

Conceptual foundations of social psychology

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Conceptual Foundations of Social Psychology University of Phoenix
Conceptual Foundations of Social Psychology Often one hears the question, what is wrong with the people in the world today? This question could be asked after watching a news story about a mother murdering her children, gangs terrorizing neighborhoods, terroristic acts committed against large community locations, and riots after a soccer game, or even hate crimes committed due to discrimination. Each of these subjects always brings up questions about why acts such as these occur. Social Psychology can attempt to answer some of these questions.

In effect, social psychology seeks to answer many questions. Social Psychology is very different in that this field tries to understand all characteristics of social behavior and the significance on the individual both positive and negative. Some research would suggest that anyone might act in a similar fashion as the person who commits a terrorist act, or the mother who murders her children if he or she were in the same situation and that the behavior has little to do with the character of that person. This concept is situationism and while it does appear extreme, situationism plays a role in social psychology.

In the following pages, what situationism is and how it pertains to social psychology is addressed. In addition, a definition of what social psychology is as well as the main characteristics of it. Last, an explanation of the five core social motives is offered and how they too affect the field of social psychology. Social Psychology Social Psychology covers so many topics that one could not possibly list them all at one time. These topics range from

interpersonal relationships to group behavior, from prosocial behavior to discrimination and prejudice and everything else in between.

The broad coverage of topics generates difficulty in narrowing the subject down to a strict definition. However, according to Fiske, (2010, p 4) “ Social psychology is the scientific attempt to explain how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings. ” Of course as stated by Fiske, this is the traditional definition of Social Psychology. This definition dates all the way back to one of the fathers of Social Psychology, Gordon Allport (Fiske, 2010). In essence, Social Psychology is about how people influence each other.

If one can imagine each way, another could possibly influence a person then he or she may achieve a better understanding of how broad this subject is. Because Social Psychology covers a broad scope of topics, broad scope by definition is one of the key characteristics of Social Psychology. The broad scope of topics is only one of the characteristics of Social Psychology; another and very important characteristic is Cultural Mandate. Just as any of field of Psychology needs to stay current so too does Social psychology need to stay current.

Because of the ever-changing world and the populations within it, cultures change. Because culture affects individual behavior, it is important to keep up with the changes. These changes occur from town to town within the United States, to larger cultural structures across the globe. For Social Psychology to stay current, an accommodation to the changing cultures is mandatory. One reason it is important to keep up with changes in cultures and how they

affect individual behaviors is the research involved. This research helps build credible scientific knowledge (Fiske, 2010).

Most people today depend on science to present the facts instead of relying on the traditional methods of understanding, which is often only common sense knowledge. Fiske, (2010, p. 34) tells us, “ Social psychology goes beyond common sense to build a scientific understanding of human social behavior. ” Therefore, the Scientific Method is the third key characteristic of Social Psychology. What can be more important than proper “ techniques, procedures, analyses, and standards that create scientifically reliable knowledge? ” (Fiske, 2010, p. 34) Maybe, one other characteristic is more important, or maybe just as important.

The search for wisdom may be the last key characteristics of Social Psychology but being last in this instance does not mean that it is less important. This characteristic is probably the most compassionate aspect of Social Psychology. This characteristic is the search for ways to help improve the circumstances of individuals in certain situations. One already knows that knowledge is important such as that gained from the scientific method, but without compassion and understanding of morals and intellectual concerns Social Psychology would not be the field of study that it is.

Perhaps Fiske states it best when she describes it like this, “ Wisdom comprises knowledge about people and the world, combined with enduring moral, intellectual, and societal concerns that together make sense in the social context of people’s lived experience” (Fiske, 2010, p. 34). Again, it is all about making sense of how individuals influence each other in every way imaginable. Situationism Situationism is a controversial topic. For instance,

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someone walking down the sidewalk drops money on the ground; the person behind them picks the money up and returns it to the owner.

According to situationism this return of the money to the owner is not due to any type of personality trait the person possesses but simply because the situation calls for it. According to Sabine and Silver, (2005, p. 3) “ virtue is not a general disposition to act in a certain way, but a disposition to act in a certain way under quite specific circumstances. ” Therefore, the person returning the money may well behave honestly in that particular circumstance but may not necessarily be honest in all aspects of life.

This does leave an opening for some broad interpretation but that is a different point altogether. An individual's orientation to social contexts, always consist of other people, many researchers even say life is dependent upon social interactions. According to Fiske “ our responsiveness to social situations and therefore their considerable impact results from evolutionary pressures for individuals to survive in groups” (2010, p. 14). If one has doubts about the power of situations all that is needed is some time to revisit the Stanford Prison Experiment.

It is possible that given the same situation anyone would behave in a similar manner no matter his or her personality type. Core Social Motives In order for individuals to survive in groups there must be something that drives this need for individuals to be a part of groups. While there are many needs that individuals have, researchers have narrowed down these needs to five core social motives. The most prominent motive is one most people can surely relate to and that is belonging. Most people are motivated to belong to a group of some type or another.

Life is much easier when others are around for many reasons, making the group work easier is one of them, not to mention the feeling of safety one has when they are around others who they believe they can trust (Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007). Many people are so motivated to belong they will often change their behavior to become a part of a group. Those who are more socially adaptive and feel a strong sense of belonging, whether that belonging is strong families, friends, community, state or nation, belonging is crucial, and has been proven to have some health benefits and those who feel a sense of belonging are happier also.

In one study using adolescents and peer relationships “adolescents who viewed peer group membership as very important to them and had a positive sense of peer group belonging had significantly fewer behavior problems than those who viewed peer group membership as very important but did not have a positive sense of peer group belonging” (Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007, par. 2). While this study used adolescents as subjects, those who feel more pressure to fit in than most other groups the need for belonging is not inclusive to this group.

Although belonging is the core motive and a powerful one, it is not the only motive. Another important motive is, understanding. How one understands his or her environment is crucial to the group dynamic. One uncomfortable feeling that accompanies an individual and stops them from feeling as if they are a part of a group is doubt. When people do not understand the environment or situation occurring around them they often believe that other people do have understanding of the situation or at least some knowledge of it.

Nothing is more frustrating than feeling that sense of being the only one that does not know or understand or as if one has no control over a situation. Control is the third core motive and closely related to understanding. People who understand what is going on in the environment have a firmer sense of control over the situation and are thus happier healthier people (Fiske, 2010). The last two motives neither are cognitive motives nor are they fundamentally the most important but do serve a purpose. A long held belief is that self-esteem is important to the daily lives of individuals.

It is true that most people like to hear praise from others for a job well done or be complimented on his or her good qualities but self-enhancement is more about improvement of the self not just the perception of it. Aside from feeling good about the self however self-enhancement is good for the group because those who feel good are more sociable. People who have low self-esteem are more often withdrawn and want to have nothing to do with others. In addition, those who have a low sense of self tend to behave in destructive ways, which in turn creates group dysfunction.

Most people in a group do not want to be around someone who commits to negative behaviors. The last motive is trust and although it is last on the list, it would appear to be one of the most important although it does not rank that high. Trust is everything in a group. Who would want to belong to a group if everyone was on guard because no one trusted the other? By trusting, one believes in others to do what is right and not bring harm to those that believe in them, much like faith. There are no guarantees that one may not get hurt but it is important to not live life in a paranoid state.

Fiske sums up trust this way, “ Trust facilitates daily life. It makes people both liked and likable, and with good reason. Trusting people deserve trust; they are unlikely to cheat or steal. They are more successful socially, being less suspicious, vindictive, resentful, and lonely than distrusting people” (Fiske, 2010, p. 24) In short trusting people create a trusting environment for others around them. Conclusion Everything people do has social motives. Some researchers believe that life is dependent on social interactions. Without the help from others, life would be incredibly difficult and boring.

People often depend on others for love and support. Social rules, help keep individuals on a more positive track and out of trouble, of course there are exceptions to the rule as with anything else. Social Psychology attempts to explain how every interaction affects individuals. With such a broad range of topics, it is amazing that Social Psychology focuses so much on the Scientific Method. However, because the topics are related to human behavior Social Psychology also deals with the more compassionate side as well, and looks to improve the human condition.

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