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## ***SCIENTIFIC MATERIALS***

Genesis, development and actuality of the Social Representation theory in more than fifty years (1961-2011 and beyond): the main paradigms and the "modelling approach"



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## **The long past and the short history of social psychology**

ROBERT M. FARR

*Department of Social Psychology,  
The London School of Economics and Political Science,  
Houghton Street, Aldwych, London, WC2A 2AE, U.K.*

### *Abstract*

*In 1908 Ebbinghaus distinguished between the long past and the short history of psychology. The short history dated from 1879 when Wundt established a psychological laboratory at Leipzig. The long past concerns the time when psychology was a branch of philosophy. Implicit in such a break with the past is a positivist philosophy of science. I show how this philosophy of science distorts the historical record. I then analyse the history of social psychology. Unwittingly Lindzey and Aronson (1985) distinguish between the long past of social psychology as part of the Western intellectual tradition and its short history as an experimental science that is mainly American. Murchison's Handbook of Social Psychology (1935), whilst marking the boundary between the long past and the short history, belongs to the long past. The break with tradition came in 1954, when Lindzey published the first Handbook in the modern series. There is a self-conscious need, in the post World War II era, to train a whole new generation of social psychologists. The Lindzey series of Handbooks meets that need. The 'progress' of modern social psychology is now measured in terms of its distance from the Murchison milestone of 1935.*

### **POSITIVIST DISTORTIONS IN HISTORIES OF PSYCHOLOGY**

Many of the errors and biases in current histories of psychology and of social psychology (Farr, 1983a, 1985a, 1987) are a *direct* consequence of subscribing to a positivist philosophy of science. Danziger (1979) has worked this out in relation to the history of experimental psychology. Here I am applying his thesis to the history of social psychology.

One manifestation of the influence of positivism on historiography is an obsession with identifying the precise origins of a particular field of study (Farr, 1983b). Comte, the founder of positivism, noted three phases in the development of a discipline. The first was '... a theological stage, in which the world and man's destiny within it was explained in terms of gods and spirits, through a transitional metaphysical



stage, in which explanations were in terms of essences, first causes, and other abstractions, to the modern positivist stage' (Encyclopedia Britannica entry on Comte). For Comte this sequence of changes was evidence of 'progress'. In the light of such a philosophy of science it then becomes imperative to identify *when* a particular field of study ceases to be metaphysics and becomes science.

In histories of experimental psychology it is generally acknowledged that Wundt played a key role in accelerating the transition from metaphysics to science. Yet Wundt was an anti-positivist. As a philosopher himself, he was opposed to the positivism of Mach and of Avenarius. The younger generation of experimentalists, however, many of whom Wundt had trained, were influenced by Mach and Avenarius. This led to what Danziger (1979) described as 'the positivist repudiation of Wundt'. The split arose because Wundt believed that psychology was only, in part, a natural science; whilst the younger generation of experimentalists believed it was wholly a natural science. For Wundt his *physiologischen Psychologie* was a part of *Naturwissenschaften*; his *Völkerpsychologie*, however, was part of *Geisteswissenschaften*.

The younger generation of experimentalists thus acknowledged, but, at the same time disowned, the founder of their discipline; the founder, in his turn, was ambivalent about the nature of the science or sciences he had helped to establish. He did not consider that thinking and other higher cognitive processes could be studied experimentally in the laboratory. Thinking, for Wundt, involved speech and language and this was a form of social psychology. Külpe and Ebbinghaus disagreed with him. For them there were no limits to experimenting.

Ebbinghaus (1908), who was one of the rebels, though not one trained by Wundt, distinguished between the 'long past' of psychology as a branch of philosophy and its 'short history' as a science. Science comprises handbooks, laboratories and research journals. The short history began when Wundt established psychology as a laboratory science. History, here, is the history of science. Before that is pre-history i.e. the 'long past' of the subject. Danziger (1979) showed how the positivism of Mach and of Avenarius, which the younger generation of German experimentalists espoused, led, at another time and in another place, to the emergence of behaviourism. A positive philosophy of science, then, engenders a break with the past. The positivists were victorious and so it was they who wrote the histories. Once a field of study has become a science positivists also assume that research will be cumulative. There are important implications, here, for the writing of history. According to the positivist credo it is the duty of the neophyte historian to celebrate the achievements of the science and to chart its progress. This is often done by contrasting the history of the field (long or short, depending upon the particular science) with its 'long past' as part of metaphysics and theology.

*Founders*, I want to argue, are located at the point of transition between the long past and the short history of a field of study. *Ancestors*, however, belong to the long past. Founders, almost by definition, are transitional figures. They belong *both* to the long past *and* to the short history. They are often, themselves, ambivalent about the fields of study they have helped to establish. The followers, too, are often ambivalent about the founders. Ancestors, however, are normally more remote in time than founders. They are, then, less likely than founders to be embarrassing, since they are usually dead before they are claimed as ancestors.

There are, however, some hazards involved in choosing ancestors. An inappro-

appropriate choice of ancestor could prove embarrassing. Allport (1954), for example, nominated Comte as the 'founding father' of social psychology. Whilst Comte certainly *founded* positivism, he could only be an *ancestor* in regard to social psychology. In terms of the usage I am seeking to establish here Comte would be an ancestor rather than a founder of social psychology. Allport, by his particular choice of ancestor, set his seal of approval on positivistic trends within the social psychology of his own day. Samelson (1974) accused Allport of writing a Whiggish account of the development of social psychology. He claimed that Allport had created a false origin myth for the discipline. He showed how Allport had depended too heavily on a secondary (English language) source for his information about Comte.

## THE 'LONG PAST' AND THE 'SHORT HISTORY' OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

I wish to demonstrate how Lindzey (1954) and Lindzey and Aronson (1968/69; 1985), in the series of *Handbooks* they have edited distinguish, in effect, between the 'long past' of social psychology as part of the Western, mainly European, tradition of thought and its 'short history' since it became an experimental science, mainly in America. The point of inflection between the 'long past' and the 'short history' of the discipline is the Murchison *Handbook* of 1935. Whilst the latter was an entirely American product it reflected, both in its layout and content the topics of Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie*.

### The 1954 Handbook

#### *The editor's preface*

Lindzey observed in his preface that 'Murchison's *Handbook of Social Psychology* ... is out of date and out of print' (p. ix). After explaining how he had set about the task of devising a handbook '... that would represent the major areas of social psychology at a level of difficulty appropriate for graduate students' (p. ix) Lindzey then explained his rationale for its layout in two volumes. Volume I comprised theoretical positions and methods of research; Volume II focused on the substantive findings and applications of social psychology. Volume I was '... a necessary preparation for good investigation' whilst Volume II reflected '... the empirical fruits stemming from the theories and methods summarised in the first volume' (p. x). Lindzey conceded, however, that this ordering of the material did not reflect current realities. '... the precedence we give to theoretical positions reflects our conviction of the importance of theories as spurs to research, but may also represent a programme for the future rather than a reflection of the past' (p. x).

After reviewing, from the vantage point of the editor's desk, some of the weaknesses of the two-volume work Lindzey, with good reason, could claim that '... the volumes ... provide the most comprehensive picture of social psychology that exists in one place to-day' (p. x). In essence, then, the position, as of 1954, is this: Murchison is 'out of date' as well as being out of print, i.e. it is old-fashioned; here is a summary of the present and a blueprint for the future. The provision of a blueprint for the



future entails a break with the past. The 1954 *Handbook* is the beginning of the modern era in social psychology.

*Allport's chapter on the historical background to modern social psychology*

This was the opening chapter of the *Handbook*. It was an account of the 'long past' of the discipline. It was an *introduction* to modern social psychology. It was not, itself, modern social psychology. The rest of the *Handbook* presumably is modern social psychology. Allport's chapter has the status, within the *Handbook*, of the book of Genesis in the Bible and perhaps contains as many myths. Allport was well-qualified, as a scholarly and revered figure, to lead the reader through the wilderness of past metaphysics to within sight of 'the promised land' — the modern era in social psychology. He lacked, however, the necessary experimental credentials to lead the tribes in settling the promised land. He was a positivist of an older generation — who looked to Comte rather than to Mach and Avenarius. It was the experimentalists in psychology who looked to Mach and Avenarius.

In this chapter Allport nominated Comte as the 'founding father' of social psychology. The influence of Comte is not confined to the section in which Allport discusses him as an historic figure. The chapter opens with a rhetorical question concerning the wisdom of studying the past. 'Why bother with the "metaphysical stage" of speculation, as Comte called it, when a new era of positivism and progress has dawned?' (Allport, 1954, p. 3). In his discussion of objective methods of research, Allport concluded: 'Since most of these signal strides in method are of recent date, they do not form a part of our historical story. The fact is that empiricism and positivism did not enter social psychology to any appreciable extent until the decade of the 1920s. The ideals of objectivity and precision then rapidly assumed a dominant position' (Allport, 1954, p. 48).

Allport also quoted, with evident approval, *both* at the beginning *and* at the end of his chapter the work of Hornell Hart (1949) who '... has plotted convincingly the recent upswing in the productions of social science, and argues that the recent acceleration marks the delayed entrance of social science into the era of positivism' (Allport, 1954, p. 4).

Allport himself, explains this upsurge in research '... in terms of Comte's theory of three stages (1830, Vol. I, Ch.1). Comte would say that only recently have the social sciences left the constraints of the first two stages, the *theological* and *metaphysical* respectively, and entered fully into the third stage of *positivism*. While Comte himself endeavoured to inaugurate the third stage, it is clear that the fruit of his effort was delayed for nearly a century until the positivistic tools of experiment, statistics, survey methods, and like instruments were most adequately developed' (Allport, 1954, p. 4).

Clearly Allport's indebtedness to Comte could not be removed merely by excising the section specifically dealing with Comte's 'discovery' of social psychology. It is also clear that Allport conceived of social psychology as a social science, rather than as a purely experimental science.

Allport covered, fairly extensively, Western traditions of thought with major sections on the search for what he called 'simple and sovereign theories' (pp. 9–29) and an outline of various attempts to analyse 'The group mind (pp. 31–40). The

history, here, is very much the history of ideas. He distinguished between the roots of social psychology and its flower. 'While the roots of social psychology lie in the intellectual soil of the whole Western tradition its present flowering is recognised to be characteristically an American phenomenon' (Allport, 1954, pp. 3-4). The distinction, here, is between a European past and an American present.

## The 1968/69 Handbook

### *The editors' preface*

The second edition of the *Handbook* (Lindzey and Aronson, 1968/69) appeared, in five volumes, between 1968 and 1969. Aronson, a noted experimental social psychologist, who had contributed significantly to the development of cognitive dissonance theory, joined Lindzey as co-editor. Aronson, since becoming editor, has also contributed an excellent chapter on experimentation in social psychology to each edition of the *Handbook*.

In their preface the editors note '... this *Handbook* is very different from its predecessor. It is substantially larger ...' (Lindzey and Aronson, 1968/69, p. vii). They then discuss the turnover in both authors and chapters from the previous *Handbook*. Clearly it is a story of significant progress. There are two and a half million words instead of one million; five volumes instead of two; and 45 chapters instead of 30. Here, indeed, is tangible evidence of *positive* progress based on the blueprint outlined in the previous *Handbook*.

### *Allport, mark 2*

Over 95 per cent of the text is *identical* to the 1954 chapter. Eighty-nine per cent of the references in the 1954 version re-appear in the 1968 version. Only 9 per cent of the references in the 1968 version are new. One could hardly claim, as the editors do in general terms, that this is a *thorough* revision. The editors may have thought there was no need for Allport to revise his account of the past. Perhaps they believed there is a difference between history and science and that only the latter needs to be revised and updated. Here the history is not the history of the science.

The textual amendments are fairly minimal. A new heading is occasionally inserted but without any change of text. Usually the more up-to-date references are tacked on to paragraphs taken from the previous edition. Very occasionally new paragraphs are added. There is one such significant addition at the end of the section on 'The beginnings of objective method': 'To-day the outstanding mark of social psychology as a discipline is its sophistication in method and in experimental design. It has come a long way from the days of "simple and sovereign" speculation .... Comte would say that now, at long last, social psychology has entered the "positive stage" with a vengeance' (Allport, 1968, pp. 67, 68).

Allport here invoked, once again (i.e. in 1968, rather than in 1954), a positivist philosophy of science. His own chapter is an account of the search in the past for simple and sovereign remedies. Here, in mark 2 of his paper, he is noting the progress that has occurred since he wrote the original paper. He thus endorses the views of the editors as discussed above.

The section on 'Textbooks' was very much abridged as it was clearly out of date.



In his 1954 analysis of textbooks Allport was able to estimate that '... two-thirds of the texts are written by psychologists and one-third by sociologists' (Allport, 1954, p. 50). Rather remarkably this same ratio is cited again in 1968, though somewhat more tentatively. '*Perhaps* two-thirds of the texts are written by authors who consider themselves to be psychologists, about one-third by sociologists' (Allport, 1968, p. 69, emphasis added). The data presented by Jones (1985, p. 48), however, show that, by the time the second edition of the *Handbook* was published (i.e. 1968), the ratio of psychologists to sociologists publishing textbooks of social psychology was 10:1. This is quite a long way from the probable ratio of 2:1 cited by Allport!

Reprinting an article, virtually unchanged, some 14 years later is bound to lead to some anachronisms, e.g. a team of five *contemporary* authors who provide a *modern* example of 'The group mind' completed their work some 18 years previously; the tide of collaboration between psychologists and social anthropologists, which was described in 1954 as still rising and as not yet reaching its crest is so described again in 1968 and, *yet again*, in 1985. Surely, by now, we should be flooded with such studies!

## The 1985 Handbook

### *The editors' preface*

The editors, Lindzey and Aronson (1985), have written a lengthy preface to the third edition in which they explain why they are reverting to a two-volume work after the five volumes of the previous edition. They create as much distance as possible between the series of *Handbooks* (1954, 1968/69, 1985) edited by themselves and the Murchison (1935) *Handbook of Social Psychology* which had been published half a century earlier. After quoting *in extenso* from Murchison's introduction they continue: 'A mere decade later this paragraph already seemed to many observers archaic and poorly informed. Even more remarkable is the fact that more than one-third (of) the chapters in the 1935 *Handbook* dealt with the social psychology of bacteria, plants, and lower animals. Moreover, four chapters dealt with the social history of the negro, the red man, the white man, and the yellow man — labels that if used today would create a wave of revulsion. These chapters and others not mentioned, strike no note of resonance with contemporary social psychology' (Lindzey and Aronson, 1985, p. iii).

They then indulge in their own piece of Whiggish history by singling out a few chapters from the Murchison *Handbook* that seemed, to them, to anticipate future trends. There are echoes, here, of a distinction between 'the long past' of the discipline, reflected in the contents of the Murchison *Handbook*, and its short history since it became an experimental science. They are also able to operate with the benefits of hindsight. They single out for special mention Dashiell who wrote the only chapter in the Murchison *Handbook* concerned with the analysis of experimental data on humans gathered under laboratory conditions. They also mention Allport's classic chapters on attitudes.

### *Allport, mark 3*

The footnote to Allport's chapter indicates that 'This chapter has been lightly abridged by Gardner Lindzey but otherwise is unchanged from the version published

in the Second Edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology*' (Allport, 1985, p. 1). It is now 'The historical background of social psychology'. It is no longer 'The historical background of *modern* social psychology' (emphasis added). It is clearly part of the 'long past' rather than of the 'short history' of social psychology. Its appearance for the third time and in the same form as before strongly suggests that the editors believed there was no need to revise the account of the 'long past' they already possessed. Revision is inappropriate since the past is now long past. It is part of the pre-history of social psychology. It is metaphysics rather than science. Only the latter needs to be revised. Science is cumulative and progressive and so is in constant need of up-dating.

The most significant of the four omissions is the offending section on 'Comte's discovery of social psychology' (1968, pp. 6–10). So much for the 'light abridgment' by the senior editor! Social psychology is now an orphan discipline. Its 'founding father' has been laid to rest. An embarrassing ancestor is no longer mentioned. The positivistic framework of the whole account, however, is left unchanged. It is very much like Hamlet without the Prince in its present version!

The anachronisms are, by now, even more noticeable than before. The 'modern example' of research on The group mind is 35 years old. The concept of 'personality in culture' still continues to be as productive as it had been in 1954; the 'recent literature' referred to in the section on attitudes is now 20 years old; the ratio of psychologists to sociologists writing textbooks of social psychology is still 2:1 as it had been in 1954 and then again in 1968! etc.

### *Jones mark 1*

The 'short history' of social psychology appears now for the first time. This is the chapter by Jones on 'Major developments in social psychology during the past five decades' (Jones, 1985). The 'past five decades' from 1985 takes us back to 1935, the year in which Murchison published his *Handbook*. This provides me with my point of inflection in the transition from 'the long past' to 'the short history' of social psychology. It is only in retrospect that the Murchison *Handbook* is seen to belong to a different era.

We now have a history of *modern* social psychology (written by Jones) together with an historical background to social psychology in general (Allport, mark 3). There was no need for Jones to be concerned with either the origins of the discipline or its long past since both were covered by Allport in the neighbouring chapter. 'Chapter 1 by G. W. Allport sets the stage for the following review of the past five decades of social psychology. We need not recapitulate, then, ...' (Jones, 1985 p. 47).

Jones was thus free to celebrate the achievements of the new science and to chart its progress. The separation between past and present is now complete. This neat separation is the culmination of a process that started with the editing of the 1954 *Handbook*. It is now clear, in retrospect, that Lindzey and Aronson see the Murchison *Handbook* of 1935 as the watershed between the long past of social psychology as part of the Western tradition of intellectual thought and its short history (since 1935) as an experimental, and a predominantly American, science. I shall now show that this editorial vision of the historical development of social psychology is shared by Jones (1985).



Jones treats social psychology as a subdiscipline of psychology. He thus fails to appreciate the significance of sociological forms of social psychology. Whilst he discusses various attempts (at Harvard, Michigan, Columbia, and Yale) to break down barriers between social disciplines (pp. 48,49) he fails to include Chicago as one of his models. Yet Chicago did produce its own distinctive forms of social psychology (e.g. Mead's social behaviourism; the symbolic interactionism of Blumer; Thomas' study of social attitudes; Ichheiser's sociology of inter-personal relations; Goffman's dramaturgical model of social interaction etc.). The history of social psychology should include sociological as well as psychological traditions of research (Farr, 1978, 1983 b,c, 1985b). None of the sociological forms of social psychology, however, is experimental in the strict sense in which this term is used in psychology.

Jones is quite explicit in his attitude toward the Murchison *Handbook*. He describes it as comprising, essentially, a series of essays in comparative psychology. The implicit contrast, here, is between essays and experiments. In his own contribution to a Whig interpretation of the history of social psychology Jones singles out Dashiell's chapter as reflecting the antiquity of experimental research in social psychology: 'If Murchison's *Handbook* can be cited to affirm the antiquity of experimental research in the one area of social facilitation effects, it may also be cited as a clear indication of the status of social psychology as a non-experimental discipline in the mid-1930s' (Jones, 1985, p. 63). There is no doubt that for Jones, as well as for Lindzey and Aronson, the Murchison *Handbook* marks the end of an era: 'Murchison's *Handbook of Social Psychology* marked the end of the pre-experimental era in social psychology' (Jones, 1985, p. 63).

Now we have the 'long past' of social psychology (Allport, 1985) and its 'short history' (Jones, 1985) conveniently available as adjacent chapters in the most recent edition of the *Handbook*. This represents the working out, with respect to the history of social psychology, of the positivist philosophy of science that Danziger (1979) first identified at work in regard to the history of experimental psychology.

## TWO RIVAL FORMS OF POSITIVISM

The positivism that informs the chapter by Allport is that of Comte. This is the positivism of psychology as a social science. The positivism that informs the chapter by Jones, however, is that of Mach and of Avenarius. This is the positivism of social psychology as an experimental science. These are two quite distinct forms of positivism. The positivism of Comte is much older than that of Mach and of Avenarius. It was the positivism of the latter that led to what Danziger (1979) described as the repudiation of Wundt. In many ways they are rival versions of the same broad philosophy of science. The proponents of the two views are not necessarily in agreement with each other, e.g. Allport had some reservations about the virtues of a purely experimental social psychology: 'Noteworthy scientific gains result from this "hard-nosed" approach. There is however, one serious disadvantage: neat and elegant experiments often lack generalizing power ... some current investigations seem to end up in elegantly polished triviality — snippets of empiricism, but nothing more' (Allport, 1968, p. 68).

Jones is much less likely than Allport to have reservations about the value of experimentation in social psychology. For Jones experiments are a hallmark of sci-



ence. In commenting on the rapid expansion of social psychology in American universities in the period following World War II he refers to: '... an additional impetus stemming from a new perception of social psychology as constructively linked to the experimental method and therefore entitled to a place in the psychological mainstream' (Jones, 1985, p. 54).

We now have rival forms of the same philosophy of science, i.e. positivism, underpinning the claims of social psychology to be (a) a social science and (b) an experimental science. Allport makes out the former case by nominating Comte as 'the founder' of the discipline; Jones makes out the latter case by treating social psychology as a subdiscipline of psychology and by focusing on major developments during the past half century.

First of all psychology became an experimental science. This was over a century ago. Then, half a century later, social psychology became one, at least in America. Two separate waves of positivism have thus helped to shape the structure of the Lindzey and Aronson series of *Handbooks*. The 1954 volume established as plausible the claim of social psychology to be considered as a social science. The contrast then was with the multi-disciplinary nature of the Murchison *Handbook*. The 1954 edition also held out the promise of social psychology becoming a science of a different kind — it was a blueprint for the future. This promise was fulfilled in large measure by the second and third editions with the co-option, as editor, of Aronson — a noted experimentalist — and the inclusion of chapters on experimentation in social psychology. The process is now complete in the third edition with two chapters of an historical nature — one covering the long past of the discipline and the other its short history. The problem with this is that the history is, now, the history of science and what went before is treated as a form of pre-history. History in the wider sense is now the long past.

### POSTSCRIPT

'The history of social psychology, as a critical examination of the past leading to a better understanding of the present, still remains to be written' (Samelson, 1974, p. 229). This is still true. The 1985 edition of the *Handbook* is of little help in meeting this need. The rejection of over-simplistic distinctions between the 'long past' and the 'short history' of the discipline may be a good point of departure. It should be possible to write a history of social psychology that is both international and interdisciplinary. It would be neither an history of ideas (such as Allport wrote) nor an ethnocentric account of the achievements of experimental social psychologists in America (such as Jones wrote). There is nothing wrong, in my opinion, with making distinctions between the past and the present of a discipline so long as the distinction is not too rigidly tied to a particular philosophy of science. 'Internal' historians are more likely than 'external' historians to subscribe to such a philosophy because they are also practitioners of the science.

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