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### Social Psychology And Social Justice: Dilemmas, Dynamics, And Destinies

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## Social Psychology and Social Justice: Dilemmas, Dynamics, and Destinies

Kenneth J. Gergen

The Oxford Handbook of Social Psychology and Social Justice

*Edited by Phillip L. Hammack Jr.*

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### Abstract and Keywords

The emergence of this handbook on social justice represents a groundbreaking event in the history of social psychology. In this summary discussion, I outline significant limits to social justice work embedded in the empiricist tradition of inquiry and point to ways in which the current work transcends these limits. However, I also view the present endeavors as in a fledgling state. In the service of enriching and rendering these pursuits more effective, I discuss five domains in which tensions currently prevail and suggest directions for future undertakings. Challenges are discussed in terms of epistemological schisms, presumed ontologies, value pluralism, explanatory paradigms, and the limits of representationalism. A final invitation is made to shift from a mirroring orientation to research to world-making.

Keywords: epistemology, ethics, pluralism, representationalism, social construction, social psychology, pragmatics

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The arrival of the *Oxford Handbook of Social Psychology and Social Justice* into the world of social psychology represents a mammoth shift in the conception of the science and its potential offerings to society. My attempt in what follows is both to reflect on this important venture and to deliberate on its emergent potentials. At the outset, it is important to understand the historical context from which the present volume has emerged and why the important topic of social justice has had such scant attention. For the past 50 years social psychology has been dominated by a singular philosophy of knowledge. It is a philosophy of the early 20th century, long abandoned by much of the intellectual world, but nevertheless sustaining its grip on the field. This philosophy, typically indexed as logical empiricism (or post-positivism), places a premium on establishing evidence-based principles of human functioning. These principles, it is reasoned, should enable science to predict patterns of human behavior, and thus to provide the grounds for effective practices and policy-making. The emphasis on prediction and control is typically tied to a mechanistic or causal explanatory orientation, and thus to experimentation as the preferred mode of investigation. This view of knowledge continues to provide the marching orders for most social psychological research.

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Yet while attractive in its optimism, this orientation to knowledge has failed to provide useful predictions about human activity outside the laboratory. This is not at all to fault the motives or values of the research community. As noted by Hammack (2018), the field has generally been associated with political liberalism. Rather, three of its philosophical legacies almost ensure its irrelevance to pressing issues of the times. The first of these legacies is furnished by the logical empiricist emphasis on establishing general laws or principles. Most research aims at testing a general hypothesis about human behavior. Using a problematic statistical logic, researchers strive to establish the universal validity of the propositions under test. Yet even for the most (p. 442) “validated” principle, there is no means of deriving predictions relevant to a particular case. This is not a problem of insufficiently elaborated theory—that is, theory encompassing a greater number of variables, situations, or populations. Rather, it is a linguistic problem. General propositions do not contain within themselves a definitional structure that enables one to specify the particulars to which they apply. A theory of prejudice, for example, does not in itself specify what counts as prejudice. Nor do attempts at closer specification clarify the matter. Thus, to say that prejudice is “preconceived judgment” (as only one such definition) does not in itself tell us what activities or actions count as such. Are we speaking here of one’s choice of newspapers, ice cream, or marriage partners? And if it is to someone of “another race,” does it mean when they are eating breakfast, helping their neighbors, or gazing at the sunset? Any such applications to specific situations will always depend on negotiated agreements among interlocutors, and there are no principled limits over the outcome of such negotiations. The discourse of prejudice, for example, is free floating within our public conversations and may with skill be applied (or not) to virtually any behavior.

The second impeding legacy is closely related to the first. If the aim of social psychology is to generate empirically grounded theories of human behavior, a primary emphasis is placed on research methods, and particularly to rigorous methods, with tight controls over possible biases and with measures that are both reliable and valid. Further, because the aim of such theories is to predict human behavior, experimentation is viewed as the methodology *sine qua non*. No other methodology, it is reasoned, can demonstrate cause and effect sequences, which is to say, the capability of predicting from a specified cause (independent variable) to a specified effect (dependent variable). Over the decades, the results of this commitment have virtually changed the face of mainstream social psychology. Because the field has grown in numbers, and there is increasing competition for journal space, methodological rigor has become a major winnowing device. Demanded are increasingly large samples, greater controls, more fully validated measures, multiple replications, and greater statistical sophistication. Increasingly, the practice of research has become a matter of technical expertise, with researchers functioning as mechanics linking method to subject matter to grind out fortifications for abstract propositions.

This increasing demand for rigorous methods—“methodolatry” as critics put it—virtually disables any attempt to speak cogently to issues of social justice. At the outset, the demand for controlled experimentation typically requires that research takes place in the confines of a laboratory. The artificiality of the conditions means that one can never study naturally occurring cases of injustice; conclusions of laboratory research can speak to

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such issues only by analogy. The samples available to most laboratory researchers, housed as they are in predominantly white, upper middle class institutions, make any generalizations additionally tenuous. Further, issues of social justice are fraught with moral consequence, which place such issues beyond the reach of the ethical requirements for laboratory research. For example, oppressing, angering, or commanding laboratory subjects would be proscribed. And of major significance, the naturally occurring phenomena that capture the interest of social justice researchers are typically of high complexity. As the contributors to the present volume attest, matters of history, politics, economy, and institutional structure—among others—may all play a part in matters of social justice. Reducing this complexity to experimental studies, where not more than three variables may interact at any given time, renders it impossible to draw conclusions of any particular utility to communities or nations confronted with challenges of social injustice.

There is a third legacy that leads to the general incapacity of traditional social psychology to make more than a tangential contribution to social issues. It is essentially the aim of the field to illuminate individual mental process. The problems here are two-fold. If the propositions that social psychologists hope to establish are about the nature of mental functioning (e.g., cognition, emotion, motivation), then issues of broad social significance will be marginalized. Whether matters of injustice, environmental degradation, or health care, for example, all are simply domains to which the results of such formulations may be applied. They are not the focus of research in itself. One may properly study the cognitive basis of racism, for example, but the study of ongoing racist policies will escape attention. As often argued, the study of the basic process can provide the grounds for widespread application. However, as we have just seen, there is no means of deducing from the abstract formulation the particulars essential for effective action. Further, such focused inquiry will not generally be pursued because it is “applied research.” In the (p. 443) positivist tradition, application is inferior to the “pure research” focus on general laws.

The problem with the concerted focus on psychological process is coupled with a second, namely the assumption of the individual as the fundamental unit of society. To the extent that we conceptualize the social world in terms of atomistic units, and it is the functioning of the units that is focal, then relations among the units are both marginalized and problematized. They are marginalized because the relations are secondary to the concern with the units themselves. They are problematized because it is impossible to conceptualize a *social process in itself*—that is, as anything more than the interaction between otherwise separate entities. One may conceptualize A acting in his or her best interests upon B, and B’s responding in his or her best interests by acting upon A, (essentially the view of behavior exchange theorists). But there is no quintessentially social process, with its structure, functions, patterns, and so on. Many social psychologists have long lamented the loss of “the social” in social psychology.<sup>1</sup>

It is in this light that the contents of the present *Handbook* stand in bold and exciting contrast to tradition. The first and most important step is that the contributors take as their starting point the very societal issues they wish to treat. The concern with social justice is

not derivative of some more general theory or of off-stage mental processes. Issues of social justice are not “applications,” but are worthy of exploration in themselves. This starting point also enables the authors to make reference to psychological process without such processes overshadowing the subject matter of importance. At the same time, in the process of inquiry the palette of possible contingencies opens wide. For example, contained within these chapters are concerns with history, economics, political dynamics, class conflicts, power dynamics, colonization, and globalization. One would be hard pressed to locate discussions of such issues in any major journal in social psychology. Further, the contributors to this handbook have largely abandoned the romance with “truth through method” in general and the experimental method in particular. Issues of rigor take second place to their major investment in social change. This is not to say that evidence does not play an important role in these chapters. However, for most of these authors evidence is typically woven into a rich tapestry of deliberation—on theory, history, contemporary social conditions, and more. As I see it, a social psychology of social justice is not an attempt to establish the final word, drowning out all voices by the misleading “weight of the evidence,” but an attempt to enter cogently and passionately into the dialogues of the times.

I, for one, am enormously excited by the potentials of this emerging venture in social psychology. It furnishes an escape from the cave of irrelevance in which the field has largely resided. I admire the work of these chapters as robust attempts to chart a new course. It is in the interest of enriching and strengthening this effort to which the remainder of this chapter is devoted. Specifically, I wish to pose a range of difficult questions about the pitfalls and potentials of the present trajectory. Significant tensions wend their way through these pages, some crippling in their potential. Still other questions will be of the kind leveled against the movement by more traditional social psychologists. Finally, there are horizons of possibility contained within these chapters that demand more concerted attention. I do not intend to answer all questions, resolve all tensions, or chart the course for future work. My major aim is to press the dialogue forward in useful ways. In what follows I will consider, then, five significant challenges toward enriching the potentials of a social psychology of social justice.

## Epistemology: Beyond the Crossroads

Why should we place our trust in any particular account of the world, whether it be an account of atoms or oppression? The answer to such a question typically makes reference to epistemological assumptions, or assumptions about how we know. Across the social sciences there are three major contenders for epistemic authority. Two have deep roots in Western culture; the third is a more recent and cosmopolitan addition. Each of these orientations has important implications for our forms of inquiry, the relationship between the scientist and those under study, the place of values in research, and the confidence placed in one’s reality posits. Debate among these positions has been heated, often forming lines of demarcation among scientific enclaves. How are psychologists engaged in social justice research to orient themselves in this respect? In my reading of the preceding

chapters of this handbook, we find allegiances to all three. As one might conclude, just beneath the surface of this seeming unity in concerns are major differences in the concept of knowledge and its acquisition. Let us explore.

At the outset, we have the traditional *empiricist epistemology* that has dominated social psychology for almost a century. From an epistemological (p. 444) standpoint, one assumes a fundamental dichotomy between the observer and the world to be observed. By employing tools of controlled observation and systematic logic, one may ultimately establish descriptions and explanations that provide an accurate picture or map of the world as it is. While not necessarily embracing the full array of epistemic assumptions, many of the chapters in the present volume rely on empirical data, including standardized measures and statistical analysis, to support their various arguments and proposals. And while many authors do not openly embrace the tenets of empiricist epistemology, their accounts of the world are unapologetically realist. At the same time, other chapters display a *hermeneutic/interpretivist* orientation to epistemology. The assumption that knowledge of human action is grounded in observation is challenged on the grounds that action can only be understood in terms of the actor's subjective condition (intention, meaning, experience). Thus, whatever is said about an actor's behavior must be grounded in an interpretive or hermeneutic process. Contributions to this volume by Frost (2018) and Cross (2018) are illustrative. The differences between these two longstanding orientations is significant, not simply in terms of assumptions, but also in matters of methodology and ethical responsibility.

Yet there is a third epistemology orientation at play throughout the volume, one that may properly be viewed as *social constructionist*. Here it is proposed that all accounts of the world are born within communities of interlocutors. One's participation in the community will furnish the assumptions that guide one's inquiry as well as the discursive conventions for description and explanation. Thus, there is no grounding of one's knowledge claims outside the particular conventions of one's community of practice. This orientation has been especially useful to social justice scholars, as it provides an important basis for the critical stance espoused in Hammack's (2018) opening essay, along with chapters by Langdrige (2018) and Fine (2018). In each of these cases attention is drawn to the ideological investments of otherwise neutral, and empirically supported, accounts of the world.

Since its beginnings in the late 19th century, struggles over epistemology have had a divisive effect on the field. Especially contentious has been the battle between positivists, as represented by early experimentalists, and interpretivists, as initially fueled by Dilthey's (1894) emphasis on *Verstehen* (roughly, the empathic understanding of the subject's experience). With the 20th century emergence of logical positivism, the interpretive orientation was delegitimized as an orientation to research, but with sustained allegiance in humanistic and therapeutic circles. Even today, the fault line remains in the separation between members of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Association for Psychological Science (APS). With the post-foundational and postmodern turns in the late 20th century, foundational philosophy of science became widespread. And it is within this

context that a social view of science, indexed as social constructionism (constructivism), became a compelling alternative to logical positivism.<sup>2</sup> In my view, a constructionist orientation enables one to escape the internecine conflict between empiricists and interpretivists. If we can understand these orientations as emerging within particular communities, for particular purposes and with particular values, we abandon the fight over fundamentals in favor of an epistemic pluralism. That is, we may ask about what may be accomplished (or not), and in what circumstances, by adopting these orientations. In many conditions, an empiricist realism may carry significant political weight. Without systematic observation and empirical data, neither the Asch (1956) nor the Milgram (1963) classics would carry any social or political significance. In other conditions, the voices of suffering may be more commanding. The power of various witnessing projects rests on just such narratives. Those who draw from a constructionist perspective might, in turn, be drawn to the history, economics, or politics serving to legitimize a discourse of exclusion. Concerns with the origins of “race” as a social category are illustrative. And by implication, invited into the arena of study may be other epistemological positions—feminist standpoint, phenomenological, and practice-based among them.

### Ontology: Social Justice in Question

Ontological questions follow closely on the heels of epistemological battles. Perhaps the most central issue in this case is the ontological status of social justice itself. How can we legitimate the concept of social justice; how can we identify when and where there is injustice? Each of the three epistemologies just discussed offers an answer to such questions, and these answers are radically different in implication. For the traditional empiricist, justice and injustice are simply facts of social life—out there in the world, open to observation, subject to progressively better understanding through systematic (p. 445) research. From the standpoint of a hermeneutic or interpretive perspective, we arrive at a far different place. Justice and injustice are not there in the world of observation, but they are constituted within the individual’s subjectivity. Thus we shift our concerns from social justice in itself to the experiences or subjectivities of those involved. The shift is a significant one, as theorists point out that systemic injustice can go unseen, while nonetheless having deleterious effects on the experiences and lives of its victims.

For scholars with a constructionist sensibility, social justice is not a fact in the world but a way of constructing or appropriating a given configuration. As Opatow (2018) discusses, even social justice scholars themselves do not agree on conceptions of injustice. More unsettling, and speaking metaphorically, if we use the lens *injustice*, we will potentially find it in our every action. Without such a lens, there is no injustice. It also follows that we suffer from injustice when we construct the world in such a way that we are its victims. What may be experienced as “unfair treatment” by one could be constituted as a “tough life” for another. This proposal has never been a happy one for those committed to social justice. It appears to deconstruct the very grounds for resistance and social change. Although it is difficult to escape the constructionist logic, it can be viewed as morally reprehensible in its consequences. However, this critique is short-sighted. First, to point out

the culturally and historically situated condition of our constructions of justice and injustice does not rob them of consequence. On the contrary, there is no true or grounded account of reality against which they can be compared. There is no authority that can declare—without question—that “all is well.” For this, too, is a constructed world, and without the means of declaring a counter-narrative untrue or invalid. In effect, to recognize the constructed character of our accounts of the world is to open a space for multiple voices.

There is more: to declare that injustice is an unalloyed fact is also an invitation to conflict. Such declarations suggest that there is someone or some group that is acting unjustly. It is to make claim to a moral high ground, from which the unjust may be held accountable—possibly shamed and punished. It is to invite resistance, antagonism, and retaliation against an “evil other.” Those designated as unjust in this scenario are simultaneously thrust into a position of defensiveness—alienated, defensive, and possibly galvanized in their resistance. In contrast to the consequences of this realist orientation, to understand that one’s sense of injustice is *one way* of constructing a given condition—fully justified within a given enclave or tradition—is also to realize the possibility of other perspectives that may contain their own inherent justifications. Hutardo’s (2018) discussion of Borderlands theory is illuminating in this context. Rather than creating a relationship of us versus them, it is to open the possibility of dialogue. It is to invite curiosity, mutual understanding, and possible collaboration in building a more mutually viable world.

## Ethical Value: The Potentials of Pluralism

The present volume stands in stark contrast to virtually all other handbooks in social psychology in the primacy of passion exhibited by so many of the authors. Traditional handbooks are virtually lifeless in their accounts of the world, with value commitments either secreted into the subtext or absent altogether. In the present volume, a passionate commitment to social justice is pervasive across the span of chapters. Such an orientation poses a major challenge to the field of social psychology. As earlier proposed, the traditional assumptions undergirding the field have rendered most of its research irrelevant to most of the major issues confronting society. Yet while inviting social and political engagement, such passionate engagement comes at a cost. On the one side is the question of whether such research is *too* political. For example, in the chapters of this volume we find scholars unabashedly confronting racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, colonization, liberalism, neo-liberalism, individualism, and more. Clearly such accounts are “ideologically loaded.” As such, they risk losing the rhetorical power of “speaking objectively.” To put it another way, for the uncommitted reader they are propaganda masking as science. This is not a small problem. For example, members of the US Congress already question the liberal biases in most social research, distrusting their conclusions, and debating the legitimacy of their applications for governmental funding.

At the same time, as we have come to realize (Hammack, 2018), all research is value saturated in its inception and its potential consequences. For example, even the most neu-



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tral study of the brain basis of mathematical reasoning leaps from the safety of “is” to bear torches of “ought” into society. Among other things such research implicitly champions the value of predicting and controlling human behavior, potentially enhances the power of those in a position to control, sustains an individualist ideology, and eliminates “free will” as a discursive tool in the pursuit of moral responsibility. (p. 446) Enlightenment regarding the values inherent in research of any kind—both in the social and natural sciences—should not only be central in the agenda of a social psychology of social justice, but of a liberal education more generally.

Given that all theory and research is value saturated, the invitation for the scholar is to choose those projects that best express their passions. Yet such a posture also yields a new dilemma: reader response bias. That is, the ideological biases of the reader will determine whether the inquiry is compelling or not. If the message is liberal, even the most rigorously performed research, accompanied by the most sophisticated statistics, will seem propagandistic to the committed conservative. Is this to say that social justice inquiry, as represented by most of the chapters in this volume, will only speak cogently to those already committed to their agenda? Herein lies a challenging question for the future: our forms of scientific writing not only communicate ideas and information; they also form relations with our readers (Gergen, 2012). As proposed earlier, there is a strong sense in which social justice writing can demonize those who, by implication, are responsible for the injustice. In effect, the very form of exposition may function to distance itself from those whose cooperation is most needed in the pursuit of social change.

In effect, we here confront the dilemma of competing values. Social justice research is more transparent than most in its value commitments. But let us recognize that while such researchers generally support equality, democracy, socialized economy, human freedom, and the like, there are also traditions that support equity over equality, a firmly ordered society, free market competition, and a society united in its religious commitment. Further, even when committed to the values of social justice, one is simultaneously invested in other values that—in terms of daily life—are often in conflict. Even social justice researchers must decide how much of their time they will allocate to such work as opposed to the well-being of families, friends, the environment, their personal health, and so on.

Perhaps the most important question here, however, is how to approach those enclaves whose values run counter to social justice investments. It’s not that such groups—such as neo-liberals—are against justice so much as that the values and policies they espouse contribute so directly to what we take to be injustice. Indeed, neo-liberals and other targets of critique may argue that their primary interests are in human well-being—even if their conception of well-being and the means for its achievement are injurious in other ways. As ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre (1988) cogently asks, “whose justice, which rationalities” should prevail? In certain respects we reach a condition similar to the preceding discussion of ontology. A realist orientation to ontology is similar to a foundationalist view of values. Firm declarations of what is or is not just are equivalent to commitments to a given moral or ethical position: both will serve to divide and alienate. Both will favor conditions for what may ultimately become mutual annihilation. There is good reason, then, for

a social psychology of social justice to embrace a value pluralism. This is not an “anything goes” orientation that might suggest that all values are equal. Rather, it is to recognize that one’s value preferences issue from a given tradition at a particular point in history and are situated within a particular circumstance. That they have no other foundations than their social lodgment does not delegitimize them. Rather, it is this very lodgment from which they gain their credibility. However, a value pluralism does invite greater modesty in terms of one’s claims and simultaneously lays the grounds for more dialogically based means of dealing with inevitable conflicts.

## Explanatory Fulcrum: Paradigms and Pragmatics

As noted earlier, the present volume is unique in social psychology in its expansive sensitivities to conditions, processes and events outside the dominant focus on mental process. Thus, we find frequent recourse in these pages to discussions of economics, history, politics, social structure, and more. This is indeed a formidable mixture and substantially enriches the range of discussions in which social psychologists should properly be involved. However, there are also significant challenges in expanding the arena of understanding in this way. Perhaps the central problem in this case has to do with the explanatory fulcrum of understanding. Given what we take to be acts of injustice, how are they to be explained? The central problem has long been endemic to social psychology, as the field has variously shifted between situation (“bottom up” environmentalist) and person centered (“top down” hereditary) explanations. Cultural explanations are typically incorporated into one or both of these orientations, with brain-based explanations falling into the person-centered camp. This problem in competing explanatory bases is inflated in the present volume. To be sure, some contributors to this volume (p. 447) do rely on psychological explanations (for example, Durheim & Dixon, 2018; Cohrs & O’Dwyer, 2018). At the same time, other social justice psychologists focus on micro-social explanations, including relational practices of exclusion (Walker & Smith, 2018) and dialogue (Maoz, 2018). Still others place far more stress on macro-social processes and structures, including history (Langhout & Fernandez, 2018), social structure (Stewart & Zucker, 2018), the legal system (Tileagă, 2018), social class (Bullock & Reppond, 2018), colonization (Hutardo, 2018), and globalization (Bhatia, 2018). Interestingly, while traditional social psychology has abandoned voluntarist explanations—with their anti-scientific echoes of free will—significant remnants of voluntarism remain within the social justice arena. In this volume, Liu and Pratto (2018) are clear in their commitment to a conception of individual agency. One may also say that agency lies implicit in all accounts of injustice, as all are implicitly intended to incite action. The goal is social change. Such provocations necessarily rest on the assumption that individuals are free to abandon their conventions and do otherwise.

How then is the researcher to select among these explanatory orientations? None can be rendered superior in terms of evidence, as the explanatory orientations themselves determine what counts as evidence. Most important, we also confront the dilemma that once

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we select an explanatory discourse, it will in principle eliminate all contending forms of explanation. An explanatory discourse essentially establishes an ontology, and once that ontology is embraced within an enclave of researchers, its competitors tend to be (1) rendered irrelevant and removed from view, (2) deemed problematic and delegitimized, or (3) offered as candidates for reductionism. In the first instance, for example, to view psychological process as central to human action potentially removes sociological explanations from interest. “Social structure is not our concern; that’s what sociologists study.” To illustrate the case of destroying existence, for micro-social theorists, psychological process is not a fact in the world. One theorizes the use of psychological discourse in social relations, but to treat such discourse as referential—indexing actual mental states—would be misleading objectification. And in the third case, once committed to a given ontology of explanation, other ontologies are subject to reductionism. This is indeed a major challenge within contemporary psychology as psychological processes are increasingly shown to be “nothing but” neurological activity. This is the challenge of eliminative materialism (Ramsey, 2016). Similarly, for many psychologists, there is no social structure, in fact; what we call social structure is the result of mental construal, a cognitive or interpretive construction.

To recognize that a choice in the form of explanation can eliminate or reduce all competing ontologies also speaks to a related problem in the social psychology of social justice: relating the individual to macro-social entities or processes. There is frequent and laudable concern within the pages of this handbook with the relationship of the individual to social institutions, economic systems, the culture, and so on. Often a causal relationship is posited, with the institutions, economic structures, or societal processes affecting the behavior of the individual. Yet as I am suggesting, these attempts at inclusion are deeply problematic. We have available multiple vocabularies for explaining injustice, but the vocabularies are self-contained and totalizing. Consider, for example, an attempt to show how socio-economic status (SES) influences the individual’s prejudices. The attempt seems reasonable enough: we should be able to demonstrate a causal connection between SES and individual behavior. Such a demonstration depends, however, on establishing the independence of the two units. Yet if we were to remove from the table everyone occupying the class structure, there would be no individuals upon which the structure could have an effect. Likewise, to remove all the individuals, there would be nothing left over to call a class structure. In effect, we have a single “observational world,” as we may call it, and two descriptive vocabularies. We come to mistake the vocabularies for actual entities, and unwittingly proceed to study their causal relations. The same may be said for all attempts to posit causal relations between macro units (economic, governmental, cultural, and so on) and the individual’s mental states or behavior. It is this very problem of non-independence that enables one to reduce the former to the latter.

How, then, are we to proceed in the further development of a social psychology of social justice? In understanding the world in terms of mental process, we will eliminate the rich repository of scholarship on which dialogues about social justice are given life. The field becomes isolated. If we eliminate psychological explanation, then a specifically “social psychology of social justice” escapes intelligibility. In my view the answer to this issue lies

in the appreciative recognition of multiple, non-competing frameworks or perspectives. With each (p. 448) framework—whether psychological, interpersonal, inter-group, or macro social—we come to understand the world in different ways. And with each illumination, new paths of action are suggested. Again we encounter the challenge of pluralism. We may ask in each case about the pragmatic value or outcomes of various alternatives, and remain flexible within a context of shifting circumstance. I am proposing, then, that we replace the search for Truth with a *reflective pragmatism* (Gergen, 2015). We cease to ask whether any account, description, or analysis of what is the case is “true in all worlds.” Rather, we inquire into what difference such accounts make to our lives, to our practices, to the culture in which we live, and to the world more generally should we accept and sustain them. Such an inquiry is clearly value laden, as we must be prepared to inquire into who gains and losses as a result of a particular account; whose voices are silenced; and who is advantaged and in what ways.

## The Challenges of Representationalism

Fields of endeavor such as the present handbook do not arrive *de novo* on the intellectual scene. As many of the contributors to this work point out, there is inspiration to be drawn from early pioneers in social psychology. At the same time one must be circumspect about this legacy, as it also contains elements that may be inimical to the goal of social justice. Indeed, critical psychologists in the present volume are keen to point out a range of divisive and oppressive assumptions and practices that characterize much of social psychology’s history. It is in this light that attention should be drawn to the forms of inquiry currently playing a central role in social justice work. My chief concern in this case is the pervasive reliance on a *representationalist* tradition regarding the relationship of word and world. In spite of the critical, interpretivist, and constructionist ideas that pervade the social justice literature, research is primarily employed as a means of representing the world—of illuminating, demonstrating, providing evidence for, showing, indicating, and so on. In effect, the aim of research is to provide a configuration of words that picture, map, or otherwise mirror the world as it is. It is in this context that attention must be drawn to a range of issues critical to the future of social justice psychology:

### Rights to Representation

For scholars and scientists, the representationalist tradition has largely functioned as a means of securing voice—that is, enabling the researcher to claim authority over the “mere opinions” or “subjective” views of the masses. In the special case of social justice research, this tradition places the researcher in the precarious position of “speaking for others”—the oppressed, marginalized, dispossessed, and so on. As the history of feminist inquiry has demonstrated, such authority claims are not only subject to the critique of those who are represented but may also be viewed as yet another form of silencing. White feminist scholars were thus placed under attack from Black feminists (“What right do you have to speak for us?”); nor were Black feminists permitted to speak for women victims of colonialist subjugation. It is the question confronted on many college campuses as to

whether “straight” scholars should be hired to teach in queer studies programs. It is also the rationale behind the cry of those whom the scholarly professions label as “disabled”: “Nothing about us without us.” When extended to its logical extreme, such a logic would suggest that no one should have the right to represent anyone except oneself. It is just such thinking that underlies much autoethnography (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). Such a conclusion would indeed be unfortunate. However, exploration is needed into means of abandoning the rhetoric of authority in scientific representations and/or including multiple voices in research undertakings.

### Representations for Whom?

Reliance on a rhetoric of authority also determines in large degree the audience for scientific representations. Under current conditions this audience is primarily constituted by scholars and researchers. As a critic might surmise, academic research on social justice is largely written for a limited network of like-minded academics. Worse still, it is published in journals that are largely unavailable to the world at large. Indeed, like the chapters of this handbook, the present offering is subject to such criticism. It is not simply that this rhetorical tradition is “elitist,” but it cannot be absorbed by the very populations for whom it is designed to serve. In this light, movements to make all research available on open-source providers are to be welcomed. However, if work on social justice is to reach its full potential, means must be found for communicating to a multi-cultural, public audience. It is here that social justice researchers would be advantaged by developing closer relationships with arts-based researchers.<sup>3</sup> Film, theater, photography, painting, and multi-media are all in active play, and all have been used as means of bringing attention to issues (p. 449) of social injustice. Arts-based media might well be added to the curricula for politically engaged social psychologists.

### Truth in Representation

Perhaps the most widely shared critique of the representationalist tradition draws from linguistic philosophy, literary theory, and social constructionist dialogues.<sup>4</sup> The critical point in question is the relationship between the world and words (or any other form of representation). Whatever exists makes no demands on how it is described. Thus, while words may seem to function as mirrors of the world, they do so only by virtue of communities of agreement. Regardless of what is observed, to say that “the cat is on the mat,” is no more or less true than describing the same observation by saying “God is in his heaven.” The validity of the former wholly rests on whether we agree in how the terms are used in the given circumstance. In effect, this line of argument undermines the validity of any account of the world, save for those who agree to the way in which the language is employed. Regardless of its rigor, research cannot provide culture-free and value-free findings. As a result, claims to Truth may thus be viewed as duplicitous and oppressive; they treat one’s position as true regardless of anyone’s opinion or values—in short, as a God’s eye pronouncement. The implications of this line of argument have had a marked effect in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and other corners of the social sciences. They have yet to be digested in psychology. Future researchers would benefit

greatly from exploring the various ways in which these companionate disciplines have been able to “speak their truths” while simultaneously subverting their authority.

### Means of Representation

The continuing debates on the assets and liabilities of various research methods often center on the justification of authority claims. For example, are one’s methods sufficiently rigorous and unbiased, is the evidence valid and reliable, is the sample size sufficient to warrant generalization, and so on. As we have seen from the preceding discussion, such criteria are themselves subject to question. They are essentially byproducts of one, among many, ways of viewing knowledge. However, one significant criterion—typically overlooked but central to issues of social justice—is the ideological and political weight carried by research methods themselves. Methodological practices are not ideologically neutral. They are forms of life, carrying assumptions about what is good, important, proper, or desirable in cultural life. In the case of experimental methods, for example, one adds credibility to an individualist and mechanistic world view, in which the social world is presumed to be made up of isolated, robotic entities. In eschewing the presumption of voluntary action, the very grounds for political action are thrown into question. Narrative research, in contrast, typically lends credibility—and often honor—to individual experience. At the same time, however, the researcher again suggests a world in which we are fundamentally separated, each residing in a private interior. It is here that social justice researchers might wish to employ research methods that add weight to their ideological or political visions for the future. For example, in this context many researchers turn to collaborative research practices, with the explicit aim of replacing the hierarchical relationship between scientist and subject with communal participation.<sup>5</sup>

## Horizons of Research: From Mirror to World-Making

One of the major reasons for the success of the natural sciences lies in their capacity to bring about changes in our worlds of practice. Such sciences have cured disease, harnessed energies, controlled pestilences, and taken humans to the moon. Although the discourse that such sciences have employed in their pursuits may be found in the libraries of the world, these discursive configurations were neither the aim of the sciences nor the reason for their significance. Or, one might say, the discourse was simply their local means of communicating about what they were doing and why, while the true knowledge was constituted within the process from which actionable outcomes emerged. In my view, a social psychology of social justice is enormously important for the field because it begins to reverse the emphasis from discourse to actionable outcomes. Researchers begin with concrete and complex issues in society with the goal of social transformation. As so many of the chapters in this volume suggest, by means of transforming our understanding, liberating us from the taken-for-granted, demonstrating daily injustices, giving voice

to the marginalized, and actively transforming community life, the directions are promising indeed.

At the same time, as I have pointed out, research is still largely representational, with publication in journals and books serving as the ultimate outcome. In my view, if the field is to become truly (p. 450) consequential, a shift will be required from research that metaphorically mirrors the world to inquiry that actively achieves social change (Gergen, 2015). I fear that the deliberations of isolated academic enclaves do little to change the world. To be sure, the kind of critical work represented in this volume can arouse resistance to the status quo among interested readers. Yet remaining, however, is the question of mobilizing for action. More directly consequential are active interventions into cultural life. The most obvious form of such inquiry at present is represented in participatory action research (Bradbury, 2015). Illustrative is Bhatia's work with the Friends of Shelter Associates to facilitate sanitation among impoverished Indian communities, Fine and Torre's (2006) attempts to help women in prison gain their rights, and Hammack's (2011) work with Israeli and Palestinian youth to reach mutual understanding. Here the end-point of inquiry is not "words on a page" but social change itself. At the same time, future-forming inquiry should also include the development of social practices contributing to a just society. For example, in this volume, Nagda, Gurin, and Rodríguez (2018) outline practices for social justice dialogue in educational systems. Inspiration may also be drawn from the practice of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), along with practices developed by the Public Conversations Project (Herzig & Chasin, 2005), which are both used effectively around the globe for replacing hostility with constructive dialogue. Finally, social justice psychologists can play an active role in the courts. Herek's (2018) contribution to this handbook is illustrative. In all cases, scholars move into the world as active agents of change. Herein lies a central challenge for the future of social justice psychology.

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### Notes:

- (1) For an extended account of the social dimension in social psychology's history, see Gergen (2012).
- (2) For more complete accounts of social constructionist epistemology see Gergen (1994, 2015a).
- (3) See, for example, Barone & Eisner (2012).
- (4) For further discussion see Gergen (1994).
- (5) See, for example, Lykes (1989).

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