

Introducing social psychology

Key concepts

- 1.1 Define social psychology.
 - What is social psychology?
- 1.2 Describe methods by which social psychologists gather research data.
 - Research methods
 - Research ethics
- 1.3 Explain the role of theory in social psychology.
 - Theories and theorising
- 1.4 List key points in the historical development of social psychology.
 - Historical context
 - Social psychology in Australia and New Zealand

Key concept

1.1 Define social psychology.

- What is social psychology?

Teaching suggestions

In-class activities and exercises

What do people know or believe about social psychology? Have the class design a short survey that explores social psychology's links to psychology and to other disciplines at their university. Each student administers the survey to five non-psychology students randomly selected on campus. The aggregated data from the class can be analysed to summarise the level of knowledge in the sample tested. The content should be interesting. The exercise also illustrates the challenges we encounter in investigating and interpreting even elementary social psychological phenomena. It will also help students understand some issues in defining social psychology.

Industry-related practical applications and discussions

Let the whole class construct a list of all the fields of psychology that they know of (e.g. developmental, organisational, clinical, personality, neuroscience, etc.). Break the class into small discussion groups and assign each group one or more of the fields of psychology from the class list. Each group should discuss the relationships between their allotted field(s) of psychology and the discipline of social psychology. Have each group feedback to the class their perception of overlaps that occur between the study of social psychology and the field that they discussed. If time permits, see if the class (or groups) can construct a diagram that demonstrates the relationships and overlaps of interests between social psychology and all the other fields of psychology discussed.

Discussion topic

Science and social psychology – Can, or should, social psychology be a 'hard' science? Discuss the role of scientific and quantitative research in the study of social psychology.

Key concept

1.2 Describe methods by which social psychologists gather research data.

- Research methods
- Research ethics

Teaching suggestions

In-class activities and exercises

Discuss with the whole class a hypothesis for a piece of novel research; e.g. that there is a gender difference in the way drivers fill their petrol tank. Are males more likely to jiggle the petrol pump hose after filling their tanks than females? Then have small group discussions, with students dealing with methodological issues (how to measure the behaviour, validity and reliability); and ethical concerns involved in such a field study. Compare the groups' ideas in a full class discussion. What statistical tests of the research hypothesis might be used?

Industry-related practical applications and discussions

Ask the students to imagine that they are working in a research company that has been commissioned to conduct a piece of research into the effects on family members of living with a problem gambler. The methodology that you have chosen (with your client) involves recruiting participants (problem gambler) and once they agree to take part, giving them \$100 to gamble. You will observe how long it takes them to lose the money and then measure how much more money they spend trying to win it back. You also plan to interview their families (including their children) in their homes, places of work or at school. You are not planning on offering participants or their families any referrals or other information on getting help. As a researcher, you suggest to your client that ethics approval should be sought, but your client has said not to worry as you got their consent so it will be okay.

Breaking the class into groups, ask them to think about:

1. Do they really need ethics approval, even if their client has said it is not necessary? Get the groups to justify their response.
2. What should they do next (should they go along with the client or try and convince them to get ethics approval)? Why?
3. What are some of the ethical issues in a study like this?

Possible answers or points to consider:

- *Can't coerce people into participating (by giving them money)*
- *Can't encourage negative behaviour*
- *Consent for the rest of the family members*
- *Location of interviews – is this private and confidential?*
- *Unintended consequences – some children may not know about their parent's gambling problem?*
- *There is no additional help or access to help given (lack of debriefing).*

Discussion topics

Experiments – Is experimentation really a good basis for social scientific knowledge? It might be possible to stage this as a debate between critics and supporters of experimentation.

Experiments – The majority of experimental social psychological research is conducted on undergraduate psychology students; does this diminish the applicability of the findings?

Research ethics: informed consent – Could the need to get informed consent ruin an experiment? Is there some way research could try to minimise such a problem?

Research ethics: deception – Under what circumstances might it be reasonable to include a mild element of deception in a study? (See the American Psychological Association (APA) Guidelines at <http://www.apa.org>.)

Key concept

1.3 Explain the role of theory in social psychology.

- Theories and theorising

Teaching suggestions

In-class activities and exercises

A common criticism levelled at social psychology is that it is nothing more than common sense (see Murphy, 1990). At first glance, common sense seems to explain events (e.g. people may state that 'birds of a feather flock together' when two people with similar interests start dating each other). Yet, common sense—particularly in the form of proverbs—can often be contradictory. Take, for instance, the proverbs 'birds of a feather flock together' and 'opposites attract'. These contradictory proverbs illustrate how common sense covers all bases by explaining the outcomes of events; it cannot predict which of these outcomes is more likely in the situation. Have the class generate contradictory pairs of proverbs (e.g. 'opposites attract' vs. 'birds of a feather flock together'; 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks' vs. 'you're never too old to learn'; 'look before you leap' vs. 'he who hesitates is lost'; 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' vs. 'out of sight, out of mind'; 'it's better to be safe than sorry' vs. 'nothing ventured, nothing gained', etc.).

Divide the class into small groups and allocate a contradictory pair of proverbs to each group. Have the group design an experiment that will test these competing hypotheses. They should attend closely to methodological issues. Each group can then present their ideas to the rest of the class, justifying their experimental design, and fielding questions from the rest of the class.

Industry-related practical applications and discussions

Discuss with the class aspects of social psychology that would operate in an organisation (e.g. decision making, persuasion, social influence, identity) and how these influence the way that organisations and teams operate and how these can have positive or negative outcomes for the company.

Discussion topic

The media – How can social psychologists interact with the popular media in society? Can the findings of social psychology influence public opinion?

Key concept

1.4 List key points in the historical development of social psychology.

- Historical context
- Social psychology in Australia and New Zealand

Teaching suggestions

In-class activities and exercises

Discuss the nature of social psychology in your country or region – how might it differ from American or European social psychology? This will be a wide-ranging discussion that might confront issues to do with culture-specific research, socioeconomic/national priorities, academic freedom, etc.

Industry-related practical applications and discussions

How has social psychology changed our understanding of how people interact in the workplace and in society in general?

Think about how the early social psychologists and their work has influenced recent social psychology.

Early researchers to think about include Triplet (Competition); Kurt Lewin (Leadership); Karl Hovland (Communication); Floyd Allport (Social facilitation); Albert Bandura (Social learning theory); Solomon Asch (1955) (Conformity); Stanley Milgram (Obedience); and Muzafer Sherif (Intergroup behaviour).

Discussion topic

Reductionism and the level of explanation – Is reductionism something that must be avoided? How is this relevant to the issue of social psychology's niche as a distinct endeavour in the social sciences? Is it possible to have simultaneous levels of explanation in social psychology?

Essays and test questions

1. What is social psychology? How can it be distinguished from other social sciences?

Social psychology investigates how the presence of others influences the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of individuals. While social psychology is related to other sciences such as psychology, economics and anthropology, it is distinct in that it focuses on the face-to-face interaction between individuals, among group members, or an individual within the group. Social psychology provides results from what it studies, how it studies it and what level of explanation is sought.

APAC: Graduate Attribute 1: Core knowledge and understanding

Graduate Attribute 6: Learning and the application of psychology

2. What are the major steps in conducting a psychological experiment? Describe independent and dependent variables, how participants are selected and assigned to groups and the need for controls.

The major steps in conducting a psychological experiment include finding a problem, conducting a literature review, identifying the methodology, collecting the data, and analysing data. First, the researcher identifies a problem based on a prediction they make from personal experience or something they have observed and questioned. Secondly, the researcher searches for any information in a literature review. During this step, the researcher identifies all important theories to develop a theoretical framework that the problem may include. The researcher may also develop a conceptual framework to gain more understanding of the concepts involved with their problem. From this research, a prediction about the problem is built, which is what the researcher will study. This prediction becomes the hypotheses for the study. Thirdly, the researcher designs the appropriate methodology for the research based on the type of problem, and the hypothesis which guides the study. For example, the researcher will identify the dependent variable (the variable that may change) and the independent variables (the variables that will be manipulated) to see if they change the dependent variable. Fourthly, once all aspects of the research have been designed, the research conducts the study and collects the data. Fifthly, after the data has been collected, statistical analysis tests will either confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis developed in the second step. When the tests confirm the hypothesis, confidence in the theory increases. When the tests disconfirm the hypothesis, confidence is reduced and the theory is either rejected or modified.

Most of the research studies completed in the 1960s used psychology undergraduate students as participants in the research. However, this can be problematic as the sample of psychology students may not represent the entire population for the study. Also, if the same subjects were used over and over, this can present a distorted view of social behaviour rather than a real world application. Most research now uses a random sampling method to select the participants that will take part in the study. A random sampling helps the researcher provide a more accurate data collection process and better replicates the conditions found in a real-world setting. Field experiments would use participants that naturally enter the natural setting where the experiment takes place. In some cases, random sampling can be used to control the population as well. For example, if you wanted to see how a teacher interacts with her students, you would narrow the population by selecting the condition that participants should be teachers before completing a random sample selection process for teachers.

APAC: Graduate Attribute 1: Core knowledge and understanding

Graduate Attribute 2: Research methods in psychology

3. How valid is it to argue that Triplett's (1898) study of competition was social psychology's first experiment?

Although the importance of Triplett's study is widely accepted, the study was not the first social psychology study recorded. It may very well be among some of the more important studies as Norman Triplett conducted this study for his Master's Thesis at Indiana University, and Indiana University is one of the oldest psychological laboratories. However, earlier studies could also hold the title of being the first social psychology experiment.

APAC: Graduate Attribute 1: Core knowledge and understanding

Graduate Attribute 2: Research methods in psychology

4. How can social psychological research contribute to society? Give three examples of more recent research that is of direct benefit to society and explain what has been achieved by each.

Social psychological research has developed a better understanding of culture, group (or collective) behaviour and social life. Phillip Zimbardo's (1971) simulated prison experiment conducted at Stanford University studied deindividuation as a result of perceived power according to roles. This experiment influenced the development of reality TV (*The Biggest Loser*, *My Kitchen Rules* and *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*), a movie and influenced the way prisons are run. Henri Tajfel (1970) studied how being categorised into groups promotes intergroup discrimination. The results of this experiment have even grown into classroom applications and how the different 'reading level groups' may stigmatise students. Stanley Milgram's (1963) experiment at Yale University on obedience used authority figures to demand subjects perform an immoral act (delivering a shock for wrong answers) is often used as an example of unethical research. While we have learned much about obedience from the study, it also spurred the ethical principles for research that are required for today's studies.

APAC: Graduate Attribute 1: Core knowledge and understanding

Graduate Attribute 2: Research methods in psychology

5. Discuss the trade-off between unethical research that yields large amounts of information and ethically appropriate research that may yield much less information. How far is acceptable to push our ethical boundaries and who should say how far we go?

Certain experiments may need to include deception or possible harm to subjects. For example, some studies may use deception. Participants in the study do not know what is being tested. If they knew, they might change their behaviour and the researcher will not obtain accurate data. Physical harm is much easier to control than mental or emotional harm. For that reason, some studies may use tactics that are harmful to some subjects. Any research should consider factors such as this and make sure precautions are taken during the research as well as strategies (such as debriefing) are completed after the research to compensate for any harm or deception.

APAC: Graduate Attribute 1: Core knowledge and understanding

Graduate Attribute 2: Research methods in psychology

Graduate Attribute 4: Values, research and professional ethics

Guided questions

1. What do social psychologists study? Can you give some examples of interdisciplinary research?

Social psychologists focus their studies on topics that originate from the symbolic interactionism perspective of sociology. An example would be how human interaction combined with cognition influences the culture and how the culture affects human interaction and cognition. The difference lies in the level of explanation given by different disciplines. Whereas sociologists may focus on an explanation of culture in this relationship, social psychologists may focus on how the culture affects the individuals within groups.

APAC: Graduate Attribute 1: Core knowledge and understanding
Graduate Attribute 2: Research methods in psychology
Graduate Attribute 6: Learning and the application of psychology

2. Sometimes experiments are used in social psychological research. Why?

Much of what we know comes from conducting experimental research. Experiments allow us to identify a correlational, causal or consequential relationship between variables under controlled situations. Researchers can manipulate variables to identify whether an independent variable affects a dependent variable. This enables us to increase our understanding of events and better control our world.

APAC: Graduate Attribute 1: Core knowledge and understanding
Graduate Attribute 2: Research methods in psychology

3. What do you understand by levels of explanation in social psychology? What is meant by reductionism?

Level of explanation in social psychology refers to the types of concepts, mechanisms and language used to explain a phenomenon. Social psychology adopts four levels of explanation for research: I. Intrapersonal (people's representation and organisation of experiences in social environments); II. Interpersonal and situational (the dynamics of interactions in specific situations); III. Positional (analysis of interindividual interactions in specific situations with the role of social position) and IV. Ideological (analysis of interindividual interactions in specific situations with the role of social beliefs and relations between groups).

Reductionism can be problematic for the social psychologist researcher. When the level of explanation becomes too low, the original research question may not be answered. Since the focus of social psychology research is the individual within groups rather than just the individual, the possibility of reductionism is a concern. Should a study become too involved in the individual, it may become a psychological research rather than a social psychological research. An example of this could be how personality affects the culture of group membership. Should the study become too involved in the personality aspect, the research becomes a psychological study on personality.

APAC: Graduate Attribute 1: Core knowledge and understanding
Graduate Attribute 2: Research methods in psychology

4. If you or your lecturer were to undertake research in social psychology, you would need to gain ethical approval. Why is this, and what criteria would need to be met?

In addition to the research design, studies must consider the ethics in each study, too. Ethical research advances scientific progress and enhances the professionalism of each discipline.

The American Psychological Association developed guidelines that serve as guiding principles for all research studies. The ethics of research covers five principles:

- i. protection from harm
- ii. right to privacy
- iii. deception
- iv. informed consent
- v. debriefing.

Protection from harm: The researcher must assure that participants will not be physically, mentally, or emotionally harmed as a result of participating in the study.

Right to privacy: Any data obtained from individuals must be anonymous and remain confidential. Most research findings report information as means or some other form of statistical data. Also, the data is destroyed within a few years after the research is completed. When an individual's data is specifically used as an example statement within the study, the statement is coded (for example, 'Participant 11 noted that leadership never asked what employee's thought' to assure confidentiality is maintained).

Deception: Some experiments may require the use deception during the data collection process to ensure the accuracy of the data collected for analysis. While some criticise the use of deception, research can be enriched when participants are not sure what the researcher expects. In some cases, subject effects may alter the accuracy of the data when the subject knows what the researcher is measuring.

Informed consent: This formal process is typically a written statement originated by the researcher that identifies the rights a participant has during the study. Participants are made aware of the purpose of the study, what will be required from them, and how they can withdraw from the study. When participants agree to take part in the study on their own free will, this is indicated by their signing the formal Informed Consent form.

Debriefing: When a study is finished, participants should be debriefed. This includes providing information about the study that may have been a deception and allowing participants to know whether anything was done to manipulate their environment. Socially-sensitive issues such as stereotyping, prejudice or discriminatory conduct must be revealed and care should be taken ensuring participants will not have any after-effects from the research study.

APAC: Graduate Attribute 1: Core knowledge and understanding
Graduate Attribute 2: Research methods in psychology

5. If the shock level 'administered' in Milgram's obedience study had been 150 volts instead of the maximum 450 volts, would this have made the experiment more ethical?

No, the actual amount of voltage delivered was not the ethical issue. In fact, no electrical shock was delivered to the participant in the learner role, but the person in the teacher role did not know this information. So the real ethical issue in this experiment was the amount of deception and mental/emotional harm to the person in the teacher role.

APAC: Graduate Attribute 2: Research methods in psychology
Graduate Attribute 4: Values, research and professional ethics

Additional online resources

Science Daily is an online portal for reporting science research and news. Social Psychology results are listed here. http://www.sciencedaily.com/news/mind_brain/social_psychology/

This article talks about the 'crisis' in social psychology relating to issues of accurate and honest reporting of research. <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/elements/2013/05/the-crisis-in-social-psychology-that-isnt.html>

This article provides an overview of the history of social psychology and some of the key figures. <http://www.simplypsychology.org/social-psychology.html>