

# Advanced social psychology: overview and analysis



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Social psychology is a relatively young science. This branch of psychology includes the study of individual behavior in a social setting as well as factors that influence behavior. Social psychology was established as a formal discipline approximately one hundred years ago (Reis, 2010). Throughout its history, social psychology demonstrated the effects of notable social and political themes of various time periods. Also, methodological and theoretical advances impacted the development of social psychology in many ways.

Although many people equate the origins of social psychology with the publication of the first social psychology textbook by McDougall in 1908, the roots of this field can be traced to the writings of Aristotle and Plato (Reis, 2010). For example, Aristotle noted the need for individuals to live in groups, while Plato emphasized the impact of the environment on behavior.

McDougall incorporated the concepts of emotion and morality in his textbook and emphasized the idea that behavior was instinctive and individual. In addition to McDougall's contribution, Wundt's writings regarding the effect of groups on individual behavior played a critical role in the development of social psychology (Reis, 2010). However, Wundt did not advocate experimental methods. In addition, his ideas did not match the behaviorist views that predominated in the early 1900's. Thus, Wundt's views were not long-lived on social psychologists.

Despite the advent of novel social psychology textbooks, the discipline of social psychology was not well defined. The work of Floyd Allport in 1924 outlined the tenets of social psychology in a way that reflected current thinking to a higher degree (Reis, 2010). Allport noted that interpersonal

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relationships are the hallmark of social psychology, but emphasized that social psychology must be studied in terms of the individual rather than in terms of the group (Patterson, 2015). Additionally, Allport asserted that many factors in the environment might elicit behaviors. Allport took an experimental approach in social psychology and invested his efforts in basic research (Reis, 2010). Allport's writings, which emphasized such topics as conformity, emotion and social influence, exerted a lasting impact on contemporary researchers.

Although Allport clearly utilized a methodological approach, Norman Triplett is widely credited with the implementation of the first social psychology experiment in 1898 (Reis, 2010). Triplett (1898) investigated the effect of the presence of other individuals on performance based upon his observation that bicyclists rode faster when paced by another rider. In addition, Sherif (1936) conducted studies that investigated the development of social norms and the impact that societal rules had on behavior. The occurrence of events such as the Great Depression, World War I and World War II set the stage for further development in social psychology (Patterson, 2015). During the World War II era, several European social psychologists fled Nazi Germany and immigrated to the United States. Notably, Kurt Lewin implemented research regarding group processes and styles of leadership in the workplace (Reis, 2010). Furthermore, Lewin's field experiments during World War II, founding of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), and his conviction in the applied aspect of social psychology, left a lasting impact on the field (Reis, 2010).

Following the end of World War II, the discipline of social psychology flourished in the United States (Reis, 2010). Social psychologists enjoyed greater prestige and high status, and were rewarded by the government with new research facilities, grants, and teaching positions. The G. I. Bill created a need for psychologists to teach at universities, and tenure was quickly earned (Reis, 2010). Also, research on conformity and obedience demonstrated the power of group influence on the beliefs and behaviors of participants (Asch, 1956). Other notable experiments occurred during this era, which lasted from approximately 1946 to 1969. For example, Festinger's (1957) research regarding cognitive dissonance showed that individuals strive to maintain consistency between their beliefs and their behaviors (Reis, 2010). Additionally, Milgram's (1963) experiments on obedience to authority demonstrated that the majority of people will obey an authority figure even if it includes inflicting possible harm to others.

Furthermore, research on romantic attraction generated both interest as well as controversy among social psychologists (Reis, 2010). Despite groundbreaking advances in the area of interpersonal attraction, many people did not think that love and romance should be topics of research experiments. In addition, the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese stimulated bystander intervention research (Reis, 2010). The attempt by the government during the 1960s to eradicate societal wrongdoings generated research regarding the interaction of personality variables and environmental factors in behaviors. The 1970's was notable for an increase in social cognition studies (Reis, 2010). However, the public became disillusioned with the possibility that society could benefit from social psychology research. In addition,

women and minorities noted that social psychology represented an extremely biased view of predominantly male, white, middle-class social psychologists.

As a result of this crisis of public confidence, a more comprehensive and revitalized discipline of social psychology emerged. For example, more rigorous ethical standards in experimental research were implemented (Reis, 2010). As social psychology continues to grow in the present era, views are expanding to include interdisciplinary as well as global concepts. The influence of social psychology has been demonstrated in various areas such as healthcare, industry and schools (Reis, 2010). Additionally, technological advances provided access to participants from many cultures. This cross-cultural perspective will undoubtedly influence future research studies. Also, methodological advances, as well as growth in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, will continue to assist researcher in the interpretation of data.

Advances in social psychology would not be possible without experimental research. However, proposed studies and related methodology necessitate attention to ethical concerns. As social psychology grew, researchers shifted their focus from speculation to the demonstration of empirical evidence. Early laboratory experiments were often criticized for their artificiality and potential biases (Reis, 2010). As a result of this evaluation, field studies were conducted to provide realistic results that could be generalized to other situations (Reis, 2010). Therefore, ethical codes of conduct must be in place to make certain that participants are not harmed in any manner. In general,

researchers must adhere to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice.

The American Psychological Association (APA) developed its code of ethical standards to guide researchers in appropriate treatment of participants. The 1974 National Research Act requires the formation of committees referred to as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) to review potential experiments before researchers begin a study (Gravetter & Forzano, 2006). This process, which may include required modifications and revisions, helps to ensure the protection of participants' welfare. For example, an IRB will examine the cost/benefit ratio to ascertain whether the possible benefits are greater than potential risks. In the event that risks are likely, researchers may be advised to seek lower-cost alternatives (Gravetter & Forzano, 2006). Experiments involving the use of deception must be carefully evaluated prior to the start of the study for analysis of the cost/benefit ratio. Above all, researchers must always endeavor to protect participants from harm.

In addition, researchers must obtain informed consent from all participants prior to the start of an experiment. Informed consent includes the responsibility of researchers to be forthcoming regarding possible risks and what is involved in the experiment. For example, Asch's (1956) study concerning conformity involves a possible breach of informed consent for several reasons. First, participants were deceived regarding the nature of the experiment. Also, participants were not told about the possibility of stress during the experiment, and may have suffered subsequent mental distress. Asch's (1956) study included the debriefing of participants, which is now required in all experimental studies. Debriefing involves explaining the true

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nature of the study to participants after the experiment is over (Gravetter & Forzano, 2006).

Several additional research studies were criticized for violations of ethical principles. For example, Milgram's (1963) landmark experiment regarding obedience to authority generated much controversy. This experiment investigated the power of authority figures on individuals by "ordering" them to administer electric "shocks" to a confederate. Participants were misled concerning the nature of the study and may have suffered severe distress as a result of the deception. Furthermore, participants may not have been aware that they had the right to leave the experiment at any time. Because the participants were paid, they might have felt obliged to continue as long as necessary. During the course of the study, the experimenter urged participants to continue to the end of the experiment. Thus, coercion might have been a factor that contributed to participants' completion of the experiment (Gravetter & Forzano, 2006).

Milgram's (1963) study illustrated an explicit violation of ethical principles regarding informed consent. This violation included misinformation concerning potential psychological harm as well as not informing participants that they were free to terminate the experiment at any time. Additionally, researchers did not adhere to the critical principle of inflicting no harm upon participants. Many participants in Milgram's (1963) study reported significant mental distress from both the pressure of the experimenter and subsequent guilt associated with their willingness to inflict pain upon others. Since individual differences could not be ascertained, researchers were unable to predict the extent of participants' distress.

Finally, past research demonstrated the crucial role that environmental and situational factors play in human behavior (Haley, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). A study by Haley, Banks and Zimbardo (1973) utilized a simulated prison setting in which participants were randomly assigned to the roles of prisoners or guards. However, the participants quickly adapted to their roles and reacted as though the situation was a real-life occurrence. The guards behaved in a cruel and demeaning manner, and the prisoners became increasingly passive and depressed. The experiment had to be terminated early as a result of the extreme psychological symptoms that participants exhibited.

The realistic nature of the experiment may have precluded participants from exercising their right to withdraw from the study. Like the Milgram (1963) study, researchers associated with the simulated prison study were not able to predict the extent of psychological harm to participants, which violated an element of informed consent. During the majority of the experiment, no attempt was made to curtail the abuse inflicted by the guards toward the prisoners. Thus, potential harm to participants was not minimized (Gravetter & Forzano, 2006). Although participants were screened for psychological disorders, the development of unanticipated harmful effects changed the risk/benefit ratio.

Researchers must continually evaluate potential risks that may occur during the study as well as possible benefits. In addition, researchers need to ensure that participation in experiments is completely voluntary and that participants do not feel coerced. If deception will be utilized, researchers must be certain that no viable alternatives exist (Gravetter & Forzano, 2006).

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Finally, in most circumstances, researchers need to obtain an informed consent form for each participant in the study. Also, researchers must be vigilant regarding signs of psychological distress or unexpected effects of participation in the study. Debriefing is essential to ensure that participants understand the purpose of the experiment and to alleviate any negative effects of participation in the study (Gravetter & Forzano, 2006). Finally, researchers must protect the confidentiality of data that is collected as well as identifying information that is provided by participants.

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