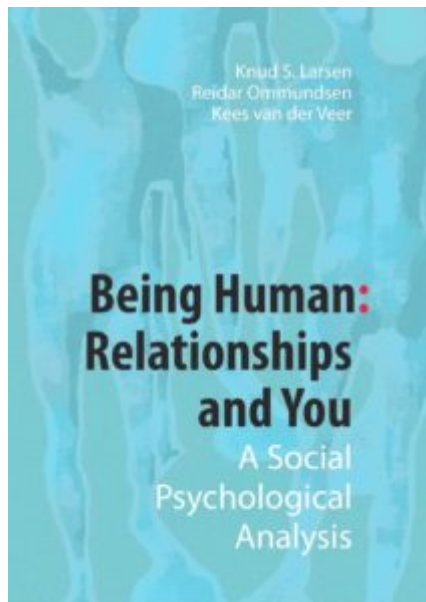


# Being Human. Chapter 1: The Theoretical Domain And Methods Of Social Psychology



Social psychological thinking is ancient, but the science described in these pages is modern. There are those who would say “there is nothing new under the sun”. It is true that we owe a great deal to philosophers like Aristotle, Socrates, Plato and many others, who thought about society, and made astute observations. Later scholars however have since put many of these early ideas, to the empirical test. We all have a cultural heritage to which we are indebted for many contemporary ideas.

However, social psychology as a separate field commenced with the publication of two books at the beginning of the twentieth century. William McDougall was the author of *An introduction of Social Psychology* published in 1908, and in the same year E.A. Ross published *Social Psychology: An outline and source book*. McDougall was a psychologist and Ross a sociologist, so it’s right to say that these two fields were the parents of social psychology. In fact, typically social psychology is taught in both fields, but with a somewhat different emphasis.

The major issue confronting those early thinkers was how the influence of others affects our behavior. Social psychology often reflects salient concerns in history, a fact that is easily ascertained by examining the major research topics in a given time period. In the early years of the twentieth century, the French revolution was still in the mind of many social thinkers and therefore social psychology placed an emphasis on such questions as why people behave less rationally in crowds. Le Bon said in affect “as individuals people are civilized, in crowds they are barbarians” (Larsen, 1977, p.iix).

Does the environment cause behavior; for example are some cultures more aggressive and war like than others? (Chagnon, 1997). McDougall felt that social

behavior could be explained by social instincts, and therefore favored the “nature” explanation. In turn McDougall was influenced by Charles Darwin whose evolutionary theory proposed that the explanation of behavior is found in its contribution to survival. Others, however, suggested that we learn to behave in altruistic or aggressive ways through imitation of others and by the power of suggestion. For example, William James (1890), another influential pioneer, believed that the primary explanation for social behavior is “habit”; we learn our social behavior through repetition, thus emphasizing “nurture”. John Dewey (1922), another early thinker in social psychology, advanced the idea of the environment as a determinant and emphasized situational influences on behavior. These varying ideas contributed directly to the dominant theories which today influence and direct social psychological research and concepts.

### *1. Theories in social psychology*

These early thinkers proposed major all embracing concepts in turn advocated as explaining all social behavior (Allport, 1985). For example, some proposed that hedonism (pleasure seeking) explain all that we do? Other thinkers suggested that we understand human behavior simply as a function of imitation or instincts. This emphasis on all embracing concepts, introduced the problem of “nominalism” into psychology. Do we really understand more by just labeling behavior? Eventually, social psychologists recognized the inadequacy of all encompassing principles and began the development of theories based on the scientific method.

What defines social psychology as a discipline? Allport (1985) suggested that social psychology is “an attempt to understand and explain how thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others” (p.3). In other words, social psychology is the scientific study of social cognition (how people think about each other), how people are influenced by the behavior of others (for example conformity processes), and how they relate to each other through cooperation or aggression.

Some scholars distinguish between a psychological and a sociological version of the discipline (see Hewstone & Manstead, 1995). The latter is said to address more explicitly the interface between the individual and the wider social structure. We think this is an unnecessary and outdated distinction. In fact, Allport also added to his definition that “The term ‘implied presence’ refers to the many activities the person carries out because of his position (role) in a complex social structure and because of his membership in a cultural group”. (Allport,

1985, p. 3). Hence, we agree with Jones (1985) that social psychology is “an excellent candidate for an interdisciplinary field” (p.47). The present book seeks to realize this standpoint. This rationale suggests that the definition of social psychology may be found in the major explanations it has produced of social behavior. This effort resulted in four major theories within psychology, and several within sociology and related social sciences.

### *1.1 Learning theories*

Social psychology, like other fields in psychology, benefited greatly from general learning theories (Lott & Lott, 1985). These theories include classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and observational learning. Of these approaches the most salient for social psychology is observational learning. For example, we learn to be aggressive, we learn to fight, to hurt one another, by observing significant others behaving in these ways. We develop our attitudes, our feelings of aggression, and other social behaviors through the subtle and not so subtle observation of others. Parents are role models in early development, but others including teachers and peers also influence children. In recent decades the media has played an important role, and a great deal of research has been conducted on the influence of television on human behavior. The early pioneers in observational learning (Bandura, 1979) provided convincing evidence that the mere observation of aggressive models could and did produce more aggression in children, and that this aggressive behavior was lasting. They also demonstrated that if the model was punished, it reduced aggression somewhat, whereas if rewarded the aggression increased. So we all learn through observation of significant others and by observing the consequences of their behaviors (Bandura, 1973; Bandura and Ross, & Ross, 1961; Bandura, & Walters, 1959, 1963). However, there is obviously more to the human experience than simply observing others. Some of us also have a tendency to think!

### *1.2 Social cognition*

Cognitive consistency theories are very influential perspectives in social psychology. These perspectives propose the idea that human beings have an essential need for cognitive consistency and balance. Festinger (1957) and Heider (1958) both influenced what would become very productive areas of research and theory building. Festinger’s for example suggested that when people become aware of beliefs and attitudes inconsistent with their behavior this contradiction is experienced as an unpleasant emotional state. Dissonance in turn motivates

behavioral change, and a reorganization of beliefs and attitudes.

Today we all know that cigarette smoking has terrible consequences for peoples' health. According to Festinger's theory that knowledge should produce dissonance in the mind of the smoker, and a change in habit. Some smokers do quit, but others simply reorganize their beliefs about the health risk. For example a smoker may say that he knows of many who smoked, who haven't died yet. Through rationalizations smokers bolster beliefs that smoking is not harmful and thereby remove dissonance.

Heider's balance theory proposes that the internal consistency of our likes and dislikes matters in our social behavior. From this theoretical perspective we have a fundamental need to hold consistent patterns of likes and dislikes. If your friend dislikes another person who is your friend, your relationship is not in balance, and according to Heider you would do something to restore balance. You may change your liking of the other person, or you may think your friend is unreasonable and restore balance by removing him from your life as a friend.

### *1.3 Information processing*

Further theory development in social cognition was influenced by advances in general information theory in the natural sciences (Markus & Zajonc, 1985). Social cognition theories find the causes of human behavior in the processing of information, and in our attempts to understand others and ourselves. The basic idea is that we function like human computers (Fiske, 1993; Markus and Zajonc, 1985) as we encode information, store it in memory, and retrieve it at a later moment in time. Why do we attend to certain information while completely ignoring other resources? The field of social perception takes note of those individual differences, and more recently cognitive theories on social categorization have made signal contributions to the understanding of prejudice, aggression as well as cooperative behavior (see e.g. Spears, 1995).

### *1.4 Equity and Exchange theories*

It should not surprise us that social psychological theories reflect our economic system, although that remains an unstated assumption of equity and exchange theories. Seeking equity and fair outcomes reflect optimal economic relations in a capitalist society. Among the most influential thinkers are Homans, 1974; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959; and Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978. Essentially these theories explain human social behavior in terms of rewards, costs, and profit

suggesting that all relationships contain these three elements. Raising a child can be rewarding, but also contain many costs not immediately apparent to young parents. The rewards may include the psychological pleasure of creating and nurturing life. The costs can include the obvious economic expenditures, but also psychological costs if the child is difficult and chooses a disapproved path of behavior. At some level, we mentally compute a balance sheet and subtract the costs from the rewards, leaving us with a relative profitable or unprofitable relationship.

An underlying assumption of equity and exchange theories is that lasting relationships always involve profitable outcomes. This assertion does not describe altruistic behavior. People may choose to behave in ways that are not only nonprofitable, but may even risk their very existence in an effort to help others. Do equity and exchange theories emerge solely from our contemporary culture? Social norms based on equity principles is in fact also described in ancient Confucian thinking (Hwang, 2006). This finding indicates that equity thinking not only reflects the present day economic system, but perhaps also more basic and universal tendencies in human psychology. In order to test for the universality of equity principles more research needs to be conducted cross-culturally.

## *2. The place of social psychology as a level of explanation*

These Social psychological theories have had great heuristic value in generating and directing research, and have also led to theory building in major research areas. Social psychology's interest in social thought, feelings and behavior has led to research on such varying topics as aggression (e.g. Larsen, 1977a), persuasion, conformity, and (the destructive influences of) obedience. Research developments on these and other topics are discussed in the chapters to come.

*To the overriding question what causes human social behavior* there is no simple answer. For example, what causes prejudice? Is it the social environment? Is it a function of the culture that produces hatred, or dislike of ethnic or minority groups? Is it the social ideology of fascism that produces bigotry? Further, social psychology seeks also to understand mediating variables or cognitive processes within the person. How do beliefs or attitudes of the individual influence the construal of a given situation? (Ross and Nisbett, 1991). These varying levels of influence must be integrated before we can present an overall theory of prejudice or of any other important social behavior (Doise, 1986).

An overall social psychological theory must also integrate information from related fields. Currently the “publish or perish” norm of world psychology and world social sciences encourage the ownership of psychological constructs, where labeling of concepts is in the domain of the individual investigator and those that follow in the particular research niche. This labeling process makes it difficult to interpret research from related fields, although varying terminology may in fact represent the same social phenomena. At some point in the future, after more maturing of our sciences, attempts will undoubtedly be made to integrate the social sciences.

Currently, social psychology is mainly interested in mediating variables like beliefs, attitudes, attribution of causality and responsibility, and social categorization. These factors are intriguing to social psychologists because they appear to be linked to important social behaviors like conformity, aggression, and altruism. Other mediating variables considered of great importance are the related concepts of authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1988), dogmatism, (Rokeach, 1960), and more recently social dominance orientation (see Pratto, Sidanius & Levin, 2006) which have influenced research on prejudice and aggression.

Social psychology is history, and two Jews responding to the genocide of the Second World War in fact initiated the research on authoritarianism. Another, more recent researcher Milgram (1965, 1974), also Jewish, investigated the willingness to obey commands to hurt others which led to great controversy over ethics in social psychology. Further investigations (Larsen, Coleman, Forbes, & Johnson, 1972; Larsen, 1974a; Larsen, 1974b; and Larsen, 1976a) showed that the willingness to shock innocent victims could be produced by social learning models and were motivated by need for social approval (more in chapter 7). This research on aggression reflected our concerns with understanding the history of the genocide of the Second World War and the experience with fascism.

Furthermore, it may be useful to think of the study of social psychology within the behaviorist model of stimulus and response. There are stimuli explanations, for example the effect of the social environment that explains much behavior. Those born into racial ghettos differ from those born rich and privileged. The environment explains some of the behavior, however we have many examples of people who have risen above their social circumstances. Therefore our beliefs, values, and attitudes also account for significant portions in the explanation of

behavior. Beliefs, values and attitudes are the mediating variables within the stimulus-response model. Finally, the actual behavior can also be studied. What are differences in for example aggression between social groups, and to what extent can the social environment, and/or the mediating variables of beliefs, values, and attitudes explain these differences. The S-R model provides a framework for different levels of explanation.

### *2.1 Levels of explanation of social behavior*

Social psychology is only one level of explanation in understanding human behavior. We are not in competition with other scientific disciplines, therefore if our results are valid they should fit the insights from other scholarly approaches. Human emotion for example may also be explained by physiological variables emphasizing chemical concomitants. Emotion may also be explained in terms of the characteristics of the individual. Culture and social norms define how national groups differ in emotional display and communication (e.g. Edwards, 1999). Philosophers furthermore try to integrate emotions into an overall viewpoint of life. Therefore social psychology explains some of the human experience, but not all. That fact does not make social psychology less valuable; only it recognizes that the complexity of human behavior requires different levels of explanation

The same variability of explanation holds true for theories *within* the field of social psychology (see Doise, 1986). As was mentioned before, learning theories explain some of social psychology. We learn many behaviors, for example to love, and also to hate. Learning theories, however, do not cover the entire range of explanations. Human beings for example also behave in accordance with the economic model of exchange proposed by equity theory. Further, we also evaluate our relationships, and seek balance and harmony as proposed by cognitive theories. Thus only by taking into account all possible theories, can we get closer to understanding of love or hate, and by recognizing as scholars that we still have much to learn.

An eclectic approach must take into account different levels of explanation from other disciplines, and also different theories within social psychology. Finally, a world psychology must evaluate the results from cross-national and cross-cultural psychology. Is it possible to develop a sound social psychology based on only western societies? Today we know that culture matters in behavior. Psychology as a discipline is dependent on the expectations of society and its cultural history. However, the other extreme, that we must only search for information that is

contextually bound to specific cultures is also misleading, because there is much in the human experience that is similar in all cultures. Therefore we can learn from empirical studies from any specific culture as long as we recognize the context, and try to verify the results where possible. Different cultural perspectives are not exclusive, but rather complimentary. All cultures represent different views into the reality that is life. Social psychologists value the exchange of ideas, and the search for the principles that someday will provide more answers within a world psychology.

## 2.2 The related disciplines

Sociology is often confused for social psychology. Like sociology, social psychology is interested in groups, but the focus of sociology is on group behavior. Groups can behave many different ways. Some might express racist behavior like the Ku Klux Klan did in the persecution and lynching of Blacks in the United States. Other groups like the American Civil Liberties Union have in turn opposed discrimination, as have political parties on the left of the political spectrum. A social psychologist however is more likely to study racist attitudes within the individual, while of course being aware of the social and situational environment that contribute to these anti-social attitudes.

So there are many other fields that study people and groups. In addition to sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics all make contributions to the understanding of social behavior. What makes social psychology different is the focus on the individual within the group setting. An anthropologist would seek group level explanations, for example focuses on the cultural traditions as a major cause for behavior. Sociology also focuses on group level explanations within a given society. Economics, as a field of study examines peoples' behavior as primarily economic forms of transactions. Political science on the other hand seeks to understand power relations between groups in a given society.

Social psychology, on the other hand, tries to integrate all this information, in the attempt to understand the individual as a unit of analysis. Why do people conform? Why are they excluding or including in relationships towards minorities? Social psychology is cognizant of the influence of the situation and environment, and in research therefore studies possible influence of situational variables on behavior. At the same time we also examine possible moderating effects of personality. Personality may in some cases neutralize, and for other behaviors exacerbate the effects of situational variables. In fact the study of the



self or personality has been considered an integral part of social psychology and a fundamental focus from the beginning of our discipline. The clearest evidence for this is the presence of journals from the American Psychological Association that reflect this integration including *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

### *2.3 The social self*

As early as the work of William James (1890) social psychology focused its attention on the self, thought to comprise two aspects the “me” and the “I”. The self as an object of knowledge comprises all that we know about ourselves. We are or are not intelligent or we are or are not good parents, etc. All this information constitutes the “me” component. The “I” component refers to the executive function of the self, the part of us that makes and executes decisions. This focus has led to a great interest in decision-making processes in social psychology, in learning how and why we make decisions. The self is of crucial importance, because there are many obvious connections between the self and social behavior for example how we present our selves in social situations (see Goffman, 1959). While personality psychologists focus on personality and self, their focus is on development of individually unique patterns, and internal dynamic of personality traits, and less on how these factors are linked to situational influence. The social self is discussed in chapter 2.

In short, the subject matter for social psychology is social behaviors and the combined social and personal influences on such behavior. The level of explanation is the individual level, e.g. individual cognition, attitudes and behavior. These individual processes are studied by either correlational or experimental methods.

### *The methods of social psychology*

How do we study social behavior? Social psychology as a science is built on two major methods. The first methodology is correlation, i.e. examining the strength and direction of relationships between variables on topics of interest. The second is experimental research in the laboratory, based on manipulations of independent variables observing for effects on dependent variables.

### *3.1 Correlational research*

For example we can survey the incidence of lung cancer among smokers. If smoking increases the risk of cancer we should expect a correlation between the

level of smoking and the incidence of cancer. Correlations vary from plus and minus 1.0, the larger the correlation the stronger the relationship between the two variables. A minus correlation means that a high score on one variable has a relationship to a low score on another variable, and visa versa. A positive correlation indicates that high or low scores follow the same pattern on the two variables.

It is important to remember that correlations do not imply causal affects. Correlations simply detect association between two variables A and B. A may cause B, or B may cause A, or the relationship may be caused by a third variable that is not examined. For example assuming there is a relationship between lung cancer and smoking, a third variable (perhaps some personality factor) may be responsible for both smoking and the bodily weakness producing cancer. There is a relationship between education and income in western societies. Does that mean that education causes higher income? Not necessarily. Perhaps a personality variable called achievement motivation causes both a desire for income and education.

It is an error to confuse correlation with causation. To answer questions about causation we would have to conduct an experiment where we would compare a group of subjects who smoke say thirty cigarettes a day for ten years, to a control group which is similar in every way except they do not smoke. An experiment would give us a definitive answer about cause and effect. However, we cannot carry out such an experiment on smoking for obvious ethical reasons. It would be highly unethical to encourage subjects to smoke when they may develop a deadly disease as a consequence. Perhaps we could train a sample of apes or monkeys to smoke? However, if you were in favor of the ethical treatment of animals you would no doubt object to an experimental treatment producing suffering in animals.

The ethical alternative is the survey, whereby we obtain information by asking questions to a written form with a standard or open-ended set of questions, or through an interview. Researchers can use two basic formats in either the interview or the written survey. For open-ended questions the respondents are asked to supply their own answers that can afterwards be subjected to content analysis for common categories of responses. In the survey with standard response categories the researcher supplies several alternatives from which the respondent must choose that which most closely correspond to his attitudes or

behavior. For example in Likert scaling the respondent chooses whether he agrees strongly, just agrees, is uncertain, disagrees, or disagrees strongly with a given question. Questions with standard response categories allow for comparisons between groups and individuals, and facilitate the interpretation of the results.

The major problem with surveys is the question of validity, is the respondent truthful in providing his/her answer? Some issues surveyed create social desirability motivation in the respondents, so the answer provided may be socially appropriate, but not necessarily truthful. Questions about intimate issues are often affected by social desirability and it is important to control for response sets. The possibility of social desirability responses should encourage the researcher to view survey results with measured skepticism, and try alternative wording or methods.

Another problem in survey research is the variable meaning of the actual words used to survey opinion. What appears to the observer to be small differences in meaning can produce profound differences in responses. In developing statements for attitude scaling there are a number of criteria that should be followed to ensure that the statements are not ambiguous, and therefore clearly understood by the respondent. For example, questions should be simple sentences, contain only one idea, and be clearly understood by the targeted audience. In one study in the US only 7 percent of those sampled would abolish government programs aimed at helping the "needy", whereas 39 percent would oppose programs going to support public welfare (Marty, 1982). One would think the support for "needy" is very closely related to "public welfare", but in the US "public welfare" is a negative concept provided encouragement to the lazy and unworthy. Questions may produce biased results, because of their wording. For example, responses to particular questions depend somewhat on the context of what preceded it in the survey. If a question on demographic information, e.g. income and education comes at the beginning of the survey, this information may bias subsequent responses.

The response options also critically affect the outcome. If the response categories are open-ended the respondent may say anything that comes to his mind. This procedure produces a different result from that produced when the respondent is guided by a standard set of response categories. The nature of the response categories may provide guidance or bias of which the researcher is unaware.

Therefore pre-testing of questionnaires is highly advisable (Van der Veer, 2005).

Interviews are very useful in obtaining the initial framework of the study that of identifying the key issues or topics. The interview procedure also contains problems. We know that the interviewer may produce biased results by simple nonverbal behaviors, like clearing his throat after a socially desirable response. Interviewers must have serious training to produce standardized interviews results. Surveys have the advantage of being relatively cheap, quick to administer and analyze. Today one can even administer surveys via the computer and the Internet. To summarize, the position of the question may affect the responses, the actual wording may contain hidden biases not immediately clear to the investigator (Schwarz and Strack, 1991), and the response and the interviewer options might guide or bias the response. Apart from careful preparation of the survey questions, an additional problem is found in the sampling process to which we turn now.

### *3.1 Random versus biased sampling of respondents*

Research has shown that it is possible to represent a population of 100,000 with a sample of just a few hundred participants if proper random sampling procedures are followed. Random sampling is based on the idea that each member of a population has an equal and independent chance of participating in the sample. In voting behavior, social scientists can predict election outcomes with great accuracy after polling a few respondents who are representative of the voters from a few polling stations that are representative of all polling stations. It is this efficiency that attracts researchers to the use of the survey method.

Random sampling is however time consuming and expensive to perform so researchers often use biased samples. Consequently, the results of the research may also be biased. For example, if you studied attitudes toward homosexuality the results would be very biased if respondents are primarily conservative members of religious organizations with well formed negative opinions. Another problem is the so-called non-response: the number of people who refuse to participate, or who just don't respond. If say 30-40 percent of the sample do not participate, we need to know how that affects the results. To learn the effect we must obtain a representative sample of those who refused and then determine how they are different from the participating respondents.

There is some middle ground in sampling procedures. For example college

students are often participants in surveys. They are easily available and often have opinions on a variety of topics. They also come from a variety of backgrounds and may therefore give us a rough approximation of broader social opinion and attitudes. In addition there are some issues where it matters little if the sample is representative, issues that are believed to reflect broad human behaviors. Van der Veer, Ommundsen, & Larsen (2007) found that attitude scales produced with college students produced scales that could be validly applied to representative samples. In the obedience to authority studies (Milgram, 1965, 1974; Larsen et al, 1972; 1974a, 1974b, 1976a) on the willingness to shock innocent victims, similar behavior was found in every group and nationality studied. Such broad behaviors can therefore be studied in more narrow samples. However, for more specific issues random sampling enables the researcher to draw conclusions about opinions in the general population.

The survey method remains a very important tool for social psychology within fields of opinion research and attitude scaling. It is most popular within the branch of social psychology found in sociology. However, the experimental method searching for cause and effect still has the attention of the majority of social psychologists within psychology.

### *3.2 Experimental research*

This type of research is typically conducted in a controlled environment like a university laboratory. From the very beginning psychology was built upon the natural sciences with aspirations to eventually becoming also a mature discipline. Given the short historical time since the beginning of social psychology it is too early to evaluate its success as a natural science, but the aspiration to become an acceptable scientific discipline explains the methods employed by most social psychologists (Higbee, 1972).

An experiment involves simulations of real life situations presented in such a way as to be believable to the participating subjects. Social psychologists manipulate some part of the situation (called the independent variable) in order to observe the effect on another variable (called the dependent variable). For example social psychologists have studied the effect of violence in the media on subsequent violent behavior (Liebert & Baron, 1972). In one study boys and girls were exposed to excerpts of an extreme violent episode of a police drama, or alternatively to excerpts of a film showing the excitement of a sporting event. The sporting event sample was the control group since emotional excitement was

created in both conditions, but only violence in the police drama. The children who viewed the violence in the police drama (experimental group) were subsequently observed behaving with more violence compared to the children who saw the sporting event film. In experiments the researcher seeks to control some aspect of a simulation believed to reflect real life, in order to observe the effect of the experimental treatment. Later in this chapter we shall examine the effect of media violence on aggression as a form of applied psychology, and its function as a social learning theory. In chapter 10 we shall more fully discuss the research on exposure to violence, as it remains a salient area of social psychology.

If the groups are different on some salient dimension other than the one studied we have no way of ascertaining if it is that difference, or the experimental treatment that is responsible for the observed effect. For example if we included only boys in the experimental group and girls in the control sample perhaps gender differences were responsible for the higher level of observed violence. Random assignment is therefore considered essential in drawing valid conclusions. All the subjects in the population of interest must have an equal chance of appearing in either the control or the experimental group. In using random sampling inferences can be drawn that it is the experimental treatment that is responsible for the observed differences. Random sampling is probably not observed frequently, since most experiments are not conducted on general populations. Choice of the population to be included in an experiment is dictated by practical concerns including the greater availability and willingness of university students to participate. That is not necessarily a negative factor since research often is directed toward topics that university students have in common with the rest of society.

### *3.3 Bias in experiments*

One source of bias in experiments refers to the demand characteristics of the study. Biases refer to cues that are unwittingly provided to the subject by the experimenter, by which the experimenter reinforces certain behaviors to the exclusion of others. "Good" subjects want to cooperate with the experimenter and therefore seek to "understand" the experiment and behave in accordance with these perceived expectations. In other words the experiment has demand characteristics for appropriate behavior. Orne (1962) pointed to compliant subject behavior as a major problem for the validity of experimental results.

The experimenter himself may also unintentionally influence the outcome of an

experiment. For example Rosenthal (1966) showed that when laboratory assistants were told that some rats were bred for higher intelligence (maze bright) these rats performed better than rats that were described as “maze dull”. In fact, there was no inbred difference between the two groups of rats, only the expectations of their handlers for the learning curve of “bright” versus “dull” rats. The expectations of the experimental assistants probably translated to more careful and rewarding handling of the rats described as “bright”, which in turn produced faster learning. Demand characteristics may appear in any experiment, and therefore repetition (replication) of the experiment under the same, as well as different conditions, is warranted.

The laboratory setting as such may also affect results. For example Milgram conducted his experiments at Yale University. Perhaps the research participants were willing to deliver shocks not because they obeyed authority, but simply because they trusted a researcher at this prestigious university not to allow serious harm being done to research participants (Mixon, 1971). However, Milgram being aware of this possible bias moved his experiments to a regular office building in a small town to avoid any association with a prestigious university. The willingness to deliver shocks continued, lending support to an obedience interpretation. However, in this new setting willingness to shock was reduced, indicating that the setting where an experiment is conducted may also make a difference.

### *3.4 The ethics of experimental investigations*

A significant problem already referred to in the previous discussion occurred when social psychology became involved in an intense debate over the ethics of manipulation of experimental subjects in the 1960's. The aforementioned obedience experiments by Milgram, Larsen, and others produced contention within psychology initiated by Baumrind (1985). The above experiments sought to understand why people were willing to obey an experimenter's commands to shock innocent victims, and were seen as the laboratory equivalent of the holocaust. Since most subjects were willing the experiments were thought to make statements about essential human nature. Most people like to think of themselves as kind and humane, and yet here apparently “normal” people participated in what could have been lethal behavior in the laboratory.

Questions were raised as to the long-term effect of such participation on the subjects' self-esteem, and if such a risk was justified. The resulting debate

produced a revision of the ethics of experimental psychology including the requirement of informed consent. Informed consent has many components, but essentially means that the subject must be sufficiently informed so they can choose whether or not to participate in the experiment. In addition professional ethics demand that the investigator be truthful. Deception can only be used in those circumstances where the information to be obtained is valued higher than the temporary discomfort of the participant. In all cases the experimenter must try to protect the participant from harm and discomfort, ensuring anonymity of the participants and their behavior. Since participants are not identified by name there should be no social consequences for participating in experiments. Finally, at the conclusion of the experiment, all procedures must be explained to the participant, including any deception, and efforts be made to reconcile the subjects' feelings

These ethical requirements would exclude the Milgram type experiment or similar manipulations from future study. Current ethics would also exclude many experiments on conformity and other significant social behaviors. The debate was overblown in the opinion of the authors of this book, and has had serious negative consequences for social psychological research. Others researchers have shown that there were no long-term negative consequences for subjects from participating in the Milgram experiment (Clark and Word, 1974; and Zimbardo, 1974). Most participants did not object to the manipulation when researchers explained the reasons for the deception (Christensen, 1988). These subject responses were entirely consistent with the anecdotal evidence collected at the conclusion of the aforementioned Larsen experiments.

### *3.5 A balance between ethical concerns of subject, society, and discipline*

An important protection for the participant must be the anonymity of the participant, and the experimenter's ethical responsibility to keep all related information confidential. Anonymity is guaranteed by the inability of the experimenter to identify who provided what results in the experiment. No data should be kept which could identify individual participants, unless the subject gives informed consent for the purpose of some follow up at a later time. That ethical responsibility means that the experimenter must remove names and other identifying information from any records. Anonymity is not a problem in research since social psychologists are not interested in individual responses, but rather in the overall results. How many subjects were willing to shock the learner in the



Milgram experiment, at what level did they stop administering shock, and how intensely did they shock? In cases where information is needed for some follow up it is incumbent on the experimenter to keep records confidential. To obtain honest responses it is necessary to create experimental conditions where the respondent feels safe, and ensure that there will be no personal repercussions for his honesty. The investigator may know the identity of the subject, but takes steps to ensure that this information is not used against the participants.

Clearly there are also ethical obligations to the larger society. Professional ethics require honesty in reporting the results, and not making inferences that are not supported by the data. At the same time society also has a responsibility toward the researcher. Instead of encumbering research, society should respect academic freedom to discover new and useful information. It is only on the basis of such information that society can respond to the human condition, and take steps to improve society.

Clearly there should be ethical considerations in social psychology, but they should include a more serious and balanced evaluation of the importance of the information obtained, and possible positive and negative consequences for the participants. For example, some of the participants in the Larsen shock experiments told the researcher that they learned a great deal about themselves, and were resolved not to find themselves committing similar behavior in the future.

#### *4. The role of human values*

Up to now we have acknowledged problems that have arisen from the experimental or survey procedures. There is also the larger problem that is not unique to social science when the results of scientific investigations are not "objective", but reflect contemporary values and biases. Does social psychology simply reflect history without an enduring set of transhistorical principles of human behavior? For example the Ash conformity experiment was conducted in the 1950s when the proto fascist senator McCarthy created anti-communist hysteria in the United States, and the fearful majority kept their collective mouths shut and conformed. It was an age of great conformity that was reflected in the experiments conducted by Asch (1956). Subsequently, Larsen replicated the experiment over several decades, and found that conformity in the laboratory varied with the social conditions. The Asch experiment (see also chapter 7) yielded a great deal of conformity in the 1950s, less in the 1960s and 1970s, and

again more in the 1980s (Larsen, 1974d, 1990). Thus behavior in the laboratory was shown to vary with the historical conditions in society (for a detailed discussion see chapter 7).

Yet at the same time our discipline is often presented as ahistorical (see Gergen, 1978). Following in the footsteps of the natural sciences the research in our journals is often presented as if representing some unvarying truth. The natural sciences, of course, discover new information as nature gives way to careful experimentation. Underlying scientific research is the idea that the fundamental laws of nature that do not change or vary. We understand much more about space now since the Hubble telescope sent back useful information, and new scientific principles may be formed as more data is gathered. But the underlying laws of nature are immutable, we just lack information to understand the complexity of nature. Can we discover similar laws of society in social psychology? The complexity of human nature almost seems to be too prohibitive in such a quest. However, if social psychology is primarily the history of society we must give careful consideration to ideology and contemporary values when discussing research results rather than assuming the permanence of these findings.

#### *4.1 Values and history*

Values inform both the content of our investigations as well as the topics that are studied. As already noted, Jewish social psychologists like Rokeach, Adorno and Milgram were in the forefront in examining both the type of personality that committed genocidal behavior and the behavior itself. It would seem reasonable to assume that personal experiences with loss, the investigator's human values, directed this research interest.

In fact as we examine the research literature we can observe a direct correlation between change in social values and the type of research focus developed. World war II, and the horrors perpetrated by the Nazi's, gave impetus to research on authoritarianism and genocide. This was followed by the McCarthyite period that engendered paranoia and conformity in U.S.A. This happened during the height of the cold war, and of course it was in the US government's interest to sustain such fear and conformity in order to keep the population mobilized for the confrontation. During this time of broad social conformity we observed the developments of studies on conformity as that found in the Asch paradigm. During the 1960's the war in Vietnam and wars of liberation elsewhere, gave rise to an interest in conflict and aggression. It is not surprising that this period saw the

foundation of peace research institutes like the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo, Norway, where the first and third author spent significant time as research fellows (e.g. Larsen, 1993). The dooms day clock ticked and the world was perceived as close to an all-consuming nuclear catastrophe. These broad social concerns inspired many social psychologists to study conflict, and try to develop knowledge on how to prevent war.

In the aftermath of student rebellion within the US and Western Europe, social norms were being challenged. This was especially true with respect to sexual behavior and gender roles. Women demonstrated and demanded equal treatment on the job and in all other significant social relations. In social psychology this became a time that saw the rise of gender studies, and an increase in research on sexual behavior. During the 1980s the relations between the big powers turned worse, and the news described the militarization of space creating an unstable world, with renewed concerns about nuclear catastrophes. This was reflected in social psychology by more research on topics related to the arms race. Although justice and peace are closely interrelated concepts, clearly the nuclear arms race presented an overriding threat of annihilating the human race or at least civilization, and controlling that threat constituted prominent value for social science researchers. In the 1990s we saw a continued effort to make the world more tolerant of diversity, since it was assumed that in the lack of tolerance lies at the foundation of conflict. So, we can see that social psychology is history. It is clear that researchers, like other thinkers in society, direct research toward what is seen as the most relevant topics and major concerns of their times

However the natural science model also had a strong hold on scientific imaginations. To some degree research reflected the concern with the scientific paradigm in wanting to control variables in a laboratory setting. In social psychology some psychologists began moving away from social issues to more abstract or theory driven studies. In social psychology we saw imaginative researchers develop very sophisticated and abstract studies as found in the minimal group design (Tajfel & Billig, 1974) that did not at face value translate easily to the human condition but nevertheless has yielded new and important theoretical understanding of causal effects of social categorization. The development toward more theory-driven research has characterized research into the 21st century.

A further factor affecting research topics is the internal ethical debate that

ensued after the obedience experiments. Researchers, like to be thought of as ethical people, and this concern (and professional injunctions) may have directed research away from the burning issues of the day that required deception, toward more socially approved research. Regardless whether research is determined by social values or internal conflict, social psychological research faithfully reflects human values, and therefore differs from the natural sciences that are less encumbered. We say less, because in the Soviet Union we saw ideology also affecting physical scientific research as in the case of the Lysenko scandal, where the Marxist emphasis on the environment caused researchers to overlook the essential genetic basis of agriculture. Also the values expressed in the arms race led to many scientific developments so the physical sciences are not independent of human ideology.

Values may also play a role in who is attracted to psychology as a “helping profession”. The two fundamental values in psychology are the pursuit of truth and helping others. Although psychological knowledge may also be used to manipulate others, the majority of those attracted to the profession, are people who want to express the fundamental values in their lives honoring for example Human Rights, and sustainable development on our planet. Research in social psychology is developing as a normative science (Larsen, 1980). The emerging discipline reflects our specific historical time and what we think, hope and fear.

#### *4.2 A critique of the natural science paradigm*

Kuhn (1980) stated that scientific paradigms continue to exist until they no longer have useful answers to scientific problems. The historical development outlined above suggested to many social psychologists, that our discipline could not meet the requirements of a natural science. Social psychology should at the very least be conscious of the effect of values and ideology on ongoing research. The so-called “crisis” literature continued for some time suggesting both an identity crisis, or that social psychology lacked a coherent direction (Larsen, 1980). Gergen (1978) suggested further that the continued commitment to the natural science paradigm would result in a myopic and irrelevant social psychology. These criticisms were echoed by Marxist social psychologists, who felt that social psychology uncritically reflected the ideology of society (Larsen, 1980).

Scholars often share common views that are not challenged because they are basically assumed or taken for granted. Social psychologists called these “social representations” (Moscovici, 1988; Augoustinos & Innes, 1990). Social

representations refer to the subtle biases that exist without examination in much of the research literature. Feminists for example take note of the political conservatism of many scientists who prefer a biological interpretation of gender differences that may have a cultural origin. The emphasis on biology in turn is believed to hamper the quest for sexual equality. Marxists have further noted how much of our research is directed toward social harmony and middle class values. The middle class has a real stake in the status quo and in static social relations, however the poor in society need change. Research funding, and acceptance of articles for publication is limited by the ideological bias of powerful individuals as to what is considered important to study, and how it is to be studied. Despite this debate research in social psychology has not changed substantially as we move into the 21st century.

Yet social psychology has also made other important contributions. These include raising the consciousness of students in psychology (and virtually everyone in the United States getting a college degree today takes the introductory psychology course). As students read about or participate in studies like the Milgram experiment they are often “socially inoculated”, and come to an awareness of the dangers of social manipulation. Those who participated in the historical genocides, including the most recent in Rwanda and the Darfur, were apparently “normal “ people, the only major distinguishing factor being their willingness to obey commands to kill and destroy. Social research can encourage higher levels of consciousness by focusing on the irrationalities and injustice of the social system. This assertion depends on academic freedom to tell the truth fearlessly as required by our findings. In addition, social psychology is also a practical science that can make useful suggestions helpful to the development of economic, and other social organizations. Organizational and applied psychology developed out of this desire to produce findings that generate efficiency and harmony in social organizations.

#### *4.3 Psychological labels are the fruit of psychological values*

Our unstated assumptions of what constitutes the good life, i.e. psychological health, also direct how we label psychological concepts. For example Maslow’s description of the “self-actualized” person was largely a reflection of his own bias and values. How we label personality traits is likewise a consequence of our hidden values since there is no set of absolute standards to guide the categorization. Social psychology seeks to understand the world through the

commonly accepted value system. One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. In Palestine those who attack the Jewish state are labeled terrorists by the Israelis, and described as freedom fighters by the Palestinians. Researchers are not different in the categorization of behavior; their labels also reflect unstated assumptions about what they consider to be optimal psychological functioning. The authoritarian personality described by Adorno et al. (1950) as "rigid" implies a negative evaluation. However, some years earlier the Nazi psychologist Jaensch used the positive word "stability" to describe a quite similar personality profile (Brown, 1965, p. 478). We all have a tendency to view happenings from the perspective of our society and culture. In doing so we have part of the picture, but only part. In trying to understand our world we must also try to understand the unstated assumptions that underlie all research, both that of the natural sciences, but also that of social psychology. In that regard it is important to remember that what is defined as "normal" is not necessarily good. Genocidal societies throughout history have made brutality normal. The concentration camp directors lived "normal" lives with social support of culture and family relationships. In many cases participants in genocide have not only viewed their behavior as normal, but also morally correct. Participants in genocide may reason that killing others is a painful duty, but necessary for the greater good. Being normal is not always good from a moral perspective.

#### *4.4 The ideology of the major theories in social psychology*

Keeping the previous discussion in mind, how are we to interpret the dominant theories in social psychology? Is it not natural in a capitalist society, and perhaps other societies, to believe that learning proceeds from a program of rewards and punishments that is central to learning theories? The unstated assumption here is that human beings are under such strong influence of the environment that it allows little room for individual volition and consciousness. Do people act according to self-interests, and it is "rational" to go for things considered rewarding and to avoid punishment? In capitalist society incentives are mostly material and economic rewards, and yet many people don't act according to principles and values that carry an economic cost. Social psychologists are also developing a literature on altruistic behavior that challenges learning based solely on rewards. Reward based learning theory is dominant in attitude research, prejudice and aggression, but also in research on prosocial behavior. Yet, human beings are more than reward driven, capable of unselfish and noble behavior.

Cognitive theories imply there is a fundamental need for consistency that motivates people in search for balance and internal peace. Is that a consequence of a society that stresses logical consistency as a virtue? Would cognitive balance also be a need among all cultures? These are questions yet to be explained in an emerging world psychology. Cognitive consistency theory has also guided research in attitude formation and change (see chapters 3 and 5), in how people are attracted or repelled by others, and in prejudicial behavior.

As mentioned earlier the information processing theories are of a more recent development, and not coincidentally emerged along with computer science. The unstated assumption of information processing is that people seek to understand and make sense of the world. People are described as social computers that evaluate, observe, and encode information. We wonder how much effort people place in understanding the world? People often live habitually and display robotic conformity even to events that have serious impact on their lives. Many people are guided by the minimum knowledge required to get through life, seeking lives of minimum effort, and are mainly motivated by the desire to avoid negative consequences? As long as the essential levels of life are met, most people seem happy for the diversion provided by television without reflecting on their lives or the meaning of the human condition? Of course information processing theories note that much thinking is automatic or unconscious, and people are unable to describe their own thinking processes (Wegner & Bargh, 1998; Wilson, 2002). Research shows that information processing often occurs at a low level of consciousness, and the human desire to understand and make sense of the world may even be processed at unconscious levels.

Equity or exchange theories fit our dominant economic system as hand in glove (see chapter 3 for more detailed discussion). These economic models of exchange argue that all human development is guided by relative costs and rewards. Implied is the assumption that relationships are only stable if the rewards exceed the costs. While it may be true that people strive for fair exchanges in social interactions, we have many examples of people who act unselfishly, without apparent personal advantage. Many parents provide a very selfless pattern of assistance to their children without apparent or expected reward. Equity theorists would say that many rewards are psychological, and parents obtain pleasure by seeing children grow into productive citizens. But often children bring grief to parents without changing parental love and affection. History reveals many cases

of absolute altruism where people sacrifice their lives to help others. Is such behavior also to be understood as some part of psychological reward and balance? Equity and exchange theories that integrate elements of other theories are very prominent in research on group conflict, bargaining, negotiation, and organizational behavior, and much of that we think of as applied social psychology. These theories have been strongly influenced by contemporary society. Whether there is a basic human need for equity (Hwang, 2006) must be explored in cross-cultural studies. The differences between interdependent and independent societies (Triandis, 1989) however suggest that social exchange is a culturally defined concept.

Finally, one other theory from social psychology has influenced thinking in modern psychology. Lewin (1935,1936) initially fled to the United States during the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany. He developed the concept of "field", by which he meant a person's life space. Lewin suggested that all psychological happenings could be understood as a function of this life space. Life space is composed of the immediate situation and the environment. Behavior is the outcome of the interaction between these two components. From this conceptual viewpoint, life space consists of all time dimensions, the past, the present as well as the anticipated future. The emphasis on the immediate situation was a particular important emphasis as it was neglected in other theories.

In Lewin's theory, we can again see the hand of history in social psychology. Since he came out of a society with brutal authoritarianism and with a strong emphasis on the hierarchical nature of leadership in the Nazi dictatorship, it is no wonder that one of the enduring research projects by Lewin was his study of the effect of authoritarian leadership or democratic leadership on productivity (Lewin, Lippit, and White, 1939). In general he found that democratic leadership was associated with greater individual contentment, more group focused behavior, and greater productivity.

##### *5. Social psychological theories emerging from related fields*

Early psychologists like William James (1890) and John Dewey (1922) sought to explain behavior as a function of habits. They assumed we develop predictable patterns of behavior by repeated practice. Some habits are collective referred to as the customs of society. In modern social psychology customs of society is defined by our social structure, i.e. how our culture and society demands certain behaviors and habitual forms of interaction. An early sociologist, Robert Park



(1922), advanced the concept of roles. We are in effect our roles in modern times as defined by the concept of impression management discussed in chapter 2 (Baumeister, 1982), and we come to know who we are through the roles we play in society. What are the roles of a teacher, a student, a mother, a manager of economic enterprises? We are our roles whether these refer to familial relationships, religious functions, or broader social roles of citizen and voter in society.

Linton (1936) advanced role theory further. In Linton's theory social interaction describes actors in society playing assigned roles as required by their culture. These role expectations are understood by everyone in society, and make social interaction predictable. We know a mother will act to protect and nurture children. This expectation is so strong that nearly all mothers comply, although in any society there are those who deviate from the norms. Role demands and expectations vary according to gender and also age. Females have different role demands than males, although much has changed in this regard over the last few decades. Growing maturity also assigns different roles depending on age. We expect children to play, but adults to make some contribution to life through employment or other achievements. Such age categories can divide our lives into stages of childhood, adolescence, young adults, mature adults, and older age. Each life stage describes a time of significant human development, and establishes timetables for accomplishments of learning or social interaction such as raising a family.

Role theory has also been developed within more narrow confines such as employment. Within employment groups roles are assigned based on specific task expectations by management. Furthermore, within task groups there are specific role expectations about abilities and task competency (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch, 1972; Berger, Wagner, & Zelditch, 1985). In general members of groups with valued competence are expected to make higher contributions to the common goals of the group.

In post modernism theory, social psychologists seek to go beyond contemporary group expectations, and take into account the effect on behavior of historical changes in the capitalist world. According to post modern theory people have gradually lost their ability to be autonomous, as their individual characteristics have been suppressed by the need for an efficient society (Murphy, 1989; Gergen, 1991). The rise of capitalism produced conformity pressures and people gradually

came to be viewed as commodities. Members of modern societies are primarily valued for their productive efforts, and not as persons with individual qualities. Personal relations become less important in such a society, and individuality gradually erodes as people seek to find a niche in an increasingly impersonal world. Conformity to clothing styles and food habits are manifestations of this historical era, together with social diversions that ensure that people do not think too much. Mindless television programs and styles of music perpetuate impersonal behavior. According to post modernism theory, dancing as a form of social interaction has changed drastically from couple symmetry, balance, and finesse to an activity that emphasize a collection of movements where individuals have only a vague idea about who the partner is in a sea of modulating individuals.

So the structural perspective adhered to by psychologists takes into account the influence of societal expectations on behavior, the power of role expectations and requirements, and the conformity pressures as a result of these demands. Theories about social structures form a necessary addition to those proposed by social psychologists from within the psychological field that seek to understand behavior primarily through an understanding of individual behavior in the group context. Obviously there are many habits and expectations, which produce culture, another word for commonly expected behaviors. These are largely formed in the mind as unstated assumptions about life, and are therefore most often carried out more or less automatically with little reflection. The structural perspective does not take into account possible interactions between the individual and role demands.

More recently, identity theory (Stryker and Statham, 1985) has placed emphasis on the reciprocal interaction between the individual and society. Identity theory argues that role theory does not provide the whole picture, as the individual has some power to select which role to play, and can therefore shape what type of interaction he/she has with others in society. Goffman originally (1959) took that view a step further by asserting that we are not assigned roles by culture, but often select one from several choices presented by society in order to achieve our own personal goals. The above ideas are reflections within sociology about the importance of cognition and personal volition, understood as part of social cognition in social psychology. Role and identity theories emphasize very important aspects of the human experience: Whatever we become psychologically

is circumscribed by role expectations. What is required by our culture is mediated further by gender and age and other cultural requirements. The above structural views differ therefore from those developed in social psychology by their emphasis on the social structure, and the power of individuals in shaping the many roles played in society. Individuals have some choice in negotiating role related behavior.

From these can we select any one theory that is best? The answer is that each represents some important view of social knowledge, and we would do best to take an eclectic approach that recognizes that fact. Each perspective is a window into social psychological reality and the “truth” of human behaviors is found in some integration of all these viewpoints, although such an integrated effort is still a task for the future.

### *6. Applied social psychology*

As the student will observe, there are many applications of social psychology that can be useful as long as we keep in mind the aforementioned discussion. As has been shown, social psychology is interested in a whole range of social issues. What are the currently important social questions? As noted earlier a recent social issue of importance is the effect of violence in the media on aggression in society (Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen, & Brook, 2002). In the United States tens of thousands are murdered each year. Sometimes the debate on violence is simplified for instance by the argument of the gun lobby that guns do not kill people, but people kill people. Such reasoning is simplistic and overlooks the fact that the availability of guns is a stimulus that routinely leads to fatal encounters in a society where violence is taken for granted. The effect of television violence remains an important social issue, and applied research into this topic might produce useful and important social solutions.

Although it is difficult or impossible to create a pure science as observed in the natural sciences, many research findings can inform and produce useful applied knowledge. Research described in the following chapters, show that even studies not inspired by social concerns (in other words that fall within a pattern of “pure” research) contain useful results applicable to individual and group behavior. Research on attitudes may for instance be useful in marketing and in persuading public opinion. Of course, we have to be cognizant of the line between persuasion and manipulation, a line that is frequently violated in the advertising world of today. Moreover, research on prejudice may be useful in addressing and resolving

issues of ethnic and national hostility. Countries that have many minorities within its borders may benefit from an examination of the major theories on prejudice. These and other research findings will be discussed in following chapters.

## **6.1 Action research is applied psychology**

Much of the aforementioned social psychological research addresses interest in theory development. Applied social psychology also addresses specific issues in the form of action-oriented research. Action research seeks to illuminate social issues from which one can infer the need for and how to improve the social condition. In Australia the Aborigines is historically a displaced people. Larsen studied the presence of discrimination toward aborigines in the areas of employment, housing, and access to public facilities (1977b). The high levels of discrimination found in the research were published in a government report that subsequently led to a debate in parliament on the adequacy of the 1975 Civil Rights Act. Other research on land rights, and alcoholism also sought to improve the conditions of the aboriginal population and could therefore be considered applied research.

There are then the two major ways in which social psychology has made applied contributions to contemporary problems. The first contribution is in the building of social psychological theories that have applied implications. The second contribution is applying research directly to social problems, with the aim of understanding these problems and changing the underlying social condition.

## *7. Toward better theories in social psychology*

Social psychology employs theories to specify the basic assumptions underlying research and topical interests. Theories identify the behavioral domains that are considered important for study, and therefore also what areas are considered irrelevant. There are scholars in the history of social psychology, who have dominated the debate about what is or is not important. Leaders in the profession decide what gets published, based on their own unstated assumptions. The professional hierarchy also acts as gatekeepers controlling access to funding, and without funding little work gets done. The end result is the social psychological literature presented on the following pages. The influence of a professional hierarchy is not necessarily a negative situation for social psychology as long as topics considered important for study are derived from open debate and not based on unstated assumptions. For example, is all conflict bad? Well, if it is in

your interest to maintain the social status quo, then conflict is indeed bad. But if your objective is to be critical of the status quo and you have a desire to improve the world, then conflict can be useful. Conflict can facilitate better thinking and improve functioning of groups and society.

Each theory has a unique perspective, but consists of man made concepts not necessarily related to any absolute truth about the human condition. The best path for all science is the eclectic, taking from each theory that which is valuable, that which experience has shown to be useful, and leaving behind dogma. Theories are merely tools that enable us to describe and analyze social behavior. A good theory will provide insights enabling us to have a better vision of reality, to understand the world better. Different theories often draw attention to different phenomena of the same topic or issue. Learning theory may emphasize the role of parents in the imitation of behavior, or in teachers providing rewards for achievements. Cognitive psychologists on the other hand seek to understand how people perceive and understand behavior, and social exchange theories focus on the profits of interaction. Each theory says something that is useful, and all are required to understand more of social reality.

### *7.1 The cultural relevance of theories developed in one culture to that of other cultures*

Cultures differ in behaviors, beliefs, and values (Kitayama & Markus, 1994). These differences, however, are not absolute differences as there is also a common human experience. For example all cultures appreciate good parents, although they differ in what may be considered good child rearing. In some dogmatic societies good child rearing may involve ritualized behavior including praying several times a day toward Mecca, female circumcision, or in Western societies demonstrating other forms of social obedience like waving the national flag. In yet other cultures child rearing takes other paths, but at the end of the day there is a similar concern for the welfare of the child. In all cultures people display common human personality traits like shyness, only to varying degrees (John & Srivastava, 1999). Some cultures encourage modesty, others encourage boasting and self-enhancement, but in all societies some people display shyness. It is part of the human condition. Likewise in all cultures we can observe aggressive individuals. Some societies may encourage aggression, other cultures will discourage this behavior. Interpersonal violence remains partly a predisposition of all humanity because it has from an evolutionary standpoint

made a contribution to survival (Lore & Schultz, 1993).

Although the content of beliefs and attitudes may vary in different societies the process of forming these attitudes is similar. We obtain our attitudes through watching our parents and other significant people (learning by imitation), or through being rewarded or punished (reinforcement theories), or through other well known psychological principles. It is important to keep this distinction in mind. Our cultures define the content of our psychology, but our common human condition produces a similar process of acquiring this psychological knowledge or content. Therefore in evaluating the findings of this book in terms of relevance to different cultures, we must recognize that differences obviously exist in the frequency and intensity of certain behaviors. However, the presence of particular behaviors, or the process by which these behaviors are acquired may be very similar in all cultures.

### *7.2 From research to "real" life*

An important issue in social psychology is whether findings found in the simulation of life in laboratories can in fact be relevant to real life experiences. Do people behave in similar ways in real life situations as under the contrived conditions set by the experimenter? For example, in the Milgram -Larsen experiments so-called "normal" people shocked innocent victims when the situation made such demands (discussed further in chapter 7). In evaluating this issue we have only to remember past wars, and the genocide of the holocaust where apparently normal people participated in atrocious acts of murdering millions of people. We don't have to revert to the example of in the concentration camps of the Second World War as similar atrocious acts are being committed as these words are written. What Milgram, and subsequently Larsen found seems to correspond very well with what is happening in the real world. All educated people are also aware of the war crimes committed during the American war on Vietnam. My Lai was not unique, except what happened there came to the knowledge of the world. This action was carried out by a group of "normal" American soldiers, who proceeded to murder women and children of an entire village. In more recent times we have the sad example of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, and the disappearance of innocent people into the Black Hole of the U.S. prison at Guantanamo, Cuba. So we see we can apply many of the findings of the laboratory to real life, and such utility must be the overall criterion of a valuable research finding and theory in social psychology.

### *7.3 Building theories, pure versus applied research in social psychology*

Pure research is carried out to meet the basic need of understanding our world, to pursue understanding of our existence. As Søren Kierkegaard said "we live life forward, but understand it backward". Some of our research findings may seem like common sense, but that is generally only after the fact, after we know the results of research. Of course many people are satisfied with simple or simplistic explanations, but for those Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living"!

So a great deal of our research is pure in the sense that we seek to illuminate the human condition, without necessarily having a practical goal in mind. Some of these findings may also, upon reflection, have practical consequences for many social issues. Is school integration helpful in overcoming racial bias? Well, some findings suggest that this depends on the conditions of contact between the racial groups (Allport, 1950; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2000). If these contacts facilitate more egalitarian relations and have the support of society, integration may indeed produce better relations. Research that seeks to understand such very specific social issues, may not make obvious contribution to building theory, but still have important practical applications.

Experimental research is primarily carried out to test hypotheses derived from one or more of the theories in social psychology. Theories are a collected set of principles that integrate findings in a logical and consistent manner. We develop such an integrated set of principles because we are interested in furthering our ability to predict and explain social behavior. With the hundreds of journals and thousands of investigators our research efforts would have no coherence if we did not have some theoretical framework with which to integrate our findings. Today we are literally drowning in our data, with tremendous resources being put to work to understand the human condition. Some of the research is of such importance that it can stand by itself, but the light it sheds on some aspect of social psychological theories justifies by far the great majority of current research projects. Theories are the principles, assumptions and hypotheses that explain our data; a good theory seeks to reduce the complexity of the research data, by placing the research within a common framework, much like classification seeks to reduce the complexity of seemingly different objects by searching for a common denominator which bring order and explain the results.

### *8. The functions of social psychological theories*

One function of social psychological theories is to produce hypotheses that can be tested in a laboratory or real life situation, thus either verifying the theory or disconfirming the hypothesis. Hypotheses are specific predictions that we make on the relationship between variables and behavior, e.g. do children learn to be aggressive by watching violence in the media as discussed previously in this chapter (Johnson et al, 2002). This hypothesis is in turn based on social learning theory that children learn by imitation. From this general hypothesis we can make more specific predictions. Is aggression facilitated if the model displaying aggression on television receives social approval like that accorded “heroes” in war films, or to police when subduing criminals? Another hypothesis might assert that television violence will produce less aggression if the person who models the behavior is punished? Such research would then shed light on social learning theory (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963), i.e. that we learn by imitating models. Social learning theory contains important ideas for a society that wants to reduce violence.

Research findings determine what may be considered a “good” or “bad” theory. Does the theory help integrate related research data and results? Can the theory produce testable hypotheses that can be examined in the laboratory or in real life situations? A theory is not useful if it cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed. Is the theory heuristic in the sense that it produces a wealth of exploratory studies? The utility of a theory is demonstrated when many researchers become interested in the same problems. However, dominant research paradigms also indicate conformity to professional norms and expectations reflecting a desire to be published in journals and receive research funding. At the end of the day a theory’s utility must be established by its applications to the human condition. What recommendations can we make to reduce violence and promote cooperation among ethnic groups? What specific steps can be recommended based on these integrated ideas that we call a theory in social psychology?

So to summarize, the function of theories is to step by step develop principles that explain significant social behavior. Social psychologists are not looking for some overriding philosophical principle that explains all life, like pleasure seeking or the denial of desire. The primary function of theories is to direct research, to offer a framework to integrate the results, and to explain social phenomena. Theories may constantly suggest new hypotheses, which can either be confirmed or disconfirmed thus advancing our knowledge of human behavior. For many keen



social psychologists theories provide the underpinnings of their research programs.

Theories give meaning to what might otherwise be a chaotic and bewildering set of empirical data. The hundreds of studies produced yearly can be brought together and given meaning when analyzed within a theoretical framework. The use of meta-analysis is a step toward theoretical integration. Finally, theories not only explain social behavior, but also help to predict social behavior. The complexity of human behavior makes prediction of behavior a goal for the future. We still have much to do before our science has matured to the level where we can say with assurance that these scientific criteria have been met.

### *8.1 Applications of social psychology to contemporary society*

In this chapter we have observed examples of some applications of social psychological research to problems of society. Each of the chapters that follow present another set of applications. Bandura's social learning theory showed how "pure" research can have applications to violence. The wars of the past century motivated much social psychological research including Lewin's concern about democratic leadership and the advantages of consensual governance. The horrors of genocidal behaviors motivated Milgram's significant research into violence as "normal" behavior. The questioning of authority that followed the war on Vietnam also produced a revolution of thinking on gender related issues. Gender related research contributed to many changes in social policy, and today women expect equal treatment in education and on the job. Although significant progress has been made in treating the sexes equally in employment, this does not hold true for equal pay for equal work. Nevertheless, both issue oriented and "pure" research has produced many findings which if applied could improve life and society.

There are also specific fields within social psychology that can be considered applied. Generally the fields of organizational or industrial psychology are domains devoted to improving efficiency and motivation within social organizations. Industrial psychology deals with many varying issues including assessments of jobs and job performance. How do we determine aptitudes, and how do we go about finding the right people for a given profession? Other practical issues are those related to training employees. Organizational and industrial psychology examines the problems of learning, how the transfer of learning takes place, and the adequacy of various learning methods. Other

important issues include job satisfaction and worker commitment. Under what conditions will the worker make his best efforts, what needs must be fulfilled by the social organizations to produce the best efforts. Also what work environment is related to productivity? Labor unrest generally derives from poor or insensitive working conditions, so a smart manager would also be aware of employee morale, and take steps to meet needs that go beyond survival and minimum wage. Findings from social psychology have direct application. How are values and attitudes related to job satisfaction? What basic motivational theories have utility to the organizational setting? Are these theories limited by culture or are they of general utility in the increasing global community?

### *8.2 Where are social psychologists employed?*

For students interested in a career in social psychology it may be of interest to see where our colleagues are employed. The vast majority of those who obtain PhD's in North America and Europe are employed in the academic field (75 percent), although some 17 percent find employment in business or government (Lippa, R.A., 1994). Students who have completed master degrees are also working in these and other fields, including social clinics, health agencies, and probation departments. The world is not getting less complicated, so it may be expected that there will be a need for social psychologists as long as they can produce ideas useful to the larger society, and provide training leading to improvement in social organizations. Currently we see more concern about the health of the world environmental system, where social psychologists may produce useful consultations to overcome denial, and other defense mechanisms which retard much needed reform. Directly related to that issue is the growing field of health psychology. How to create a social environment that is productive of maximum health? That is an issue of the social environment, as well as other health obstructions, like how to help people to quit smoking.

Beyond these major fields there is also the use of the specific skills of the social psychologists. For example an important field is opinion research since that is directly linked to behavior. How do we go about completing useful market research, how can we poll opinion in society so the results represent genuine and informed public opinion (as contrasted with manipulated views)? How can we evaluate progress in government functioning, and the effect of social change derived from these programs?

These are all issues to which social psychologists can make contributions with

appropriate training and social support. The future is exciting, and especially for the keen students of social psychology who want to make a contribution and carve out a niche for themselves in improving society.

### *Summary*

This chapter outlined the domain, methods, and major issues of the field of social psychology. A consistent thread running through this discussion is that social psychology is actually history. From the earliest thinkers to the present, our field reflects the major concerns of our times. The parent disciplines are psychology and sociology, although social psychology, as an integrating discipline has also been influenced by other social sciences. The major social psychological theories reflect history and our theoretical debt to those who came before. Contributing ideas include those that are derived from learning theories, e.g. classical and operant learning with a special emphasis on imitation or observational learning. The second theoretical perspective is social cognition based on the assumption that human beings have a need for cognitive consistency and balance and that this requirement motivates behavior. A third perspective is information processing in which people are seen as having a need to understand the world. Finally, the chapter examined equity and exchange theories that reflect the dominant economic system in the world. Equity and exchange theories propose that human interaction involves costs, rewards and profits to the participants.

What is the place of social psychology? There are many social sciences seeking to explain human behavior. Therefore only an eclectic viewpoint is useful eventually leading to more accurate views about human behavior from a cross-cultural perspective. We can learn from research conducted in other societies since after all, people from all cultures share common demands of the human condition. In Western societies much of the focus has been on mediating variables of beliefs and values used to explain a variety of behaviors like aggression and conformity. Eastern societies display more interdependence affecting their psychological responses.

Social psychology is history, because the historical experiences of individual researchers, as well as of historical changes in society, have both to a large extent determined the focus and content of our studies. Like other disciplines our work reflects what is considered urgent in society, although there is also the influence of powerful individuals who through control of funds and publication access define what is important. All sciences are important in explaining human

behavior. Likewise all theories within social psychology are salient for an eclectic perspective and integrated theory. Culture also provides a framework for understanding behavior, although there is much to the human experience that is common in all cultures. Stimulus response theory helps in providing an overall theoretical framework since all behavior is elicited by social stimuli that include mediating variables like beliefs and attitudes, resulting in actual behaviors produced by the stimuli and mediating variable. This chapter recognizes the contributions of the related fields, and notes that social psychology is the integrating field which has its utility in combining the findings and overlap from these fields.

The methods of social psychology include correlational techniques that the researcher employs to investigate how variables co-vary. Is there an association between smoking and cancer? Correlational work typically uses surveys in either written form or in interviews. The chapter also discusses common problems in surveys that affect the truthfulness of the responses. These problems of validity show that social desirability may confound the results, and motivate socially acceptable responses. Interpretation of survey data must be cautious as related words may have very different social meanings to our respondents, and the order of questions in the survey affect the results. What precedes a question may influence the responses that follow. Problems in interviews show that the interviewer may have subtle, yet powerful effects through nonverbal behavior like smiling or nodding at different times. This evidently reinforces certain responses and therefore presents a problem of validity.

The importance of representative sampling is stressed for all methods used in social psychology. Random sampling is the only scientific method. Using this scientific procedure requires that each member of the population of interest have an equal and independent chance of appearing in the sample. Biased sampling and the refusal to participate have effects that are not easily understood.

The majority of social psychologists employ the experimental method, exclusively or in combination with survey efforts. In the research situation the experimenter seeks to control some aspect of a simulated environment in order to study the effects of independent variables on dependent variables. This procedure require the use of two groups from the same population, one of which is given some experimental treatment (like observing violence in the media), and then compared, to a control group which does not get any treatment. The overall intent

is to observe if the treatment had an effect on the dependent variable. As shown televised violence (the independent variable) did that have an effect on increased aggression (the dependent variable). Bias that occurs in the experimental situation often results from the demand characteristics of the experiment. Here too the experimenter can influence the outcome through subtle yet powerful expectations and reinforcement.

A very important issue in social psychology is that of ethics. The Milgram experiments and those that followed created a large debate in psychology about the possible effects of experimentation on the participating subjects. This controversial issue produced many changes that have influenced the content and direction of investigations of social psychology. Subsequent research on participating subjects however showed that subjects' self concept was not damaged by participation, and the ethical debate might have been overblown. The ethical changes include informed consent for participation, and limitations on deceit used by the experimenter. In most cases however, the participant is well protected if assured anonymity or confidentiality, both essential in order to obtain valid results. As social psychologists we have an obligation to be truthful with society, in turn society has an obligation to support academic freedom in order to allow investigators to pursue useful information.

Ideology and human values play important roles in providing frameworks for social psychology. While psychology aims at being an objective natural science, human values produce a discipline that is circumscribed by the prevailing ideologies and values. Social psychology is history that can provide useful information. In disseminating results from social psychological research we can raise human consciousness, and provide practical applications to social problems. Many of the major research thrusts in social psychology relate to important events in society including the women's movement and studies of gender. The internal debate we had on ethics also influences research, and the values expressed by such investigations. There are always unstated assumptions involved in all human endeavors including research. The labels used by social psychologists in describing behavior are but a reflection of the author's own unstated views of the behavior being considered. What for example is the ideal human condition? Maslow's concept of the self-actualized person was developed from the comfort of middle class society that assumed that people had the luxury of pursuing fulfillment rather than struggle for survival. Dominant theories in

psychology also reflect many unstated assumptions about human values and ideology. There are unstated assumptions understood by everyone, but never discussed.

We build theories because of fundamental human needs to understand the human condition partly reflected in so-called pure research, which does not necessarily have practical goals in mind. But theories are also useful in generating hypotheses that may shed light on the validity of concepts. A good theory helps reduce the complexity of our findings which otherwise is overwhelming in quantity. Whether a theory is good or bad depends on whether it helps in answering important questions. Is it heuristic and does it generate useful research? Does it have applications to the human condition? If the theory helps direct research and offers a framework for understanding human phenomena, then it is considered a good theory

A major value of social psychology is the application of its findings to pressing social issues. In applied psychology we seek solutions to problems of society like violence, or improvement in the work of important social organizations. Applied social psychology aims to improve the life of individuals and the functioning of society. As the world is becoming increasingly complex there will be employment for social psychologists for the foreseeable future assisting society in overcoming salient problems, and facilitating solutions.