GOAL-DIRECTED ACTION

MARIO VON CRANACH
URS KALBERMATTEN
KATRIN INDERMÜHLE
BEAT GUGLER

*Psychologisches Institut, Universität Bern,
Bern, Switzerland*

Translated from the German by
Mary Turton

1982

(AP)

12435

European Monographs in Social Psychology

Series Editor: HENRI TAJFEL

E. A. CARSWELL and R. ROMMETVEIT
Social Contexts of Messages, 1971

J. ISRAEL and H. TAJFEL
The Context of Social Psychology: A Critical Assessment, 1972

J. R. EISER and W. STROEBE
Categorization and Social Judgement, 1972

M. VON CRANACH and I. VINE
Social Communication and Movement, 1973

CLAUDINE HERZLICH
Health and Illness: A Social Psychological Analysis, 1973

J. M. NUTTIN, JR (and Annie Beckers)
The Illusion of Attitude Change: Towards a Response Contagion Theory of
    Persuasion, 1975

H. GILES and P. F. POWESLAND
Speech Style and Social Evaluation, 1975

J. CHADWICK-JONES
Social Exchange Theory: Its Structure and Influence in Social Psychology,
    1976

M. BILLIG
Social Psychology and Intergroup Relations, 1976

S. MOSCOVICI
Social Influence and Social Change, 1976

R. SANDELL
Linguistic Style and Persuasion, 1977

H. GILES
Language, Ethnicity and Intergroup Relations, 1977

A. HEENWOLD
Decoding Oral Language, 1978

H. TAJFEL
Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of
Intergroup Relations, 1978

M. BILLIG
Fascists: A Social Psychological View of the National Front, 1978

C. P. WILSON
Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function, 1979

J. P. FORGAS
Social Episodes: The Study of Interaction Routines, 1979

R. A. HINDE
Towards Understanding Relationships, 1979

A-N. PERRET-CLERMONT
Social Interaction and Cognitive Development in Children, 1980

B. A. GEBER and S. P. NEWMAN
Soweto's Children: The Development of Attitudes, 1980

S. H. NG
The Social Psychology of Power, 1980

P. SCHÖNBACH, P. GOLLWITZER, G. STIEPEL and U. WAGNER
Education and Intergroup Attitudes, 1981

C. ANTAKI
The Psychology of Ordinary Explanations of Social Behaviour, 1981

W. P. ROBINSON
Communication in Development, 1981

H. BRANDSTÄTTER, J. H. DAVIS and G. STOCKER-KREICHGAUER
Group Decision Making, 1982

J. P. FORGAS
Social Cognition: Perspectives on Everyday Understanding, 1981

H. T. HIMMELWEIT, P. HUMPHREYS, M. JAEGER and M. KATZ
How Voters Decide: A Longitudinal Study of Political Attitudes extending
over Fifteen Years, 1982

P. STRINGER
Confronting Social Issues: Applications of Social Psychology, Vol. 1, 1982

P. STRINGER
Confronting Social Issues: Applications of Social Psychology, Vol. 2, 1982

M. VON CRANACH with URS KALBERMATTEN, KATRIN INDERMÜHLE and
BEAT GUGLER
Goal-directed Action, 1982

G. MUGNY
The Power of Minorities, 1982

In Preparation
J. JASPERS, F. FINCHAM and M. HEWSTONE
Attribution Theory and Research: Conceptual, Developmental and Social
Dimensions

To Konrad Lorenz, who taught me to look
for connections

Mario von Cranach

Preface to the 1980 edition

This book is the outcome of a long, varied and strenuous, but on the whole, happy collaboration between many researchers and students. In it I am presenting the results of almost seven years' work, of which we are still only at the very beginning. Our aim was to integrate and test empirically the main ideas of various psychological and sociological theories of action. Apart from one paper given at a congress (von Cranach, 1975), none of this work has so far been published; because the whole project was the object of strong criticism and difficult problems of method were still unresolved, we wanted to delay publication until we could verify empirically the usefulness of our assumptions. We have now reached that position but even so some of our results are in the nature more of informed guesses than proven facts. Meanwhile the situation generally seems to be changing. Formerly, assumptions about the psychology of actions were strongly contested if, indeed, they were known at all; now there are signs on all sides that they are beginning to be accepted. When I began writing this book, some time ago, my principal objective was to introduce the non-specialist reader to the ideas of action psychology and so the book was to start by taking nothing for granted and lead gradually to theory; essential, fundamental assumptions were to be spelt out and over-technical details in the presentation of empirical work to be omitted; examples and demonstrations seemed more important than strict empirical proof. It is for the reader to decide whether this goal, assuming it has been achieved, was justified.

The expression "we" in the last paragraph should not, in fairness, be restricted to the authors alone (Urs Kalbermatten, Katrin Indermühle, Beat Gugler and myself). Our research stemmed from some undergraduate work (Müller and Kühne, 1974) and is based, in part, on the constantly renewed efforts of many students who prepared their final theses in the framework of a work group. They seldom

needed the whip but it was often hard to hold their divergent thoughts and energies together. A research project supported by the Swiss Nationalfonds formed the nucleus of the group whose collaborators maintained stability and, by contributing ideas and effort, kept the work going, often at the expense of their own studies; we really worked as a team and so the collaborators in the research project who helped bear the brunt of the work published here, appear as co-authors, but I wrote the book alone helped by their critical comments. So some of the bolder formulae must be ascribed to me alone; my co-authors support the ideas expressed here but not necessarily every sentence. In addition to my co-authors, Heidi Müller helped me in the early stages of our project and Vinzenz Brunner more recently; they contributed a great deal to our results.

In additon to the students and collaborators already mentioned, I would like to thank my wife and Vinzenz Brunner for their critical reading of the manuscript and the secretaries at our Institute, Charlotte Apostolou, Christine Mauderli and Christine Walter for the often laborious work of typing. My warmest thanks are due to the institutions that promoted our work. The Swiss Nationalfonds deserves a special mention for its repeated, sustained and generous support which made the tentative plan possible. Thanks are due too, to Berne University whose infrastructure and research facilities we were able to use and to the Berne Education Authority for helping the book onwards by granting me a sabbatical term; and finally to the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Clemens Heller) and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Serge Moscovici), Paris, for their hospitality in the winter of 1978/79 which helped me with the actual writing.

Berne, April 1980   Mario von Cranach

Preface to the 1982 edition

We hope this translation of our first publication on the topic of goal-directed action will serve as an introduction for readers from an Anglo-American tradition to a subject area in which considerable theoretical and empirical progress is being made.

Berne, June 1982   Mario von Cranach

Publisher's Note

It is with great regret that we announce the death of Henri Tajfel. Our association with him has been a long, stimulating and fruitful one. This series on European Social Psychology was very much his creation. Henri was concerned to demonstrate that, while no subject in science is "European" in a parochial sense, work done in Europe had a quality, a character, and, when the series started, a corrective dimension to bring to the subject.

Look now at Henri's foreword to the first volume (opposite) and you will see how well he fulfilled this task.

From the beginning we included records of meetings, specialized monographs, edited books. The criteria were always excellence, relevance, and the capacity to stimulate, indeed excite: some of the qualities of Henri Tajfel himself.

Foreword

It is fitting that the present monograph should be the first in the series of European Monographs in Social Psychology. It represents a convergence of scientific interests and of diverse backgrounds that, we hope, will remain characteristic of some of the monographs which will appear in the near future.

The initial planning of the monograph and the various stages of work which resulted in its publication were closely interwoven with the development of the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology which sponsors the series. As the editors write in their introduction, the idea of publishing the monograph first arose in connection with the work done at the second European Summer School in social psychology, held in Louvain in 1967, and organized in part by the European Association. Further stages of the preparation were greatly helped by individual "exchange visits" across Europe, also sponsored by the Association; and the subsequent conference in Oslo which enabled the authors to continue working together was supported jointly by the Norwegian Social Science Research Council and the Association. Equally important is the fact that the monograph represents by no means the end of the road. The Foreword is written only two weeks after another "small working group meeting" of the Association was held in Paris (with participants from Britain, France, the Netherlands, Norway and Rumania) on a theme closely related to that of the present monograph. In all these ways, the publication of the "Social Contexts of Messages" is like one strand among many, all having similar origins and composition. The origins are in the development of active exchange and cooperation amongst social psychologists in Europe; the "composition" consists of the ingredients of this cooperation, such as the summer schools, the exchange visits, the small working group meetings, the recent appearance of the first issue of the *European Journal of Social Psychology;* and perhaps, most of all, a new network of personal contacts and friendships across Europe.

Why a *European* Association and a series of *European* Monographs in Social Psychology? These titles are not meant to reflect some new version of "wider" or "continental" nationalism—academic, intellectual or any other. The future of social psychology as a discipline and as a contribution to knowledge and society is no more "European", "American" or "African"

than it is Basque, Welsh, English, German or French. It is, however, true that the past and the present of what is often defined as the "scientific study of human social behaviour" and predominantly American. More work has been and is being done in the United States than in all the rest of the world together. This is so for a number of historical, social, economic and even political reasons which cannot be discussed in a brief note. In the long run such an exclusive focus from, and on, one cultural context cannot escape being damaging to the healthy development of a discipline which is in the last analysis one of the social sciences. There was a time, not so long ago, when most of us were quite happy to accept the proposition that the social and human sciences can be "value free" and independent of their cultural and social framework. It is undoubtedly true that, whatever the case may be, this has become today a highly controversial issue, and not only for social psychology. Even the outwardly neutral description above of social psychology as the "scientific study of human social behaviour" has not managed to remain *au-dessus de la mêlée*.

For all these reasons, and many others, we must create a social psychology which grows simultaneously in many places, even if in some of them growth will be based, to begin with, on a transplantation from elsewhere. The European Monographs in Social Psychology do not set out to be "European" in explicit opposition, competition or contradistinction to anything else. All of them will present work done in Europe; some will take advantage of the rich cultural and social diversity of Europe; some could have been written anywhere. No discipline, however much it may change in the future, can afford to forget its roots, and the roots of much of contemporary social psychology are in the United States. But a discipline concerned with the analysis and understanding of human social life must, in order to acquire its full significance, be tested and measured against the intellectual and social requirements of many cultures. It would be sheer conceit to write that this is what we hope to achieve with the publication of the European Monographs. What we do hope, however, is that they will contribute to the interest and creativity of a discipline which, though potentially of great importance, has not yet managed to break out of its various parochialisms.

Bristol, July 1971   Henri Tajfel

Contents

1

Simple observations of everyday actions

It is seven o'clock in the morning — a good time for starting something new (like this book). Anyway I have already done a host of things before sitting down at my desk, even though they were only everyday routine tasks: getting up, washing, shaving, dressing, waking my wife and children, preparing breakfast as one of my sons appeared in the kitchen and then eating breakfast.[1]* Now I am writing. At ten o'clock I shall go to the Institute — by car today. These activities I have described follow a certain order which is determined partly by their own inner logic and the requirements of efficiency and partly by external necessity, but also partly by my habits and prejudices. I must prepare breakfast before I can eat it; I wake the children after I have dressed because before that I am occupying the bathroom and afterwards it would be too late; and I prefer to wash, dress and shave before breakfast.

To describe these morning tasks even slightly more precisely would require a whole chapter; a detailed analysis would take a monograph. However, we shall select a few examples for closer examination because activities of this kind — I will call them actions from now on — are our theme. First let us reconstruct the way in which I prepared breakfast — or at least a part of that very complex action.

How do I decide to select this action as a unit and separate it from the others, such as dressing? Clearly there are difficult theoretical and methodological problems underlying this question of breaking up the "stream of behaviour" and I do not want to go into them here; for the moment what interests me is the instinctive, routine solution of the

---

* Superscript numbers refer to notes at the end of each chapter.

problem because the distinction does not seem problematic in everyday life. The members of my family, who have no scientific or psychological training, make this division easily, rapidly and with as much precision as the solution of their routine problems demands: so do all other members of our culture. Apparently they are guided by various inter-linked criteria. The distinction reflects established social conventions, "self-evident facts", for which the language itself provides various terms. Moreover "dressing" and "preparing breakfast" are directed towards different aims, they have clearly distinguishable *functions* (covering the body in order to keep warm and comply with custom; preparation of food at the beginning of the day) which correspond subjectively, up to a point, to consciously experienced aims. Con-ventions on the one hand, and function and aim on the other are circumstances with which we must concern ourselves if we are to understand the organization of our everyday actions.

Preparing breakfast is, again, an organized activity consisting of a succession of "part actions": laying the table, setting out foodstuffs such as milk, butter, bread etc.; preparing raw materials, e.g. making coffee and boiling eggs. These activities, like all human behaviour, have three special aspects: first, the manifest, externally visible, "objectively"[2] observable course of the actions: ordered series of move-ments, which are difficult to describe structurally but easy to character-ize functionally, such as picking up the saucepan, turning on the tap, holding the saucepan under it, etc.

Secondly, the subjective world of experiences: the feelings, wishes and ideas that accompany my activity: I want to boil myself an egg, I am hungry, I am looking forward to it, I must see that it boils for exactly 4½ minutes. Thirdly, the social significance viewed objectively, the sense and coherence of the manifest action which is immediately appar-ent to any European: that to boil an egg is to prepare food and not some kind of religious rite (they could be closely bound up with each other in other cultures); that I look at the clock in order to check the cooking time etc. Each of these three dimensions of my actions deserves brief consideration.

1.1 The manifest course of the action

I want to start by looking at my activity as it were from outside: this is made easier for me because I frequently observe other people engaged

in similar activities or rather I have often "watched" them. Of course the knowledge thus obtained is limited and I do not pretend that I can describe my activity with complete accuracy in every respect and in all its details; but certain regularities (features) of its external course I believe I can recognize.

We have just established how easily and simply a naïve judge can separate actions from the stream of behaviour in normal daily life. But if we attempt a more detailed and precise description we make more discoveries. It is very difficult to describe well known, simple, small activities. Problems of method arise immediately. How should I break down my action and how precisely (with what degree of "breakdown") should I describe it? There are various ways of solving these problems. After many attempts I found it answered the purpose if I attempted a two-dimensional description: on the one hand I want to establish features of the temporal sequence; on the other, I want to give several descriptions of varying fineness, in which I present the action as a system of super- and subordination of larger and smaller units standing in an ordered relationship with each other and so establish a kind of hierarchical order.

To describe the temporal sequence I start with the assumption that, as with the stream of behaviour as a whole, individual actions can also be split up into sections which appear to be relatively independent. Thus boiling an egg contains, amongst others, the part actions: getting the pan out of the cupboard, filling the pan with water, lighting the gas, putting the water on, fetching the eggs, pricking them, putting them into the boiling water, timing them, and so on. Independent part actions of this kind which are embedded in the continuity of the action we shall call "action steps". Now if we observe several actions of a similar kind (repeated actions of one person or similar actions of various people) we find that many of the action steps are always, while others are only sometimes, present; these latter seem at times to be replaced by other action steps which take their place in the sequence. Boiling eggs, for example, always and of necessity involves putting them in water; but we shall not find them being pricked every time before boiling. In some cases salt is put in the water, in others the eggs are pricked and salt added to them; and finally it may be that both these steps are omitted. I have just been dealing with the sequence of the action steps. If I examine more closely the sequence that occurs in various actions, I again find both fixed and variable arrangements. When I am boiling an egg my practice is always to put the water on and