

The Social Psychology of J. F. Brown: Radical Field Theory

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Junius Flagg Brown, one of Lewin's most brilliant students, extended field theory to social psychology even before Lewin. Brown's *Psychology and the Social Order* (1936) provided a distinctive integration of field theory, psychoanalysis, and the Marxist view of society. The theory advocated a hypothetical-deductive scientific approach to social psychology, in the interest of finding solutions to persistent social problems. Influential in the 1930s and 1940s, Brown's work is currently neglected. In view of recent critical attacks on experimental social psychology, it is suggested that Brown's thought may provide an important bridge between the experimental tradition of American social psychology and the critical social psychology now emerging in Western Europe.

European social psychologists are becoming increasingly critical of the social psychology developed in large part by their American colleagues. Their concerns range from theoretical inadequacies to limitations on the generality of experimental findings to humanistic concerns. The new criticism from Europe strikes to the very core of existing assumptions about the possibility of a positivistic, value-free social psychology. Examples of these critical attacks are to be found among the contributions to Israel and Tajfel's (1972) book, and in the more recent work of Billig (1976). The gist of these concerns was summarized in Smith's (1973) review of the Israel and Tajfel book:

rejection of the positivist epistemology of social science, emphasizing instead the intrinsic importance of prior assumptions or stipulations concerning the nature of man and society; doubt about the possibility or desirability of value-free social science; rejection of the linear, one-way-traffic conception of causation implicit in much experimental social psychology in favor of an interactive view; and emphasis on meaning and symbolic communication as the hallmark of the social, with

The authors are grateful to Ross Stagner for his reminiscences about his association with J. F. Brown, and for his comments on an earlier draft of this article. We also acknowledge the helpful comments of R. M. Ryckman.

This paper was completed while the first author was Visiting Professor at the Institute of Psychology, University of Oslo.

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criticism of current social psychology as stopping short of its proper task in this respect. (p. 611)

While the past few years have seen considerable self-examination by American social psychologists, only recently have Americans begun to address the issues at the center of the European critique. Two critical thrusts can be discerned among American social psychologists. The first, led by Gergen (1973) and Sampson (1977) explores the generality of social-psychological findings and the role of values in current research. Gergen's suggestions regarding the limitations imposed on generality by the historical context are well-known, and do not need repeating here. Sampson focussed on the individualist bias which he discerned in American social psychology; in a similar vein, Stone (in press) has pointed out what he calls "the centrist bias" in American social science.

The second critical thrust in America is dialectical social psychology. Beginning in developmental psychology, this movement has been taken up by social psychologists (Rappoport, 1977). Dialectical social psychology has been variously perceived, as "a thoroughgoing, radical interactionism" (Smith, 1977, p. 720), as Marxist social psychology, or in terms of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis formulation of Engels. In any of these meanings, the dialecticians touch upon issues raised by the European social psychologists.

One difficulty in analyzing the current state of social psychology is that neither the critics nor traditional experimentalists evidence an historical perspective. Our exegesis of J. F. Brown's work suggests that some issues now current have been raised in the past, a past whose examination is now due.¹ An indication of the contemporary relevance of Brown's thought is given by the following quotation:

The present confusion, one might almost say chaos, regarding the scope, problems, and subject-matter of social psychology must be understood historically. The broad, inclusive, but meaningless theoretical principles of the nineteenth century writers have been shown to be methodologically inadequate . . . the Behaviorists . . . [created] a reaction towards objectivity . . . [and] an enormous amount of statistical, in some cases even experimental, material has been gathered . . . Unfortunately, however, science does not grow by fact alone . . . the Behaviorists have tried to get along with no theory. Hence the lack of systematization in contemporary social psychology. (Brown, 1936, p. 483)

The author of the foregoing passage suggested that "We field-theorists believe the time is now ripe to attempt a systematized science of social psychology" (1936, p. 484).

¹ We are keenly aware of the problems inherent in using the past to directly instruct the present — the problems of presentism (Stocking, 1965). On the other hand, the "lost history" we present contains many striking parallels to present day discussions. We believe that this paper will serve to introduce the historical dimension into the current discussion.

Junius Flagg Brown

In a book entitled *Psychology and the Social Order*, J. F. Brown (1936) anticipated current desires for a social psychology both scientific and humanist. Brown's social psychology regards the social actor from three perspectives:

- (1) *Individual psychological processes.* Brown believed that Freud's psychology was the best approach then available to understanding the individual.
- (2) *The immediate situation.* The immediate context of behavior can best be described in terms of psychological and social fields.
- (3) *The historical context.* Marx's class analysis is the key to understanding social change.

A consideration of J. F. Brown's writings may provide helpful perspective on the differences among social psychologists. Brown's field-theoretical social psychology emphasizes both the individual and the social setting. It stresses the importance of theoretical analysis, stresses the scientific approach, and is appreciative of the Marxist view of historical causation. Such an approach may be helpful in building bridges between the differing approaches to social psychology.

Brown's book was quite influential in its day, but interest in it declined rapidly in the 1940s. It is our view that the time may now be ripe for a reintroduction of Brown's socially and politically conscious version of field theory. Therefore, we strive to present Brown's thought to a new generation of social psychologists. This presentation begins with a brief introduction to the man.

A Biographical Sketch

Junius Flagg Brown, born in 1902, studied the sciences at Yale and remained there for his graduate work in psychology. Awarded a fellowship to study in Germany, he attended the University of Berlin for two years, studying with Köhler and Wertheimer. He was drawn to the work of Kurt Lewin, and later (1929) published an article on Lewin's "psychology of action and affection." This article has been credited as the introduction of Lewin's theory to the English-speaking audience (Marrow, 1969).

Brown returned to Yale for his last two years of graduate school and in 1929 completed his thesis on "the visual perception of velocity" which was published, as were several others of his experimental papers in the Gestalt journal, *Psychologische Forschung* (1931a, 1931b, 1931c). He returned to Berlin on a National Research Council fellowship to study with Köhler and Lewin. In the Fall of 1930, Brown returned to the United States to teach, first at the University of Colorado and then at the University of Kansas, where he taught until 1942.

Brown's early writings were largely the technical papers on vision;

after 1933 with one or two exceptions his contributions were theoretical. Although he did not teach social psychology until he went to Kansas in 1932, he had become interested in the social and political implications of psychology, an interest that derived from his radical politics. Brown was a Marxist as early as 1931, and was a founder of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI).

Although he continued to be active in SPSSI into the mid-1940s, Brown's social activism and social-psychological writing gradually declined in the 1940s. One reason for the decline was his own psychological state, which included a severe drinking problem (Smith, Note 1). In addition, after the publication of *Psychology and the Social Order*, "Brown had . . . undergone psychoanalysis and become a devoted Freudian" (Stagner, Note 2). His increasing fascination with psychoanalysis led to the writing of an abnormal psychology textbook (Brown, 1940), and only a year or two after its publication he left teaching and went into the practice of clinical psychology. After the report of the Committee on the Psychology of Peace and War was published (Stagner, Brown, Gundlach, & White, 1942), Brown published no more work of social relevance (although he did make some minor contributions to *The Authoritarian Personality* study [Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950]). He was active in clinical work and published a few articles through the mid-1950s, retiring in 1959. He died in 1970.

Brown's Field-Theoretical Social Psychology

Brown's introduction to field theory started with his perceptual studies under Wertheimer and Köhler, followed, one might suppose, by more theoretical work with Lewin in Berlin. Such supposition is supported by Brown's knowledge of the work on incompleting tasks and level of aspiration by Lewin's German students.

Brown's field-theoretical social psychology is primarily an application of Lewinian theory to social behavior. According to Mey (1965/1972), Brown must be credited with the first field-theoretical treatment of social behavior. Brown was rapidly overtaken by Lewin's writings in social psychology, it seems, but "the appearance is deceptive," according to Mey, "for Brown distinguishes himself completely by reasons of his evolutionary (not to say, revolutionary) interest" (p. 156). Thus the very scope of Brown's social psychology differentiates it from Kurt Lewin's social-psychological analyses, which always seemed to have been tied to ecologically "smaller" situations. The following discussion of Brown's book will illustrate this scope.

Psychology and the Social Order: An Overview

Brown's *magnum opus* is a striking book in several respects. He

argued for a scientifically based social psychology, believing that general ahistorical laws can be discovered through use of the hypothetico-deductive method. The proper basis for such development, of course, was the field-theoretical schema developed by Kurt Lewin. The approach to this general social psychology was presented in a methodological section, which criticized previous conceptions of social psychology as mechanistic and/or vitalistic and, finally, offered the Gestalt-field theoretic conception as the proper starting point of social psychology. The reader was given an extensive introduction to Lewin's use of topology. Also included in the book were a sociological section, a psychological section, and a political science section, which concluded with a chapter on "Theories concerning the outcome of the present world crisis" (pp. 427-461), which compared the approaches of Pareto, Spengler and Marx.

Methodological Concepts

Brown used the standard topological concepts: the notions of boundary, force, fluidity, barrier and vector seem to parallel Lewin's usage, though there are some extensions because of the new problems, such as class conflict, that Brown was treating. (Mey, 1965/1972, used many diagrams from Brown's book even when illustrating specifically Lewinian concepts).

Brown endorsed wholeheartedly Lewin's characterization of Aristotelian versus Galilean modes of scientific thought; he preferred the Galilean mode, as did Lewin. In his writing, however, Brown used the terms *class-theoretical* (Aristotelian) and *field-theoretical* (Galilean). These philosophical ideas were extended in his critique of Freud (Brown, 1934) and in his discussion and advocacy of the superiority of organic (*i.e.*, *field*) theory over class-theoretical approaches in *Psychology and the Social Order*. Of interest is his endorsement of the logical positivist position, and particularly his enthusiastic espousal of P. W. Bridgman's (1927) operationism, which he saw as being compatible with the field-theoretical approach. Brown carefully disavowed behaviorism, however, execrating J. B. Watson by name as being class-theoretical in his approach.²

Brown's General View of Social Psychology

Brown's concern was for a scientific social psychology which would

² It is important to distinguish clearly between "class-theoretical," as Brown used the term, and "class analysis" as used by Marxist writers. For Brown, class-theoretical concepts predict the behavior of organisms according to the category to which they belong, attributing characteristic behaviors to individuals according to their membership in a class, without concern for the overall context. Class analysis, on the other hand, suggests that an analysis of the current situation must derive from a theory about the dynamic interplay of forces within a class system.

aid in the understanding of contemporary social problems. Such problems as social conflict, recurring economic crises and war among nations might be solved if we understood their social-psychological origins:

Undoubtedly if we knew exactly the factors causing men to act in groups as they do, if we knew how men will behave under certain conditions, if we knew *social psychology*, a Utopia might be created here on earth. It seems obvious that the future of world civilization depends on obtaining a knowledge of social psychology in order that the economic system which is failing us so miserably may be changed before it collapses. (Brown, 1936, p. 10)

Brown's argument for progress in the development of the science was primarily directed toward method, toward the proper philosophy of science and the methodological approach. Both his concern for field theory and his Marxist orientation reflect these methodological concerns.

Because of his primary concern with the field-theoretical approach, Brown took a very broad view of social psychology, emphasizing sociological, political and historical as well as psychological levels of causation. These, together with his methodological concerns, forestalled extensive review of the then-existing approaches. He did, however, deal with a selected list of the topics which interested his contemporaries.

Leadership. The conventional topic upon which Brown is most often quoted by contemporary writers is his treatment of leadership. A leader, says Brown, must have *membership-character* in the group. As might be expected from his field orientation, Brown emphasized situational determinants of leadership over against the "hero" theories. While it may seem that changes in field structure are wrought by leaders, "the activity of the leader is the *resultant* of changes in the field structure and this activity only superficially changes the field" (Brown, 1936, p. 332).³

Attitudes. Brown's comments on attitudes give something of the flavor of his approach to other topics of interest to social psychologists of the 1930s (instinct versus intelligence, the concepts of imitation, suggestion, sympathy and social habit, and the effect of the group on the behavior of the individual and the effect of the individual on the behavior of the group). Most of these topics were approached from a class-theoretical perspective, he argued. In the study of social attitudes he saw some hopeful signs of change. After quoting Allport's (1935) article on attitudes in Murchison's *Handbook*, Brown suggested that

the reasons for this only partially pleasing state of affairs [agreement among social scientists that attitude is a valuable concept, but without any notable further progress], is that the social psychologists have again investigated their problems with a methodology which is implicitly class-theoretical. [However] attitude psychology at least raises the problem of the effect of field structure on the attitude. (Brown, 1936, pp. 98-99)

³ On this point, Stagner (Note 3) notes: "Marx pointed out long before that 'man changes society'; field changes may facilitate leader effectiveness. I think JFB was more Marxian than Marx."

Experimental social psychology. Of experimental social psychology, Brown noted that "the beginnings . . . are at hand" (1936, p. 101). On the whole, however, he opposed experimentation unguided by theory. Commenting on Murphy and Murphy's (1931) *Experimental Social Psychology*, Brown suggested that "on the whole, social psychology has gone from the broad but important generalities of the nineteenth century to the specific but sometimes meaningless researches of the twentieth" (1936, p. 101). He believed that the inadequacies of social science were not to be solved through the collection of ever-increasing quantities of data in an atheoretical context, but through theory-guided research. And, of course, the most promising theoretical approach is field theory.

Freud and Marx

Brown's treatment of psychoanalytic theory needs rather little discussion, since he presented it simply as the best analysis of individual psychology known to him: "The Freudian theory remains in many aspects class-theoretical. It is, however, probably the best explanation we have of the development of personality under the existing structure of the social field" (1936, p. 466). Thus Freud was seen as having developed a satisfactory description of individual psychic economy for the people of the class and time and country with which he was dealing. He also acknowledged some social insights of Freud, in his discussion of leadership, but these played little part in Brown's social psychology. Hall and Lindzey (1968) cite Brown's as the one exception, of social psychology texts published in the 1930s, to the general neglect of psychoanalytic theory. He was, they opined, "well grounded in psychoanalysis as well as field theory, and his effort to synthesize these two major viewpoints is without parallel in social psychology" (pp. 290-291).

As we have seen, Brown's synthesis included more than field theory and psychoanalysis. The third element was Marxism, or more abstractly, dialectical materialism. Brown shared with other thinkers attracted to the two approaches the problems of contradiction between certain aspects of Marxism and psychoanalysis. His 1938 paper in *Psychiatry* represents his attempt to reconcile these contradictions.

Marx. The thought of Karl Marx was more important than that of Freud in Brown's overall scheme. One seldom thinks of Marx as a social psychologist, yet we find Brown so characterizing him:

Marx is undoubtedly the most important social psychologist of modern times on the question of the effect of social class membership-character on the social psychology of the individual, when the class struggle exists. (1936, p. 169)

This carefully qualified statement is compatible with the view of a field theorist who felt that some class-theorists could approach truth given certain boundary conditions. But Brown saw Marxian analysis as more

than simply a class-theoretical analysis appropriate for the time and circumstances. More than any other social theorist, Marx verged on field-theoretical explanation (1936, p. 357). In this assertion, interestingly enough, Brown was supported by Lewin himself:

To my mind Marx's emphasis on the totality of factors influencing social life which forbids, for instance, the abstraction from the economical side of any social event is one of the most important steps in the direction to a field-theoretical approach. (Lewin, 1938, p. 259)

Brown espoused the Marxist notion of social class divisions based upon production relations. Given the prevailing configuration of the social field, he found Bukharin's (1925) to be an apt characterization of the social structure. He employed Bukharin's class divisions in his topological representations of social strife: The *bourgeoisie*, owners of the means of production, the *petty bourgeoisie*, who may own property but in general depend upon salaries and fees for a living, and the *proletariat*, who own little or nothing, but who provide the labor of production.

He disagreed with Marx, however, on the inevitability of class conflict, since the hostile forces can vary in strength according to the "field-dynamics (of an economic and social type) of the particular society under consideration" (Mey, 1965/1972, p. 177).

Brown did not stress the idea of class-consciousness in the Marxian sense. A parallel to Billig's (1976) discussion of false consciousness is to be found, however, in Brown's insistence on the distinction between the actual field structure (the genotype) and a phenomenological description of the field (the phenotype). Throughout, he insisted that attitudes are a product of field structure. One example he gives is that of the change in a person's liberal attitudes when his own country goes to war (Brown, 1936, p. 91).

Field theory and dialectical materialism. In one of his technical appendices, Brown noted several points of agreement between dialectical materialism and field theory:

- (1) *The common emphasis on the important role of theory in the scientific process.* "We have seen that 'theory,' rather than crowning the scientific process after the 'facts' are discovered, plays an integral part in their discovery" (1936, p. 485). The dialectical materialists were advanced, he felt, in stressing the priority of theory over practice.
- (2) *A common conception of the role of theory.* "Theory represents [for both] the conceptual solution of perceived antithesis which must be synthesized in practice . . . From objective conditions (thesis), there arise human needs and wishes which in recognizing the conditions of the objective situation (antithesis) set up a course of action (synthesis) which changes reality" (1936, pp. 485-486). The actual operations, he thought, are analogous to the hypothetical-deductive process.
- (3) *Shared concern with dynamic processes rather than static conditions.* Thus, "as in field theory the laws discovered by the method of dialectical materialism are to be looked on as relative absolutes. The laws are absolute only under the condi-

tions of the experiment or relative to the total surrounding field" (1936, p. 486).

Brown went on to point out certain areas of disagreement between field theory and dialectical materialism; for example, the latter's supposition of "the complete historicity of natural law" (1936, p. 486). For Brown, "dynamic constructs must be temporal but need not be concerned with history as it is popularly understood" (p. 486). A second divergence is field theory's dedication to the use of "mathematically defined operational constructs" (p. 486).

Responses to Brown's Work

Marrow (1969) gave Brown credit for the introduction of Lewin's field theory to the English-speaking world, noting that "Brown set the work of Lewin and his group in a perspective that could not be gained alone from Lewin's own writings or the scattered reports of his group's experimental investigations then appearing in *Psychologische Forschung*" (pp. 48-49). The primary vehicle for this introduction was Brown's 1929 *Psychological Review* article, which appeared just in time to preface Lewin's first appearance in America, at the Yale meeting of the International Congress of Psychology.

Soon, Lewin became known to American psychologists through his own articles in English (Lewin, 1931a, 1931b). However, Brown's early articles, together with *Psychology and the Social Order*, became standard sources on field theory during the 1930s and early 1940s, cited even by Lewin (1939) himself. And, of course, Brown's textbook was in broad use in social psychology courses. The influence of *Psychology and the Social Order* during the years immediately following its publication is widely attested (Back, Note 4; Marrow, 1969; Smith, 1969; Stagner, Note 2).

Contemporary reviews of *Psychology and the Social Order* were complimentary (Jenness, 1937; Schanck, 1937), although we suspect that many psychologists shared the reservations later expressed by the authors of *The Harvard List of Books in Psychology* (1955) concerning Brown's "socio-political bias."⁴ While further analysis of the contemporary response to the book is needed, it is clear that it was quite popular in the 1930s and early 1940s. Few psychologists educated since World War II, however, cite the book — even comprehensive reviews of field theory (Cartwright, 1959; Deutsch, 1968) now neglect Brown's contributions. A few current works do cite *Psychology and the Social Order* in passing

⁴ Stagner (Note 3), who taught using Brown's text in the 1930s, writes: "I think his book suffered from its aggressive Marxist views and from some degree of over-simplification of issues. He was high on dogmatism, and many psychologists would have reacted negatively to some passages (I did, and I was a Marxist of sorts myself). Also, of course, the Joe McCarthy era came shortly after the war and may have scared off potential users; and JFB never revised the book."

(interestingly enough, the early technical articles on vision are more often referred to than Brown's social writings), but no recent work in English had treated Brown's social psychological thought until the publication in 1972 of the English translation of Harald Mey's (1965/1972) *Field Theory*, which first appeared in Germany in 1965.⁵

Mey's assessment of Brown supports our image of him as a bridge between the American experimentalists and the European social psychologists with their penchant for radical theory:

The early student of Lewin who is the most important for social science, is Junius Flagg Brown . . . [who] succeeded in bursting out of the framework of social psychology, which had been generally concerned, especially at the time of Brown's book, with the influences exerted by the social element on the individual, when he made his large-scale attempt to penetrate the dynamics of politics and history. (Mey, 1965/1972, p. 156)

This brief resume of Brown's thought suggests that he occupies an important but as yet unrecognized position; a position which bridges traditional and contemporary concerns in social psychology, and provides in addition an important perspective on the issues currently of concern to American and European workers. He was an ardent advocate of scientific social psychology. He saw radical implications for the discipline in Marx's view of society and history. Finally, he was an ardent advocate of the importance of a theoretical approach to social-psychological problems, and pointed out the parallels between his version of field theory and dialectical method.

Summary and Conclusions

Brown's version of Lewinian field theory was an attempt to synthesize the opposition between the conception of social psychology as an ahistorical discipline and the realization emerging among many social scientists that social behavior is shaped by historical forces. On the one hand he argued, with Lewin, for the contemporaneity of psychological causation: A force which acts, acts now. On the other hand, "When we characterize the field theory as *ahistorical* it does not mean that temporal change is of no importance to us but rather that what we must know of time is included in the construct of the field" (Brown, 1936, p. 78). Thus, in constructing the field of 1936, Brown introduced a historical class analysis, quoting liberally from both Bukharin (1925) and John Strachey (1933).⁶

This synthesis, we suggest, is relevant to the social psychology of our

⁵ Recently, however, Sarason (1974) has cited Brown at length as a "neglected pioneer" whose perspective should have been more influential in the development of community psychology.

⁶ John Strachey's (1933) *The Coming Struggle for Power* was the most influential volume of the decade in introducing Americans to Marxist thought.

time in that the critics of current work emphasize the historical nature of social psychology's laws. Brown argued for a field-theoretical approach which would employ specific constructs derived from an historical class analysis. He did *not*, and this may well divide him from many modern critics of social psychology, attempt to do a class analysis of field theory itself.

Kurt Lewin (1939) suggested that field theory had the potential to integrate "divergent physiological, psychological and sociological facts on the basis of their interdependence" (p. 868). This "Lewinian synthesis" (Smith, 1969, p. 6) has yet to be realized, but we believe that renewed attention to the work of J. F. Brown may further its attainment.

Reference Notes

1. Smith, A. J. Personal communication, March 7, 1972.
2. Stagner, R. Personal communication, January 30, 1978.
3. Stagner, R. Personal communication, February 28, 1978.
4. Back, K. Personal communication, January 6, 1978.

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