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Grand challenge: social psychology without hubris

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In this editorial, the Founding Field Chief Editor of *Frontiers* in Social Psychology expresses several ideas about the past, present, and possible future of social psychology, seeking to explain we need social psychology, why we need a new journal in social psychology, and what kind of journal in social psychology we need. The Editor argues for a rich, humanistic, interdisciplinary, philosophically informed social psychology devoted to addressing social problems in the illustrious traditions of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Gordon Allport, Muzafer Sherif, Solomon Asch, Morton Deutsch, and others. He suggests that disciplinary "crises" of practicality, historicity, and replicability may be more interconnected than is generally recognized. The Editor advocates a non-hubristic, theory-driven, multi-leveled analysis of human behavior that attends to both subjective and objective aspects of social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. Editorial priorities of the new journal include scientific rigor, social relevance, and intellectual humility.

KEYWORDS

social psychology, social science, history, culture, politics, theory, evidence

"We are not called upon to be either boasters or sentimentalists regarding the possibilities of our science… But we are entitled in our daily work to be sustained by the conviction that we are not working in indifference to or at cross purposes with the practical strivings of a common humanity."

(Dewey, 1917, p. 277)

Introduction

In this editorial, I take the opportunity to convey some of my own ideas about the past, present, and possible future of social psychology, with the ulterior motive of explaining why I think we will always need social psychology, why we need a new journal in social psychology now, and what kind of journal in social psychology it is I think we need. My history of the field is necessarily brief, highly selective, and admittedly impressionistic, if not downright idiosyncratic. I do not claim that my perspective on the first century and a quarter of social psychology is comprehensive or complete, nor do I expect it to be universally accepted. I am simply offering my take on where we have been, where we went wrong, and where I would like to see us go next.

Fortunately, there are many intellectually satisfying histories of social psychology available—especially the ways in which it grew out of nineteenth century philosophy in Europe and North America—written by others more qualified than I (Allport, 1968; Cartwright, 1979; Collier et al., 1991; Farr, 1996; Jones, 1998; Jahoda, 2007; Ross et al., 2010; Dovidio et al., 2012; Hilton, 2012; Kashima and Gelfand, 2012; Kruglanski and Stroebe, 2012; Reis, 2019). There are also valuable autobiographical recollections offered by some of the field's most prolific contributors over the last half-century or more (e.g., Festinger, 1980; Bruner, 1983; Heider, 1983; Deutsch, 1999; McGuire, 1999; Rodrigues and Levine, 1999; Kelman, 2004; Moscovici and Marková, 2006; Aronson, 2010; Kassin, 2022). Scientific and professional developments in Asian, African, and Latin American social psychology have received much less historical attention over the years, but hopefully this is finally changing (Kruglanski and Stroebe, 2012, p. 10–14), for the social psychology we envision is one that knows no geographical boundaries.

In the early twentieth century, the great philosopher, psychologist, and educator Dewey (1917) remarked that social science was roughly three centuries behind physical science

(p. 275). Even today, the feeling persists that social psychology is a young field. It is hard to say whether we are catching up—or whether we should even be comparing ourselves to physics in the first place, although one of the founders of modern social psychology, Kurt Lewin, encouraged such comparisons. Some—like Smith (1976), Sherif (1977), Nisbett (1990), and Rozin (2001)—have argued that we should cease defining ourselves in relation to the natural and physical sciences.

Sherif (1977), for instance, remarked that too often we behave like "dazzled copycats:" "The physical sciences are psychology's rich relatives... We strive to be like them as they are now—mature and established," but we are ignorant of the "tribulations that [they] went through at the hands of the Establishment of their times" (p. 376). Asch (1987) lamented that "Because physicists cannot speak with stars or electronic currents, psychologists have often been hesitant to speak to their human participants" (p. xv). Smith (1976), too, argued it is a mistake to be guided exclusively "by aspirations and strategies borrowed from the inanimate sciences" (p. 442). My own view is that physics envy is but one manifestation of a *scientistic* outlook shared by far too many social psychologists.[1]

We should recognize, for instance, that not every important issue is an empirical one, and we should do a better job of distinguishing between empirical and non-empirical questions (e.g., Wallach and Wallach, 1994, 1998a,b, 2001a,b; Gigerenzer, 1998). Moreover, we need not distance ourselves from the humanities and other social sciences; we would do well to embrace what we have in common with other areas of scholarly inquiry, including those that are not amenable to the experimental method. Smith (1976) would point out that we do have something important to add: "With the humanistic scholar and the artist, the social psychologist might also hope to ... participate in societal feedback processes that make it less likely that future realities will be humanly disastrous, more likely that they will be humanly fulfilling" (p. 442; see also McGuire, 1973).

Most would agree that social psychology, despite its promising nature, has endured a fairly turbulent childhood and adolescence. Its practitioners have endured a string of crises and have suffered, in my view, for its most hubristic excesses. Arguably these include the drawing of universalistic, sometimes grandiose conclusions about "human nature" based on underdeveloped,

unsystematic theorizing; a fetish for flashy, surprising, or newsworthy effects; reliance upon statistically underpowered studies involving a culturally narrow, parochial data base; flawed research designs, poor measurement techniques, and unacknowledged threats to internal, external, and construct validity; and the opportunistic manipulation of dubious statistical procedures to draw desired conclusions[2] (*inter alia*, Henrich et al., 2010; Fiedler, 2011; Simmons et al., 2011; Nosek et al., 2012; Open Science Collaboration, 2015; Spellman, 2015; Bless and Burger, 2016; Finkel et al., 2017; Gray, 2017; Giner-Sorolla, 2019; Muthukrishna and Henrich, 2019; Blake and Gangestad, 2020; Fabrigar et al., 2020; Berkman and Wilson, 2021; Gelman and Vazire, 2021; Grahek et al., 2021). Still, hope is not lost. Many adults succeed in overcoming adversity experienced early in life (Masten and Reed, 2002; Cutuli et al., 2020).

Pettigrew (2018), for one, believes that the field has improved greatly by responding to so-called "crises." And, as Jones (1998) noted years ago, "The future of social psychology is assured" because of "the vital importance of its subject matter" and "its unique conceptual and methodological strengths," which, under the best of circumstances, "permit the identification of underlying processes in everyday social life" (p. 49). We need social psychology.

In what follows, I first highlight what I see as some of the most valuable themes and enduring challenges of social psychology—its legacy and the things we should seek to preserve and tackle going forward. I find it extremely useful to return to the roots of social psychology—especially the wisdom and leadership of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Gordon Allport, Muzafer Sherif, Solomon Asch, Morton Deutsch, and others—because I often feel that we have strayed too far from their visions of a rich, humanistic, interdisciplinary, philosophically informed social psychology that is devoted to diagnosing and ameliorating serious social problems. It is a troubling sign of scientistic hubris that we ignore our past—or treat it sentimentally but not seriously—and assume that we have little or nothing to learn from those who made their contributions in the last century (Billig, 2015; Colucci and Colombo, 2018).

After revisiting the early history of social psychology, I make a few brief comments about the so-called "crises" of social psychology—including the "practicality crisis," the "historicism crisis," and the "replication crisis"—and suggest that they may be more connected to one another than is commonly assumed. The fact that so few social psychologists appear to have noticed any connections is another sign that we are ignoring—rather than learning from—our shared history. I humbly submit that there are some extremely important lessons we could learn from the past and potential gains to realize by embracing a more realistic understanding of our particular brand of social science. Finally, I outline ambitious plans to launch a new journal in an unsettled landscape marked by ongoing controversies and conflicts in social psychology and a rapidly changing market for open-access academic publishing.

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1   According to Williams (2015, p. 6–7), there are four major tenets of *scientism*, which are clearly distinguishable from mere adherence to the scientific method. They are: (1) "Only certifiably scientific knowledge counts as real knowledge. All else is mere opinion or nonsense." (2) "The methods and assumptions underlying the natural sciences including epistemological and metaphysical doctrines, are appropriate for all sciences, including, prominently, the human and social sciences." (3) "Scientism exudes and promotes an exaggerated confidence in science (i.e., natural science in all its avatars) to produce knowledge and solve the problems facing humanity. Such confidence would be reasonable only if the world, in every aspect of reality, were of a nature that lends itself to study by a science conceived and constructed as our natural science is." (4) "Scientism assumes, and requires a naturalist, materialist, rather than mechanistic metaphysics. To understand fundamental aspects of humanity is to explain them in terms of things outside of them, and to explain them in that way is to destroy [or reduce] them."

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2   Here I am not referring to cases of outright fraud, of which several have come to light, but to manipulating the data in ways that were once considered normatively appropriate but that inflated error rates and distorted scientific conclusions (e.g., Simmons et al., 2011).

The need for social psychology

In the English-speaking world, we often assume that social psychology began in 1908 with the publication of two major textbooks—one by an American sociologist, E. A. Ross, and the other by a British psychologist, William McDougall. The fact is that both were beaten to the punch by a few continental Europeans, including an Italian author, Paola Orano, who published *Psicologia Sociale* in 1902 (Jahoda, 2007; Kruglanski and Stroebe, 2012). It is convenient for us now to forget all about Orano, who supported the fascist regime in Italy and was a close collaborator of Mussolini (Doise, 1986; Sensales, 2020). But perhaps it behooves us to bear in mind that social psychology—like virtually all other scientific and technological innovations—can be used for good or evil, and it is a constant part of our ethical mission to distinguish clearly between the two.

In celebrating the first 25 years of the American Psychological Association, Dewey (1917) paid appropriate tribute to pioneers such as William James, Jean-Gabriel De Tarde, James Mark Baldwin, E.A. Ross, William McDougall, Edward Thorndike, Graham Wallas, and Wilhelm Wundt. But he also urged humility: "No science has so much cause to be humble about its actual achievements as has social science, including social psychology" (p. 275). He asked rhetorically: "How often have we been invited to build up our social, political, and ethical explanations in terms of some single and supposedly dominant mental constituent!" (p. 268).

Dewey's (1917) article, entitled "The Need for Social Psychology," was full of complaints about the status quo. Among other things, he lamented the "backwardness of social psychology" (p. 271), the fact that it often served as "a bulwark of conservatism"—a way of looking behind rather than ahead. For example, he bristled at psychological approaches that relied too heavily on innate tendencies in human behavior, to the exclusion of socialization processes. Dewey worried that social scientists were not only getting things wrong but justifying the existing social system:

> The most powerful apologetics for any arrangement or institution is the conception that it is an inevitable result of fixed conditions of human nature. Consequently... an antecedently given mind [is] appealed to in justification of the established order as to the family, the school, the government, industry, commerce and every other institution (p. 273).

Dewey objected to "attitudes of polite aloofness [and] condescending justification as to social institutions" (p. 274), which he felt were all-too common among psychologists of his generation. He was a restless progressive, an educational innovator, and a champion of liberal democracy. The social psychology he "needed" was one that would pave the way for a better, freer, and more just society (Colucci and Colombo, 2018).

More than a century ago, Dewey (1917) argued for a "new point of view" that treated the "social mind" as "an offspring of the life of association, intercourse, transmission, and accumulation" and "social facts as the material of an experimental science, where the problem is that of modifying belief and desire … by enacting specific changes in the social environment" (p. 273–274). He envisioned a science that would demonstrate clearly how objective social forces shape the mental states of individuals and groups and, consequently, their behavior. Because of his unwavering commitment to democratic progress, Dewey saw personal and social change—and, indeed, human agency—as fundamental to the emerging science of social psychology, a dynamic field that would "show man how his mind is to take part in giving these changes one direction rather than another" (Dewey, 1917, p. 274). There was an ethical dimension to Dewey's vision of social psychology that is woefully lacking in contemporary contributions. Authors these days often make ostentatious, albeit unconvincing displays of "value neutrality," presumably in an effort—largely in vain, as it turns out—to avoid pernicious accusations of "ideological bias" that are themselves ideologically motivated in obvious ways (e.g., Duarte et al., 2015).

The social psychology Dewey envisioned was ambitious but not hubristic. Befitting a "pragmatist" or an "instrumentalist" (his preferred term), Dewey felt that the scientific method was supremely useful but fallible. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, he noted that the scientific revolution "began with recognition that every natural object... is to be *known* only by experimental inquiries which will exhibit a multitude of complicated, obscure and minute relationships." He went on: "The case is not otherwise with ideals of justice or peace or human brotherhood, or equality, or order. Like thunderbolts and tubercular disease and the rainbow they can be known only by extensive and minute observation of consequences incurred in action" (Dewey, 1930, p. 56–57). The fact that science is the most reliable form of epistemic inquiry available to us does not mean that it is free from human limitations. On the contrary, we should always treat the fruits of our investigation—in natural science no less than social science—as provisional and subject to revision (McGuire, 2013).

More than anyone else in the early twentieth century, it was Kurt Lewin who most definitively answered Dewey's call for a dynamic social psychology emphasizing freedom, social justice, and democratic self-determination. Both sought to identify ideal but attainable conditions for human agency and progressive change in mental life and social affairs. In the preface to a posthumous collection of Lewin's essays, Gordon Allport (Allport, 1948) wrote:

> There is a striking kinship between the work of Kurt Lewin and the work of John Dewey. Both agree that democracy must be learned anew in each generation, and that is a far more difficult form of social structure to attain and to maintain than is autocracy. Both see the intimate dependence of democracy upon social science. Without knowledge of, and obedience to, the laws of human nature in group settings, democracy cannot succeed. And without freedom for research and theory as provided only in a democratic environment social science will surely fail. (p. xi)

Dewey and Lewin shared many things, including a philosophical education, a commitment to the experimental method, and an interdisciplinary outlook. They valued "action research," that is, problem-oriented collaborations between researchers and practitioners with the aim of producing "context-bound, values-based knowledge and solutions from their public inquiries into system problems" (Dickens and Watkins, 1999, p. 186). According to Colucci and Colombo (2018), Dewey and Lewin also shared the normative goal of "emancipatory

social relevance," that is, the pursuit of knowledge that would serve not to control others but to help "individuals to obtain self-enlightenment about their societal and social dependencies" (Teo, 1998, p. 240; see also Tolman, 2009). It should go without saying that pursuing emancipatory social relevance does not mean one is entitled to distort the truth or prioritize one's values over the facts; on the contrary, we assume that truth itself serves an emancipatory function and is essential to the unmasking of bogus ideologies.

Part of Lewin's extraordinary success as the founder of modern social psychology is attributable to his own personality and leadership style. His biographer, Marrow (1969, p. ix–xv), wrote that Lewin "lived psychology—not only for his love of science but also for his devotion to mankind" and believed that "his life as a scientist must be integrated with his life as a citizen:" "Unlike the typical German professor, he was a natural, spontaneous democrat" (p. xi). Lewin's legacy of training and pedagogy is unparalleled. Many of his former students became illustrious figures who spread the message of social psychology throughout Europe and the US for decades. At the same time, contemporary appreciations of Dewey and Lewin tend toward the superficial (Billig, 2015; Colucci and Colombo, 2018), and social psychologists today would do well to ground their research much more firmly in their tradition, which was "optimistic and constructive," focusing on the complex "relationship between theory and practice" with a clear emphasis on "the issue of social change" and the goal of "improving society by spreading democracy and 'resolving' or at least addressing social conflict" (Colucci and Colombo, 2018, p. 32).

Two (or more) crises in social psychology

Opinions differ greatly about the nature and substance of the first so-called "crisis" in social psychology (e.g., McGuire, 1973; Elms, 1975; Secord, 1976; Sherif, 1977; Minton, 1984; Blank, 1988; Jackson, 1988; Greenwood, 1989; Parker, 1989; Wallach and Wallach, 1994; Jost and Kruglanski, 2002; Pettigrew, 2018). Some point to Ring's (1967) critique of his contemporaries for abandoning Lewin's humanistic, action-oriented vision of a scientific discipline that would "advance the cause of human welfare" (p. 113) in favor of "clever experimentation on exotic topics with a zany manipulation" (p. 117). Only 30 years after Lewin's death, Ring felt that social psychology had already become frivolous: "Whoever can conduct the most contrived, flamboyant, and mirth-producing experiments receives the highest score on the kudometer" (p. 117). The worry that social psychologists have abandoned their charter to use scientific methods to address serious social problems has recurred throughout the years (Helmreich, 1975; Smith, 1976; Minton, 1984; Giner-Sorolla, 2019; Berkman and Wilson, 2021; Moghaddam, 2023; Power et al., 2023).

Dissatisfaction with the field emerged also in Europe, where prominent voices such as Moscovici (1972) and Tajfel (1972) decried the alleged individualism of North American social psychology (as did Steiner, 1974) and the neglect of social-contextual influences on human behavior. Some of these concerns were amplified by Gergen (1973), who claimed that:

> The continued attempt to build general laws of social behavior seems misdirected, and the associated belief that knowledge of social interaction can be accumulated in a manner similar to the natural sciences appears unjustified. In essence, the study of social psychology is primarily an historical undertaking. We are essentially engaged in a systematic account of contemporary affairs. We utilize scientific methodology, but the results are not scientific principles in the traditional sense (p. 316–317).

Ultimately, Gergen's (1991) "social constructionism" took a radical, relativistic turn. He embraced the skeptical conclusion that scientific statements "are simply optional myths on all fours with religious or political dogmas and ideologies" (Smith, 1994, p. 408).

Unsurprisingly, most social psychologists rejected the above critiques, especially that of Gergen (1973, 1991), as far too sweeping, even nihilistic. In the eyes of many, it was a postmodernist call to dispose of the baby with the bathwater (Schlenker, 1974; Deutsch, 1976; Greenwald, 1976; Manis, 1976; Shaw and Costanzo, 1982; Zajonc, 1989; Jones, 1998). Even M. Brewster Smith, who had welcomed Gergen's earlier critique (Smith, 1976), objected to the abandonment of a reasonably modest conception of social psychological science "as an evidential, public, self-critical social enterprise, an enterprise that has successfully sought progressively more adequate and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena in its domain—an enterprise committed to an ideal of truth, the approach to which can be evaluated pragmatically" (Smith, 1994, p. 408).

The sheer extremity of the social constructionist critique was, perhaps, unfortunate, insofar as some specific points were well-taken (Cronbach, 1975; Deutsch, 1976; Secord, 1976; Smith, 1976; Sherif, 1977; Converse, 1986; Blank, 1988; Greenwood, 1989; Campbell and Russo, 1999; Jost and Kruglanski, 2002; Sullivan, 2020; Power et al., 2023). Chief among these was the conclusion that human social behavior is linked to concrete historical, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts (inter alia, Moscovici, 1972; Tajfel, 1972; Geertz, 1973; Hardin and Higgins, 1996; Rozin, 2001; Nisbett and Masuda, 2003; Markus, 2005; Roberts, 2007; Kay and Zanna, 2009; Kashima and Gelfand, 2012; Bar-Tal, 2013; Kay and Eibach, 2013; Greenfield, 2017; Salter et al., 2018; Muthukrishna and Henrich, 2019; Jost, 2020; Napier et al., 2020; Banaji et al., 2021; Essien et al., 2021; Pettigrew, 2021; Cikara et al., 2022; Goudarzi et al., 2022; Najdowski and Goff, 2022; Rivera Pichardo et al., 2022; Liaquat et al., 2023; Kitayama and Salvador, 2024). Indeed, the same argument was made convincingly by Dewey (1917) and is perfectly compatible with Lewin's (1947) dynamic field theory (e.g., Minton, 1984). To my mind, recognizing the importance of social-contextual factors does not mean that social psychologists should cease striving for generalizability as a scientific goal. On the contrary, we should seek to develop a comprehensive, systematic understanding of social situations, fields, environments, episodes, or contexts and to identify the most important underlying dimensions—such as different types of social structures, roles, resources, and stratification systems—to explain variability in social contexts (e.g., Milgram, 1965; Frederiksen, 1972; Forgas, 1979; Argyle et al., 1981; Magnusson, 1981; Saucier et al., 2007; Reis, 2008; Yang et al., 2009; Foa and Foa, 2012; Uskul and Oishi, 2020).

Perhaps Gergen's (1973) biggest mistake was assuming that science itself is incapable of modeling dynamic processes such as those characterized by temporal or historical change. Many social psychologists objected that his ahistorical view of the natural sciences was a caricature. Manis (1976) noted that we would not "ask a meteorologist to predict tomorrow's weather from a general forecasting system, while denying him vital information concerning air pressure, winds, neighboring weather patterns, etc., that would presumably serve as important variables in the application of his model" (p. 429). Smith (1976) added: "There are natural sciences that are explicitly historical: thus paleontology and historical geology" (p. 440). Converse (1986) wrote: "if being 'firmly wedded to historical circumstance' is sufficient to disqualify the investigation as 'science,' then we must hastily, if perhaps apologetically, inform geology it is not, and has never been, a science" (p. 45). Moreover, "the study of biology is every bit as 'firmly wedded to historical circumstance' as is geology or planetary science" (p. 51). Converse pointed out that Lewin's "situation" term is, in fact, vastly more complex than is often recognized, encompassing as it does, "social structure, political and economic institutions, cultural values, and historical sequencing" (p. 58; see also Minton, 1984). Because of this complexity, Converse conjectured, social psychology might take 500 years "to match the accomplishment of the first 50 years of physics" (p. 48).

With regard to the "practicality crisis" (Ring, 1967; Helmreich, 1975; see also Elms, 1975; Smith, 1976; Minton, 1984), Deutsch (1976), one of Lewin's protégés, counseled modesty and patience about what social psychology can accomplish:

> Social psychology, *per se*, does not and cannot provide the solutions to war, poverty, racism, sexism, crime, or any social problem. This is not to say that social psychology is unable to make important contributions to the understanding of these problems. But it is to say that the gap between what we can do, even at our best, and the elimination of these problems is very large. When these problems take on an urgent character, the gap is experienced as an acute crisis but the gap is chronic—it is an inevitable frustration of being a socially concerned social psychologist. We have our role to play in helping to bring about progressive social change but it is only a small role in a complex drama with many actors. Recognition of the inherent limits of our part would not reduce the gap but it might alleviate some of our frustration. (p. 135)

Deutsch's position should not be confused with apathy or, as Lewin put it, "highbrow aversion or... a fear of social problems" (Lewin, 1947, p. 169). Rather, like Dewey (1917), Deutsch took the long view in advocating for an action-oriented, humanistic, non-hubristic social psychology, recognizing that many of the problems we seek to address are multiply determined and resistant to social change for reasons that are beyond our control.

Social psychology's second major crisis period, which arose roughly 40 years after the first, is often referred to as the "replication crisis." Ostensibly, it had nothing to do with the earlier crisis (or crises). The presenting problem was that attempts to reproduce the results of large numbers of social psychology studies in the published literature "failed" roughly half of the time, stoking anxiety that the field as a whole suffered from "selective reporting, selective analysis, and insufficient specification of the

conditions necessary or sufficient to obtain the results" (Open Science Collaboration, 2015, p. 943; see also Spellman, 2015). While many scholars blamed statistical improprieties (e.g., Simmons et al., 2011), others pointed to deficiencies in theory, that is, the "lack of a cumulative theoretical framework or frameworks" (Muthukrishna and Henrich, 2019, p. 221; see also Gintis, 2007). No doubt both contributed to the problem, and there are probably other causes as well, including widespread naïveté about philosophy of science (e.g., see Cacioppo et al., 2004, for a useful primer with implications for social psychology).

McGuire (2013), who lived through social psychology's first crisis, anticipated at least some aspects of the second. He took aim at psychologists' uncritical acceptance of logical empiricism, as exemplified by Karl Popper, arguing that "one is led to absurdity in thinking of the empirical work as testing one's hypotheses rather than developing them by making clear to ourselves and others the implicit limitations of austerely stated laws" (p. 420). From the perspective of McGuire's (1989) perspectivist meta-theory, the goal of research in social psychology is not merely to reject "false positives" nor to provide "confirmatory" evidence that enables one's pet hypotheses to live and fight another day, but to identify the boundary conditions under which a given theoretical proposition may—and may not—be treated as a useful, valid generalization. Among other things, this approach requires a deep appreciation of the context-embeddedness of social psychological phenomena.

By chasing flashy results, ignoring earlier critiques about the context-dependence of social psychological observations, and stubbornly pushing universalistic theories of human nature assuming "a genetic line possessed by all species"—all the while ignoring "a cumulative cultural line unique to us" (Muthukrishna and Henrich, 2019, p. 223) and failing to develop sophisticated, dynamic, integrative theories that incorporate "social structure, political and economic institutions, cultural values, and historical sequencing" (Converse, 1986, p. 58)—social psychologists may have been setting themselves up for a fall. We now know that studies on topics that are understood to be "contextually sensitive (varying in time, culture, or location)" (Van Bavel et al., 2016, p. 6,454)— such as specific cultural stereotypes—are less easily replicated than studies on other topics (Klein et al., 2012; Gilbert et al., 2016; Greenfield, 2017; Noah et al., 2018; Pettigrew, 2018). This suggests, at least to me, that there is a connection between the first crisis in social psychology and the second.

To take an obvious example, one could be deeply dismayed— on short-sighted, scientistic grounds—that this month's Gallup Poll "failed to replicate" President Biden's approval ratings from only 1 month ago. However, this would be silly, insofar as everyone assumes that public opinion about the president is the kind of thing that is *likely to change* from 1 month to the next. So, the question I have is, why do (or did) so many social psychologists assume that most or all of the phenomena that interest them are static rather than dynamic—the kinds of things that should *not* be expected to change over time (or from one place to the next)? Historical permanence was not assumed by Dewey, Lewin, Allport, Sherif, or other founders of social psychology. Nor was cultural universality. How and why, then, did contemporary social psychologists drift so far from their roots?

My own impression, as someone who was trained in the U.S. in the early 1990's, is that for many years social psychologists were encouraged to speak and write about their work in hubristic terms.

It is conceivable that, as the neoliberal age unfolded, professional and self-promotional (i.e., marketing) considerations of a personal and/or collective (i.e., disciplinary) nature came to eclipse attention to and awareness of philosophical and scientific realities. This problem is by no means confined to social psychology. I suspect it is a prevalent consequence of university incentive structures (e.g., Nosek et al., 2012), which focus increasingly on individual achievements and the rewarding of "academic stars." In social psychology, leaders of the field—presumably under pressure from employers as well as governmental and non-governmental funding sources—may have responded defensively rather than constructively to the first "crisis," fighting off accusations that the discipline was "unscientific" by overcompensating and redoubling efforts to conform to an unrealistic image of the natural sciences. This, in turn, may have led many otherwise reasonable scholars to make exaggerated claims about the generality and universality (e.g., timelessness) of their "effects."[3]

In this way, it seems to me that social psychologists were taught to be *scientistic* rather than *scientific*. For decades, "basic" research on (presumably) domain-general processes was at all times favored over "applied" research that might address some specific social problem (Helmreich, 1975). Simple, declarative sentences about general, if not universal or absolute, statements of psychological fact were (and often still are) selected as titles for articles and conference presentations. These hubristic titles practically dare other researchers to contradict them, initiating a scramble to discover minor exceptions that add little in the way of theory-building. The discussion sections of articles published in flagship journals invariably claimed that some fundamental cognitive or motivational process had been successfully isolated in the laboratory. Results were seldom, if ever, seen as influenced by decisions researchers made about how to operationalize or measure their variables—or the fact that only a few carefully chosen stimuli had been selected to represent a wide array of human experiences (e.g., Yarkoni, 2022). If there was another theory that could (also) explain the findings, the article was apt to be rejected, and the authors knew it. Thus, they were obliged to argue that no rival theory could possibly explain the totality of their observations. If they wanted to be tenured or promoted, many social psychologists probably felt they had little choice but to exaggerate the importance, universality, and generalizability of their work.

If those days of hubris are finally over, and—because past failures can no longer be denied or dismissed—intellectual humility and scientific modesty are finally "in" (Teo, 2019; Hoekstra and Vazire, 2021; Power et al., 2023), then I, for one, am glad. However, I worry that by placing all of the blame for the "replication crisis" on statistical problems—and ignoring the serious conceptual, theoretical, and meta-theoretical issues—the next generation of social psychologists may be setting themselves up for another fall.

I agree that it is a terrific idea for researchers to think through all aspects of their research program from the outset (if possible). However, the idea that "preregistration" of one's hypotheses is a panacea against the scourge of false positives strikes me as hubristic.[4] So is the notion that a conclusion is more trustworthy, in a scientific sense, because someone happened to put their educated guesses up on a website. I am especially skeptical that publicly proclaiming a few (relatively safe) predictions and interpreting all results only in light of what was anticipated is, in itself, likely to produce any real scientific breakthroughs. I also see other problems with what is confidently declared to be "best practices" in psychological science these days. Frequently one is invited to review a manuscript in which 40% or 50% or 60% of the participants have been dropped because the authors adhered rigidly to an unfortunate set of exclusion criteria that seemed reasonable to them some weeks or months before. Robustness tests make more sense to use than turning science into a betting contest.

To be clear, I think it is wonderful that our research community is constantly trying to make empirical observations more informative and trustworthy. And I agree with Pettigrew (2018) that many methodological innovations, such as multilevel modeling, are strengthening our ability to illuminate sources of social-contextual variability in human behavior, thereby linking micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis in social psychology. At the same time, we need to recognize and accept what my statistics professor, Abelson (1995) knew, namely that scientific work is itself a rhetorical endeavor—an attempt to *persuade* people of something they do not already know based on logic and evidence.

Theory is paramount, and there is a huge role for creativity in the development and empirical assessment of social psychological argumentation (Nisbett, 1990; McGuire, 1999). We ought to give researchers credit for generating new and interesting ideas—whether they bear out empirically or not, encouraging them to take risks and be creative, rather than requiring authors to commit themselves to (and "defend") any specific empirical outcome. Let us acknowledge explicitly that theory development is and should be a dynamic process rather than a static one, and revising theories in light of accumulating evidence is not something to be hidden or ashamed of; it is a valuable part of the scientific process (e.g., Trope, 2004).

Any given social psychological study—because of choices made by human beings about which variables to emphasize and how to operationalize them, how to implement experimental manipulations and procedures, how to collect, code, and analyze the data, and so on—is either rhetorically convincing to experts in the field or not (Abelson, 1995). That is, every decision made about study design, measurement, data analysis, and interpretation is one that should be justified on grounds that are sensible and compelling to other researchers. In this endeavor, theory is critically

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3   It is interesting to consider whether these scholars believed their own overconfident rhetoric (possibly succumbing to self-deception) or merely exaggerated the conclusiveness of their results because of professional incentives to "sell" their work. In any case, it is safe to say that social norms developed in many areas of academia to favor hubristic forms of self-promotion over more modest forms of communication (e.g., Hoekstra and Vazire, 2021).

4   I do not mean to suggest that all proponents of scientific preregistration believe that this practice, in and of itself, will solve all of the field's problems. However, too many authors seem to be treating it as a *sine qua non* of good scientific research without thinking deeply about the theoretical foundations of hypotheses that are or are not preregistered. Some also treat a preregistration "badge" as an invitation to exaggerate the importance and generalizability of their contribution.

important (Becker and McClintock, 1972; Shaw and Costanzo, 1982; Kruglanski, 2001, 2004; Trope, 2004; Van Lange et al., 2012; Gray, 2017), because all properly scientific disputes are about whether various patterns of data strengthen or weaken belief in some proposition or set of related propositions about the state of the world. The answers we arrive at in science are nothing like the absurd one imagined in *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy,* when a supercomputer states that the answer to a question about the meaning of life is "42." The answers we seek are not just numbers; they are *arguments* that satisfy our curiosity, at least for now.

New frontiers in social psychology

How, then, can a new journal help us overcome and learn from past mistakes and move forward in a determined, more successful fashion on all these fronts? Certainly, no single journal will be able to "fix" the various deficiencies in the theory, meta-theory, and practice of social psychology that led to the field's major crises. Nor can it cure the historical amnesia that, in my view, inhibits us from learning (enough) about the past. However, my editorial team and I are offering an alternative platform that researchers can use to counter broader professional trends toward scientific hubris and help to reestablish a shared sense of social psychology's historical mission.

We sincerely hope that you will enjoy reading *Frontiers in Social Psychology*. It is a brand-new open access journal that aims to establish itself as one of the leading publication outlets of conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and empirical work in social psychology. Please note that we value qualitative as well as quantitative methods, and we seek to promote innovative methodological techniques that advance our understanding of the human situation. We prize theoretical development and sophisticated, properly nuanced, and socially contextualized efforts at hypothesis confrontation (not merely confirmation). Save the bluster, just tell us what you think you have or have not found and why, and why you think our readers should care.

We will publish a wide range of article types, including brief research reports and more lengthy research articles, hypothesis and theory statements, opinion and perspective pieces, general commentaries, methodological contributions and data reports, mini reviews and more systematic review articles, case reports and clinical trials, policy briefs and extended discussions (see https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/social-psychology/for-authors/article-types). This tremendous diversity of "deliverables" parallels our pluralistic (but not relativistic) view of academic scholarship. As should be clear from this editorial, we do not assume that "one size fits all" or that a bright line separates facts from values, data from interpretation, or truth from deeply considered opinion.

In my work as Field Chief Editor, I am supported by an esteemed, generous, democratic, insightful, and non-hubristic group of Specialty Chief Editors. We are launching this journal in the fall of 2023 with four Specialty Areas: (1) *Attitudes, Social Justice, and Political Psychology*, led by Richard Eibach of the University of Waterloo in Canada; (2) *Intergroup Relations and Group Processes*, led by Kimberly Rios of the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign; (3) *Gender, Sexuality, and Relationships*, led by Rachel Calogero of the University of Western Ontario,

Canada, and Maria Giuseppina Pacilli of the University of Perugia in Italy; and (4) *Computational Social Psychology*, led by Michal Kosinski of Stanford University. We worked hard on recruiting an internationally recognized and ethnolinguistically, geographically, culturally, and methodologically diverse board of Associate and Review Editors, people who are also generous and accomplished. Our work, please remember, is an act of community service.

Unfortunately, we have learned that many potential authors are skeptical of the *Frontiers* model of scientific publishing. We share many of your concerns and are seeking to learn from past problems with other journals, including runaway AI. For better or worse, the financial burden of academic publishing is in the process of being shifted away from (a) university libraries and other institutions that (for decades) paid handsomely for journal subscriptions to (b) an open-access model in which fees are paid instead by authors and those who support their work, including granting agencies and, again, universities as employers of those who produce the vast majority of social scientific output.

One perfectly understandable concern is that scholars in developing countries will be unable to afford to pay publication fees. We hasten to mention that the publisher has institutional agreements with over 250 institutions and a Fee Support Program for researchers who lack access to research funding. Fortunately, our impression is that other *Frontiers* journals have featured more articles from authors working in East Asia and the Global South than we are accustomed to seeing in the pages of "traditional" or "mainstream" journals in social and personality psychology, which have been strongly influenced by reputational familiarity and other institutional prestige cues.

In a relatively short time, *Frontiers* journals have risen aggressively and impressively through the ranks of scientific publishing. On average, their journals rank at the 72nd percentile (out of 99) in terms of Impact Factors, and some are as high as the 91st percentile. In terms of scientific publishers, they currently rank as #3 in the world (averaging five citations per article)—behind the American Chemical Society and the Royal Society of Chemistry, but ahead of Elsevier, *PLoS*, Springer Nature, Wiley, Oxford, Cambridge, Sage, Taylor & Francis, De Gruyter and other publishers. In 2022 alone, *Frontiers* articles were viewed and downloaded 646 million times all over the world.

In any case, all of us—authors, editors, reviewers, and readers—find ourselves struggling to adapt to this brave new world of academic publishing, which brings new levels of transparency and accountability. Peer reviews, which were once guarded secretly, are now made public, at least for articles accepted for publication. Although we cannot promise perfection, my editorial team and I will do our best to build a new, open-access repository of social psychological contributions of which the entire research community can be proud for years to come.

Concluding remarks

The need for social psychology, it seems to me, is universal, even if the specific topics, problems, methods, and solutions we favor are not. For better or worse, we cannot stand outside of history—or culture or politics or economics. But we can make truly valuable contributions to understanding how these forces

shape and are shaped by individuals and social groups in our own times and places, and perhaps—especially if we are willing and able to collaborate with fellow travelers in other disciplines—understanding the structures, functions, and dynamics of social and psychological systems more generally. It is still within the purview of our science to understand how, as Sherif (1977) put it, "the human psychological system [is] transformed during development and concrete interchanges with the social environment, as it shapes up into a human individual in a given culture with its particular living conditions and social arrangements of class, gender, occupation, etc. with their associated value orientations" (p. 376–377). According to no less an authority than Pettigrew (2018), researchers are closer than ever to fulfilling the promise of "contextual social psychology" by quantitatively modeling both subjective and objective aspects of the social context and documenting their effects on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of individuals and groups.

Like John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Gordon Allport, Muzafer Sherif, Solomon Asch, Morton Deutsch, and many others they inspired—we keep the faith that a dynamic, context-sensitive social psychology can make a genuine difference in people's lives and point the way toward a better and more just future for humanity. At *Frontiers in Social Psychology*, we would like to see studies that are theory-driven and methodologically sound, communicated in ways that are accessible, constructive, reasonable, and persuasive. Many of the articles will also be problem-focused, that is, potentially valuable to society. Whether our activity is supported by public or private contributions (or both), we owe it to society at large to produce work that addresses the needs and interests of the many, especially those who are presently underserved, and that promotes their welfare. Our editorial priorities, therefore, are scientific rigor and social relevance, along with intellectual humility.

Concerning the last of these, we may still have something to learn from Dewey (1917), who abhorred "pretending [that] a scientific treatment starts from any other than a pluralistic basis" and disregarding "the complexity and specific variety of the factors of human nature, each operating in response to its own highly specific stimulus, and each subject to almost infinite shadings and modulations as it enters into combination and competition with others" (p. 269). We should not deceive ourselves into thinking that the behaviors we observe are simpler or more general, let alone immutable or inevitable, than they really are. At *Frontiers in Social Psychology*, we seek to promote research that is ethically grounded, methodologically sound (that is, convincing to experts),

and both theoretically and practically ambitious. It should be offered modestly, without intellectual grandiosity, pomposity, or dismissiveness toward the valid contributions of others, including those working in neighboring disciplines or subdisciplines. If you share this vision of what social psychology can and should be, please, please join us.

Author's note

Author contributions

JJ: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The author JJ declared that they were an editorial board member of Frontiers, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

Publisher's note

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