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Field Social Psychology

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Abstract

Field social psychology is a conceptual and methodological approach to describe, examine, and explain psychological phenomena at multiple levels of analysis with emphasis on the sociocultural environments in which people are embedded, the unfolding of psychological processes over time, and the use of ecologically valid multiple methods in conjunction. In this essay, we first define a contemporary form of field social psychology from its roots in the history of psychological study. Second, we argue for the necessity of the reemergence of this approach given the limitations of the dominant current social psychological paradigm exposed by the replication crisis. Third, we outline an integrative and actionable model of field social psychological research. We describe two contemporary examples of field social psychological research concerning climate change protests in Norway and restorative justice in the U.S.A. to illustrate this framework. We end with implications of field social psychology for developing psychological science.

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Keywords:
ecological validity, field social psychology, history of social psychology, replication crisis, qualitative methods

Field social psychology is a conceptual and methodological approach to studying how individuals and groups think, feel, and act in context. It guides psychological research of unfolding societal phenomena by privileging the contextualized use of multiple methods, at different levels of analysis, in ecologically valid ways, amid dynamic, unfolding contexts. In this articulation of field social psychology, we recognize that these pursuits are rooted in the very origins of social psychology. At its core, social psychology involves understanding how individuals' thoughts, actions, and feelings interact with the actual or imagined presence of others, including social norms (Allport, 1968). Engagement with forms of field social psychological research has been marginalized within contemporary social psychology. Our intention in this essay is to redefine the conceptual basis of field social psychology and demonstrate its place in contemporary social psychology by systematically answering three related questions: What is it? Why do we need it? And how do we do it?

The current in vogue approaches in our discipline tend to emphasize the manipulation of independent and dependent variables in the laboratory or online. People's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are widely assumed to be understandable by carefully testing predictions derived from theoretically informed hypotheses. Experimental testing of relevant variables is the gold standard of social psychology. One important underlying assumption is that complex societal phenomena be unpacked and clarified primarily via simplified experimental and correlational procedures. Another assumption is the processes unpacked in the laboratory or online can be meaningfully extrapolated to inform our understandings of people in their real, lived societal contexts.

These assumptions can lead to theories in social psychology—as well as the hypotheses and experimental findings tied to them—becoming too separated from how individuals and groups *actually* think, feel, and behave (Sullivan, 2020). Yet, the primary aim of social psychological research is to comprehend people's cognition, emotions, and actions as individuals or groups. It is not to explain the results of other experiments (Reicher, 2017). Therefore, by following the dominant in vogue model, social psychologists run the risk of separating their research from the actual, complex, dynamic, and contextually situated realities of individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Power & **Velez**, 2020).

Experimental social psychology is not the only game in town. There are historical, conceptual, and practical reasons why methodological plurality is needed to study the individual and groups in context—a primary pursuit of social psychology as a discipline (Allport, 1968; Faye, 2012; Fiske & Shweder, 1986; Rozin, 2001). These reasons motivate the broader discussion of field social psychology in this paper. First, we answer, "What is field social psychology?" We draw on conceptual, theoretical,

and methodological issues in social psychology to motivate a novel and expanded definition of this once and future social psychological approach. Second, we address, "Why do we need field social psychology?" We argue the contemporary replication crisis illustrates the inherent limitations of an overreliance on experimental methods to holistically comprehend how individuals and groups think, feel, and act in context. This limitation justifies why a paradigmatic expansion of social psychological research is needed to meaningfully and holistically understand people in context. We suggest a largely unacknowledged possible response to the replication crisis is expanding the current paradigm with various and integrated field methodologies. These methods are widely used in related social scientific disciplines, but are side-lined in contemporary social psychology. Third, we provide a response to "How does one do field social psychology?" We present a multimethod, ecologically valid, integrative framework to conduct field social psychological research. We discuss two examples of field social psychological research: investigating a climate change protest movement in Norway and adolescents' meaning making of school-based restorative justice in the United States. These two case studies are meant to illuminate a pathway forward rather than be a definitive blueprint of what inherently must be a semiflexible, reflexive, research agenda to study the individual in context. In our discussion of these examples, we also highlight practical issues and barriers, and ways to overcome them, when conducting field social psychology. As a whole, we argue for social psychologists to consider field social psychology as a conceptual and methodological approach to advance psychological science.

What is Field Social Psychology?

Field social psychology is a conceptual and methodological approach to comprehend individuals and groups in context. It draws on both historical and current theory and methods from across the social sciences. The function of field social psychology is to effectively study, describe, and explain complex human thought, feeling, and behavior, within unique social, dynamic, and temporal contexts, through an application of ecologically valid mixed-methods, at multiple levels of analysis, and over time.

As social psychologists, we are interested in understanding humans' thoughts, feelings, and behavior–from the radical to the mundane. But there is a separation between the experimental methods social psychologists typically use and holistically understanding people in context. Social psychological theories, broad hypotheses, and predictions derived from them, are often generated within one cultural context at a specific period of time. Nevertheless, they are frequently presented as ahistorical and relevant across time and place (Gergen, 1973; Shweder, 2010; Sullivan, 2020). As such, social psychological theories are often isolated from dynamic and overlapping social spheres.

This isolation raises two related problems. First, social worlds are inherently shifting; people experience and make-making of their subjective realities in different ways over time. People develop–that is, they change cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally–amid fluid social, political, and cultural trends, processes, ruptures, and norms. Experiments and the theories based on them, however, cannot replicate the dynamic nature of individual development and socioecological systems. Laboratory work may be particularly ill-suited to addressing phenomenology; that is, the ways people make meaning of these changes (both personal and contextual; Power et al., 2018; Power & **Velez**, 2020; Shweder, 1997; Smedslund, 2015). Second, experiments capture only partial components of more complex processes because they are conducted in a particular zeitgeist at one specific time-point. More broadly, this limitation underlies a common criticism that experiments in social psychology are not explaining real

social psychological behavior because they are separated from unfolding psychological processes embedded in context.

Social psychologists who use experiments to understand the individual in context are like photographers capturing social reality with the images of certain moments. These pictures of the social world reveal and conceal. It matters where the camera is pointed, what image is taken, who takes the photograph, what the broader context is, how the image is explained, and whether other snapshots of reality reveal a similar picture or not. We use this metaphor because it demonstrates that while there is deep value in experimental methods—much as there is valuable information captured in a snapshot—it is not a complete framework contextualized in time and space.

The predominance of the experimental method of counting, measuring, calculating–rather than observing, describing, and exemplifying–lies in the ontological basis of contemporary social psychological research. The world of "quanta" is a world rid of human subjectivities. It is a world of knowable truths that exist without humans' concepts of them. The function, contours, and reality of these phenomena can be described and examined using quantitative measures and by manipulating variables and analyzing outcomes. In contrast, the world of "qualia" is a world of human subjectivities, representations, experiences, and meaning-making processes. It is the "social world" that exists because of people, and their understandings of it, and cannot be studied in isolation from the lived context within which they are embedded or how they make sense of this world (Shweder, 1996).

On a practical level, diverse methods can complement one another with the aim to understand thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in context over time. On an ontological level there is good reason to doubt the utility of using experimental methods to comprehend phenomena in the world of qualia. Rozin (2001, 2009) insightfully exemplifies this point through a parody of fictitious grant applications to describe and understand football. Applying a narrow experimental lens to football, you might end up funding research into players as they are the most common people on the field of play. Of course, the meaning of–and people's experiences with–football for fans, referees, and society would not be addressed with this approach. Nor would the rules, the structure, or tactics. Rozin's point is to identify how ridiculous it is to study the specific details of a field without first observing it. His example underscores the often-repeated emphasis on research questions driving research methods. Yet, in the modern discipline of social psychology—and in the training of future researchers in the field—scholars become specialists and limited to the methods in which they are well versed. Experimental and quantitative methods are not an issue in and of themselves, but their supremacy at the expense of others, then, becomes more problematic as the theories and empirical work derived from them are not challenged, expanded, or integrated with other approaches.

Historical Roots

It is not our intention to revisit these well-worn debates that have been extensively documented by our colleagues, but rather to articulate what a return to field social psychology has to offer. Psychology did not always have such an overemphasis on experimental methods to understand people. Social psychologists were often inspired by major social and political realities taking place in the world around them. They provided dynamic models to understand social phenomena in context. In this section we highlight these historical roots as a foundation for presenting a novel approach to help guide contemporary social psychologists. While current trends in social psychology may marginalize field

methods, we draw on this historical grounding to assert that they are critical elements of understanding how individuals' thoughts, actions, and feelings interact with their social groups and influences.

In the late 19th Century, William Wundt conceptualized a two tier, multimethod, form of psychological inquiry in his Leipzig laboratory. On one level he and his students performed basic perceptual studies. The hypotheses tested with these investigations were often derived from real world observations. In turn, the results of these quantitative studies were meant to inform understandings of the real world (Jahoda, 2007). This dialogical model, articulated most clearly by Wundt later in his life, illustrates two important points. First, dialogism suggests a process ontology lying at the basis of psychological research. Second, on a practical methodological level, Wundt's articulation provides a theoretical road map for using quantitative and qualitative methods in conjunction. The aim of this dualistic conceptualization of psychological science was to holistically understand social phenomena (Ellis & Stam, 2015).

The explicit conceptualization of "Field Theory" gained visibility and influence from the work of Kurt Lewin (1939, 1951). In contrast to the dominant behavioristic views of the time, field theory aimed to recontextualize the individual in their environment. From this perspective, human behavior could best be comprehended as a function of the individual person and their subjective perceptions of their objective environment. Lewin advocated for a Galilean, rather than Aristotelian, perspective on psychology. A Galilean perspective emphasized the discovery of universal laws from field research. In contrast, the Aristotelian perspective emphasized a "historic-geographic" viewpoint and values and beliefs particular to those historical and contextualized field understandings. Lewin's strength was to highlight the importance of comprehending the individual in context. A main limitation of his approach was to operate from a static ontology and to assume the creation of "useful theories" that were generalizable across history and cultures because they were considered to capture universal aspects of psychological functioning.

In contrast to the Galilean ontological perspective espoused by Lewin, a more complete and contemporary definition of field social psychology is based in process ontology and highlights the importance of comprehending social psychological phenomena as unfolding, in context, over time. To this end, our definition of field social psychology is based on Aristotelian ontological perspective and aims to examine and explain thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, in context, over time, with multiple-methods, at different levels of analysis. This expanded definition emphasizes a more comprehensive conceptualization of the person and ways of understanding their thoughts, feelings, and actions than using experimental methods alone. Additionally, the temporal dimension illuminates the importance of documenting and describing, examining and explaining, these phenomena as they unfold, and perhaps change, over time.

Nonetheless, Lewin and his students had immense influence, particularly with advocating for the experimental method in psychological science. The legacy of his approach to field theory is that studies are often reduced to experiments at the expense of pluralistic and integrative field methodologies. Explaining this trajectory, Rozin (2001) argues social psychologists tried to emulate more developed "hard sciences" such as biology and physics without doing the necessary descriptive, exploratory, and observational work that these other sciences are built on. Rozin contrasts publications in generally

acknowledged “top journals” in biology and psychology. He finds publications in biological journals are often focused on describing and charting the contours of observed phenomena. In contrast, premier psychology journals privilege experimental manipulations at the expense of observational or descriptive studies of social life. As evidence, there were no descriptive or observational studies published in the top tier social psychological journals in 2017 (Power et al., 2018).

The Boundaries of Field Social Psychology: Strengths and Limitations

A strength of field social psychological research comes from understanding phenomena close to the actual context in which individuals are embedded and through the ways they experience it, by using multiple methods, at multiple levels of analysis, over time. This definition also offers an important bridge between integrative field methods and experimental social psychology. Conducting experiments in the field can help researchers get the best of both worlds. Innovative empirical research is being conducted in diverse cultural contexts by colleagues in psychology (Broockman & Kalla, 2016; Cialdini, 1993; Paluck, 2009), behavioral economics (List & Rasul, 2011), with some even claiming field, as opposed to lab experiments, offer greater control (Al-Ubaydli & List, 2015). In our contemporary articulation, field social psychology moves beyond current models of how research in the field can intersect with experiments and laboratory investigations, such as the “full-cycle” model (Mortensen & Cialdini, 2010). The framework in these current models presents the natural world as a place to identify and later validate experimental work to isolate phenomena and their underlying mechanisms. We advance upon this position. We assert that lived contexts, including their dynamic nature unfolding over time and its inherent interconnection with the way individuals experience and make meaning of these social worlds, must be considered in and of themselves. Experimental methods have a role, but should not subjugate more expansive field work.

Asserting this strength must be balanced by also acknowledging limitations. First, being contextually embedded and close to individuals makes it difficult to control confounding variables to clarify and explain the documented phenomena. Experimental social psychology can provide researchers with control of these factors and allow for larger samples from diverse populations. Still, lived realities defy control and isolation of variables: people operate, experience, develop, and make meaning at the intersection of complex and interconnected social and psychological dynamics. Field social psychology may be limited in neatly describing underlying mechanisms or personality traits, but offers vast potential for temporal, integrative, understandings of social psychological phenomena in context.

Experimental laboratory methods involve clear and direct obtrusion (Webb et al., 1999). People are removed from their naturalistic surroundings. They know they are being observed, and their answers recorded, in the artificial surroundings of a psychology laboratory. In a different manner, field social psychology is also limited by less clear and indirect obtrusion by the researcher into the lives of participants. Subjective claims are made all the time regarding choice of location, research questions, participants, cocreation, and interpretation of data, as well as writing and publishing reports. These levels of obtrusion mean claims of objectivity cannot easily be made. Field social psychological researchers are embedded in the contexts they investigate. Articulation of the researchers' reflexivity—laying bare these subjective decisions—is essential in field social psychological research.

Though it is less often acknowledged, experimental social psychologists have high levels of obtrusion and make subjective choices all the time. What questions get asked by whom to whom, what is and is

not measured and counted, how results are interpreted, what "significance" means (statistical or otherwise), how research is written, published, and communicated; these are all located within the subjective ontological qualia world shared with field social psychological research. One difference between field and laboratory social psychology is in levels of direct or indirect obtrusion. Another difference is in openness to reflecting upon the inherent subjectivities of conducting social psychological research within the two traditions. Yet, all methods involve obtrusion into the lives of others. A strength of field social psychology is generally less obtrusion than traditional laboratory-based experimentation. Moreover, field social psychology offers wider variance in degrees of direct and indirect obtrusion. Field experiments are most obtrusive within field social psychology. Naturalistic observation is least intrusive. Reflection and contextualization help make transparent the obtrusion of the field researcher, which is seldom the case in laboratory based experimental social psychology.

Two Unclassified, Classic Examples

To enrich description of what field social psychology is, we offer two concrete examples spanning from different eras. While these researchers did not label their work as "field social psychology," we use them to demonstrate that the approach and methods has been an insightful part of social psychology for decades. Our goal is to link historical foundations and contemporary manifestations both to demonstrate what field social psychology entails and assert that it is a form of social psychology despite its marginalization in currently predominant paradigms. Later, we detail more specifically what using a field social psychology approach looks like through current examples of our own work.

A first example comes from a research project that aimed to understand the role of identity formation in the intergenerational transmission of intergroup prejudice and conflict. In *Narrative and the Politics of Identity: The Cultural Psychology of Israeli and Palestinian Youth*, Phil Hammack challenges fundamental ideas about intergroup contact as reducing prejudice (Hammack, 2011). In particular, he demonstrates that for these young people, alternative narratives about themselves and the groups they belong to create dissonance with their experience and processing of social norms and developing personal identities. These insights on psychological processes emerge from an integration across different methodologies that are based in the field—that is, in the lived experience of these young people. Hammack spent multiple years engaging in this multimethod synthesis: learning about and participating in two coexistence peace education programs for Israeli and Palestinian youth; taking detailed notes on the interactions and lessons in the programs; engaging in informal discussions with these young people and their families; and conducting semistructured life history interviews with select participants. The findings—that have implications not only for efforts to promote peace in the Middle East, but more generally for how intergroup conflict and prejudice are tied to identity processes across generations—integrate the various methods embedded within the context Hammack was studying.

As another example, Festinger and colleagues' *Social Pressures in Informal Groups* provides an exemplary illustration of the use of multimethod research, where each method overcomes the limitations of the last to describe and explain the creation of social norms within groups over time (Festinger et al., 1950). The researchers took advantage of the formation of two new groups: former military officers and their wives moving in to two new housing estates close to the M.I.T. campus. The researchers developed an interlinked, multimethod design to describe, examine, and explain the

formation of groups and the processes underlying the social networks. The first, and only, continuous method used by the researchers was observation. Naturalistic observation throughout led to the generation and refining of hypotheses and explanations of group formations. Participant observation was then followed by semistructured interviewing with a sample of residents from the two neighborhoods. Formal interviewing occurred with a larger range of respondents. Quantification of formalized interviewing, coupled with qualitative analyses of interview data and consistent observation, led to the generation of a field experiment to test a hypothesis about the structure of informal groups. The researchers planted a rumor and gathered data on how it spread among the group. Analyses showed how knowledge spread throughout the new neighborhoods and informed the researchers' theorizing about group structure. The findings generated from this in-depth, qualitative–quantitative approach, over time, could be generalized to provide insights into other instances of group formation.

These are well known examples of field social psychology that span different times and contexts. They illustrate the benefit of field social psychology as a conceptual and methodological approach by demonstrating observed effects as they occur over time in the world, using multiple methods to triangulate our comprehension of these observed phenomena, and generating new hypotheses to develop social psychology. These studies never intended to be end points: science progresses through falsification of testable hypotheses (Popper, 2005). The value of these studies was describing social worlds, demonstrating social psychological processes, and generating ecologically valid hypotheses about how the world worked.

Why Do We need Field Social Psychology?

Laboratory experimental social psychology has grappled with multiple challenges in recent years. In this section we outline these critiques and the dominant way experimental social psychologists have aimed to overcome these challenges. We argue that although social psychological science has advanced by replying to these critiques, more can be done. Field social psychology can expand the discipline's paradigm. An advantage of this is to expand theory and methods to understand individuals in contexts over time. This is achieved both by conceptually extending the social psychological paradigm and by utilizing multiple methods to triangulate our understanding of social phenomena.

The Open Science Collaboration (2015) identified the majority of one cohort of experiments published in premier psychology journals did not replicate under more stringent conditions. Since the publication of this seminal research, other large-scale interlab collaborations have highlighted a similar pattern of nonreplication of results sampled from the most prestigious academic journals. Indeed, the unfolding of the replication crisis, coupled with earlier critiques of experimental social psychology, has opened the door for a list of concerns with the experimental method: a focus on atypical populations; a prizing of novel findings at the expense of replication; lack of preregistered experimental designs and analyses; overreliance on using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) samples that are not probability samples; a general divorcing of psychological research from historical, cultural, social, economic, legal, contexts; an over reliance on the experimental method to capture the complexities of human experiences and meaning-making processes; the lack of mixed method integration; the failure of experimentalists, in general, to study unfolding temporal process; the lack of reporting of different results from studies conducted simultaneously using different methods (Zwaan et al., 2018). There are

clearly many concerns, and yet the problems with method variance are often glossed over. Experiments are still prized and disseminated, especially when they cut through the noise and signal a clear counterintuitive or surprising finding that (re-)orientates our understanding of a certain phenomenon.

Responses to the replication crisis in psychology have sought to improve transparency and the rigor of research designs, hypotheses generation, statistical analyses, and norms surrounding the sharing of data and replicating findings with different samples. Our argument moves beyond the realm of experiments and quanta: to reexpand the social psychological paradigm to include field social psychological approaches and methodologies. Improved quantification procedures are essential to develop sound social psychology. However, field social psychological concepts and methods offer another line of generative research capable of providing more valid, reliable, and holistic understandings of dynamic individuals and groups in context.

How Do We Do Field Social Psychology?

There are multiple ways to undertake field social psychological research. Flexibility and synthesis are important: there is not a one size fits all model. In practice, a combination of methods helps to triangulate a more holistic comprehension of social phenomena (Denzin, 2012). The multiple methods used in field social psychology are informed by both contemporary and classic research in the discipline as well as our definition of contemporary field social psychology. In this section, we first present concrete methods falling under the umbrella of field social psychology and discuss how these can be integrated in a synthetic, complementary way.

In the forthcoming section we discuss six broad methodological approaches in isolation. However, these frameworks are used in conjunction because each has its own scopes and limits. We have argued elsewhere for the utility of using multiple methods—spanning qualitative and quantitative investigative procedures—to holistically comprehend social psychological phenomena (Power et al., 2018). We first outline six methods in isolation that, when used in conjunction with other methods, can be conceptualized as a field social psychological approach. After presenting each method, we discuss their integration as well as challenges and ways to overcome these challenges to conducting field social psychological research.

Method 1: Naturalistic Observation

Naturalistic observation of social phenomena lies at the basis of field social psychological research. This method is implicit, and rarely made explicit, in much current social psychological research. Some authors even refer to social psychological research as ODD—an acronym for “Observation and Description Deprived” (Rai & Fiske, 2010). In contrast, field social psychological research prioritizes initial and intentional observations about social, political, economic, and other contemporary phenomena.

For example, in the classic field study *When Prophecy Fails*, Festinger, Schachter, and Reicken (Festinger et al., 1956) made observations on two levels. First, the authors read a media report about a group who predicted the end of the world. Undeterred by the fact that the world did not end, the group recalculated the next date the world was likely to end (due to flooding). This piqued the interest of the researchers. Next, they infiltrated the group. Although considered unethical by today’s

standards, the researchers integrated into this secretive and initially untrusting group. The researchers observed the group dynamics, overheard phone conversations, and attended meetings. In this particular case study, the authors were not passive observers, but moved from naturalistic observation to participant observation.

Naturalistic observation is a core, primary method of field social psychology. The implication is further steps in the research process are bound to observations about the "real world" and how individuals operate and make meaning within it. Naturalistic observation—recorded and systematic or more general and exploratory—is generative of further research. Although naturalistic observation lies at the basis of field social psychological research, it should be a flexible method used to guide research from the generation of hypotheses and predictions to interpreting and analyzing research findings.

Method 2: Participant Observation

Participant observation is a mainstay of research in psychological anthropology and an invaluable method in field social psychology. Participant observation pertains to the researcher as an embedded and active agent in a particular field context. In ethnographic research reported in the essay *Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight* the anthropologist Clifford Geertz provides a classic example of participant observation in developing understandings of Balinese individuals within their localized context (Geertz, 1973). During their first week in this Balinese village, Geertz and his wife were treated as though they were not there: "we were nonpersons, specters, invisible men [sic]" (p. 412). However, when Geertz and his wife attended an illegal cockfight in the village, their fortunes changed when the fight was raided by police. Their intention had been to observe the local cultural activity to glean insights into Balinese people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors through this group activity. Instead, fearing arrest, Geertz and his wife fled with the rest of the attendants. They followed a local couple and ended up, uninvited, in their back-yard sipping tea. When a police officer came in, the local couple leapt to the Geertz' defense, explaining to the police they were American researchers, studying culture, and intended to write a book to tell Americans about life in Bali. Through observing the cockfight, and then participating in the event by fleeing the police, Geertz gained the trust and credibility of the local population who no longer treated them as total outsiders. Gaining acceptance led to "thickly descriptive" ethnographic field research reported in the classic *Interpretations of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973).

Becoming part of a group offers inherent pros and cons for a researcher. Of course, one concern with participant observation is the obtrusion of the researcher into the local community and the resultant explicit subjective interpretations of the coupling of researcher and participants. Although less intrusive than experimental social psychological methods, detractors of this more ethnographic approach argue this introduces noise, confounding variables, and distorts both the context and how individuals respond. An advantage, however, is gaining access to key informants, getting closer to the phenomena to be documented, examined, and comprehended. This is called "thick description" (Geertz, 1973; Shweder, 1997). Observations may easily lead to participation and possibly gaining access to key informants. These are an atypical sample of people who serve as an entry point to help you stay close to the observed phenomena of interest. The problem is a lack of representativeness: these people could be motivated to describe or articulate particular views of the social world and its

actors from their viewpoint. Yet, like any methodological tool in field social psychology, these concerns can be balanced by synthesizing analyses from participant observation with other methods over time.

Method 3: Informal Interviewing

Participant observation and building relationships with key informants can open up the possibility of gaining insight through informal interviewing. Informal interviewing allows the field researcher to ask orientating questions about how individuals are thinking, feeling, and acting in a specific context or in relation to a specific phenomenon. These forms of interviewing require few exclusive questions. They are largely nondirective but like every social psychological method, still involves some level of obtrusion, as the researchers is a cocreator of knowledge with interviewees. The aim is to allow for the flow of conversation. It allows interviewees to describe, explain, and examine the social phenomenon of interest with minimal directive input.

Informal interviewing with one or more key informants orients the field researcher within the specific contextual dynamics. It provides preliminary data, has potential for interpretative frameworks, and engenders questions, hunches, and hypotheses that can be explored further with more systematic approaches such as semistructured and standardized interviews. Informal interviewing is often not discussed explicitly in social psychological research, but in conjunction with other data can provide insights into populations that may be difficult to access or conduct research on formally. Terrorist groups, and the individuals who join them, are one example of such a case. Drawing on informal interviewing as part of a broader endeavor, Fathali Moghaddam has built a theoretical framework for involvement in terrorist groups (Moghaddam, 2005, 2006). Years of interviewing during Moghaddam's time in the Persian Gulf Region built a basis for modeling engagement as a five-step staircase that articulates the psychological processes at each stage and the motivation for movement to the next. Some "climb the staircase to terrorism" having failed to deal with feelings of unequal treatment and relative deprivation through legal or political means. Of this group, only some become polarized and see "the west" as an outgroup enemy. Of these, fewer still reach the next step of the staircase and come under the charge of influential and polarizing leaders who convince them to reach the final stage of the staircase: committing a terrorist act. While further investigation was needed to define this staircase, it emerged from a foundation of widespread informal interviewing (Moghaddam, 2005, 2006).

Method 4: Semistructured Interviewing

Semistructured interviews allow for a series of flexible interview questions—generated from theory, observations, participant observation, and informal interviewing—to be asked of a greater sample (Brinkmann, 2013). The field researcher can ask similar questions derived from previous field work or theory of a broad number of participants while still being flexible enough to allow for the exploration of deviations that could prove generative of different opinions, representations, and attitudes toward the social world. Responses can be coded or quantified for top-down analyses with a large sample set and in relation to one another. They can also be approached by inductively exploring meanings and experiences.

The analyses can be generative of other methods that can be more effectively quantified if need be. Surveys, which can be administered in the field or online, can be produced from semistructured or

standardized interviewing. Moreover, the results of large-scale surveys that gain broad, but superficial, responses to complex social phenomena can be better understood in relation to the thickly descriptive fieldwork (Power et al., 2018).

Method 5: Field Experiments

Experimentation—the controlled manipulation of independent variables and their effects on dependent variables—is an essential feature of social psychological research (Paluck & Cialdini, 2014; Reyna, 2004). But it is not limited to quantified studies in a lab. Field experiments are an integral method in field social psychology and are one way to overcome limitations of qualitative interviewing. They entail experiments conducted in the field with high levels of ecological validity but are directly obtrusive. This is because participants know they are being observed and recorded in an experimental setting. The experimental materials and procedures are derived from naturalistic observation and interviewing, and analyses may draw on observation and interviewing after the introduction of a stimuli into the research context.

Field experiments, like any one method, have their strengths and weaknesses, and are part of an integrative multimethod approach. While field experiments often have high levels of ecological validity and are “close” to participants’ lived experience, they are also directly obtrusive and they may also introduce confounding variables because they are embedded in the complexity of everyday social worlds. Although field researchers aim to limit the amount of “noise” in these experiments, one can never be entirely sure of the causality of observed, or reported, effects on the dependent variable.

Despite this, field experiments have historically been generative of important insights in social psychology. An excellent example comes from the work of Paluck (2009), who demonstrated the efficacy and limits of radio to communicate social norms and influence intergroup behaviors through a field study randomly assigning communities to different radio programs in Rwanda.

Method 6: A Note About Online or Lab Experiments

We suspect many colleagues in social psychology will most readily identify with the utility of field experimentation. After all, the same logic of online and lab experimentation applies. Experiments in the field are often seen as “the cherry on top” of lab experiments. Effects seen in the lab or online studies are demonstrated “in the field” and serve as a replication of lab results. Specifically, taking these hypotheses to the field boosts the ecological validity of findings that have high levels of internal validity in lab studies.

Yet, a field social psychology framework reverses this dynamic to ground research in the ecological context and lived experiences of those being studied. For example, while the role of mass media in shaping social norms is widely accepted, understanding how different media can actually influence psychological processing and intergroup relations cannot be devoid of cultural and social context.

Integrating Across Methods: Practicalities, Challenges, and Opportunities

We outline these methods for conducting field social psychology research not as isolated tools, but rather with the intent that they can be applied in integration. To this end, field social psychology can be practically and precisely conducted based on the formulation of two metamethodological models that have been previously detailed: *SAGE* and *MOVE* (Power et al., 2018; Power & **Velez**, 2020). *SAGE* is

a *Synthetic* model where qualitative methods are *Augmentative* to quantitative methods, where they are *Generative* of novel hypotheses that could be tested experimentally, and where they could be used to examine *Experiences*. Moreover, a model was also developed to frame research practices with a specific focus on comprehending and documenting how people experience, and make-meaning of, sociopolitical phenomena that unfold over time. Under the title of the *MOVE* framework, it was outlined how being attentive to *Meanings*, *Observations*, *Viewpoints*, and *Experiences* of relevant stakeholders as sociopolitical phenomena developed is one way to holistically incorporate a wise, or *SAGE*, multimethod model of inquiry (Power et al., 2018).

These models can guide implementation of the methods described above for field social psychology research because both are based in a "process" ontology that views the world of qualia as dynamic. Conducting research through multiple methods over time is a core principle of field social psychology. Moreover, both *SAGE* and *MOVE* dictate using multiple methods spanning qualitative and quantitative procedures in a synthetic manner. All methods reveal and conceal, but used in conjunction—with the ontological bases in dynamic, subjective, and experiential views of the social world—multiple methods can overcome the limits of singular ones used in isolation.

The *SAGE* model can be flexibly applied to field social psychology. For example, initial open-ended participant observation can be used to document the experiences of individuals or groups in a community or culture. Or, these methods can be used to generate hypotheses, and related predictions, to develop meaningful experimental tasks to further unpack or describe sense-making or experiences in the field. Alternatively, and contrastingly, ethnographic or qualitative methods when conducted in the field can unpack insights from surveys or experimental studies that lack ecological validity to further document and describe how individuals make-meaning of, and experience, their social, communal, and cultural contexts. An idealized version of field social psychological research would be to have these "Augmentative, Generative, and Experiential" aspects of the *SAGE* models used in "Synthetic" conjunction over time.

The *MOVE* framework offers a temporal dimension—both ontologically and epistemologically—to conduct field social psychological research. In contrast to one-time experiments or snap-shot surveys, field social psychological research values the embeddedness of a researcher in a context over time. In practice, this involves gaining access to a field-site, meeting with key informants, charting the psychological landscape, and reflecting on one's direct or indirect obtrusiveness, power, positionality, and ethical responsibilities to individuals, communities, and knowledge construction. It entails generating a broad initial research question to orientate informed curiosity and then aligning and integrating appropriate methods to gain evidence to inductively (from theory) or deductively (developing theory). In reality, our view is that most field social psychological research is abductive. This is a combination of theoretically informed and theoretically informative research.

As with any approach, field social psychology comes with challenges and barriers. It takes time to conduct holistic, multimethod, multilevel, research over prolonged periods of time. Students need to be trained in multiple methods, to learn how these tools can and cannot be used in conjunction and at what levels of analysis and insight. Universities and funding bodies need to be convinced that advantages of field social psychology outweigh drawbacks of specialized disciplines defined by isolated methods. It can be more difficult to publish field social psychological research articles in prestigious

journals. In a “publish or perish” research culture prolonged field social psychological research with unclear prospects for publication might be unattractive from a career perspective.

These problems have solutions. Field social psychology–principles and practices—can be taught at undergraduate and graduate levels so students can be more open to the possible avenues to explore their research interests. PhD programs and doctoral advisors can train and incentivize students to preform prolonged multimethod fieldwork for at least a year. Some world-leading programs offer this choice, such as the transdisciplinary Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago (where both authors were awarded their doctoral degrees). Public and private funding bodies can be attuned to the importance of funding field research. Although field social psychological research can involve researchers spending time “in the field,” close or far from home, the expense of financing these trips can be justified in relation to the cost of running studies online or financing graduate students to live in expensive western cities. Moreover, while field social psychological research may possibly cost more than studies with online samples or with students, the value and applied impact of such ecologically valid research has the potential to surpass that of online or student studies. Journal editors can be attuned to the challenges and also benefits of field social psychological research for developing empirical and theoretical insights when social psychological research is fully or partially embedded in the field with attentiveness to temporal dynamics and meaning making processes. No journal for field social psychology exists, yet. The value of such a journal and award or recognition for field social psychological research from premier social psychology associations would help develop this perspective. Next, we highlight some of these challenges and pathways forward from two contemporary examples of field social psychology.

Contemporary Example: Protest in Norway

The Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg generated a global protest movement against inaction toward climate change. One recent case study examined how high-school students in another Scandinavian country, Norway, understood and made meaning of political inaction concerning climate change (Haugestad et al., 2021). The first two authors of that study—who did this field social psychological project as their MA thesis—conducted thickly descriptive observations (Geertz, 1973) and participated in a series of high-school strikes and other demonstrations throughout 2019 in Oslo. They conducted randomly sampled interviews with protesters to understand why young people in Norway organized and attended these “#FridayForFuture” protests. Thematic analysis suggested protestors experienced a sense of shared responsibility for both causing and addressing climate change. The demonstrators highlighted the importance of implementing policy changes at the structural level. Moreover, these school strikers constructed a shared identity as “the future” that motivated engagement with the protest movement because striking was seen as their only legitimate and effective tool to push politicians toward policy change.

Congruent with the field social psychological approach we advocate for here, these authors conducted another study to further examine the psychological processes involved in motivation for protest against political inaction to mitigate climate change. They administered a survey to a broader sample of high-school students in Oslo to further explore motivations for protest. They used insights from the ethnographic study to augment and extend past psychological research of protest intentions based on the Social Identity model of Collective Action (SIMCA; Rees & Bamberg, 2014; van Zomeren et al.,

2008). By adding novel pathways connected to group identification, the authors showed the value of generating new hypotheses and more holistically testing, and elaborating on, previous theoretical insights in social psychology via ethnographic field methods. The quantitative testing of the novel pathways led to theoretical development of the SIMCA approach to comprehend motivations to engage in collective behavior. Moreover, taken together, both field social psychology studies describe a paradox that needs to be addressed in the climate change debate: how do citizens and politicians in climate-friendly nations—such as Norway—deal with their oil-producing and wealth enhancing past? Overall, this project encapsulates the underlying principles of field social psychology: contextually situated multiple method investigations of ecologically valid phenomena that unfold over time. Moreover, this project reveals potential barriers in field social psychology can be surmounted: The two MA students successfully conducted multimethod research on an unfolding, dynamic, political event using, and advancing, multiple theories to explain the phenomenon of interest. The original thesis was awarded a U.N. prize for sustainability via the University of Oslo. The fact it was published in the premier journal in environmental psychology shows the importance of visionary editors in chief, and thoughtful reviewers, for advancing field social psychology.

Contemporary Example: Restorative Justice in the United States

A second contemporary example of field social psychology illustrates the generalizability of the conceptual and methodological approach through an application to studying the developmental impacts of school-based restorative justice. Schools systems across the world are increasingly integrating restorative practices into discipline systems and school policies (e.g., Gregory & Evans, 2020; Wong & Gavrielides, 2019). In the United States, this movement builds on growing awareness that prevailing punitive, zero tolerance approaches to addressing harm and behavioral concerns unequally target Black, Brown, and Indigenous children (e.g., Wadhwa, 2015). Focused on this potential, research has primarily addressed school behavior and discipline, academics, school environment, and best practices (Fronius et al., 2016; González et al., 2019). These outcomes, while valuable to educators, administrators, and activists, are limited for richly understanding the underlying psychological processes and the ways that these experiences can influence young people's identity development (**Velez** et al., 2020).

Studying how young people make sense of restorative justice has meant working closely with them, experiencing and seeing what the rituals and activities in their schools look like, and developing field experiments to test how and why individuals engage with these processes in their schools. This process began with participant observation and informal interviewing of educators, restorative justice practitioners, and youth. Community building circles in schools were observed and participant-observation occurred in virtual activities during the pandemic. Discussions were held with those who implement this work in schools—teachers, restorative practice coaches, administrators—to understand what these processes looked like and how they felt young people responded. Focus groups were run, and discussions were held, with students in various settings.

Though varied and at times "informal," these activities were intentionally structured and carefully documented. The systematic approach was oriented to developing understandings of the context, procedures, and salience of restorative justice to young people. From this groundwork emerged a finding that these young people's thinking about restorative practices varied based on contextual

factors, such as whether or not they knew the people involved, what type of harm was committed, and how they viewed the possibility of reconciliation. It was also found that the format of the engagement itself mattered as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic moved schools to remote learning. Adapting research to this change in context, researchers worked closely with youth practitioners to propose a model of how virtual interaction could impact young people's experience of restorative justice (**Velez** et al., 2021).

This project involves developing ecologically valid experimental tools to study the role of the contextual factors noted above. Using semistructured interviews with adolescents in diverse schools, types of harm are solicitated and responses in schools that are salient to students. From these interviews, vignettes of harm and restorative and nonrestorative responses that also vary along the identified contextual factors will be developed. These will be used in a field experiment to better understand how these young people make sense of harm and justice in relation to restorative approaches, how the varied contextual factors influence their thinking, and what limits their psychological engagement in restorative justice. The research goal is to formulate a model of the developmental impacts of restorative justice and specifically its interconnection with processes of identity and moral development.

While in many ways strikingly different than the research process on climate change protest in Norway, both examples demonstrate the flexibility of the field social psychology approach. The two projects are driven by multiple methods, across time, and with attentiveness to the lived realities and perspectives of the target populations. Furthermore, both examples demonstrate the utility of this approach for the dynamic nature of the real world. Protests are often rapidly shifting and in a constant back and forth between participants and the responses of the target (e.g., government actors, corporate decision makers). COVID-19 disrupted traditional methods of education and added numerous complexities and challenges to the growing movement of school-based restorative justice. In both, the flexibility, multiple methods, and focus on ecological validity allowed the researchers to adapt and use these changes to enrich the analysis and theoretical development.

Conclusion

As we have articulated in this article, field social psychology is a conceptual and methodological approach to describe, examine, and explain individuals and groups, in context, with multiple ecologically valid methods, at different levels of analysis, over time. This approach can lead to valid, holistic, and comprehensive insights into people's thoughts, feelings, and actions. In this essay, our aim has been to articulate what field social psychology is, why it is needed, and how we can do it. It is an argument about a core purpose of social psychology: understanding individuals and groups in context over time. This essay draws on the history of field social psychology, and advances this history, to describe "what it is" and specifically how it leads to richer, ecologically valid insights about individuals and groups.

The complexity and nuance of field social psychology is not without its challenges. Methodological pluralism takes time to master. A researcher needs to be able to conduct, interpret and synthesize, and research using multiple methods spanning observing, participating, interviewing, and experimenting.

Even with a grasp on these complexities, carrying out this work requires more time and resources than running subjects in a lab or online.

But the challenges for field social psychological research do not outweigh the potential benefits. Consistently testing theories, elaborating them, or forming newer, better, ones, is the aim of all science including social psychological science. The hallmark of social psychological research should be staying on the move between alternative methods, generating hypotheses, and testing derived predictions, from multiple methodological perspectives in ecologically valid contexts over time. Understandings can also be deepened by a greater focus on experience and meaning making of these contexts. This is because social phenomena and everyday life is similarly complex and dynamic. Our recommendation is not a common manifestation of “solutions” to the replication crisis. The dominant response to solving this crisis has been to improve experiments (registering reports, improving sampling, increasing statistical sophistication, etc.). In contrast, the aim of this article is to offer an alternative way to develop social psychological science by drawing on, and advancing, its historical roots. Field social psychology has been, and is, an integral part of understanding the social influences and context of individuals’ thoughts, actions, and feelings, which area at the heart of the discipline (Allport, 1968). A new space has opened up and the replication crisis ought to be generative of a new arena of ideas, methods, and interlinked approaches. The argument is to expand the social psychological paradigm. Models integrating laboratory and field work exist (e.g., Mortensen & Cialdini, 2010), but field social psychology offers greater depth to exploring social psychological phenomena through a focus on meaning making, integrative methods, and framing research in dynamic, changing contexts. Field social psychology offers psychological science the potential to extend both its methodological repertoire and to offer a framework to conceptualize and assess the congruence and complementarity of methodological pluralism with attention to phenomenology, temporality, and embeddedness in context. A consequence of field social psychology might be to increase our understanding of people in context with a view to creating more sustainable and just social worlds.

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