Brazilian contributions to Community Psychology[1]

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Abstract

This paper presents a research current that has spread over Brazil: the Community Psychology that is now recognized as an autonomous subject and that is supported by Anglo-Saxon and European countries where national and international associations are being multiplied. The analysis of some aspects of this subject allows for outlining some relevant remarks to subsidize our discussion: values, principles and models of action that are common or specific in this discipline; aspects of social dimension to the approaches of Community Psychology and its places of observation and application.

Keywords: Social Psychology, Community Psychology, values, principles.

Resumo

Brazilian contributions to Community Psychology. Este artigo apresenta uma tendência de pesquisa cuja radiação do Brasil é inegável: a Psicologia Comunitária, hoje reconhecida como uma disciplina autônoma e encontra eco nos países anglo-saxões e europeus, onde se multiplicam as associações nacionais e internacionais. O exame de alguns aspectos desta disciplina permite esboçar algumas observações relevantes para subsidiar nossa discussão: valores, princípios e modelos de ação que lhe são comuns ou específicos; aspectos relevantes para integrar a dimensão social nas abordagens de psicologia comunitária e seus lugares de observação e de aplicação.

Palavras-chave: Psicologia Social, Psicologia comunitária, vertentes, valores, princípios.

My participation is an opportunity of raising important memory to me. This memory dates back 30 years. When Silvia Maurer Lane learned I was coming to the Northeast of Brazil, she invited me to attend a Symposium on Social Psychology that she was organizing to the SPCB of Campinas. Silvia was acquainted to a compilation I had made: "*Psicologia Social, uma disciplina em movimento*" (Social Psychology, a subject in movement) which would inspire the title of her book "*O homem em movimento*" (The man in movement.) Silvia was coming back from a trip around all Latin and South American countries, where she met social psychologists and became a messenger of their concerns. The symposium, just like this one, was focused on a reflection about the status of Social Psychology, and would open a long-lasting period of collaboration and friendship that I use to call the "great lady" of Social Psychology. Silvia asked me to find other important actors in the Brazilian Social Psychology, and get to know the original currents that were being set up. These currents had strong impacts on me.

And I must say that now, thinking about what happened 30 years ago, I am a little amazed. The SBPC Symposium gave a feeling of vitality, renewal, commitment to innovation allied to a strong desire of facing social reality's problems, responding to what Moscovici (2000, 284) refers to as the reason of being of Social Psychology: "a subject that effectively catches the main historical and cultural phenomena, which are also policy-sensitive." However, after listening to the reports and discussions in this symposium, I fell that little has changed and, above all, that the imported models remain holding a leading place in research. Undoubtedly, there is always the posture called by the Modernist literary movement as "anthropophagic", which consists in modeling, in a unique way, what it has borrowed from other cultural trends. However, it all seems to happen with no consciousness - by the Brazilian researchers and thinkers - that they should to give something to the others. As my contact with you have enriched and comforted my theoretical and practical options, I decided to testify this contribution you gave me.

Instead of talking about what should define the good practice of our subject based on its phenomena, processes, objects, models, concepts, methods, applications and so on, I'll resort to a research current that has spread over Brazil: the Community Psychology that is now recognized as an autonomous subject (Saïas, 2009) and that is supported by Anglo-Saxon and European countries where national associations are being multiplied, and an European association has just been built. The analysis of some aspects of this subject (that ensues mainly from Social Psychology) allows for outlining some relevant remarks to subsidize our discussion. I will further consider the following: 1) values, principles and models of action that are common or specific; (2) relevant aspects to mainstream social dimension

to the approaches of Community Psychology and its places of observation and application.

Since early this century, the work dealing with the Community Psychology history and assumptions have been multiplied (Marcou et al., 2008; Rappaport & Seidman, 2000; Reich; Riemer, Prilletensky, & Monter, 2007.) Latin American contributions are found in the trends of deinstitutionalizing the mental health sector, and in the practices of prevention and health promotion. However, the contributions from Brazil prevail in the values, principles and models of action.

Overview on the history and currents of Community Psychology

Among the currents that have historically emerged in Community Psychology, the oldest one is the so-called "Popular Education" and "Psychology of Liberation." Born in Latin America, where it remains notably represented (Fals Borda, 1978; Freire, 1974; Martín-Baró, 1998), it is viewed today as a major source of inspiration to the Critical Psychology (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002.) This perspective is the cradle to the core principles of community action. In this light, it is amazing perceiving how in a country like Brazil, which is among the starters of this current of thought, the conceptions of community intervention have developed. Since its early stages, this intervention has implied in social psychologists whose practice changed a long time. Freitas (1996) thus delimits several stages closely connected to the political history of the second half of the 20th Century, differentiating Psychology "of" Communities, work "in" communities and, finally, Community Psychology. Until the 1960's, interventions were somewhat paternalistic to allow for the adjustment "of" the communities - that were perceived as an object of aid – to the changes resulting from the introduction of an industry-based agricultural production. From middle 1960's on, three movements meet again: 1. The popular expression of a desire of participating in the civil society's life; 2. the criticism to the work of human sciences researchers that were perceived as isolated in their academic "marble tower"; 3. the pedagogical approaches inspired in Paulo Freire. This movement led social psychologists to intervene "in" the communities, in a voluntary, philanthropic and many times clandestine way, serving disadvantaged populations, and helping them to get organized and claim for improved living conditions.

In the 1970's, social psychologists wanted to move their subject away from elitism, engaging in the lives of popular sectors, disseminating the problems experienced by population at large, becoming fosterers of debates on topics essential to their existence in terms of health, education and culture. After the falling of the dictatorship, their work is no longer clandestine, and in the 1980's they start challenging the theoretical and methodological aspects of the practice "in" the communities.

That would lead, in the 1990's, to the establishment of a Community Social Psychology that corresponds to a view of social actors as individuals marked by their socio-historical insertion , and as active agents in the building of their conceptions about themselves, the others and their life context. Inspired by the theoretical frameworks provided by Social Psychology, this Community Psychology privileges the work with groups,

the building of critical consciousness, and the establishment of a social and individual identity oriented by ethical and humanistic principles. That perspective – largely disseminated in Latin American countries (Montero, 2000) - intends to move away from the aiding practices that, according to participants, continued to be developed pursuant to the models prevailing in the United States.

Simultaneously to that movement, Europe and North America have experienced the development of three approaches that ground the current Community Psychology and foster new procedures. In the United States, the Community Psychology's inaugural conference held in Swampscott, in 1965, defined a new role to psychologists that went beyond the individual level of analysis and intervention, considering the ecological, cultural and social dimensions to promote better status of health and social welfare, through non-conventional participatory methods (Kelly, 2001.) This line echoes in the so-called "mental health" that emerged after the challenging of institutional policies oriented to treat people with mental disorders, and thanks to the great contribution of the Italian psychiatrist Franco Basaglia in the 1960's. Focused on leaving behind the status of asylum and promoting the social rehabilitation of users, it built structures of inclusion and support in the city, thus assuming that health agents would network while hosting units would accept such structures and their beneficiaries as participants in their social integration (Daumerie & Caria, 2009.)

Later on, the current focused on the policies on prevention and health promotion comes about, involving ways of information and management other than those of the public health. This current also denies exclusively biomedical concepts that are focused on the illness etiology and cure, disregarding psychological and social factors that could intervene on the disease development. These currents are strengthened by an opposition to the individualist projects of the clinical therapy, which prescribe placing individuals in their contexts, based on their experiences, considered to be a testimonial of their vulnerability, and a potential resource to community action, thus avoiding a psychological reductionism.

Late in the 1960's, a critical current was developed in Psychology, providing continuity to the expression of philosophical, political and practical differences in relation to classical approaches of Psychology. This trend advocates for the use of community perspectives to challenge the prevailing paradigms, or respond to social threats related to modernity, liberalism and globalization. These different currents – different for their targets of observation and intervention (individuals in contexts, social groups; sets built in territory-related or cultural collectives) – should clearly correspond to the goals and principles of action that are not completely overlapping, although adhering to mutual values.

Values and principles of action advocated by Community Psychology

I have analyzed the main texts and manifests published in the field of community. It seems to me that, despite their diversity, the currents claim the same perspective and subject, or even a "spirit" as advocated by one of the pioneers of the

Community Psychology (Kelly, 2001), due to their adherence to some universal values and principles, and to the methodological perspectives that guide the intervention practices.

During his intervention in this symposium, Doise has shown the importance of the distinction introduced by Moscovici between operatory systems and cognitive meta-systems, and the role played by these last in rules and values. One could say that in Community Psychology the meta-system directly inspired by Brazilian and Latin America thinkers gathers the different currents around values – some of which common to all – while others more specifically imply different objects and practices of intervention.

All the Community Psychology advocators adopt four kinds of values:

1) defense of rights and interests of individuals and communities, and condemnation of all forms of oppression and social exclusion;

2) justice that refers to equal distribution of resources in the society;

3) solidarity that translates the concern about the others and the common good, and is mainly affirmed by the respect to oppressed and discriminated individuals and groups;

4) self-nomination, liberation and emancipation of these individuals and groups.

Supplementary values are also shared by all. These refer to the intervention practice that should respect confidentiality of relations, ensure confidence, security and support of the individuals subject to intervention. Additionally to those supplementary values, some currents bear specific values. To mention only few examples, the current of popular education condemns the elitism of university psychologists, urging them to serve people. The current of prevention and health promotion researches the improvement of social welfare, betterment of the care system, location of illness in the environment rather than in the subject. The mental health current argues the internal and external oppression of the psychiatric institutions users. The critical current insists on the legitimacy of the demands for knowledge, the development of social reflexivity, and identifies itself with a progressive ideology.

Some principles and models are stated in strict relation to the values claimed. In the field of principles, it provides for:

1) accompaniment of social groups and their members in the pursuit for liberation and well-being;

2) support of the communal structures, and participation and collaboration in and between communities;

3) assistance to empower individuals and the collective, and to the development of subjectivity and reflexivity;

4) advocacy for human and cultural diversity;

5) contribution to social transformation and change;

6) fight against discrimination of disadvantaged individuals, or individuals suffering from psychic disturbances.

Community Psychology proposes models of actions oriented to the collectivity or to the individual as correspondent to these principles. Some currents are closer to the Psychology of Liberation. Thus, it is all about understanding and analyzing the processes whereby a given social body can achieve awareness about its identity in their everyday lives' conditions.

For that, the researcher or community intervener should adopt the following postures: preserve the existential dynamic of relations established in the heart of the group; avoid any distortion or de-contextualization in relation to the group's reality; approach the community members ensuring their participation in their own future as producers of knowledge, and providing an alternative to their everyday histories. The result is a collective way of working, carried out in collaboration with groups, oriented to identify needs and demands shared by collectivity. Therefore, the researcher or intervener should consistently analyze, review and adjust their knowledge based on the community's dynamics of life; accept the possibilities of changing their way of working; challenge the validity of their work, submitting it to the group's evaluation.

In fact, this concept of the researcher's or intervener's activity is found in all cases, be them sociologists, psychologists, health professionals, social workers, or just volunteers. It defines a new statute or role to researchers and interveners, who are no longer experts, but only the holders of a given knowledge. They are not the only authority ruling changes. Their role now is more of a catalyst, a facilitator that deals with partners as free actors that bear skills and knowledge of different nature but as valuable as theirs. So, that is the importance granted to local knowledge and its valuation, and the corresponding negotiation of knowledge and of the processes of re-signification of their experiences.

These perspectives are found in community health that, on one hand, takes into consideration the activity and participation of care systems users and, on the other hand, the existence of their own culture. Community health is defined by a territory-based structure that can be located nearby the neighborhood public area; a sharing of similar social conditions of existence; social relations of interdependence and neighborhood; common cultural background, which could be pre-existing for ethnical, religious, regional groups, or a recently/emergent history due to the destination community, as happens in situations of poor, clandestine or individuals with no documents or homeless, etc.

Community health is also supported by political perspectives. On one hand, it aims at overcoming the limitations posed by the biomedical model of public health which implies one single sector, individualism, deprivation of users' responsibility, verticality of benefits in a centralized and bureaucratic way. On the other hand, it tries to promote an open system that employs educational programs to favor the acquisition of the skills required to manage care in an autonomous way. These lead to a change in the status of health professionals that now foster the promotion, incentive and canalization of sanitary activities, developing a new status of users that become co-responsible and active participants of the care system.

These ethical, political and practical approaches fit into frameworks to construe realities focused on action and context. All the Community Psychology currents, adopting a posture against the individualist nature of most of the clinical approaches and diagnosis on social discomfort, propose a holistic and systemic view that displaces responsibility, replacing the individuals' responsibility over their situation and conditions for the recognition of their social vulnerability. They postulate the

interdependence between environment and social discomfort, or the illness corresponding to the individuals' experience. Here, it is worth emphasizing that this perspective resembles that of the Psychology of Environment that emerged concomitantly to the Community Psychology, and which has also insisted on the need of taking the psychological practice out of the laboratory or office, and on the transaction between individuals and their environment.

By the end of this brief overview, however, once can notice that although the values, principles and models of action disclose the social nature of the Community Psychology's concerns, the way how social dimension interferes on the processes analyzed remains unclear. In fact, it seems to clearly refer to the social field and social relations that make up the social game, and the actions taking place in it. Social situations and actions are governed by rules and positions of actors participating in the structure of social relations. Community Psychology defines social relations in terms of relations of power between dominant and dominated individuals in the political or professional arena, either in terms of inclusion/exclusion relations between the same and the different in the social life, or in terms of conformity/deviation in the plan of roles and rules.

Moreover, Community Psychology has historically emerged as continuity to social movements that have, for different reasons, stirred the civil society (Sarason, 1976). Thus, it has adopted a nature of criticism against a given social order, regardless if of some political regimens, or with forms and ideologies of modernity, that of the psychiatric institution and public health, or that of the universe of research and its prevailing current. Then, there are evidences of a social concern that Community Psychology expresses through the selection of its objects and practices oriented to individual and social changes, as well as through its values and principles.

Social piece of Community Psychology

However, an issue is still to be clarified: which social we are talking about. This question refers to material spaces (territories, institutional arrangements, situations) and symbolic spaces (relational fields, socio-cultural contexts that make up the mental space of groups and individuals, therapeutic space) where a social dimension can be located. Considering these different spaces would allow for refining the analyses focused on contexts and the styles of communal actions. Clarifying the statute recognized in social dimension should contribute toward the theoretical progress of this subject.

The articulation between contexts and social relations remains almost unexplored or poorly defined. Such vagueness could be due to the fact that some phenomena or processes are distributed throughout the several currents of Community Psychology. Thus, the concept of empowerment that was firstly thought in the collective scope of political and social reflection, aiming at obtaining autonomy and promoting oppressed communities, is used to approach psychological and individual phenomena connected to states of disease or psychic disorders, and to improve the situation of people suffering from disorders. Effects and different connotations of this kind sometimes differ.

This vagueness is also attributed to the way how community is conceptualized. In fact, the notion of community - characterized by the sharing of a material or symbolic good of the same origin, history, destination or activity – widely varies and has changed along time. The comments inspired by the Community Psychology journals that serve as evidence to historical changes, additionally to the different interpretations found in this field, are witnesses of this vagueness. Analyzing the content of surveys that employ the notion of community allows for finding two major trends: an empirical and a theoretical one.

In some cases these refer to the notion of community to designate concrete social sets object of our observation and intervention. These sets are defined by their territory properties (like district, slum), or for sharing a same way of living, same activity or same culture (as happens to professional or indigenous communities), or by relationships of proximity and neighborhood that contribute to coin a collective spirit through exchanges. These can also refer to organizations of institutional nature, like family, school, hospital. This observation brings about the need for exploring the relation between the processes that rule social relations and the particular context where these take place. So, making reference to cultural and social rules that organize transactions in the community under consideration becomes essential.

One can also observe how the community has historically received a status of ideological operator, taking on an utopist character. Nisbet (1984) has also shown the links between advances of individualism and the re-emergence of community utopias, and vice-versa. Community then becomes a space of reference, recalling the previous ways of socialization that could be of negative nature or, on the contrary, ideal ones. Thus, in recent modernity the community has become object of debate between those who support social progress, and those contrary to modernization. In the second modernity, ways of living in community are sought to respond the negative evaluations that inspire pessimist observations on the development of the contemporary world. This perspective has been criticized as an attitude of comfortable but illusory refuge in face of the disturbances ensuing from globalization (Bauman, 2001).

The authors that build a theoretical construct to meet several objectives (Jovchelovitch, 2007) support the concrete contents assigned to the concept of community. Such construct provides a picture on how social relations were made objective. The community is then managed as a symbolic and material space, as load of memory where social identity and the sense of belonging are coined, where the positive or conflictive interactions with the group members (and of these with other groups) are elaborated. Here, engaged social relations are placed at the level of inter-individual, intra- and cross-group relations. The theoretical construct is also considered to favor an analysis of the relation between the individual and the society, in an optimized approximation to psychosocial phenomena. It is mainly focused on those devoted to building knowledge through dialogical exchange in public spaces. This concept lets us approach the role played by social representations in the social dynamic that rules the links between the members of a social collective, and between different collectives.

Additionally to this multitude of perspectives, one could

imagine that the trend of approaching community without integrating its social dimensions undoubtedly supports the idea of "community" (Gemeinschaft), in opposition to that of "society" (Gesellschaft), as stated by Tönnies (1977). The first one is based on the "organic will" and has to do with several factors:

1) link, fondness for the family (referring to blood ties, a history, sites and common ways of living) and for neighborhood (referring to friendship ties);

2) tradition (local uses and religion);

3) shared moral (cement that joints the members of a community.) The second one is based on the "intentional will" inspired by ways of thinking that could be different, conflicting and competitive, and are marked by individualism in contemporary societies. This opposition was resumed and commented by many thinkers from European and Anglo-Saxon countries.

On the other hand, if the notion of community or communal is hardly understood, that is so because – as regards the concrete sets of observation or intervention – it is placed between two extremes: one that dilutes it and another that stiffens it. In fact, many times researchers say "I'm coming to the community" just for saying it, I'll go to the field, to the street, where people live. There is no distinctive trait between what the "community" does from what the "communal" does. On the other hand, the "community" or "communal" phenomenon stands for an unfolding of the ethnical, cultural or religious uniqueness that isolates it from the collective and universal values, Republicans and others. That is why some European countries are reluctant to use the term "Community Psychology." Such a particularistic indexation, fought mainly in France, was stigmatized by the sociologist Simmel (2010) who perceived a danger in communities that prevented individuals from adhering to the values of universality.

However, it does not hinder human sciences today to assign to the term a positive sense and status, recognizing multiculturalism and the identity claimed by subjects that are free to choose. Here we find the emergence of a new modernity that dilutes the opposition between the Illuminist heritage and the attachment to traditions, where all the national, cultural, linguistic or religious hegemony is disputed (Wieviorka, 2008). Recovering the notion of community makes the definition of its shapes, dimensions and properties an even more urgent task.

The places of social dimension observation

Based on the aforementioned considerations, one could reintroduce social dimension, differentiating the several forms found in the community. For that, it would be wise considering how disciplines that employ the concept of community have specified it. In history, the term 'community' is used to refer to groups built along time, in a given place, sharing the same culture and language. This global perspective is supported by other human sciences (sociology or anthropology) when referring to groups of individuals that live and work in the same room, like family, school, etc., or to sets that share the same culture or history.

Sociology introduces extensions that are pertinent to our purposes. For example, the unification around common values and interests, as happens to the communities that defend beliefs (religious or spiritual communities), specific identity or rights (movements of gender identities – homosexual communities, feminism) or sharing the same condition (groups of users of the mental health system.) Finally, new concepts related to activities of research and scientific and technical innovation, from the "scientific communities" currently analyzed in terms of networks of actors (Latour, 1989) to the "communities of knowledge" (Dupouët, Cohendet, & Creplet, 2006) – individuals gathered around an issue, a shared objective – emerged based on volunteer services, and aimed at building and maintaining knowledge in the organizations or virtual networks. Such communities, also known as "of knowledge" or "cognitive", allow for exchanging or transforming the know-how, transforming tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge to be used to meet specific demands. These exchanges gradually build a common "identity", and are consolidated through the establishment of shared social rules.

It is also worth considering how the notion is defined in the civil or administrative law. Here we find a construction different from that of a "society" or "association", since it does not assume that its members voluntarily decide to engage to or participate in the collective (for example, using a shared asset.) In the administrative plan, the notion of community is applied to the association of collectivities defined by territory, ranging from city to the nation.

As regards these different meanings, we could isolate the social traits that could influence the community dynamics, and serve as ground to or impair interventions. To show it, it would be useful resorting to the paradigm of the Social Psychology analysis levels proposed by Doise (1982), i.e., the individual, inter-individual, inter-group, cultural and ideological. This paradigm could be compared to the layers model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) to analyze the social context wherein individuals participate. By differentiating environments that are closer to or farther from the subject, it brings the definition of contexts (onto-, micro-, meso- and exosystems) that assists overcoming the barrier of a concept that reduces the subject to an isolated individual.

In the historical, social and anthropological sense, social dimension refers to solidarity of memory and adherence to cultural models that lead the ways of saying, doing and thinking. It refers to values, rules, beliefs, representations and ideologies that individuals actively endorse, or are subjected to, in order to guide their behaviors, decisions and positions, depending on the group to which they belong. This social dimension interferes more on the subjective level of individuals that are part of a collective than on the collective itself. When we refer to sets defined by shared histories and culture, we should consider the models of relationship, behavior and thought it comprises, leading to intervention, the need for respecting this cultural and historical capital, taking advantage of it to assist the autonomous communal development. However, it also implies the risk – in the event of the search for personal or collective change – of coming up against the common cultural background and causing conflicts with social actors, as I have mentioned, for illustration purposes, in the interventions at indigenous communities in Mexico (Jodelet, 2006).

When the term community is applied to sets like family, school, hospital, etc. we face what sociologists use to call "agencies of society." In other words, organizations working regularly, according to rules that implicitly or explicitly ensure the performance and distribution of the roles assigned to their members. So, the community analysis could be related to the institutional analysis, allowing for identifying the repertoires and codes in force in a given social field. This perspective, located at the inter-individual and cross-group level, takes into consideration the configuration of social relations that shape social interactions in those organizations. When we focus on contexts that put power relations on the bet, we should look at the social positions assigned to social actors. The recent development of a sociological approach of communities (ecological, defense of identity or knowledge) as relationship networks, lets us understand how the social exchanges established between actors sharing the same activity, interest or objective could produce creative and empowered collective actions. It invites us to assign new meanings to community intervention, considering the social ties. So, it becomes a supporting power to foster common reflection and action, which could comprise a minority form and, then, be inscribed to inter-group relations.

Finally, the perspective inherited from Law focuses on social spaces defined by territory-related aspects and relations of proximity, which are not necessarily optional. These are pertinent because they delimit the conditions of acceptance of subjects about to be emancipated, as happens with the psychiatric system users that benefit from the policies on deinstitutionalization. Hence, the commitment of local spheres and authorities is a must to change the living conditions of new residents, and encourage the acceptance and participation of the urban community members. This territory space is the scene for inter-group and inter-personal relations which should be object of attention of interventions on the community. It should abide by the changes (communications, interactions) established in the systems of representations, facilitating the management of relations in the everyday life. Considering the environments where the new ways of acting of people suffering from psychic problems are implemented, it should identify the self-defining powers and representation systems that could prevent their acceptance.

These findings make me emphasize one of the core social dimensions considered by the community intervention, namely the role played by beliefs and shared representations that ensure cohesion and identity to the communities that lead their behaviors. This posture is clearly stated by the Latin American researchers. A Brazilian mate has perfectly summarized this view, when she said that health and disease are concepts built in social spaces delimited by the relations set up therein, intertwined by the productive process, religion, beliefs, moral and ethical values, and by the conditions of access to the official health structure, among others (Trindade & Andrade, 2003). The thinkers that have largely inspired the Community Psychology and Critical Psychology - Paulo Freire, Fals Borba, and Martín-Baró - have also insisted on the appraisal of the common sense knowledge, on the awareness and the need of working on genuine knowledge, so that a community could master its history and maximize its action.

When the change on practices penetrates the social fabric, mobilizing the health and mental health fields as well as the political fights, an additional objective is set to the Community Psychology: that of fighting against the resistances that replace and oppose to change. Community Psychology bears a social and humanitarian mission; it has also performed an epistemological task in its criticisms to the traditional Psychology. In the struggle against resistances to changes a new task emerges, and its importance is more and more evident to a large number of social actors. Community Psychology will be ready to face these resistances if it takes advantage of the resources provided by the ever-changing networking, which gathers several perspectives to build new scientific and practical knowledge. Now we can find in this development the elements that allow for answering the questions posed to the current status of Social Psychology.

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