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Social Psychology: A Complete Introduction: Teach Yourself

by Dr. Paul Seager

INTRODUCTION AND CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

When asked the question, 'What is social psychology?' many people's initial response is along the lines of, 'Oh, it's just common sense, isn't it?'. Certainly many students perceive social psychology to be the easy option in their academic year. As a social psychologist, I can tell you that both of these views are not true – and here are the reasons why.

First, what exactly is common sense? If common sense is defined by collective wisdom, then we should turn perhaps to proverbs to give us a view on the world. For example, 'Opposites attract' would tell us about interpersonal relationships, and 'Many hands make light work' would give us insight into group behaviour. But wait, I hear you cry, what about 'Birds of a feather flock together' contradicting our first common sense pearl of wisdom, and 'Too many cooks spoil the broth' as a counterpoint for the second. And this is exactly my point: common sense can be very contradictory at times, and may simply be one person's point of view.

It is often the case that we may only remember the time we met a happy couple who seemed to be opposite in every way, but have forgotten the countless times that we encountered happy couples that were very alike. Of course, there is no doubting that some of the areas dealt with by social psychology do seem obvious to us now, but my counter-argument here would be that this is only because social psychologists have done their job so well in the past, by investigating areas of interest and giving some definitive answers through the application of good research.

To address the second issue, with regard to students' views of social psychology, it is probably because the topics covered by social psychology are so linked to us as individuals. Take any chapter in this book, and it is likely that each of us will have had a personal experience related to it. This closeness can lead us to believe that we understand it completely, and this in turn may lead us to conclude that we don't need to work

any further at understanding it; we simply use our personal views and experiences to explain the topic (and heaven knows I've read many exam scripts over the years that have done just that). However, social psychologists work very hard to give an objective (as opposed to subjective) view of the social world, and this involves using a number of different research methods to address some tricky issues. Many students don't appreciate the amount of work required to tackle the subjects that comprise social psychology.

So, having (hopefully) justified the existence of social psychologists, it begs the questions as to just what is social psychology.

What is social psychology?

One of the classic definitions of social psychology was given by Gordon Allport (1954a), who defined it as: 'the attempt to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of other human beings' (p. 5). To be quite honest, definitions of social psychology don't get too much better than this. It seems then that social psychology is all about the interaction with, and influence by, others. When talking of other human beings, this could mean a reference to individuals or groups, and groups certainly play an important part in European social psychology (see below).

Social psychology is also about the context of the interactions, and the way in which the situation can influence the behaviour of an individual. In this regard, it becomes clearer as to what social psychology isn't, and this would be that it isn't so much about the personality of individuals – certainly not according to Allport's view.

There will certainly be times throughout the book when we look at how personality characteristics might influence behaviour, such as leadership, but much of the time this is not the case (for instance, Milgram was more interested in the context in which an authority was situated, and less interested in how obedience was accounted for by individual differences – but we're getting

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a little ahead of ourselves here, though you could skip to Chapter 6 to learn more about Milgram if you really can't wait). Typically, social psychologists view personality characteristics as moderators of behaviour rather than a sole cause.

There can be no doubt that the field of social psychology has changed over the years, and is changing still, with other disciplines and theoretical perspectives, such as cognitive psychology, neuroscience and evolutionary theory, exerting some degree of influence on it. Whilst this book aims to give an overview of some of the more traditional areas covered by social psychology, by way of introduction to the topic, the reader should certainly be aware that the field is currently evolving, in much the same way as it has always done, as a brief historical survey of the field will show.

A brief history of social psychology

It is difficult to know exactly from where social psychology sprang originally: some say that the German scholars known as the 'folk psychologists' were an early influence with their idea of a collective mind. Others claim that Auguste Comte's idea of using scientific principles to study social processes was also an influence. In all likelihood, there were probably a number of different factors that contributed to its birth. However, in terms of the earliest social psychology experiment, this distinction normally goes to Normal Triplett (1898), who conducted a study investigating what we would now refer to as 'social facilitation' (see Chapter 11 for more details).

With regards to the first social psychological textbooks, some claim that 1908 is the key year. Textbooks by both Ross and McDougal are acknowledged by many as the first of their kind; however, others argue that their content bears very little resemblance to what we recognize today as being social psychology (which is likely a fair comment as McDougal's text seems to be based in biology and, as Ross was a sociologist, his text focuses more on topics such as crowd behaviour and culture). A better claim to the first social psychology text probably comes from Floyd Allport who published his book

Social Psychology in 1924. The book, which was a strong advocate of the experimental method, put forth an agenda for this emerging field of study.

Experimental psychology facilities were being created in a number of American universities around the beginning of the twentieth century, following on from Wundt's establishment of such a laboratory in Leipzig, Germany in 1879; it is likely that such facilities provided the breeding ground for social psychologists.

Perhaps a little surprisingly, there was a quiet period of about twenty years for the discipline following the publication of Allport's work, though this time frame probably marked the bedding-in of the topic. However, that's not to say that important work wasn't being conducted, as there are one or two key publications of note that emerged during this time (for example, a text by Sherif in 1936 detailing the use of the autokinetic effect to look at the formation and development of group norms and its effect on conformity – see Chapter 6). Nevertheless, it seems that the onset of the Second World War marked a turning point for social psychology.

The war is generally credited for furthering the cause of social psychology on three fronts, though it was mainly in America that the benefits were felt initially. First, the military took an interest in what the field could tell them about, amongst other things, propaganda and its effects on morale. Attitude change was also high on the agenda, both on the front lines and the home front; for example, how could people be persuaded to make do with less as rationing began to take hold. Secondly, there was an influx of academics, both Jewish and non-Jewish to United States' universities, and some of these went on to become highly influential figures in the field: for example Kurt Lewin, who went on to inspire a generation of social psychologists. Thirdly, people started to take an interest in important topics such as obedience and authoritarianism. For instance, why didn't German soldiers just say 'no' when ordered to carry out atrocities? Was it the power of the

situation, or was it the personality of the German people? Together, these three factors helped promote the importance of social psychology, and soon no university was without such a department.

But where was European social psychology in all of this? Well, there were certainly a number of European academics who played an important role in helping the field to develop pre-war. For example, Hugo Munsterberg played a key role in introducing social psychology into the legal arena, as well as influencing a number of other individuals, such as Floyd Allport (see above). However, by the end of the war there was very little in the way of a European social psychological movement.

Whilst America tried to revive the field in Europe after the war, it was probably more in the way of self-interest (in an attempt to prevent the spread of Communism to places like Britain) than altruism. Certainly European social psychology remained a fractured movement into the 1960s, with any links being mainly via American scientists rather than directly with each other. However, slowly but surely, a European movement began to emerge, and one which was moving in a slightly different direction to that of their transatlantic cousins: whilst America was interested in a more 'individual' focus, investigating areas such as interpersonal factors, the Europeans, perhaps as a direct consequence of the post-war rebuilding effort going on across the continent, were more interested in groups and intergroup processes.

To a certain extent, these differences persist in the present, and this is perhaps evidenced by the way that this book devotes a number of chapters to group processes and intergroup relationships (a trend that may not be found in some North American texts). The likes of Henri Tajfel and Serge Moscovici were important players in the development of the European social psychology agenda in the 1960s, which led to the formation of what is currently known as the European Association of Social Psychology. Today, there is a flourishing social psychology culture on both sides of the Atlantic.

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'The Second World War proved to be something of an intellectual watershed for theory and research into intergroup relations. The publication of Dollard et al.'s (1939) Frustration and Aggression *and Adorno et al.'s (1950)* The Authoritarian Personality *were enormously influential in kindling social psychologists' interest in the factors that determine the attitudes and behavior of members of one group toward those of another.'*

(Brewer & Brown, 1998, p. 554).

The aim of this book

This book aims to give you a glimpse into a new world. Imagine this book as the wardrobe into the Narnia-like world of social psychology. It will act as a starting place for your journey of exploration. Some of you may have been here before, but are now looking to explore the world more fully; but for some of you, this will be your first encounter with social psychology. You've probably picked up the book because you're curious. And curiosity is an excellent trait for any budding social psychologist.

This book will introduce you to many areas of social psychology. Chapter 1 will give you an overview of how social psychologists go about doing their research. Chapter 2 aims to take a look at the 'self'. When embarking on a journey filled with individuals and groups, there's no better place to start than at home – finding out about yourself, and what makes 'you' tick. Chapter 3 looks at how we make sense of the people around us; the attributions we make about others and their behaviour. Chapter 4 investigates why the decisions we make with regards to the world around us can sometimes be flawed, or, at the very least, not optimal. Welcome to the world of social cognition. Chapter 5 looks at the relationships we build with others – from casual acquaintances, through friendship, to love – and what happens when they break down. Chapter 6 begins to look at how our actions can be influenced by other people, and Chapter 7 continues the theme by investigating the extent to

which our attitudes guide our behaviour, and how those attitudes can be changed through persuasion techniques. Chapters 8 and 9 look at two opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of our social behaviour – why and when we might help other people (even in the most adverse of circumstances), and why and when we might behave aggressively towards others. Chapter 10 will be the starting point on your journey to explore groups: what they are and how they work. If you've ever thought about forming a group (perhaps a rock band, perhaps a neighbourhood watch group, or perhaps even a social psychology society), then this chapter should prove to be illuminating. Chapter 11 looks at some of the processes that go on within a group, and Chapter 12 looks at one specific component of groups – their leaders. Chapter 13 looks at the thorny issue of prejudice and how this can be propagated by group membership. The journey through all things 'groups' ends with Chapter 14 which looks at intergroup relationships, why they sometimes descend into conflict and ways that social psychologists have devised to reduce, and potentially resolve, such conflict. Chapter 15 reiterates the very applied nature of social psychology, a theme that has run through just about all of the chapters, and looks at how it impacts on the world on a daily basis.

Each chapter provides you with a clear and concise introduction to each topic. It will define key terms as appropriate, and will give you a detailed look at a number of studies that have been conducted in the area. Some important names and dates are dropped in to give you a sense of when significant concepts were formalized and by who: it will also allow you to build a historical timeline of the development of different areas of social psychology. However, in order to avoid getting bogged down and bamboozled by a multitude of names and dates (which so many students do) and potentially missing the messages delivered by each chapter, not all studies or concepts are referenced (although there is a list of references at the back of the book for the quotes used in each chapter). However, it should be fairly straightforward – using the power of Google Scholar (or another academic search engine of your choice) – to follow up on these as you see fit.

Each chapter ends with a summary, and a 'Food for thought' section which invites you to think about how the topic of the

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chapter can be applied to a particular aspect of the real world. It also lists a small number of sources for further reading which will help you to explore the topic of each chapter in more detail if you are so inclined. And just to check that you were paying attention (and more importantly, to help you formalize your new-found knowledge), each chapter ends with ten 'Fact-check' questions to quiz you on its content.

So, that's the aim of the book – a complete introduction to social psychology. Of course, what this book therefore doesn't do is to tell you everything there is to know about social psychology, or even everything about the topics of each chapter. There was simply not enough room to do this. What I have aimed to do though is to give you a good overview of each topic, and introduce you to some of the key concepts and studies involved. There may be bits missing which you were expecting, and for this I apologize (but I did try to include everything which I thought you might find interesting); but I do hope that this book will motivate you to explore each topic further. My aim then is to whet your appetite for social psychology, and I hope you will be prompted to go on to feast further on this fascinating subject.

Summary

Social psychology is so much more than common sense, but to get to grips with it fully does require a little application. And the first step on this journey is to understand exactly what social psychology is and isn't: the definition supplied by Gordon Allport certainly provides an excellent starting point. The chapter aimed to show that social psychology has a rich and interesting history, a fascinating present and the promise of an exciting future.

Food for thought

Pick up a copy of one of today's newspapers, flick through the first ten to twenty pages and make a note of the major stories. Then, when you have read this book, come back to your list and try to marry up the stories with a relevant chapter. If the stories involve people or groups, it is highly likely that you will be able to make a match in most cases. When you have done this, think about the content of the relevant chapter and how it might be applied to the story. For example, there is bound to be a war going on somewhere (though I'd be more than happy to be proved wrong) – turn to Chapter 14 (intergroup relations) and look at the strategies for reducing intergroup conflict. How could these be applied to the war?

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How to use this book

This Complete Introduction from Teach Yourself ® includes a number of special boxed features, which have been developed to help you understand the subject more quickly and remember it more effectively. Throughout the book, you will find these indicated by the following icons.

The book includes concise **quotes** from other key sources. These will be useful for helping you understand different viewpoints on the subject, and they are fully referenced so that you can include them in essays if you are unable to get your hands on the source.

The **case study** is a more in-depth introduction to a particular example. There is at least one in most chapters, and hopefully they will provide good material for essays and class discussions.

The **key ideas** are highlighted throughout the book. If you only have half an hour to go before your exam, scanning through these would be a very good way of spending your time.

The **fact-check** questions at the end of each chapter, are designed to help you ensure you have taken in the most important concepts from the chapter. If you find you are consistently getting several answers wrong, it may be worth trying to read more slowly, or taking notes as you go.

The **dig deeper** boxes give you ways to explore topics in greater depth than we are able to go to in this introductory level book.

1

Doing research in social psychology

Imagine you are having a debate with a friend about relationships, and about what types of people get together. Your friend claims that 'opposite attracts' and points out that a couple he knows are happily married but they are like chalk and cheese; she is very extroverted and likes to host parties whereas he is very introverted and likes nothing better than a quiet night in with a cup of cocoa and a good book. But no you say, surely 'birds of a feather flock together', and you point out a couple you know who are both introverts, and both like cycling; and what's more you say, you once knew of a friend who was an extrovert who started dating an introvert but it never lasted – after six months they split up because they were too dissimilar.

The chances are that you will both claim you are right … but how could we test which of these two contradictory proverbs is actually correct? Well, this is what social psychologists do – they formulate interesting questions and then test them to find an answer. However, the way in which they do so can vary greatly (depending on the question) but the manner in which they do it is a careful one to ensure that the answer they arrive at is valid. There are many books that deal in depth with how social psychologists go about doing research, but the aim of this chapter is to give you a very simple overview of the area so that you are able to understand some of the different methods and terminology used in the studies described in the coming chapters.

1

The scientific method

Most social psychologists consider the discipline of social psychology to be a science, and to reflect this, many of their studies employ what is known as the scientific method. This involves a number of steps:

1 **Observe**: social psychologists observe the world around them, and when they find something interesting they put it to the test. This book is full of areas in which they have been testing over the years. In the case of relationships, the interesting question is whether birds of a feather flock together or whether opposite attracts.

2 **Hypothesize**: the next step is to make a prediction – called a **hypothesis**. This is a statement that can be measured in some way and potentially falsified. For our example, the hypothesis could be something along the lines of: 'There will be a difference in the length of time couples stay married dependent on their levels of similarity'.

3 **Test**: The hypothesis is then operationalized in some way; that is to say, it is turned into something that can be tested. For example, for our hypothesis the terms need to be defined – what do we mean by 'levels of similarity' (e.g. will we be testing personality traits of both individuals, such as Introversion/Extraversion; Agreeableness; Openness, Conscientiousness, etc., or will we define similarity in some other way.). Once this has been done, we set about collecting our data.

4 **Analyse**: once the data has been collected, we analyse it to see if there is any truth in the theory that we are testing; to state it more formally, we look to see whether we can accept or reject our hypothesis. If we accept it, then we are suggesting that the data we have collected supports our theory, but if we reject it, our theory might need some modification (before we reject it totally).

5 **Modify**: whilst the data might support our initial idea, our hypothesis might still be too general, or perhaps too specific. We might then modify our theory to tell us more.

For example, when we referred to married couples, we might only have tested heterosexual couples, and therefore be unable to say whether it applies to same-sex couples. We would therefore modify our hypothesis, or perhaps generate a number of new hypotheses, and run our study again by collecting more data to incorporate our new parameters.

6   **Repeat:** if we have modified our hypotheses, we would run a new study. However, even if we were happy with our study, other researchers might not be. They might see something in our research that they consider to be a methodological flaw (perhaps we only collected data in a specific area of the country and they might feel that this is not a representative sample of married couples); or they might feel that our findings are so unusual that they want to repeat our study just to check that we haven't falsified our data. One of the strengths of the scientific method is replication. If someone else, in a different university or a different country, can take our methodology, repeat our study and find the same results, this will give our theory even more credibility. If they were to find something different, then perhaps further work would be needed on our theory.

> **Key idea:** Hypothesis
>
> A statement that is falsifiable through some form of testing employing the scientific method.

There are a number of different methods through which scientists test their hypotheses, and they are generally broken down into two broad categories: experimental methods and non-experimental methods. Both have their strengths and weaknesses, and many hypotheses can be tested in more than one way.

Experimental methods

The experiment is a traditional method employed by scientists and it is usually conducted within a controlled 'laboratory'

environment. It consists of a situation where the researcher manipulates something (called an **independent variable**) and observes its effects on something else (called the **dependent variable**). For example, if we were interested in whether viewing violence on television increased aggressive behaviour, we might create an experiment to test our idea. We could assign participants to one of two different conditions: in one they watch a television clip containing violent acts, and in one they watch a television clip containing no violent acts. After they have watched their clip, any subsequent acts of aggression are measured (for example, we might ask them to wait in a room that contains a punch bag and secretly monitor if, and how often, they hit the bag whilst waiting).

Key idea: Independent variable (IV)

The variable or variables that are manipulated to see whether they produce an effect on one or more dependent variables.

Key idea: Dependent variable (DV)

The variable which is expected to change as a result of the manipulation of an independent variable.

When designing our experiment, there are a number of elements that we need to consider:

1 Who are our **participants**? These are the people who take part in our experiment (or our research in general). They can be drawn from the general population, or they can have specific characteristics (e.g. children). Generally, participants are randomly allocated to different experimental conditions to equalize any individual differences exhibited by specific individuals (e.g. intelligence). Where participants cannot be randomly assigned to conditions, for example, if gender or nationality is an independent variable, then this is referred to as a *quasi-experiment*.

Key idea: Participants

The individuals, or groups, who take part in studies to allow researchers to collect data to test hypotheses.

2 The role of the *experimenter* and/or any confederates. It is necessary to ensure that there is no chance of the experimenter inadvertently influencing the outcome of the experiment (known as *experimenter effects*). Additionally, one experimenter may not be able to run a complicated experiment alone and may require confederates (also called stooges) to act out certain roles within the study.

3 What are our *independent and dependant variables*? Many experiments have more than one of each type of variable. The independent variable (which can lead to a number of 'conditions') is something that is manipulated to see if it produces a desired effect on what we are measuring, which in turn is called the dependent variable. In our proposed experiment, the independent variable would be the type of television clip viewed (aggressive or non-aggressive) and the dependent variable would be the number of times that they hit the punch bag in the waiting room.

4 We must decide whether there are any *ethical considerations* that we need to consider for our experiment (see below for a more detailed discussion). For example, if watching a television clip with violent content does make a person more aggressive, do we (as the researcher) really want to be responsible for sending a violent person back out into the world where they might harm another individual.

Our experimental design to test our research question ('Does watching violence on TV make people more aggressive') allows us to look for a causal relationship (our IV affects our DV). In our simple design, we would test the hypothesis by analysing our data to see whether the participants watching the violent clip hit the punch bag more than those watching the non-violent clip. If they did, we might accept our hypothesis and claim that our theory was correct. However, I'm sure you've already spotted a

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number of flaws in the design of the experiment (e.g. is hitting a punch bag in a waiting room a sign of aggression or boredom? How hard would the bag have to be hit to be classified as an aggressive act?). To minimize these flaws, we would perhaps need to design a slightly more elaborate experiment (or perhaps use a different research method – see below).

There are a number of advantages to the experimental method:

1 It allows us to attribute cause and effect.

2 It allows us to carefully control the conditions of our study, and control is very important to ensure that there are no **confounding variables** that might also explain our findings.

3 Experiments are more straightforward to replicate than some other methods.

> *'The great advantage of the experimental method is that the causal relationship between variables can be determined with much greater certainty. This is done in two ways: by controlling all factors except the independent variable and by randomly assigning people to condition.'*
> (Aronson, Wilson & Brewer, 1998)

Key idea: Confounding variables

Anything that is not the IV which might also affect the DV; some other uncontrolled factor(s) that might account for the findings of a study.

However, there are also a number of problems with the experimental method. These include:

▶ Experiments can be difficult to design, and sometimes they are simply unethical to conduct.

▶ Experiments are sometimes highly artificial and don't reflect what happens in the real world (they lack external validity).

▶ They only measure a small snapshot in time and may not capture longer-term effects.

▶ They are susceptible to reactivity effects whereby participants act in a certain way because they know they are part of an experiment (though if they don't know they are part of an experiment, there may be ethical issues to consider).

Related to the experiment is the *field experiment*; this is a study conducted outside of a controlled laboratory setting but which satisfies the criteria for an experiment. For example, experiments carried out in a school or a shopping centre would be considered to be field experiments. There have been a number of notable social psychology field experiments, and two of my favourites include one conducted on a rickety bridge over a deep ravine (Dutton & Aron, 1974) and one in a men's lavatory (Middlemist, Knowles & Matter, 1976). Such studies represent the inventiveness of social psychologists (read up on these studies to find out more).

However, on many occasions, the research question requires a method other than an experiment to be applied.

Non-experimental methods

There are a number of non-experimental methods, and these include:

FIELD STUDIES

Usually conducted outside of a laboratory setting, these types of studies attempt to investigate social phenomena in the real-world. It may include the naturalistic observation of a specific population (e.g. schoolchildren in the playground, or football crowds) in an attempt to record and explain the behaviour of individuals or groups. This type of method circumnavigates some of the problems with a lab-based study in that it avoids the problem of artificial reactive behaviour on the part of the participants, but it does raise some ethical questions (e.g. the idea of informed consent – see below). Field studies can include methods (such as the experiment or the survey) other than

observation. Generally, this method has the advantage in that it has a greater level of **ecological validity**, but the downside is that it usually lacks control, and some of the findings of such research may be accounted for by factors of which the researcher is unaware.

Key idea: Ecological validity

The degree to which research findings can be generalized to a real-world setting.

SURVEYS

This method involves asking a series of questions (for example, via a paper-based questionnaire, a phone poll or, increasingly, a web-based survey) to tap into the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of a given population. One advantage to this type of methodology is that it allows a large number of participants to be recruited quite easily and quickly, which allows the researcher to be confident that the findings of any such study can be generalized to a large population. However, there are also a number of disadvantages, such as the need for the questions to be worded very carefully to avoid any misinterpretation of their intention, and the worry that participants will not respond truthfully, but will instead answer in such a way that paints themselves in the best possible light (a '**social desirability**' bias). Additionally, because the researcher is typically not present when participants complete questionnaires, the method lacks the control of an experiment.

Key idea: Social desirability

The way in which participants may modify their responses or behaviour to ensure that they 'look good' and are portrayed in the best possible way.

ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

It is possible that a set of data, which is of interest to social psychologists, already exists in some form; in which case they

will simply reanalyse the data in such a way to give them answers to a question that is of interest. For example, if they were interested in whether female defendants in a jury trial were treated more leniently than male defendants, and whether this varied by type of crime (e.g. murder vs. shoplifting), they might seek permission to access the archives of a number of Crown courts and pull out the data they need from existing records. This method has the advantage that it is real-world data and thus possesses a good degree of ecological validity (in a way that experimental lab-based data may not), but has the disadvantage that the data may be incomplete (e.g. missing data that the researcher needs) or lacking in context (for example, the exact circumstances in which the data was collected). Typically archival data is used to formulate a hypothesis that is then tested using a more controlled method.

CASE STUDIES

A case study typically involves collecting some form of data about a single individual or group. A particularly interesting case study was conducted by Festinger and his colleagues with regard to a small group who prophesized the end of the world (chronicled in his fascinating book 'When prophecy fails' – well worth a read); it details the group dynamics both in the lead up to the predicted event and after the event fails to happen, and looks at the way the individuals react. It has the advantage of being able to take a very detailed and intricate look at behaviour in a naturalistic setting, but lacks control of confounding variables, may be very difficult to replicate and potentially hard to generalize to a wider population. However, such studies usually facilitate the production of specific hypotheses which can be tested under more controlled conditions.

Having looked at a number of different methods that might be employed, it is important to note that no one method is necessarily better than another. They all have strengths and weaknesses, and it may be possible to employ more than one method to address a research question (e.g. we could employ a survey method and/or an experimental method to address our question of whether 'birds of a feather flock together').

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There are certainly many additional issues that should be considered with regards to the design and implementation of studies, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter, or indeed this book, to cover them all. However, one question that does crop up from time to time in the forthcoming chapters is whether or not a study, a method, or a tool (such as a questionnaire) is a valid one; thus it will be useful to introduce briefly the notion of 'validity'.

Types of validity

There are a number of different types of validity that relate to research. In general, if an individual asks about the validity of a study, they are just questioning whether the study is doing what it purports to do. For example, if a study claims that it is testing the effect of type of leadership on group productivity, then this is what it must do, and in this particular instance, for the study to be valid, steps should have been taken to ensure that the productivity of the group cannot have been affected by anything else other than the type of leadership. However, there are other more specific types of validity and these include:

▶ **Face validity:** the extent to which it is clear as to what the study is testing. The advantage of this type of validity is that it can motivate participants to engage with a study if they can see its purpose. However, in some cases, if a study has too much face validity, the responses of participants may be affected. For instance, if a questionnaire distributed to participants states in the opening sentence of its instructions that it intends to measure how racist the individual is, this will almost certainly have an effect on participant answers;

▶ **Internal validity:** the degree to which confidence can be maintained that the independent variable actually influences the dependent variable, thus reflecting a real effect;

▶ **Content validity:** the extent to which a test used in a study covers the specific topic area, and to which it has been verified by an expert. Some intelligence tests have been scrutinized with regards to their content validity: do they actually measure intelligence (whatever that might be).

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There are many other types of validity, such as predictive validity, construct validity, concurrent validity, external validity and so forth. These may refer to either the study itself or the tools (e.g. questionnaires) employed by the study.

This chapter then has looked at the different methods that social psychologists employ to study social phenomena, and there are certainly many different areas for them to study and many questions to answer. However, the ways in which they go about obtaining these answers must be ethical ones, and hence the final section of this chapter deals with the sometimes tricky issue of ethics within social psychological research.

Ethics

When conducting research, social psychologists are bound by a set of ethical guidelines in order to protect their participants. These guidelines are usually set by the governing body for psychologists in whatever country they practice: for example, in Britain it is the British Psychological Society (BPS), and in America it is the American Psychological Association (APA). It should be noted that not all psychologists will necessarily belong to a governing body: it is usual that they do, but it is not a legal requirement.

The full BPS code of ethics and conduct can be accessed from: http://www.bps.org.uk. The structure of the code is based around four ethical principles (see Spotlight below). However, whilst these four principles are indeed the cornerstones of the ethical code, there are five key factors that every student, who plans to carry out some form of research, has drummed in to them:

1 Informed consent

2 Respect for privacy (anonymity and confidentiality)

3 Use of deception

4 Welfare of participants

5 Debriefing

Informed consent refers to the fact that every potential participant has the right to know what the researcher will be asking them to

do before they agree to take part in a study. Occasionally, it is necessary to employ deception (see below) in a study whereby participants are not informed about the true nature of the study until it has concluded. However, it is important that participants are informed of the exact nature of the study at the earliest possible opportunity (see debriefing below).

It is important that researchers have a *respect for privacy* of their participants. As a general rule, all participants can expect to remain anonymous with regards to the data that they are providing by taking part in a study; likewise, any responses they give to the researcher should be treated as confidential. If for any reason *anonymity and confidentiality* are unable to be preserved, the researcher must inform the participant at the earliest possible opportunity so that they can decide whether or not to take part in the study, or, if they have already completed the study, whether or not they want to withdraw their data – a decision that must be accepted unconditionally by the researcher.

Probably the most (in)famous use of *deception* in a study was by Stanley Milgram in his obedience experiments (see Chapter 6 for further details). Deception is usually used in order to get a snapshot of a participant's true behaviour in a given situation; in some situations, if participants were told about the exact nature of the study in advance, it is unlikely that the researcher could have confidence that their results were a true reflection of what would really happen in the situation. Where possible the use of deception should be avoided unless the integrity of the study depends upon its use. If deception is used within a study, the researcher must inform the participants of the nature of the deception as soon as possible (usually at the conclusion of the study via the debriefing – see below).

The physical and psychological *welfare of participants* is of paramount importance. Any research must be carefully considered to ensure that the potential for harm to participants has been reduced as much as possible. Additionally, participants should be told that even if they agree to take part in a study, they have the *right to withdraw* from it at any point, especially if they are experiencing any form of distress. Where

any possible distress is anticipated in advance (no matter how small), such as when asking participants to complete questionnaires regarding difficult topics (for example, studies investigating child abuse or rape myths), the researcher needs to have a support mechanism in place. It is not unusual for a participant to be given a list of support help lines, or websites, at the end of a questionnaire study.

Debriefing must occur at the end of any study, its purpose being to inform participants of the nature of the study (or the true nature of the study if deception has been used). It is also the ideal time to tell participants of any support networks that are available to them, and to answer any questions that they may have about the study in which they have just participated. Where the study may appear to the participant to be evaluative in nature (e.g. a test of an ability, such as intelligence, reasoning or lie detection), it is important that they are reassured of their anonymity, the confidentiality of their data, that the results are merely a snapshot at one specific moment in time and therefore perhaps are not a true reflection of their actual ability (if appropriate). A final consideration of the debriefing is to ensure that the participant leaves the study in the same condition (e.g. mood) as when they started the study.

Spotlight: British Psychological Society: Four ethical principles

According to the BPS code of ethics and conduct published in August 2009, which is current at the time of the publication of this book, there are four guiding principles. All members of the BPS are bound by these principles, and the statement of values attached to each; these are stated verbatim below:

1 **'Respect:** Psychologists value the dignity and worth of all persons, with sensitivity to the dynamics of perceived authority or influence over clients, and with particular regard to people's rights including those of privacy and self-determination.

2 **Competence**: Psychologists value the continuing development and maintenance of high standards of competence in their professional work, and the importance

of preserving their ability to function optimally within the recognized limits of their knowledge, skill, training, education and experience.

3 **Responsibility:** Psychologists value their responsibilities to clients, to the general public, and to the profession and science of Psychology, including the avoidance of harm and the prevention of misuse or abuse of their contributions to society.

4 **Integrity:** Psychologists value honesty, accuracy, clarity, and fairness in their interactions with all persons, and seek to promote integrity in all facets of their scientific and professional endeavours.'

Summary

This chapter looked at the different ways in which social psychologists conduct research. The basic tenets of the scientific method (which underlies such research) were described, as were a number of different popular methods that they use, such as experiments and surveys. Advantages and disadvantages of the different methods were highlighted, and it became clear that it was possible to use different methods to address different (or even the same) research questions. The importance of ethics in research was also addressed.

Food for thought

As you work your way through this book and read about different studies, try to think about whether there might have been alternative ways in which the research could have been conducted. Assess the advantages and disadvantages of these alternative methods and consider any ethical issues that might need to be addressed. If you're feeling really brave, design a study to test whether 'Many hands make light work' or whether actually 'Too many cooks spoil the broth'.

Dig deeper

British Psychological Society. (2009). *Code of Ethics and Conduct*. Guidance published by the ethics committee of the British Psychological Society. Accessed via: www.bps.org.uk

Coolican, H. (2014) *Research Methods and Statistics in Psychology*. Sixth Edition. Hodder & Stoughton.

Robson, C. (2011) *Real World Research*. Third Edition. Wiley & Sons.

Fact–check

1 A statement that can be measured in some way, and which is potentially falsifiable, is referred to as:
   a A hypothesis
   b An independent variable
   c A dependent variable
   d A theory

2 With regard to the scientific method, which is the correct order for the sequence of steps employed?
   a Hypothesize, observe, test, analyse, repeat, modify
   b Observe, hypothesize, test, analyse, modify, repeat
   c Hypothesize, observe, test, modify, analyse, repeat
   d Observe, test, hypothesize, modify, analyse, repeat

3 A study is conducted that aims to investigate whether or not 'Opposites attract'. University students who have recently started dating are asked to complete a number of personality tests. Six months later, the couples are contacted again by the researcher to find out whether they are still together. It is expected that couples who show different personality traits are more likely to still be together than couples who show similar personality traits. The independent variable for this study is:
   a Participants are university students
   b Whether the couple are still together after six months
   c Whether or not couples share the same personality traits
   d The different type of personality tests used

4 With regards to the study above, the dependent variable is:
   a Participants are university students
   b Whether the couple are still together after six months
   c Whether or not couples share the same personality traits
   d The different type of personality tests used

5 With regards to the study above, is it:
   a A survey
   b A case study
   c An experiment
   d A quasi-experiment

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6 If we modify our study slightly and decide to test both same-sex couples and heterosexual couples, what type of study is it?
- **a** A survey
- **b** A case study
- **c** An experiment
- **d** A quasi-experiment

7 Which of the following is not an advantage of an experiment?
- **a** It allows us to determine cause and effect
- **b** It allows us to control the conditions and reduce the influence of confounding variables
- **c** It is easier to replicate than some other methods
- **d** It measures a small snapshot in time

8 Which of the following is not a true statement?
- **a** Field studies are high in ecological validity but lack a degree of control
- **b** Surveys can recruit large numbers of participants quite quickly whilst retaining a good level of control
- **c** Archival research gives the researcher access to existing data which saves time, but the data may be incomplete
- **d** Cases studies allow a very detailed look at one individual or group, but lack generalizability to a wider population

9 The extent to which a study appears to be investigating what it claims to be investigating is referred to as:
- **a** Face validity
- **b** External validity
- **c** Internal validity
- **d** Ecological validity

10 Which of the following is not one of the four ethical principles of the British Psychological Society?
- **a** Respect
- **b** Competence
- **c** Vision
- **d** Integrity

We hope you enjoyed this sample. Reading on, you'll find the table of contents for the complete book, which will help you master the subject step by step.

Contents

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