

Chapter 1

Introducing the Science of Social Psychology

In This Chapter

- ▶ Mapping out the territory of social psychology
 - ▶ Understanding the people around you
 - ▶ Exploring relationships, families, groups and cultures
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Social psychology is a fascinating science. It investigates feelings, thoughts, cultures and the ways that people relate to one another. Before social science, these aspects of human life were discussed only in the context of art, religion and philosophy. But now, humans can generate scientific knowledge about their social selves.

In this chapter, I define the scope of social psychology, the sorts of behaviour, actions and thought processes that it tries to understand, and the tools that it uses. In its quest, social psychology has gobbled up ideas and techniques from the neighbouring sciences such as cognitive psychology, neuroscience and evolutionary biology. Although they have shifted during social psychology's short history, its goals have remained constant: To understand people and their relationships to each other.

Looking Down the Social Psychologists' Microscope

What is the focus of social psychology? Is it thoughts in the mind, people in society or cultures across the world? It is all of these levels together. Imagine a giant microscope looking not at cells or creatures, but people. At the start of this book, I train this microscope on the smallest building blocks of social

psychology – the thoughts and attitudes that exist inside people’s heads and govern their behaviour. Then I zoom out to look first at the beliefs people have about other people, and then the ways that they exert power and influence over each other. In the final part of the book I zoom out again, and look at how people interact and relate, forming friendships, families and cultures.

So if it’s not a scale on a microscope, what defines the science of social psychology? The boundaries are continually shifting, as they are in many active and developing sciences. But if you want a short, concise definition of the scope of social psychology, you can do no better than the definition Gordon Allport gave in 1954. He said that social psychology is:

The scientific investigation of how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others.

I’d like to highlight two aspects of this definition:

- ✔ What distinguishes social psychology from the rest of the field is the focus on cause and the effects of the ‘presence of others’.
- ✔ These other people do not have to be physically present. So you can be under the influences of social forces when you’re in the middle of a party or all alone. For example, I discuss conformity, obedience, and persuasion and authority in Chapters 12, 13 and 14, respectively, the power of stereotypes in Chapter 10 and belonging to groups in Chapters 16 and 17.

To put it bluntly – if it is an aspect of human behaviour that involves more than one person, it is of some interest to social psychologists. Social psychologists want to understand whom you like and whom you love, why you seek to help some people and harm others, what you think of yourself and what you think of other people, and the connections you make between yourself and others. The next sections reveal in more depth the phenomena social psychologist study and the scientific tools that they employ.

Rummaging through the social psychologists’ toolkit

Social psychology is an interdisciplinary science. When you socially interact with another person, you are using your visual system to recognise their emotions, your auditory system to process their speech and your memory

systems to make sense of what they are saying and predict what they may say next. So to understand this social interaction, social psychologists can draw on the many fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience.

What's more, during this social interaction, your behaviour is a precise and well-learned ballet of co-ordinated actions – a polite incline of the head to show that you are listening, nodding and murmuring 'uh-huh' at precisely the right moments, and shifting your body posture to show that you accept what the other person says. All of these things you learnt as a child, and all of these things may be slightly different in different cultures. So to fully understand this social interaction, social psychologists may turn to developmental psychology, cross-cultural psychology or even sociology or anthropology.

In Chapter 2 I examine how social psychology connects to these closely related disciplines. Also, I look inside the social psychologists' tool kit to see how they developed their own tools such as surveys, interviews and field studies. But there is one tool that is so important to social psychology that it deserves a chapter of its own: the experiment.

Mastering the power of the experiment

Experiments are the most powerful tool that we have in social psychology, and indeed, in all of science. They allow us to make strong, lasting conclusions. With an experiment, we can distinguish between two things that happen to co-occur, and one thing that causes another. For example, rich people tend to be less kind drivers. They are more likely to cut you up on the road. Is this because if you are a selfish driver, then you are more self-interested throughout your life, and more likely to make money for yourself? Or does having money and owning an expensive car make you a meaner person? The surprising answer, as I discuss in Chapter 15, is that money and power can *cause* you to be less considerate towards others. It is only because of carefully designed experiments that we can make that bold claim.

Experiments get their power from careful design and analysis. In Chapter 3, I examine what makes a good experiment in social psychology, and what makes a bad one. As you will see, people who study chemistry and physics really have life easy. They are doing a simple science where you have to measure straightforward things like mass, heat and velocity. But in social psychology we have to measure things such as happiness, prejudice and a sense of belonging. There is no stereotype-o-meter for prejudice in the same way that there is a thermometer for heat. So, as I will show you, social psychologists have to be clever and creative in the ways that they do their science.

Digging for the foundations of social psychology

To understand the way that we do social psychology today, you have to understand the past. As much as social psychology studies phenomena such as conflict, aggression and prejudice, it is also the outcome of events in real life such as the Second World War and the Holocaust. Also, social psychology is a child of psychology itself. In the recent past, psychology conceived of people as very different things – as learning machines, as computers, as social beings and as sets of competing desires. The way that psychology has defined people has had profound consequences for the way that social psychology studies the interaction between people.

No couches here!

This sidebar is the only place in the whole book that I talk about Sigmund Freud. This may seem very strange to non-psychologists, who often assume that he is the dominant figure in psychology. Indeed, if you tell people that you are currently studying psychology, the first thing that they may say is, 'Oh don't analyse me!' (This will quickly become tiresome for you). In fact, Freud is a marginal figure, at best, in contemporary empirical psychology. His ideas had an enormous influence on popular culture and the novels and films at the time. And his ideas on therapy had a lasting influence on psychiatry, although few people follow his original theories now. The traces of his ideas that remain in psychology are often unhelpful. For example, some parenting books tell parents not to hug their young babies too much during the first months of life. The reason for this advice can be traced to Freud's belief that unconditional love from a mother could produce an over-dependent child

that never frees itself from the mother's influence. Now we know (from doing the hard work of studies and experiments) that this is nonsense, and parental affection has no such negative effects on an infant. Similarly, there is simply no evidence for most of Freud's specific theories about unconscious drives and the causal influences a parent's actions have upon a child.

In short, Freud was an exceptional thinker but a poor research scientist. He only ever had a small number of patients that he used to generate his ideas, and he never sought to measure their success systematically. There is even evidence to suggest that the small number of his patients he did treat never improved, or even got worse, but Freud continued to push his theories regardless. So, if someone assumes that you are learning how to perform Freudian analysis on them, feel free to tell them it's mostly nonsense. Or tell them to call their mother.

On the other hand, one can say that social psychology is one of the youngest sciences that there is. The sort of social understanding that our species has been doing for thousands of years is nothing like a proper *science*. It is not knowledge that has been built up from a systematic method of experimentation and hypothesis testing. Since its inception around 500 years ago, the scientific method has been applied to understanding every facet of the world around us. But it was long after we studied stars, planets, oceans, animals, cells, molecules and atoms that we turned the microscope upon ourselves and our own behaviour. In this sense, social psychology is indeed one of the youngest of the sciences.

Understanding What People Think and What Makes Them Act

If you are a zoologist and want to understand the social behaviour of ants, you are going to spend a long time on your knees with a magnifying glass, and you're probably going to get bitten. Social psychologists have a luxury that zoologists do not: we can just ask people what they think and the reasons for their behaviour. We can directly measure people's attitudes. And we rarely get bitten.

As I show you in Part II, social psychologists have developed many sophisticated tools to measure, survey and record people's attitudes towards a whole range of things: people of other races, prayer, ice cream flavours and taxation. But they quickly discovered a big problem. What people say about their attitudes doesn't always – in fact rarely does – tell you what they are actually going to do at all. So the zoologists may have the last laugh after all.

Asking people what they think

Do you think that our society should spend more money helping people who are poor? That seems like a pretty straightforward question. I imagine that you have some opinions and could give me a one-word answer or an hour-long argument. In both cases, you would be reporting what social psychologists call your *explicit attitude*: the opinions and beliefs that you can state out loud.

But here's the problem. In Chapter 4, I show you the remarkable number of factors that can change the answer you give to that question. Were you asked by an attractive young person? Did they introduce themselves as being from

a homeless charity or the TaxPayers' Alliance? Before asking the question, did they talk to you about your latest tax return, or about a time that you yourself felt the effects of poverty? What were the exact words they used – did they say spending more money on 'poor people' or on 'the welfare state'?

Social psychologists have found time and time again that they can easily influence the explicit attitudes that people report. People may say they have one attitude, but then behave in a completely opposite manner. This leads to a number of practical and scientific questions: how do you measure what people *really* think? Do they even have lasting, stable attitudes that cause them to behave one way or another?

Measuring what people really think

Social psychologists now have the scientific tools to look under the surface of your everyday attitudes. If I ask you, 'Do you think that men and women are equally capable in the workplace' you would probably say yes. In other words, your explicit attitude would be that men and women are equal.

But imagine that I flashed up a picture of a person and you had to press one button to identify them as male, and another as female. I would predict that you would be very slightly slower to press the female button if she was shown wearing a business suit or a fire-fighters outfit than if she was shown in the home or the kitchen. The difference in your button press may be imperceptible to you, a matter of a few milliseconds, but social psychologists have computers that can measure and add up such differences.

Even though most people report explicit attitudes that treat people the same regardless of sex, race or nationality, in experiments like this their millisecond reactions to words or pictures are different depending on if they refer to men or women, Black faces or White faces, and Christian names or Muslim names. These differences are called *implicit attitudes*. In Chapter 5, I show you how they are measured and how they can be used to predict people's behaviour. I address the sometimes uncomfortable question: do these implicit attitudes reflect what people *really* think?

Predicting people's behaviour

When was the last time someone asked you, 'Why did you do that?' Perhaps it was after you pointedly ignored a friend, were unexpectedly kind to a stranger or punched a sibling. The person asking you wanted to know about your attitudes, I imagine, because they assumed that your behaviour was

caused by your attitudes. You were angry with the friend, you were attracted to the stranger or mildly irritated with the sibling. This seems like a reasonable, common-sense assumption, but social psychology has discovered remarkable evidence that the assumption has things completely the wrong way round. Often, our behaviours cause our attitudes.

In Chapter 6 you will meet cognitive dissonance, one of the most powerful, elegant, and counter-intuitive theories in social psychology. Do you think that you'd be happier with this book if you got it at half the price? If your partner treats you poorly, do you think you'd love them more or less? These seem like obvious questions, but cognitive dissonance makes a series of remarkable predictions that are borne out by careful experimentation.

Who Am I, Who Are You and Why Did They Do That?

Like a collector looking at a butterfly pinned to a board, so far we've focused on the individual outside of its natural habitat. We've explored the attitudes and beliefs that exist inside individuals' heads, and how this might determine their behaviour. But people, like butterflies, live in a social context in which they interact with each other and the world around them. In Part III of the book I start to explore how people generate beliefs about themselves and the people around them, and how they understand each other's social behaviour.

As you may have guessed, the opinions people have about others are not always completely fair, objective and rational. In this part of the book we explore how you make judgments about other people, and how stereotypes and prejudice can build up about certain groups and types of people. But first, there is one person who is on the receiving end of more of your prejudice and biased thinking than any other: yourself.

Constructing your sense of self

My favourite recurring scene in the science fiction show *Dr Who* is when he regenerates from an old body to the new. The new actor playing the Doctor would leap up from behind the console of the TARDIS, stare wildly at his hands and run to a mirror. He would then try and figure out who he was, what he was like and whether he liked his new taste in clothes.

Though you aren't a Time Lord (probably) you too have to go through a process of self-discovery and identity formation. This takes more than the five minutes that the Doctor has before the Daleks attack again. In Chapter 7, I explore this process. It begins in childhood, takes a left turn in adolescence and continues into adulthood. You are not just figuring out who you are, but also, importantly, how you fit into the social world. The conclusion that most of us reach during this process is that, actually, I'm a pretty good person.

Loving yourself

You are awesome. You are better than average at most things, you are more moral, more correct in your opinions and you make the right choices. At least, that is what you tend to believe. The problem is, that's what everyone else believes too. And though everyone can't all be better than average, that is what, on average, everyone believes.

No matter how self-deprecating or modest you may seem on the surface, you maintain a pretty good opinion of yourself. In Chapter 8, I look at the evidence that you, like everyone else, have a robust set of self-serving biases. You tend to believe that your successes are due to your personal qualities, but your failures are due to your bad luck. Whereas other people have prejudices and subjective opinions, your own views are more like objective facts.

Although you may think I'm making you out to be a horrible egotist, you are perfectly normal and healthy. Indeed, these self-serving biases appear to be a vital part of your psychological 'immune system' that, more or less, keeps you happy and sane no matter what you experience.

Explaining the actions of others

We don't spend our entire lives thinking about ourselves, however. Pick up a gossip magazine, turn on the TV or eavesdrop on a conversation and the chances are you'll hear people trying to figure out other people. Why did your boss snub you in the hallway? Why did one blond, beautiful celebrity dump another beautiful blond celebrity? Why did the waitress give you that funny look?

If you have the misfortune not to have read this book already – and probably even if you have – then you are likely to reach systematically incorrect explanations for the behaviour of other people. As I demonstrate in Chapter 9, in

everyday life, you, like everyone else, tend to explain other people's behaviour in terms of their personalities. The boss who snubbed you is rude, the celebrity is in love, and the waitress is a snob.

You tend to leap to these conclusions about personality and overlook explanations in terms of the situation. You don't consider that the boss was just thinking about something else, that the waitress thought she recognised you, and that the blond celebrity has a film coming out and her PR team just need her to be in the magazines. Later, in Part IV of this book, I try and convince you just how powerful these situational factors are in determining behaviour. But in Chapter 9, I explain how this bias towards personality explanations – called the *fundamental attribution error* – dominates your thinking about other people.

Judging and labelling others

The detective Sherlock Holmes was famous for his ability to deduce remarkable things from people at only a glance. He would infer that a visitor to 221b Baker Street, for example, was a schoolmaster from the countryside who suspected his wife of having an affair from the mud on his shoes, a dusting of chalk on his sleeve and the lack of starch in his collar, suggesting a Victorian wife that no longer cared for him.

You may not have the eye for detail and the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes, but that doesn't stop you leaping to generalisations and unfounded conclusions whenever you meet other people.

You are hardwired to categorise and label other people. I explain in Chapter 10 how this process of impression formation, judgment making, and generalisation can be a very useful way to understand and predict the people around you. But it can also easily lead to bias and prejudice, as you make conclusions based on your own assumptions rather than the people you see in front of you. I examine how this process of stereotyping occurs and how it can be avoided.

Measuring the Power of Social Forces

You may think of yourself as an independent person who stands up for their own opinions, even if you are a bit headstrong sometimes. No matter how independent you *think* you are, I would bet that much of your life and your decisions are under the thumb of social forces.

Walk out onto the street or into a room filled with people about your own age. Are they wearing the same sorts of clothes as you, some of the same labels? Look on your music player or your bookshelf – how many of those authors or musicians did you discover entirely yourself, and how many have your friends heard and read? In fact, I might argue that even your very conception of yourself as an independent, unique person is something that you have picked up from those around you, or that it's an idea that has been marketed to you by the fashion industry so that (ironically) they can sell unique you the same clothes that everyone else is buying.

I explore in Part IV of this book all the ways that the world and the people around you can influence your actions, from the way that your job changes who you are, to why you obey your boss or your teachers. I explore the reasons why you feel an urge to mimic and follow your friends and peers, and why salespeople and advertisers have such an easy time persuading you to buy things.

Controlled by the situation

Have you ever had to wear a uniform? The white and black of a waiter, the fatigues of a soldier, or just the same business outfit that everyone else wears at the office. Does wearing that uniform change who you are and how you act?

I tell you the story of one of the most famous studies in social psychology, the Stanford prison experiment, in Chapter 11. It was a stark demonstration that as much as your attitudes, beliefs and intentions, the situation that you are placed in – the restaurant, the army unit or the office – can determine your behaviour. In the case of the Stanford prison experiment, a group of regular, happy young men turned into broken, spiritless prisoners or oppressive, sadistic guards, depending on which identity they were assigned by the researcher. The experiment's conclusions reverberate through society today.

Obeying authority

Mr Tanner was the name of the worst teacher at my school. He had a boil on his neck like a half-buried snooker ball and a sadistic streak as thick and ugly as his ginger wig. He taught PE, mostly by yelling. Once he told a boy to run over to the side of the field, and the poor boy ran straight through a thorn bush rather than go round it so he didn't get shouted at.

We obeyed Mr Tanner out of terror. But most obedience in our society does not come from fear. Rationally we know that the consequences of disobedience are small. It would be easy to violate parking laws or tax regulations,

or to shoplift and get away with it. But the moment someone in authority – a policeman, a teacher or even a scientist – asks us to do something, we are compelled by a force to obey.

I explore the power of authority in Chapter 12. You, like many people, may feel that obedience to authority is something that other people do, conjuring up images of jackbooted Nazis saluting their leaders. Our culture, you would think, prizes rebels and challenges authority. But some very compelling experiments proved that you don't need threats and fear of Mr Tanner to make people obey. You just need a white coat, a calm voice and authority, and you can make nice people commit the most evil acts.

Being one of the crowd

Being a sheep is not much fun. You exist to be shaved or slaughtered, and all for the benefit of people who use your name as an insult. Who would be a sheep? Well, it may not be much of a consolation, but those people wearing jumpers, eating lamb and taking the name of sheep in vain – they are sheep too. For as much as people need warmth from wool and nourishment from meat, they have a basic human need to belong with others, to act and feel the same, too.

I explore the urge to conform in Chapter 13. Sometimes we follow the actions of others because we are clueless. The first time you got on a bus or paid at a self-service checkout, you probably looked at the person in front of you to see how it was done. More often, though, we follow the actions of others just because it feels right. Or perhaps, as I shall discuss, because not following others, being left out of the group, feels so bad. The only thing worse than being a sheep, is a lonely sheep.

Persuading and convincing

Perhaps you are flicking through this book in the shop, deciding whether to buy it. Or perhaps, given my comments on obedience, whether to steal it. Let me say a few things.

Firstly, you clearly have a good eye for books. You appreciate a quality, well-written book. If you are thinking about buying this book – and it's entirely your choice, of course – then you may want to do it sooner rather than later. It's already sold out in many markets, as many, many students and interested readers have already bought copies. In fact, since this copy is half price, you

may need to act fast. But I tell you what – don't decide to buy it now. Finish reading a couple more pages of this chapter first, and then make your decision. Would that be okay? After all, I did write it just for you!

I reveal the Jedi mind tricks that I (or advertisers before me) employed to compel you to buy this book in Chapter 14. I explain the techniques of labeling, low-balls, foot-in-the-door, reciprocity and others. You can use these mind powers yourself, or armed with the knowledge, resist persuasion attempts upon you. But you have to buy the book.

Living the Social Life

I've shown you how the attitudes inside your head relate to the actions you take, how these lead to thoughts about the people around you, and how those people can influence and determine your actions. In Part V, the final part of the book, I discuss how all those ideas and forces come together when you interact with other people, generating friendships and families, in groups and out-groups, and cultures and conflicts.

Liking, loving and respecting

The groups of people that define your life – friends, families and colleagues – are bound together by social forces. Some of these people you like. Some of them you love. And there are a few whose authority you respect. Thankfully, for people who have to write soap operas at any rate, you don't always respect the ones you love, like the ones you respect or even like the ones you love.

I map out these competing and intertwining forces in Chapter 15. If you've ever wanted to know why some people are attractive and some not, why you fall in love with one type of person and not another, or what happens to you if you gain power and money, this is a good place to start.

Thinking and deciding

The man who designed the Mini did not have a high opinion of camels: 'A camel is a horse designed by committee,' he said sniffily. Though I think he is a little unfair on the camel, he makes a good point about the problems with group decision-making. No matter how smart the individual people in a group may be, together in a committee they are capable of spectacularly bad decisions.

I explain the dangers and failures of *group think* in Chapter 16. One particularly disastrous meeting in the 1960s between President Kennedy and his top advisors led to a series of decisions that came frighteningly close to starting a nuclear war. Following this, social psychologists saw the urgency in studying exactly why and what goes wrong when people gather together to make decisions.

Despite these pitfalls, we are remarkably successful social creatures, however. When he was able to avoid nuclear war, the same president inspired a nation to co-operate on a vast scale and send men to the moon with a tenth of the technology that is in your mobile phone. In the rest of the chapter I explore when and how people do co-operate and help each other.

Living in different cultures

And so, in Chapter 17, our social psychologists microscope pulls back to the widest field of view – a culture. As I show you, there are many differences in how people across the world think of themselves, their society and their place within it. These are not just abstract, theoretical differences in philosophical outlook. They translate to measurable shifts in behaviour, differences in how people literally move their eyes across a scene, interpret what they see and remember their world.

The discovery of widespread cultural differences also leads me to re-examine a scientific assumption that has supported many of the experiments than run throughout this book: that people are pretty much the same the world over, and so it is justifiable to perform experiments on (mostly) rich white American psychology students, and assume that our conclusions hold for the rest of the world's population. That is an assumption that social psychologists have lazily made for many years, and we are only just figuring out its consequences.

Looking Back Up the Microscope

I began this chapter by asking you to imagine a giant microscope zooming in on the subject of its science. But in one crucial way, a social psychologist looking down a microscope is very different from a biologist looking down a microscope. Don't forget while you're reading about all these theories and experiments that when you are looking down the social psychology microscope you are not just peering at organisms, or people, you are looking at yourself, too.

