Exploring Social Psychology

SECOND EDITION

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MODULE

1

Doing Social Psychology

There once was a man whose second wife was a vain and selfish woman. This woman had two daughters who were similarly vain and selfish. The man's own daughter, however, was sweet and kind. This sweet, kind daughter, whom we all know as Cinderella, learned early on that she had best do as she was told, accept insults, and not upstage her vain stepsisters.

But then, thanks to her fairy godmother, Cinderella was able to escape her situation and go to a grand ball, where she attracted a handsome prince. When the lovestruck prince later encountered a homelier Cinderella back in her degrading home, he at first failed to recognize her.

Implausible? The folk tale demands that we accept the power of the situation. In one situation, playing one role in the presence of her oppressive stepmother, meek and unattractive Cinderella was a different person from the charming and beautiful Cinderella whom the prince met. At home, she cowered. At the ball, Cinderella felt more beautiful and walked and talked and smiled as if she were.

The French philosopher-novelist Jean-Paul Sartre (1946) would have had no problem accepting the Cinderella premise. We humans are "first of all beings in a situation," he believed. "We cannot be distinguished from our situations, for they form us and decide our possibilities" (p. 59–60, paraphrased). Social psychology is a science that studies the influences of our situations, with special attention to how we view and affect one another. It does so by asking questions that have intrigued us all:

- How and what do people *think* of one another? How reasonable are the ideas we form of ourselves? of our friends? of strangers? How tight are the links between what we think and what we do?

- How, and how much, do people *influence* one another? How strong are the invisible threads that pull us? Are we creatures of our gender roles? our groups? our cultures? How can we resist social pressure, even sway the majority?
- What shapes the way we *relate to* one another? What leads people sometimes to hurt and sometimes to help? What kindles social conflict? And how might we transform the closed fists of aggression into the open arms of compassion?

A common thread runs through these questions: They all deal with how people view and affect one another. And that is what social psychology is all about. Social psychologists study attitudes and beliefs, conformity and independence, love and hate. To put it formally, **social psychology** is *the scientific study of how people think about, influence, and relate to one another.*

Unlike other scientific disciplines, social psychology has nearly 6 billion amateur practitioners. People-watching is a universal hobby—in parks, at the beach, at school. As we observe people, we form ideas about how human beings think about, influence, and relate to one another. Professional social psychologists do the same, only more systematically (by forming theories) and painstakingly (often with experiments that create miniature social dramas that pin down cause and effect).

FORMING AND TESTING THEORIES

Many of us are social psychologists because we simply are fascinated by human existence. If, as Socrates counseled, "The unexamined life is not worth living," then simply "knowing thyself" seems a worthy enough goal.

As we wrestle with human nature to pin down its secrets, we organize our ideas and findings into theories. A **theory** is an integrated set of principles that explain and predict phenomena. Theories are a scientific shorthand.

In everyday conversation, "theory" often means "less than fact"—a middle rung on a confidence ladder from fact to theory to guess. But to any kind of scientist, facts and theories are different things, not different points on a continuum. Facts are agreed-upon statements about what we observe. Theories are *ideas* that summarize and explain facts. "Science is built up with facts, as a house is with stones," said Jules Henri Poincaré, "but a collection of facts is no more a science than a heap of stones is a house."

Theories not only summarize, they also imply testable predictions, which we call **hypotheses.** Hypotheses serve several purposes. First, they allow us to *test* the theories on which they are based. By making specific

predictions, a theory puts its money where its mouth is. Second, predictions give *direction* to research. Any scientific field will mature more rapidly if its researchers have a sense of direction. Theoretical predictions suggest new areas for research; they send investigators looking for things they might never have thought of. Third, the predictive feature of good theories can also make them *practical.* What, for example, would be of greater practical value today than a theory of aggression that would predict when to expect it and how to control it? As Kurt Lewin, one of modern social psychology's founders, declared, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory."

Consider how this works. Say we observe that people sometimes become violent when in crowds. We might therefore theorize that the presence of other people makes individuals feel anonymous and lowers their inhibitions. Let's let our minds play with this idea for a moment. Perhaps we could test it by constructing a laboratory experiment that modestly mimics execution by electric chair. What if we asked individuals in groups to administer punishing "shocks" to a hapless victim without their knowing which one of the group was actually shocking the victim (and without their knowing that no real shocks are administered)? Would these individuals administer stronger "shocks" than individuals acting alone, as our theory predicts?

We might also manipulate anonymity: Would people hiding behind masks deliver stronger shocks because they could not be identified? If the results confirm our hypothesis, they might suggest some practical applications. Perhaps police brutality could be reduced if officers were required to wear large name tags, drive cars labeled with large identifying numbers, and videotape their arrests.

But how do we conclude that one theory is better than another? A good theory does all these jobs well: (1) It effectively summarizes a wide range of observations. And (2) it makes clear predictions that we can use to (a) confirm or modify the theory, (b) generate new exploration, and (c) suggest practical applications. When we discard theories, usually it's not because they have been proved false. Rather, like an old car, they get replaced by newer, better models.

Most of what you will learn about social-psychological research methods you will absorb as you read later modules. But let us go backstage now and take a brief look at how social psychology is done. This glimpse behind the scenes will be just enough, I trust, for you to appreciate findings discussed later and to think critically about everyday social events.

Social-psychological research varies by location. It can take place in the *laboratory* (a controlled situation) or in the **field** (everyday situations). And it varies by method—**correlational research** asks whether two or more factors are naturally associated, and **experimental research** manipulates some factor to see its effect on another. If you want to be a critical

reader of psychological research reported in newspapers and magazines, you will benefit from understanding the difference between correlational and experimental research.

CORRELATIONAL RESEARCH: DETECTING NATURAL ASSOCIATIONS

Using some real examples, let's first consider the advantages of *correlational research* (often involving important variables in natural settings) and the disadvantage (ambiguous interpretation of cause and effect). As we will see in a later module, today psychologists are relating personal and social factors to human health. Among these researchers are Douglas Carroll at Glasgow Caledonian University and his colleagues George Davey Smith and Paul Bennett (1994). In search of possible links between socioeconomic status and health, Carroll and his colleagues ventured into Glasgow's old graveyards. As a measure of health, they noted from grave markers the life spans of 843 individuals. As an indication of status, they measured the height of pillars over the grave, reasoning that height reflected cost and therefore affluence. As Figure 1-1 shows, higher markers were related to longer lives, for both men and women.

Carroll and his colleagues explain how other researchers, using contemporary data, have confirmed the status–longevity correlation. Scottish postal-code regions having the least overcrowding and unemployment also have the greatest longevity. In the United States, income correlates with longevity

Commemorative markers in Glasgow Cathedral graveyard.

(poor and lower-status people are more at risk for premature death). In contemporary Britain, occupational status correlates with longevity. One study followed 17,350 British civil service workers for 10 years. Compared to top-grade administrators, those at the professional-executive grade were 1.6 times more likely to have died, clerical workers were 2.2 times more likely, and laborers 2.7 times more likely to have died (Adler & others, 1993, 1994). Across times and places, the status–health correlation seems reliable.

Correlation Versus Causation

The status–longevity question illustrates the most irresistible thinking error made by both amateur and professional social psychologists: When two factors like status and longevity go together, it is terribly tempting to conclude that one is causing the other. Status, we might presume, somehow protects a person from health risks. Or might it be the other way around? Maybe health promotes vigor and success. Perhaps people who live longer accumulate more wealth (enabling them to have more expensive grave markers). Correlational research allows us to *predict*, but it cannot tell us whether changing one variable (such as social status) will *cause* changes in another (such as health).

Confusing correlation with causation is behind much muddled thinking in popular psychology. Consider another very real correlation—

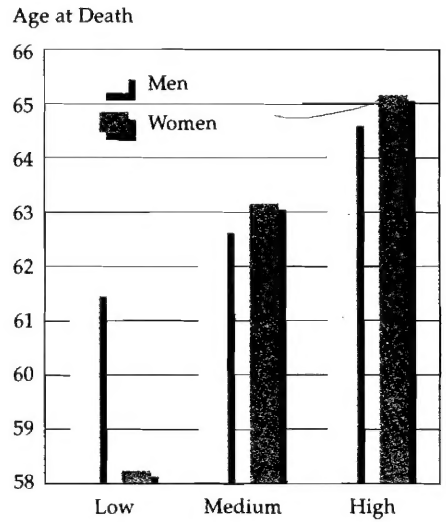

FIGURE 1-1
Status and Longevity. Tall grave pillars commemorated people who also tended to live longer. (Adapted from Carroll & others, 1994.)

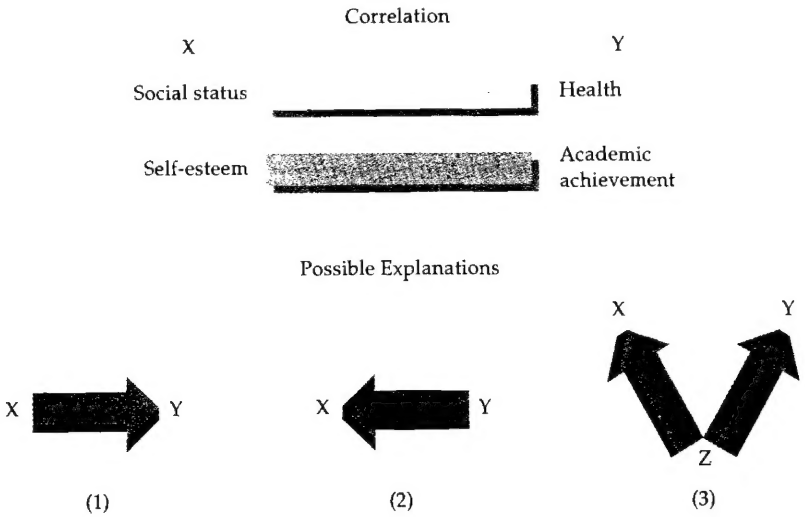

FIGURE 1-2
When two variables correlate, any combination of three explanations is possible.

between self-esteem and academic achievement. Children with high self-esteem tend also to have high academic achievement. (As with any correlation, we can also state this the other way around: High achievers tend to have high self-esteem.) Why do you suppose this is? (See Figure 1-2.)

Some people believe a "healthy self-concept" contributes to achievement, and that boosting a child's self-image can also boost their school achievement. Others argue that high achievement produces a favorable self-image. Do well, and you will feel good about yourself; goof off and fail, and you will feel like a schmuck. A study of 635 Norwegian schoolchildren suggests that a string of gold stars by one's name on the spelling chart and constant praise from an admiring teacher can boost a child's self-esteem (Skaalvik & Hagtvet, 1990).

It's also possible that self-esteem and achievement correlate because both are linked to underlying intelligence and family social status. That possibility was raised in two studies—one a nationwide sample of 1,600 young American men, another of 715 Minnesota youngsters (Bachman & O'Malley, 1977; Maruyama & others, 1981). When the researchers statistically removed the effects of intelligence and family status, the correlation between self-esteem and achievement evaporated. Similarly, John McCarthy and Dean Hoge (1984) disputed the idea that the correlation between low self-esteem and delinquency means that low self-esteem causes delinquency; rather, their study of 1,658 teenagers suggested, delinquent acts lower self-esteem. Breaking rules leads to condemnation, which leads to lower self-esteem.

Advanced correlational techniques can *suggest* cause-effect relations. *Time-lagged* correlations reveal the *sequence* of events (for example, by indicating whether changed achievement more often precedes or follows changed self-esteem). Researchers can also use statistical techniques that extract the influence of "confounded" variables. Thus, the researchers just mentioned saw the correlation between self-esteem and achievement evaporate after extracting differences in intelligence and family status. (Among people of similar intelligence and family status, the relationship between self-esteem and achievement was minimal.) The Scottish research team wondered whether the status–longevity relationship would survive their removing the effect of cigarette smoking, which is now much less common among those higher in status. It did, which suggested that some other factors, such as increased stress and decreased feelings of control, must also account for the greater mortality of the poor.

So, the great strength of correlational research is that it tends to occur in real-world settings where we can examine factors like race, sex, and social status that we cannot manipulate in the laboratory. Its great disadvantage lies in the ambiguity of the results. The point is so important that, even if it fails to impress people the first 25 times they hear it, it is worth making a 26th time: Knowing that two variables change together enables us to predict one when we know the other; but correlation does not specify cause and effect.

EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH: SEARCHING FOR CAUSE AND EFFECT

The near impossibility of discerning cause and effect among naturally correlated events prompts most social psychologists to create laboratory simulations of everyday processes whenever this is feasible and ethical. These simulations are roughly similar to how aeronautical engineers work. They don't begin by observing how flying objects perform in a wide variety of natural environments. The variations in both atmospheric conditions and flying objects are so complex that they would surely find it difficult to organize and use such data to design better aircraft. Instead, they construct a simulated reality that is under their control—a wind tunnel. Then they can manipulate wind conditions and ascertain the precise effect of particular wind conditions on particular wing structures.

Control: Manipulating Variables

Like aeronautical engineers, social psychologists experiment by constructing social situations that simulate important features of our daily lives. By varying just one or two factors at a time—called **independent variables**—the experimenter pinpoints how changes in these one or two things affect us. As the wind tunnel helps the aeronautical engineer

discover principles of aerodynamics, so the experiment enables the social psychologist to discover principles of social thinking, social influence, and social relations. The ultimate aim of wind tunnel simulations is to understand and predict the flying characteristics of complex aircraft; social psychologists experiment to understand and predict human behavior.

Social psychologists have used the experimental method in about three-fourths of their research studies (Higbee & others, 1982), and in two out of three studies the setting has been a research laboratory (Adair & others, 1985). To illustrate the laboratory experiment, consider an issue we will explore in a later module: the effect of television violence on children's attitudes and behavior. Phrasing the issue like that suggests that there is a cause-effect explanation of the well-known correlation between television viewing and behavior. Figure 1-2 reminds us that there are two other cause-effect interpretations that do not implicate television as the cause of the children's aggression. (What are they?)

Social psychologists have therefore brought television viewing into the laboratory, where they control the amount of violence the children see. By exposing children to violent and nonviolent programs, researchers can observe how the amount of violence affects behavior. Robert Liebert and Robert Baron (1972) showed young Ohio boys and girls a violent excerpt from a gangster television show or an excerpt from an exciting track race. The children who viewed the violence were subsequently most likely to press vigorously a special red button that supposedly would heat a rod, causing a burning pain to another child. This measure of behavior we call the **dependent variable.** (Actually, there was no other child, so no one was harmed.) Such experiments indicate that television *can* be one cause of children's aggressive behavior.

So far we have seen that the logic of experimentation is simple: By creating and controlling a miniature reality, we can vary one factor and then another and discover how these factors, separately or in combination, affect people. Now let's go a little deeper and see how an experiment is done.

Every social-psychological experiment has two essential ingredients. One we have just considered—*control.* We manipulate one or two independent variables while trying to hold everything else constant. The other ingredient is *random assignment.*

Random Assignment: The Great Equalizer

Recall that we were reluctant, on the basis of a correlation, to assume viewing violence *caused* aggressiveness. A survey researcher might measure and statistically extract other possibly pertinent factors and see if the correlations survive. But one can never control for all the factors that might distinguish violence-viewers from nonviewers. Maybe violence-viewers differ in education, culture, intelligence—or in dozens of ways the researcher hasn't considered.

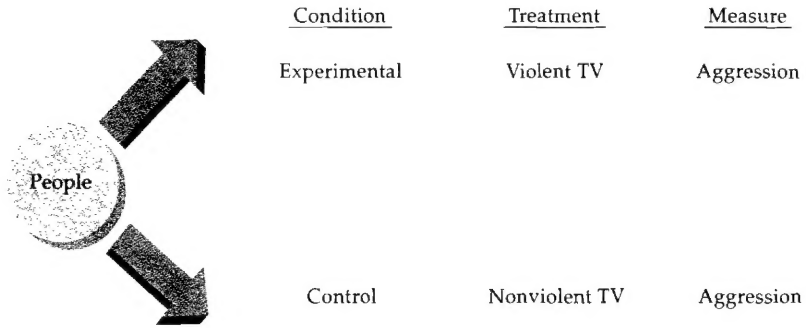

FIGURE 1-3
Randomly assigning people either to a condition that receives the experimental treatment or to a control condition that does not gives the researcher confidence that any later difference is somehow caused by the treatment.

In one fell swoop, **random assignment** eliminates all such extraneous factors. With random assignment, each person has an equal chance of viewing the violence or the nonviolence. Thus, the people in both groups would, in every conceivable way—family status, intelligence, education, initial aggressiveness—average about the same. Highly intelligent people, for example, are equally likely to appear in both groups. Because random assignment creates equivalent groups, any later aggression difference between the two groups must have something to do with the only way they differ—that is, whether they viewed violence (Figure 1-3).

The Ethics of Experimentation

Our television-viewing example illustrates why some experiments are ethically sensitive. Social psychologists would not, over long time periods, expose one group of children to brutal violence. Rather, they briefly alter people's social experience and note the effects. Sometimes the experimental treatment is a harmless, perhaps even enjoyable, experience to which people give their knowing consent. Sometimes, however, researchers find themselves operating in that gray area between the harmless and the risky.

Social psychologists often venture into that ethical gray area when they design experiments that really engage people's thoughts and emotions. Experiments need not have what Elliot Aronson, Marilynn Brewer, and Merrill Carlsmith (1985) call **mundane realism.** That is, laboratory behavior (such as delivering electric shocks as part of an experiment on aggression) need not be literally the same as everyday behavior. For many researchers, that sort of realism is indeed mundane—not important. But the experiment *should* have **experimental realism**—it should absorb and involve the participants. Experimenters do not want their participants

consciously play-acting or ho-humming it; they want to engage real psychological processes. Forcing people to choose whether to give supposed intense or mild electric shock to someone else can, for example, be a realistic measure of aggression. It functionally simulates real aggression.

Achieving experimental realism often requires deceiving people with a plausible cover story. If the person in the next room is actually not receiving the shocks, the experimenter does not want the participants to know this. That would destroy the experimental realism. Thus, about one-third of social-psychological studies (though a decreasing number) have required deception (Korn & Nicks, 1993; Vitelli, 1988).

Experimenters also seek to hide their predictions lest the participants, in their eagerness to be "good subjects," merely do what's expected—or, in an ornery mood, do the opposite. In subtle ways, the experimenter's words, tone of voice, and gestures can call forth desired responses. To minimize such **demand characteristics**—cues that seem to "demand" certain behavior—experimenters typically standardize their instructions or even use a computer to present them.

Researchers often walk a tightrope in designing experiments that will be involving yet ethical. To believe that you are hurting someone, or to be subjected to strong social pressure to see if it will change your opinion or behavior, can be temporarily uncomfortable. Such experiments raise the age-old question of whether ends justify means. Do the insights gained justify deceiving and sometimes distressing people?

University ethics committees now review social-psychological research to ensure that it will treat participants humanely. Ethical principles developed by the American Psychological Association (1981, 1992) and the British Psychological Society (1991) urge investigators to do the following:

- Tell potential participants enough about the experiment to enable them to give **informed consent.**
- Be truthful. Use deception only if it is justified by a significant purpose and if there is no alternative.
- Protect participants from harm and significant discomfort.
- Treat information about the individual participants confidentially.
- Fully explain the experiment afterward, including any deception. The only exception to this rule is when the feedback would be distressing, say by making participants realize they have been stupid or cruel.

The experimenter should be sufficiently informative *and* considerate that people leave feeling at least as good about themselves as when they came in. Better yet, the participants should be repaid by having learned something about the nature of psychological inquiry. When treated respectfully, few participants mind being deceived (Christensen, 1988; Sharpe & others, 1992). Indeed, say social psychology's defenders, we provoke far greater anxiety and distress by giving and returning course exams than we now do in our experiments.

GENERALIZING FROM LABORATORY TO LIFE

As the research on children, television, and violence illustrates, social psychology mixes everyday experience and laboratory analysis. Throughout this book we will do the same by drawing our data mostly from the laboratory and our illustrations mostly from life. Social psychology displays a healthy interplay between laboratory research and everyday life. Hunches gained from everyday experience often inspire laboratory research, which deepens our understanding of our experience. This interplay appears in the children's television experiment. What people saw in everyday life suggested experimental research. Network and government policymakers, those with the power to make changes, are now aware of the results.

We need to be cautious, however, in generalizing from laboratory to life. Although the laboratory uncovers basic dynamics of human existence, it is still a simplified, controlled reality. It tells us what effect to expect of variable *X*, all other things being equal—which in real life they never are. Moreover, as you will see, the participants in many experiments are college students. This might help you identify with them, but college students are hardly a random sample of all humanity. Would we get similar results with people of different ages, educational levels, and cultures? This is always an open question.

Nevertheless, we can distinguish between the *content* of people's thinking and acting (their attitudes, for example) and the *process* by which they think and act (for example, how attitudes affect actions and vice versa). The content varies more from culture to culture than does the process. People of different cultures might hold different opinions yet form them in similar ways. Thus college students in Puerto Rico report greater loneliness than do collegians on the U.S. mainland, yet in both cultures the ingredients of loneliness are much the same—shyness, uncertain purpose in life, low self-esteem (Jones & others, 1985). Our behaviors can differ yet be influenced by the same social forces.

CONCEPTS TO REMEMBER

Social psychology The scientific study of how people think about, influence, and relate to one another.

Theory An integrated set of principles that explain and predict observed events.

Hypothesis A testable proposition that describes a relationship that might exist between events.

Field research Research done in natural, real-life settings outside the laboratory.

Correlational research The study of the naturally occurring relationships among variables.

Experimental research Studies that seek clues to cause-effect relationships by manipulating one or more factors (independent variables) while controlling others (holding them constant).

Independent variable The experimental factor that a researcher manipulates.

Dependent variable The variable being measured, so-called because it may *depend* on manipulations of the independent variable.

Random assignment The process of assigning participants to the conditions of an experiment such that all persons have the same chance of being in a given condition. (Note the distinction between random *assignment* in experiments and random *sampling* in surveys. Random assignment helps us infer cause and effect. Random sampling helps us generalize to a population.)

Mundane realism The degree to which an experiment is superficially similar to everyday situations.

Experimental realism The degree to which an experiment absorbs and involves its participants.

Demand characteristics Cues in an experiment that tell the participant what behavior is expected.

Informed consent An ethical principle requiring that research participants be told enough to enable them to decide whether they wish to participate.