

Strategic Application of Human Development Applying Positive Psychology

Social Psychology

8.1 The History of Social Psychology

The science of social psychology began when scientists first started to systematically and formally measure the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of human beings (Kruglanski & Stroebe, 2011). The earliest social psychology experiments on group behavior were conducted before 1900 (Triplet, 1898), and the first social psychology textbooks were published in 1908 (McDougall, 1908/2003; Ross, 1908/1974).

During the 1940s and 1950s, the social psychologists Kurt Lewin and Leon Festinger refined the experimental approach to studying behavior, creating social psychology as a rigorous scientific discipline. Lewin is sometimes known as “the father of social psychology” because he initially developed many of the important ideas of the discipline, including a focus on the dynamic interactions among people. In 1954, Festinger edited an influential book called *Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences*, in which he and other social psychologists stressed the need to measure variables and to use laboratory experiments to systematically test research hypotheses about social behavior. He also noted that it might be necessary in these experiments to deceive the participants about the true nature of the research.

Social psychology was energized by researchers who attempted to understand how the German dictator Adolf Hitler could have produced such extreme obedience and horrendous behaviors in his followers during the Second World War. The studies on conformity conducted by Muzafir Sherif (1936) and Solomon Asch (1952), as well as those on obedience by Stanley Milgram (1974), showed the importance of conformity pressures in social groups and how people in authority could create obedience, even to the extent of leading people to cause severe harm to others. Philip Zimbardo, in his well-known “prison experiment” (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973), found that ordinary male college students who were recruited to play the roles of guards and prisoners in a simulated prison became so involved in their assignments, and their interaction became so violent, that the study had to be terminated early. This research again demonstrated the power of the social setting.

Social psychology quickly expanded to study other topics. John Darley and Bibb Latané (1968) developed a model that helped explain when people do and do not help others in need, and Leonard Berkowitz (1974) pioneered the study of human aggression. Meanwhile, other social psychologists, including Irving Janis (1972), focused on group behavior, studying why intelligent people sometimes made decisions that led to disastrous results when they worked together. Still other social psychologists, including Gordon Allport and Muzafir Sherif, focused on intergroup relations, with the goal of understanding and potentially reducing the occurrence of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

Social psychologists gave their opinions in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case that helped end racial segregation in U.S. public schools, and social psychologists still frequently serve as expert witnesses on these and other topics (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991).

The latter part of the 20th century saw an expansion of social psychology into the field of attitudes, with a particular emphasis on cognitive processes. During this time, social psychologists developed the first formal models of persuasion, with the goal of understanding how advertisers and other people could present their messages to make them most effective (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1963). These approaches to attitudes focused on the cognitive processes that people use when evaluating messages and on the relationship between attitudes and behavior. Leon Festinger's (1957) important cognitive dissonance theory was developed during this time and became a model for later research.

In the 1970s and 1980s, social psychology became even more cognitive in orientation as social psychologists used advances in cognitive psychology, which were themselves based largely on advances in computer technology, to inform the field (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). The focus of these researchers, including Alice Eagly, Susan Fiske, E. Tory Higgins, Richard Nisbett, Lee Ross, Shelley Taylor, and many others, was on *social cognition*—an understanding of how our knowledge about our social worlds develops through experience and the influence of these knowledge structures on memory, information processing, attitudes, and judgment. Furthermore, the extent to which humans' decision making could be flawed by both cognitive and motivational processes was documented (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982).

In the 21st century, the field of social psychology has been expanding into still other areas. Examples that we will consider in this book include an interest in how social situations influence our health and happiness, the important roles of evolutionary experiences and cultures on our behavior, and the field of social neuroscience—*the study of how our social behavior both influences and is influenced by the activities of our brain* (Lieberman, 2010). Social psychologists continue to seek new ways to measure and understand social behavior, and the field continues to evolve. I cannot predict where social psychology will be directed in the future, but I have no doubt that it will still be alive and vibrant.

8.2 The Person and the Social Situation

Social psychology is the study of the dynamic relationship between individuals and the people around them. Each of us is different, and our individual characteristics, including our personality traits, desires, motivations, and emotions, have an important impact on our social behavior. But our behavior is also profoundly influenced by the social situation—*the people with whom we interact every day*.

These people include our friends and family, our fraternity brothers or sorority sisters, our religious groups, the people we see on TV or read about or interact with on the web, as well as people we think about, remember, or even imagine.

Social psychologists believe that human behavior is determined by both a person's characteristics and the social situation. They also believe that the social situation is frequently a stronger influence on behavior than are a person's characteristics.

Social psychology is largely the study of the social situation. Our social situations create social influence, *the process through which other people change our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and through which we change theirs*.

Maybe you can already see how the social influence provided by the members of the Heaven's Gate cult was at work in the Hale-Bopp suicide. Kurt Lewin formalized the joint influence of person variables and situational variables, which is known as the *person-situation interaction*, in an important equation: **Behavior = f (person, social situation)**. Lewin's equation indicates that the behavior of a given person at any given time is a function of (depends on) both the characteristics of the person and the influence of the social situation.

8.3 Evolutionary Adaptation and Human Characteristics

In Lewin's equation, *person* refers to the characteristics of the individual human being. People are born with skills that allow them to successfully interact with

others in their social world. Newborns are able to recognize faces and to respond to human voices, young children learn language and develop friendships with other children, adolescents become interested in sex and are destined to fall in love, most adults marry and have children, and most people usually get along with others.

People have these particular characteristics because we have all been similarly shaped through human evolution. The genetic code that defines human beings has provided us with specialized social skills that are important to survival. Just as keen eyesight, physical strength, and resistance to disease helped our ancestors survive, so too did the tendency to engage in social behaviors. We quickly make judgments about other people, help other people who are in need, and enjoy working together in social groups because these behaviors helped our ancestors to adapt and were passed along on their genes to the next generation (Ackerman & Kenrick, 2008; Barrett & Kurzban, 2006; Pinker, 2002).

Fitter organisms pass on their genes more successfully to later generations, making the characteristics that produce fitness more likely to become part of the organisms' nature than are characteristics that do not produce fitness. For example, it has been argued that the emotion of jealousy has survived over time in men because men who experience jealousy are more fit than men who do not. According to this idea, the experience of jealousy leads men to protect their mates and guard against rivals, which increases their reproductive success (Buss, 2000).

Although our biological makeup prepares us to be human beings, it is important to remember that our genes do not really determine who we are. Rather, genes provide us with our human characteristics, and these characteristics give us the tendency to behave in a “human” way. And yet each human being is different from every other human being. Evolutionary adaptation has provided us with two fundamental motivations that guide us and help us lead productive and effective lives. One of these motivations relates to the self—the motivation to ***protect and enhance the self and the people who are psychologically close to us***; the other relates to the social situation—the motivation to ***affiliate with, accept, and be accepted by others***. We will refer to these two motivations as self-concern and other-concern respectively.

8.4 Self-Concern

The most basic tendency of all living organisms, and the focus of the first human motivation, is the desire to protect and enhance one's own life and the lives of the people who are close to us. Humans are motivated to find food and water, to obtain adequate shelter, and to protect themselves from danger. Doing so is necessary

because we can survive only if we are able to meet these fundamental goals. The desire to maintain and enhance the self also leads us to do the same for our relatives—those people who are genetically related to us. Human beings, like other animals, exhibit kin selection—*strategies that favor the reproductive success of one's relatives, sometimes even at a cost to the individual's own survival*. According to evolutionary principles, kin selection occurs because behaviors that enhance the fitness of relatives, even if they lower the fitness of the individual himself or herself, may nevertheless increase the survival of the group as a whole.

In addition to our kin, we desire to protect, improve, and enhance the well-being of our in group: *those whom we view as being similar and important to us and with whom we share close social connections*, even if those people do not actually share our genes. Perhaps you remember a time when you helped friends move all their furniture into a new apartment, even when you would have preferred to be doing something more beneficial for yourself, such as studying or relaxing. You wouldn't have helped strangers in this way, but you did it for your friends because you felt close to and cared about them. The tendency to help the people we feel close to, even if they are not related to us, is probably due in part to our evolutionary past: The people we were closest to were usually those we were related to.

8.5 The Social Situation Creates Powerful Social Influence

When people are asked to indicate the things that they value the most, they usually mention their social situation—that is, their relationships with other people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Fiske & Haslam, 1996). When we work together on a class project, volunteer at a homeless shelter, or serve on a jury in a courtroom trial, we count on others to work with us to get the job done. We develop social bonds with those people, and we expect that they will come through to help us meet our goals.

The importance of others shows up in every aspect of our lives—other people teach us what we should and shouldn't do, what we should and shouldn't think, and even what we should and shouldn't like and dislike. In addition to the people with whom we are currently interacting, we are influenced by people who are not physically present but who are nevertheless part of our thoughts and feelings. Imagine that you are driving home on a deserted country road late at night. No cars are visible in any direction, and you can see for miles. You come to a stop sign. What do you do? Most likely, you stop at the sign, or at least slow down. You do so because the behavior has been internalized: Even though no one is there to watch you, others are still influencing you—you've learned about the rules and

laws of society, what's right and what's wrong, and you tend to obey them. We carry our own personal social situations—our experiences with our parents, teachers, leaders, authorities, and friends—around with us every day.

An important principle of social psychology, one that will be with us throughout this lesson, is that although individuals' characteristics do matter, the social situation is often a stronger determinant of behavior than is personality. When social psychologists analyze an event such as a cult suicide, they are likely to focus more on the characteristics of the situation (e.g., the strong leader and the group pressure provided by the other group members) than on the characteristics of the cult members themselves. As an example, we will see that even ordinary people who are neither bad nor evil in any way can nevertheless be placed in situations in which an authority figure is able to lead them to engage in evil behaviors, such as applying potentially lethal levels of electrical shock (Milgram, 1974).

In addition to discovering the remarkable extent to which our behavior is influenced by our social situation, social psychologists have discovered that we often do not recognize how important the social situation is in determining behavior. We often wrongly think that we and others act entirely on our own accord, without any external influences. It is tempting to assume that the people who commit extreme acts, such as terrorists or members of suicide cults, are unusual or extreme people. And yet much research suggests that these behaviors are caused more by the social situation than they are by the characteristics of the individuals and that it is wrong to focus so strongly on explanations of individuals' characteristics (Gilbert & Malone, 1995).

There is perhaps no clearer example of the powerful influence of the social situation than that found in research showing the enormous role that others play in our physical and mental health. Social support *refers to the comfort that we receive from the people around us—for instance, our family, friends, classmates, and coworkers*(Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Diener, Tamir, & Scollon, 2006).

8.6 Social Psychology in the Public Interest

The Social Situation Influences Our Mental and Physical Health In comparison with those who do not feel that they have a network of others they can rely on, people who feel that they have adequate social support report being happier and have also been found to have fewer psychological problems, including eating disorders and mental illness (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Diener, Tamir, & Scollon, 2006).

People with social support are less depressed overall, recover faster from negative events, and are less likely to commit suicide (Au, Lau, & Lee, 2009; Bertera, 2007; Compton, Thompson, & Kaslow, 2005). Married people report being happier than unmarried people and overall, a happy marriage is an excellent form of social support.

8.7 Social Influence Creates Social Norms

In some cases, social influence occurs rather passively, without any obvious intent of one person to influence the other, such as when we learn about and adopt the beliefs and behaviors of the people around us, often without really being aware that we are doing so. Social influence occurs when a young child adopts the beliefs and values of his or her parents or when we start liking jazz music, without really being aware of it, because our roommate plays a lot of it.

In other cases, social influence is anything but subtle; it involves one or more individuals actively attempting to change the beliefs or behaviors of others, as is evident in the attempts of the members of a jury to get a dissenting member to change his or her opinion, the use of a popular sports figure to encourage children to buy products, or the messages that cult leaders give to their followers to encourage them to engage in the behaviors required of the group.

One outcome of social influence is the development of social norms—*the ways of thinking, feeling, or behaving that are shared by group members and perceived by them as appropriate* (Asch, 1955; Cialdini, 1993). Norms include customs, traditions, standards, and rules, as well as the general values of the group. Through norms, we learn what people actually do (“people in the United States are more likely to eat scrambled eggs in the morning and spaghetti in the evening, rather than vice versa”) and also what we should do (“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) and shouldn’t do (“do not make racist jokes”). There are norms about almost every possible social behavior, and these norms have a big influence on our actions.

8.8 Different Cultures Have Different Norms

The social norms that guide our everyday behaviors and that create social influence derive in large part from our culture. A culture represents *a group of people, normally living within a given geographical region, who share a common set of social norms, including religious and family values and moral beliefs* (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Matsumoto, 2001). The culture in which we live affects our thoughts, feelings, and behavior through teaching, imitation, and

other forms of social transmission (Mesoudi, 2009). It is not inappropriate to say that our culture defines our lives just as much as our evolutionary experience does.

Cultures differ in terms of the particular norms that they find important and that guide the behavior of the group members. Social psychologists have found that there is a fundamental difference in social norms between Western cultures (including the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand) and East Asian cultures (including China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, India, and Southeast Asia).

Norms in Western cultures are primarily oriented toward individualism—*cultural norms, common in Western societies, that focus primarily on self-enhancement and independence*. Children in Western cultures are taught to develop and value a sense of their personal self and to see themselves as largely separate from the people round them. Children in Western cultures feel special about themselves—they enjoy getting gold stars on their projects and the best grade in the class (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997).

Adults in Western cultures are oriented toward promoting their own individual success, frequently in comparison with (or even at the expense of) others. When asked to describe themselves, individuals in Western cultures generally tend to indicate that they like to “do their own thing,” prefer to live their lives independently, and base their happiness and self-worth upon their own personal achievements. In short, in Western cultures the emphasis is on self-concern.

Norms in the East Asian cultures, on the other hand, are more focused on other-concern. *These norms indicate that people should be more fundamentally connected with others and thus are more oriented toward interdependence*, or collectivism. In East Asian cultures, children are taught to focus on developing harmonious social relationships with others, and the predominant norms relate to group togetherness, connectedness, and duty and responsibility to one’s family. The members of East Asian cultures, when asked to describe themselves, indicate that they are particularly concerned about the interests of others, including their close friends and their colleagues. As one example of these cultural differences, research conducted by Shinobu Kitayama and his colleagues (Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004) found that East Asians were more likely than Westerners to experience happiness as a result of their connections with other people, whereas Westerners were more likely to experience happiness as a result of their own personal accomplishments.