

The history of social psychology

Book review

Farr, Robert M (1996) **The roots of modern social psychology, 1872-1954**. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. Pp. xvii, 204. ISBN 0-631-19447-9.

John Carson

Department of Science and Technology Studies

Cornell University

USA

Why do psychological social psychology and sociological social psychology have so little to say to each other? Why has European social psychology, where it has withstood the onslaught, had so little impact on the dominant American-style of practice? And why is there so little of the social in social psychology? These are the questions that haunt Robert Farr's **The roots of modern social psychology**. Clearly deeply unhappy with the current state of the discipline, Farr has fashioned a series of essays that seek to use history to suggest both how contemporary social psychology has come to be as it is, and how it might have been different. It is a tactic that makes for a curious book. As a work of pure history, **The roots of modern social psychology** is highly flawed, exhibiting few of the characteristics that one would expect of a piece of good historical scholarship. And as a call to arms, it left at least this reader (admittedly an historian rather than a social psychologist) a bit at sea, wondering whether rewriting the history of a discipline is the most efficacious way in which to reform its current practice.

Farr structures **The roots of modern social psychology** as a response to Gordon W Allport's chapter on the historical background of the discipline that appeared in the three editions of the **Handbook of social psychology** (1954, 1968-9, 1985). Following the arguments of Franz Samelson, Farr critiques Allport's attempt to create an origin myth for social psychology that nominated Auguste Comte as the founder of the discipline. Farr never explicitly explains why Allport's choice of Comte is incorrect; rather, Farr is concerned with emphasizing the deleterious consequences of establishing the founder of positivism as the progenitor of modern social psychology. In Farr's view, choosing Comte meant adopting a particular understanding of how science progresses and should be pursued, one that encourages the long history of the development of the field to be ignored in favor of its recent "scientific" stage. Although Farr concedes that Allport's Comtean positivism was soon superseded, he argues that what replaced it in social psychology, especially in its American variant, was yet another version of positivism, identifiable with the writings of Ernst Mach, that emphasized experimentalism and empiricism and that made the individual the focus of

investigation. It is this account that Farr seeks to challenge, and does so by creating his own origin story, one that begins with Wilhelm Wundt and his **Völkerpsychologie**.

In Farr's telling, the social aspect of psychology was, in a sense, orphaned from the start. Farr sees the ten volumes of the **Völkerpsychologie** that Wundt produced between 1900 and 1920 on such topics as religion, customs, myth, and magic as constituting the first significant attempt to produce an interactional, community-oriented, social psychology. Specifically rejecting the focus on individual consciousness that was the hallmark of the physiological psychology that he had also pioneered, Wundt argued that phenomena like language and culture could be understood only when approached at the level of the collective, or *volk*, rather than that of the individual. This move to groups as the unit of analysis, however, also demanded that the experimental laboratory-based techniques of investigation dominant within physiological psychology be abandoned in favor of historical and comparative methods. While experimental psychology could be deemed a natural science (*Naturwissenschaft*), social psychology, Wundt contended, must resolutely remain a human science (*Geisteswissenschaft*). It is this split, Farr suggests following Kurt Danziger, that helped produce the marginalization of social psychology within Germany. For the generation following Wundt, experimental techniques and laboratory-based investigations - positivist science - became the hallmarks of proper scientific inquiry, leading them largely to ignore Wundt's **Völkerpsychologie** in favor of his individually-oriented physiological psychology.

The same basic pattern would be followed in America. There, according to Farr, George Herbert Mead, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago and someone deeply influenced by Wundt, sought "to resolve the antithesis proposed by Wundt" - individual mind *versus* collective consciousness - by placing the self between mind and society. In Mead's theory, developed over the years 1900-1931, individualization was understood as something resulting from socialization, rather than inimical to it. Mead strove mightily to create a theory of mind that attended both to the individual and the social, minimizing the importance of neither. As developed further by Herbert Blumer under the name symbolic interactionism, Mead's theory would have a profound effect on sociological social psychology. But, Farr contends, within psychology proper Mead was largely ignored. When social psychology did begin to develop in America as an independent subfield, the reigning influence was Floyd H Allport, whose 1924 textbook **Social psychology** sought, in Farr's words, "to establish social psychology as a behavioural and experimental science." Adopting the positivist principles of physiological psychology, Floyd Allport, along with his equally influential brother Gordon Allport, emphasized observation and laboratory manipulation in which the unit of analysis would be the *individual*. Both rejected out of hand the notion that there was any form of consciousness outside of the personal. The social, for both, was a concatenation of discrete individuals, no more and no less. The introduction of gestalt psychology to America in the 1930s, according to Farr, continued this approach to the social investigated through the individual, an orientation that has remained dominant down to the present day.

Such, in outline, is the major narrative thread that runs through **The roots of modern social psychology**. Additional chapters on crowd psychology, Murchison's 1935 **Handbook**, and social psychology during World War II serve to provide some additional detail, but the basic message remains the same: Wundt and Mead

articulated the possibility of a truly social social psychology, a possibility that was lost through the slavish reliance on a positivist methodology that was single-mindedly infatuated with experimentation to the exclusion of all other methods of social psychological analysis and that could conceive of society only as a collection of individuals. As a contribution to the growing historical literature on the evolution of psychology as an intellectual pursuit and academic discipline, **The roots of modern social psychology** is, unfortunately, sadly lacking. Farr's reliance on primary texts is limited, his construction of explanations for why events transpired almost non-existent, his engagement with most of the works he discusses limited, and his awareness of the last thirty years of science studies scholarship virtually undetectable. Nowhere, for example, does Farr address seriously the question of why the individual became the central ontological unit of social psychology. Casual references to America's penchant for individualism and the gestalt orientation toward questions of cognition do not begin to unpack this issue, so central to the concerns of the author. Although Farr cites the work of Danziger repeatedly and with fulsome praise, he seems to have learned little from Danziger's imaginative analysis of the development of experimental psychology in **Constructing the subject**. There Danziger's focus on the multiple ways in which the subject has been constituted within psychology allowed him to provide a detailed analysis of how a particular complex of intellectual questions, institutional practices, and experimental techniques - those associated with the aggregated statistical object - came to dominate the practice of experimental psychology. By contrast, Farr exhibits little interest in looking closely either inside the science to explain how specific approaches became or failed to become persuasive or outside to examine the social and cultural contexts within which social psychology developed.

If **The roots of modern social psychology** fails to contribute significantly to historical scholarship, it can still be asked whether it will succeed in its task of convincing social psychologists to re-think their allegiance to the positivistically oriented individualistic social psychology of contemporary practice? Certainly Farr makes a good case that alternatives are available, either by resuscitating the insights of figures like Mead or by exploring within psychological social psychology some of the findings of the sociologists, who have continued to focus on the social as a unit of analysis. What is less clear is whether simply pointing out a different road will be sufficient. As many studies of scientific practice suggest, enrolling scientists in a new course of investigation requires that a whole host of conditions be present, including institutional support, research questions that are validated by the field, and the sense that new approaches will have important payoffs. Historical investigation, while it might help to reorient the culture of social psychology, will have to be united with the fruitful results of practical investigations before social psychology is likely to move decisively in a different direction. Thus it will be sometime before we can know whether Farr's call to arms will succeed.