

Doing Social Psychology: Laboratory and Field Exercises

Theory in Applied Social Psychology

Past Mistakes and Future Hopes

Darryl B. Hill

COLLEGE OF STATEN ISLAND, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT. Across the last four decades, applied social psychology has sought to apply theories to 'real world' social problems, hoping for some insight into intractable social issues. This paper reviews applied social psychology discourse on the application of theory in the resolution of social problems, with a focus on the 'post-crisis' literature. This analysis suggests that much of applied social psychology lacks serious theoretical analysis and has yet to use the kind of theory needed to understand social problems. While exceptions to these trends are noted and discussed, current mainstream applied social psychology, as exemplified by a survey of recent texts, seems highly individualistic, rarely focused on important social issues, and generally atheoretical. Two themes, which run counter to these trends—the emergence of critical psychology and renewed attention to the limits of generalizability, along with the importance of knowing contexts—may set the agenda for further theoretical efforts in applied social psychology.

KEY WORDS: application, applied social psychology, history, theory

Worrying about the lack of theory in 1960s social psychology, Gordon Allport (1968) strikes a note of optimism with this hope: 'Interest in broad theory may again have its day. If so, investigators who are familiar with the history of social psychology will be able to strike out with firm assurance' (p. 69). These were admirable sentiments about social psychology in general, but what is it that history tells us about the relationship between 'broad' theory and *applied* social psychology? This analysis of discourse on theory in applied social psychology over the last four decades suggests that there have been persistent proponents of the view that theories are needed for a sophisticated understanding of social problems, yet there has been a consistent avoidance of theory. A history of the ways theory has been used in applied social psychology, in fact, sensitizes us to the kinds of theories needed for such a task and to the pitfalls and the potentials involved in the application of these social theories. While the majority of applied social

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