

# This Week's Citation Classic

CC/NUMBER 47  
NOVEMBER 22, 1982

Gergen K J. Social psychology as history.  
*J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 26:309-20, 1973.  
[Department of Psychology, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA]

Theories of social behavior are not, as traditionally argued, subject to empirical correction and progressive refinement across time. Patterns of human conduct are, for the most part, historically contingent, thus rendering behavioral theory vulnerable to historical decay. Dissemination of theory may also hasten such decay. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*<sup>®</sup> (SSCI<sup>®</sup>) indicates that this paper has been cited in over 190 publications since 1973.]

Kenneth J. Gergen  
Department of Psychology  
Swarthmore College  
Swarthmore, PA 19081

September 22, 1982

"Although many of the ideas in this paper were developed while I was a graduate student, and later presented to seminars at Harvard University, at the time I saw little promise of publication. Not only did most of the important journals in the field discourage reflexive scrutiny, but my ideas were at variance with the traditionally accepted beliefs and all the more unlikely to be accepted from a fledgling scholar. It was not until I had published a sizable number of more traditional articles, and had thus gained membership in an elite organization, the Society for Experimental Social Psychology, that the door was opened to publishing my ideas. A presentation at a society meeting prompted the editor of the most central journal in the discipline to ask if I would submit a piece for possible publication. Many months after submission of the requested article, the editor indicated that he could find no one willing to review the piece. Later, when he agreed to publish, the article was placed at the end of the journal. In spite of its obscure positioning, however,

the immediate result was somewhat staggering. Unlike anything I had written within the traditional mold, I received hundreds of reprint requests, letters of both support and disapproval, papers that extended or attacked the thesis, and many invitations to speak. On the other hand, the journal editor seemed to feel that he had made an error. He accepted only one paper<sup>1</sup> on the issues raised by my paper, a biting defense of traditional empiricism. This piece was allowed to exceed my own in length and was featured as a lead article. Response from me and all others was then barred as a matter of editorial policy. His stance was later adopted by his colleague, an editor of a second major journal. In this case, my extension of the initial article, an invited address to the American Psychological Association, was denied publication after it had passed peer review on the apparent grounds that it would damage the reputation of the field. This article was subsequently published in a European journal.<sup>2</sup>

"In spite of these various problems, the issues I have raised concerning the character of the science and its potential have become the focal point for several international symposia, special sections in other periodicals, interviews, and books. Many others are now engaging in reevaluation and one is able to recognize a significant movement to reconceptualize the nature of the science. Many of the critical issues surrounding this movement are now featured in my recent book, *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*.<sup>3</sup> There appear to be a number of reasons for the widespread interest in the initial article. First, the arguments represented an attack on the long prevailing understandings of the discipline. Their impact was enhanced by the fact that for ten years I had contributed actively to this tradition; in effect, I was not an outsider. In addition, the fact that the article appeared in the major periodical of the field seemed to give it positive sanction. However, the article also seemed to speak either directly or indirectly to the concerns of a broad number of investigators, particularly in the younger ranks, who had unexpressed doubts about the traditional cast of the discipline. It seemed to capture a certain aspect of a then unarticulated *Zeitgeist*."

1. Schlenker B R. Social psychology and science. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 29:1-15, 1974.

2. Gergen K J. Experimentation in social psychology: a reappraisal. *Eur. J. Soc. Psychol.* 8:507-27, 1978.

3. ...., *Toward transformation in social knowledge*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982. 272 p.