

# Chapter 1: Introducing the Science and Methods of Social Psychology

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## 1. Chapter Outline

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By the end of Chapter 1, your students should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What is social psychology?

This section defines social psychology as a science that studies the influences of situations, with special attention to how people view and affect one another.

- To be precise, it is the scientific study of how people think about, influence, and relate to one another.
  - The case of Robert Dziekanski, who was tasered and died at the Vancouver International Airport, illustrates how the responses or actions of a person are interpreted differently based on the context.

2. What are the major themes of social psychology?

This section explains the following six major themes of social psychology:

- We construct our social reality.
  - This theme can be seen when people react differently to similar situations. This is because people think differently, and their perceptions of the social world depend on various factors such as culture, gender, ethnicity, and personal beliefs.
- Our social intuitions are often powerful but sometimes perilous.
  - People often fail to realize how much their nonconscious mind guides their thoughts and behaviours. Intuitive decisions can backfire sometimes. For example, people can misread their minds and trust their memories more than they should. This is substantiated by research; subjects have denied being affected by things that objectively did influence choices and decisions. Research by Leary (2016), discussed in the text, illustrates the powers and

perils of intuition.

- Social influences shape our behaviour.
  - Social situations lead people to act in ways that depart from their espoused attitudes.
    - In Rwanda in 1994, the Hutus slaughtered over 800,000 Tutsis based on cultural, ethnic, and economic distinctions that grew out of whether they farmed crops or raised livestock.
    - The 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the 2011 tsunami in Japan, the 2016 fires in Fort McMurray, Alberta, the 2018 hurricane that devastated Puerto Rico, and the COVID-19 pandemic all inspired unprecedented generosity.
- Personal attitudes and dispositions also shape behaviour.
  - People's political attitudes influence their voting behaviour.
  - Their attitudes toward smoking influence their susceptibility to peer pressure to smoke.
- Social behaviour is biologically rooted.
  - To understand social behaviour, one must consider both under-the-skin (biological) and between-skins (social) influences. Research by Bos et al. shows that a dose of testosterone decreases trust and a dose of oxytocin increases it.
- Relating to others is a basic need.
  - Indigenous students who leave their homes to go to university often feel ostracized by the system due to the fundamental differences of living in solitary versus community settings.
- Social psychology's principles are applicable in everyday life.
  - Principles of social thinking, social influence, and social relations have implications for human health and well-being, for judicial procedures and juror decisions in courtrooms, and for the encouragement of behaviours that will enable an environmentally sustainable human future.

### 3. How do values affect social psychology?

This section explains the obvious and subtle ways in which values enter the field of social psychology.

- These values play an important part in the theories and judgments a psychologist supports.
  - Study of prejudice flourishing during the 1940s because of fascism in Europe
  - Studies of conformity during the 1950s amidst the rise of look-alike fashions and rows of identical suburban homes
- The subjective aspect of science and the hidden values in psychological concepts

have also been covered in this section.

- During the 1980s, feminists exposed some of social psychology's unexamined assumptions, criticizing the ideas of scientists who favoured a biological interpretation of gender differences in social behaviour.
- Hidden values in psychological concepts can creep in while forming concepts or labelling.
  - A tendency to say nice things about oneself and not to acknowledge problems can be either termed as high self-esteem or defensiveness.

#### 4. Is social psychology merely common sense?

This section looks at the two contradictory criticisms faced by social psychology:

1. It is trivial because it documents the obvious.
  - Research by Richard Ryan indicates that individuals who strive most for wealth tend to live with lower well-being.
2. It is dangerous because its findings could be used to manipulate people.

Common sense is often invoked after we know the facts.

- Research on hindsight bias in mental health professionals points out that even trained professionals are not immune to such bias.

#### 5. How do we do social psychology?

This section discusses the scientific methods that are used in social psychology.

- The steps include the formation and testing of hypotheses. Hypotheses help researchers to test theories.
  - Alan Leshner (2005) noted, "Evolution is only a theory, but so is gravity." People often respond that gravity is a fact—but the fact is that things fall to the ground when dropped. Gravity is the theoretical explanation that accounts for this observed fact.

The section also explains correlational research in detail and compares correlation and causation. Methods such as survey research used in longitudinal studies have also been discussed.

- Research by Fowler et al. on the relationship between obesity and the consumption of diet soft drinks is a good example of correlational research.

The authors then focus on experimental research, which involves the creation of laboratory simulations of everyday processes or events that are correlated.

- The research data presented in the text on the following topics can be useful:
  - Research on the prejudice against people with obesity
  - Television viewing and its effect on behaviour

Additionally, this section exemplifies experimental research and sheds light on the ethical

aspect of experimentation.

- Ethical principles developed by major psychological organizations and government organizations urge investigators to follow certain practices. Some of them are as follows:
  - Tell potential participants enough about the experiment to enable their informed consent.
  - Protect people from harm and significant discomfort.
  - Treat information about the individual participants confidentially.

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## **2. Lecture Ideas and Topics**

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### **I. Demonstrate the Power of the Situation**

The first class of the term is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the power of the situation and the impact of violating expectations. There are several variations of this approach. Even if they are in their first post-secondary class, students will have certain assumptions about how you will act when you arrive in class. Surprise them. You could do the following:

- a) Arrive very early: Sit in the class (students' seat) and wait as students arrive. You could then either wait until the appointed time for the class, go up to the front, and teach or simply teach from the seat.
- b) Play a role/act differently: The absent-minded professor, the strict disciplinarian, dress funny, etc. Do this for a while, then stop the students and ask them what they think of you.
- c) Enter the class at the appointed time and ask participants to stand. See how many do. Start to lecture while they are standing. Ask them to discuss how this violation of the norm makes them feel.

The best part about taking this type of approach is that, especially in an introductory social psychology class and regardless of the approach you take, they will be surprised. Social psychology is about how people react and think in the presence of others. Violating the expectations and norms of the students can have the wonderful effect of stimulating discussion.

### **II. Graphical Representation of Research Data**

One of the criticisms faced by social psychology is that it manipulates people. This will be covered in Chapter 5. However, it would be helpful to set context on this topic while covering this chapter. Instructors can lecture on the truthfulness of this statement. They can also cover the different media used to show the research data. They should explain how the media used in the representation of research findings affects the way the information is interpreted. Instructors can use bar graphs as an example. Data in the form of a graph can look totally different when the scale of the graph is tweaked. Percentages can seem a lot larger or smaller than reality based on

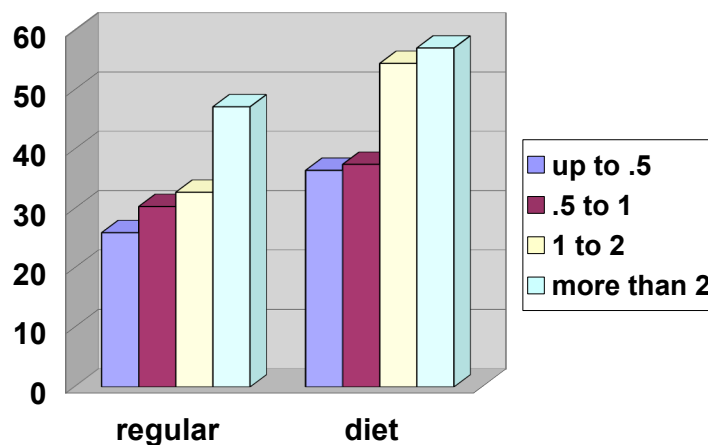
the scale of the graph.

### III. Re-enacting Social-Psychological Experiments

Wann (1993) reported success in helping students comprehend social-psychological research and methodology by having small groups each select a different experiment and develop a dramatic script to describe the research. Each group of four to six individuals was responsible for obtaining a copy of the relevant article (e.g., Milgram's study of obedience), using the article to write a script, and developing the props necessary to perform the play. Students play the roles of experimenters, confederates, and subjects, with each play being approximately 10 minutes long. Students are instructed to pay attention to detail in an effort to re-enact the study as accurately as possible. A poetic licence is allowed where authors were not explicit.

### IV. Correlation versus Causation: The Case of Weight Gain and Diet Cola

This is an expanded version of what is in the text. This topic has the advantage of being topical and inherently relevant to students (especially those who drink diet soft drinks!). We saw in the text that Dr. Sharon Fowler, a public health researcher, along with her colleagues, found that consuming soft drinks was correlated with obesity—the more you drink, the more likely you are to be overweight. As one can see in the figure, a person's risk of being overweight or obese increased with the number of cans of soft drinks they drank per day. More surprisingly, we can see that the risk was higher in every consumption category for diet soda drinkers over regular soda drinkers.



Students could be asked why this was the case and why they think the relationship between the consumption of soft drinks and obesity exists. Dr. Fowler has proposed a few possible explanations (personal communication, 2005). Next, students are asked, for each of these explanations, to evaluate the extent to which they believe this would be true (i.e., confidence), as well as “Why do you think the way you do?”

- Consumption of soft drinks and obesity are directly related in that people who drink diet

drinks may already be on a track to gain weight (before they joined the study). Seeing their weight gain, these people may switch to diet cola to avoid any further weight gain.

However, this tactic does not slow their weight gain.

- b) Consumption of soft drinks and obesity are directly related in that drinking diet soda is a marker for a high-risk lifestyle, whereby people may be combining diet drinks with fast food meals. Thus, it is related to weight gain through its association with the intake of fatty food.
- c) Consumption of soft drinks and obesity are indirectly related because when people drink diet sodas, they are less likely to drink milk and juice and eat fresh fruits and vegetables. There is significant evidence that suggests that consuming healthy food helps control weight gain.
- d) Consumption of soft drinks and obesity may be directly related because people who drink diet soda may feel they have “been good” by avoiding the sugar in regular soda and, therefore, can eat other high-calorie foods (chips, pizza, ice cream, etc.) and get away with it. However, these foods probably have more calories than a typical soda (140 calories), thus resulting in weight gain.
- e) Some research suggests that there might be a physiological trigger that diet drinks cause, which actually makes people eat more after drinking diet soda. This trigger is not seen in sugared soda. Our body is looking for a carbohydrate “satisfaction” that a diet cola will not provide. Thus, we crave high-fat and sugary foods, which will tend to cause weight gain.
- f) There is a direct and causal relationship because there is an unknown property of artificial sweeteners that triggers hunger and causes people to eat more. Indeed, there is some published research that suggests people who use artificial sweeteners report being hungrier than people who drink sugared soda.

## **V. Survey on Ethics in Social Psychology**

This is a simple activity. Indeed, it is so simple that you could do it by a show of hands in class if you prefer or assign it to students to do before the next class. It is a one-item survey that presents the following to students:

“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 behaviour may be temporarily uncomfortable. Such experiments raise the age-old question of whether the ends justify the means. What do you think? Do the insights gained from research justify deceiving and sometimes distressing people?” Ask students to respond to the questions with a “yes” or a “no.”

Students can view the results that have been submitted by all respondents to the item (i.e., all students who use the *Exploring Social Psychology* text. In addition, students can “route” their answers according to the course they are in. You can then retrieve this information and present it

back to the class. This will provide an excellent springboard for a discussion of research ethics. You may want to have students read the Tri-Council policy ([pre.ethics.gc.ca](http://pre.ethics.gc.ca)) or the ethics guidelines at your own institution as a reference for discussion.

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### **3. Discussion Questions**

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#### **I. Rise of Social Psychology**

Social psychology is still a relatively young science. Not until the 1930s did social psychology assume its current form. And not until the Second World War did it begin to emerge as the vibrant field it is today. What could be the reasons for social psychology to rise at this pace?

#### **II. Correlational versus Experimental Research**

Chapter 2 emphasizes the distinction between correlational and experimental research and the problems with drawing cause–effect conclusions from the former. What possible reasons can you think of for the absence of causation when two variables are correlated? How can one draw a cause–effect conclusion between two variables? How can one identify the third or the mediating variable? Could there be another variable that affects the mediating variable? What are the factors one should keep in mind when selecting the type of research method?

#### **III. Ethics and Experimental Research**

Researchers sometimes find themselves operating in a grey area between the harmless and the risky. What, according to you, is the grey area? How can researchers justify the use of deception in research? Should researchers monitor their colleagues to avoid any unethical practices? What precautions can researchers take to avoid unethical practices when they are studying children, people of different ages, and cultures? How can one decide if the experimental method is ethical or not? Does it change based on the demographic or any other parameters of the sample/participants (e.g., giving an electrical shock to a kid versus an adult)?

#### **IV. Hindsight Bias**

Does prior knowledge about the concept of hindsight bias reduce its effect or does hindsight bias reduce prior knowledge? Could there be any possible benefits of hindsight bias? Explain. What are some of the dangers and consequences of hindsight bias?

#### **V. Representative Sampling**

How do the results of a study change based on the sample size? What should be the size of the sample for the findings to be applicable to the real world? Does the sample size depend on the study? What hurdles is a researcher likely to encounter using a sample size that is representative of the larger population? How can these hurdles be minimized or eliminated?