may be motivated to modify their behavior in response
to cultural values that stress freedom and individuality, and because
social behaviors are the product of learned dispositions that shift over
time. Moreover, Gergen adds that the theoretical terms commonly used
in psychology are heavily value-laden in that they contain prescriptive
biases which mirror contemporary social values. That is, psychological
theories not only describe what appears to be, but more subtly, they
prescribe what is desirable to be. Hence, while we study authoritarianism,
machiavellianism, and dogmatism as well as altruism, self-actualization,
and self-esteem, the implicit message is understood by nearly all members
of our culture that it is desirable to be low on the former attributes
and high on the latter.

The second approach examines the relationship between contemporary
theories and specific antecedent social contexts. This approach has been
termed "critical history" and has been used by Samelson (1974, 1975) and
Baumgardner (1976, 1977) to highlight the economic and political factors
that contributed to the development of different perspectives within
psychology. For example, Samelson (1974) has reevaluated the contributions
of Comte to social psychology and concluded that the ideological components
of his position were ignored by contemporary authors in favor of positivist
doctrine which was more acceptable to the science of their time. In a
similar manner, Baumgardner (1976, 1977) has suggested that the rejection
of McDougall's ideas about the role of instincts in behavior was largely

16

determined by the emergence of a progressive liberalism rather than by the
lack of confirmatory evidence. Comparable analyses have been offered by
Riegel (1972) in describing the status of developmental psychology and
by Kamin (1974) and Buss (1976) in discussing the IQ debates within
differential psychology.

Consequences of Embeddedness

The third step in "working on" theories requires an examination of
the consequences of contextual embeddedness. One of the more obvious
consequences (and one already considered) is that much psychological
theory corroborates common sense. Insofar as common sense assumptions in
the culture provide a background from which theoretical notions are
derived, the self-evident nature of many of our findings is not surpris-
ing. Moreover, overreliance on prevailing cultural assumptions serves
mostly to legitimize the status quo by endowing it with the respectabil-
ity of scientific sanction. Thus, in spite of claims to the contrary,
social psychology all too often serves a politically conservative con-
stituency rather than an opposition one. This sentiment is echoed in
Ring's (1971) observation that traditional social psychological researchers
inadvertently ally themselves with conventional institutional power struc-
tures that operate in opposition to weaker, less-organized segments of
society. Ring's proffered solution to this is a type of "radical social
psychology" combining advocacy research with partisan social action.

A byproduct of alignment with the power centers of society is that
social psychology virtually excludes alternative ideological perspectives

that depart from the currently accepted value consensus. As an illustration, Sedgwick (1974) points out that the paradigms of modern social psychology lend themselves to both a conservative perspective (e.g., holding minority group members accountable for their disadvantaged status while admonishing them to improve their situation by dint of hard work) and a liberal perspective (e.g., holding society accountable for the disadvantaged status of minority group members and encouraging reformist programs such as Head Start and Fair Housing laws). However, as Sedgwick notes, the paradigms of modern social psychology do not permit the viability of a radical perspective. The radical perspective would, among other things, identify the existing social structure as the source of the disadvantaged status of minority groups and advocate a restructuring of the social order that would end the dominance of one group over others.

Although widespread, the systematic exclusion of alternative perspectives in psychological theory is generally unacknowledged. A noteable exception is Caplan and Nelson's (1973) identification of the "person-blame" bias as a particularly vivid example of this exclusionary tendency. This bias refers to the pervasive view in psychology that individuals, in contrast to situations, are responsible for their problems. By holding this view, the failure of social programs is attributed to target populations rather than to inadequacies in the programs themselves. Moreover, the need for "person-change" rather than "system-change" policies is legitimated and system-oriented criticism is discredited. In serving these functions, Caplan and Nelson conclude that, although not necessarily

intended, "person-blame" interpretations serve the interests of the relatively advantaged segments of society.

Alternative Theoretical Assumptions

The final step in "working on" theories invovles a rigorous considera-
tion of alternative assumptive bases for theoretical explanations including
their social, political, and economic implications. A recent attempt in
this direction was a symposium on dialectical social psychology chaired
by Rappoport (1977). In spite of numerous discussions of dialectical
theory (Buss, 1979; Rappoport, 1975; Riegel, 1976), there has not yet
emerged a consensual definition of what is meant by a dialectical social
psychology. Nonetheless, a core set of assumptions characterizes most
thinking in this area. These include the view that persons must be
treated as active agents who not only react to but also act upon their
environment, as well as the belief that the proper focus of psychological
inquiry is on temporally bound, ever-changing processes rather than on
ahistorical, static concepts such as states and traits.

Dialectical thinking also eliminates the dualistic distinction be-
tween subject and object as illustrated, for example, by the concept of
the "science-society dialectic" by which it is acknowledged that neither
social developments nor scientific practices can be understood without
reference to the other. The purpose of a dialectical social psychology
is to describe and understand the social conflicts and apparent paradoxes
encountered in everyday life. It focuses on the changing individual in a
changing world and it involves a "radical interactionism" (Smith, 1977)

of developmental processes in which it is assumed that people themselves create the environment to which they, in turn, react. Thus, a model emerges in which individuals are simultaneously the cause and effect of their own worlds.

Methodological considerations that arise from this perspective rest on an additional set of assumptions. These include the beliefs that social behavior must be understood in its historical context, that science is more than the accumulation of facts inasmuch as research orientations are influenced by social and/or political motives, and that the popularity of certain ideas may be a function of the ability of individual scientists to attract a following among their colleagues. Cvetkovitch (1977) provides several illustrations of methodological techniques available to the dialectical social psychologist. These include increased use of observational studies, the introduction of histori- cal-longitudinal designs that permit the assessment of developmental and generational trends, and a behavioral census procedure (Elms, 1975) which relies on systematic recording of the frequencies of various social behaviors. By collecting base rate information on the occurrence of different categories of social behaviors, the behavioral census procedure permits an estimation of the relative importance of the social phenomena under investigation. Added to these approaches is the method of dialogues advocated by Riegel (1978) that investigates interaction patterns among interdependent persons each of whom serves as both stimulus and response to the other.

Although the introduction of the dialectical perspective offers a constructive alternative to the positivist-dominated methods currently used by social psychologists, Gergen (1977) has pointed out the difficulties involved in establishing dialectical social psychology on a firm footing. Among reasons why resistance is likely to be encountered are the dialectician's concern with the valuational bases of scientific facts, a tendency to stress theory more than data, a sensitivity to historical developments, and an inclination to use Marxist concepts in theory formulation. Insofar as it is easier to criticize existing approaches than to articulate a viable alternative, Gergen concludes that if dialectics is to be taken seriously, a rationale is required that will demonstrate that dialectics is no more subjective, unverifiable, and ideologically biased than are current approaches.

A somewhat different though related viewpoint, called ethogenics, has been advocated by Harré (Harré, 1977; Harré & Secord, 1972). This approach assumes that individuals act under the powers of their own agency and thus emphasizes self-directed and self-monitored social behaviors. These behaviors in turn are assumed to be explicable in terms of a widely accepted body of rules that lend meaning to them. The principle research technique employed is that of the ethnomethodologist (Garfinkel, 1967) which involves the obtaining of accounts, that is, the actor's own statements about why certain acts were performed and what social meanings were attributed to them. By analyzing these accounts, the rules that underlie social behavior are discovered. Therefore, the

21

advantage of ethogenics is that it reveals the skills necessary to

competently interact with other persons in a given cultural context and

does this by examining the actor's explanations of his everyday behaviors

using ordinary language. While the ethogenic approach has much to recom-

mend it, it has not gone without its detractors (cf., Schlenker, 1977).

Closely allied with the ethogenic approach is a paradigm referred to

by Ginsburg (1979b) as situated action. Sharing the assumption that

people are active agents whose actions are guided by reasons as well

as by environmental causes, this paradigm additionally assumes that under-

standing of action necessarily requires an understanding of the situa-

tional context in which it is embedded. Significant features of situations

include availability of goals, patterns of roles and rules, prescribed

and proscribed behaviors, physical props, and the skills and knowledge

necessary to successfully interact with others. Also stressed is the

view that coordinated action among people rests on a shared framework

of meanings that themselves are the product of human activity. As with

the ethogenics approach, situated action relies on the solicitation and

analyses of verbal accounts as a source of evidence concerning the meanings

and rules within which action can be made intelligible. Ginsburg identi-

fies certain implications that this paradigm has for the conduct of

social psychology, including a focus on action settings, a diminution of

laboratory experimentation, increased use of film and video technology,

and role playing simulations.

Other alternatives to conventional social psychological research and

practice have also been proposed in recent years. Among these are Gergen's (1978b) generative theory, Moscovici's (1972) admonishment to seek out "dangerous truths," and Sampson's (1978) distinction between Paradigm I and Paradigm II science. Let us briefly consider each of these.

As part of a continuing critique of contemporary social psychology, Gergen (1978b) has argued that a commitment to the positivist orientation has hindered the development of generative theory, that is, theory that would challenge people's common conceptions of the world and suggest new alternatives to serve as the impetus for constructive social action. Among reasons Gergen offers to adopt this approach are the contention that social theory is inevitably biased on ideological grounds (Habermas, 1971; Horkheimer, 1972), as well as the often-acknowledged lament that despite the large number of carefully conducted experiments, few, if any, highly reliable propositions have emerged. By accepting these arguments, then, the generative theorist is free to examine a broader set of ideological components than are available in present theory and is unencumbered by the immediate necessity for verification.

Numerous benefits may be anticipated by recognizing the utility of generative theory. It would release social psychology from its attachment to duplicating common sense and preserving the status quo; its use would focus attention on the valuational biases that are implicit in current social theory; promote the flexibility of the culture to meet adaptive challenges; heighten awareness of the scientists' role in shaping

the existing social order; and expand our knowledge of the range of human potential as different researchers explore social phenomena from competing value positions.

Voicing a sentiment similar to Gergen (1978b), Moscovici (1972) contends that for social psychology to attain the status of a proper science, it must go beyond the verification of common sense and the systematization of what is already known. Instead, social psychology must postulate entirely new concepts--dangerous truths--that would transcend the given views of a culture and explore new realities in an attempt to stimulate social progress. Social psychologists must be willing to participate in societal experiments and to take on the added roles of social critic and political advocate. Failing this, Moscovici maintains that social psychology will remain a secondary enterprise busily engaged in the clarification of minor issues.

Lastly, Sampson (1978) has distinguished a naturalistic model of science (Paradigm I) that seeks abstract, general, and universal truths from an historical model (Paradigm II) in which truths appear in concrete, situated and particularistic forms. Whereas Paradigm I implicitly embodies traditional values such as Protestantism, individualism and competition, Paradigm II explicitly recognizes the linkage between scientific knowledge and dominant social values. Although the ahistorical and acontextual approach of Paradigm I continues to dominate our discipline, Sampson urges that a fuller perspective on human behavior can be obtained only in the presence of a paradigm shift wherein the historical model

gains parity with the naturalistic model.

Summary and Implications

The purpose of this essay has been to explicate the distinction between "working with" and "working on" theories. A convenient way to view this distinction is to link the former with matters of verification and the latter with matters of explanation. The distinction between verification and explanation (discovery) in science has not gone unnoticed by social psychologists and some theorists have recently incorporated this perspective into their work. For example, Gibbs (1979) notes the difference between experimental verification of self-evident hypotheses which he refers to as "hypothesis-confirming" research and the discovery of novel relationships which he terms "hypothesis-forming" research. Moscovici (1972) describes social psychology as predominantly a "science of appearances" in which primary effort is directed toward systematizing existing knowledge and distinguishes this from a "science of effects" in which creative endeavors are channeled toward postulating entirely new concepts.

Although it may be tempting to view the distinction between "working with" and "working on" theories as implying incompatible approaches to the conduct of social psychological inquiry, we share both Sampson's (1978) and Gibbs' (1979) sentiments as to the desirability of establishing a synthesis between the two orientations. In seeking this synthesis one possibility would be to let the nature of the problem dictate the orientation. Gergen (1973) has suggested that social phenomena may be viewed along a continuum of historical durability with certain phenomena

more susceptible to sociohistorical shifts than others. For example, social behaviors with a physiological basis (pain avoidance, emotional arousal) may be relatively more enduring, whereas most acquired dispositions (achievement striving, persuasibility) are likely to be more transient. Given this, those phenomena that occupy the more durable end of this continuum might appropriately be studied within the context of "working with" theories, whereas those phenomena that are more sensitive to historical flux might be better examined within the framework of "working on" theories.

Rather than letting the nature of the problem dictate the orientation, Gibbs (1979) has recently described research that utilizes both approaches in what he terms "ecologically-oriented inquiry." While preserving the features of manipulation and control inherent in conventional practices, such research asks questions that are not tied to single contexts, avoids mere demonstrations of self-evident knowledge and is concerned with the meanings that subjects attach to experimental situations. In this way, Gibbs hopes to achieve an interplay between the goals of both verification and discovery.

Granting the desirability of a synthesis, there nevertheless exists strong resistance to "working on" theories. As a matter of fact, increased calls for transition in the coming years may rigidify social psychology still further. Both Sampson (1978) and Westland (1978) suggest that a likely reaction to continued criticism of standard research practices will be a heightened reactive posture characterized by

increased demands for loyalty and an exaggerated defense of scientific philosophies acquired early in individuals' careers.

Reluctance to "working on" theories is undoubtedly further contributed to by the increased complexity that this approach entails. A scientific approach that is sensitive to sociocultural definition will of necessity be more complex than one in which these influences are disregarded. That valid social theories will unavoidably be more complex is exemplified by Thorngate's (1976) impostulate of theoretical simplicity. Briefly stated, it is impossible for any theory of social behavior to be simultaneously general, simple, and accurate. Although the conventional approach with its high priority placed on internal validity has sought simple and accurate explanations at the expense of general ones, Thorngate concludes that valid social theories are attainable only by elevating their level of complexity.

Acknowledging the failure of laboratory experimentation to capture the complexity required by valid explanations of social behavior, some have called for purely technical solutions such as increased use of field experiments (Bickman & Henchy, 1972) or more sophisticated multivariate designs (McGuire, 1973). In our view this reflects an all-too-frequent tendency to address questions of substance by transforming them into questions of method. The inadequacy of this solution is indicated by Baumgardner (1977) who notes that attempts to modify conventional social psychological research by offering technical alternatives may be largely irrelevant in that they fail to address the sociohistorical assumptions

upon which the research is founded.

In a broader sense the imbalance between "working with" and "working on" theories that prevails in social psychology reflects the reward structure that characterizes our academic discipline. Wachtel (1980) has recently identified pervasive influences that discourage theoretical inquiry, including the failure to appreciate temperaments and talents among particular researchers that would enable them to contribute to theoretical development, an unfortunate preoccupation with quantitative rather than qualitative research productivity, and an overreliance on the experimental method as the mark of progress in psychology. Owing to the preponderance of these influences, social psychologists continue to be encouraged to be productive rather than inventive. As Wachtel (1980) remarks, one can easily think of a list of successful social psychologists whose reputation rests on publishing empirical studies whereas there are precious few examples of success among those whose work is exclusively theroetical. Even those who have achieved some recognition as theorists have also done extensive empirical work.

The priority that this places on "doing" rather than "thinking" has caused some to judge the situation serious enough so as to warrant a temporary moratorium on journal publication with the hope that energies spent previously on data collection will now be rechanneled into conceptual analysis. One such plan first offered by Condry (1973) and subsequently reiterated by Wachtel (1980) would award grants to researchers for not publishing in certain years, much as farm subsidies are used to prevent an

oversupply of certain crops.   In an earlier suggestion to halt data col-
lection, Moscovici (1972) argued that since we have subsidized our empiricism
by a dearth of theory, this debt should be repaid by encouraging theoretical
development unfettered by the requirement of immediate verification.
Though some may find these notions unconventional or, perhaps, even out-
rageous, the fact that several prominent observers have made such proposals
is indicative of the serious nature of the problem.

While we obviously share a deep concern about the priority given to
data collection relative to conceptual analysis, our advocacy of "working
on" theories is not intended to suggest that experiments should no longer
be done, that the hypothetico-deductive method should be scrapped, or that
data collection should be abandoned. To the contrary, it is recognized
that there is a symbiotic relationship between theory and data inasmuch
as both are vital elements in the scientific enterprise. To encourage
theoretical inquiry apart from empirical work would be as misguided as it
has been to rely on research in the absence of theory. The solution lies
not in supplanting one orientation with the other, but in offsetting the
relative inattention heretofore paid to theoretical endeavors. In pro-
posing the distinction between "working with" and "working on" theories,
we have attempted to redress this imbalance by pointing out the shortcom-
ings of overdependence of the former and by proposing some ways to proceed
with respect to the latter. Admittedly, "working on" theories will require
a major shift in the primary activites of many persons actively engaged
in social psychological research. However, it is anticipated that scholarly

effort thus redirected will engender a flexibility that will contribute to an enriched understanding of social life.

References

Apfelbaum, E. On conflicts and bargaining. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology (Vol. 7). New York: Academic Press, 1974.

Armistead, N. (Ed.). Reconstructing social psychology. London: Penguin, 1974.

Atwood, G. E., & Tomkins, S. S. On the subjectivity of personality theory. Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences, 1976, 12, 166-177.

Baumgardner, S. R. Critical history and social psychology's "crisis." Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1976, 2, 460-465.

Baumgardner, S. R. Critical studies in the history of social psychology. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1977, 3, 681-687.

Berscheid, E., & Walster, E. Physical attractiveness. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology (Vol. 7). New York: Academic Press, 1974.

Bickman, L., & Henchy, T. (Eds.). Beyond the laboratory: Field research in social psychology. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972.

Brehm, J. W. A theory of psychological reactance. New York: Academic Press, 1966.

Buss, A. R. The emerging field of the sociology of psychological knowledge. American Psychologist, 1975, 30, 988-1002.

Buss, A. R. Galton and the birth of differential psychology and eugenics: Social, political and economic factors. <u>Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences</u>, 1976, <u>12</u>, 47-58.

Buss, A. R. <u>A dialectical psychology</u>. New York: Irvington, 1979.

Caplan, N., & Nelson, S. D. On being useful: The n. ure and consequences of psychological research on social problems. <u>American Psychologist</u>, 1973, <u>28</u>, 199-211.

Coan, R. W. Toward a psychological interpretation of psychology. <u>Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences</u>, 1973, <u>9</u>, 313-327.

Condry, J. A modest proposal. <u>American Psychologist</u>, 1973, <u>28</u>, 534-536.

Cvetkovich, G. Dialectical perspectives on empirical research. <u>Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin</u>, 1977, <u>3</u>, 688-696.

Deutsch, M. Cooperation and trust: Some theoretical notes. In M. Jones (Ed.), <u>Nebraska Symposium on Motivation</u>. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962.

Deutsch, M. <u>The resolution of conflict: Constructive and destructive processes</u> (2nd ed.). New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977.

Deutsch, M., & Krauss, R. M. The effect of threat upon interpersonal bargaining. <u>Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology</u>, 1960, <u>61</u>, 181-189.

Deutsch, M., & Krauss, R. M. Studies of interpersonal bargaining. <u>Journal of Conflict Resolution</u>, 1962, <u>6</u>, 52-76.

Elms, A. C. The crisis of confidence in social psychology. <u>American Psychologist</u>, 1975, <u>30</u>, 967-976.

Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. Attribution of responsibility: A theoretical note. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1973, 9, 148-153.

Foss, D. C. The value controversy in sociology. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977.

Garfinkel, H. Studies in ethnomethodology. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

Gergen, K. J. Social psychology as history. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1973, 26, 309-320.

Gergen, K. J. Social psychology, science and history. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1976, 2, 378-383.

Gergen, K. J. Taking dialectics seriously. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1977, 3, 714-718.

Gergen, K. J. Experimentation in social psychology: A reappraisal. European Journal of Social Psychology, 1978, 8, 507-527. (a)

Gergen, K. J. Toward generative theory. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1978, 36, 1344-1366. (b)

Gibbs, J. C. The meaning of ecologically-oriented inquiry in contemporary psychology. American Psychologist, 1979, 34, 127-140.

Ginsburg, G. P. (Ed.). Emerging strategies in social psychological research. Chichester: Wiley, 1979. (a)

Ginsburg, G. P. Situated action. The society for the advancement of social psychology newsletter, 1979, 5, 12-14. (b)

Glass, G. V., & Ellett, F. S. Evaluation research. In M. Rosenzweig & I. Porter (Eds.), Annual Review of Psychology, 1980, 31, 211-228.

Habermas, J. Knowledge and human interest. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

Harré, R. The ethogenic approach: Theory and practice. In L. Berkowitz
(Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology (Vol. 10). New York:
Academic Press, 1977.

Harré, R., & Secord, P. F. The explanation of social behavior. Oxford,
England: Blackwell, 1972.

Hendrick, C. Social psychology as an experimental science. In C.
Hendrick (Ed.), Perspectives on social psychology. Hillsdale, N. J.:
Erlbaum, 1977.

Horkheimer, M. Critical theory: Selected essays. New York: Seabury
Press, 1972.

Hovland, C. I., Janis, I. L., & Kelley, H. H. Communication and persuasion
New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953.

Israel, J., & Tajfel, H. (Eds.). The context of social psychology: A
critical assessment. London: Academic Press, 1972.

Kamin, L. F. The science and politics of I.Q. Hillsdale, N. J.:
Erlbaum, 1974.

Kelley, H. H. Experimental studies of threat in interpersonal negotia-
tions. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 1965, 9, 79-105.

Lerner, M. J. The desire for justice and reactions to victims. In J.
Macaulay & L. Berkowitz (Eds.), Altruism and Helping Behavior. New
York: Academic Press, 1970.

Lerner, M. J. (Ed.). The justice motive in social behavior. Journal of
Social Issues, 1975, 31, 1-205.

McClintock, C. G. Game behavior and social motivation in interpersonal
settings. In C. G. McClintock (Ed.), Experimental social psychology.
New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972.

McGuire, W. J. Inducing resistance to persuasion: Some contemporary
approaches. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in experimental social
psychology (Vol. 1). New York: Academic Press, 1964.

McGuire, W. J. Attitudes and opinions. In P. R. Farnsworth, D. McNemar,
& Q. McNemar (Eds.), Annual review of psychology, 1966, 17, 475-514.

McGuire, W. J. The yin and yang of social psychology: Seven koan.
Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1973, 26, 446-456.

Merton, R. K. Social theory and social structure. Chicago: Free Press,
1957.

Moscovici, S. Society and theory in social psychology. In J. Israel, &
H. Tajfel (Eds.), The context of social psychology: A critical
assessment. London: Academic Press, 1972.

Rappoport, L. On praxis and quasi-rationality. Human Development,
1975, 18, 194-204.

Rappoport, L. Symposium: Towards a dialectical social psychology
introduction. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1977, 3, 678-680.

Riegel, K. F. Influence of economic and political ideologies on the
development of developmental psychology. Psychological Bulletin, 1972,
78, 129-141.

Riegel, K. F. The dialectics of human development. American Psychologist,
1976, 31, 689-700.

Riegel, K. F. Psychology mon amour: A counter text. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1978.

Ring, K. Experimental social psychology: Some sober questions about some frivolous values. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1967, 3, 113-123.

Ring, K. Let's get started: An appeal to what's left in psychology. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Psychology, University of Connecticut, 1971. Cited in Wrightsman, L. S. Social psychology (2nd Ed.). Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1977.

Samelson, F. History, origin myth and ideology: "Discovery" of social psychology. Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, 1974, 4, 217-231.

Samelson, F. On the science and politics of the I.Q. Social Research, 1975, 42, 467-488.

Sampson, E. E. Scientific paradigms and social values: Wanted--A scientific revolution. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1978, 36, 1332-1348.

Schlenker, B. R. The ethogenic approach: Etiquette and revolution. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in Experimental Social Psychology (Vol. 10). New York: Academic Press, 1977.

Sedgwick, P. Ideology in modern psychology. In N. Armistead (Ed.), Reconstructing social psychology. London: Penguin, 1974.

Shaw, M. E., & Sulzer, J. L. An empirical test of Heider's levels in attribution of responsibility. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 1964, 69, 39-46.

Sherif, M. Crisis in social psychology: Some remarks towards breaking
    through the crisis. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1977,
    3, 368-382.

Shomer, R. W., Davis, A. H., & Kelley, H. H. Threats and the development
    of coordination: Further studies of the Deutsch and Krauss trucking
    game. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1966, 4, 119-126.

Silverman, I. Why social psychology fails. Canadian Psychology Review,
    1977, 18, 353-358.

Smith, M. B. A dialectical social psychology? Comments on a symposium.
    Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1977, 3, 719-724.

Strickland, L. H. (Ed.). Soviet and Western perspectives in social
    psychology. London: Pergamon Press, 1979.

Strickland, L. H., Aboud, F. E., & Gergen, K. J. (Eds.). Social psychology
    in transition. New York: Plenum, 1976.

Tapp, J. L. Psychological and policy perspectives on the law: Reflec-
    tions on a decade. Journal of Social Issues, 1980, 36, 165-192.

Tedeschi, J. T., Smith, R. B., & Brown, R. C. A reinterpretation of
    research on aggression. Psychological Bulletin, 1974, 81, 540-562.

Thorngate, W. Possible limits on a science of social behavior. In L. H.
    Strickland, F. E. Aboud, & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), Social psychology in
    transition. New York: Plenum, 1976.

Wachtel, P. L. Investigation and its discontents: Some constraints on
    progress in psychological research. American Psychologist, 1980, 35,
    399-408.

Walster, E. Assignment of responsibility for an accident. Journal of
Personality and Social Psychology, 1966, 3, 73-79.

Walster, E., Berscheid, E., & Walster, G. W. New directions in equity
research. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1973, 25,
151-176.

Walster, E., Walster, G. W., & Berscheid, E. Equity: Theory and research.
Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1977.

Westland, G. Current crises of psychology. London: Heinemann, 1978.

Vidmar, N., & Crinklaw, L. D. Attributing responsibility for an accident:
A methodological and conceptual critique. Canadian Journal of
Behavioral Sciences, 1974, 6, 113-130.

Zajonc, R. B. Social facilitation. Science, 1965, 149, 269-274.