



The repression of the Social¹

Grahame Hayes
University of Natal
Department of Psychology

The development of psychology and the term "psychological" (cf Williams, 1977, pp 207-209) has often been against the domain and sciences of the social. This "against" is meant negatively, that is, the separation of the realms of the psychological and the social. It is against this traditional current that I shall try to present a rigorous conception of the psychological, which integrally incorporates a notion of the social.

The history of psychology in its study of individual behaviour has been dominated by an individualism, a psychologism, and has negated and disregarded the interaction of the social with the personal.

As Resler & Walton say

"we must jettison the false conceptual divisions that official psychology erects between individual and society; one must see people and society as forming a complex unity." (p 292, in Armistead, 1974)

¹It might seem that this article has relied too much on quoting the various sources, for and against, the integration of the social in psychological theory and research. This has been done intentionally so as to demonstrate the substantive basis against which this article situates its critique. In contentious and ideological matters in science the charge of caricature and/or fabrication can otherwise be invoked to dismiss unpalatable critiques!

Developing this further it is argued that the "complex unity" of people and society is based on a materialist ontology which posits social reality **before** consciousness. In other words, the scientific order of determination is physical reality - biological reality - social reality - psychological reality (cf Soper, 1979; Timpanaro, 1980). This scientific materialism must not be construed as **reducing** the psychological to the social, or biological, or physical for that matter. Two epistemic conditions are implied here for psychology : one ontological, the other epistemological. Ontologically the realm of the psychological is constituted and enhanced in its articulation with prior orders of determination, in this case particularly the social. We do not come to a better comprehension of what the psychological is by negating its context. Resler and Walton in talking about social psychology make a point in this regard which applies as pertinently to psychology in general; they say

"What is necessary for the reconstruction of social psychology is to analyse people's psychic development and responses within a historical perspective, which recognizes that the limits on behaviour are shaped by the relations between power, politics and people." (p 290, In Armistead, 1974).

Theoretically the ontological constitution of the psychological will directly affect the epistemological dimension. I say theoretically, because in psychology and other social sciences there are often antinomies between ontology and epistemology. Therefore, **what** the psychological is, is certainly going to logically influence our (psychology's) **conception** of the

psychological. On this basis then it seems that the separation of the psychological from other co-determining, or in the language of phenomenology, co-constituting, orders or realities is logically fallacious and epistemologically absurd.

If the psychological is not logically explained in terms of the philosophy of science (of psychology), then it seems that the explanation lies elsewhere : in its internal history, and the ideological distortions of its ontology and epistemology. Social reality is integrally part of the psychological and hence must constitute part of its definition. Referring again to Resler & Walton

"It is the theoretical split between the individual and society which is unreal; even the best methods and techniques would fail to put them together again" (ibid., p 283)

Jacoby (1977) corroborates this by saying that

"... psychology is not a passing fad on the fringes of society; rather it is deeply entangled in the social reality. For this reason any study of psychology must simultaneously study the society and culture of which it is a part." (p xvii)

In this book of Jacoby's, which has the title of **Social Amnesia**, he shows how in the case of post-Freudian psychology the social dimension of psychological experience has been "forgotten", repressed, and "driven out." This clearly serves ideological rather than scientific interests. Jacoby develops his memory loss analogy

"The general loss of memory is not to be explained solely

psychologically; it is not simply childhood amnesia. Rather it is social amnesia - memory driven out of mind by the social and economic dynamic of this society." (ibid, p.4)

Psychology has not only divorced itself from other social sciences in its rupture with the social, it has also compartmentalised its relations internally. So it would seem that the science of the social in psychology is to be found in social psychology. An investigation of social psychology reveals a strangely asocial notion of the social dimension of human experience. For example, English and English (1974) define the social as

"... whatever relates to the interaction of two or more persons or to the influence of one upon another. The term is designedly very broad; comparatively few psychological phenomena are non-social." (pp 506-507)

This definition, on its own admission, is at the same time very broad (everything is social) and very restricted (interaction between two or more persons). In another dictionary of psychology this definition is developed. Victoroff says that most specialists in the field of social psychology

"... would certainly admit that the notion of social interaction - a concept mediating between individual and group qualities - is central to their interests. It is psychology as the study of interaction processes : interaction between individuals, between individuals and groups, and between groups." (p 1027, in Eysenck et al, 1975)

Commenting on these kinds of definitions of the social in social psychology Armistead (1974) says

"From early on, psychological social psychology conceived of the "social" as the **interaction between organisms** leading to differences in behavioural output, these organisms being abstracted from any ongoing real-life social context and processes." (p 13)

Predominantly the whole tradition of social psychology in the English-speaking world has been guilty of the above definitions of the social, when they have been explicit enough as to **define** the social! See for example the following texts in social psychology : Krech et al, 1962; Middlebrook, 1974; the symbolic interactionism of Karp & Yodanis, 1979; and to a lesser extent the work of Sherif & Sherif (1969) in America. This work has been critically attacked by British social psychologists, and European social psychologists. See for example the critical volume edited by Armistead (1974), and the substantive social psychology of Israel & Tajfel (1972) and Billig (1978; 1982), and the German "Kritische Psychologie" (Stroebe, 1980). This is obviously just a sample of the work that has gathered around Tajfel² in England, and the whole marxist social psychology that has (re-)developed in Europe, especially Germany. I say "re-developed" because there has been a significant historical repression of the critical social psychology of the early Frankfurt School, that is, the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. The most famous piece of social psychology which came from this group was the work on the authoritarian personality by Adorno and his co-workers. Significantly too this work has been subject to a positivist interpretation in mainstream social psychology (cf Krech et al, 1962).

² Tajfel died in 1982.

In short, the positivist influence in social psychology has been responsible for the lack of critical and theoretical reflection on substantive and fundamental issues : what is the constitution of the social in social psychology? As Hartley says in discussing social psychology, "There is currently little interest in social philosophy or theoretical speculation" (p 1023, in Eysenck et al, 1975). Criticising this positivist dominance in social psychology Armistead (1974) says

"When you combine the striving for general laws with a conception of the 'social' in terms of interaction between organisms and with the experimental, laboratory method, you end up with a social psychology that systematically ignores, both in its conceptualizations and in its predominant method, the social context in which social behaviour occurs." (p 15)

A final comment on this kind of social psychology is by Stroebe (1980), "Change in social psychological theorizing is thus more a matter of satiation than falsification." (p 106)

A further effect of positivist social psychology that needs to be discussed is the resultant conception of "society" that comes from the absent and inadequate notion of the social. Because of the paradoxical asocial basis of much contemporary social psychology the notion of "society" is often taken for granted, or identified with the social group, or a social group (e.g. minority groups), or reified as something **outside, against, and alien** to the individual. We rarely see a dialectical conception of the individual in his/her social functioning. Stroebe (1980) makes the point that,

"Social psychologists are unable to develop a general theory of social cognition which would subsume the distortion of reality through dissonance reduction as a special case, because such a theory would have to be based on assumptions about the

objective nature of social reality, which they are unwilling to consider." (p 109)

There have more recently been some critical correctives "... to the individualistic orientation of present-day social psychology..." (ibid, p105). Stroebe talks about the emphasis on "social structural variables and functional analysis" in the "Kritische Psychologie." Armistead (1974) suggests that as

"I have already mentioned how psychological social psychology thinks of the 'social' as to do with observable social interaction. This definition of the 'social' has excluded a serious developmental or historical perspective. However, we need to follow the development and change of social behaviour and experience over time both in the individual and in society." (p 20)

Positively he says about a reconstructed social psychology that

"... we need to have a developmental perspective on the individual (the accumulation of past experience), and a historical perspective on 'society' (the accumulation of other people's experience and ideas); we need to look at real-life behaviour and pay a lot of attention to people's experiences in real life; we need to look carefully at the social context of behaviour and experience; and we need to be involved in producing social change ourselves." (p 10)

In this more coherent articulation of the social with society Resler & Walton correctly ask that we specify the dynamics of society in our conception of social psychology, thus :

"For we are not dealing with a social psychology of all societies, but a social psychology of societies in a given historical period. In our period the contours of advanced societies are determined by their relationship to the world market - a capitalist market. Thus, a social psychology which ignores these relationships and their impact on the psyche of the individual cannot be regarded as social." (p 289), in Armistead, 1974, emphasis added).

So a social psychology must be responsive to an historical conception of society and a developmental conception of the individual and individuals in particular historical social formations (societies).

I have thus far discussed the problem of the social in psychology as I see it, and detailed some of the effects of this "social amnesia" in social psychology. The social is not important simply because the materialist and realist theory of knowledge which informs this critique of psychology calls this forth substantively, repetitively, and sometimes vacuously (Meiksins Wood, 1981 ; Hirst & Woolley, 1982). The whole meaning of the social in materialist scholarship is currently being debated (cf, for example Mephram & Ruben, 1979). However it is not only a social theory like marxism which insists on the social articulation of individual experience in understanding the complexities and dynamics of human behaviour. The reviewers of personality theory and research, in the Annual Review of Psychology since 1976 at least, have been making a call for personality to be the study of social - interpersonal behaviour, and that personality loses it's meaning unless understood as situationally dependent behaviour. They have also bemoaned the traditional separation between personality research and social psychology (cf Sechrest, 1976; Phares & Lamiell, 1977; Helson and Mitchell, 1978; Rorer & Widiger, 1983). Sadly, it seems that these rigorous reviews of personality studies have not significantly, if at all, changed the direction of empiricist & positivist research in personality. The extent of the problem is such that the 1983 reviewers started their article by saying

"... we have studiously avoided most of the literature that is typically included under this topic, on the grounds that it deserves to be avoided." (pp 431432, Rorer & Widiger, 1983).

They then review literature which they feel **should** comprise the science of personality.

What then is the social that needs to be incorporated in the constitution of the personality so as not to **reduce** individual behaviour to an individualist distortion? The trouble with most social sciences, and psychology is no exception, is that there is a tendency to over-formalise concepts, and especially when trying to define complex and difficult social and human realities. The argument in this article is that the social in psychology has been denied a theoretical space, or at best reduced to one of its dimension : the micro-social analysis of interpersonal relationships. We need as psychologists to open up the space inhabited by the social (cf Deleuze, in Donzelot, 1980; and Donzelot, 1980, pp ix-xxvii).

Positively the social is a number of things and relations, and it is a mechanical social science which tries to restrict it to one set of meanings. Furthermore, the social is nothing on its own, and it is also a strained theoretical concept trying to accurately capture the complexity and totality of human social reality. For some authors it is the interaction of the personal and the political (p 9, Armistead, 1974; p 290, Resler & Walton, in Armistead, 1974; Halmos, 1978). It is also to repeat some previous quotes,

"... a **developmental** perspective on the individual (the accumulation of past experience), and a **historical** perspective on 'society' (the accumulation of other people's experience and ideas); we need to look at real life behaviour and pay a lot of attention to people's experiences in real life; we need to look carefully at the social context of behaviour and experience; and we need to be involved in producing social change ourselves." (p 10, Armistead, 1974, emphasis added)

And to repeat another important quote on the social, Resler & Walton say,

"What is necessary for the reconstruction of social psychology is to analyse people's psychic development and responses within a **historical perspective**, which recognizes that the limits on behaviour are shaped by the relations between power, politics and people." (p 290, in Armistead, 1974, emphasis added).

And again these authors say that,

"[I]n insisting that we examine the way members have internalised the values of a given social system, they have advanced social psychology. But when they go on to reject objectivity and thus the reality of structure, they lapse into metaphysics of idealism. In substance their project is atomistic; they see individuals as creating rules not social relationships. It is significant, therefore, that most of their work focuses on face-to-face interaction. For such action is apparently relatively unstructured. Our approach so far has been critical and somewhat negative. But it is the case that the positions outlined above show a characteristic carelessness in moving from the individual to the social." (ibid, pp 288-289, emphasis added).

It is an attempt to undermine this "carelessness" of analysis of the individual and the social that this article contributes.

Finally besides some of the above theoretical and definitional statements about the social, it is also historically and substantively constituted. In short, the social is what the history of the sciences of the social have been trying to grapple with in the last two centuries : social science, sociology and

psychology, social psychology, marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism (cf Deleuze, in Donzelot, 1980; Donzelot, 1980). As Deleuze comments about the social,

"[A]s the contours of this domain are nebulous, one has to recognize it first by the way it took form, beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by the way it sketches out its own originality in relation to older sectors, so that it is able to react on them and effect a new distribution of their functions." (p ix, in Donzelot, 1980)

Developing this "new distribution" Deleuze says

"... the social is a **hybrid domain**, particularly in regard to relations between the public and the private spheres..." (ibid, p x - emphasis added)

Donzelot (1980) then captures the historico-theoretical movement of the social; for psychologists the social as **process**,

"For 'the social' is not society understood as the set of material and moral conditions that characterize a form of consolidation. It would appear to be rather the set of means which allow social life to escape material pressures and politico-moral uncertainties; the entire range of methods which make the members of a society relatively safe from the effects of economic fluctuations by providing a certain security-which give their existence possibilities of relations that are flexible enough, and internal stakes that are convincing enough, to avert the dislocation that divergences of interests and beliefs would entail." (p xxvi).

It is hoped that in critically moving through different and problematic conceptions of the social in psychology, and concluding with a positivity of what the social is, that a different and scientifically acceptable rigour has in part been established in trying to "define" and constitute the social.

This project must be continued, in both theoretical and empirical research, in trying to integrate and mediate between the social and the individual in constituting the domain of the psychological.

This article is based on part of the first chapter of my Masters' thesis.

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