

## THE SOCIETY OF EXPERIMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY:

### AN HISTORICAL NOTE<sup>1</sup>

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Contextual and practical reasons for the formation of an interest group among social psychologists are discussed. Preliminary sessions were held to determine goals, membership, meetings, growth, and title of the organization. Accounts of the September 1965 and subsequent meetings are given.

Psychologists, as much or more than scientists in other disciplines, have been experiencing in recent decades the mixed blessings of rapid growth. The convention programs of our large scientific societies, such as the American Psychological Association, have reached intimidating dimensions. Even the subunits of the societies tend to be so large as to make personal contact and communication unwieldy. For example, Division 8 of APA, which houses most of the psychologists interested in social and personality research, currently has about 4,000 members. The size of such entities at the very least complicates the attainment of certain vital goals of scientific societies, a situation which gave rise to the founding of the Society of Experimental Social Psychology.

Discussions some years ago with my Buffalo colleague, W. Edgar Vinacke, and then with many other social psychologists, suggested that it would be useful if the larger associations could be supplemented by an "interest group" among social psychologists. In December, 1964, Vinacke and I wrote 35 social psychologists, soliciting their views regarding the formation of a society that would include a relatively small number of social psychologists whose interests were primarily research-oriented. The common focus and smaller size of such a group would allow more flexible organization and would permit the group to engage in more intimate and informal dialogue than is possible at the conventions of the larger associations. In this way, social psychologists could conduct pro-

ductive scientific interchanges in addition to those at the larger professional meetings.

Two-thirds of those to whom our letter was addressed responded within a few weeks. Their comments were preponderantly positive regarding the advisability of continued explorations toward the formation of such a group, and a number of the respondents expressed a readiness to help in this effort. In February we sent a summary of the comments received to the initial recipients and to those additional people whose names had been suggested. We then invited all of those who had indicated a willingness to help in such an undertaking to attend a meeting in Chicago on May 1, 1965, at the time of the Midwestern Psychological Association convention. A group of seven social psychologists attended and constituted itself an ad hoc steering committee to proceed with the formation of a society. They were William McGuire, Albert Pepitone, Marvin Shaw, Ezra Stotland, Fred Strodtbeck, W. Edgar Vinacke, and myself.

At that meeting, our agenda was essentially set by the suggestions embodied in the responses we had received. Our discussions ranged over a number of matters—the goals to be attained by the organization, the nature of its membership, the character of meetings, their time and place, and problems associated with size and growth. The title of the organization also occupied our attention. Some respondents had felt that the term "experimental" might be too narrowly construed as favoring a methodology. The intent, however, was to signify the broad sense of a commitment to hypothesis testing. The important point, as the committee saw it, was to attract social psychologists from both

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psychology and sociology who were actively engaged in research and in making contributions to theory building. We agreed, too, that size should be limited lest this new group experience the difficulties of largeness that it had been formed to avoid. A beginning with about 50 members, and slow growth thereafter to perhaps 100, in a few years, was considered to be a rough guideline.

We believed that the Society's *raison d'être* was essentially to provide an enriched opportunity for social psychologists to mingle, share ideas, and communicate their findings. In achieving those goals, it was felt that several kinds of procedures could be instituted in the annual meetings of the organization which would further a dialogue on the research and conceptual interests of the members. Such activities would include holding round-table discussions on common areas of research interest; arranging critical evaluations of current lines of work; seeking out novel ideas, methods, and intriguing findings that might facilitate new research departures; disseminating information on the design of laboratories and apparatus; providing a forum for discussion of professional concerns that are common to social psychologists; exchanging information rapidly through some such mechanism as a reprint circulation list; organizing visits to various social psychology laboratories; and furthering social psychology in its international aspects.

An inauguration meeting was planned for September 2, 1965, just after the American Sociological Association Convention and just before the American Psychological Association Convention, both of which were scheduled for Chicago at that time. Thanks to Fred Strodbeck's invitation, we were able to meet at the University of Chicago's Social Psychology Laboratory. Thirty people from all parts of the country plus several foreign visitors attended this first meeting. Morning round-table discussions included reports by Fred Fiedler on his recent leadership research and by Freed Bales on some innovations in interaction recording under naturalistic conditions. Henri Tajfel gave an account of the then recent organization of the European Association for the Advancement of Experimental Social Psychology. There followed lunch, and

a business meeting under the writer's chairmanship at which a number of the points emerging from the ad hoc committee meeting were discussed further. The major substantive decisions were to proceed with the organization of the Society, to maintain an "open" membership policy whereby members could nominate others, and to retain the ad hoc steering committee with additional members "co-opted" to provide continuity and flexibility of development. It was also agreed that we would hold the next Society meeting in New York on September 1, 1966, in conjunction with the American Psychological Association Convention. Our meeting place was set for New York University, with the generous assistance of Murray Horwitz, who also joined the committee as the 1966 program chairman.

In a March 1966 committee meeting in New York plans were made for the next annual meeting and some additional attention was given to the creation of organizational forms with a minimum of trappings. Recommendations were carried forward to the annual meeting that: an Executive Committee of nine members, three elected each year, be the governing body of the Society; this committee choose its own chairman on an annual basis rather than have a president; and it be functional in encompassing such subcommittee tasks as membership and programming. Funds were requested and gratefully received from APA's Division 8 to help finance the September 1, 1966, meeting.

Forty-three people attended the 1966 meeting at New York University. A morning round-table discussion of cross-cultural research was led by Fred Fiedler, Albert Pepitone, Brewster Smith, Fred Strodbeck, and Harry Triandis. This led into a discussion of governmental interests in supporting social psychological work, with Carl Backman, Ralph Exline, O. J. Harvey, Luigi Petrullo, and Henry Riecken taking an active part. At a lunchtime business meeting, organizational procedures were discussed, with particular regard to mechanisms for election to membership. It was agreed that this issue should be considered in connection with the framing of the bylaws. In the afternoon a panel discussion was held on the topic of "Ethics and Social Reality: Problems of

Methodology in Social Psychology," with Robert Chin, Irving Janis, Ezra Stotland, and Edgar Vinacke as Chairman. Many of the issues raised continued to be topics for lively conversation through the cocktail hour.

The 1967 meeting was set for August 31, the day prior to the Washington, D. C., APA Convention. The designated site was the social psychology laboratory at the Naval Medical Research Institute in Bethesda where Irwin Altman had extended their hospitality and agreed to serve as program chairman.

Progress was made on organizational questions between the 1966 New York meeting and the 1967 meeting at Bethesda. A brief set of bylaws was drafted and circulated among the members for comment. A meeting of the ad hoc steering committee at Harvard in April 1967 reviewed and revised this draft, and the revision was circulated among the members prior to the Bethesda meeting. These bylaws were presented for adoption and with only minor modifications were unanimously passed by the members assembled at the August 31 Bethesda meeting during the business session. Because some concern was expressed again regarding the inclusion of the term "experimental" in the name of the Society, an advisory vote of the membership was taken by a mail ballot subsequent to the Bethesda meeting. The result indicated that the present name of the Society was the first-choice preference of the majority. Also subsequent to the Bethesda meeting, an election was held to fill three places on the executive

committee. Of the six nominees on the mail ballot, the highest number of votes was received by Leonard Berkowitz, Morton Deutsch, and William McGuire, who accordingly will begin 3-year terms in 1968. They will join the continuing members including R. F. Bales, M. E. Shaw, M. B. Smith, E. Stotland, W. E. Vinacke, and myself.

The August 31, 1967, meeting at Bethesda was attended by 53 people. The morning session was devoted to reports on current social psychological research. Included in this program were presentations of studies by Richard de Charms on the origin-pawn variable in person perception, Rosalind Feierabend on systemic conditions of political aggression, Jane Allyn Hardyck on interpersonal attraction, Edwin Hollander on legitimacy of leadership and influence, Herbert Kelman on moral versus hedonic dissonance, Marvin Shaw on cultural differences in sanctioning behavior, Ezra Stotland on birth order and empathy, and Richard Willis on role playing versus deception in experimentation.

Afternoon discussion sections were held on five topics including research in underdeveloped countries, research on organizations, achievement motivation, strategies in games, and problems of laboratory experimentation in social psychology. The Society's fourth annual meeting was scheduled for the end of August, 1968, in the San Francisco Bay area, in conjunction with the APA convention. At the present time, there are some 70 dues-paying members of the SESP.