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### **published in**

British Journal of Social Psychology  
1986

### **DOI (link to publisher)**

[10.1111/j.2044-8309.1986.tb00719.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1986.tb00719.x)

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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### **citation for published version (APA)**

Semin, G. R. (1986). The individual, the social and the social individual. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 25, 177-180. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1986.tb00719.x>

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## The individual, the social, and the social individual

Gün R. Semin

If one reviews previous work in psychology, one soon discovers that the theme of this Special Issue is not a new one. Thus the attempt to introduce a 'social' level of analysis different to the 'individual' one prevailing in the German psychology of the 19th century was responsible for the emergence of *Völkerpsychologie* in the 1850s (cf. Waitz, 1859; Lazarus & Steinhal, 1860; Wedewer, 1860; Lazarus, 1861). The subject matter of social psychology itself as it emerged around the beginning of the present century fluctuated between notions of 'group mind', on the one hand, and 'instinct', on the other. Durkheim, LeBon, Ross, Tarde and Wundt argued in different voices for collective representations, group mind, collective mind, collective consciousness or *Völkerpsychologie*. These arguments invited a level of analysis that contrasted with that implied by instinct theories. For example, Wundt's argument referred to a collective consciousness which is a composite of '... those mental products created by a community of human life and are therefore inexplicable in terms of merely individual consciousness' (1916, p. 3). Correspondingly, the social instinct view had its adherents with McDougall as its most familiar proponent. Of these various influences, Mead's seminal work notwithstanding, it was Floyd H. Allport's vision of social psychology which was to prevail and produce an individual-centred subdiscipline of psychology (e.g. F. H. Allport, 1924, p. 4; cf. Post, 1980; Graumann, 1984, *inter alia*). The emergent and dominant form of social psychology analyses social behaviour from an individual-centred perspective.\* This is not to deny the fact that the last 15 years in social psychology have seen an increased concern with 'socializing' social psychology, along with numerous attempts to introduce variations on the theme of 'social context'. These concerns have not, however, progressed much beyond critiques of mainstream social psychology, and have generally failed to introduce a radically new innovative strand of social psychology that contrasts with the criticized tradition in mainstream social psychology. The two questions to be addressed in this introduction are (i) the nature of the theme of this Special Issue, and (ii) how the various contributions attempt to address this theme.

This Special Issue was intended to marshal theoretical and methodological perspectives which dissolve a duality inherent in contemporary social psychological thinking: individual reductionism (cf. Moscovici, 1972, 1984; Tajfel, 1972; Sampson, 1981, *inter alia*) and the implicit if not explicit assumption that society exists independently of its constitution and reproduction by individuals, and is to be addressed by disciplines other than social psychology.†

The predominant view in contemporary social psychology is that social action and social thinking are produced by individuals and therefore require an individual-centred analysis. In the final instance this assumption can be defended by reference to the biological finitude of individuals. Are there any qualities, any psychological reality, that can be called social and at the same time be explained without reference to individual thinking and action? The

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\*cf. Graumann (1984) for an excellent exposé of F. H. Allport's critical influence on social psychology.  
†Indeed, it can be argued that the title of the Special Issue itself invites this dualism and this is correct (cf. Paul Drew's comment, this issue).

unequivocal answer, as is evident from the models of analysis to be found in mainstream journals and textbooks, is in the negative. This constitutes the individualization of the social and, in the prevalent mode of cognitive social psychology, also entails a 'subjectivist reduction' (cf. Sampson, 1981) which 'grants primacy to the structures and processes of the knowing subject' (p. 730). Thus, the argument is that the *social* must be examined in terms of intrapersonal processes.

Unarguably, action and thinking are individual products. However, they are elements in an equation in which a third parameter is not entered, namely the *production and reception of meaning*. 'Humans' activity *assimilates the experience of humankind*. This means that humans' mental processes (their 'higher psychological functions') acquire a structure necessarily tied to the sociohistorically formed means and methods transmitted to them by others in the process of cooperative labour and social interaction. But it is impossible to transmit the means and methods needed to carry out a process in any way other than external form—in the form of action or external speech' (Leont'ev 1981, p. 56). The vaguest, unspoken thought, just as much as a complex argument presupposes organized communication among individuals (cf. Mead, 1934; Wittgenstein, 1958; Berger, 1966; Voloshinov, 1973; Giddens, 1976; Vygotsky, 1981, *inter alia*). Indeed, a central insight of all these authors is that *intersubjectivity precedes subjectivity*; that 'self-understanding is connected integrally to the understanding of others' (Giddens, 1976, p. 19); that it constitutes the ontological condition of human life in society. The first two elements in the equation are predicated upon the biological finitude of human beings, but the essential characteristic of being human is that we are part of an historical process, and it is therefore not sufficient to consider human action and thought as predicated upon the biological characteristics of the individual. It is only ' . . . a social and historical localization [that] makes man real, and determines the content of his personal and historical creation' (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 24).

This means that the ways in which individuals perceive themselves, relate to others, and their processes of self-consciousness are permeated, maintained and reproduced by social processes (cf. Mead, 1934; Berger, 1966; Voloshinov, 1973; Vygotsky, 1981; Wertsch, 1985). As Berger argues, 'Self and society are inextricably interwoven entities. Their relationship is dialectical because the self, once formed, may act back in its turn upon society that shaped it. . . . The self exists by virtue of society, but society is only possible as many selves continue to apprehend themselves and each other with reference to it. . . . This dialectical relation between social structure and psychological reality may be called the fundamental proposition of any psychology in the Meadian tradition. Society not only defines but creates psychological reality. The individual realizes *himself* in society—that is, he recognizes his identity in socially defined terms and these definitions *become reality* as he lives in society' (1966, pp. 107–108, emphases in the original).

An inevitable corollary of the interdependence of identity and society, of psychological reality and social processes, is the sociocultural and historical embeddedness of psychological realities. To that extent the data which are uncovered by a psychological theory are integrally tied to the sociocultural world that has produced the psychological reality (cf. Schütz, 1955; Winch, 1958; Giddens, 1981; Semin *et al.*, 1981, 1985; Gergen, 1985; Semin, 1987). This corollary can be illustrated by reference to the conception of 'individual' and the penetration of contemporary psychological theorizing by a sociohistorical conception of 'identity' as found in contemporary Western capitalist societies (cf. Sampson, 1983, 1985). Geertz summarizes this view thus: 'The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may

seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures' (1979, p. 229). Indeed, an examination of diverse sources from literary analysis and history, to anthropology and philosophy (e.g. Cherry, 1967; Foucault, 1970; Morris, 1972; Lyons, 1978; Weintraub, 1980; Kirkpatrick, 1983; Harrison, 1985; Kon, 1985, *inter alia*) provides convincing evidence for the conclusion reached by Geertz. Identity as individuality with reference to persons is a contemporary conception and has influenced the construction of psychology's subject (cf. Sampson, 1983, 1985). One result which has become an implicitly taken-for-granted assumption in social psychology is the prevailing conception in our theories of persons as biologically contained, autonomous entities, which is itself a sociohistoric product.

The five papers in this Special Issue begin with Taylor & Johnson's contribution. In their examination of the relationship between 'individual psychology' and social structure they advance two strategies of how this relationship might be fruitfully incorporated into social psychological analysis. In doing so they furnish a perspective which supersedes the discussion of 'psychological' and 'sociological' social psychologies, and they attempt to provide a synthesis through their plea for an eclectic social psychology that would be a more informed inter- and crossdisciplinary enterprise.

It will come as no great surprise to some that the remaining four papers are all concerned with the delineation of identities, albeit from different theoretical perspectives and orientations. The concept of identity and its social constitution provides a central focus in contemporary human sciences, psychology being no exception. This is partly due to the realization that identities are products rather than givens and their conceptualization has not only epistemic consequences for the human sciences, but also existential ones. The socio-historical processes responsible for the production of social identities is addressed by Shotter who utilizes Vico's contribution to this problem as a platform for discussing the emergence of 'shared moments in social activity', and of 'collective identities'. Duveen & Lloyd also employ the concept of identity, drawing attention to the fact that individuals are constructed in terms of the group. Utilizing the concept of social representations to point out the constructed nature of the concepts of the individual and the social, they focus on the development of a social gender identity to illustrate the complex social processes involved in its production. Turner & Oakes approach social identity from a social categorization point of view. They use this in their examination of individualism, interactionism and social influence. The final paper in this Special Issue is concerned with how the self is represented as a function of different social contexts. McGuire & Cheever's contribution provides an original and innovative methodological approach to the investigation of identities. This involves the examination of basic linguistic characteristics of terms (type of verb usage) used in descriptions of self. Using this method McGuire *et al.* illustrate the distinct roles that school and home contexts play in the mediation of situated self-concepts.

Each paper is followed by two commentaries and a brief rejoinder. These critical evaluations, elaborations, and defences provide additional perspectives on the issues discussed in the five main papers. I am grateful to the authors and commentators for their willingness to participate in the production of this Special Issue. The original aim was to create a platform for debate, and my hope is that the final product succeeds in fulfilling that ambition.

### **Acknowledgement**

The writing of this paper was facilitated through an ESRC personal grant G 00 24 20 33.

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