

CHAPTER 1 OUTLINE

I. What is Social Psychology?

A. Social influence is at the heart of social psychology.

- Other people can influence our behavior through direct attempts at persuasion or more indirectly through their presence and the transmission of cultural values.
- Social psychologists take an expanded view of social influence to include not just behavior but thoughts and feelings as well.
- Social psychology is defined as the scientific study of the way that the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people.

B. The Power of Social Interpretation

- Social psychology is distinct from other social sciences because of its emphasis upon construals—the way people perceive, comprehend, and interpret the social world.
- Social psychology is also distinct because it is an experimentally based science.

C. How Else Can We Understand Social Influence?

1. Journalists, instant experts, and social critics

- Common sense explanations such as those offered by journalists are known as folk wisdom.
- Folk wisdom may be contradictory and provides no way of determining correctness.

2. Philosophy

- Social psychology differs from philosophy because it is empirical.
- Educated guesses, or hypotheses, are tested in well-designed experiments to discern the situations that would result in one outcome or another.

D. Social Psychology Compared with Personality Psychology

- Personality psychology focuses on individual differences in human behavior (those aspects of people's personalities that make them different from other people), while social psychology focuses more on how the social situation affects people similarly.
- Social psychologists believe that explaining behavior primarily in terms of personality factors can be superficial because it leads to a serious underestimation of the role played by social influence. The fact that most people fail to take the situation into account has a profound impact on how people relate to one another.

E. Social Psychology Compared with Sociology

- Social psychology joins other social science disciplines in its focus on social behavior. Social psychology differs from these other disciplines in its level of analysis: the individual in the context of a social situation.
- Sociology is concerned with social class, social structure, and social institutions. Although sociology and social psychology share areas of interest, sociology, rather than looking at the individual, is interested in a society or group.
- Table 1.1 (page 14) depicts comparisons between social psychology and closely-related fields of personality psychology and sociology.

II. The Power of Social Influence

A. Fundamental Attribution Error

- Social psychologists face barriers to convincing people that their behavior is greatly influenced by the environment.
- People tend to explain behavior entirely in terms of personality traits and thus underestimate the power of social influence. This is called the fundamental attribution error.

B. Underestimating the Power of Social Influence

- The fundamental attribution error can lead to a false sense of security—we assume problematic behavior could never happen to us and thus we do not guard against its occurrence.
- In a demonstration of the fundamental attribution error, Ross and Samuels (1993) found that college students' personalities, as rated by the resident assistants in their dormitories, did not determine how cooperative or competitive they were in a laboratory game. The name of the game—whether it was called the Wall Street Game or the Community Game—did, however, make a tremendous difference (see Figure 1.1 on pg. 16).

C. The Subjectivity of the Social Situation

- If the social situation has profound effects on human behavior, how do we define the social situation?
- Behaviorism is a school of psychology maintaining that, to understand human behavior, one need only consider the reinforcing properties of the environment (how positive and negative events in the environment are associated with specific behaviors). Behaviorists tried to define social situations objectively, focusing on the reinforcements received in response to behavior.
- Because behaviorism does not deal with cognition, thinking, and feeling, this approach has proven inadequate for a complete understanding of the social world. We have learned that it is important to look at the situation from the viewpoint of the people in it, to see how they construe the world around them.
- This emphasis on construal has its roots in Gestalt psychology, a school of psychology stressing the importance of studying the subjective way in which an object appears in people's minds, rather than the objective, physical attributes of the object.
- Kurt Lewin, the founding father of modern experimental social psychology, was the first to apply Gestalt principles from the study of the perception of objects to social perception.

III. Where Construals Come From: Basic Human Motives

- Social psychologists have found that two motives are of primary importance in determining our thoughts and behavior: the need to be accurate and the need to feel good about ourselves.
- Sometimes these motives both pull us in the same direction, but noted theorist Leon Festinger realized that it is when these two motives pull us in opposite directions that we can learn the most about psychological processes.

A. The Self-Esteem Approach: The Need to Feel Good About Ourselves

- Self-esteem is people's evaluation of their own self-worth, or the extent to which people see themselves as good, competent, and decent. Most people have a strong need to maintain high self-esteem. This need can clash with the need for accuracy, leading people to distort their perceptions of the world.
- Justifying past behavior – In order to preserve self-esteem, people may distort their perceptions of reality. Such distortions are more “spins” on the facts than they are total delusions.

1. Suffering and self-justification

- Social psychological research demonstrates that when people volunteer to undergo a painful or embarrassing initiation in order to join a group (e.g., a fraternity hazing), they need to justify the experience in order to avoid feeling foolish. One way they do this is to decide that the initiation was worth it because the group is so wonderful.
- Under certain conditions, then, the need for self-justification can lead people to do surprising or paradoxical things (e.g., preferring things for which they have suffered to those which are associated with ease and pleasure).

B. The Social Cognition Approach: The Need to Be Accurate

- Although people may bend the facts to serve their self-esteem needs, they by and large do not distort reality. In fact, human reasoning skills are extraordinary.

1. Social cognition

- Social cognition is the study of how people think about themselves and the social world; more specifically, how people select, interpret, remember, and use social information.
- This approach views people as amateur sleuths seeking to understand and predict their social world. Coming up with an accurate picture of the social world may be difficult because there are many relevant facts and we have only limited time.

2. Expectations about the Social World

- Our expectations can sometimes get in the way of accurately perceiving the world.
- In the self-fulfilling prophecy, our expectations about another person's behavior result (via the mechanism of influencing our behavior toward the target) in changing the target's behavior.

C. Additional Motives

- Although the need for self-justification and accuracy are the dominant motives influencing social behavior, our behavior is also influenced by biological drives, social motives, and the need for control.

IV. Social Psychology and Social Problems

- While social psychologists are often motivated by simple curiosity to study social behavior, they are also frequently motivated by the desire to help resolve social problems such as increasing conservation of natural resources, increasing the practice of safe sex, understanding the relationship between viewing television violence and aggressive behavior, developing effective negotiation strategies for the reduction of international conflict, finding ways to reduce racial prejudice, and helping people adjust to life changes.
- Social psychologists helped the government change an ad campaign to promote safe sex that was based on increasing fear of contracting AIDS, noting that fear promotes denial and flies in the face of the need to preserve self-esteem.