

Chapter 1

Introducing Social Psychology



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Chapter Outline and Learning Objectives

Defining Social Psychology

LO 1.1 Define social psychology and distinguish it from other disciplines.

Social Psychology, Philosophy, Science, and Common Sense

How Social Psychology Differs From Its Closest Cousins

The Power of the Situation

LO 1.2 Summarize why it matters how people explain and interpret events, as well as their own and others' behavior.

Underestimating the Power of the Situation

The Importance of Construal

Where Construals Come From: Basic Human Motives

LO 1.3 Explain what happens when people's need to feel good about themselves conflicts with their need to be accurate.

The Self-Esteem Motive: The Need to Feel Good About Ourselves

The Social Cognition Motive: The Need to Be Accurate
The Role of Culture

Why Study Social Psychology?

LO 1.4 Explain why the study of social psychology is important.

Survey **What Do You Think?**

Do you consider yourself good at predicting how people around you will behave and react under different circumstances?

It is a pleasure to be your tour guides as we take you on a journey through the world of social psychology. As we embark on this journey, our hope is to convey our excitement about what the field is and why it matters. Not only do we, the authors, enjoy teaching this stuff (which we've been doing, combined, for several decades), we also love contributing to the growth and development of this field. In addition to being teachers, each of us is a researcher who has contributed to the knowledge base that makes up our discipline. Thus, not only are we leading this tour, we also helped create some of its attractions, which we are excited to share. (If you are curious to know more about us, check out the About the Authors section at the beginning of the book.) We will travel to fascinating and exotic places like love, propaganda, education, conformity, prejudice, aggression, compassion... all the rich variety and surprise of human social life. Ready? OK, let's go!

Let's begin with a few examples of the heroic, touching, tragic, and puzzling things that people do:

- The global COVID pandemic has brought out the best and worst of humankind. On the positive side, people have stepped up to help others in countless ways. Health care workers across the world have gone to extraordinary lengths to care for those with the COVID-19 virus, often at considerable risk to themselves. Celia Marcos, for example, was a nurse at Hollywood Presbyterian Medical Center in Los Angeles. Because she worked on a floor that wasn't treating COVID-19 patients, she was not routinely given the best protective gear to wear, such as an N95 mask. But then the COVID unit filled up and a man with the virus was admitted to her floor. When the man suddenly stopped breathing, Marcos had to make a split-second decision: Should she attempt to resuscitate him while wearing a thin surgical mask, knowing that that would put her at considerable risk? Or should she take the time to find and put on an N95 mask, a delay that could cost the man his life? Marcos didn't hesitate: She rushed into the man's room and revived him with chest compressions, her face inches from his. Three days later, she came down with COVID symptoms, and 14 days later she died from the disease. "She gave her life to try to save a life," said Nina Wells, the president of the local nurses' union (Karlman, 2020).
- Mario Salerno is a New York City landlord who owns 18 residential buildings in Brooklyn. Knowing that many of his tenants had lost their jobs and were struggling during the initial stages of the COVID pandemic, he decided to waive the April 2020 rent payment for all of his tenants—which cost him hundreds of thousands of dollars. "My concern is everyone's health," he said. "I told them just to look out for your neighbor and make sure that everyone has food on their table" (Haag, 2020).
- The pandemic has also brought out the worst in humankind, as illustrated by acrimonious disputes over wearing (or not wearing) masks. In a grocery store in Florida, fights over masks became so common that the police were called three or four times a day. "We've had shoppers go after each other," the store's manager said. "Pushing matches, running carts into each other, running over people's feet and ankles" (Bromwich, 2020). A taco restaurant in California closed temporarily because of frequent disputes over mask wearing. "The one that we most viscerally remember is that a customer at the pickup window who was asked to wear a mask literally threw a cup of water through the window

at the clerk,” said Bill Kohne, the chief executive of the restaurant (Bromwich, 2020). A dispute became even more violent in Michigan: A 77-year-old was stabbed by a man he confronted for not wearing a mask in a convenience store (Haynes, 2020).

- The pandemic was not the only thing that haunted America in 2020. There were several highly publicized cases of racial injustice, including the killings of George Floyd (a police officer in Minneapolis put his knee on Floyd’s neck for over 9 minutes, suffocating him to death), Breonna Taylor (police shot and killed her in her own Louisville, Kentucky, home) and Ahmaud Arbery (while Arbery was out for a run, a White man in Georgia tracked him down and fatally shot him). Racial injustice has existed in America since White Europeans encountered the indigenous inhabitants of the “new” world and African slaves first landed in Virginia in 1619, but these recent cases brought renewed attention to how the color of our skin has profound effects on how we are treated.
- Let’s go further back in time and consider a bizarre and tragic incident from the 1970s. Several hundred members of the Peoples Temple, a California-based religious cult, immigrated to Guyana under the guidance of their leader, the Reverend Jim Jones, where they founded an interracial community called Jonestown. But within a few years some members wanted out, and a delegation led by a U.S. congressman visited to investigate the group. Jones grew despondent and ordered the killings of the delegation as they were boarding their plane to leave. Jones then summoned everyone in the community and spoke to them about the beauty of dying and the certainty that everyone would meet again in another place. The residents lined up in front of a vat containing a mixture of Kool-Aid and cyanide. Although some residents may have felt coerced to drink the poison (there were armed guards surrounding the compound), most waited their turn and willingly drank the lethal concoction. Parents first gave the poison to their children, then consumed their own dose. (The legacy of this massacre is the term “drinking the Kool-Aid,” referring to a person’s blind belief in ideology.) A total of 909 people died, including 80 babies and Jones.
- There are many other mundane (but no less fascinating) examples of social behavior. Take Kristen, who has known Martin for 2 months and feels that she is madly in love with him. “We’re soul mates!” she tells her best friend. “He’s the one!” “What are you thinking?” says the best friend. “He’s completely wrong for you! He’s as different from you as can be—different background, religion, politics; you even like different movies.” “I’m not worried,” says Kristen. “Opposites attract. I know that’s true; I read it on the internet!”
- Janine and her brother Oscar are arguing about fraternities. Janine’s college didn’t have any, but Oscar is at a large state university in the Midwest, where he has joined Alpha Beta. He went through a severe and scary hazing ritual to join, and Janine cannot understand why he loves these guys so much. “They make the pledges do such stupid stuff,” she says. “They humiliate you and force you to get sick-drunk and practically freeze to death in the middle of the night. How can you possibly be happy living there?” “You don’t get it,” Oscar replies. “Alpha Beta is the best of all fraternities. My frat brothers just seem more fun than most other guys.”

Why do people help complete strangers at such risk to themselves? Why do they act in such aggressive and prejudiced ways? Is Kristen right that opposites attract, or is she just kidding herself? How could hundreds of people be induced to kill their own children and then commit suicide? Why did Oscar come to love his fraternity brothers despite the hazing they had put him through?

All of these stories—the good, the bad, the ugly—pose fascinating questions about human behavior. In this book, we will show you how social psychologists go about answering them.

Defining Social Psychology

LO 1.1 Define social psychology and distinguish it from other disciplines.

Social Psychology

The scientific study of the way in which people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people

Social Influence

The effect that the words, actions, or mere presence of other people have on our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behavior

Our thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by our immediate surroundings, including the presence of other people—even mere strangers.

The task of the psychologist is to understand and predict human behavior. To do so, social psychologists focus on the influence other people have on us. More formally, **social psychology** is the scientific study of the way in which people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people (Allport, 1985). When we think of social influence, the kinds of examples that readily come to mind are direct attempts at persuasion, whereby one person deliberately tries to change another person's behavior or attitude. This is what happens when advertisers use sophisticated techniques to persuade us to buy a particular brand of deodorant, or when our friends try to get us to do something we don't really want to do ("Come on, have another beer!"), or when bullies use force or threats to get what they want.

The study of direct attempts at **social influence** is a major part of social psychology and will be discussed in our chapters on conformity, attitudes, and group processes. To the social psychologist, however, social influence is much broader than attempts by one person to change another person's behavior. Social influence shapes our thoughts and feelings as well as our overt acts, and it takes many forms other than deliberate attempts at persuasion. For example, we are often influenced by the *mere presence* of other people, including perfect strangers who are not interacting with us. Other people don't even have to be present: We are governed by the imaginary approval or disapproval of our parents, friends, and teachers and

by how we expect others to react to us. Sometimes these influences conflict with one another, and social psychologists are especially interested in what happens in the mind of an individual when they do. For example, conflicts frequently occur when young people go off to college and find themselves torn between the beliefs and values they learned at home and the beliefs and values of their peers or professors. (See the Try It! exercise on conflicting social influences.) We will spend the rest of this introductory chapter expanding on these issues, so that you will get an idea of what social psychology is, what it isn't, and how it differs from other, related disciplines.



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Try It!

Conflicting Social Influences

Think of situations in which you feel conflicting pressures: Your parents (or other influential adults in your life) would like you to do one thing, but your friends would like you to do something

altogether different. Are there situations like this in which you feel conflicting pressures from your parents versus your friends? How do you decide how to act in these situations?

Social Psychology, Philosophy, Science, and Common Sense

Throughout history, philosophy has provided many insights about human nature. Indeed, the work of philosophers is part of the foundation of contemporary psychology. Psychologists have looked to philosophers for insights into the nature of consciousness (e.g., Dennett, 1991) and how people form beliefs about the social world (e.g., Gilbert, 1991). Sometimes, however, even great thinkers find themselves in disagreement with one another. When this occurs, how are we supposed to know who is right?

We social psychologists address many of the same questions that philosophers do, but we attempt to look at these questions scientifically—even questions concerning that great human mystery: love. In 1663, the Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza offered a highly original insight. In sharp disagreement with the hedonistic philosopher Aristippus, he proposed that if we fall in love with someone whom we formerly hated, that love will be stronger than if hatred had not preceded it. Spinoza's proposition was beautifully stated, but that doesn't mean it is true. These are *empirical* questions, meaning that their answers should be derived from experimentation or measurement rather than by personal opinion (Aronson, 1999; Wilson, 2015).

Now let's take another look at the examples that opened this chapter. Why did these people behave the way they did? One way to answer would simply be to ask them. We could ask Mario Salerno why he decided to be so generous to his tenants; we could ask the store patrons why they were fighting so vociferously over wearing masks; we could ask Oscar why he enjoys fraternity life. The problem with this approach is that people might not want to tell us their reasons, and even if they did, they are often unaware of exactly why they responded the way they did (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 2002). People might come up with plenty of justifications for running over each other with shopping carts, but those justifications might not be the real reason they did so.

Another approach is to rely on common sense or folk wisdom. Social psychologists are not opposed to folk wisdom—far from it. The primary problem with relying entirely on such sources is that they often disagree with one another. Consider what folk wisdom has to say about the factors that influence how much we like other people. We know that “birds of a feather flock together.” Of course, we agree, thinking of the many examples of our pleasure in hanging out with people who share our backgrounds and interests. But folk wisdom also tells us—as it persuaded lovestruck Kristen—that “opposites attract.” Of course, we agree again, thinking of all the times we were attracted to people with different backgrounds and interests. Well, which is it? Similarly, are we to believe that “out of sight is out of mind” or that “absence makes the heart grow fonder”?

Social psychologists would suggest that there are some conditions under which birds of a feather do flock together, and other conditions under which opposites do attract. Similarly, in some conditions absence does make the heart grow fonder, and



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People march to protest the killing of George Floyd by police in 2020. What causes such acts of racial injustice? Popular theories say that there are a few “bad cops” who are unusually aggressive toward minorities. Social psychologists try to understand the conditions under which racial prejudice can develop in anyone.

in others “out of sight” does mean “out of mind.” But it’s not enough to say all of these proverbs can be true. Part of the job of the social psychologist is to do the research that specifies the *conditions* under which one or another is most likely to take place.

Thus, in explaining why two people like each other—or any other topic of interest—social psychologists would want to know which of many possible explanations is the most likely. To do this, we have devised an array of scientific methods to test our assumptions, guesses, and ideas about human social behavior, empirically and systematically rather than by relying on folk wisdom, common sense, or the opinions and insights of philosophers, novelists, political pundits, and our grandmothers. As scientists, our goal is to find objective answers to such questions as: What variables cause two people to like or love each other? What are the factors that cause aggression?

What causes prejudice, and how might we reduce it? Why do certain kinds of political advertisements work better than others? Testing hypotheses in social psychology presents many challenges, primarily because we are attempting to predict the behavior of highly sophisticated organisms in complex situations. In Chapter 2 we discuss these challenges, describing the scientific methods social psychologists use to answer questions about social behavior.

How Social Psychology Differs From Its Closest Cousins

Social psychology is related to other disciplines in the physical and social sciences, including biology, neuroscience, sociology, economics, and political science. Each examines the determinants of human behavior, but important differences set social psychology apart—most notably in its level of analysis. For biologists and neuroscientists, the level of analysis might be genes, hormones, or physiological processes in the brain. Although social psychologists sometimes draw on this approach to study the relationship between the brain and social behavior, their emphasis is, as we will see, more on how people interpret the social world.

Other social psychologists draw on the major theory of biology—evolutionary theory—to generate hypotheses about social behavior. In biology, evolutionary theory is used to explain how different species acquired physical traits, such as long necks. In an environment where food is scarce, giraffes that happened to have long necks could feed on foliage that other animals couldn’t reach. These giraffes were more likely to survive and reproduce offspring than were giraffes with shorter necks, the story goes, such that the “long neck” gene became dominant in subsequent generations.

But what about social behaviors, such as the tendency to be aggressive toward a member of one’s own species or the tendency to be helpful to others? Is it possible that social behaviors also have genetic determinants that evolve through the process of natural selection, and if so, is this true in human beings as well as other animals? These are the questions posed by **evolutionary psychology**, which attempts to explain

Evolutionary Psychology

The attempt to explain social behavior in terms of genetic factors that have evolved over time according to the principles of natural selection

social behavior in terms of genetic factors that have evolved over time according to the principles of natural selection. The core idea is that evolution occurs very slowly, such that social behaviors that are prevalent today, such as aggression and helping behavior, are a result, at least in part, of adaptations to environments in our distant past (Brown & Cross, 2017; Buss, 2016; Endendijk, van Baar, & Deković, 2019; Neuberg, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2010; Schaller, 2020). We will discuss in upcoming chapters how evolutionary theory explains social behavior (e.g., Chapter 10 on interpersonal attraction, Chapter 11 on prosocial behavior, and Chapter 12 on aggression).

We note here that a lively debate has arisen over the testability of evolutionary hypotheses. Because current behaviors are thought to be adaptations to environmental conditions that existed thousands of years ago, psychologists make their best guesses about what those conditions were and how specific kinds of behaviors gave people a reproductive advantage. But these hypotheses are obviously impossible to test with the experimental method. And just because hypotheses sound plausible does not mean they are true. For example, some scientists now believe that giraffes did not acquire a long neck to eat leaves in tall trees. Instead, they suggest, long necks first evolved in male giraffes to gain an advantage in fights with other males over access to females (Simmons & Scheepers, 1996). Which of these explanations is true? It's hard to tell. Evolutionary explanations can't be tested directly, because after all, they involve hypotheses about what happened thousands of years ago. They can, however, suggest novel hypotheses about why people do what they do in today's world, which can then be put to the test, as we will see in later chapters (Al-Shawa, 2020).

Well, if we aren't going to rely solely on an evolutionary or biological approach, how else might we explain why people do what they do, such as in the examples that opened this chapter? If you are like most people, when you read these examples you assumed that the individuals involved had some weaknesses, strengths, and personality traits that led them to respond as they did. Some people are leaders and others are followers; some people are public spirited and others are selfish; some are racist and some are not. Perhaps the customer who threw the cup of water into the face of the clerk at the pick-up window was a selfish and heartless jerk. Given what you know about what this person did, would you loan them your car or trust them to take care of your new puppy?

Explaining people's behavior in terms of their traits is the work of personality psychologists, who generally focus on *individual differences*, that is, the aspects of people's personalities that make them different from others. Research on personality increases our understanding of human behavior, but social psychologists believe that explaining behavior primarily through personality traits ignores a critical part of the story: the powerful role played by social influence.

Consider again the tragedy at Jonestown. Remember that it was not just a handful of people who committed suicide there, but almost 100% of the residents. To understand why this happened, we need to consider the kind of power and influence a charismatic figure like Jim Jones possessed, the nature of the impact of living in a closed society cut off from other points of view, and other factors that could have caused so many people to obey him.

Here is a more mundane example. Suppose you go to a party and see a great-looking fellow student you have been hoping to get to know better. The student is looking uncomfortable, however—standing alone, not making eye contact, not talking to anyone who comes over. You decide you're not so interested; this person seems pretty aloof, even arrogant. But a few weeks later you see the student

Personality psychologists study qualities of the individual that might make a person shy, conventional, rebellious, and willing to wear a turquoise wig in public or a yellow shirt in a sea of blue. Social psychologists study the powerful role of social influence on how all of us behave.



David Silpa/UPI/Alamy Stock Photo

Try It!

Social Situations and Shyness

1. Think about one of your friends or acquaintances whom you regard as shy. (You may use yourself!) Try not to think about them as “a shy person,” but rather as someone who has difficulty relating to people in some situations but not others.
2. List the situations you think are most likely to bring out your friend’s shy behavior.
3. List the situations that might bring forth more outgoing behaviors on your friend’s part. Being with a small group of friends they are at ease with? Being with a new person, but one who shares your friend’s interests?
4. Set up a social environment that you think would make your friend comfortable. Pay close attention to the effect that it has on your friend’s behavior—or yours.

Construal

The way in which people perceive, comprehend, and interpret the social world

The people in this photo can be studied from a variety of perspectives: as individuals or as members of a family, a social class, an occupation, a culture, or a region. Sociologists study the group or institution; social psychologists study the influence of those groups and institutions on individual behavior.



Keren Su/China Span/Alamy Stock Photo

again, now being super social and witty, the center of attention. So what is this person “really” like? Aloof and arrogant or charming and welcoming? It’s the wrong question; the answer is both and neither. All of us are capable of being shy in some situations and outgoing in others. A much more interesting question is: What factors were different in these two situations that had such a profound effect on the student’s behavior? That is a social psychological question. (See the Try It! exercise on social situations and shyness.)

For personality and clinical psychologists, the level of the analysis is the individual. For the social psychologist, the level of analysis is the individual in the context of a social situation—particularly the individual’s **construal** of that situation. The word *construal*, which means how people perceive, comprehend, and interpret the social world, is a favorite among social psychologists, because it conveys how important it is to get inside people’s heads and understand how they see the world, and how those construals are shaped by the social context. For example, to understand why people intentionally hurt one another (such as hurling a cup of water into someone else’s face), the social psychologist focuses on how people construe a specific social situation: Do they do so in a way that makes them feel frustrated? Does frustration always

precede aggression? If people are feeling frustrated, under what conditions will they vent their frustration with an aggressive act and under what conditions will they restrain themselves? (See Chapter 12.)

Other social sciences are more concerned with social, economic, political, and historical factors that influence events. Sociology, rather than focusing on the individual, focuses on such topics as social class, social structure, and social institutions. Of course, because society is made up of collections of people, some overlap is bound to exist between the domains of sociology and those of social psychology. The major difference is that in sociology, *the level of analysis is the group, institution, or society at large*, whereas the level of analysis in social psychology is *the individual within a group, institution, or society*. So although sociologists, like social psychologists, are interested in causes of aggression, sociologists are more likely to be concerned with why a particular society

Table 1.1 Social Psychology Compared to Related Disciplines

Biology and Neuroscience	Personality Psychology	Social Psychology	Sociology
The study of genes, hormones, or physiological processes in the brain	The study of the characteristics that make individuals unique and different from one another	The study of the psychological processes people have in common that make them susceptible to social influence	The study of groups, organizations, and societies, rather than individuals

(or group within a society) produces different levels of violence in its members. Why is the murder rate in the United States so much higher than in Canada or Europe? Within the United States, why is the murder rate higher in some geographic regions than in others? How do changes in society relate to changes in aggressive behavior?

In sum, social psychology is located between its closest cousins, sociology and personality psychology (see Table 1.1). Social psychology and sociology share an interest in the way the situation and the larger society influence behavior. Social psychology and personality psychology share an interest in the psychology of the individual. But social psychologists work in the overlap between those two disciplines: They emphasize the psychological processes shared by most people around the world that make them susceptible to social influence.

The Power of the Situation

LO 1.2 Summarize why it matters how people explain and interpret events, as well as their own and others’ behavior.

Suppose you go to a restaurant with a group of friends. The server comes over to take your order, but you are having a hard time deciding which pie you want. While you are hesitating, she impatiently taps her pen against her notepad, rolls her eyes toward the ceiling, scowls at you, and finally snaps, “Hey, I haven’t got all day!” Like most people, you would probably think that she is a nasty or unpleasant person.

But suppose, while you are deciding whether to complain about her to the manager, a regular customer tells you that your “crabby” server is a single parent who was kept awake all night by the moaning of her youngest child, who was terribly sick; that her car broke down on her way to work and she has no idea where she will find the money to have it repaired; that when she finally arrived at the restaurant, she learned that her coworker hadn’t shown up, requiring her to cover twice the usual number of tables; and that the short-order cook keeps screaming at her because she is not picking up the orders fast enough. Given all that information, you might now conclude that she is not a nasty person but an ordinary human under enormous stress.

This small story has huge implications. Most Americans will explain someone’s behavior in terms of personality; they focus on the fish, and not the water the fish swims in. The fact that they fail to take the situation into account has a profound impact on how human beings relate to one another—such as, in the case of the server, whether they feel sympathy and tolerance or impatience and anger.

Underestimating the Power of the Situation

The social psychologist is up against a formidable barrier known as the **fundamental attribution error**, which is the tendency to explain our own and other people’s behavior entirely in terms of personality traits and to underestimate the power of social influence and the immediate situation. We are going to give you the basics of this phenomenon here, because you will be encountering it throughout this book.

Fundamental Attribution Error

The tendency to overestimate the extent to which people’s behavior is due to internal, dispositional factors and to underestimate the role of situational factors

Explaining behavior in terms of personality can give us a feeling of false security. When people try to explain repugnant or bizarre behavior, such as the people of Jonestown taking their own lives and killing their own children, they find it tempting and, in a strange way, comforting to write off the victims as flawed human beings. Doing so gives them the feeling that it could never happen to them. Ironically, this way of thinking actually increases our vulnerability to destructive social influences by making us less aware of our own susceptibility to them. Moreover, by failing to fully appreciate the power of the situation, we tend to oversimplify the problem, which can lead us to blame the victim in situations where the individual was overpowered by social forces too difficult for most of us to resist, as in the Jonestown tragedy.

To take a more everyday example, imagine a situation in which two people are playing a game and they must choose one of two strategies: They can play competitively and try to win as much money as possible and make sure their partner loses as much as possible, or they can play cooperatively and try to make sure they both win some money, even though they'll end up with less than what they could win on their own. How do you think each of your friends would play this game?

Few people find this question hard to answer; we all have a feeling for the relative competitiveness of our friends. Accordingly, you might say, "I am certain that my friend Jennifer, who is a hard-nosed business major, would play this game more competitively than my friend Anna, who is a warm and generous person." But how accurate are you likely to be? Should you be thinking about the game itself rather than who is playing it?

To find out, researchers at Stanford University conducted the following experiment (Lieberman, Samuels, & Ross, 2004). They described the game to resident assistants (RAs) in a student dorm and asked them to come up with a list of undergrads whom they thought were either especially cooperative or especially competitive. As expected, the RAs easily identified students who fit each category. Next, the researchers invited these students to play the game in a psychology experiment. There was one added twist: The researchers varied a seemingly minor aspect of the social situation—what the game was called. They told half the participants that they would be playing the Wall Street Game and the other half that they would be playing the Community Game. Everything else about the game was identical. People who were judged as either competitive or cooperative played a game that was called either the Wall Street Game or the Community Game, resulting in four conditions: cooperative people playing the Wall Street Game, cooperative people playing the Community Game, competitive people playing the Wall Street Game, or competitive people playing the Community Game.

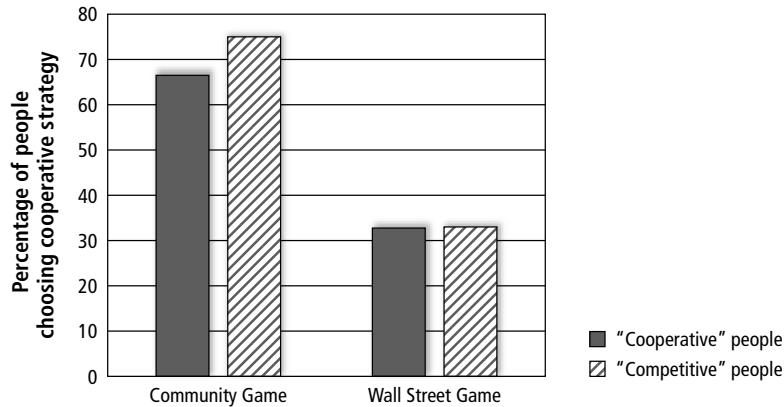
Again, most of us go through life assuming that what really counts is an individual's true character, not something about the individual's immediate situation and certainly not something as trivial as what a game is called, right? Not so fast! As you can see in Figure 1.1, the name of the game made a tremendous difference in how people behaved. When it was called the Wall Street Game, approximately two-thirds of the students responded competitively; when it was called the Community Game, only a third responded competitively. The name of the game sent a powerful message about how the players should behave. But a student's alleged personality trait made no measurable difference in the student's behavior. The students labeled *competitive* were no more likely to adopt the competitive strategy than those who were labeled *cooperative*. We will see this pattern of results throughout this book: Aspects of the social situation that may seem minor can overwhelm the differences in people's personalities (Ross & Ward, 1996).

If merely assigning a name to a game in a psychology experiment has such a large impact on the behavior of the players, what do you think the impact would be conveying to students in a classroom that the activity they were doing was competitive or cooperative? Suppose you are a seventh-grade history teacher. In one of your classes,

Figure 1.1 Why the Name of the Game Matters

In this experiment, when the name of the game was the “Community Game,” players were far more likely to behave cooperatively than when it was called the “Wall Street Game”—regardless of their own cooperative or competitive personality traits. The game’s title conveyed social norms that trumped personality and shaped the players’ behavior.

(Data from “The name of the game: Predictive power of reputations versus situational labels in determining Prisoner’s Dilemma Game moves,” by Varda Liberman, Steven M. Samuels, and Lee Ross. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30.9, pp. 1175–1185.)



you structure the learning experience so that it resembles the situation implied by the term “Wall Street Game.” You encourage competition, and you tell your students to raise their hands as quickly as possible and to jeer at any incorrect answers given by other students. In your other class, you structure the learning situation such that the students are rewarded for cooperating with one another, for listening well, and for encouraging one another and pulling together to learn the material. What do you suppose would be the effect these different situations might have on the performance of your students, on their enjoyment of school, and on their feelings about one another? Such an experiment will be discussed in Chapter 13 (Aronson & Patnoe, 2011).

Of course, personality differences do exist and frequently are of great importance, but social and environmental situations are so powerful that they have dramatic effects on almost everyone. This is the domain of the social psychologist.

The Importance of Construal

It is one thing to say that the social situation has profound effects on human behavior, but what exactly do we mean by the social situation? One strategy for defining it would be to specify the objective properties of the situation, such as how rewarding it is to people, and then document the behaviors that follow from these objective properties.

This is the approach taken by **behaviorism**, a school of psychology maintaining that to understand human behavior, one need only consider the reinforcing properties of the environment: When behavior is followed by a reward (such as money, attention, praise, or other benefits), it is likely to continue; when behavior is followed by a punishment (such as pain, loss, or angry shouts), it is likely to stop, or become extinguished. Dogs come when they are called because they have learned that compliance is followed by positive reinforcement (e.g., food or petting); children memorize their multiplication tables more quickly if you praise them, smile at them, and give them a sticker following correct answers. Behavioral psychologists, notably the pioneering behaviorist B. F. Skinner (1938), believed that all behavior could be understood by examining the rewards and punishments in the organism’s environment.

Behaviorism has many strengths, and its principles explain some behavior very well (see Chapter 10). However, because the early behaviorists did not concern

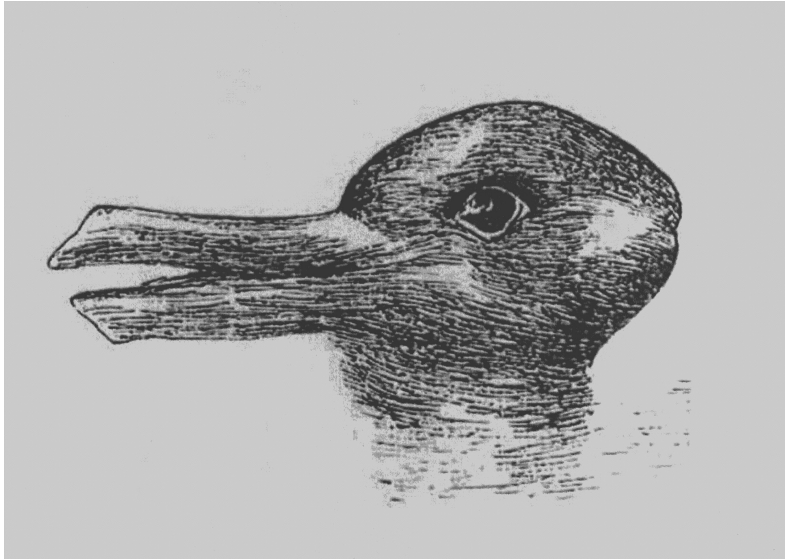
Behaviorism

A school of psychology maintaining that to understand human behavior, one need only consider the reinforcing properties of the environment

Figure 1.2 Duck or Rabbit?

An illustration of the Gestalt approach to perception is optical illusions, such as the one shown in the picture below. Is this a picture of a duck looking to the left or a rabbit looking the right? Objectively it is neither; rather, it is how you are *construing* it at any particular point in time.

Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo



Gestalt Psychology

A school of psychology stressing the importance of studying the subjective way in which an object appears in people's minds rather than the objective, physical attributes of the object

The emphasis on construal has its roots in an approach called **Gestalt psychology**. First proposed as a theory of how people perceive the physical world, Gestalt psychology holds that we should study the subjective way in which an object appears in people's minds (the *gestalt*, or whole) rather than the way in which the objective, physical attributes of the object combine. An illustration of this point is how people perceive optical illusions like the one shown in Figure 1.2. What do you see in that figure? Do you see a duck looking to the left or a rabbit looking the right? Objectively it is neither; rather, it is how you are *construing* it at any particular point in time. That is, according to Gestalt psychology, one must focus on the phenomenology of the perceivers—on how an object appears to them—instead of on its objective components.

The Gestalt approach was formulated by German psychologists in the first part of the 20th century. In the late 1930s, several of these psychologists fled to the United States to escape the Nazi regime. Among the émigrés was Kurt Lewin, generally considered the founding parent of modern experimental social psychology. As a young German Jewish professor in the 1930s, Lewin experienced the anti-Semitism rampant in Nazi Germany. The experience profoundly affected his thinking, and once he moved to the United States, Lewin helped shape American social psychology, directing it toward a deep interest in exploring the causes and cures of prejudice and ethnic stereotyping.

As a theorist, Lewin took the bold step of applying Gestalt principles beyond the perception of objects—such as the duck/rabbit picture in Figure 1.2—to how we perceive the social world. It is often more important to understand how people perceive, comprehend, and interpret each other's behavior, he said, than it is to understand its objective properties (Lewin, 1943). "If an individual sits in a room trusting that the ceiling will not come down," he said, "should only his 'subjective probability' be taken into account for predicting behavior or should we also consider the 'objective probability' of the ceiling's coming down as determined by engineers? To my mind, only the first has to be taken into account" (p. 308). The same goes with

themselves with cognition, thinking, and feeling—concepts they considered too vague and mentalistic and not sufficiently anchored to observable behavior—they overlooked phenomena that are vital to the human social experience. Most especially, they overlooked the importance of *how people interpret their environments*.

For social psychologists, people's behavior is not influenced directly by the situation but rather, as we mentioned earlier, by their construal of it (Griffin & Ross, 1991; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Suppose you look at your phone and see that your romantic partner sent the following text: "What are you up to?" How would you react? It depends on how you *construe* the text. Maybe you'll interpret it as a flattering indication that you are on their mind and text them back with a few heart emojis. Or maybe your partner is the jealous type who thinks you've been hanging out too much with Chris from down the hall, and you interpret the text as controlling and inappropriate. You're not likely to send heart emojis in that case.

Kurt Lewin (1890–1947)



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the text you got from your romantic partner—it isn't the words that matter, but how you interpret them. We are busy guessing all the time about other people's intentions, motives, and thoughts. We may be right—but often we are wrong.

That is why construal has major implications. In a murder trial, when the prosecution presents compelling evidence it believes will prove the defendant guilty, the verdict always hinges on precisely how each jury member construes that evidence. These construals rest on a variety of events and perceptions that often bear no objective relevance to the case. During cross-examination, did a key witness come across as being too remote or too arrogant? Did the prosecutor appear to be smug, obnoxious, or uncertain?

A special kind of construal is what Lee Ross calls **naïve realism**, that is, the conviction that we perceive things “as they really are,” underestimating how much we are interpreting or “spinning” what we see. People with opposite political views, for example, often can't even agree on the facts; both sides think that they are “seeing as it really is,” when in fact both are probably letting their beliefs color their interpretation of the facts. We tend to believe, therefore, that if other people see the same things differently, it must be because *they* are biased (Ross, 2010, 2018). Ross has been working closely with Israeli and Palestinian negotiators who are trying to resolve the decades-long conflict between Israel and Palestine. These negotiations frequently run aground because of naïve realism; each side assumes that other reasonable people see things the same way they do. “[E]ven when each side recognizes that the other side perceives the issues differently,” says Ross, “each thinks that the other side is biased while they themselves are objective and that their own perceptions of reality should provide the basis for settlement” (Ross, 2010). So both sides resist compromise, fearing that their “biased” opponent will benefit more than they.

In a simple experiment, Ross took peace proposals created by Israeli negotiators, labeled them as Palestinian proposals, and asked Israeli citizens to judge them. The Israelis liked the Palestinian proposal attributed to Israel more than they liked the Israeli proposal attributed to the Palestinians. Ross (2010) concludes, “If your own proposal isn't going to be attractive to you when it comes from the other side, what chance is there that the *other* side's proposal is going to be attractive when it comes from the other side?” The hope is that once negotiators on both sides become fully aware of this phenomenon and how it impedes conflict resolution, a reasonable compromise will be more likely.

You can see that construals range from the simple (as in the question “How do you see it?”) to the remarkably complex (international negotiations). And they affect all of us in our everyday lives. Imagine that Jason is a college student who admires Maria from afar. As a budding social psychologist, you have the job of predicting whether or not Jason will ask Maria to have dinner with him. To do this, you need to begin by viewing Maria's behavior through Jason's eyes—that is, by seeing how Jason interprets her behavior. If she smiles at him, does Jason construe her behavior as mere politeness, the kind of politeness she would extend to any of the dozens of people in their class? Or does he view her smile as an encouraging sign that inspires him to ask her out? If she ignores him, does Jason figure that she's playing hard to get, or does he take it as a sign that she's not interested in him? To predict what Jason will do, it is not enough to know Maria's behavior; we must know how Jason construes her behavior. But how are these construals formed? Stay tuned.

Naïve Realism

The conviction that we perceive things “as they really are,” underestimating how much we are interpreting or “spinning” what we see

Research by social psychologists on construal shows why negotiation between partisan groups can be so difficult: Each side thinks that it sees the issues clearly but that the other side is “biased.”

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Estate of Francis Bello/Science Source

Leon Festinger (1919–1989) wrote: “If the empirical world looks complicated, if people seem to react in bewilderingly different ways to similar forces, and if I cannot see the operation of universal underlying dynamics, then that is my fault. I have asked the wrong questions; I have, at a theoretical level, sliced up the world incorrectly. The underlying dynamics are there, and I have to find the theoretical apparatus that will enable me to reveal these uniformities” (Festinger, 1980, p. 246). Finding and illuminating those underlying dynamics is the goal of social psychology.

This is Edward Snowden, a former computing contractor for the National Security Agency. Snowden’s release in 2013 of thousands of classified documents related to the U.S. government’s surveillance programs led the Department of Justice to charge him with espionage. Some have argued that Snowden is a spy, a traitor, and a criminal who should be brought back to the United States from his asylum in Russia to face trial. Others view him as a whistleblower, a patriot, and a hero fighting to protect privacy rights and inform the American public of what its government is up to (in fact, here you see him pictured receiving a German peace prize, a prize he was only able to accept via Skype). Each side is sure that they are right. Where do differing construals come from, and what are their consequences?



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Where Construals Come From: Basic Human Motives

LO 1.3 Explain what happens when people’s need to feel good about themselves conflicts with their need to be accurate.

How will Jason determine why Maria smiled at him? If it is true that subjective and not objective situations influence people, we need to understand how people arrive at their subjective impressions of the world. What are people trying to accomplish when they interpret the social world? Are they concerned with making an interpretation that places them in the most positive light (e.g., Jason’s deciding that “Maria is ignoring me just to make me jealous”) or with making the most accurate interpretation, even if it is unflattering (e.g., “Painful as it may be, I must admit that she would rather go out with a sea slug than with me”)? Social psychologists seek to understand the fundamental motives that determine why we construe the social world the way we do.

We human beings are complex organisms. At any given moment, various intersecting motives underlie our thoughts and behaviors, including hunger, thirst, fear, a desire for control, and the promise of love and other rewards (see Chapters 10 and 11). Social psychologists emphasize the importance of two central motives in steering people’s construals: *the need to feel good about ourselves* and *the need to be accurate*. Sometimes, each of these motives pulls us in the same direction. Often, though, these motives tug us in opposite directions, where to perceive the world accurately requires us to admit that we have behaved foolishly or immorally.

Leon Festinger, one of social psychology’s most innovative theorists, realized that it is precisely when these two motives pull in opposite directions that we can gain our most valuable insights into the workings of the mind. To illustrate, imagine that you are the president of the United States and your country is engaged in a difficult and costly war. You have poured hundreds of billions of dollars into that war, and it has consumed tens of thousands of American lives as well as thousands more lives of innocent civilians. The war seems to be at a stalemate; no end is in sight. You frequently wake up in the middle of the night, bathed in the cold sweat of conflict: On the one hand, you deplore all the carnage that is going on; on the other hand, you don’t want to go down in history as the first American president to lose a war.

Some of your advisers tell you that they can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and that if you intensify the bombing or add thousands more troops, the enemy will soon capitulate and the war will be over. This would be a great outcome for you: Not only will you have succeeded in achieving your military and political aims, but history will consider you to have been a great leader as well. Other advisers, however, believe that intensifying the bombing will only strengthen the enemy’s resolve; they advise you to sue for peace.

Which advisers are you likely to believe? President Lyndon Johnson faced this exact dilemma in the 1960s, with the war in Vietnam; so did George W. Bush in 2003, when the war in Iraq did not end in 6 weeks as he had predicted; so did Barack Obama and Donald Trump, in 2009 and 2017, respectively, in deciding whether to invest more troops in the war in Afghanistan. Most presidents

have chosen to believe their advisers who suggest escalating the war, because if they succeed in winning, the victory justifies the human and financial cost; but withdrawing not only means going down in history as a president who lost a war, but also having to justify the fact that all those lives and all that money have been spent in vain. As you can see, the need to feel good about our decisions can fly in the face of the need to be accurate and can have catastrophic consequences (Draper, 2008; McClellan, 2008; Woodward, 2010). In Johnson's case, the decision to increase the bombing *did* strengthen the enemy's resolve, thereby prolonging the war in Vietnam.

The Self-Esteem Motive: The Need to Feel Good About Ourselves

Most people have a strong need to maintain reasonably high **self-esteem**—that is, to see themselves as good, competent, and decent (Aronson, 1998, 2007; Baumeister, 1993; Tavris & Aronson, 2007). Given the choice between distorting the world to feel good about themselves and representing the world accurately, people often take the first option. They put a slightly different spin on the matter, one that puts them in the best possible light. You might consider your friend Christian to be a nice guy but an awful slob—somehow he's always got stains on his shirt and empty food cartons all over his kitchen. Christian, though, probably describes himself as being casual and "laid back."

Self-esteem is obviously a beneficial thing, but when it causes people to justify their actions rather than learn from them, it can impede change and self-improvement. Suppose a couple gets divorced after 10 years of a marriage made difficult by the husband's irrational jealousy. Rather than admitting the truth—that his jealousy and possessiveness drove his wife away—the husband blames the breakup of their marriage on her; she was not responsive enough to his needs. His interpretation serves a purpose: It makes him feel better about himself (Simpson, 2010). The consequence of this distortion, of course, is that learning from experience becomes unlikely. In his next relationship, the husband will probably recreate the same problems. Acknowledging our deficiencies is difficult, even when the cost is failing to learn from our mistakes.

SUFFERING AND SELF-JUSTIFICATION Moreover, the need to maintain our self-esteem can have paradoxical effects. Let's go back to one of our early scenarios: Oscar and the hazing he went through to join his fraternity. Personality psychologists might suggest that only extroverts who have a high tolerance for embarrassment would want to be in a fraternity. Behavioral psychologists would predict that Oscar would dislike anyone or anything that caused him pain and humiliation. Social psychologists, however, have found that the major reason that Oscar and his fellow pledges like their fraternity brothers so much was because of the degrading hazing rituals.

Here's how it works. Suppose Oscar freely chose to go through a severe hazing to become a member of the fraternity but later discovers unpleasant things about his fraternity brothers. If he were completely honest with himself, he would conclude, "I'm an idiot; I went through all of that pain and embarrassment only to live in a house with a bunch of jerks." But saying "I'm an idiot" is not exactly the best way to maintain one's self-esteem, so instead Oscar puts a positive spin on his situation. "My fraternity brothers aren't perfect, but they are there when I need them, and this house sure has great parties." He justifies the pain and embarrassment of the hazing by viewing his fraternity as positively as he can.

An outside observer like his sister Janine, however, can see the downside of fraternity life more clearly. The fraternity dues make a significant dent in Oscar's budget, the frequent parties take a toll on the amount of studying he can do, and consequently his grades suffer. But Oscar is motivated to see these negatives as trivial; indeed, he considers them a small price to pay for the sense of brotherhood he feels. He focuses on the good parts of living in the fraternity, and he dismisses the bad parts as inconsequential.

Self-Esteem

People's evaluations of their own self-worth—that is, the extent to which they view themselves as good, competent, and decent



Roberto Herrera Pellizzari

These first-year students are being “welcomed” to their university by seniors who subject them to hazing. Hazing is sometimes silly, but it is often dangerous as well (and even fatal), leading college campuses to crack down on the practice. One difficulty faced by such efforts is that for all of its downsides, hazing can also build group cohesiveness. Does this explanation sound far-fetched? In Chapter 6, we will see a series of laboratory experiments that indeed show that people often come to love what they suffer for.

Social Cognition

How people think about themselves and the social world; more specifically, how people select, interpret, remember, and use social information to make judgments and decisions

which is the study of how people select, interpret, remember, and use information to make judgments and decisions (Fiske & Taylor, 2017; Markus & Zajonc, 1985; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Researchers who investigate processes of social cognition begin with the assumption that all people try to view the world as accurately as possible. They regard human beings as amateur sleuths who are doing their best to understand and predict their social world.

Just as the need to preserve self-esteem can occasionally run aground, however, so too can the need to be accurate. People are not perfect in their effort to understand and predict, because they almost never know all the facts they need to judge a given situation completely accurately. Whether it is a relatively simple decision, such as which breakfast cereal offers the best combination of healthfulness and tastiness, or a slightly more complex decision, such as our desire to buy the best car we can for under \$20,000, or a much more complex decision, such as choosing a partner who will make us deliriously happy for the rest of our lives, it is usually impossible to gather all the relevant information in advance. Moreover, we make countless decisions every day. No one has the time and stamina to gather all the facts for each of them.

Does this sound overblown? Aren't most decisions fairly easy? Let's take a closer look. Which breakfast cereal is better for you, Lucky Charms or Quaker Simply Granola with oats, honey, raisins, and almonds? If you are like most of our students, you answered, “Quaker Simply Granola.” After all, Lucky Charms is a kids' cereal, full of sugar and cute little marshmallows, with a picture of a leprechaun on the box. Quaker Simply Granola cereal boxes have pictures of healthy granola and fruit, and doesn't *natural* mean “good for you”? If that's



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Timothy Wilson

We rely on a series of expectations and other mental shortcuts in making judgments about the world around us, from important life decisions to which cereal to buy at the store, a conclusion with which advertisers and marketers are very well aware. Which of these cereals is healthier, do you think?

the way you reasoned, you have fallen into a common cognitive trap: You have generalized from the cover to the product. A careful reading of the ingredients in small print will reveal that, per one-cup serving, Quaker Simply Granola has 400 calories, 24 grams of sugar, and 10 grams of fat. In contrast, a cup of Lucky Charms has 140 calories, 12 grams of sugar, and 1.5 grams of fat. Even in the simple world of cereals, things are not always what they seem.

Thus, even when we are trying to perceive the social world as accurately as we can, there are many ways in which we can go wrong, ending up with the wrong impressions.

The Role of Culture

Social psychology is a relatively young science that was initially developed in the United States, and many of the studies have been limited to “WEIRD” participants (those from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic backgrounds; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). In the past couple of decades that has changed; researchers throughout the world have devoted their attention to the role of culture (e.g., Heine, 2020; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Heine, 2020; Nisbett, 2003). On the one hand, the basic human motives we just reviewed, such as the need to form accurate views of the social world, are universal. And indeed, throughout the book, we will point out cases in which findings have been replicated in different cultures. At the same time, it is clear that the culture in which we live has profound influences on how we think about ourselves and the social world. Put differently, all human beings have the same cognitive toolbox from which to draw when construing the world, but culture influences the specific tools they employ (e.g., whether they think analytically or holistically about their environments; Nisbett, 2003; Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). Increasingly, researchers are also examining differences within a culture among different social classes and ethnic groups (Markus & Stephens, 2017).

We are thus learning more about the extent to which social psychological laws are universal, as well as cultural differences in these laws and how they are expressed. *Cross-cultural research* is therefore extremely valuable, because it sharpens theories, either by demonstrating their universality or by demonstrating the ways in which culture influences people’s construals of themselves and the social world (see Chapter 2). We will discuss cultural differences and offer many examples of cross-cultural research throughout this book.

Why Study Social Psychology?

LO 1.4 Explain why the study of social psychology is important.

We defined social psychology as the scientific study of social influence. But why do we want to understand social influence in the first place? What difference does it make whether our behavior has its roots in the desire to be accurate or to bolster our self-esteem?

The basic answer is simple: We are curious. Social psychologists are fascinated by human social behavior and want to understand it on the deepest possible level. In a sense, all of us are social psychologists. We all live in a social environment, and we are all more than mildly curious about such issues as how we become influenced, how we influence others, and why we fall in love with some people, dislike others, and are indifferent to still others. You don’t have to be with people literally to be in a social environment. Social media is a social psychologist’s dream laboratory because it’s all there: love, anger, bullying, bragging, affection, flirting, wounds, quarrels, friending and unfriending, pride and prejudice.

Many social psychologists have another reason for studying the causes of social behavior: to contribute to the solution of social problems. This goal was present at



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Social psychology can help us study social problems and find ways to solve them. Social psychologists might study whether children who watch violence on television become more aggressive themselves—and, if so, what kind of intervention might be beneficial.

the founding of the discipline. Kurt Lewin, having barely escaped the horrors of Nazi Germany, brought to the United States his passionate interest in understanding how the transformation of his country had happened. Ever since, social psychologists have been keenly interested in their own contemporary social challenges, as you will discover reading this book. Their efforts have ranged from reducing violence and prejudice to increasing altruism and tolerance (Chapters 11 and 13). They study such pressing issues as how to induce people to conserve natural resources like water and energy, practice safe sex, or eat healthier food (Chapters 7 and SPA1). They study the effects of violence in the media (Chapter 12). They work to find effective strategies to resolve conflicts within groups—whether at work or in juries—and between nations (Chapter 9). They explore ways to raise children's intelligence through environmental interventions and better school programs, and

reduce the high school dropout rate of minority students. They study happier topics, too, such as passion, liking, and love—and what sustains them (Chapter 10).

Throughout this book, we will examine many other examples of the application of social psychology to real-world problems. For interested readers, we have included three final chapters on the environment, health, and law. We hope that by understanding the fundamental causes of behavior as social psychologists study them, you will also be better able to change your own self-defeating or misguided behavior, improve your relationships, and make better decisions.

We are now ready to begin our tour of social psychology in earnest. So far, we have been emphasizing the central theme of social psychology: the enormous power of most social situations. As researchers, our job is to ask the right questions and to find a way to capture the power of the social situation and bring it into the laboratory for detailed study. If we are adept at doing that, we will arrive at truths about human behavior that are close to being universal. And then we may be able to bring our laboratory findings into the real world—for the ultimate betterment of our society.

Summary

LO 1.1 Define social psychology and distinguish it from other disciplines.

- **Defining Social Psychology** Social psychology is defined as the scientific study of the way in which people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people. Social psychologists are interested in understanding how and why the social environment shapes the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the individual.
- **Social Psychology, Philosophy, Science, and Common Sense** Social psychologists approach the understanding of social influence differently from philosophers, journalists, or the layperson. Social psychologists develop explanations of social

influence through empirical methods, such as experiments in which the variables being studied are carefully controlled. The goal of the science of social psychology is to discover universal laws of human behavior, which is why cross-cultural research is often essential.

- **How Social Psychology Differs From Its Closest Cousins** Some social psychologists attempt to explain social behavior in terms of genetic factors that have evolved over time according to the principles of natural selection, adopting the approach of *evolutionary psychology*. Such ideas are hard to test experimentally but can generate novel hypotheses about social behavior that can be tested

scientifically. When trying to explain social behavior, personality psychologists explain the behavior in terms of the person's individual character traits. Although social psychologists would agree that personalities vary, they explain social behavior in terms of the *power of the social situation* to shape how one acts. *The level of analysis for social psychology is the individual in the context of a social situation.* In contrast, the level of analysis for sociologists is the group, institution, or society at large. Social psychologists seek to identify universal properties of human nature that make everyone susceptible to social influence regardless of their social class, gender, or culture.

LO 1.2 Summarize why it matters how people explain and interpret events, as well as their own and others' behavior.

- **The Power of the Situation** Individual behavior is powerfully influenced by the social environment, but many people don't want to believe this.
- **Underestimating the Power of the Situation** Social psychologists must contend with the *fundamental attribution error*, the tendency to explain our own and other people's behavior entirely in terms of personality traits and to underestimate the power of social influence. But social psychologists have shown time and again that social and environmental situations are usually more powerful than personality differences in determining an individual's behavior.
- **The Importance of Construal** Social psychologists have shown that the relationship between individuals and situations is a two-way street, so it is important to understand not only how situations influence individuals, but also how people *perceive and interpret* the social world and the behavior of others. These perceptions are more influential than objective aspects of the situation itself. The term *construal* refers to the world as it is interpreted by the individual.

LO 1.3 Explain what happens when people's need to feel good about themselves conflicts with their need to be accurate.

- **Where Construals Come From: Basic Human Motives** The way in which an individual construes (perceives, comprehends, and interprets) a situation is largely shaped by two basic human motives: *the need to feel good about ourselves* and *the need to be accurate*. At times these two motives tug in opposite directions; for example, when an accurate view of how we acted in a situation would reveal that we behaved selfishly.
- **The Self-Esteem Motive: The Need to Feel Good About Ourselves** Most people have a strong need to see themselves as good, competent, and decent. People often distort their perception of the world to preserve their self-esteem.
- **The Social Cognition Motive: The Need to Be Accurate** Social cognition is the study of how human beings think about the world: how they select, interpret, remember, and use information to make judgments and decisions. Individuals are viewed as trying to gain accurate understandings so that they can make effective judgments and decisions that range from which cereal to eat to whom they marry. In actuality, individuals typically act on the basis of incomplete and inaccurately interpreted information.
- **The Role of Culture** An important question is the extent to which social psychological laws are universal, as well as cultural differences in these laws and how they are expressed.

LO 1.4 Explain why the study of social psychology is important.

- **Why Study Social Psychology?** Why do social psychologists want to understand social influence? Because they are fascinated by human social behavior and want to understand it on the deepest possible level. Many social psychologists also want to contribute to the solution of social problems.

Shared Writing What Do You Think?

In this chapter you read about the fundamental attribution error. How might understanding the FAE help you do a better job predicting the future behavior of those around you?