

CHAPTER 16: SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

IF YOU LEARN ONLY FIVE THINGS IN THIS CHAPTER . . .

1. Social psychology refers to how groups influence the behavior of an individual.
2. Attribution theory refers to how we make judgments about others.
3. Obedience and conformity both refer to the influence of others on our behavior.
4. Milgram did studies in social psychology that seem to be on the ethical edge.
5. Behavior can be influenced by the presence of a group.

INTRODUCTION

The study of social psychology is one of the older branches of psychology and is an enormous area of research. This area is most concerned with how the social environment impacts an individual's behavior. As more research is performed, we develop a better sense of what social psychology is really all about. Typically, it looks at a variety of processes, including impression formation, making attributions, and interpersonal relations such as attraction, prosocial behaviors and aggression, and social influence.

Much has been made in the media about many of the findings of social research; however, the area is still filled with much uncertainty.

IMPRESSION FORMATION

The notion of **impression formation** begins with the premise that, to form an impression, we need to have a target and a perceiver. In such a situation, we often fall back on a preconceived notion of a person or a thing. This is, of course, called a **stereotype**, and it is something we use all the time to determine how we should behave or what course of action we should take.

We form stereotypes in a variety of ways, and they can be positive or negative. The problem with stereotypes is not that we form them (it is probably impossible given the enormity of the human experience not to form them) but that their consequences sometimes lead us to make choices or perform behaviors that are not appropriate.

The **cognitive-confirmation bias**, for example, has demonstrated that participants are more likely to search for information that confirms a previously learned bias than to seek information that contradicts the bias. Suppose you want to buy a particular car. You will actively seek out information that supports the good aspects of that car and will overlook information that doesn't support that choice.

Likewise, the **self-fulfilling prophecy** suggests that if you hear something good or bad about a person, you will perceive that skill in the person more than if you hadn't previously heard that information.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

One of the things that we do when we are interacting with others is to make guesses, or "**attributions**," about the causes of their behavior. We are not perfect in this process, but it doesn't stop us from doing it. We often make mistakes because of biases we have.

The **fundamental attribution error (FAE)** suggests that we tend to make attributions about causes of behavior being internal and not external. In other words, we often believe that someone does something because of who he is, not because of the situation.

The **actor-perceiver bias** is another attribution error we make. If we are doing something, we believe our behavior is due to external causes; if we are watching someone else, we believe behavior is internally motivated.

AP EXPERT TIP

Many sports announcers and reporters are guilty of the FAE when they make guesses about the causes of athletic performance.

Finally, the **self-serving bias** occurs as well, where we attribute causes of behavior to external causes if we fail and internal causes if we succeed. So if we have done well on an exam, we are smart, but if we have not done well, then the teacher made a very tough test.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

What causes **attraction**? Research has shown that proximity, affect (emotions), similarity, and reinforcement all contribute to attraction. What is interesting about this is that we are not certain which is the most important factor and which is the least. All seem to play a role in attraction, and with more research, we might better be able to tease these variables apart.

Prosocial behavior is when we engage in behavior that leads to some good outcome. **Altruism**, for example, is helping behavior that is motivated by helping others for the sake of helping. Psychologists became interested in this topic because a great deal of research done in the 1960s and 1970s suggested that people are not likely to help others unless they are alone with that person. If someone needs help and there are many people around, **diffusion of responsibility** occurs (called the **bystander effect**): the probability of someone helping another in distress decreases as the number of people available to help increases. (Interestingly, people today are slightly more likely to help because of the well-publicized research on the bystander effect.)

AGGRESSION

Aggression is behavior that is intended to inflict harm on others. We are aggressive because of frustration or anger. Typically, aggression takes place when the aggressive act does not have an immediate negative consequence. That is, we are aggressive when it appears that we can get away with it. Sometimes, that is due to what psychologists call deindividuation. **Deindividuation** is the tendency for people to lose individuality, often because one is a member of a group or because the situation warrants it.

Aggression is common in all animals. Interestingly, only mammals kill out of anger or in an organized fashion, such as war.

SOCIAL INFLUENCE

One of the biggest areas of social psychology has to do with social influence. That is, how does the situation we are in influence our behavior? **Persuasion** is one area that has attracted a great deal of attention. How are we persuaded to alter our behavior?

Several variables can persuade us to alter our behavior:

- The **source** of the information or persuasion (Is it an authority? Is it a person attractive to me?)
- **How** we are persuaded (in person or via some communication channel)
- **What** we are hearing
- Our **background**

We can be persuaded to alter our behavior in a variety of ways (through newspapers, television ads) depending on how the persuasive situation is set up. Think of the commercials on TV that are designed to persuade. The makers of these commercials are well trained in persuasion. They target these messages to a particular audience and use the techniques that work best with that audience. On channels that cater to children, for instance, the commercials are shorter (children have a short attention span) and are filled with appealing images (sweets, toys). The commercials on other channels are likewise designed.

One of the more well-studied forms of social influence is obedience. **Obedience** is performing a behavior because one is told to do so. In **Milgram's** famous study, participants "shocked" other participants because they were told to do so. Milgram argued that anyone can be obedient and that obedience is not limited to the lab. He pointed to Nazi Germany as evidence that this is so. We obey because the person telling us to do something is an authority and we assume he takes responsibility. This is not always the case, but it is part of human behavior.

Compliance and conformity are two other types of social influence. **Compliance** occurs when behavior changes because of a request, not a command or order. For instance, we may allow a salesperson to give us details about a vacuum cleaner after we have inquired about a carpet cleaning. We are more willing to listen to those details because we had initiated a request for other information. This is called **reciprocity**. Another form of compliance is the **foot-in-the-door technique**. If you comply with a small request, you may then comply with a larger request. These techniques have been known for years and have led to a large number of sales for people in the business.

Conformity is slightly different. In **conformity** situations (such as the famous study by **Asch**), participants often change behavior (and opinion) when faced with others who make a different choice. Of the numerous studies on conformity, many show that if enough people are engaging in a certain behavior or attitude, it is very difficult for others to resist that and engage in their own—unique (different)—behaviors. **Private conformity** occurs when we change our behaviors and our attitudes. **Public conformity** occurs when we just change our behavior.

GROUP PROCESSES

Much has been made of the issue of **how groups influence behavior**: Does group size matter, for instance? In fact, it does matter. People are more likely to conform in larger groups. One dissenter decreases the probability that people will conform, but group size matters. If the group is small, **social facilitation** might occur. That is, our performance can be enhanced by competing (this is why in the Olympics, people run against each other, even though they are really running against the clock).

In groups, we sometimes see social loafing. **Social loafing** occurs as one member of the group does not “carry his weight.” **Groupthink** can occur as well, where people have a desire to maintain good relations within the group. The views of the group leader are known early on, and no one is designated to voice a dissenting opinion. Thus, the group reaches a consensus it might not otherwise have reached because of a strong leader at the beginning. This will sometimes happen in juries.