

---

# A Brief Introduction

- 
- Introduction
  - A definition of social psychology
  - The organization of this book
- 

## Introduction

This textbook is intended as an introduction to social psychology for university students and others with little or no prior knowledge of the field. What usually attracts people to social psychology is a desire to understand more about the self, interpersonal relations, aggression, prejudice and the variety of other issues that make up social psychology. This introduction is deliberately brief in order not to stand in the way of you, the reader, getting quickly to chapters 2 to 18, which provide a broader view of social psychology than do most textbooks.

As you discover what social psychologists do or do not know about the issues which interest you, and how they go about finding out, you will almost certainly ask yourself questions about the adequacy of the research methods they use and about the nature of social psychology as a whole. Textbooks usually start with chapters on those issues, offering abstractions and generalizations regarding social psychology about which the reader, as yet, knows little that is concrete or specific. The writers of this book believe that, before trying to grapple with ‘the nature of social psychology’ and ‘methods of research’, you should sustain your interest by satisfying your curiosity about the content of social psychology, and so we reserve our general chapters for the very end of the book. That, of course, does not mean you have to wait until you have completed

seventeen other chapters before you can read about research methods, the history of the field and alternative conceptions of social psychology, including ‘the broader view’ which underpins this book. Feel free to read the final chapters when you feel ready to put the substance of what you have read in earlier chapters into a broader context. You may even wish to compare your own emerging impressions of the nature of social psychology against what we claim in chapters 19 and 20.

Meanwhile, there are two aims to this purposefully short introduction. The first is to present our definition of social psychology, which underlies the organization of this book. The second is to outline the book’s structure and contents.

### **A definition of social psychology**

Social psychology is the study of the interrelations amongst individuals, their interactions and the societies they live in. The key feature of that definition is that it emphasizes that social psychology is continually concerned with interrelating ideas and phenomena at three different levels of analysis: the personal, the interpersonal and the societal. Social psychologists are fascinated by the internal psychological processes and observable behaviours of the individual person. We are also extremely interested in what happens when two or more people interact together, particularly when they are face to face, and form relationships. In addition, we try to understand how individuals, dyads (i.e. pairs of people) and small groups are influenced by, and sometimes succeed in influencing, the larger-scale social, economic and political processes and institutions of society. We struggle to attempt to integrate what we have learned about those three very rich sets of issues. Those issues and their interrelations are what make social psychology so exciting, and such a potentially ambitious discipline. It is sometimes described as the link between psychology and the biological sciences, on the one hand, and sociology and the social sciences, on the other. Ambitious indeed! It is only honest to admit, perhaps to your relief, that by no means all of those ambitions have as yet been achieved. It is also true that some social psychologists hold more modest conceptions of social psychology, as we shall see in chapter 20. But it is this ambitious and broad view which underlies this textbook, and this view provides the rationale for the way in which the book is organized.

### **The organization of this book**

Social psychology should be continually concerned with relations amongst the individual, interaction and society. Yet, in practice, one of those levels of analysis frequently seems to be focused on at the expense of the other two. I would argue that in good social psychological theory and research that is something of an illusion. The individual or the interpersonal or larger-scale social influences may, at first sight, seem to be the focus, but in fact the primary concern will not be understood unless the other two sets of concerns are adequately accounted for. One of the three levels of analysis may be foregrounded but the other two will be lurking not far behind. Thus, parts I, II and

III of this book are organized according to whether the individual, social interaction and relationships or the social world seems to be the primary focus. Part IV examines a number of major social issues, which span all three levels and to the study of which social psychology fruitfully contributes. Part V considers the general nature of social psychology.

## Part I The Social Individual

The first part attempts to capture the social nature of the individual by considering in turn what we know about the personalities, cognitive bases of social behaviour, feelings and language abilities of individuals. You might expect chapter 2, 'Personality and the Self', to deal exclusively with personal and individualistic concerns, and you will see that efforts to understand personality as traits or in Freudian terms partly confirm those expectations. But a third approach to the study of personality, in terms of how the self emerges and functions, forces us to grasp the idea that a person's sense of self is in large part socially constructed through both interaction with particular others and the influences of society at large, thereby providing a particularly good illustration of what was argued in the previous section. Chapter 3, 'Cognition and Social Behaviour', begins to make clear, as do many subsequent chapters, the importance for social psychology of understanding the cognitive abilities, and limitations, of individuals. The chapter considers not only how the thought, judgement and decision-making of individuals affect their social behaviour but also how culture and society influence their cognitive functioning. Although social psychology continues to be dominated by a concern for cognition, or thinking, it has relatively recently rediscovered the importance of emotion, or feelings. Chapter 4, 'Emotion', examines how the emotions operate in our social life, and in doing so reveals both the interdependence of our thoughts and feelings and striking cultural differences, as well as similarities, in how feelings are expressed. Chapter 5, 'Language and Communication', which analyses how individuals communicate, especially through the use of language, applies this analysis to gender differences in language use. This is the first of many discussions throughout the book of relations between the sexes and possible gender differences. The inclusion of this chapter in part I helps round off an analysis of the individual which is inherently social. It could also, of course, have been the first chapter in part II.

## Part II Social Interaction and Relationships

In part II, the apparent focus is now firmly on interaction and interpersonal relations, rather than on the individual. Chapter 6, 'The Development of Social Relationships', begins, appropriately enough, at the beginning, by examining the infant's early interaction with adults before looking at the increasingly complex relationships engaged in by children as they grow older. Although interpersonal phenomena are central, the importance of internal psychological processes and of differing cultural contexts is also made apparent. Many social psychologists build a barrier between social psychology and developmental psychology which we, on principle, will ignore (and, in chapter 20,

will justify ignoring), hence the inclusion of chapters 6 and 10 and various other discussions of relevant developmental matters. Chapter 7, 'Interpersonal Relationships', carries the study of relationships into adulthood. It sets out a broad framework within which we can see what should be taken into account if we are to begin to understand the variations in and richness of interpersonal relations. In chapter 8, 'Interaction in Groups', the examination of social interaction switches from dyads to small groups of people. A consideration of what constitutes a group is followed by the main issue of the chapter, an analysis of how members of a group, whether in a majority or a minority within the group, are influenced by other group members. Chapter 9, 'Altruism and Aggression', examines particularly positive and particularly negative facets of social interaction. The main emphasis in the treatment of these far-reaching issues is on interpersonal manifestations of prosocial and antisocial behaviours.

### Part III Understanding The Social World

Part III contains five chapters on the theme of how we understand the social world and represent it to ourselves and to others. Although the primary focus is now the social world around us, the individual's cognitive and emotional processes as well as interpersonal relations remain very relevant. Chapter 10, 'The Development of Moral Reasoning', for example, looks at how we acquire a system of morality. It does so by examining cognitive processes which, at least in part, underlie, amongst other things, the prosocial and antisocial behaviours of the previous chapter, and by emphasizing the role of interpersonal relations in the development of moral reasoning in the individual, especially in childhood. The most salient part of our social world is other people and chapter 11 is on 'Perceiving and Understanding People'. This chapter includes a major topic in social psychology, attribution making, which deals with how we interpret the behaviour of others as well as our own behaviour. Traditionally, our views of the social world have been studied by social psychologists as 'attitudes', and these are examined in the next two chapters. Chapter 12, 'Attitudes and Actions', includes a discussion of varying conceptions of attitudes but its main theme is the complex, and at times rather unexpected, relations between our views of the world and our behaviours in it. Chapter 13, 'Attitude Organization and Change', asks whether our attitudes and actions are as organized as the 'consistency theories' imply. It also considers how attitudes can be changed. A more recent way of studying people's views of the social world is the focus of Chapter 14, 'Social Representations'. A social representation can be thought of as a shared, sometimes widespread, view of a facet of the world, such as the body or mental illness. This chapter shows why, for social psychology, it is at least as important to understand why many people share similar views of the world as it is to understand differences amongst individuals in their views.

### Part IV Social Issues

This part also focuses on our social world, with its four chapters analysing major social issues. Chapter 15, 'Prejudice and Intergroup Relations', which deals with prejudice and

hostility mainly between ethnic groups, is a prime example of the need to consider processes at different levels of analysis. The chapter critically examines four contrasting types of theories put forward by social psychologists and asks what social psychology has to offer with regard to improving intergroup relations. Chapter 16, 'The World of Paid Work', asks what employees might hope to get from paid work and what, in the way of job satisfaction, they do appear to gain from work. It also examines the psychological impact of unemployment and insecure employment, especially on people's mental health, a topic which reappears in Chapter 17, 'Health and Illness'. This chapter presents ideas and research on psychological aspects of both physical and mental health and illness, in keeping with the considerable interest in recent years in a 'health psychology' more broadly based than psychology's traditional and much narrower interest in just mental illness. Prejudice, employment and health, amongst other topics, all raise important issues of social policy to which social psychology is potentially capable of making more major contributions than has often been recognized. That is the theme of the final chapter of part IV, a chapter possibly unique in social psychology textbooks. Chapter 18, 'Social Psychology and Policy', makes clear that social psychology is about not only understanding but also changing the social world and the social individuals who interact in it.

## Part V The Nature of Social Psychology

The final part consists of two chapters which aim to place the specific contents of parts I to IV into a broader, more general context. Chapter 19, 'Research Methods', offers a broad introduction to methods of inquiry in social psychology, with an emphasis on the multiplicity of research methods available to the social psychologist. Finally, Chapter 20 examines 'The Nature of Social Psychology' in two ways. First, it offers a brief and selective history of Social Psychology. Then it looks at alternative conceptions of what social psychology is and contrasts a common narrower view with the broader view of social psychology which underpins this book.

