

such a strict interpretation and allow themselves to challenge the truth value of claims they 'know' to be false (Gusfield 1985; Rafter 1992). There are disagreements about whether the radically subjectivist position that Spector and Kitsuse (1977) called for is desirable or even possible (Best 1989; Troyer 1992; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985). From those working outside a constructionist perspective there are still questions about the real social problems that have an existence independent from how they might be seen and the moral obligation social scientists have to speak out and even to act against conditions they consider to be unjust (Eitzen 1984). Despite these debates, what remains clear is that the constructionist approach has been and will probably continue to be a productive source of social problems theorizing and research.

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## Further reading

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*See also: crime and delinquency; deviance; domestic violence; mental health; suicide; violence.*

## social psychology

Social psychology is the study of the nature, functions and phenomena of social behaviour and of the mental experience of individuals in social contexts. It includes the study of social effects on aspects of behaviour and mental experience that are studied more generally in other branches of psychology. It also includes a number of psychological phenomena that do not arise, or in some cases cannot even be delineated, in individuals outside of their social contexts. Among these distinctively social psychological phenomena are aggression and anger, altruism and helping behaviour, social attitudes and persuasion, attraction and social relationships, attribution and social cognition, bargaining and negotiation, conformity and social influence processes, co-operation and competition, group decision making, group dynamics, language and speech, leadership and group performance, non-verbal communication and body language, obedience to authority, prejudice and intergroup conflict, self-presentation and impression management, sex roles, sexual behaviour, social learning and socialization.

Most authorities agree that social psychology is the biochemistry of the social sciences, a field lying between sociology and individual psychology. The field is in this sense interstitial, and it plays a pivotal role as a major social science discipline. In its theories and research, social psychology provides vital information about how social factors influence individual thoughts, feelings and actions.

Although there remain a number of highly resonant pockets of overlapping interest in sociology, most of the research literature and most of the recent texts in social psychology have been written by psychologists. It is also the case that the early development of social psychology was dominated by theories and research generated in the USA. Many of the seminal figures behind this array of contributions did, however, emigrate from Europe in the 1930s: they included Brunswik, Heider, Katona, Lazarsfeld and Lewin. Under the stimulus of the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology (founded in 1967), there has been considerable momentum towards redressing the imbalance represented by the pre-eminence of the USA. The European tradition of social psychology has tended to place more emphasis on such non-experimental approaches as discourse analysis, social representations research, and various qualitative research methodologies, in addition to experimental social psychology.

Social psychology evolved out of a recognition of human diversity within cultural uniformity. It focuses on choices and behavioural decisions among the competing options that confront us all in complex

contemporary societies, and on the rich complexity of human social life. It has become a field that, more than any other, deals with the psychology of everyday life.

### *Historical outline*

In the mid-1950s, Gordon Allport (1954) argued that most of the major problems of concern to contemporary social psychologists were recognized as problems by social philosophers long before psychological questions were joined to scientific methodology. Perhaps the most fundamental question was posed by Comte: how can people simultaneously be the cause and the consequence of society? Although many textbook authors conveniently identify the birth date of social psychology as 1908, when two influential early texts by McDougall and Ross were published, in a very real sense the field began to cohere and develop its own identity only in the mid-1930s and did not really take on momentum until after the Second World War. This coherence and subsequent momentum depended largely on the development of genuinely social theories and methods, the most influential early examples of which were the contributions of Kurt Lewin in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Partly through sustained advocacy and partly through example, Lewin championed the possibilities of experimentation in social psychology. His experimental studies of autocratic, democratic and *laissez-faire* leadership atmospheres (with Lippitt and White in 1939) showed how complex situational variables could be manipulated, validated, and shown to produce distinctive but orderly consequences. Lewin hoped to solve the problems of generalizing from the laboratory to the 'real world' by advocating not only the linkage of experimentation to theory but also the parallel conduct of laboratory and field experimentation on conceptually cognate problems.

Although there would be wide agreement that Kurt Lewin deserves the title of the father of *experimental* social psychology, there were many other influences gathering under the social psychology umbrella during the 1920s and 1930s in the USA. These included a sustained series of empirical studies on group problem solving, the invention by Thurstone and Chave (1929) and Likert (1932) of ingenious attitude measurement techniques, and the development of respondent sampling and survey research methodologies.

The central identity of social psychology was to remain anchored in the experimental approach. One of Lewin's students, Leon Festinger, exemplified Lewin's emphasis on going back and forth between the laboratory and the field, and showed in particular how experimentation made sense only when it was wedded

to theory. Between the mid-1940s and the mid-1960s, when he was active as a social psychologist, Festinger (1954; 1957) developed two theories that had a profound impact on the field. The first was a theory of 'social comparison processes', a detailed set of postulates and propositions concerning the consequences for social interaction of people's need for the kinds of information about themselves and the outer world that only other people could provide. The second was a theory of 'cognitive dissonance', which portrayed the various mental and behavioural manoeuvres by which people attempt to maintain and restore cognitive consistency. The power of this theory was greatly enhanced by Festinger's recognition that some cognitions are more resistant to change than others, and that behavioural commitment is a potent source of such resistance. This recognition permitted rather precise predictions to be made concerning the form that dissonance reduction would take in different situations, in particular that changes would usually be observed in the least resistant cognition. The ideas informing both of these theories remain important in much current social psychological thinking and have become a part of our cultural wisdom. Equally important, perhaps, the voluminous research generated by the theory of cognitive dissonance provided a clear example of coherent progress through experimental research in social science, research yielding cumulative insights that helped to refine and amplify the theory that inspired it.

Just as enthusiasm for investigating dissonance phenomena began to wane in the late 1960s, a very different kind of theoretical orientation became prominent in social psychology. This was the 'attributional approach' to social cognition, an approach pioneered by Fritz Heider and identified with his seminal treatment of the *Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1958). The basic premise of the attributional approach is that people are motivated to understand behaviour, and readily do so by viewing it within a meaningful causal context. Our responses to others, in other words, are a function of the causes we attribute to explain their behaviour. Although initially the focus of attribution theory was almost exclusively on the perception of other people, Kelley (1967) and Bem (1967) extended the attributional orientation to include self-perception. The perception of our own inner dispositions and emotions may sometimes be mediated by our causal evaluations of our own behaviour, taking into account relevant features of the situational context.

As the attributional orientation flourished in the early 1970s, it fed and was fed by a broad revival of interest in *social cognition*. Social psychology (at least since the subjectivism championed by W. I. Thomas) has always been interested in the ways in which people

interpret their social environments, but an emphasis on detailed analyses of information processing and social cognition has become more dominant since the late 1980s (see e.g. Fiske and Taylor 1991). The influence of the attributional approach has been reflected in a concern with attributional biases and errors in the application of inference strategies (Nisbett and Ross 1980; Schneider 1994).

While these developments in social cognition were occurring within the mainstream of experimental social psychology, some social psychologists continued to concentrate on the traditional problems of social influence and group processes. Asch's (1956) classic studies of conformity and Milgram's (1974) research into obedience to authority have become standard textbook topics. In different ways, their findings showed the remarkable sensitivity of normal adults to social influence pressures. The nature of group processes was especially informed by Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) analysis of outcome exchanges in dyads and larger groups. This analysis capitalized on the contingency matrices of game theory, as well as building on both reinforcement and social comparison theories within psychology. It provided a rich and provocative framework for dealing with power relations, roles, and the development of norms, and it also influenced the development of the distinctively European social identity theory of intergroup relations. Many publications since the 1960s have dealt with complex interpersonal conflict situations that might be resolved through bargaining and negotiation. Throughout this period, also, a steady stream of articles has appeared shedding light on such social phenomena as aggression, helping behaviour, attitude change, jury decision making, crowding, social discrimination, sex-role stereotypes, the impact of television, and a variety of other applied topics. More comprehensive historical overviews – both general and within specific content areas – may be found in the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Lindzey and Aronson 1985) and *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Zanna 1990; 1991; 1992; 1994).

### *Current status of the field*

Any brief characterization of such a complex discipline must be arbitrary and selective in many respects. It is nevertheless possible to venture a few generalizations on the current status of the field that would probably recruit a reasonable consensus among social psychologists. The emphasis on experimentation has been buffeted by critical winds from several directions. Some critics have concluded that the problem of generalizing from artificial laboratory situations is insurmountable, and that there is no way to extrapolate meaningfully from the historical and contextual particularities of any

given experiment. Other critics have been concerned with the ethics of those deceptive cover stories that used to be common in social psychological experiments but have become much less so with the tightening up in the USA, Britain, and elsewhere of ethical guidelines for the conduct of research with human subjects. Still others are bothered by the treatment of research subjects as manipulable objects rather than autonomous agents with whom one negotiates appropriate explanations for behaviour. Finally, there are those who feel that experimentation implies a highly restrictive form of one-way causation, misrepresenting the normal processes of situation selection and movement through complex feedback loops in which the behaviour of actors is both causal and caused.

Although many of these criticisms raise vital concerns, neither singly nor in combination are they likely to relegate the experimental approach to a secondary position in the armamentarium of social psychology. The viability of the experimental approach may be even more assured as its practitioners more clearly realize its particular strengths and its limitations. Even if the generalization problem seems insurmountable, on occasion, the design of experiments are often useful in facilitating and disciplining conceptual thought. There is no doubt, however, that non-experimental approaches will continue to make important contributions to social psychology.

The current flowering of cognitive social psychology seems to be producing new intellectual alliances and breaking down old boundaries between general experimental and social psychology. Certainly social psychologists are borrowing paradigms from the traditions of general research on attention, memory and thinking; cognitive psychologists in turn are showing greater sensitivity to the influences of social factors. In a similar fashion, social psychological theory has shed light on such clinical phenomena as depression, alcohol and drug abuse, obesity, and a range of problems associated with symptom labelling. Although social psychology may in some respects play the role of a gadfly within the social sciences, borrowing here and lending there, it is not likely to lose its special identity as the one field especially concerned with the details of interpersonal influence. During the 1980s, the pendulum seemed to swing away from a concern with social interdependence and group phenomena towards a concern with individual information processing, but many cognitive psychologists later began to move away from the entirely non-social implications of the information-processing metaphor. Here there seems to be some divergence between the more 'individualistic' Americans and the more 'groupie' Europeans. It would be interesting if the more blatantly *social* psychology of the Europeans influenced an American revival of

interest in groups. This seems to be an old story in social psychology: the study of individuals must be informed by a clear understanding of the matrices of social interdependence within which they function; the study of groups must comprehend the cognitive and motivational processes of group members. The tension between these two focuses, in the long run, may be what keeps the field on its relatively straight track, in spite of temporary deviations in course.

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*See also: aggression and anger; altruism; attitudes; conformity; group dynamics; non-verbal communication; norms; prejudice; self-concept; sensation and perception; stereotypes.*

## social research methods *see* methods of social research

## social science

Social science is the ambitious concept to define the set of disciplines of scholarship which deal with aspects of human society. The singular implies a community of method and approach which is now claimed by few; thus the plural, social sciences, seems more appropriate. The social sciences include economics, sociology (and anthropology) and political science. At their boundaries, the social sciences reach into the study of the individual (social psychology) and of nature (social biology, social geography). Methodologically, they straddle normative (law, social philosophy, political theory) and historical approaches (social history, economic history). In terms of university departments, the social sciences have split up into numerous areas of teaching and research, including not only the central disciplines, but also such subjects as industrial relations, international relations, business studies and social (public) administration.

The term social science(s) does not sit easily in the universe of scholarship, especially not in English. *Sciences sociales* and *Sozialwissenschaften* are somewhat happier expressions, though they too have suffered from being interpreted either too widely or too narrowly. Frequently, social science is meant to define either sociology, or synthetic social theory only. Everywhere, the implied analogy to the natural sciences has been contested. In 1982, the British government challenged the name of the publicly financed Social Science Research Council, arguing *inter alia* that 'social studies' would be a more appropriate description for disciplines of scholarship which cannot justly claim to be scientific. (The council is now called Economic and Social Research Council.)

The history of the concept does not help much in trying to make sense of it. Social sciences have grown out of moral philosophy (as the natural sciences emerged from natural philosophy). It has often been observed that their separate identity owes much to the great revolutions of the eighteenth century, the Industrial (English) and the bourgeois (French) Revolutions. Among the Scottish moral philosophers of that time, the study of political economy was always coupled with that of wider social issues (though not called social science). With the ascendancy of positivism in the early