

# Social Psychology

## Lecture 1: Introduction to Social Psychology

Lecturer: Maria Heidi P. Arconado

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The purpose of this discussion is to introduce the field of Social Psychology to you. Starting with the basics: definition, history and pioneers. We will explicitly define what social psychology is with a focus on the three main areas of the field. Next, we will visit the historical development of social psychology. Subsequently, we will tackle the different perspectives of social psychology to know how people in this field explains human behavior. Lastly, we will recognize the contributions of the people behind the growth of this field.

At the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

1. Define social psychology and identify its core focus.
2. Trace the origin of social psychology as a field of study.
3. Evaluate human behavior based on the major perspectives in Social Psychology.
4. Name important figures in the development of Social Psychology and cite their contributions in the field.

*What situations trigger you to be helpful? Why are you sometimes friendly and sometimes antagonistic toward others? Why do you suddenly lose words the moment you were asked a question in front of a crowd? What stimulates you to like or dislike someone? What situations trigger you to be greedy?* These are just some of the many questions that are answered by Social Psychologists. Interestingly, these are questions we've all wondered about at one point or another. What makes Social Psychology interesting is the fact that this isn't just a psychology course; it's an exploration of your daily life. Social Psychology breaks down the science of how we view ourselves, how are we influenced by others and what causes us to relate with others. This course enables us to explore everything from the power of persuasion and group dynamics to the roots of prejudice and the mysteries of attraction.

## DEFINING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Social Psychology is the scientific study of how people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others (Allport, 1954, as cited in Hewstone & Stroebe, 2020).

By this definition, **scientific** refers to the empirical method of investigation. Social psychologists apply scientific methods to the study of social behavior. This means that social psychologists design studies and base their conclusions on direct observation and measurement and do not just rely on intuition or common sense.

The terms **thoughts**, **feelings**, and **behaviors** include all the psychological variables that are measurable in a human being. These encompasses both the overt and covert behaviors of humans. Overt behaviors are easily measured since they are directly observable. The most straightforward way to do this is through observation either in natural environment or in a laboratory setting. Covert behaviors, on the other hand, relies on the use of self-report measures, physiological measures (e.g. neuroimaging) and projective tests. These techniques rendered it feasible to systematically investigate human thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

The words **actual**, **imagined** or **implied** suggest that humans are prone to social influence even when no other people are present. Our behavior, thoughts, and feelings change based on the mere idea of being watched, even if no one is actually present.

How does the actual, imagined or implied presence of other influenced our thoughts, feelings and behaviors?

The questions presented below illustrate these mechanisms.

<b>Actual presence of people</b>	<b>Imagined presence of others</b>	<b>Implied presence of others</b>
Have you ever changed your opinion in a group setting just because you didn't want to be the only one disagreeing?	Before you post something on social media, do you 'rehearse' how a specific person might react to it before you hit send?	Does the presence of a security camera, even if you aren't doing anything wrong, make you feel like you need to act 'more normal'?

## AREAS OF INTEREST OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Social Psychology focuses on three main overlapping areas. These three areas converge in our everyday lives, collectively shaping our thoughts, feelings and behavior. These areas are:

1. **Social Perception** – focuses on understanding how we view ourselves and others. This area allows us to know how we perceive ourselves and others, what we believe in, what judgments we make and how our attitudes are formed.
2. **Social Influence** – focuses on understanding how we influence one another. This area provides insight into the impact of pressure on conformity, persuasion and group influence.
3. **Social Relations** – focuses on understanding why we interact the ways we do with others. This area facilitates an understanding of the positive and negative aspects of people relating to others such as prejudice, aggression, attraction and intimacy, and helping behavior.

## HISTORY OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Social Psychology is still a young science compared to many other disciplines. The discipline of social psychology began in the United States at the dawn of the 20th century. The first published study in this area was an experiment by Norman Triplett on the phenomenon of social facilitation. His experiment was conducted to find out how people's performances are affected by the presence of others. Triplett published this experiment in 1898 and was credited with introducing empirical scientific methods into the social sciences.

During the 1930s, many Gestalt psychologists, most notably Kurt Lewin, fled to the United States from Nazi Germany. They were instrumental in developing the field as something separate from the behavioral and psychoanalytic schools that were dominant during that time, and social psychology has always maintained the legacy of their interests in perception and cognition.

During WWII, social psychologists studied persuasion and propaganda for the U.S. military. After the war, researchers became interested in a variety of social problems, including gender issues and racial prejudice. Most notable of them all were the shock

experiments on obedience to authorities conducted by Stanley Milgram. In the sixties, there was growing interest in new topics, such as cognitive dissonance, bystander intervention, and aggression. It was not until the 1970s did social psychology enjoy accelerating growth in Asia – first in India, then in Hong Kong and Japan, and, recently, in China and Taiwan.

Social psychology reached maturity in both theory and method during the 1980s and 1990s. Careful ethical standards now regulate research in the field.

## **PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Social psychologists use four principal approaches or perspectives in conducting their studies. There is no single perspective that can explain all human behavior thus, social psychologists propose several different theoretical approaches. Understanding the various influences that contribute to and shape social behavior allows social psychologists to undertake in-depth, meaningful research to better comprehend the numerous forces that influence how people think and behave in social situations.

Some social psychologists favor a particular perspective to guide their study of social behavior whereas others do not confine themselves to a single perspective. Instead, they opt to adopt a multi-dimensional approach to social behavior.

The four perspectives in social psychology are differentiated below:

- A. Socio-cultural perspective** – this approach explains how human behavior is influenced by social context, specifically through the influence of group memberships and cultural backgrounds. Social psychologists who adopt this perspective underline the importance of social norms and culture in influencing individual behavior. This perspective is important because it highlights the fact that human behavior is not only influenced by an individual's close companions, but also by the culture in which the individual lives.
  
- B. Evolutionary perspective** – this perspective argues that people's characteristics and their social behaviors are the result of psychological adaptations that helped our ancestors survive and reproduce. Proponents of this perspective like Charles Darwin and William Donald Hamilton emphasize the role of biology and gene transmission to

explain current behavior. Evolutionary perspective argues that we have inherited the mental capacity to use language, to detect the emotions of others, to cooperate with one another, etc. because all these behaviors are necessary to our survival.

**C. Social-learning perspective** – this approach contends that human behavior is built upon the power of learning. Behaviors are learnt by observing and mimicking the modeled behaviors of others.

**D. Social-cognitive perspective** – this perspective views social behavior through an information processing model, focusing on how we notice, process, store and apply the things we learn about other people and social situations.

How do these perspectives in social psychology explain human behavior? Let us cite an example (from Duff, 2012):

### **Human Behavior: STEALING**

#### ***Explanation of the behavior:***

- ***Socio-cultural perspective:*** People steal because our culture appreciates objects more than people.
- ***Evolutionary perspective:*** People steal because gaining certain objects, even if through stealing, improves a person's ability to survive.
- ***Social-learning perspective:*** A person steals because he learned through example that stealing is an acceptable behavior.
- ***Social-cognitive perspective:*** A person steals because he simply doesn't believe it is wrong.

### **HISTORICAL FIGURES IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Social Psychology will not be what it is today if not for the collective efforts of diverse pioneers who dared to lead the way. Let us highlight the contribution of the primary architects of this discipline.

- A. FLOYD ALLPORT** – he was the first to systematically apply experimental methods to the study of group process and social relationships. Thus, he was regarded as the father of experimental social psychology. Allport published *Social Psychology* in 1924, a book that is based heavily on experimental and research studies and has become the standard for the field for decades (Katz, 1979).
- B. SOLOMON ASCH** –he studied how peer pressure shapes human behavior. His early experiments on compliance and on how one forms impressions of others are widely recognized as among the century's seminal studies in social psychology (Stout, 1996). He also published seminal studies on the primacy effect and halo effect.
- **Primacy effect** – the information we receive first about a person carries more weight than information received later.  
*Example: You meet someone who is described as intelligent, industrious, stubborn and envious.*  
*Which word stuck with you the most? Intelligent and Industrious*
  - **Halo effect** – the information we receive first about a person carries more weight than information received later  
*Example: You meet someone who is described as intelligent, industrious, stubborn and envious.*
- C. NORMAN TRIPLETT** – he published one of the first experiments related to social psychology. The report, appearing in the *American Journal of Psychology* in 1898, compared how fast children wound a reel when alone and in competition with another child. He concluded that the presence of another contestant "serves to liberate latent energy not ordinarily available."
- D. MUZAFER SHERIF** – He conducted research and studies on social norms and perception, reference groups, the self, social judgment, communication, and attitude formation and change. He also conducted the Robbers Cave Experiment on intergroup relations in 1954 (Harvey, 1989). The Robber's Cave experiment

demonstrated how intergroup conflict, ignited by dividing boys at a summer camp in two competing groups, could be resolved after working toward super ordinate goals.

### **Robber's Cave Experiment:**

Rattler's vs Eagles

1. Ingroup Formation
2. Friction Phase
3. Integration Phase

**E. CAROLYN WOOD SHERIF** – together with her husband, Muzafer Sherif, they conducted research on intergroup conflict and cooperation through the "Robber's Cave" experiment. She also conducted research on self-system and social judgment (Shaffer & Shields, 1984). She worked with Carl Hovland to develop social judgment theory, an influential theory about how and when attitude change takes place.

**F. MAXIMILIEN RINGELMANN** – he conducted some of the first experiments in social psychology on 1880s. These experiments showed that individual members of a group often become less productive as the size of their group increases -- a phenomenon referred to as the **Ringelmann effect** and now better known as **social loafing**.

**G. STANLEY MILGRAM** – he was famous for conducting set of studies suggesting that most people will obey an experimenter's order to administer potentially deadly levels of electric shock to a protesting stranger. He also invented several research techniques such as the lost-letter technique, cyranoid technique, and small-world ("six degrees of separation") technique.

- **Lost-letter Technique.** The lost-letter technique was designed to assess prejudice in an unobtrusive way. The experiment was conducted in a natural environment with the subjects didn't even know they were part of a study. Milgram strategically dispersed hundreds of stamped, addressed envelopes in public places across various neighborhoods. Each letter was addressed to one of four types of organizations, but all were sent to the same P.O. Box. Addresses

include: The Medical Research Associates, a private individual named Mr. Walter Carnap, Friends of the Nazi and Friends of the Communist Party. By comparing the 'return rates' across different neighborhoods, Milgram saw where prejudice was strongest. The result: The Friends of the Nazi and Friends of the Communist Party received low return-rates.

- **Cyranoid Technique.** The experiment was conducted by Milgram in 1970s. The experiment was named after the play *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897). Milgram wanted to see if he could scientifically isolate the body and the mind to study how we form impressions of others. The characters in the experiment are:
  - **Source** – the one who generates the actual words and thoughts
  - **Shadow** – he speaks the words provided in real-time by the Source
  - **Interactant** – the one who engages with the Shadow

This technique was used to study social perception, obedience, and conformity.

- **Small World Technique.** The experiment was designed to mathematically measure the "social distance" between any two random people. Milgram wanted to see if human race was a collection of isolated groups or one single, giant, interconnected web. The social distance between any two people is surprisingly small. Despite the billions of people on Earth, we are all connected by a very short chain of acquaintances. We live in a "Small World" where "strangers" are actually just friends-of-friends-of-friends.

**H. EVELYN HOOKER** – she was the first social scientist to study the psychosocial adjustment of gay men outside hospital or prison settings. Her results showed no difference between gay and heterosexual men, challenging antigay stereotypes and eventually leading the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its diagnostic manual of mental disorders.

**I. CARL HOVLAND** – he conducted path breaking research on attitude change, propaganda, and persuasion, including studies of the sleeper effect, source credibility, two-sided persuasive appeals, and contrast effects.

**J. KURT LEWIN** – he was an early leader of group dynamic research and is regarded by many as the founder of modern social psychology. Lewin's Equation,  $B=f(P,E)$ , stipulates that behavior is a function of the person and environment. He coined the term "action research". He advocated "action research" applying his equation and scientific methods to address social problems such as prejudice and group conflict.

*"No action without research; no research without action."*

**K. LEON FESTINGER** – he developed the *theory of cognitive dissonance*, a motivational theory suggesting that people seek to minimize discomfort caused by inconsistent beliefs and behaviors. He also developed social comparison theory in 1954 and documented the key role of proximity in social relationships.

Let's wrap up our discussion by reflecting on these final points.

1. Have you ever changed your behavior just because you felt like someone was watching, even if you were actually alone?
2. If you had to choose one of the four major perspectives in social psychology, which one do you find most compelling or scientifically sound?
3. Describe a scenario where you utilized social comparison to evaluate your own abilities or social standing.
4. How have the primacy and halo effects manifested in your personal interactions? Provide an example where an early observation dominated your overall evaluation of someone.
5. Describe a situation where you experienced intense in-group loyalty and out-group hostility, similar to the tension between the Rattlers and the Eagles.

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