

## Imitation and Distinction. History of Two Theoretical Concepts in Social Psychology: The legacy of Simmel, Tarde and Bourdieu

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### INFORMACIÓN ART.

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### ABSTRACT

The Annales Movement underlined the importance of the non-conscious mechanisms which perpetuate social phenomena. Such mechanisms can be understood as the object of microanalysis by multiple social sciences. Concerning Social Psychology, the theoretical concepts of imitation and distinction are found at the same microlevel and have been the object of such a microanalysis by three eminent sociologists. The thought of George Simmel, Gabriel Tarde and Pierre Bourdieu on these topics is exposed in order to show the historical relevance of their contributions concerning these microlevel key-concepts of Social Psychology. As a conclusion, this article aims to provide a rationale for innovative researchers to reflect on the boundaries that separate their discipline from Sociology; the interdisciplinarity required to address theoretical concepts underlying the discipline (such as imitation and distinction); and the relevance of these contemporary classics to understand phenomena that occur in an increasingly networked social world.

### Imitación y distinción. Historia de dos conceptos teóricos en Psicología social: el legado de Simmel, Tarde y Bourdieu

### RESUMEN

La Escuela de los Anales subrayó la importancia de los mecanismos inconscientes que perpetúan los fenómenos sociales. Tales mecanismos pueden ser entendidos como objeto de microanálisis por parte de múltiples ciencias sociales. En Psicología Social, los conceptos teóricos de imitación y distinción se encuentran en el mismo micronivel y han sido objeto de tal microanálisis por parte de tres eminentes sociólogos. El pensamiento de Simmel, Tarde y Bourdieu es expuesto con el fin de mostrar la relevancia histórica de sus aportes entorno a estos conceptos clave a nivel micro. A modo de conclusión, el artículo pretende ser motivo de reflexión para investigadores innovadores en relación con: los límites que separan su disciplina de la Sociología; la interdisciplinariedad al abordar conceptos teóricos subyacentes a la disciplina (como imitación y distinción); y, finalmente, la pertinencia de estos clásicos contemporáneos para comprender fenómenos que suceden en un mundo social cada vez más reticular.

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## **Introduction. A brief review of epistemological issues concerning to Social Psychology and Sociology**

If Sociology focuses on the way that groups, organizations, social categories and societies organize, function and change, it is still a matter of discussion to firmly establish what distinguishes Social Psychology from Sociology (Hogg & Vaughan, 2018, p. 6). As Hogg and Vaughan (2018, p. 4) claim, following Allport (1954, p. 5), it can be affirmed that the individual continues to be the fundamental reference in Social Psychology. Above all, it matters how he is influenced as such an individual by the presence of others. The word “presence” should be understood in a broad sense. This sense carries within it the effective and patent reality of others being there, next to the subject, at a certain time and place, but also the mere consideration of their hypothetical reactions before acting. Our social being modulates our thinking, promotes the change of our emotions and modifies our behavioural responses. Of course, all these questions are, legitimately, part of the field of study of Psychology (1).

However, to the extent that the very notion of “structure” has been questioned in the social sciences for five decades (Parker, 2013, p. 49), the border between the field of Sociology and that of Social Psychology fades without disappearing. And yet Sociology resists as an independent science, despite criticism of structuralism. This is because this science has been able to progress without assuming the contributions of methodological individualism (Picavet, 2001, p. 9751) from the Austrian School of Economics (Denis, 2014, p. 7) and the Chicago School (Odabas & Adaman, 2018), that also reached Anthropology (Goffman, 1956, p. 493), as Bourdieu (2016, p.733) points out. Nevertheless, changes are taking place both in the approach and in the research methodology. The fundamental reason lies in the fact that the individual, as a *mere individual*, necessarily adopts a leading role now also for Sociology -in the social relations of a society deeply arranged in social, virtual and nonvirtual networks. The latter could facilitate that, as Fernand Braudel (1958) exposed, each social science struggles to be the scientific frame of reference that captures social relations in its totality. However, an approach to these authors in relation to two fundamental theoretical concepts for Social Psychology and Sociology provides us with a key to understand the essential irreducibility of the two disciplines, as shown below.

### **Imitation and distinction as microlevel analysis objects in psychosocial research: Simmel, Tarde and Bourdieu**

Imitation and distinction are specific forms of individual behaviour whose genesis always lies in social interactions. The network arrangement that characterizes a good part of interactions has increased the occurrence of these forms of behaviour. This networked arrangement of an increasing number of interactions between individuals was foreseen by Gabriel Tarde (1902). These concepts comprise a series of behaviours whose origin lies in social coexistence. They entail social consequences and are arranged transversally through multiple objects of study in the specific field of Social Psychology. Among these multiple objects of research, the following are noteworthy: collective action, cooperation and competition,

propaganda, pluralism (related to diversity), the perpetuation of gender asymmetry, altruistic behaviour, the propensity to volunteer, cultural stereotypes, social isolation, the need for affiliation, romantic love and its frustrations, obedience, antisocial and prosocial behaviour, individualistic lifestyle and cultural integration. These research objects belong to diverse lines of research within Social Psychology: attitudes, persuasion, social influence, group behaviour, leadership, study of prejudices and discrimination, intergroup behaviour, aggressiveness and studies on cultural influence. However, as Bandura (1963, p. 3) stated, for decades there has been a refusal to allow imitation as a concept of Social Psychology. The triumph of *behaviourism* relegated the contributions of Morgan, Tarde and MacDougall for understanding imitation as an instinctive behaviour.

Georg Simmel distinguished the underlying interest of a social group from the forms of socialization that occur in that group. The same interest may be behind disparate forms and, at the same time, different interests may well hide under similar or even identical forms. Among these forms of socialization are, according to the author: subordination, competition, division of labour, partisanship, representation, the coexistence of union inward with exclusion outward, and imitation. Imitation is understood as a manifestation of coincidence with others, understanding this coincidence as a fact and as a trend. This form of coincidence, as the author explains, has the same relevance as the concept of difference since both are “the great principles of all external and internal development, so that the cultural History of humanity itself can be defined as the History of the struggle and the attempts at reconciliation between them.” (Simmel, 1970 [1917], p. 37). Insightfully, Simmel continues reasoning that all the individuals constantly produce distinctions between themselves and others where there are none, even though the shared common social space where they strive to find them had been constituted precisely to differentiate themselves from another from which they sought to distinguish. All forms of socialization, for Simmel, operate internally in the psychic subjects that make up social groups. The struggle that we see going on outside of us becomes accessible to us, so to speak, only because the relations of our ideas represent it for us inwardly; the idea of the struggle is often a struggle of the ideas. And the same thing that happens in relationships within political parties, it also happens in relationships of domination and indulgence, etc. The exterior is modelled and understood by the interior, but the interior by the exterior, alternating sometimes and, other times, simultaneously. (Simmel, 1908, p. 567).

As can be seen, in Simmel's project we find an approach to the psychological area of social cognition in terms of defence of an isomorphism between natural knowledge and knowledge of the sociocultural, as stated by Broughton (1978). Of course, the sphere constituted by society is not the natural spatial world but a super individuality where a kind of “reciprocal action” works among *souls* instead of among pieces of matter (Simmel, 1908, p. 567).

A Psychology of social cognition is needed so that it can eventually help Sociology -assuming that epistemological differences between natural and social knowledge do not necessarily imply a cognitively compartmentalized subject of knowledge. According to Simmel, something like that requires a reinterpretation of epistemology (Simmel, 1908, pp. 7-8). The question of the specific field of Social

Psychology -its relation to individual Psychology and the difference from Sociology- constitutes a problematic issue for Simmel, but not an insoluble one. Simmel affirms that what rests on the next conclusion can be considered as Social Psychology: that the uniformity of many individuals, thanks to which a type, an average, a unitary picture can be formed, cannot be produced without reciprocal influences. The object of research is always the psychological individual; the group as a whole cannot have *soul* for this category of considerations. But the homogeneity of many individuals that this category presupposes, as a general rule, only arises through reciprocal actions, with their result of similarity, identical influences, utilitarian ends, and belongs to Social Psychology, which thus manifests itself here not as another equivalent pole of individual Psychology but as a part of it (Simmel, 1908, pp. 424-425).

Indeed, the task to be entrusted to a *pure* Sociology is rather another one: "If it can be said that society is the reciprocal effect of the action of individuals, then the description of the forms of this reciprocal effect would be the task of the science of society." (Simmel, 1970 [1917], p. 27) (2)

According to Gabriel Tarde (1895), the gist of the system of society consists of certain laws of imitation. Minds are imperfectly united with each other, forming a kind of *disseminated brain* where mental states take root in multiple places -the psyches of the individuals, endowed with real brains- and are aimed at joint resolution, although not fully aware of the fundamental problem, namely: the condition consisting of having to deal with the cognitive dissonance that the conflict between beliefs or prejudices and desires or aspirations produces in the system itself, something of which the subjects may have a greater or lesser degree of consciousness. The constant search for balances and harmonies requires what Tarde calls imitative radiation as a basic social relationship between individuals, something that happens whenever the subject 0 (emitter) of such radiation conceives a plausible idea or performs a useful action. The social group, in general, is defined as a set of beings willing to imitate each other. However, Tarde had previously been obliged to clarify doubts about the sociological relevance of a psychological concept that also applies to relationships that occur in nature (3). Tarde was aware that, if one considers that the laws of imitation already work in nature, the similarities that they produce in the institutions and ideas of the people would have a non-social cause, but a natural one. But Tarde argues that the need for logical coordination, augmented and specified by the influences of the social environment, is subject to the greatest and strangest variations, although a certain logical orientation of pre-social man cannot be denied. For Tarde, the social relationship between individuals is a network relationship of component nodes that do not necessarily form organic attributes of a social system. Imitation has an inescapably psychic component in his sociological discourse. He uses historical examples to clarify this difference in his approach (Tarde, 1902, p. 20). This broadening of the social spheres is not essentially due to the progress of the population, since they are maintained even when the population is stationary or retrograde. The author insists that the course of these various social expansions is not the same and that it would be a mistake to think that there is always one, always the same - for example, economic expansion - that precedes and drives the others. It is sometimes one,

other times another, the one that goes ahead and there is a kind of speed emulation between them. The comparison of their uneven gait may, however, give rise to general comments. Tarde wonders which of these progressive movements is usually ahead of the others (the movement of religion or the language of a state, the state or the market) and raises, against historical reductionism, the possibility that it exists for each moment, and in each region, particular causes that foster the expansion of the language in some place first, in another place that of religion, or that of the market or that of political and legal institutions.

For the French sociologist, it is possible to imitate by repetition and there can be imitation without repetition. The first occurs, for example, in the use of a language's own vocabulary, in religious rites and work routines, while the second takes place in political institutions and the field of law that order behaviours through norms. In addition, imitation can be differentiated into two main types: logical imitation (which occurs by virtue of reasoning and instructions according to the end pursued or consistent with what is understood as true, as happens with the implementation and useful management of technology) and extra-logical imitation, whose paradigmatic example could be fashion and customs and which do not adhere to criteria of truth or utility but to other criteria that the author sometimes considers harmful. Counter-imitation -not to be confused with the absence of imitation- serves the same purpose on the part of the psychic subject in relation to the social as imitation. A society is a group of people who present great similarities to each other, produced by imitation or by counter-imitation. Because men and women counter-imitate by doing or saying the opposite of what other people do or say, they echo of what is being done or said around them, so that they get more and more assimilated (Tarde, 1895, p. 16).

In the late 1970s, a complete treatise on counter-imitation was published (Bourdieu, 1979). To date, it remains one of the most brilliant and internationally recognized work on this subject. Imitation and distinction are incardinated in his discourse within the game of social oppositions that give rise to systems of classification. Some statements from the conclusion of his work are especially relevant:

Social psychologists have observed that any division of a population in to two groups, however arbitrary, induces discriminatory behaviour favourable to members of the agents' own group and hostile to members of the other group, even if it has adverse effects for the former group. More generally, they describe under the term 'category differentiation' the operations whereby agents construct their perception of reality, in particular the process of accentuating differences vis-a-vis 'outsiders' (dissimilation) and reinforcing similarities with insiders (assimilation). (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 478-479)

Bourdieu claimed that differentiation becomes distinction when the purpose is to execute a classifying operation. But this operation does not belong to the class of operations whose principles are clearly explicit, but rather to that of some classifying schemes that are always already in operation: "The system of classificatory schemes is opposed to a taxonomy based on explicit and explicitly concerted principles in the same way that the dispositions constituting taste or ethos (which

are dimensions of it) are opposed to aesthetics or ethics.” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471)

According to Bourdieu's approach, the distinction safeguards the exclusivity of a classification with which the individual identifies or allows to clearly distance the subject from the enclosed collective. Be that as it may and regardless of the degree of consciousness, the social subject (always in need of occupying a place in the social space) can never stop playing the game of distinctions. But the fact of distinguishing oneself inevitably implies at the same time the fact of classifying others by determining who is imitated and from whom each subject is distinguished, to the extent that any classification always establishes a rank. Classification systems differ in that they can be based on economic position, socially relevant influences or contacts, as well as knowledge endorsed by the educational and cultural system. Subjects cannot renounce to participate in classification operations, but they can fight to discredit classification systems in which they do not have opportunities to be well valued and can also legitimize as the authentic or the best the one in which they can occupy a significant position:

Any individual or group insofar as he or it is a potential object of categorization, can only retaliate against the partial perception which limits it to one of its characteristics by highlighting, in its self-definition, the best of its characteristics, and, more generally, by struggling to impose the taxonomy most favourable to its characteristics, or at least to give to the dominant taxonomy the content most flattering to what it has and what it is. (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 475-476)

### Final comments

Why is it important for contemporary Social Psychology to return to the ideas of these three classics of sociology? A retrospective view on Simmel's thought helps to distinguish the specific scientific field of Social Psychology from the field of Sociology: Social Psychology preferably deals with the behavioural uniformity of many individuals, thanks to which interesting regularities can be envisioned. These regularities must meet an essential requirement: they have to be the result of reciprocal influences between individual subjects. Furthermore, it has to be considered that the extension of social topology to *virtual* space – nowadays accessible almost anywhere, at any moment- is opening a horizon of networked social life where imitation and distinction are working as those theoretically defended by Tarde. Since new research methods in Social Psychology are appearing and changing the mode of experimental design according to the parameters of computational Social Psychology (Vallacher et al., 2017) based on the use of technology that allows high-speed computing, it seems reasonable to expect (if Tarde was right) that new phenomena strongly related to imitation and distinction occur given the networked nature of the virtual space (see note 1 below). It is known that the studies of Kahneman, Tversky (2003, p. 1449) and Thaler (1999, p. 183) on limited rationality and mental accounting –among others- have installed Psychology in Economics refuting the theoretical foundation grounded on *homo oeconomicus*. Analogously, the verification of the qualitative change that the growing functioning

of social networking implies could finally install Social Psychology at the very heart of sociological research. Whatever it may be, a framework to interpret such phenomena is provided by the fact that imitation and distinction appear as something closely related to social classifications, as Bourdieu pointed out.

### Notes

(1) The implicit presence of these two concepts in Social Psychology can be found over the last seven decades in some remarkable publications. The following nine research pieces just show the relevance of a retrospective approach on the contributions of these three *heterodox* sociologists, given the fact that these authors considered imitation and distinction as fundamental interpretive keys to understand the different forms of socialization (obviously, this does not imply that Simmel, Tarde and Bourdieu always *intended* these concepts in the same manner. Moreover, because these two key concepts are not always well defined in the literature, providing a critical definition of them could be a relevant theoretical topic, but this is something that exceeds the scope of this article).

The first one is Asch's (1951) famous experiment on conformity. As is known, the social pressure of the group leads the experimental subject to give an answer that he or she considers false by imitating the group. The second one is the famous study by Moscovici (1961) on the social popularization of psychoanalysis, impossible without the imitative propagation of the use of its own language, to the point where “although each group does not have its own psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis belongs to it in some way (this also eliminates everything that goes too directly against the obvious signs of his identity).” (Moscovici, 1979, p. 123) The third one (Bandura et al., 1967, p. 16) clearly showed how it is possible to overcome the phobias that hinder the social integration of the individual by observing the behaviour of others to later imitate it. The fourth one is known for studying the effect of false consensus (Ross et al., 1977, p. 279), which shows how deviant behaviours are justified in the supposed imitation of the behaviours of others. The fifth one (Rosenfield et al., 1982) discovered that, once an act of symbolic inclusion (token) is performed with a minority, subjects show a lower willingness to compromise compared to those who had not performed such an act. The effect increases when the action involved dealing with a negative stereotype, compromising social distinction in a symbolic act of imitation forced by political correctness. The sixth one (Hoffman & Hurst, 1990, p. 197) focused on the relationship between stereotypes and rationalization of differences and allowed to conclude that gender roles have to do with the unequal distribution of roles among groups, acquired by imitation. The seventh one (Quiamzade & Mugny, 2009, p. 652) studies the phenomenon of inducibility within collaborative work in groups. Certain subjects strive to distinguish their behaviour from that of other team members even when the expertise of these others is well known. The eighth one (Lin & Utz, 2015, p. 29) examined the imitative contagion of emotions in virtual social networks and drew a conclusion as interesting as expected: positive emotions are felt to a greater degree the closer the subject is on the network who shares them. The last one (Lin, 2018) is a study on the link that relates

envy to social networks and to the tendency to acquire goods or to the way consumers experience such purchase decisions. Two types of envy are distinguished: healthy and unhealthy. The first triggers the acquisition of the same good or the enjoyment of an experience very similar to the one that causes it (imitation). The second leads the subjects to purchase a different good with a higher price or to consume an “experience” linked to a higher social and economic status (distinction).

Certainly, there is also relevant research that calls into question the importance of imitation for our behaviour, such is the case of phenomena like the ‘diffusion of responsibility’ and the bystander effect’ (Darley & Latané, 1968).

(2) For Simmel, the object of Sociology is not “society” but socialization; on this, it is indeed possible to make an autonomous scientific discourse. Social Psychology fits into the field resulting from the intersection between the domains of individual Psychology and Sociology: in this field appear those phenomena constituted by forms of socialization that account for phenomena genuinely belonging to individual Psychology, both those that belong to the specific field of personality Psychology as those that correspond to the Social Psychology of cognition, whose objects of study also imply relevant clinical consequences (Higgins, 1992).

(3) The lack of precision of Tardean Sociology was denounced by James Mark Baldwin, in an article (Baldwin, 1894) where he specifically dealt with the issue of imitation. There he considers this as evident in its expression through the performance that organisms perform through the musculoskeletal system. That is to say, not only is it based on observation prior or parallel to the accommodation-assimilation of the behaviour of others, but imitation is not a hidden cognitive process that has to be indirectly deduced or reported through an introspective exercise, but rather behaviour that is susceptible to observation by a third party. The medium is incorporated within and reproduced by subjects; psyches endowed with a living corporeity. The self and the other (not-self) owe their identity to each other because the sense of oneself is not prior to the deployment of imitative behaviours, but it is strengthened with these so that the social factor is fundamental for account for one’s own subjectivity.

James Mark Baldwin owes his place in the History of Psychology and Biology primarily to his attempt to reconcile the evolutionary theory of natural selection with an original idea. According to this, a series of behaviours learned by imitation would be incorporated into the heritage of a species. These behaviours require some inheritable characteristic that in itself does not have to be directly relevant. As is known, when we speak of natural selection we speak of what happens with characteristics whose acquisition will correspond to the process of genetic assimilation (by virtue of the triad that constitutes the virtuous circle of selection: “random” variation, selective pressure and differential adaptation), but nevertheless a genetic assimilation is possible that is not a direct result of this process of natural selection. If so, this would provide a bridge between certain natural behaviour learned with an evolutionary sense in the initial stages of our species and what we understand by social behaviour in cultural contexts. There have been later versions of the “Baldwin effect”, such as Huxley’s, which try to show the contingent nature of the associated heritable characteristics so that such a transition can take place,

even though there is no genetically “spandrel” transmitted (Gould & Lewontin, 1979), the propagation by imitation of certain behaviours -as long as they are incorporated into their common social or community heritage- would have been enough to reduce the selective pressure or improve the chances of having offspring. It is obvious in any case that for Baldwin the question of imitative behaviour and its relevance to explain the survival of our species was fundamental to Psychology -without falling into contradictions with the theory of natural selection- in order to also understand the step from nature to culture as something progressive.

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