

## **SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

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### **Summary**

The historical and professional development of Sociological Social Psychology is described, with attention given to particular accomplishments from mid-century to the present. Then several of the more recent perspectives that contribute to the growth of social psychology are discussed such as symbolic interaction, social exchange theory, expectation states theory, and theories of everyday life. Additional research, theoretical approaches, and issues are also identified. Finally, prospects for the future of Social Psychology are forecast.

### **1. Introduction**

While social psychology has played a vital role in sociology during the twentieth century the nature of this role has changed through the years. Earlier in the century social psychology was viewed by many as a separate body of research distinct from other more accepted parts of sociology. Today, however, this field occupies a much more central role in the discipline increasingly interconnected with other areas of sociological research. In this article the nature and history of social psychology will be addressed with special attention to key developments within this area especially in recent decades.

An event critical to the formalization of the field of social psychology in sociology was

the founding of the journal *Social Psychology Quarterly* (first entitled *Sociometry*) in 1937 by the American Sociological Association (ASA). Furthermore, social psychology forms a major section within the ASA. Among its activities are the publication of a newsletter and the awarding each year of the Cooley-Mead Award, which is given in recognition to those individuals who have made outstanding contributions to theory and research in social psychology. Work in this area also appears in many mainstream journals in sociology and in more specialized volumes, especially the research annual, *Advances in Group Processes*, which has been published for over two decades.

Reflecting the advances that have taken place in this area, several decades ago the ASA commissioned the publication of a volume that would serve as a sourcebook and textbook for the field of social psychology. Under the editorship of Morris Rosenberg and Ralph H. Turner a number of scholars contributed to *Social Psychology: Sociological Perspectives* (1981) reporting on major research and theory in the mid-twentieth century. An updated and expanded examination, *Sociological Perspectives on Social Psychology* was subsequently produced by Cook, Fine and House in 1995. Other sources that summarize major research and theoretical developments include the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (2003), edited by John Delamater and *The Handbook of Social Psychology, Volumes 1 & 2*, edited by Daniel T. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and Gardner Lindzey (1998).

In terms of substantive interests and orientations both sociologists and psychologists populate this field of study and have defined its basic character. This situation has resulted in what some analysts refer to as “sociological social psychology” and “psychological social psychology.” In years past these differing perspectives have been portrayed as being in marked competition, however, today one finds a greater degree of overlap between them. While differences still exist, the relationship between the two perspectives is not marked by a pronounced sense of conflict. As noted by various writers social psychology is truly interdisciplinary. According to Cook, Fine, and House:

Social psychology represents an interdiscipline lodged between the disciplines of psychology, which examines inner lives and selves, and sociology, which examines the relationships between collectivities and organizations. Social psychologists argue that it is essential to examine how self and system interpenetrate.

## **2. History of Social Psychology**

Interest in social psychological issues has an historical legacy. Indeed, writers such as Aristotle, Hegel, Rousseau, and Hobbes raised many questions about why social behavior takes the forms that it does, and their work provides a foundation for the growth of social psychology. During the nineteenth century theoretical and philosophical thought focused on social issues clearly foreshadowed the development of the science of social psychology. Analysts such as Auguste Comte put forth specific explanations for how social reality influences people while others including Gabriel Tarde focused on the role imitation plays in conformity in social life.

The first two social psychology textbooks were written in 1908 with each reflecting the intellectual background of its authors. E. A. Ross, a sociologist, focused on the place of imitation in social life and the group mind that had been discussed by Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde. William McDougall, a psychologist, emphasized instinctive, internal motivations for social behavior. Shortly thereafter other theoretical orientations began to influence the growth of psychology and social psychology. Behaviorism as developed by John B. Watson impacted social psychology through its emphasis on environmental determinants of learning and behavior and the use of experimental methods. Psychoanalytic theory developed by Sigmund Freud stressed other dimensions of social behavior including the importance of socialization and the role of non-rational factors such as emotions.

In 1924, social psychology began to assume greater definition with the publication of Floyd Allport's social psychology text, which stressed experimental methods, the development of theory, and the importance of social influence. Shortly afterward, in 1934, George Herbert Mead's writings established the foundation for what would later become a major approach toward social psychology, namely symbolic interaction. Two years later, Muzafer Sherif published *The Psychology of Social Norms*, a very different type of work that investigated social interaction and conformity to social norms by employing a laboratory experiment. In this same decade Kurt Lewin advocated a deductive approach directed towards the development of general theories that could be tested through experiments. World War II followed and provided impetus to the growth of the field. For instance, Carl Hovland, Janis, and Kelley initiated a series of persuasion studies focused on attitude change, particularly in regard to developing effective propaganda programs. Research on attitude change continued after the war and became a major area of study that continues to the present day.

Over the next several decades social psychology blossomed. Samuel Stouffer and Merton and Rossi, for example, introduced the concept *relative deprivation*, utilizing it to explain differences in World War II soldier's feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction between themselves and others. Other important sociological approaches emerging during this period include *reference group theory* and *role theory*.

At the same time Solomon Asch's 1956 research on conformity and Stanley Milgram's studies of *obedience to authority* generated numerous follow-up studies and further strengthened a long standing concern with social influence and norm formation in social psychology. Other research such as the simulation study of prisoners and guards conducted by Zimbardo and Haney also demonstrated how a social situation could profoundly impact actors. Leon Festinger's 1957 *cognitive consistency* theory focused on the effects of social situations, and the ways *cognitive inconsistency* motivates people to restore consistency. For at least the next fifteen years research on this perspective proliferated, addressing issues ranging from consumer behavior and conversion of beliefs among prisoners of war to the ways cult members reconcile disconfirmation of group beliefs.

By the 1960s *social exchange* theory began to emerge. Based on the premise that social behavior is best understood as an exchange of valued resources, social exchange theory represents one of the major research programs in sociological social psychology. Other

approaches also began to develop in the last several decades of the past century. In particular, the 1960s witnessed the emergence of *attribution theory*, a perspective that focuses on social inferences. This approach represented a major departure from the behaviorist paradigm, a paradigm that had been dominate in psychology and contributed to a growing interest in the ways people perceive and process social information. This important breakthrough ultimately resulted in the cognitive or social cognition approach. Although psychologists have dominated this perspective, sociologists also have shown interest in recent years.

During the second half of the twentieth century *symbolic interactionism* flourished albeit its development has taken a variety of paths. Other perspectives related to symbolic interactionism have also emerged over the last four or five decades, each of which focus on different aspects of daily life. These include the work of Erving Goffman, *ethnomethodology*, and *conversation analysis*. Finally, another contemporary theoretical program that has come to play a major role in social psychology is *expectation states theory*, a theory which focuses on the decisions made by social actors and group dynamics.

Many different research issues and agendas currently exist, of which some issues play a dominant role in the developing intellectual landscape of the field. In the following sections several of these more recent perspectives that contribute to the growth of social psychology will be discussed.

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work which contributed to the development of symbolic interactionism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.]

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**David Knottnerus** is currently working on several projects related to “structural ritualization theory.” This perspective focuses on the role rituals play in social life and the processes by which ritualization occurs and influences social structure. Dr Knottnerus is the co-editor (with Bernard Phillips) of the book series "Advancing the Sociological Imagination" published by Paradigm Publishers (Boulder, Colorado). He has served as President of the Mid-South Sociological Association and as a member of the Council for the Theory Section, American Sociological Association.

He has co-edited (with Sing C. Chew) *Structure, Culture, and History: Recent Developments in Social Theory* (2002) and co-authored (with Frederique Van de Poel-Knottnerus) *Literary Narratives on the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century French Elite Educational System: Rituals and Total Institutions* (2002). His most recent books, which are scheduled for publication in 2010 (Paradigm Publishers), are *Ritual as a Missing Link: Sociology, Structural Ritualization Theory and Research* and (co-authored with Jason S. Ulsperger) *Elder Care Catastrophe: Rituals of Abuse in Nursing Homes – and What You Can Do About It*.