

Chapter 1

What is social psychology?

What's it about?

(Social Psychology pp. 3–20)

Social psychology studies the effects of **social processes** and **cognitive processes** on the way individuals perceive, influence, and relate to others in order to understand the social behavior of individuals. This is done in a systematic way, using scientific methods, constructed with the awareness of possible error.

Social psychology split from general psychology by maintaining an emphasis on important effects of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Human social behavior can be understood in terms of a few fundamental social psychology processes, flowing from eight principles. We shape our own **construction of reality** by cognitive and social processes. Other people influence this construction by influencing our thoughts, feelings, and behavior, which shows the **pervasiveness of social influence**. In addition, people's motivations to **strive for mastery**, **seek connectedness**, and **value "me and mine"** influence their social behaviors.

Finally, social behavior can be understood in terms of the way people process (**superficiality versus depth**), and consider information (**accessibility**: accessible information has the most impact). And when views are established, the principle of **conservatism** holds; established views are slow to change.

Chapter topics

- A definition of social psychology (*SP pp. 3–6*)
- Historical trends and current themes in social psychology (*SP pp. 7–13*)
- How the approach of this book reflects an integrative perspective (*SP pp. 14–20*)

A DEFINITION OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

]Ask yourself

- How is social psychology defined?
- What components are involved in social psychology?
- What does social psychology study?

What you need to know

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY... (<i>SP p. 3</i>)
...OF THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE PROCESSES... (<i>SP p. 4</i>)
...ON THE WAY INDIVIDUALS PERCEIVE, INFLUENCE, AND RELATE TO OTHERS (<i>SP pp. 5–6</i>)

Observers can reach different conclusions about the same event. This is demonstrated by Hastorf and Cantril's (1954) [\[DOI: 10.1037/h0057880\]](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0057880) study on perceptions of a football game (see SP p. 3).

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Making inferences in sports [see ch01-RA-01.doc]

Axsom, Yates, and Chaiken (1987) showed that audience response influenced responses of individuals when the issue was not relevant to them. However, when the issue was relevant, individuals were not influenced by audience responses, and were persuaded by strong, not weak, arguments (see SP pp. 3–4).

Social psychology is defined as the scientific study of the effects of social and cognitive processes on the way individuals perceive, influence, and relate to others.

Social psychologists are interested in underlying social and cognitive processes, and overt behavior. Their central concern is how people understand and interact with others.

Weblink: Want to put your knowledge of social psychology to the test? Smartphone users can download the Social Knowledge: The Game app. Every day, users can

answer one thought-provoking question about social behavior. The correct answers will be sent the next day as well as a description of the relevant research findings (along with references). The app even tracks your success rate over time.

Link for iPhone users:

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/social-knowledge-the-game/id561508167?mt=8>

Link for Android users:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=nl.wligtenberg.inmind.quiz>

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY... (*SP p.3*)

Social psychologists study social behavior in a systematic way, using scientific methods, constructed with the awareness of possible error. This to avoid misconceptions and distortions.

CASE STUDY: The principles of science [see ch01-CS-01.doc]

...OF THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE PROCESSES...

(*SP pp. 4–6*)

Social processes are the ways in which our thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by the people around us, the groups to which we belong, our personal relationships, the teachings of our parents and culture, and the pressures we experience from others.

Cognitive processes are the ways in which our memories, perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and motives guide our understanding of the world and our actions.

Emotion and motivation are intrinsic parts of cognitive processes.

Social and cognitive processes have intimate connections and operate together to influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; (a) social processes affect us when others are not physically present, and (b) social processes affect us when others are present, depending on how we interpret others, and their actions. So by considering the group in the individual (a), insight is gained into an individual's cognitive processes in social contexts. By considering the individual in the group (b), it is

examined how people affect our thoughts, feelings, and actions, which depends on cognitive processes.

CASE STUDY: The cold never bothered me anyway: How thinking of a loved one can reduce sensitivity to pain [see ch01-CS-02.doc]

...ON THE WAY INDIVIDUALS PERCEIVE, INFLUENCE, AND RELATE TO OTHERS

(SP pp. 5–6)

Social psychology seeks to understand the social behavior of individuals; why people do what they do. The social and cognitive processes shape all sorts of social behavior. Understanding why people act the way they do helps to explain events in our lives, helps us to comprehend the factors that contribute to complex events, and allows us to develop solutions for social problems.

Weblink: A tour through social psychology www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/socpsy.html

So what does this mean?

Social psychology studies the effects of **social processes** and **cognitive processes** on the way individuals perceive, influence, and relate to others, in a systematic way, using scientific methods, constructed with the awareness of possible error. Social and cognitive processes have intimate connections, and operate together to influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Social psychology seeks to understand the social behavior of individuals. This can help us to explain events in our lives, and to comprehend the factors that contribute to complex events, and allows us to develop solutions for social problems.

HISTORICAL TRENDS AND CURRENT THEMES IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Ask yourself

- How did social psychology develop its special perspective over time?
- What makes social psychology distinctive from general psychology?
- What kind of integrations contributed to the development of social psychology?

What you need to know

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY BECOMES AN EMPIRICAL SCIENCE (<i>SP p. 7</i>)
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY SPLITS FROM GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY OVER WHAT CAUSES BEHAVIOR (<i>SP p. 8</i>)
THE RISE OF NAZISM SHAPES THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY (<i>p. 9</i>)
GROWTH AND INTEGRATION (<i>SP pp. 10–13</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Integration of cognitive and social processes• Integration with other research trends• Integration of basic science and social problems

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY BECOMES AN EMPIRICAL SCIENCE (*SP p. 7*)

The study of the human condition was considered to be the domain of philosophy until the field of social psychology was born in the late nineteenth century.

Norman Triplett (1898) [[DOI: 10.2307/1412188](https://doi.org/10.2307/1412188)], one of the first social psychologists, demonstrated that performance on tasks is improved in the presence of others.

However, Ringelmann (1913) showed that people put in less effort when they worked together.

The difference between these two studies can be explained by differences in the ease with which individual contributions can be identified.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY SPLITS FROM GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY OVER WHAT CAUSES BEHAVIOR

(SP p. 8)

The behaviorist perspective believed external stimuli influence behavior, and denied the influence of thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Social psychologists split from general psychology by maintaining an emphasis on important effects of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

THE RISE OF NAZISM SHAPES THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

(SP p. 9)

The rise of Nazism shaped the development of social psychology as a result of the immigration of European researchers to North America, and raised questions about the roots of prejudice. In addition, social psychologists helped in the search for solutions to practical problems (see SP p. 9).

The work of one famous social psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1936), embodied the themes that characterized the discipline. He stated that all behavior depends on the individual's life space. Life space is defined as a subjective map of the individual's current goal and his or her environment.

Kurt Lewin (1947) also demonstrated that active participation in discussion groups is more effective than listening to lectures on a topic.

Weblink: Historical figures in social psychology. The following website contains brief descriptions of each of the famous social psychologists described in this section of the text (and more!), including Moshe Sherif, Kurt Lewin, Henri Tajfel, Stanley Milgram, Norman Triplett, and William McDougall. Each description also contains links to additional information about the life and work of each historical figure.

www.socialpsychology.org/social-figures.htm

GROWTH AND INTEGRATION

(SP pp. 10–13)

By the 1970s the movement toward integration had begun.

Integration of cognitive and social processes

Cognitive themes, theories, and research techniques gained attention, which led to theoretical and methodological convergence. Scientific understanding of the way social and cognitive processes work together to influence behaviors has benefited from integrating European and North American social psychology.

Integration with other research trends

In the twentieth century, social psychologists have begun to focus greater attention on cultural differences and similarities (the study of cultural psychology), how both humans and animals have evolved over time to solve specific problems (evolutionary psychology), how the movement and actions of our bodies influence our psychological experiences (the embodiment perspective), and how our brain represents and processes social information (neuroscience).

Integration of basic science and social problems

Social psychology research is simultaneously basic and applied; social psychologists work on theoretical issues, and apply knowledge to practical problems at the same time.

Weblink: [More information about a famous classic psychology experiment \(1971\)](http://www.prisonexp.org/)

www.prisonexp.org/

CASE STUDY: [The history of social psychology \[see ch01-CS-03.doc\]](#)

So what does this mean?

The study of the human condition was considered to be the domain of philosophy until the field of **social psychology** was born in the late 19th century. Social psychologists split from general psychology by maintaining an emphasis on important effects of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The rise of Nazism shaped the

development of social psychology as a result of the immigration of European researchers to North America, and raised questions about the roots of prejudice. In addition, social psychologists helped in the search for solutions to practical problems. By the 1970s, the movement toward the integration of cognitive and **social processes**, and of basic science and social problems, had begun.

HOW THE APPROACH OF THIS BOOK REFLECTS AN INTEGRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Ask yourself

- What are the fundamental axioms of social psychology?
- What basic motives do people have?
- How can the operation of social and cognitive processes be described?

What you need to know

TWO FUNDAMENTAL AXIOMS OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY (<i>SP pp. 15–17</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Construction of reality• Pervasiveness of social influence
THREE MOTIVATIONAL PRINCIPLES (<i>SP p. 17</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People strive for mastery• People seek connectedness• People value “me and mine”
THREE PROCESSING PRINCIPLES (<i>SP p. 18</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conservatism: Established views are slow to change• Accessibility: Accessible information has the most impact• Superficiality versus depth: People can process superficially or in depth
COMMON PROCESSES, DIVERSE BEHAVIORS (<i>SP p. 20</i>)

Human social behavior can be understood in terms of a few fundamental social psychology processes, which flow from eight principles.

TWO FUNDAMENTAL AXIOMS OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY (*SP pp. 15–17*)

Construction of reality

People assume that their impressions are accurate and true, expecting other people to share those impressions.

We shape a **construction of reality** by cognitive and social processes. Cognitive processes enable us to piece together fragments of information, draw inferences from them, and try to weave them into a coherent whole. Social processes enable us to influence and be influenced by the views of others.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Constructing our own reality [see ch01-RA-02.doc]

Pervasiveness of social influence

The **pervasiveness of social influence** means that other people influence our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Our thoughts about others' reactions and our identification with social groups mold our perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and motives, and our sense of self.

Whether a group is large or small, our membership provides a frame through which we view social events. Sometimes social influence is experienced as social pressure, but most of the time we are not aware of being socially influenced.

THREE MOTIVATIONAL PRINCIPLES

(SP p. 17)

People strive for mastery

People **strive for mastery**; that is, they seek to understand and predict events in the social world in order to obtain many types of rewards. Achieving mastery is an important incentive in our attempt to form and hold accurate opinions and beliefs about the world, because accurate beliefs can guide us to effective and satisfying actions.

Weblink: More information about striving for mastery

<http://changingminds.org/principles/understanding.htm>

People seek connectedness

People also **seek connectedness**; that is, they attempt to create and maintain feelings of mutual support, liking, and acceptance from those they care about and value.

Even when conforming to group standards has constructive consequences for others, the need for connectedness is fulfilled.

People value “me and mine”

Valuing “me and mine” means we are motivated to see ourselves, and anything or anyone connected to us, such as our families, teams, nations, or even possessions, in a positive light.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Me and mine [see ch01-RA-03.doc]

THREE PROCESSING PRINCIPLES

(SP p. 18)

Conservatism: Established views are slow to change

Individuals' and groups' views of the world are slow to change, and prone to perpetuate themselves. This is the principle of **conservatism**: established knowledge tends to perpetuate itself.

Accessibility: Accessible information has the most impact

We consider only a fraction of the potentially relevant information when making judgments or decisions. Whatever information is most readily available to us usually has the most impact on our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. This is described in the principle of **accessibility**.

Superficiality versus depth: People can process superficially or in depth

According to the principle of **superficiality versus depth**, most of the time people operate superficial processing; that is, they put little effort into information processing and rely on accessible information. However, sometimes people process in depth; which means they put time and effort into processing. This usually happens when something is relevant to them, and when they are motivated to think hard.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Thinking fast vs. slow [see ch01-RA-04.doc]

COMMON PROCESSES, DIVERSE BEHAVIORS

(SP p. 20)

These eight principles can account for all kinds of behaviors, desirable or undesirable. For instance, the ability to shape a construction of reality allows us to add meaning and coherence to our world, but can also lead to bias and misinterpretation. Seeking connectedness and valuing “me and mine” gives us a feeling of belonging, but can also lead to rejections, devaluations, and exclusion. Basing decisions on the accessibility of information can be very efficient, but can also lead to bad decisions.

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