Social Psychology

Social psychology is the study of the nature, functions, and phenomena of social behaviour and of the mental experience of individuals in social contexts. It includes the study of social effects on aspects of behaviour and mental experience that are studied more generally in other branches of psychology. It also includes a number of psychological phenomena that do not arise, or in some cases cannot even be delineated, in individuals outside of their social contexts. Among these distinctively social psychological phenomena are aggression and anger, altruism and helping behaviour, social attitudes and persuasion, attraction and social relationships, attribution and social cognition, bargaining and negotiation, conformity and social influence processes, cooperation and competition, group decision making, group dynamics, language and speech, leadership and group performance, non-verbal communication and body language, obedience to authority, prejudice and intergroup conflict, self-presentation and impression management, sex roles, sexual behaviour, social learning, and socialization.

Most authorities agree that social psychology is the biochemistry of the social sciences, a field lying between sociology and on the one hand and individual psychology on the other. The field is in this sense interstitial, and it plays a pivotal role as a major social science discipline. In its theories and research, social psychology provides vital information about how social factors influence individual thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Although there remain a number of highly resonant pockets of overlapping interest in sociology, most of the research literature and most of the recent texts in social psychology have been written by psychologists. It is also the case that the early development of social psychology was dominated by theories and research generated in the United States. Many of the seminal figures behind this array of contributions did, however, emigrate from Europe in the 1930s: they included Brunswik, Heider, Katona, Lazarsfeld, and Lewin. Under the stimulus of the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology (founded in 1967), there has been considerable recent momentum towards redressing the imbalance represented by the pre-eminence of the United States. The European tradition of social psychology has tended to place more emphasis on such non-experimental approaches as discourse analysis, social representations research, and various qualitative research methodologies, in addition to experimental social psychology.

Social psychology evolved out of a recognition of human diversity within cultural uniformity. It focuses on choices and behavioural decisions among the competing options that confront us all in complex contemporary societies, and on the rich complexity of human social life. It has become a field that, more than any other, deals with the psychology of everyday life.

Historical Outline

Gordon Allport argued four decades ago (1954) that most of the major problems of concern to contemporary social psychologists were recognized as problems by social philosophers long before psychological questions were joined to scientific methodology. Perhaps the most fundamental question was posed by Comte: How can people simultaneously be the cause and the consequence of society? Although many textbook authors conveniently identify the birth date of social psychology as 1908, when two influential early texts by McDougall and Ross

were published, in a very real sense the field began to cohere and develop its own identity only in the mid-1930s and did not really take on momentum until after World War II. This coherence and subsequent momentum depended largely on the development of genuinely social theories and methods, the most influential early examples of which were the contributions of Kurt Lewin in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Partly through sustained advocacy and partly through example, Lewin championed the possibilities of experimentation in social psychology. His experimental studies of autocratic, democratic, and *laissez-faire* leadership atmospheres (with Lippitt and White in 1939) showed how complex situational variables could be manipulated, validated, and shown to produce distinctive but orderly consequences. Lewin hoped to solve the problems of generalizing from the laboratory to the 'real world' by advocating (a) the linkage of experimentation to theory and (b) the parallel conduct of laboratory and field experimentation on conceptually cognate problems.

Although there would be wide agreement that Kurt Lewin deserves the title of the father of *experimental* social psychology, there were many other influences gathering under the social psychology umbrella during the 1920s and 1930s in the United States. These included a sustained series of empirical studies on group problem solving, the invention by Thurstone (1929) and Likert (1932) of ingenious attitude measurement techniques, and the development of respondent sampling and survey research methodologies.

The central identity of social psychology was to remain anchored in the experimental approach. One of Lewin's students, Leon Festinger, exemplified Lewin's emphasis on going back and forth between the laboratory and the field, and showed in particular how experimentation made sense only when it was wedded to theory. During the two post-war decades when he was active as a social psychologist, Festinger (1954, 1957) developed two theories that had a profound impact on the field. The first was a theory of social comparison processes, a detailed set of postulates and propositions concerning the consequences for social interaction of people's need for the kinds of information about themselves and the outer world that only other people could provide. The second was a theory of cognitive dissonance, which portrayed the various mental and behavioural manoeuvres by which people attempt to maintain and restore cognitive consistency. The power of this theory was greatly enhanced by Festinger's recognition that some cognitions are more resistant to change than others, and that behavioural commitment is a potent source of such resistance. This recognition permitted rather precise predictions to be made concerning the form that dissonance reduction would take in different situations, in particular that changes would usually be observed in the least resistant cognition. The ideas informing both of these theories remain important in much current social psychological thinking and have become a part of our cultural wisdom. Equally important, perhaps, the voluminous research generated by the theory of cognitive dissonance provided a clear example of coherent progress through experimental research in social science, research yielding cumulative insights that helped to refine and amplify the theory that inspired it.

Just as enthusiasm for investigating dissonance phenomena began to wane in the late 1960s, a very different kind of theoretical orientation became prominent in social psychology. This was the attributional approach to social cognition, an approach pioneered by Fritz Heider and identified with his seminal treatment of the *Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1958). The basic premise of the attributional approach is that people are motivated to understand behaviour, and readily do so by viewing it within a meaningful causal context. Our responses to others, in other words, are a function of the causes we attribute to explain their behaviour. Although initially the focus of attribution theory was almost exclusively on the perception of other people, Kelley (1967) and Bem (1967) extended the attributional

orientation to include self-perception. The perception of our own inner dispositions and emotions may sometimes be mediated by our causal evaluations of our own behaviour, taking into account relevant features of the situational context.

As the attributional orientation flourished in the early 1970s, it fed and was fed by a broad revival of interest in *social cognition*. Social psychology (at least since the subjectivism championed by W. I. Thomas) has always been interested in the ways in which people interpret their social environments, but an emphasis on detailed analyses of information processing and social cognition has become more dominant in recent years (see e.g. Fiske and Taylor, 1991). The influence of the attributional approach has been reflected in a concern with attributional biases and errors in the application of inference strategies (Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Schneider, 1994).

While these developments in social cognition were occurring within the mainstream of experimental social psychology, some social psychologists continued to concentrate on the traditional problems of social influence and group processes. Asch's (1956) classic studies of conformity and Milgram's (1974) research into obedience to authority have become standard textbook topics. In different ways, their findings showed the remarkable sensitivity of normal adults to social influence pressures. The nature of group processes was especially informed by Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) analysis of outcome exchanges in dyads and larger groups. This analysis capitalized on the contingency matrices of game theory, as well as building on both reinforcement and social comparison theories within psychology. It provided a rich and provocative framework for dealing with power relations, roles, and the development of norms, and it also influenced the development of the distinctively European social identity theory of intergroup relations. Many publications since the 1960s have dealt with complex interpersonal conflict situations that might be resolved through bargaining and negotiation. Throughout this period, also, a steady stream of articles has appeared shedding light on such social phenomena as aggression, helping behaviour, attitude change, jury decision making, crowding, social discrimination, sex-role stereotypes, the impact of television, and a variety of other applied topics. More comprehensive historical overviews – both general and within specific content areas – may be found in the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Lindzey and Aronson, 1985) and *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Zanna, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994).

Current Status of the Field
Any brief characterization of such a complex discipline must be arbitrary and selective in many respects. It is nevertheless possible to venture a few generalizations on the current status of the field that would probably recruit a reasonable consensus among social psychologists. The emphasis on experimentation has been buffeted by critical winds from several directions. Some critics have concluded that the problem of generalizing from artificial laboratory situations is insurmountable, and that there is no way to extrapolate meaningfully from the historical and contextual particularities of any given experiment. Other critics have been concerned with the ethics of those deceptive cover stories that used to be common in social psychological experiments but have become much less so with the tightening up in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere of ethical guidelines for the conduct of research with human subjects. Still others are bothered by the treatment of research subjects as manipulable objects rather than autonomous agents with whom one negotiates appropriate explanations for behaviour. Finally, there are those who feel that experimentation implies a highly restrictive form of one-way causation, misrepresenting the normal processes of situation selection and movement through complex feedback loops in which the behaviour of actors is both causal and caused.

Although many of these criticisms raise vital concerns, neither singly nor in combination are they likely to relegate the experimental approach to a secondary position in the armamentarium of social psychology. The viability of the experimental approach may be even more assured as its practitioners more clearly realize its particular strengths and its limitations. Even if the generalization problem seems insurmountable, on occasion, the design of experiments are often useful in facilitating and disciplining conceptual thought. There is no doubt, however, that non-experimental approaches will continue to make important contributions to social psychology.

The current flowering of cognitive social psychology seems to be producing new intellectual alliances and breaking down old boundaries between general experimental and social psychology. Certainly social psychologists are borrowing paradigms from the traditions of general research on attention, memory, and thinking; cognitive psychologists in turn are showing greater sensitivity to the influences of social factors. In a similar fashion, social psychological theory has shed light on such clinical phenomena as depression, alcohol and drug abuse, obesity, and a range of problems associated with symptom labelling. Although social psychology may in some respects play the role of a gadfly within the social sciences, borrowing here and lending there, it is not likely to lose its special identity as the one field especially concerned with the details of interpersonal influence. During the 1980s, the pendulum seemed to swing away from a concern with social interdependence and group phenomena towards a concern with individual information processing, but many cognitive psychologists later began to move away from the entirely non-social implications of the information-processing metaphor. Here there seems to be some divergence between the more 'individualistic' Americans and the more 'groupy' Europeans. It would be interesting if the more blatantly *social* psychology of the Europeans influenced an American revival of interest in groups. This seems to be an old story in social psychology: the study of individuals must be informed by a clear understanding of the matrices of social interdependence within which they function; the study of groups must comprehend the cognitive and motivational processes of group members. The tension between these two foci, in the long run, may be what keeps the field on its relatively straight track, in spite of temporary deviations in course.

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See also: *aggression and anger; altruism; attitudes; attribution theory; authoritarian personality; cognitive dissonance; collective behaviour and crowds; communication networks; conflict resolution; conformity; culture and personality; environmental psychology; friendship; game theory; group dynamics; loneliness; prejudice; role; reference groups; self-concept; semantic differential; sexual behaviour; socialization; social psychology of language; social skills and social skills training; stereotypes; stigma.*

What topics do social psychologists study? Find out more here. Â What is social psychology? What are its practical applications? Who are its main authors? What topics do social psychologists study? In this article, we will solve all these questions and we will comment on several examples. Learn valuable knowledge that will help you to scientifically explain your day to day. Welcome to the exciting world of social psychology. Social Psychology. Table of Contents. According to psychologist Gordon Allport, social psychology uses scientific methods "to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied the presence of other human beings."ï»¿ï»¿ Essentially, social psychology is about understanding how each person's individual behavior is influenced by the social environment in which that behavior takes place. Social psychology is the scientific study of how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, and implied presence of others. In this definition, scientific refers to empirical investigation using the scientific method, while the terms thoughts, feelings, and behaviors refer to the psychological variables that can be measured in humans. Imagined and implied presences refer to the internalized social norms that humans are influenced by even when alone.