

American SOCIOLOGICAL Review

December
1950

Volume 15
Number 6

The Official Journal of the American Sociological Society



SOME NEGLECTED PROBLEMS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY*

LEONARD S. COTTRELL, JR.

Cornell University

NEARLY twenty years ago, I wrote a paper for presentation at a section of the annual meeting of this Society in which I sought to demonstrate the feasibility and utility of analyzing marital problems in terms of dynamic situational fields composed of interacting roles.¹ Of little moment in the general progress of social psychology, the paper is nevertheless pregnant with meaning for me. In the first place, it represented the results of my own efforts to integrate such of their ideas as I had assimilated from G. H. Mead, John Dewey, Sigmund Freud, Kurt Koffka, R. E. Parks, E. W. Burgess, H. D. Lasswell, and many others whose thinking and orientation are symbolized by these names,² into a theoretical frame work which I could apply to the very concrete and real problems of analysis and understanding of human behavior in the groups I was studying at that time. In the second place, the paper symbolized in my own experience the shift which characterized

much of social psychology in the thirties from an orientation that led to phrasing explanations in terms of intrinsic attributes to one which can be called interactional. In the third place, when a decade later I had occasion to appraise the current state of social psychology I had the easily understood satisfaction of discovering that the formulations explicit and clearly implied in the paper referred to were in close agreement with the dominant trends in theory and method which were apparent in the literature of 1930-1940. The publication of this appraisal³ quite naturally drew the criticism from some quarters that we had allowed our own theoretical bias to control unduly our selection and evaluation of the evidence. My present rebuttal of such criticism is to say that while it took another decade (including the war and its interruptions) for the language of our monograph to sound reasonably contemporary and conventional, a comparison of the 1949-1950 crop of text-books in social psychology with those of around 1930 leaves no doubt whatever that our conclusions and predictions in 1940 accurately reflected what was and was to come.

It is, therefore, especially gratifying to me at this time, before I discuss some of the

*The Presidential Address read before the annual meeting of the American Sociological Society held in Denver, September 7-9, 1950.

¹"Roles and Marital Adjustment," *Publications of the American Sociological Society*, 27 (1933), 107-115.

²I should note here that during the decade that followed the writing of this paper my own thinking was greatly influenced by the contributions of H. S. Sullivan, J. L. Moreno, and Kurt Lewin.

³L. S. Cottrell, Jr. and Ruth Gallagher, *Developments in Social Psychology, 1930-1940*, Beacon Press, 1941.

principal shortcomings and unsolved problems in social psychology which strike me as critically important, to report substantial progress in theoretical formulation, the setting of problems and the development of methods and techniques appropriate to a consistent interactional orientation. If any should doubt that this progress is substantial, let him be reminded that one year ago, almost to the day, in this very city, the American Psychological Association through the address of its then president, Professor E. R. Hilgard, officially restored the social self as a legitimate object of attention by reputable scientists. I pause at this point to extend your greetings and congratulations to our esteemed sister society. It is my opinion supported only by that cursory hit and miss observation permitted to Deans of Colleges of Arts and Sciences that we are now over the hump so far as the establishment of an interactive orientation in social psychology is concerned. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that any alert graduate student or junior staff member in our major centers of social psychological training and research could get very far with a research project on traits or attributes of persons or groups without redefining the problem in dynamic situational terms. Nor will a morale branch agency in World War III fail to give as much or more time and skill in precisely specifying the dynamic situational contexts it studies as it will to the measurement of the specific items of behavior and attitude.

It is one thing to claim a notable advance in general orientation and theory; it is another to say that a desirable level of precision and articulation in theoretical formulation and in method has been achieved. This latter we cannot claim. Notwithstanding some rather reckless promises made by some in the heat of seeking commercial and government research contracts, a candid appraisal must find much of our terminology extremely fuzzy, our hypotheses lacking in rigorous casing and our methods as yet not well adapted for operationally testing our hypotheses or for yielding that consensual validation of observation upon which any community of scientists must rely for recog-

nizing what is accepted fact. I do not say this in any destructive mood. I am painfully aware of the extreme difficulties we face in the next phase of our development, especially when some of my associates in the Cornell Social Science Research Center point to problems they encounter in trying to use in their research some of the ideas I have had some part in perpetrating. But social psychologists and their close kin do need to remind themselves that their very progress in getting something of a common orientation and some common currency of terms like role, self, situation, and field may become a handicap if they fail in a rapid advance toward more precision and rigor in their conceptualization and more relevancy in their methods and procedures.

I could not, even if time and your patience permitted, cover the entire range of important problems confronting social psychology in the next phase of its development. My efforts shall be limited to brief citations of a few rather specific problems which, in my opinion, are characterized by the fact (1) that they have not yet received adequate systematic attention; and (2) that direct and indirect results of intensive attack upon them would greatly strengthen our theory and method for the responsibilities social psychology is now expected to assume.

I. THE EMPATHIC RESPONSES

Social psychologists in this country have thus far succeeded in ignoring almost completely what, in my opinion, is one of the most fascinating and challenging as well as one of the most critical processes in the whole range of phenomena with which they are concerned. I refer to the empathic responses.

Many of you have sought to understand the processes involved in such phenomena as the development of a conception of self, in acquiring a role, in the emergence of insight, in communication, in the integration of a group, in the internalization of social norms, or have at least studied the work of those who have made major contributions to our understanding of these processes—for example, G. H. Mead, C. H. Cooley, Sigmund

Freud, H. S. Sullivan. You must, therefore, share with me the recognition that in most current theory regarding human interaction there is the basic assumption that as the individual reacts in his various life situations he not only develops those responses appropriate to his own part in the relationships but also incorporates in his reactive system the responses of the others in the situation. Only as this takes place, we say, can the individual acquire a system of significant symbols by means of which true communication takes place, or can he acquire a mind or a social self, or can collectivities achieve a consensus upon which must rest their capacity to function as integrated units. Under such terms as internalization, identification, taking the role of the other, empathic response, social psychologists have recognized the universality and central importance of this process.

If the empathic phenomena are so crucial in human interaction, it is indeed surprising that they have not been subject to intensive research. This lack may be due in part to the fact that these responses are so much a part of our taken-for-granted experience that they have failed to challenge interest and attention. I suspect, however, that a large part of the failure to tackle problems in this area stems from the nature of the phenomena which makes them very difficult to study with available techniques. But whatever the reasons for this lack of research on empathic phenomena, it is my conviction that a vigorous effort in this direction is a prime need now.

This field is teeming with problems that challenge interest and skill. Take, for example, the problem of variability both among individuals and in the same individual in different situations. Preliminary explorations of these questions which we have undertaken at Cornell⁴ indicate that

tests of relative empathic responsiveness which will discriminate reasonably well are feasible and that such tests will show wide variability among individuals. Results also suggest that the empathic responsiveness of a given individual will vary with the situational context. Moreover, it seemed clear that our subjects who were consistently high in empathic performance and those who were low differed rather markedly in developmental histories, personal characteristics, social insight, and relations with others.

With nothing more than this modest amount of exploration one becomes aware of a substantial list of questions and problems that press for serious attention. Only a few may be noted here.

There is the obvious task of developing a reliable and sensitive index of the empathic ability which will permit appropriate rankings of individuals and the detection of changes in individuals under varying conditions. Equipped with such an index we may then undertake through descriptive and experimental procedures to answer the following questions:

1. Is this a general capacity or is it specific to situations?
2. What types of early formative social relations are associated with varying levels of empathic responsiveness? in general? in specified types of situations?
3. What types of social situations heighten and depress empathic responsiveness?
4. What kinds of social relations and adjustments are made by persons of varying empathic capacity?
5. Is it possible to modify empathic responsiveness by deliberate training?
6. If so, are solutions to certain problems in human relations facilitated by increasing or decreasing the level of responsiveness?
7. Are there optimal levels of empathic responsiveness for the various social roles called for in our society?

And so we could continue this list indefinitely. It is generally recognized, I believe, that a fool can ask more questions in five minutes that a wise man can answer in a lifetime. But sometimes the wise man finds one or two of the fools' questions worth, if not a lifetime, then at least six months.

⁴See Rosalind Dymond, "Empathic Ability: An Exploratory Study." An unpublished Ph.D. thesis written under my direction, Cornell University, 1949. See also an article by the same author, "A Scale for the Measurement of Empathic Ability," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 13 (1949), 127-133.

But before we leave the subject of empathy, I should like to touch briefly upon two other matters which appear to me to merit some attention by members of our craft. One has to do with a deliberate use of empathic responses for conscious investigative purposes. We have long used the participant observer technique in the social sciences, but in much of the use of this technique I doubt that the user knew what was taking place and hence did not use himself as an instrument of observation as effectively as might be. It appears to me on the basis of as yet very informal and unsystematically gathered evidence that the perception of social situations under observation is greatly sharpened when the participant observer is aware of his covert role-taking and deliberately stimulates himself to do it systematically. Just the simple device of saying to himself, "Now I am X facing this situation and having to deal with this problem," seems to enhance the observer's comprehension of the perspectives, attitudes, and overt behavior of his subject. Deliberate role-taking practice also seems to increase these observational skills. Harry Stack Sullivan came closer than anyone in the clinical field in explicit recognition of the deliberate use of empathic methods in analysis and therapy and made it a part of the training he gave to those who studied under him. All of this leads me to suggest as a very promising field the systematic study of the devices and operations used by clinicians and research workers to empathize with their subjects. I have no illusions about the difficulties involved, for many of the operations are covert and unconscious; but at least we can begin by finding out what the good operators report they do. Such information should at least be of some help in answering our tougher minded students when they ask us just what one does when he takes the role of another in participant observation.

This leads me to my second observation, namely, that we must undertake to state more explicitly than we have thus far the operations we refer to when we use such terms as empathic response or taking the role of the other. Certainly we have no wish

to leave these terms in the realm of mysticism nor are we satisfied with circular definitions. At present the nearest we can come to an operational statement of empathy is to say that an empathic response of individual A to individual B is that response of A to B assumed to take place whereby A is able to correctly predict B's response to a specified situation. But this merely sets up correct prediction as a way of testing the degree to which A has taken B's role. It says nothing about the nature of this response. However, we can at least go as far as we can with this criterion and hope to make more explicit what does take place which makes possible these predictions which we are constantly making not only in our professional studies of behavior but in all of our social interaction.

In this connection it should be noted that prediction is not necessarily based upon the kind of knowledge and understanding which comes from an alleged empathic response. Actuarial knowledge provides the basis for prediction without the kind of understanding which we assume results from empathy.

We have by no means exhausted the important and interesting problems having to do with empathic processes. But enough has been said to indicate an extensive and almost untouched field in which we may expect some significant research in the near future.

Let me turn, then, to another not unrelated category of problems.

II. THE SELF

It may seem a bit presumptuous on my part to point to the self as a neglected problem for research in view of the increasing attention the concept has received during the past several years, culminating in the recognition given the problem by Professor Hilgard in his presidential paper referred to above. However, it might be noted that Hilgard's paper is chiefly devoted to pointing out the failures of psychologists to make any significant progress in research on this problem and to suggesting the directions which he thinks an appropriate program of research should take. Moreover, I think it fair to say that with a few exceptions the re-

search reported and the general discussions of the self still suffer from a failure to profit fully by the insights and formulations contributed by G. H. Mead, H. S. Sullivan and others of their general orientation. Our thinking and our formulation of research problems with reference to the self lacks clarity because so few workers use the term self with the sophistication, say of Lindesmith and Strauss. I quote from their recent text:⁵

The use of such expressions as "awareness of self" and "self consciousness" naturally leads to the question of what the "self" is. Since the term "self" is used as a noun, the existence of a corresponding entity or object seems to be implied. This, however, is an erroneous conception—as erroneous as it would be to think of "speed" in the same manner. Both terms refer to events and relationships, rather than to entities having a definite location in space. It is for reasons of this kind that the self or ego has been described as a "grammatical illusion."

The concept of self, if it is to be useful and valid, must be formulated as an organization of activity. More specifically, it refers to (a) a set of responses which (b) exercise a regulatory function over other responses of the same organism. This is equivalent to saying in another way what we have already noted: that the behavior of the child is first controlled and guided by the responses of others, but in time these responses become internalized so that the person himself controls and guides his own behavior.

It is both convenient and necessary to use a term like "self" to refer to this relationship of response systems within the same person. . . . When an individual assumes the roles of others toward himself, he begins to evaluate and thereby to regulate his own behavior in terms of those assumed roles of other persons. The term "self" may be applied to this organization of the responses of an individual to his own behavior. One's self is, therefore, indissolubly linked with participation in groups, since the way in which one responds to himself is a partial reflection of the way other persons respond to him.

In my opinion the unsatisfactory state of our knowledge about self phenomena and the

very hazy notions of the directions present research should take is due largely to the fact that we have not followed out the concrete research implications of the view of the self expressed by the authors just cited. This theoretical position has been in our sociological literature a long time now, but we have not sufficiently exploited it in systematic empirical research.

What are some of the research problems implicit in this theory of self? Certainly a general implication is that the focus of attention be shifted away from a search for attributes of an entity or for an intrinsic complex of reified motive patterns to an analysis of interaction in an explicitly described context of relations. More specifically we should devote systematic effort to such problems and questions as the following:

1. What patterns of self conception emerge from what types of interactional contexts in the early social experiences of the individual? By self conception I mean the individual's characteristic pattern of expected response from others and his assumption as to what response others expect from him in given types of situations. The nature of the self conception can be inferred partly through the individual's own communication and partly through interpretation of his behavior. While new research with this explicit frame of reference should be undertaken, it should also be remembered that already existing clinical and observational records, although gathered with a different frame of reference and interpreted differently, are a rich source for investigation of this problem.

2. What accounts for persistence of a given self-other organization? Unfortunately the vast amount of work on learning has been so preoccupied with rote learning in molecular problems that their results are of little help here. It is to be hoped that substantial effort in learning research can be directed to this problem. One important line of investigation would be to study the extent to which self conceptions persist as a result of the stability of situational contexts rather than as an intrinsic perseveration. This leads into such interesting questions as

⁵ A. R. Lindesmith and A. L. Strauss, *Social Psychology*, New York: Dryden Press, 1949, pp. 199-201.

to the tendency of a self conception to select or actually contrive and create those social contexts which confirm and support its patterns of self-other expectations. This is a particularly interesting problem when it involves self conceptions involving what to an outsider appear to be negative and punishing expectations.

3. Closely related to the problem of persistence is that of change. How do self-other organizations change? We need here to have intensive studies of the impact of changes in the social context as well as changes in the perceptive structuring of the context by the individual.

4. When the individual manifests a change in his self-other pattern, what happens to the previous pattern? If we interpret within our present frame of reference the clinical findings made by Freudians, hypnotists, and others using "depth" techniques, we are led to suspect that previous self-other patterns remain more or less intact and sometimes are rather active and troublesome inhabitants of the personality. A very important problem is the determination of the conditions under which earlier self-other patterns disintegrate or are integrated into new patterns and those under which they seem to remain as relatively separate organizations which either press for overt expression or simply remain as latent but available for appropriate situational conditions.

5. The foregoing readily leads into the much more generally recognized problem of multiple selves, and the question of the unity of the personality. Here again I feel that in searching for some intrinsic principle of unity and integration (which is entirely proper) we have neglected to study the phenomena of unity and integration in terms of the nature of the life situations of the individual and his roles in them to determine the extent to which his experience of a unified self is based on the integration and consistency of his life situations.

6. Another question on which we need more explicit theory and empirical study is: What are the determinants of identity? The problem can be stated concretely somewhat as follows: As the child develops he is faced

with competing definitions of himself by his various social contexts. In any context one of these definitions is accepted by him and becomes his self-concept while the other possible selves are not accepted. Moreover, as the person develops further he accepts certain significant members of his social contexts as identification models and not others. As he moves into contexts involving group symbols he identifies with some and not with others. Now, in social interaction the roles of all components of the field are assumed here to be incorporated in some measure in the reactive systems of each participant. But fortunately for order and stability most of us are reasonably clear most of the time as to what our roles of identity are. How and why we embraced these rather than others is not so clear. Of course we make *post hoc* interpretations of great plausibility and no doubt of genuine validity. But we are as yet quite lost when called upon to state, for example, the conditions under which a child's major identification model will be that of his father or his mother.

7. And while we are discussing what determines selection of group symbols of identification we should also list the neglected problem of how the individual manages an identification with a group symbol. That something of this sort happens we are certain, but the processes by which it happens are very obscure. Terms like "taking the role of the generalized other" and "ego-involvement" are useful up to a point in suggesting what may be taking place, but they are far from adequate to our present need for precise description. This problem of course has more significance than merely tidying up our descriptions. It leads us into the question of how separate individuals integrate their separate goals and actions into a collective unity; how that unity is maintained; how it disintegrates. These are questions of utmost relevance to a society facing the testing we are bound to undergo in our long struggle ahead for a democratic world community.

8. The group self or the self-other pattern in which the other is a generalized other confronts us with another important but

neglected problem. This problem has to do with what might be called a role taking or empathic range of which individuals are capable. Human beings *can* be integrated by controls over them by which they are directed in the performance of their parts without any awareness of the total process. Authoritarian systems rest heavily on such controls. But a sounder social order and one which democratic values call for is based upon maximum participation in the total process. This participation depends upon the role-taking processes so that each member of the social action is able to some extent at least to incorporate the social act in himself and to conceive his own activity in relation to the whole. Now it is relatively easy for this to happen in the smaller life situations of which we are a part, but as the dimensions of the situational field expand the role-taking process may become quite attenuated. The problem, therefore, in building and maintaining a real and genuinely experienced consensus is in part at least one of the role-taking or empathic capacities of human beings plus means of communication which fully utilize these capacities. This obviously opens up an extensive area for research (a) in empathic capacity as we have noted before, and (b) in methods and techniques of communication by which role-taking processes are facilitated and maximized in situations of secondary contact. It might be noted that as yet little if any of the research in communication is formulated properly to explore this field.

I shall not tax your patience with further discussions of needed research on the self. There are many other problems, but these have impressed me as having special interest and importance for social psychologists at the present time.

III. THE SITUATION

One can hardly have an ordinary conversation without making frequent use of the word situation. Such popularity must be deserved, and I have little doubt that its function in communication is important, though I sometimes suspect its utility is quite as great in preserving an illusion of

understanding as it is in conveying genuine comprehension.

When we move over into the more technical conversations, we also find the term widely used by students of social behavior. Indeed, sociology can be thought of as a discipline devoted to the analysis of social situations. Here again, however, it must be said that in the ready use of this term we do not always find the ends of precise communication well served.

A social psychologist of my orientation would, of course, be quite lost if you deprived him of the word situation or situational field. But, in spite of the embarrassment it would cause me I must confess that the use of the word in social psychology is almost as vague as it is in general conversation. This is as true among those who aspire to a rigorous experimentation as it is among those who operate with less refined research procedures.

The neglected question is essentially one of how we can precisely define the situations to which we refer the behavior of individuals or groups which we happen to be studying. Now all of us—at least in the social behavior fields—have gotten away from the naive effort to study behavior as though it related to single isolated stimuli. We know that social behavior takes place and can be understood only as a part of a complex process of interaction among the component parts of an identifiable situational field. But when we try to state the composition and boundaries of a particular situation we discover that our conceptual and methodological tools are inadequate. We are quite certain that individuals and groups react to their own definitions of situations and that we must understand these definitions in order to understand their reactions, but we are very uncertain in describing these defined unities for ourselves or for others. At my own institution we are finding situational analysis a highly promising approach to social behavior, but we are also finding it extremely awkward to identify precisely and describe the situations we seem to be studying. If you think this is a pedantic or irrelevant problem, try it yourself some time.

Various suggestions of solutions have been proposed which if followed out systematically should yield a convergence of knowledge and experience out of which an adequate answer will emerge. According to Mead the dynamic field is structured by the social act.⁶ Dewey's emphasis on the problematic situation adds greatly to the value of Mead's conception.⁷ Lewin integrates the field by a structure of goals, vectors, barriers, and pathways.⁸ Newcomb proposes to use a "motive pattern" to integrate a field.⁹ Kretch and Crutchfield emphasize perceptual structuring.¹⁰ I have suggested the expected responses of self and of others aroused by the initiation of an act as a way of defining the situational field.¹¹ None of these is sufficient but they all suggest research of a type which should yield results relevant to a solution.

One dimension usually neglected in the analysis of situational contexts is that of time. Harold Lasswell, fifteen years ago, pointed out this gap in the analysis of political behavior,¹² but we still fail to give this dimension adequate recognition, to say nothing of developing a way of describing it precisely.

If our theory and method for determination of the boundaries and structures of situations, including the time dimension, were developed satisfactorily, we should then be in

⁶ G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, University of Chicago Press, 1934.

⁷ J. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1922.

⁸ K. Lewin, "Field Theory and Experiment in Social Psychology: Concepts and Methods," *American Journal of Sociology*, 44 (1939), 868-896.

⁹ T. M. Newcomb, *Social Psychology*, Dryden Press, 1950, pp. 98-106.

¹⁰ D. Kretch and R. S. Crutchfield, *Theory and Problems of Social Psychology*, McGraw-Hill, 1948, Chaps. 3 and 4.

¹¹ L. S. Cottrell, Jr., "Analysis of Situational Fields in Social Psychology," *American Sociological Review*, 7 (1942), 370-382.

¹² H. D. Lasswell, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*, McGraw-Hill, 1935, Chap. I.

position to provide a more adequate analysis of the phenomena of overlapping and conflicting situations and their resolutions. One need not dwell on the practical importance of this particular problem in a world as full of conflict as ours.

IV. MOTIVATION

It is fortunately not necessary for me to discuss in any detail here the neglected problems of research on motivation with a situational rather than an individual orientation. My colleague, Mr. Nelson Foote, will present a paper on this problem in one of the section meetings of this Society. I shall merely note the following general observations. Motivation is, of course, not a neglected field of research, but we are still handicapped by our distorted emphasis on seeking for motive categories as intrinsic attributes of individuals. What we need to fructify our present knowledge is a frankly avowed situational approach to the problem. I hope Mr. Foote's paper will give us a good start in this direction. Current discussions and research in motivation still fail to relate satisfactorily individual motives and social values.

Had we time to discuss matters tonight, I am quite sure we would find some disagreement as to whether or not I have picked for mention problems of importance, but I am confident that, with certain qualifications I have noted, there would be substantial agreement that they are neglected problems. However, I should be prepared to argue that they are not only neglected but are of basic importance. The empathic processes are crucial in social integration; the self organization is the most important resultant of these processes; the concept of the situational field is fundamental to all modern social psychology. The solutions of these three problems together with a suitably consistent theory of motivation without question will form the core of a matured social psychology able to undertake its obligations and responsibilities as the basic social science.