How Social is Social Psychology, Really? Assessing Social Psychological Research on Dance.

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Abstract

The social aspect of social psychology has been the topic of debate for multiple scholars over the years. In this work, this aspect is reexamined based on secondary literature by Gergen, Greenwood, Fiedler, and Steiner. Several articles were picked, which study the link between synchronized movement or dance and belonging or cooperation. The studies are analyzed based on a definition of social psychology previously created with the secondary literature; the main points of focus are methodology and concepts. Concerning methodology, the use of self-reports and their inherent focus on individual perception is criticized. The concepts are judged by theorizing that some concepts like belonging are inherently individualistic and thus not social. Lastly, a point is raised about conducting research in a capitalistic society, whether it can truly be social and about being cautious when choosing methodology, since some experimental measures can bring capitalistic influence closer to, and thereby clouding the experimentation.

Keywords: Social Psychology, Synchrony, Belonging, Cooperation

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Introduction

Social psychology could, by some, be regarded as one of the most important fields of psychology. We cannot escape the social, it is all around us and an essential characteristic of our species as social beings. There are a few experiments that can be regarded as the first, the introduction of, social psychological experimentation. One of those could be the work of Max Ringelmann who conducted his research between 1882 and 1887 on a phenomenon later called social loafing, but whose studies weren't published until years later. Another candidate could be the study of Norman Triplett undertaken in 1898. Triplett wanted to find out whether cyclist would be faster competing against others or simply trying to beat the clock. Then, in the years 1900 to 1920 the institutional founding father of psychology, Wilhelm Wundt, wrote a ten-volume work titled "Völkerpsychologie". In it, he described a form of psychology that is social, describing emotions and behaviors that are grounded in the belonging to a certain group. His "Völkerpsychologie" was clearly distinguished from his individual, experimental psychology.

During the 20th century, social psychology has changed a lot. According to the textbook "An Introduction to Social Psychology" (Hewstone et al., 2015), today, one of the most recognized definitions of social psychology, is that of Gordan Allport of 1954 stating: "Social psychology is the attempt to understand and explain how the thoughts feelings, and behaviors of individuals are influenced by actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings" (Hewston et al., 2015, p. 5). In this definition though, we encounter a problem which is the topic of my thesis. As a reaction to Allport's individualistic trend, some voices

from the social psychological community raised concerns because they felt that it is reduced to research of individual's states of mind.

The question this thesis aims to answer is: how social is social psychology, really? I intend to do so by analyzing a type of social psychological research that has been done in recent years. Because social psychology is a large field I chose dance, or more precisely synchronized movement, as a central topic because I think it can provide some insight about a truly social phenomenon as it constitutes an ancient social practice. Thus, the studies I will examine deal with this topic.

First, I will present my secondary sources, since the question of how "social" social psychology is, has been raised before. One relevant text on this behalf has been written by Kenneth J. Gergen with the title "On the very idea of social psychology". In this text Gergen criticizes social psychological research and methodology; in his view methodology grew more important than the actual content of research, due to the high regard for laboratory experimentation, which prompted social psychological researchers to rely mostly on examining "single, self-contained subject(s)" (Gergen, 2008, p. 332). In his opinion, a lot of research might have a social context and examine behavior with social implications but fails to consider the social environment and social potential of the examined behavior. By this, he writes, we reach a certain understanding about phenomena and potential social implications, but we do not bring light to the social life and processes in and of itself. One example Gergen uses in his text is the study of aggression; he explains that if aggression can be defined differently by each person, depending on whether it is the culprit or the victim, but also depending on the personal attitudes and experiences of the researcher, there can be no objective, empirical study of this phenomenon. Gergen suggests that a coherent concept of social psychology might be reached by incorporating the mind, as in personal experience and opinions, into the definition of the science without making it the focal point.

Another relevant text for my work is "From intrapsychic to ecological theories in social psychology: Outlines of a functional theory approach" (2014) by Klaus Fiedler. The text centers around and criticizes the methodology that is currently most used in social psychological research. In Fiedler's opinion, too much of social psychological research relies on subjective feeling or the intrapsychic; too much research seeks to explain behavioral phenomena with (individual) cognitive processes rather than environmental factors. He also explains that it would allow for more powerful hypothesis and scientific growth, if the "explanatory concepts" are "sufficiently distant and detached form the phenomenon they are to explain" (Fiedler, 2014, p. 658). To illustrate this Fiedler, like Gergen, uses the example of aggression. He outlines that aggressive behavior is most often explained through (e.g.) hostile attitude or priming of aggression cues, which, while being legitimate theoretical concepts, do not add much insight beyond the aggression that is to be explained. One might feel that explanations relying on attitudes or motives simply explain the internal proceedings of the behavior. Further, he argues that intrapsychic concepts and the surrounding theories most of the time lack objectivity since they depend on "subjective feeling and rhetoric" (Fiedler, 2014, p. 659), which is very similar to Gergen's point.

Furthermore, Ivan D. Steiner's older text "Whatever Happened to The Group in Social Psychology?" published in 1974, nevertheless adds some valuable insight to this topic. Steiner describes two distinct directions in social psychology, which he calls *individualistic orientation* and *groupy approach*. The *individualistic* approach, being almost self-explanatory, assumes attitudes, motives, or personality as factors influencing how the individual reacts to the environment or how the individual changes their environment. For the *groupy* approach however, Steiner uses the metaphor of seeing the whole forest as a system and not solely focusing on one tree. The *groupy* approach assumes the individual's behavior to

"reflect the state of the larger system and the events that are occurring in it" (Steiner, 1974, p. 96).

A very important point Steiner mentions is that the increasingly individualistic research mostly heeded results concerning the individuals state of mind rather than observable behavior and the interaction of the group or system ("[…] this research often had more to say about who *thought* something was happening at a particular time than about who actually did what when." Steiner, 1974, p. 99). He continues the forest analogy by describing that the prominent individualistic orientation examines the one-way process of the tree reacting to a (constructed) forest, but not about the forest reacting to a tree or whether or not forests actually ever act in this constructed way. This argument ties in closely with Gergen's opinion about social research not examining social environment and processes. Steiner, however, also explains that the *groupy* approach always had a weak point even when it was still more widespread: theories. While there was and is an abundance of psychological theories about the processes of the individual, the same cannot be said about the group as a system. Steiner explains: "Empirical studies were often excellent, but they lacked the catalytic enzymes that would have transformed them into life-giving energy." (Steiner, 1974, p. 101)

Steiner also explains that the two strains of social psychology (*groupy* and *indidvidualistic*) were always separate, but both needed. In the 1940's, he describes, the *groupy* social psychology was very much still acclaimed, but already weak, whereas the *individualistic* approach gained more attention and eventually almost vanished the *groupy* approach in the 1960's. He partly blames the fact that empirical studies with a *groupy* approach were difficult to conduct and would take a lot of time without promising a fruitful result. In the final paragraph of the text, he theorizes the *groupy* approach will grow larger again by the late 1970's, so I am trying to give insight on whether he was correct.

Greenwood, like Steiner, presented a trend of social psychology shifting from more group-oriented research to a more individualistic and laboratory-based approaches. Greenwood's text titled "Individualism and the social in early American social psychology" was very helpful as it explains much more concretely how the social disappeared from social psychology. He mostly credits, or blames, Floyd Allport for redefining social psychology in a way which removes the social aspect; moreover, he explains that Allport believed social psychological states and social attitudes are merely common factors between individuals and explanations for social phenomena can be reached by examining the affected individuals. This is the definition or viewpoint that was adopted by most of social psychologists working in the United States.

Grouping all of the preceding theories and opinions together, we arrive at a definition of social psychology that is best suited for my research and which I will be using as a guideline for commenting on social psychological research in this thesis. A social psychological study should be measuring observable behavior and reactions rather than feelings and perception. It should concern itself with how the group operates as a system rather than how individuals feel in group settings or what they think is happening in groups. Furthermore, the concepts explored by social psychology need to be social concepts in and of themselves. This means, they need to be measurable outside of an individual's feelings.

Since the scholars I mentioned before already commented on this topic, what can my thesis contribute to the debate? Firstly, it will be interesting to see how their critique fits with certain empirical cases, since Fiedler, Gergen, and Greenwood do not criticize any specific studies. Furthermore, the studies I chose are relatively recent, which gives me the opportunity to see whether more recent studies have already changed their approach and, eventually, taken these critiques into account. This means I can comment on most recent trends and developments.

In the following section of my thesis, I will analyze three studies on several criteria which, in my opinion, have some form of meaningfulness about how the social aspect is treated in these studies and ultimately how social they are. Of course, it is to be kept in mind, that this is a very small sample and in no way meant to be representative for the whole field. It will simply give insight into what I think could be critically evaluated when conducting or reading social psychological studies. All studies center around dance, its links to group cohesion, collaboration, or belonging, and will be thoroughly analyzed. The primary sources I used were all found via PsychInfo under the search terms "dance" or "synchrony" and "social psychology", or under the search term "dance"/"synchrony" only, which was then filtered by setting the classification search filter to Social Psychology.

The Methodology

The first point that is striking is the widespread use of self-report questionnaires in social psychological research, and the question of whether or not these assessments are useful seems relevant. One might guess that the use of self-report questionnaires originated from the strand of social psychology developing under the influence of Allport's definition; precisely the kind of individualistic approach which Steiner mentioned. They examine the way in which individual's feelings are influenced by the presence of other people. However, as I already mentioned, I think this definition is inadequate, as it is lacking the aspect of the group as a system.

In their study Reddish et al. (2013) investigated the effect of synchronized movement and shared goals on cooperation. To do so, participants were instructed to move either in time or out of time with each other and cooperation was then measured through an economics game, which I will comment on in another section. In all three subsections of the experiment a post-activity questionnaire was completed by the participants. The questionnaire measured

entitativity (a feeling of groupness within a social unit (Campbell, 1958)), perceived similarity and trust with a single item 7-point Likert scale; the following questions were used in experiment 1: "How much did you feel you were on the same team with the other participants?", "How similar do you think you are to the other participants?", "How much did you trust the other participants going into the group investment exercise?" (Reddish et al., 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, they used an adapted version of the Inclusion of the Other in Self scale (Aron et al., 1992) which asks participants to rate ""how close you currently feel to all the people you just did the activities with" by indicating which of a series of increasingly inclusive circles best described their judgement" (Reddish et al., 2013, p. 3). The questions used in experiment 2 and 3 were similar in a sense that they asked about inner states of the participants; how they felt, what they felt, and to what extend they experienced certain feelings.

What knowledge does the questionnaire add to the findings? The authors explored the effects synchronized movement has on cooperation. They measured this using the economics game. What the questionnaires are supposed to add to this is not clear. Using this tool, they manage to obtain information regarding whether or not the participants perceive themselves as part of the group ("interdependent self-construal" (Reddish et al., 2013, p. 3)), which, as they theorize, promotes further cooperation. Steiner comments on this topic by saying: "Instead of observing process, scholars speculated about it" (Steiner, 1974, p. 98). It appears to me to be an unnecessary step to include individual feelings when another part of the experimentation already investigates the topic in a much more tangible way. I believe the inclusion of self-report measures *by hook or by crook*, is misplaced in social psychology, because it does not fit and does not seem necessary, since other measures are already employed that measure exactly what was intended.

Another, perhaps more extreme, example of this is a study by van Mourik Broekman et al. (2019) in which they wanted to explore the link between watching a dance performance and assessing the level of cooperation/solidarity between performers and audience members, and also amongst audience members themselves. The research is made up of four parts: Experiment 1, 2a, 2b, and 3, of which the first three were carried out during a performing arts festival, whereas the last was performed in a lab environment. In each experiment the audience participants watched different choreographies based on different conditions (organic solidarity, mechanic solidarity, no solidarity) and completed a questionnaire about solidarity with the dancers and solidarity amongst the audience.

The questionnaire contained three questions from the Need Threat Scale (Van Beest & Williams, 2006): ""During the performance I felt as one with the dancers," "During the performance I felt connected with the dancers," and "I felt like an outsider when I watched the performance."" (van Mourik Broekman et al., 2019, p. 946). The items were rephrased to fit the questions about solidarity with the audience ("During the performance I experienced a sense of togetherness in the audience" (van Mourik Broekman et al., 2019, p. 946)). In experiment 2b the researchers added a collaboration task for audience members to carry out, which was filmed, and added a measure of solidarity amongst audience members. This, to me, shows that there are ways to measure the intended concept without using questionnaires.

Both of these studies also tie into Steiner's point about investigating the single tree and not the forest as a whole system. In both studies the dominant method was asking the participants about their perception of events. Both also had other measures of the concept, namely the economics game and the collaboration task, which I think were more useful for understanding "the big picture", however I also think not enough emphasis was placed on these methods in their respective studies.

The concepts

In 2018, Kreutzmann et al. published a study with the title "Dancing is belonging! How social networks mediate the effect of a dance intervention on students' sense of belonging to their classroom." The aim of their study was to investigate the benefits of a dance intervention for classroom cohesion/ connectedness and belonging. Students were assigned to either junior or master classes, which varied in duration (1 or 2 semesters), or to the control group which did not take dance classes, but participated in other academic or non-academic activities, such as sports or project studies about environmental protection. They argue that dance is well suited to explore belonging because of three aspects: the focus on a shared goal during the intervention, the strong interdependence that is necessary for performing the choreography, and regular synchronization of body movements (Kreutzmann et al., 2018, pp. 240-241). In the introductory sections of the study, the authors mention that most research in their specific field, social belonging, has focused on self-report measures exclusively. Thus, they argue, "the interrelational changes in students' subjective construal of belonging in a classroom (…) and the degree to which they are accepted by their classmates (…) is unclear" (Kreutzmann et al., 2018, p. 240).

Fiedler mentions in his text, which was referenced in the introduction of this study, that distance between the phenomenon and the explanation leads to more powerful theorizing. In this study however, I feel like the two are not sufficiently distanced. While cooperation (like in Reddish et. al. (2013)) is something that can be measured in several ways, as evident by the economics game, the feeling of belonging is mainly linked to the individual and only indirectly linked to a social situation. It presents the same difficulty as the example of aggression that both Gergen and Fiedler pick up in their texts, which is that belonging is, essentially, a feeling, which can be defined differently by participants or researchers. This is already evident in the title of the study which indicates it is preoccupied with students' *sense*

of belonging. Furthermore, based on Steiner (1974), I argue that this study is, again, one that

examines more the individual trees and not so much a forest system. While the social network

data that was collected in this study appears to connect and systemize the group (or class), it

still essentially focuses on how individuals feel about other individuals, not how they act and

react as a system. Since this was the aim of the study, I argue that the concept was not chosen

with a *groupy* approach in mind.

The study by van Mourik Broekmann et al. (2019) shows a more social approach in

my opinion. Since they examine how a group of people (dancers moving in unison) affect

their environment (the audience), they work more with what Steiner called the system or

forest (Steiner, 1974, p. 99). Despite having criticized the execution of this research, I think

their approach was more *groupy*.

The capitalist horizon

This last argument essentially belongs within the methodology discussion; however, I

will dedicate a separate headline to it because it makes up a large part and has overarching

implications for social psychology as a whole, that do not only concern methodology.

Integral to this discussion is a text by Ryan Gunderson. In this text he picks up Aron

Gurwitsch's phenomenology of consciousness and applies it to cognitive sociology and other,

closely related fields like social psychology (Gunderson, 2021, p. 307). Gurwitsch published

"The field of consciousness" in 1957 and, in it, describes three (or four) domains of

consciousness: "(1) what is thematized, attended to, or made topical (the theme), (2) what

items are considered relevant to the theme (given the thematic field), and (3) what is

irrelevant to the theme yet co-present in consciousness (relegated to the margin)" (Gunderson,

2021). The last domain is further split into (3a) the halo, which are items/data irrelevant yet

related to the theme and part of perception, and (3b) the horizon, which is the domain of

everything irrelevant and unrelated to the theme. Gunderson establishes the term of *social*

horizon, thereby "sociologizing" (Gunderson, 2021, p. 307) Gurwitsch's model. It is explained that capitalism, of which primary goals are maximizing profit and gaining capital, is a part of this social horizon and thus influences our consciousness.

The study by Reddish et al. (2013) shows a great example of this. In the second and third section of the study (Experiment 2 and 3) they used an economics game (Stag Hunt) to measure cooperation between the participants. The economics games are constructed so that participants can choose between 2 options. In one option they will get a certain, fixed amount of money. If they choose the other option they get more money, but only if all other participants choose this option as well. In this study participants could choose between option X (7\$ guaranteed) or option Y (10\$ if all other participants also chose Y, otherwise 0\$). The intent with using this measure was to "test cooperation behaviourally" (Reddish et al., 2013, p. 2) and to create an incentive to cooperate (Reddish et al., 2013, p. 5).

I think, though, that a measure of this nature moves the influence of capitalism even closer. This is based on a section in Gunderson's text, in which he explains that items from the horizon can be brought to attention through structurally imposed themes. An example of this, which ties in perfectly with this study, is the wage labor system, which typically lives in the social horizon but effects of it (like unemployment) may shape consciousness. Gunderson mentions in his text: "Troubles with employment are "structurally imposed themes" because unemployment, precariousness, etc. are endemic to capitalism" (Gunderson, 2021, p. 316).

In this sense money might shift the focus away from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation for "being good" at the game. This make it so that I doubt we explore "pure" cooperation but rather a cooperation clouded by gain-mindset and individualistic motivation. Of course, this is nothing that researchers can control, but I do think that it would add important and interesting aspects to research if researchers became more aware of this. For example, more research could be conducted in more collectivistic cultures, or the methodology could be adjusted to, at

least, not contain any elements that move capitalist influence from horizon to the thematic field. I, however, also think that capitalistic influence is near impossible to get rid of so I would like to hear future debate about whether social psychology can ever be truly social under capitalism, an antisocial system.

Discussion

The aim of this theses was to assess whether social psychology is really social. The focus I chose was on research centered around dance or synchrony and belonging or cooperation. What I found through my analysis confirmed earlier findings like Gergen's, Fiedler's, or Steiner's. Some social psychological studies on dancing (synchronized movement) are focused on individual experiences and on how individuals perceive social situations. This reflects what Steiner wrote in 1974. The recent studies of the 21st century I have examined seem to disprove Steiner's prediction that the *groupy* approach in social psychology would rise again.

I also reflected critically on the downsides and limitations of the use of self-reports. It seems to me that researchers tend to rely too much on them, giving them a prominence that does not seem to fit well into the definition of social I have used in this thesis.

Furthermore, in my analysis Fiedler's claim was confirmed. Some studies did lack in distance between phenomenon and explanatory concepts, or the phenomenon was not very 'strong' to begin with. This was apparent in the concept of belonging, which parallels the issues that were pointed out by Gergen and Fiedler about the concept of aggression. While conducting my research about this topic I noticed how difficult it is to find helpful definitions. Defining something in (social) psychology, be it a concept, phenomenon, or the discipline itself, is complex. Things that we, as psychologists, want to define are ever changing. While this is a beautiful quality which fosters everlasting discourse, it can also lead to stalemate. This is the point Fiedler makes in his text, where he mentions that more powerful theorizing

might aid the discipline of social psychology, not only in how it is perceived, but also in its growth.

It should be mentioned here that my implications should be treated with caution, since I only analyzed a small part of the social psychological field and, at the point of writing this, I am still an undergraduate student, which means that someone with a larger pool of sources and more expertise might find different results than me. Furthermore, I constructed my definition of social in a more radical manner, following the authors of my secondary sources. This does not fully represent my own stance, which is more moderate.

In sum, it has become apparent in my analysis that the focus of my sample of studies lies more on individual experiences than on group dynamics. Whether this means that social psychology is not social is, as I pointed out, beyond the scope of this bachelor thesis and depends on how the social is defined. In the definition I used, it means that the kind of social psychology I have assessed, seems to lack, or disregard, ways in which the system or group processes can be observed and measured. Instead, most of the studies primarily relied on self-report measures, which mainly offers knowledge about individuals and their feelings and perception of events.

I do not want to discredit the importance of individual-focused research in social psychology. As Steiner stated, the two approaches need and feed into each other, Thus, I hope my analysis of current research inspires someone to "rediscover" the *groupy* approach and dare conduct research in a more social way.

In the future, the 'socialness' of social psychology could be analyzed in a broader scope, to gain a sense of other areas of social psychology and how social the research in that area is. Furthermore, more theories could be created that support or warrant more group-focused research. Lastly, research could employ methodology that is less individual focused and more observant of the group-system's actions and reactions.

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