Social Psychology

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Social psychologists define, examine, and construct scientific theories of human social behavior. One of the most interesting aspects of social psychology is that social behavior is defined in a multitude of ways, ranging from directly observable, measurable, and publicly presented (e.g., kissing), to indirect, subtle, and internal (e.g., a smirk, religious beliefs). Topics of interest to social psychologists are many and include self and identity, social beliefs and judgments, attitudes and behavior, language and communication, culture, social influence, and conformity, persuasion, social relations, groups, attraction and intimacy, as well as applications of these in social arenas such as organizations and business, health, the environment, and the justice system.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Graham Richards (2002) has identified several key phases in the development of the discipline. According to Richards, the major points of development in social psychology were: nineteenth-century France; United States in the 1920s and 1930s; Britain and United States in the 1960s onwards; and the "crisis" in social psychology of the 1980s, and the current climate. Nineteenth-century France is the location of the first identifiable social psychological text. Gustav LeBon (1896, cited in Richards 2002), in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, influenced by current cultural concepts of hypnosis and contagion, identified "the crowd" as a problematical element to explain France's social unrest at that time, which was underpinned by the rising forces of anti-Semitism and Far Right politics. In this work, the crowd was seen as the necessary unit to be examined and analyzed. The solution, for LeBon lay in the identification of the laws of crowd behavior. Individualism, the currently popular manifestation of the proper unit of analysis for social psychologists and which foregrounded the social cognitivist perspective that we know today, first came to prominence at the turn of the century through to the 1920s in the United States. Triplett (1898, cited in Richards 2002), who examined social facilitation effects (does the presence of another person increase performance?) in various scenarios, for example, among cyclists or children fishing and so forth, is considered to be the person to have conducted the first social psychological experiment. Further experimental work followed. Generally, this early work in 1920s America was concerned with analyzing the motives of people living "in social relations." It is possible to see how the social psychological interest in social interactions (e.g., criminality) would arise during this period in the United States – a New World, people living in ever-larger cities with all of their evolving issues, as well as volatile changes such as the "Roaring Twenties" followed by the Great Depression (1929–1933) and its attendant prosperity for some but not for others (for example, African Americans and farmers remained in poverty) created an interest in the individual and their situation, unfettered by long-standing class and genealogy lines so prescient in Europe. This is the epoch when social psychology cemented its interested in people's thoughts and feelings – the individual, as a useful unit of study, came to the fore. By

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the 1930s, social psychology in the United States was changing rapidly, exploding in in the number of publications and new research methodologies (e.g., observational methods). Psychological monographs covering unemployment, mass media and public opinion, race prejudice, delinquency, and industrial conflict were all products of this period. Thus, social psychology in the 1920s and 1930s United States was characterized by the creation of experimental social psychology that was both individualist and pragmatic (a focus on applied research assumed great focus at this time), where measurement of attitudes became important (Gordon Allport considered as the "father" of attitude theory), and there was an increase in numerous methodologies. During this period, British, and more generally European social psychology came to the fore. These social psychologies differed from their American counterpart in several distinctive ways. Although British social psychology borrowed heavily from American methods and concerns, it nevertheless exhibited idiosyncratic foci and topics of interest. British social psychology emerged predominantly after World War II and, just as with American social psychology, was heavily influenced and stimulated by the conflict. Distinctive British features of social psychology included: a theorization of social class (theorized here both as a cultural and economic variable) that was not evident in its American counterpart, a greater use of observational methods than American social psychology, and a greater reception to insights from evolutionary theory. In addition, British research was, and remains, heavily influenced by European social psychology with its focus on social groups, collective identities, and intergroup conflict (promoted by Henri Tajfel and his students). American postwar period constituted an interest in a wide range of topics such as authoritarianism, conformity, prejudice, small group dynamics and the nature of leadership, attitudes, communication and the media, and role theory, among others. Interest in these topics was undoubtedly stimulated by the influx of highly intellectual European academics to America and was also foregrounded by sociohistorical events of that time: the Vietnam War in the 1960s and the growth of political activism such as that of second-wave feminism, concerns with the rise of Nazism, and civil rights activism during that period.

Research in social psychology has continued to expand rapidly and diversify from the 1960s to the present day. The 1960s saw research on topics such as aggression, prosocial behavior, and interpersonal relationships come to the fore. Social cognition became a prominent way to theorize human social behavior from the 1970s. The 1970s and 1980s also saw some tensions within the discipline in what can be characterized as "the crisis years" (Hogg and Vaughan 2014), which documented worries that social psychology was overly reductionist, positivistic, and devoid of a social theory of language. These tensions and debates have resulted in a theoretically vibrant and methodologically diverse social psychology of today.

FAMOUS EXPERIMENTS

The postwar era in American social psychology was also when some of the most famous experiments in social psychology were conducted. Key concerns of the researchers who had emigrated to America and had been directly affected by the European developments in anti-Semitism/rise of Nazism clearly played a significant role in these experiments. Social influence, in all its manifestations, became an important behavior to understand. Were people generally passive and

open to influence? Would and could they resist others' directives? Will others influence our judgments even in the face of clearly wrong information? Which factors play a role when someone is telling you to harm another? How does power lead to aggression and violence? These are some of the questions posed by what are arguable the three best-known but also controversial experiments in the history of social psychology – Solomon Asch's conformity experiments, Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments at Yale in 1961, and Philip Zimbardo's prison experiments at Stanford.

Solomon Asch (1951, cited in Hogg and Vaughan 2014) conducted several studies into what became known as his "conformity" studies. Male university students were asked to take part in supposedly a simple experiment on "visual perception." Participants were invited into a room with seven or eight other people – in reality, only one person was the genuine participant while the others were the "confederates," primed as to the real purpose of the study. How would the real participant react to the majority confederates' actions, especially when these actions were wrong? All participants were shown a card with a line on it, followed by a card with three lines on it (lines labeled A, B, and C, respectively). Participants were then asked to say aloud which line (i.e., A, B, or C) matched the line on the first card in length. Each line question was called a "trial." Prior to the experiment, all confederates were given specific instructions on how they should respond to each trial. Specifically, they were told to unanimously give the correct response or unanimously give the incorrect response. The group was set up such that the real participant was always the last to respond (i.e., the real participant sat toward the end of a table). For the first two trials, the participant would feel at ease in the experiment, as he and the confederates gave the obvious, correct answer. On the third trial, the confederates would all give the same wrong answer. How would the participant react? The aim was to see whether the real participant would change his answer and respond in the same way as the confederates, despite it clearly being the wrong answer. Once the experiment was completed, the "real" participant was individually interviewed where he was debriefed about the true purpose of the study. An examination of all critical trials in the experimental group revealed that one third of all responses were incorrect. These incorrect responses often matched the incorrect response of the majority group (i.e., confederates). Overall, in the experimental group, 75 percent of the participants gave an incorrect answer to at least one question. The implications from Asch's research are great. The demonstrated ability of individual people to collate information about group norms, others' judgments, and their own perceptions of themselves as group members has influenced research in social identity and social categorization theories. Asch's emphasis that independent thought and disagreement among group members are the crux of group functioning influenced psychologists such as Serge Moscovici in his minority influence theory. Asch also believed that the relationship between conformity and nonconformity was not a simple correspondence of opposites; instead, each element is part of wider, sometimes non-mutually exclusive social processes. For example, conformity could simultaneously be a function of how aware a person is that they are being influenced by the group (distortion of perception), the degree to which the person believes that the group consensus is correct (distortion of judgment), and the extent to which the person is seeking group acceptance (distortion of action) (Levine 1999).

Stanley Milgram's experiment (1963, cited in Hogg and Vaughan 2014) on obedience is

perhaps the most famous social psychological experiment of all, continually inspiring further research, in an effort to "open up new perspectives on an old experiment whose legacy lives on" (British Psychological Society 2015). Milgram's experiments (there were several variations) examined the extent to which "naive" participants would be willing to ostensibly cause harm to another person under direct orders from a scientist. The scientist was, of course, a confederate of the experimenters. The experiments began in July 1961, at Yale University. Milgram designed the experiment in an attempt to address the frequently voiced concerns from the general public seeking to understand how the Holocaust could have happened, how ordinary people could have been accomplices to the horrors, and why only a few people would refuse to participate.

In a typical Milgram experiment, three individuals would be involved: the "scientist" (the person giving the orders), the subject (a naive volunteer), and a confederate of the experimenter, who pretended to be a volunteer. Thus, the experiment comprised the Experimenter (an authoritative role), the Teacher (a role intended to obey the orders of the Experimenter), and the Learner (the recipient of stimulus from the Teacher). The teacher and the learner would be asked to randomly draw paper out of a hat to determine their roles; in reality, these roles were fixed so that the subject was always guaranteed to be the teacher. The "teacher" and "learner" were separated into different rooms where they could communicate over an intercom but not see each other. The teacher would be told to administer electric shocks to the learner from an electroshock generator located in the experimental room, in full view of the teacher, if and when the learner gave an incorrect answer to a task. The teacher was thus lead to believe that they were administering an increasingly high electric shock with each wrong answer. Of course, there were no electric shocks – just very well acted and increasingly desperate actions from professional actors. For example, the actors would begin with moans and shrieks, ending up with banging on a wall, culminating in silence. Some participants indicated their wish to stop the experiment; most continued although not without significant and obvious discomfort (participants were sweating, trembling, stuttering, biting their lips, groaning, digging their fingernails into their skin, and some were even having nervous laughing fits and even seizures!). A series of verbal instructions ("Please continue") were given whenever a participant indicated that they wanted to stop the experiment. If the participant still wished to stop after all four successive verbal prompts, the experiment was halted. Otherwise, it was halted after the subject had given the maximum 450-volt shock three times in succession. In Milgram's first set of experiments, 65 percent (26 of 40) of experiment participants administered the experiment's final massive 450-volt shock. This occurred despite the significant discomfort – at some point, every participant paused and questioned the experiment; some said they would return the money they were paid for participating in the experiment. The experiment's fame and infamy are such that it continues to invite reinterpretations explaining the findings, ranging from personal determinants, such as personality (e.g., sadism, but this is unlikely given the distress exhibited by participants), to situational determinants, such as physical and emotional proximity of learner to the experimenter (experimenter and participant in same room), which reduced obedience but only to approximately 30 percent. Recent explanations include a focus on the subtle mechanisms of compliance and resistance of interpersonal dynamics, which may have been evident not only in the experiments

mentioned here but also in Nazi Germany (Reicher and Haslam 2011). "Engaged (or identified) followership" suggests that participants did not resists because they felt themselves to be engaged in the wider project to benefit humankind, impressed on them by the sophisticated arguments of the skillful "salesman" Milgram. Reicher and Haslam (2011) suggest that rather than being distressed by their experiences (as some have claimed), the participants were delighted to take part, felt honored by the opportunity and were therefore committed to the grand project (science) that the experiment represented. They would have done whatever Milgram asked because they believed in him, demonstrating "engaged (or identified) followership," not mindless conformity. Reicher and Haslam's (2011) research extrapolates from the social influence experiments to answer the question, "How do genocides happen?": It was not blind obedience that motivated Milgram's subjects and Himmler's squads in Nazi Germany but rather, a "labor of love" where ordinary people were committed to a greater, benefits-for-all, grand plan.

The Stanford prison experiment was designed to examine how people respond to assigned roles and their subsequent behavior as a consequence of that internalized role. In reality, the results of this experiment have been able to highlight many social psychological processes such as the relationship between authority and those without power, deindividualization, depersonalization, and interpersonal aggression, among others. The experiment was conducted at Stanford University from August 14–20, 1971, by a team of researchers led by psychology professor Philip Zimbardo. It was funded by the United States Office of Naval Research and was of relevance to that department because of an interest in the causes of conflict between military guards and prisoners, the main hypothesis to be tested being whether it is the prescription of the role rather than personality/internal dispositions that cause violent behavior in society. Twenty-four "psychologically stable" male students were selected for the experiment; they were randomly assigned to the roles of prisoner and guard in a mock prison constructed in the basement of Stanford University buildings. Given the hypothesis, the participants were screened to exclude those with criminal background, psychological impairments, or medical problems. Half of the participants were randomly allocated the role of guard while the other half were randomly selected to be prisoners. Zimbardo himself was the superintendent and a research assistant was selected to play the part of warden. The guards were specifically instructed not to physically harm the prisoners although they could introduce behaviors which would create boredom, fear and, most importantly, a sense of powerlessness and lack of control. The guard has various "props" such as wooden batons and was dressed in similar ways to real American prison guards. They also had mirrored sunglasses to prevent eye contact. Prisoners wore uncomfortable ill-fitting smocks and stocking caps, as well as a chain around one ankle. Guards were instructed to call prisoners by their assigned numbers, sewn on their uniforms, instead of by name. The prisoners, aided by the Palo Alto police department, were arrested at their homes, finger printed, and photographed. They were also strip searched. The small mock prison cells were set up to hold three prisoners each and the prisoners were to stay in their cells all day and night until the end of the study. The guards worked in teams of three for eight-hour shifts. The guards did not have to stay on site after their shift. The continuing fascination with this experiment is because of what happened next. After a relatively uneventful first day, on the second day several prisoners blockaded their cell door, refusing

to come out, or follow the guards' instructions. Guards from other shifts volunteered to work extra hours to assist in subduing the revolt, and subsequently attacked the prisoners physically and brutally, with batons and fire extinguishers. During the next day, another prisoner began to act out of control, screaming, shouting, and raging. Further issues arose as the guards asked prisoners to participate in dehumanizing tasks, for example, asking the prisoners to repeat their assigned numbers and using these counts to harass the prisoners, using physical punishment such as protracted exercise for errors in the prisoner count. Sanitary conditions declined rapidly, exacerbated by the guards' refusal to allow some prisoners to urinate or defecate anywhere but in a bucket placed in their cell. As punishment, the guards would not let the prisoners empty the sanitation bucket. Mattresses were a valued item in the prison, so the guards would punish prisoners by removing their mattresses, leaving them to sleep on concrete. Some prisoners were forced to be naked as a method of degradation. Several guards became increasingly cruel as the experiment continued; experimenters reported that approximately one third of the guards exhibited genuine sadistic tendencies. Most of the guards were upset when the experiment concluded. Although the prisoners initially revolted, they gradually became passive and subdued. Some prisoners had to be released early because they exhibited severe emotional disturbance such as uncontrolled crying, screaming, and disorganized thinking. On August 20, 1971, Zimbardo officially terminated the experiment, after only six days instead of the anticipated two weeks, on prompting from another student and Zimbardo's future wife, Christina Maslach, who, it was noted surprisingly by Zimbardo, was the only person out of a group of about fifty researchers that raised any kind of ethical and moral objection to the unfolding events. The results of the experiment have been argued to demonstrate the impressionability and obedience of people when provided with a powerful and legitimizing ideology, and social and institutional support. Other explanations include uncertainty of role reduction (Reicher and Haslam 2006), the power of authority, and mindless conformity, among others.

DEBATES IN THE FIELD

By the late 1970s, tensions between positivism and social constructionism became an important issue in American and European social psychology. The tensions centered around a crisis of confidence in positivism, which brought on the emergence of alternative explanations of social behavior such as social constructionism. Frequently referred to as the "turn to language," the "discursive turn," or the "crisis" in social psychology, these philosophical debates were predicated upon an increasing dissatisfaction with the realist, experimental ontology, and epistemology of positivism.

Historically, viewing social psychology through a scientific, positivist lens is a relatively recent development not only for social psychology, but also for the natural sciences more generally. The modern scientific method represented a major shift in human epistemology and knowledge acquisition:

> Modern scientific methods, invented in the 16th Century, were not only a stunning technical innovation, but a moral and political one as well, replacing the sacred authority of the Church with science as the ultimate arbiter of truth. (Riger 1992: 730)

Positivism, as a philosophical paradigm, can be characterized by its realist ontological position, its priority of individualistic cause and effect relationships between social phenomena, statistical manipulation, and

the fundamental belief that real and valid knowledge can only be garnered through empiricism (Gergen 1973; Fox, Prilleltensky, and Austin 2009). More specifically, positivistic accounts seek to use experiments to produce value free knowledge, unburdened by partiality and positioning. Historically, the positivistic approach emerged globally following the Enlightenment, where the Church and religion, as long-held gatekeepers of knowledge about the world, began losing their power in Western societies. Scientists emerged as the new generators and bastions of knowledge, with a program designed to acquire new forms of explanation which were objective, independent of human bias and therefore not imbricated in the previously religious struggles for power. Indeed, an influential early text by William McDougall, published in 1908, epitomized these struggles, jostling for position between clerics, philosophers, and biologists. As reader at the University of Oxford, McDougall had been forbidden by the industrialist funder of the readership, Henry Wilde, to carry out experimental research in psychology (which is exactly what he proceeded to do!): "He (Henry Wilde) was an old manufacturer who has a great admiration for John Locke and a conviction that mental life cannot be experimentally studied; and he had learned that I had been guilty of efforts along that line" (McDougall 1930: 207, cited in Hughes 2012). For social psychology, in order to classify itself as a natural science, it needed to adopt strong scientific principles. Thus, through the adoption of the hypothetico-deductive (experimental) method, social psychology took on a realist ontological position which assumed that the material world exists independently of thoughts, actions, and intentions. Given these assumptions, social psychology began to seek the "truth," in the same way as the natural sciences, by attempting to understand the fundamental properties of the world and human nature. Social psychology sought to explain and understand the social world through parts, propositions, and governed rules. These claims to science brought social psychology a new found status and it has remained predominantly positivistic ever since. Social psychology was thus engaged in understanding the "real" nature of human existence and social interaction, through the generation of the laws of human behavior, universal to human societies and applicable to all.

The focus of social psychology on investigating what is observable and more or less directly measurable, with an emphasis on empiricism as the only way to generate accurate and valid knowledge is, according to critics, potentially problematic for a discipline, which attempts to offer an ecologically valid explanation of human social life. With a high frequency of use of controlled experimental situations such as experiments and self-report questionnaires, other critiques suggest that social psychologists may struggle to accurately determine the very processes that they are trying to understand. For example, social desirability in the form of politically correct answers which portray the respondent in the best possible light are a significant issue for any type of experimental, observational, and self-report research. A disproportionate focus on individuals and the reification of theoretical and hypothetical social psychological concepts such as attitudes and attributions added to the critique. Although many significant works emerged during this period, Potter and Wetherell's (1987) book entitled *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour* stands out as a highly influential account to lay out the social discursive principles of behavior. Discourse analysis, as theory, methodology, and method, assert that reality is constructed and made meaningful through

discourse (Burr 2015). This is referred to as the social production of meaning: meaning produced between individuals through social interaction. Language and discourse produce (construct) rather than reflect reality. They construct it (social constructionism). Language is an active phenomenon, intimately bound up with action (e.g., where we apportion blame for a crime will have direct implications such as incarceration), it shapes our lives and produces subjectivity (our roles and identities). Methodologically, primacy is given to qualitative methods, which often use interview transcripts to study the *how* people actively construct meaning in their lives.

The turn to language in social psychology also occurred within wider developments of critical theory in social psychology. Critical social psychology focuses not only on language and discourse but also on issue such as diversity, empowerment, and advocacy. One of critical psychology's main criticisms of conventional psychology is that it fails to consider or deliberately ignores the way power differences between social classes and groups can impact the mental and physical well-being of individuals and groups of people. It does this, in part, because it tends to explain behavior at the level of the individual. Critical social psychology's objectives are to emphasize social justice and human welfare. Critical social psychologists believe that social psychology's traditional theoretical and methodological practices hinder social justice, are detrimental to many individual, communities and oppressed groups, and support societal institutions that reinforce unjust and unsatisfying conditions. Mainstream psychologists too often shy away from the resulting moral, social, and political implications of value-laden practices (Fox, Prilleltensky, and Austin 2009).

The social constructionist and critical social psychological position are not without their critics. The difficulties with "endless reiterations of relativism" (on which basis can one position be chosen over another?) are great for social constructionism (although critical realism (Parker 1992) and other positions on the realist-relativist epistemological spectrum offer an apparent resolution). Positivist social psychology is also critical of social constructionism and critical social psychology because these approaches are considered to lack reliability, replicability, often use small sample sizes, and lack other scientific rigor.

It is clear that all of the above perspectives have made a significant contribution to the discipline, with a vibrant research community working within each paradigm. The historical backdrop and the political reasons for social psychology's emergence as a science are well documented as are the issues within it which have contributed to its tensions. However, positivism has also afforded social psychology the status of science and the importance of this should not be underestimated although its drive to follow rigid experimental principles, it is questionable whether the approach is truly able to capture the essence of human social nature and interaction. Future social psychologists can attempt to recapture the "social" by investing more time and research funding in mixed methodologies, which are able to not only document the individual but also the social experience and context of human social behavior.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future directions for social psychology include continued developments in discursive and critical theories, use of mixed methods, and to diversify into in the growing disciplines of evolutionary social psychology and social neuroscience. Drawing on Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, evolutionary social psychology draws on Darwin's

principles of evolution and natural selection to argue that social behavior is shaped by these forces. Social neuroscience focuses on the neurological and biochemical correlates of social behavior through carefully examining electro-chemical brain activity. Biochemical markers such as saliva samples to measure stress and brain imaging to observe social cognition are deployed to explain human social interactions. It is likely that these recent developments will be closely aligned with wider changes such as globalization, climatic, geopolitical, technological, and economic movements. These, in turn, may be reflected in the continuing importance of social psychology as a discipline.

SEE ALSO: Discourse Analysis; Positivism; Social Cognition; Social Constructionism; Social Neuroscience

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