

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: A TOPICAL REVIEW

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Summary

Social psychology is concerned with the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors humans have toward others. The topics considered in this article demonstrate that there are a variety of ways that social psychology is involved in human life. Moreover, this article illustrates that there is a vast array of applications of social psychology to help understand and resolve the problems that arise with our social interactions. Given the social nature of many of the problems of sustainable development, there are a variety of implications of social psychology for this and numerous other issues (e.g. conflict resolution, healthy living, law, politics, government).

As we will illustrate in this nonexhaustive review, the field of social psychology incorporates a number of diverse, yet similar, issues. For example, interpersonal attraction contrasts with prejudice in that they reflect positive versus negative feelings toward individuals, but they are similar in that they are both feelings and they do not implicate any particular behavior. Helping and aggression are positive and negative behaviors toward one another. Similarly, close relationships stand in contrast to discrimination in terms of positive and negative relations we have with others. Cooperation involves actions in an interdependent situation with mutual benefit in outcomes of the parties involved. Conflict, on the other hand, involves mutually incompatible outcomes. Social perception and social cognition focus on thoughts, while social attitudes relate to feelings. These similarities and differences reflect an underlying theme indicating that people respond to social interaction in terms of their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Another theme that is evident in the results of social psychological research is the profound impact of the situation. All social interaction is situated in some context, and this context dramatically influences the ways people think, feel, and act regarding their social interactions.

1. Introduction

There is a common saying that “nothing is more certain than death and taxes.” Although this saying may generally be true, we argue that the certainty associated with death and taxes pales in comparison to the certainty of social interaction. In our lives, perhaps nothing is more assured than our interactions with other humans. Social psychology can be viewed as the scientific study of our social interactions.

Social interactions are ubiquitous and paramount in our lives. Humans are social creatures. Like most mammals, we can not survive without the care of other members of our species. With very rare exceptions, we are conceived through a social interaction. We can think of human birth as a social interaction, an interaction that brings another member into our social realm. Most people are born into a social group we term a family, with a social network of friends and extended family. We grow, develop, and learn through our interactions with others. Our existence has meaning and value to this network of individuals. As we age, we develop new social bonds; while some bonds grow, others wane. Our lives continue as a series of social interactions, some more important and meaningful than others. The ceremonies we have in our lives are for others or are shared with others. The institutions we interact with are generally social institutions (e.g. schools, government districts, political parties, businesses, religious).

Few things are more certain to humans than social interactions. Death occurs to us just once. And when we die, our death has meaning to others. In fact, perhaps our death's real meaning is the loss of social interactions with others. The ceremonies associated with the death of humans are generally not for the dead, but for the living. From conception through death, our lives are enveloped in social interactions. So, social interaction is much more certain than death in terms of frequency, and death's impact is social.

Taxes are also social in nature. Taxes can be considered as social obligations for the privileges people receive as members of specific collectives. And taxes often occur via a social interaction. Some agent requests payment for taxes and/or goods and services. This is a social interaction. Commerce and trade are generally formalized social interactions that exchange one valued commodity for another. So, taxes become a reality for us because of, and through, social interaction. We hope we have been convincing that it is social interaction that is one of life's certainties. And because it is prevalent in so many aspects of people's lives, whole fields of psychology and sociology have emerged dedicated to the study of social interaction. We call that study social psychology.

2. Definition of Social Psychology

One of the founders of the field of social psychology, Gordon Allport, provided what is still perhaps its best definition. Social psychology is an attempt to explain and understand how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others. This definition highlights a number of elements that are central to modern conceptions of social psychology. First, social psychology seeks to explain and understand social interaction. Most of social psychology's explanations and understanding of social interaction is derived from research using the rigor and features of scientific methods. Second, social psychology considers the As, Bs, and Cs of social interaction: *affect* (feelings), *behavior* (actions), and *cognition* (thoughts). Our conceptions of social interactions are not limited to just thoughts, feelings, or actions, but instead incorporate all three of these components. Third, it is the thoughts, feelings, and actions of individuals that are investigated. The individual is the realm of social psychology. Social psychology is distinct from sociology, which focuses on social institutions; anthropology, which focuses on cultures and societies; and neuroscience, which emphasizes internal biological states. Fourth, social psychology focuses on the responses of individuals to situations and social stimuli. There is a continuous interplay of person and situation with the situation influencing the person and the person influencing the situation. And finally, the study of social psychology requires the existence of others. These others can be imagined or implied as well as real. Human social interaction is a central part of people's lives. Consequently, humans also imagine social interactions. As part of our human consciousness, the social interaction can be implied, such as carrying our elders' prescriptions about appropriate actions with us as we interact with others. Although Allport provided us with a good definition of social psychology, this definition does not give a layperson a true understanding of the richness of the field that is social psychology. This article hopes to provide readers with an exposure to the wealth of knowledge that has come to be social psychology.

3. A Structure for Topics in Social Psychology

As this article and others in this section demonstrate, social psychology is a very broad field. A very diverse array of topics is considered under the umbrella of social psychology (e.g. the self and large group processes). The triumvirate of affect, behavior, and cognition can also be seen to reflect a structure for these topics in social psychology and help readers understand the diversity that is considered social psychology. In a sense, social psychology is an attempt to understand, explain, and uncover the meaning of social interactions. Several philosophers of psychology have considered psychology to be the search for meaning in our lives. By implication, the definition of social psychology suggests a relation to finding the meaning in our social lives.

An extensive research program found that across topics and cultures, the measurement of meaning falls along three dimensions. This finding implies that humans use these three dimensions to impose, or perceive, meaning in their social lives. These three dimensions can be seen to reflect what we have labeled affect, behavior, and cognition. The affect dimension suggests that social interaction is evaluated with regard to the positive (good) or negative (bad) feelings and reactions a person has toward social stimuli and a social interaction. Our first response to some social stimuli (e.g. person, group) is to evaluate them relative to our lives. This will reflect our feelings regarding those stimuli. We consider these social stimuli along a dimension of positive to negative. The second dimension reflects cognitions we have toward the object of interest. How much thought does the object initiate or demand from us? Does our social interaction with the object involve a thoughtful process, or is our interaction less thoughtful and more mindless or automatic. The third dimension considers the actual behaviors we have toward the stimuli. Some social interactions involve little activity on our part (e.g. observation) whereas other social interaction is quite active (e.g. aggression).

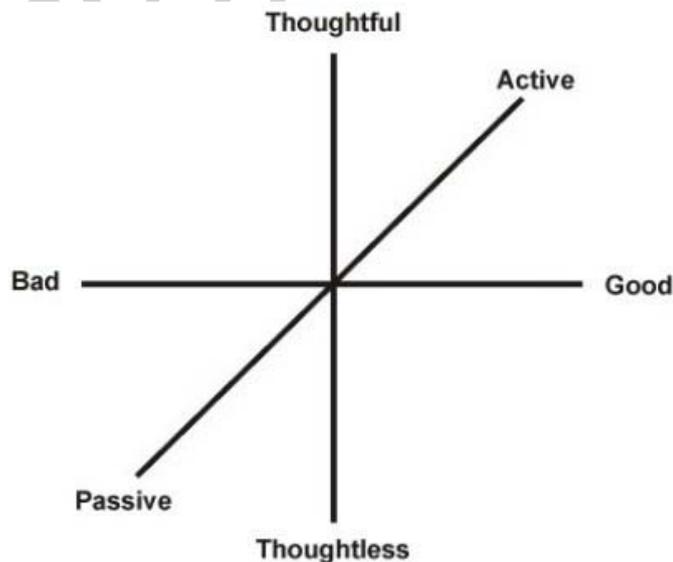


Figure 1. An underlying three-dimensional structure for topics in social psychology: the X-axis is the affect dimension, Y-axis is the cognitive dimension, and Z-axis is the behavior dimension

Many topics in social psychology might be labeled as falling somewhere along these three dimensions of the social interaction. For example, for most cultures, aggression would be considered as a negative, active, but not very thoughtful response of one person toward another. In contrast, helping the less fortunate is considered a positive, active, and more thoughtful response. It is also useful to note that these three dimensions of meaning are related to the three components of social interaction from our definition of social psychology. The many topics in social psychology can be conceptualized along these three dimensions to indicate those aspects of social interaction. Figure 1 provides a graphic indication of the intuitive placement of the topics of social psychology along the three dimensions of social interaction. This figure represents one way in which these topics can be organized to reflect their similarities and differences. Next, we will review a number of the topics that are considered part of the modern field of social psychology.

4. A Review of Social Psychology Topics

One of the foundations of modern social psychology is the notion that humans are processors of information. In particular, we are processors of “social” information. This processing of social information is important for virtually all of our social interactions. The first processes we will consider are those associated with our perception of others, and likewise, their perception of us: social perception.

4.1. Social Perception

Social perception involves the processes by which we gain information about our social world. Humans are constantly taking in social information. It is how we become socialized, and learn about, and from, others. Based on social perceptions, we are able to interact with others in appropriate ways. Social perception is important because many of our behaviors are based on the information we get from others and our social world. Our thoughts, feelings, and actions towards others and our social world are dictated to a great degree by how we perceive those others and our social world. Thus, we should begin our analysis of social interaction with the processes of social perception.

Our social perception is based on the information we have of others in our social world. In this respect, social perception reflects a high level of the cognitive component of our preceding organizing structure, and little in terms of activity and feelings, although these are eventual consequences of our social perception. The information we receive from others influences the way we think and feel about others. In particular, it leads us to form and hold impressions of others.

Impression formation is a particularly powerful social perception. We often form impressions of others with very limited information. It is not unusual for us to form an impression in just a few seconds. Moreover, based on this impression, we often decide that we like or dislike a person and that we are willing to act in specific ways toward the person. As social creatures, we also recognize that other people form impressions of us relatively quickly and easily. Consequently, we attempt to manage the impressions others have of us. Primarily, we want to appear in the most favorable light possible. Given the speed with which impressions are formed and judgments are made, we would

do well to always put our “best foot forward” (see *Psychology of Nonverbal Communication and Interpersonal Interaction*).

One particular type of social judgment we make involves our understanding of “why” people behave the way they do. Attribution refers to a set of processes that humans engage in when trying to determine and understand the causes of behavior. One of our primary social motivations is to understand why people behave as they do. If we understand why a person engages in certain behaviors, then it is possible for us to predict how they might behave in the future. This ability to predict others’ actions reduces uncertainty in our social interactions (and consequently apprehension) and also demonstrates social knowledge. Consequently, attribution is a fundamental process associated with our social interactions.

Research on attributional processes has demonstrated a number of patterns in our social judgments. One clear finding is that we tend to attribute behavior to two types of causes: internal and external. Internal attributions are made when we believe that a person’s actions are caused by states, dispositions, or characteristics of the person. For example, we often attribute a person’s actions as being due to their personality; an internal attribution. External attributions, on the other hand, are made to aspects of the situation or surrounding environment. For example, we might believe that a person was in a situation in which they had no choice but to engage in a specific behavior (e.g. a highly structured and regimented environment such as the military).

Our attributions for our own and others’ actions tend to emphasize internal or external causes, but these attributions also seem to fall prey to a set of biases. That is, although attribution is an important function of social perception, our attributions are not always accurate. One particularly powerful bias is termed the fundamental attribution error. This profound bias reflects the human tendency to overemphasize internal causes in our attribution of other people’s actions, and underemphasize external causes. That is, we are much more likely to attribute the causes for a person’s action to the person, while failing to recognize the real impact that external causes have on people’s behavior.

The fundamental attribution error reflects one of the consistent themes in human social behavior. Across settings and people, humans tend to focus more on the individual and neglect the importance of the situation for an understanding of the way people act. In reality, there is a continuous interaction between person and situation. Situations can profoundly impact on the ways in which people act. For example, individuals may not act the same around their parents as they do around their close friends. Additionally, not all people respond in the same manner to the same situation.

For example, some people become anxious and frightened by the prospect of flying in an airplane while others remain calm. Consequently, it is difficult to separate the person, or isolate an individual’s personality, from the situational influences of our social world (see *The Social Psychology of Personality*). One of the conclusions from decades of research in social psychology is that we as humans fail to appreciate the importance of the social situation when we consider the reasons for the nature of social interactions.

4.2. Social Cognition

Social cognition concerns how humans organize and process the social information that they perceive as a result of their social interactions. The various features associated with human cognition are generally applied in this processing of social information (e.g. attention, memory, encoding, storage, retrieval, integration, inference). Moreover, many of the cognitive and knowledge structures associated with human cognition are also considered important for social cognition (e.g. scripts, schemata). These cognitive structures represent how the social information is organized for an individual. These structures also represent the knowledge an individual has about some person, object, relation, or concept. This is perhaps best illustrated by social schemata (see *Cognitive Psychology*).

Social schemata (or schemas) are richly interconnected networks of information that are relevant to some social entity (i.e. person, object, concept, group, or category). Schemata represent both the relevant information and the network of connections (relations) among the pieces of information pertaining to the relevant entity. Just as they do in cognitive development, schemata of social interactions develop over time, becoming more elaborate with greater experience (see *Cognitive Development of Children*).

A host of properties associated with schematic processing of information are also implicated for social schemata (see *Cognitive Psychology*). Although these properties are too numerous and detailed to mention, they do indicate some basic generalizations about schematic processing. One of these generalizations is that schematic processing rests upon the efficient but simplified processing of available information pertaining to an entity. People prefer to categorize other people and objects because it is simple and more efficient than trying to understand others or objects attribute by attribute (i.e. taking all the characteristics into consideration). In a sense, we become cognitive misers, relying on schemata to conserve our cognitive efforts. This leads directly to the second generalization. Schematic processing, because it is efficient and simplified, can often lead to errors and biases in how the social information is processed. By not considering people or objects based on their individual characteristics, we are often forced to lump them into a category (e.g. race, gender).

The processing of information relevant to social schemata relies on a number of simplification strategies or heuristics. These heuristics are mental shortcuts that allow us to function in a complex social world where we are often exposed to an overwhelming amount of information. Heuristics provide a means of simplifying the processing of social information so that it is more manageable. A consequence of these heuristic strategies is that they can result in inaccuracies, errors, and biases in the processing of social information and in our social judgments.

One example of these simplification strategies is the tendency for people to make judgments based on the salience and vividness of information. A common example of this tendency is revealed in some individuals' fear of flying. Though it is well known that air travel is one of the safest modes of transportation, the vivid images of plane crashes are not easily forgotten. The images of a pile of rubble and a fire are colorful

and extreme and so our attention is drawn to such incidents. Moreover, because air travel is limited to certain locations (e.g. airports) in contrast to the widespread travel by motor vehicles, it remains relatively novel. Thus, because airline crashes grab our attention, they are more memorable than other traffic accidents. Individuals may then readily recall a crash that occurred some time ago, but will tend to ignore the multitude of flights that went without incident. This can lead to an irrational fear leading to judgments not to fly. The salience and vividness of information may lead us to pay more attention to these aspects of the social situation and so we may not focus on other, more critical, information that is more relevant to our judgments.

Another common bias that humans are prone to is the tendency to interpret new information as confirming our existing schemata and beliefs. Thus, if individuals believe that a certain group of people is lazy or unintelligent, for example, they will tend to interpret the behavior of members of this group as confirming their stereotypes, often ignoring or reinterpreting events so as not to disrupt their existing schemata of the group. This confirmation bias also influences other aspects of our social interactions. If we hold a belief that our location of residence is the best place to live on the planet, then we focus only on information that is consistent with that belief. Also, we will generally fail to consider information that might contradict our existing beliefs. Nevertheless, logically the only way that we can truly support the belief is to seek out information that may disconfirm our belief. The confirmation bias reflects the human tendency to focus only on information that confirms our beliefs and to seek out only information that can confirm rather than disconfirm our beliefs.

The research conducted that explores and explains the many heuristics and biases that influence how we consider information about our social interactions is quite extensive and complex. However, it has become evident that these heuristics and biases have very important influences on the way information is processed about individuals and groups. Consequently, this research on social cognition has also contributed to our understanding of self-perception and stereotypes, as well as a host of other topics in social psychology.

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