

How is “social” conceptualized and assessed in Social Psychological research on the “self-concept”?

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Abstract

The current review uses two secondary sources to assess the conceptualization and assessment of the “social” and the “self-concept” in three recent research articles within the field of Social Psychology. A brief summary of the development and supposed problems within the field is given as well as strengths and limitations of the analysed research articles. The conceptualization and assessment of “social” within the analysed research articles includes implying other people and measuring relationships between the individual and the “social” through self-report questionnaires which mostly lacks the power to ascertain causality between the “social” and individual world. Although there is limited representativeness and comparability within this review, the analysis is thorough albeit at least partly influenced by my own world view.

Introduction

The current thesis aims to critically analyse recent research in the field of social psychology, specifically research on the “self-concept” and determine in what way the concept of “social” is defined and assessed. The link with the “self-concept” is especially interesting for this thesis as the “self-concept” is part defined by the individual and part by their context and as such is a combination of the individual and their “social” environment. Second the historical development of the “self-concept” is akin to that of the field of Social Psychology and the definition has been debated throughout as well as the specific definition of “social” within Social Psychology (Mark, R., Leary, 2014; John D., Greenwood, 2009). And finally, the “self-concept” is a relevant subject when looking at modern developments in how people define themselves. Looking at subjects such as sexuality and gender, society in America and Europe is trying to become more inclusive and allowing for these different ways of identifying yourself at least on a federal level (*Diversity and inclusion initiatives*, z.d.; House, 2020). In this way the potential forms of the “self-concept” are expanding. Social Psychology could investigate the changing relationship between the expanding “self-concept” and the “social” environment

Two questions are important when analysing research in the field of Social Psychology: “How is “the social” measured?” and “How is the “social” related to the individual?”. The two questions lead to another question: “How is the “social” conceptualized?” An answer to each of these three questions will help us to obtain a general outline to what degree and how the researchers conceptualize and assess the “social”. The abstract term of “social” is often not explicitly defined in research papers. For now, I will define “social” along the lines of Greenwood (2009) and later contrast this definition with the conceptualization within the research papers. Greenwood states that the “social” part in Social Psychology, refers to the existence and consequent influence of other people on the self and the influence of the self on other people, thereby creating a “social” world outside of the self. Second, because this paper specifically analyses research regarding the “self-

concept”, I will also give a definition for the “self-concept”. Again, it is a concept, which is not explicitly defined within most research papers. Following Leary (2014), who also offers five possible ways to define the “social” which we will see later in this thesis, defines the “self-concept” as “believes about oneself” (Leary, 2014, p.5).

In order to adequately analyse recent Social Psychological research, two reviews of the field have been chosen and analysed. And I will start with an outline of the historical developments within the field of Social Psychology in relation to research on the “self-concept”. Second, I will go more in depth about the main points made by the authors of these reviews and use them to analyse three research papers published in notable Social Psychology Journals, focussing on the self-concept. In the discussion part of this thesis, I will present the most important findings, strengths and limitations of this review and a comment on the effects of my own world view on this review.

The two reviews on “social” psychology were chosen because they give adequate guidelines for assessing the usage and conceptualization in recent Social Psychological research as they give a historical as well as a philosophical account of the field and it’s supposed problems. The analysed sources were gathered from The Journal of Social Psychology, as this gives some guarantee that the research is positioned within the field. Criteria for selecting the sources was recency and focus on the “self-concept” to ensure the research gives a look into the current state of affairs of the field and because the “self-concept” is at least partly mediated by others implying a “social” aspect.

Philosophical Conundrums and Historical Negligence

From a historical point of view the field of social psychology has seen a shift in the conceptualization of “social”. Following Greenwood (2009), until the 1950s’ researchers in the field of social psychology mainly studied groups. Since the behaviouristic take of Floyd Allport, research has picked up but at the same time started moving away from the original group “paradigm” as stated by Greenwood (2009). With this supposed move from the “group paradigm”, the field of Social Psychology has moved closer to individual psychology and became less distinctive. According to

Greenwood (2009) both Social and Individual Psychology examined psychological processes within an individual. The distinctiveness of Social Psychology comes from the inclusion of the “social” environment in this examination. For example, if a certain attitude is held by the person as a consequence of group membership. In turn, Kenneth J., Gergen (2008) defines the distinctiveness of Social Psychology as paying attention to the “social” environment or “social” potential of behaviour within this environment. Accordingly, Greenwood (2009) and Gergen (2008) think the modern definition has conceptual problems as well as practical problems. These problems presumably lead to research which is not essentially different from Individual Psychology. As well as research which does an inadequate job at explaining “social” phenomena.

Second, around the same time Social Psychology moved away from the “group paradigm”, research on the “self-concept” increased. In part this was due to the development of self-report questionnaires focussing on observable behaviours through a behaviouristic lens. This behaviouristic lens allowed researchers to infer more concretely on self-related constructs such as “self-concept” or “self-esteem” (Leary, 2014). In line with the development of the field of Social Psychology, the research into the “self-concept” has also become more individualized (Leary, 2014).

In order to understand how the “social” is conceptualized and assessed in recent research we will look at two reviews. The first review is written by Kenneth J. Gergen, from 2008 and titled ‘on the very idea of social psychology’. The second review is written by John D. Greenwood, (2009) and titled: ‘the disappearance of the social in American social psychology’. Greenwood gives more of a philosophical account and Gergen gives more of a critical take on the problems within the field. In the following text the main points of Gergen (2008) and Greenwood (2009) will be summarized. After that, I will do my analysis of the research papers using the framework put forth by Gergen (2008) and Greenwood (2009)

“On the Very Idea of Social Psychology”

Gergen states that the current form of social psychology fails to relate psychological processes to “social” life and sociology fails to display the importance of psychological processes

(Gergen, 2008). He splits the field of social psychology in two distinct methods; a method more akin to Sociology and a method more akin to Individual Psychology. The first focusses mainly on crowds, fashions and customs but is unable to relate them to psychology. And the latter focusses mainly on psychological processes such as attitudes or cognition but is unable to adequately relate these processes to “social” life (Gergen, 2008).

The handbook by Steg, L., Keizer, K., Buunk, A. P. & Rothengatter, T (2017), defines Social Psychology as a science which tries to understand human behavior and cognition in social situations. We can see in this definition, that Social Psychology is supposed to relate the “social” world with the individual world. Following Gergen’s (2008) line of thought, the field of Social Psychology is actually not able to fulfil this mission. Gergen (2008) poses that the problem of connecting the two worlds is partly due to a bigger problem because we do not know how to measure certain construct such as attitudes. Moreover, how do we know we are measuring exactly what we are referring to when defining an attitude? There is a body of research into processes and effects such as, for example, the Bystander Syndrome. From a relativistic standpoint such as Gergen’s it is a fallacy to see these processes and effects as something that actually exists in itself. Imagine taking a picture of an attitude and hanging it on your wall. After defining what we mean by the concept of attitude, this should be a clear and well-lit picture. However, from a relativistic perspective, such as Gergen’s, these concepts are dependent on the specifics of a situation. Thus, the picture hung on the wall does not resemble the concept of an attitude or the bystander effect but rather a specific situation in which a commonly observed behaviour received the label of “Attitude” or “Bystander Effect”. Gergen states that because of this weak link between external events and internal processes the current method of combining Psychology with the Social world is impossible. (Gergen, 2008).

To overcome these problems, Gergen (2008) proposes a new “method” in which the mental life is explained within our “social” life. Looking then at our definition of the “self-concept”; beliefs and attitudes about oneself (Leary, 2014), we can relate this definition to the “method” set forth by Gergen (2008). When forming beliefs about ourselves we use the feedback of others, in that sense

our “self-concept” is defined in “social” life through interactions with others. Thus, the mental life, e.g., “self-concept”, finds its definition in “social” life, e.g., interactions with others.

“The Disappearance of the Social in American Social Psychology”

Gergen’s text offered guidelines on what to look for when reviewing the research papers. Greenwood, on the other hand, will take us along a more philosophical account of how Social Psychology arrived at its current form. Greenwood (2009) starts with a depiction of pre-contemporary Social Psychology. During this time, specifically pre-1950’s, Social Psychology was still focussed on groups, customs and behaviour of individuals with regard to being a member of a group (Greenwood, 2009). From the 1950s onward, Social Psychology has changed. Following Floyd Allport’s introduction of a more behaviourist approach, the field flourished increasing the amount of research that is done although it being less distinctive according to Greenwood (2009). The relation between the individual and their “social” environment was no longer being assessed (Greenwood, 2009). As Greenwood (2009) states, the method within Social Psychology defined specific “social” aspects as such whenever they could be compared to other people or, more specifically, when it was representative of a broader group. In this way, a behaviour towards a tree could be considered “social” when it represented a traditional behaviour enacted within a certain culture. Eventually, the defining aspect of “the social” changed over time and now it was only taking into account the target of a specific behaviour. In this sense the previous behaviour towards the tree can never be “social” as the tree is not a “social” object such as, e.g., person. Following this historical development, there is a great loss in which objects can now-a-days be studied within Social Psychology according to Greenwood (2009).

The results of this redefinition of Social Psychological research are important because it dictates how subjects are researched which is illustrated in these three distinctions between pre-contemporary Social Psychology and Contemporary Social Psychology as stated by Greenwood (2009), of which the first is classified by him as “pre-contemporary” and the latter as “contemporary”. First, making a distinction between individual behaviour as a member of society

and individual behaviour purely as an individual vs. making no distinction between behaviour as an individual or as a member of society. Second, individual cognition being different when taking into account “social” context vs. the cognition of an individual being either “social” or individual based on the contents of the cognition such as trees or behaviour of someone else. And finally, research focussed on “social” behaviour respective to the broader “social” group vs. research focusses mainly on the target of the behaviour being other persons or groups and deducing general principles by summation of individuals.

Now I will try to outline the essential differences when defining the “self-concept” through a contemporary and pre-contemporary lens. When discerning whether the “self-concept” is a “social” construct in contemporary terms, we look at what the “self-concept” is e.g., the contents of the cognition. In this case the contents of the cognition are the believes someone has about themselves and as such an individual concept in contemporary terms. In pre contemporary terms we also take into account the context of the cognition. In this case the context is partly responsible for what the “self-concept” is e.g., interactions with different people might make different parts of the “self-concept” salient. In this case the “self-concept” is a “social” concept because the believes that are salient are partly due to the context of an individual. Now I will give a look at what happens to experimentation on the “self-concept” in contemporary terms. The experimental method according to Greenwood (2009) would focus on examination through a purely psychological lens which leads to summation of individuals, e.g., in summing test scores or scores on a questionnaire. Examining the “self-concept” through this method would result in information about the formation of the “self-concept” within the individual and perhaps information about how the individual perceives feedback on their “self-concept”. This would leave a gap in how others influence the “self-concept” or how someone’s “self-concept” influences interactions with others.

The development and conceptualization of the “self-concept”

Here I will touch on the historical development of the “self-concept” and relate it to the development of the field of Social Psychology as a whole and I will make the previous definition of

the “self-concept” more concrete so that it can be contrasted with the conceptualizations in the research papers.

Following David Sills (1968), it wasn’t until 1890 with James W. that the construct of the “self” was thoroughly investigated among psychologists in Western countries. As James put it “A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him” (James, W., *The Principles of Psychology*, 1890, p. 294). This is essentially in line with Greenwood and Gergen in the sense that “social” depends on the context of the subject involving other people in one way or another.

Following up on this conceptualization about the “self”, Charles H. Cooley (1902) took the concept of the “Social Self” by James and came up with his “Looking-glass self theory”. What he meant was that we perceive how others might perceive us by seeing the other as the “looking glass” through which we shape our identity. In this regard Cooley posited that mental processes must be a result of this “social” interaction. (Cooley, 1902). On a slightly different note, George H. Mead (1932) in “The I and the Me” took the distinction of James of the self as object and subject and developed it further, positing that the self as object can only be known through others. Thus, in line with the previous works, he meant that, the self is what gets known through interactions with other people.

A lot of research on the self has been done in the 20th century, mainly using hyphenated constructs such as “self-esteem”, “self-traits” and more (Leary, 2014). Other than being a seeming fruitful period, it seemed to have historically developed along similar lines as Social Psychology; from an interactionist, to an individualistic approach based on constructs that are defined within individual psychology.

Presentation and analysis of three research articles dealing with the “self-concept”

Below I will give a detailed analysis of the three chosen articles: which focus on “self-presentation”, “social identity” and “relational change”. I will give a summary of who the researchers are and a summary of the research paper itself. After that, I will analyse the articles and give a conclusion on how they define and assess the “social” and the subsequent implications or the results.

Self-presentation as a function of perceived closeness and trust with romantic partners friends and acquaintances (Camilla S. Øverup & Clayton C. Neighbors, 2016).

Camilla Stine Øverup is an associate professor at the university of Copenhagen and has a Ph.D. in Social Psychology and specializes in “Relationship Science”. She reviews multiple journals one of which focusing on the field of Social Psychology (Camilla Stine Øverup - Staff, z.d.). Clayton Neighbors is the director of Social, Personality and Health Psychology at the university of Houston and also has a Ph.D. in Social Psychology which has focused on Quantitative Methods. His research interests are social and motivational factors in problem behavior (Clayton Neighbors, Ph.D., 2022).

This research paper addresses the question whether “self-presentation” differs as a function of feelings of “closeness” and or “trust” towards the “self-presenting” target. In order to understand what this research is about I will first explain the key terms and concepts. “self-presentation” is the behaviour of presenting specific parts of the “self” in a specific way e.g., presenting oneself weaker than one in reality is to get help. This behaviour can then be categorized as either “assertive self-presenting”; asserting an identity or “defensive self-presenting”; defending an identity. “trust” and “closeness” are conceptualized as factors which gauge the quality of a relationship. And are defined as attitudes about the dependability of the other for “trust”. And feelings of knowledge or shared characteristics for “closeness”. These two concepts are placed within the broader context of different relationships namely, “romantic partners”, “friends” and “acquaintances”. The purpose of this research paper is to ascertain whether the degree of “self-presenting” behaviour varies with relationship type with “closeness” and “trust” being moderators of “self-presenting”.

I will present, first, how the research paper uses and assess both the concepts “social” and “self”. After that, I will project the critiques of Gergen (2008) and Greenwood (2009) on these usages and we will have a critical look at the following questions: how are the constructs conceptualized? how does the individual affect the “social” or vice versa and what are, if any, the societal implications of this research?

The paper defines the behaviour of “self-presentation” as “social” as well as the constructs of “closeness” and “trust”. The “social” aspect of “self-presentation” is by virtue of the target of the behaviour being another person. Looking at the research question: *“Does self-presentation differ as a function of reports of closeness and or trust to the self-presenting target”* (Øverup, 2016, p.3). We can discern that “self-presentation” also varies between different kinds of relationships. So, the concept of “self-presentation” goes beyond the individual. In order to examine this in a “social” manner the “social” environment has to be accounted for as well as the “social” potential of this “self-presenting” behaviour (Gergen, 2009). In this case that would be “self-presenting” behaviour affecting the target individual. In order to infer in what degree, the researchers take this into account we have to look at the second set of constructs: “closeness” and” trust” and the different relationship types.

There is indeed talk of “self-presenting” affecting the “social” environment. And there are also inferences about how the “social” environment affects the” self-presenting” behaviour in the form of different kinds of relationships. Though the measurements consist of self-report questionnaires. Second, they use Venn Diagrams to gauge levels of “closeness”. In this way there is a measurement of the relationship between the individual and their environment. But the measurement is only indirectly related to the constructs. Second, the different kinds of relationships are a big part of the research. Though there is no extra investigation in what is considered “normal” in these kinds of relationships and as such I think the researchers are missing a part of the “social” environment in their investigation.

The results of this study showed more “self-presentation” to “romantic partner” than to “friends” and more “self-presentation” to “friends” than to “acquaintances” for both styles. When people felt high “closeness” or “trust” to the persons there were no differences in degree of “self-presentation”. In the second study the results showed only one difference; persons reported more “self-presentation” to” romantic partners” than” acquaintances” in relationships high in “closeness” or “trust”. The researchers interpreted this by linking the degree of “self-presentation” to the quality

of the relationship. Stating that: *“Current research is somewhat in line with this finding, reporting that people engage more in Self-Presentation in context of more established relationships”* (Øverup, 2016, p. 14)

Indeed, when taking the definitions of what established might mean this finding would hold up. Only there is no examination in what the different kinds of relationships might mean for the individual and as such this finding could be riddled with unknown influencing variables. However, when taking into account all the different ways people define their relationship, making an inclusive measurement could be very time consuming. That said, although the relationship types are pre-determined this research lays groundwork for experimental studies in “self-presentation”. When variables are manipulated, there is better control over potential third variables. The limitations of this research then can be accounted for while all the while using the outline of “self-presentation” given in this research paper.

Looking at the overall scope of this research there are well based results showing that, in line with theory, “self-presentation” varies over static “Relationship Types”. However, considering the examination of the affecting of “self-presentation” on the “social” surrounds or the unexamined influences of group processes, norms and values on “self-presentation”, little can be said about the implications of this research for society. Second this paper does infer into the “social” world albeit in a very indirect manner. There is examination into interactions between people in the form of “Self-Presentational” behaviour.

Coping with Negative Social Identity: The Case of Mexican Immigrants (Rachel S. Shinnar, 2021)

The author is Rachel S. Shinnar from Appalachian State University who specializes in work-related issues in the Hispanic Community. In this study they use Social Identity Theory to investigate the lives of Mexican Immigrants in the United States, specifically how they cope with negative Social Identity. The study is exploratory and descriptive and uses a qualitative method, specifically semi-structured interviews.

The Social Identity Theory is used within this study. This theory has been developed by Henri

Tajfel and was used as a way to capture what an identity is in both a group context and individual context (Spears, 2005). One of the results of this theory was that the “self-concept” was seen as a more dynamic, context depended structure (Spears, 2005). Social Identity Theory has three aspects; people are motivated to maintain a positive “self-concept”; the “self-concept” derives largely from group identification and lastly people establish positive “social” identities by favourably comparing their in-group to an out-group. When this “social” identity is perceived to be negative people are said to be motivated to cope with this negative identity in a way that makes it less negative. The following coping mechanisms can be used: “individual mobility”, “social creativity” and “social competition”. “Individual mobility” being an individual chose and action to dissociate oneself from their in-group. “Social creativity” being altering one’s perception by seeking new elements for intergroup comparison, redefining existing elements for such comparisons and selecting an alternative referent group to compare to.

The goal as stated by the author specifically: “the author examined the ways in which negative “social” identity perceptions triggered different coping mechanisms”. Four hypotheses are proposed. The first being that Mexican immigrants experience negative “social” identity and the other three linked to the three coping mechanisms. The author then summarizes participants’ answers to the interviews per proposition and gives some direct quotes which get used as evidence for each proposition leading to the general conclusion that Mexican Immigrants in the United States perceive negative “social” identity and use “individual mobility” and “social creativity” to cope with the negative “social” identity.

We will now look at the pros and cons of this paper. On first sight the paper looks to be perfectly positioned between individual and “social” to capture how “social” life influences individual behaviour or coping. The usage of a qualitative method enables the researcher to capture “social” life and infer from a rich framework (C, Willig, 2013). Second, the usage of qualitative data enables the researcher to build theory from the data instead of testing pre-defined constructs/hypotheses (Hill, Thompson and Williams., 1997; C, Willig, 2013). Looking deeper into the

paper, we notice there is no mention of any individual constructs which makes it hard to study the link between the “social” and individual world. Specifically, the author created a very rich framework from which we can analyse but, as the author themselves acknowledges there is no triangulation of data for example using observations or individual measures and therefore inferences about moderation of individual factors cannot be made. Although the link between “social” and individual seems scarce there is thorough investigation on “social” experiences of the individuals with a focus on “social” interactions.

Looking, specifically at the second proposition: *“Mexican immigrants who perceive negative social identity would attempt to dissociate themselves from their ethnic group”* (Shinnar, 2008, p. 13). The author goes on offering ample evidence for the point that this coping is used in this specific way, for example: *“4 interviewees specifically explained how occupational advancement was desirable because it could serve as a way to differentiate themselves from other Mexican immigrants, whom they saw as conformistas, or accepting of their state and satisfied with what the interviewees perceived to be minimal achievements”* (Shinnar, 2008, p. 13).

In this quote it becomes clear that there is indeed a very rich framework depicting “social” life but the limitations for inferences about the relationship between the individual and the “social” world also become clear. As there is no explicit definition of ethnic group or investigation into which group the individuals want to dissociate from it is a stretch to relate “conformistas” to ethnic group and could potentially be an example of a language game. Second, causality is implied between the “social” world and the individual, which is then used as evidence for negative identity leading to this specific coping of dissociation. This is done by posing that people want to dissociate from their group as a result of fellow group members only having minimal achievements. But there is no investigation into individual level attitudes or potential confounding factors related to minimal achievements. As it stands this could also be a causal link between individual predisposition for achievement leading to a certain attitude about other Mexican Immigrants.

Looking at the third proposition: *“Mexican immigrants who perceive negative social identity*

would engage in social creativity” (Shinnar, 2008, p. 14). Including the specific behaviors of: new dimensions for intergroup comparison, changing interpretation of characteristics for favourable comparisons and searching for a new referent group for comparisons. And on the surface this proposition seems to provide a fruitful link to for investigation into the factors determining how individual level attitudes are influenced by “social” interaction or as Gergen states including the psychological world into the “social” world (Gergen, 2008). Again, for this proposition ample evidence is provided and the look into the experiences of the individuals is enriching. For example, *“She critiqued a co-worker who had not seen her child in 5 years, something this woman considered unacceptable. She felt, it’s like [the Americans] don’t give any value to the family”* (Shinnar, 2008, p. 15). But here it becomes clear that indeed the co-worker seems to find a new dimension for intergroup comparison but there is no way of knowing this dimension is new. The changing of attitudes towards family would be a perfect example of merging the individual and “social”. But there is a link missing between individual and “social”. The link being how representative the family attitudes are for both the American and Mexican people and secondly the implied causality is a far stretch as there is no temporal or variable control.

In sum, this paper gives a thorough look into the “social” life of Mexican Immigrants and illuminates a problem of high societal relevance namely the effects of negative “social” identity due to stereotyping and different kinds of discrimination. As a whole there is ample attention for the “social” environment and the potential effects of this environment on the individual (Gergen, 2008). And there is groundwork for deep analysis in the group of Mexican Immigrants with regard to how and which coping strategies are used or what is representative of the group (Greenwood, 2009). As this is an exploratory study it does the goal justice in exploring the narratives of Mexican Immigrants. That said, there is limited capacity to actually infer about the effects of the “social” interactions on the individual both in exploratory and causal sense as there is only one kind of data and no individual measures.

I Hope My Partner Can Make Me Change (Lijing Ma & Eddie M Clark 2021)

The first author is Lijing Ma, Ph.D., she currently works at the university of San Francisco and is a Postdoctoral fellow there. She has a Ph.D. in Social Psychology which has focussed on research methods and is mainly concerned with research into romantic relationships. The second author, Eddie M. Clark, Ph.D. is a professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Saint Louis and is connected to their Applied Psychology Lab. His research interest includes Close Relationships and Health Attitudes but not specifically in the domain of Social Psychology.

This paper assesses the Two-Dimensional Model of Relational Self-Change specifically investigating the relationship between expected “self-change” and actual “self-change” as well as the relationship between expected “self-changes” and future relationship “satisfaction” and “commitment”. Questionnaires are used to determine the degree to which people experience certain forms of “self-change” and how they rate their relationship “satisfaction” and “commitment” at times one and two with three months in between. Four types of changes are defined and I will add some additional analysis to these: “self-expansion”: *“adding new positive aspects to their self”* (Ma, 2021, p. 2). “Self-pruning”: *“a decrease in negative aspects of the self”* (Ma, 2021, p. 3). “Self-contraction”: *“a decrease in positive aspects of the self”* (Ma, 2021, p. 3). And “self-adulteration”: *“an increase in negative aspects of the self”* (Ma, 2021, p. 3). All these definitions imply the partner is influencing the individual and could mean a link between the individual and their environment, although the measurements should go beyond the individual processes then. Second, the definition of what exactly they mean by changes in the “self” is not explicit and does not go further than “aspects” which can range from new hobbies to walking the dog more often and could imply problems in interpreting the results because it is not sure what exactly is measured.

In this paper the theory defines the partner’s influence as “social”. Specifically, the attitude towards expected “self-change” is used essentially meaning the attitude someone has about the influence their partner might have on them. In turn the expected “self-change” is being related to

actual “self-change” and relationship “satisfaction” in the future: *“Specifically, higher levels of expected self-expansion and self-pruning will be correlated with higher relationship satisfaction at Time 2”* (Ma, 2021, p. 4). Multiple questionnaires are then used to measure the amount of expected “self-change”, actual “self-change” and “relationship commitment”.

Generally speaking, this paper is mostly investigating the effects of attitudes about the relationship on the actual relationship. These effects then are said to be in the form of these four different kinds of relationship changes. Which proposes a very interesting dynamic between the individual and the “social”. The measurement however being solely self-report questionnaires depicting attitudes: *“Positive qualities about myself have been diminished”, “I have learned many great new things”, “I feel satisfied with our relationship”* (Ma, 2021, p. 5-6), does not move beyond the world of the individual. And does not capture the full extent of the “social” environment. This is being mitigated by the use of a longitudinal design where the differences in actual relationship change are most important. As defined by the researchers: *“The goal of the current research is to understand the role of expected self-change of TDM in romantic relationships and how it impacts actual self-change and relationship outcomes”* (Ma, 2021, p. 4).

The impact as described above is said to be evidenced in changes from time one to time two where there is specific measurement on “self-changes”, correlating this with relationship “commitment” and or “satisfaction” should then tell us how expected “self-change” influences actual “self-change”. The question most important is now in what degree does this method capture the relationship between the “social” world and the individual world. Looking at the method, strictly speaking it only captures attitude changes. Looking at Greenwood (2008) the most important aspect of being “social” is the way in which attitudes are engaged and for an attitude to be “social” it should be an attitude held by a larger group. In this light we can clearly see the limitations of this method because it does not fully capture the “social” environment.

The causal dynamics as mentioned above are different from an individual acting alone as opposed to an individual acting as a member of a group or in this case a relationship. The attitudes

measured are engaged in a “social” sense in the way that it is representative of attitudes of people in relationships but, based on this argumentation everything including at least two people can be seen as “social” and would not hold up. The concept of “self-change” is defined in psychological terms which leads us to a philosophical problem of the ghost in the machine. As we cannot read someone’s mind so to say there is no way to know in psychological terms how the “social” interactions within the relationship effected the change in attitude.

This paper has a very interesting research question which from the get go seems to be positioned perfectly to capture the dynamic between the individual and their “social” environment. Mainly, the bidirectional relationship between the individuals and their attitudes about their relationship, the resulting behaviour and then again, the effects on their attitudes. Because of their longitudinal design there is definitely something to say about how the expectations affect the actual behaviour. But because of the use of only self-report measures and their definition of concepts in mostly psychological terms the investigation of the “social” environment is scarce and so to say something about causality between the individual and their “social” environment is hard for there is no way to know what exactly triggered the attitude change.

Conclusion

First, I will conclude the analysis of the research papers with a critical look at the reviews by Gergen (2008) and Greenwood (2009), after which a summary of the main findings will be given. Second, I will outline the strengths and limitations of this study and the influence of my own world view and finally give a comment on what I think future research should focus on.

Although a lot of good can be said about both Gergen and Greenwood there are some critiques that can be given as well. Below I will outline some standings of the two authors that I find somewhat misplaced and I will justify why. Gergen is a post-modernist and a constructivist which becomes very clear in his text as he refers to reality of attitudes as constantly changing from situation to situation. Gergen poses that words have only meaning in specific context and the empiricism does no more than just indexing very specific psychological states which are bound to

specific situations. One could say he goes too far in his stance and conclude that there are actually real attitudes which are being referred to in questionnaires and some evidence is shown for this. For example, the work going into validating the constructs measured by questionnaires.

In his book Greenwood (2008) makes a case for the negligence of the group in Social Psychology. He does this in a thorough way and makes a strong point. In his own words however there have been developments in re-recognizing the “social” in the field of Social Psychology which could be a sign the methods in the field are moving in a more “social” direction again.

When looking at the three papers the most essential difference I think is their way in labelling and measuring the constructs which they investigate. The first paper takes constructs which are inherently “social” in contemporary terms to ascertain causality between relationship dynamics and individual behaviour in the form of “self-presentation”. When looking deeper the causality and the degree of “social” falls apart in pre-contemporary terms. In the second paper about Hispanic Immigrants, they ascertain labels from stories from the immigrants through interviews which gives space to examine what is representative of the group. In the third paper about self-change in relationships they have already defined the labels and ask people to rate the applicability of this label to themselves e.g., the label of relationship satisfaction is already defined and being rated by the participant through a questionnaire. In essence these two papers are doing the opposite of each other. What happens is that the “social” in terms of attitudes or believes being representative of a broader group is being used as such in the first research paper but not in the second research paper because the attitudes or believes are pre-defined. Although I must say that the pre definition of labels is based on validity tests of constructs in questionnaires and should be representative of the norm group.

When looking at all three papers the main findings of this literature review is that all papers have at least a “social” set up in the form of including other people at least indirectly. When looking at the measurements only one paper used a qualitative approach which resulted in a rich framework of people’s experiences, which can be used to deduce relationships between the individual and the

“social”. The other two papers used self-report questionnaires without extra investigation in the “social” potential of the used constructs. As such the “social” in these papers is conceptualized as implying other people and assessed by inferring the influence of implied others on latent variables.

Finally, I must say this study only consists of three analysed research papers as such the representativeness of this analysis for field of Social Psychology is debatable. Second, the definition of “self-concept” varies throughout the analysed articles and as such comparing them on this subject is limited. Although the number of papers and the comparability is limited, this is at least partly compensated by the depth of the analysis. This analysis has also been affected by my world view which I think is akin to that of Gergen and Greenwood and I would call myself a relativist and interactionist. This stance has led me to favour this specific definition of “social” and steered slightly in a specific direction in searching for secondary literature. In order to get a representative view of the current state of the field of Social Psychology future research could focus on more quantitative analysis of research papers. By using the combined results of qualitative analysis into the field, qualitative analysis could give a more representative view and make use of more in-depth findings such as specific usages of methods and their implications.

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