ESSENTIAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

3RD EDITION

RICHARD J. CRISP & RHIANNON N. TURNER
HISTORY, METHODS AND APPROACHES

A History
Research Methods
   Archival Approaches
   Correlational Approaches
   Experimental Approaches
   Qualitative Approaches
Research Ethics
‘Social psychology … it’s all just common sense, right?’ (we pretty much guarantee someone will say to you at some point).

‘Oh’ (you can say), ‘what, like “Birds of a feather flock together?”’

‘Yes!’ they’ll say.

‘Ah, OK … like “opposites attract?”’

‘Um … yes …’

‘Hmm’, you can say, ‘Yes, two bits of “common sense” there that are completely contradictory!

In reality, as you’ll see later in this book, there is some evidence that having similar attitudes predicts attraction, but there is also evidence that people with different, but complementary, traits also get along. As social psychologists you’re going to see how things tend to be much more complex and nuanced than the ‘common sense’ approach might suggest. That’s (one of the reasons) why we need social psychology: to provide scientific tests of what people believe is common sense, and to debunk misperceptions. For instance, surely no one would apply (what they believed to be) life-threatening electric shocks to a fellow human being just because a scientist asked them to? That’s what 99.9 per cent of people believed before Stanley Milgram’s classic obedience study (common sense, right?). In fact 65 per cent of participants went all the way to administer (what they believed was) a dangerous shock to their fellow participant. Now, who could have predicted that?! So much for common sense … (you can read all about Milgram’s study in Chapter 5).

OK, that’s what the discipline’s not, so what is it? Influential social psychologist Gordon W. Allport defined social psychology as ‘an attempt to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others’ (1985, p. 3), and this is a pretty good description. Social psychology is about the world around us and the people that populate our reality and our imaginations. It involves trying to understand peoples’ behaviour in terms of both internal characteristics of the person (e.g. personality, mental processes) and external influences (the effect of the social environment). It is the study of how society, culture and context shape our behaviour, sense of self, beliefs, attitudes and ideologies.

There are important links between social psychology and a range of other disciplines (sociology, anthropology, linguistics), and it is related to all other parts of psychology (cognitive psychology, neuroscience, developmental psychology). It is, however, a distinct discipline, with a distinct emergence, history and development. A little bit of that history is what we’ll turn to next.

A HISTORY

The idea of studying social processes in a scientific manner emerged in the mid nineteenth century. French thinker Auguste Comte helped to lay the foundations for social
psychology in 1838 by arguing that society and social issues should be studied in the same scientific manner as natural science. Although it is difficult to pinpoint an exact starting point, the study of social psychology gathered pace at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1895, French writer Gustav LeBon proposed a theory of crowd behaviour, arguing that people behave badly in groups because they are controlled by a crowd mind. This work was a precursor to much later work on social influence and aggression, discussed in detail in this book, and was some of the first work to focus on the way in which the behaviour of individuals is influenced by their social context. In 1897, Norman Triplett conducted what was probably the first social psychology experiment, when he systematically compared children who completed a task alone or in the presence of others who were completing the same task. He found that performing in the presence of others led children to complete the task more quickly because it aroused a competitive instinct.

In 1908, the first two textbooks on social psychology were published. English psychologist William McDougall wrote *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, which grounded social behaviour in biology, talking about the role of instincts, which he defined as inherited or innate dispositional characteristics, in producing primary emotions (e.g. fear, anger, curiosity and tenderness) in response to stimuli in the social world. American sociologist Edward Ross wrote *Social Psychology* from a rather different perspective, focusing on more complex social phenomena such as crowd behaviour, culture, conformity and conflict.

The first half of the twentieth century saw an explosion in social psychology research. Many of the classic social psychology studies that occurred in this period are discussed in this book. In 1934, in an investigation of behaviour and attitudes of American hotel owners towards a Chinese couple (see Chapter 4 on attitudes), LaPierre found that people’s attitudes and behaviour do not always correspond with one another. In 1935, Sherif experimentally demonstrated the role of social norms in influencing people’s behaviour when they are in the presence of others (see Chapter 5 on social influence). In 1940, Hovland and Sears proposed and tested a theory that explained why people behaved aggressively, based on how people take out their frustrations about their lives on a scapegoat (see Chapter 10 on aggression).

The Second World War had a profound influence on the direction of social psychology and the need for understanding how human behaviour could lead to such terrible acts of violence, was one of the things that led to the emergence of social psychology.
social psychological theory and research. At around this time, societies began to realize that prejudice against ethnic minorities (see Chapter 8) was irrational and morally wrong (Harding, Kutner, Proshansky, & Chein, 1954). Psychologists became interested in the idea that bringing together members of different groups would lead to mutual regard and respect. The battlefield in the Second World War provided an opportunity to consider the effects of contact. Despite an official policy of segregation between black and white soldiers, combat conditions made it impossible to maintain this, as soldiers relied on one another in battle. Researchers found that white soldiers who had experienced integrated combat had more positive racial attitudes than those who did not have this experience (Singer, 1948; Stouffer Suchman, Devinney, Star, & Williams, 1949).

Research of this kind resulted in Allport’s classic text *The Nature of Prejudice*, in which he proposed the ‘contact hypothesis’, the idea that bringing different groups together would reduce prejudice, although, critically, only under certain conditions (Allport, 1954). At around the same time, a series of classic studies were conducted by Sherif and colleagues looking at group dynamics, at a summer camp for boys (Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Sherif, White, & Harvey, 1955). This research demonstrated two of the key conditions for intergroup contact to reduce prejudice – cooperation and common goals – as well as providing the basis for a classic theory of intergroup conflict: realistic group conflict theory (see Chapter 8 on prejudice).

Events during the Second World War also generated research on conformity, in an attempt to understand events in Nazi Germany. Asch (1956) experimentally investigated the impact of group members on the individual while, in one of the most famous social psychology experiments, Milgram (1963) explored why people follow orders, even where those orders involve causing harm to other people (see Chapter 5 on social influence). At around the same time, Adorno and colleagues (1950), in their research on the authoritarian personality, considered whether people with a certain type of personality were more likely to behave with prejudice towards others.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, through to the present day, research on social psychology has continued to expand rapidly and diversify. The 1960s saw research on a diverse range of topics, including aggression (see Chapter 10), prosocial behaviour (see Chapter 11) and interpersonal relationships (see Chapters 12 and 13), while the role of cognition in social psychology came to the fore in the 1970s (see Chapter 3 on social cognition). In this book, we talk about classic theory and research from the first half of the twentieth century right through to research that is hot off the press.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

Social psychology is now a huge discipline, published in over 100 journals such as *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.
History, Methods and Approaches

Psychology, European Journal of Social Psychology, British Journal of Social Psychology and Journal of Applied Social Psychology (as well as general psychology journals such as Psychological Science, Psychological Bulletin and Science). These journals, for the most part, publish the results of social psychological research – scientific studies of social behaviour. By this, we mean that the majority of research involves the systematic testing of hypotheses that are based on previous observations, research or theories (although there are exceptions to this basic approach, as we will discuss below).

As you’ll see throughout this book, there are a diverse range of methods available to social psychologists in order to test their ideas about social behaviour. Here we briefly describe some of these methods, along with their advantages and disadvantages. Hypotheses are testable predictions made by a theory. The stuff of social psychology is testing hypotheses. A theory is an integrated set of principles that explain and predict observed events. A good theory will generate predictable behaviours that will provide unambiguous evidence for the central tenets of the theory. It will also be able to organize and predict a wide range of observations, and provide a fertile ground to generate a range of new directions of investigation. Ideally the theory will also be able to signpost potential applications for society and social issues. A good example of a theory in social psychology is social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory proposes that our social behaviour is, in part, determined by our beliefs about the groups we belong to. This simple idea generates a whole range of predictions: from the notion that we are therefore invested in our groups looking good (and so we engage in ingroup-favouring competition with other groups), to the notion that we will be more easily persuaded to change our attitude when the person trying to persuade us shares our social identity. The theory provides testable predictions and has generated a great number of empirical studies, and further theories (sometimes complementary, sometimes oppositional). We’ll learn more about social identity theory later on, and especially in Chapters 7 and 8.

So once we have developed a theory, how do we go about testing it? There are a range of approaches, which largely conform to the scientific method (see Figure 1.1) and which we summarize below. Some of these approaches are quantitative, that is they involve the collection of numerical data which can be analysed using statistical methods. Other approaches are qualitative, and involve collecting and analysing data that is not numeric. This might include closely inspecting, interpreting and analysing what is said in diaries, focus groups and interviews. Below we outline methods that fall into each of these general approaches.

Archival Approaches

The first way that social psychologists can observe social phenomena is not actually to collect any data at all. Archival approaches involve testing hypotheses by looking at existing data, often data that was collected for a different purpose. This is particularly useful when researchers are interested in the effect of societal events on behaviour,
particularly when those events occurred in the past. In Chapter 10, for
instance, we talk about archival research conducted by Hovland and
Sears (1940). They analysed existing data to investigate whether the
number of lynchings of blacks in the American South increased during
times of economic crisis, assessed by looking at cotton prices and eco-
nomic growth from 1882 and 1930. Another good example of archival
analysis is Janis’s (1982) analysis of ‘GroupThink’ – the conditions
that lead to catastrophic breakdowns of group decision making, evident
in historical events such as the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster
(see Chapter 5). Despite its advantages, the main problem with this sort
of data is that because it is usually not collected with social psychology
in mind, potentially useful information might not be available.

**Correlational Approaches**

The first approach that fully complies with the scientific method as
outlined in Figure 1.1 is correlational research. Correlational research
involves measuring two or more variables and examining how they
relate to one another. Correlations are often obtained by adminis-
tering a survey, a research method that involves asking participants to
respond to a series of questions, either through interviews (in which a
researcher asks participants questions face to face or over the phone,
and then records their answers) or through questionnaires (in which par-
ticipants provide written responses to a series of questions on paper).
For instance, Pettigrew (1997) investigated the relationship between
cross-group friendships and prejudice across several European coun-
tries using a survey, and found a strong correlation between the number
of cross-group friendships a participant had and their level of prejudice
towards a range of minority groups. The correlation that emerged was
negative: the more cross-group friends a participant had, the less
prejudice they showed (for more on this, see Chapter 8). An example of a
positive correlation would be where the more cross-group friends one
has, the more they trust the outgroup. This research highlights a clear
advantage of correlational survey research: surveys can be administered
to a very large sample with relative ease and at little expense. Moreover,
because they can be administered on a large scale, researchers can be
confident that their findings can be generalized rather than being spe-
cific to one group of participants. A key downside is that, because there
is no experimental manipulation, it is impossible to determine causal
direction (in the case of Pettigrew’s study, one cannot assign participants to have either
low or high numbers of cross-group friends!). Put another way, we cannot be sure that it
is having more outgroup friends that leads to reduced prejudice: it could be just as likely
History, Methods and Approaches

that people who are highly prejudiced avoid making friends in other groups, because they do not like those groups to begin with. Another downside to questionnaires is that if they are not very carefully designed, they can be misinterpreted by participants, and there is no experimenter present to correct these misinterpretations. There are also a number of response biases: participants have a tendency to blindly agree with positively worded questions, and frequently fail to use the full range of possible responses (e.g. sticking to mid-range responses like ‘I don’t know’ or ‘sometimes’, or alternatively always using the extreme responses on a scale like ‘Strongly agree’ or ‘Strongly disagree’).

A Correlational Study

Voci and Hewstone (2003) undertook a survey of Italian students’ experiences with, and views of, African immigrants in their country. In particular, the researchers wanted to test the hypothesis, derived from intergroup contact theory (see Chapter 8), that people who had experienced positive, high-quality contact would show more positive attitudes towards immigrants, and that this relationship might occur because those with positive contact experience might be less anxious about interacting with immigrants. In all, 310 students from two Italian universities completed the survey.

Intergroup contact was operationalized by averaging participants’ responses across four questions measuring quantity of contact (e.g. ‘How many people from Africa do you know?’ on a five-point scale that ranged from ‘None’ to ‘More than 10’) and three questions measuring quality of contact (e.g. ‘When you meet African immigrants, in general do you find the contact pleasant?’ on a five-point scale ranging from ‘Not at all’ to ‘Very’). As Voci and Hewstone were interested in participants’ amount of high-quality contact, average scores across these two sets of items were multiplied. To measure intergroup anxiety, participants were asked: ‘In a hypothetical situation in Italy, how would you feel if you were the only Italian among a group of strangers all of whom had come from Africa?’ Respondents had to indicate how they would feel in terms of five adjectives, including ‘awkward’ and ‘self-conscious’ on a five-point scale from ‘Not at all’ to ‘Very’. Attitude towards immigrants was operationalized by asking respondents to rate how warm (versus cold), positive (versus negative) and friendly (versus hostile) they felt towards African immigrants, a measure developed by Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp (1997).

Voci and Hewstone’s findings supported their hypotheses. Students who had experienced more high-quality contact with Africans also held more positive attitudes towards Africans in general. Moreover, the relationship between contact and attitude was explained by reduced intergroup anxiety. That is, contact was negatively correlated with anxiety (people with more positive contact experience were
Experimental Approaches

Correlational studies are relatively easy to administer, and can provide a lot of data that establishes key relationships. However, as noted above they are limited with respect to interpreting causality. The second method of data collection that conforms to the scientific method – and which enables researchers to infer causality – is the experimental approach. An experiment involves manipulating one variable, which we call the independent variable, and then seeing whether this has an effect on a second variable, which we refer to as the dependent variable. We describe many experiments in this book. In Chapter 7, for instance, we describe an experiment conducted by Scheier and Carver (1977) in which the independent variable, self-awareness, was manipulated by having participants either watch themselves in a mirror or not. These two levels of self-awareness (mirror present: high self-awareness; mirror not present: low self-awareness) formed the two experimental conditions. The researchers predicted that people would have more extreme emotional responses in the high self-awareness condition than in the low self-awareness condition, showing that self-awareness leads to more extreme emotional responses. Participants’ self-reported emotions were therefore measured to see if this was the case; these emotions provided the dependent variable in the experiment.
Types of Dependent Measure: Implicit vs Explicit

Until quite recently, research on prejudice was reliant on explicit outgroup attitude measures. *Explicit attitudes* are conscious, deliberative and controllable, and are usually captured by traditional measures in which participants report how positive or negative their attitudes, feelings or stereotypes are towards members of another group. Although such measures have been used widely in investigations of prejudice, they have one inevitable limitation: they are influenced by social desirability (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Plant & Devine, 1998). We have a general desire to be perceived positively by others. At the same time, there is a strong contemporary norm for equality and intergroup tolerance. It may therefore be the case that people do not report their true intergroup attitudes because they fear that those attitudes are not socially desirable. To some extent, this problem has been dealt with by getting participants to complete questionnaires anonymously. However, it may be that people do not want to admit the extent of their prejudices, even to themselves.

Recently, however, the development of new technologies has allowed us to use implicit attitude measures. *Implicit attitudes* are attitudes that are unintentionally activated by the mere presence (actual or symbolic) of an attitude object. Implicit attitudes are thought to develop through repeated pairings of a category (e.g. an ethnic or gender group) and an evaluation (e.g. positive or negative), and have been assessed using a variety of tasks, including response latency procedures, priming tasks, memory tasks and physiological measures (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Beach, 2001). Two frequently used measures are the implicit association test (IAT; Greenwald, McGee, & Schwartz, 1998) and the ‘bona fide pipeline’, or evaluative priming procedure (e.g. Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). The IAT is a response latency task which identifies the speed at which participants can categorize positive or negative stimuli alongside ingroup or outgroup stimuli (e.g. names or faces). It typically
shows that people find it easier to associate their own group (compared with the outgroup) with positive stimuli, and the outgroup (compared with the ingroup) with negative stimuli, indicating implicit intergroup bias (for a demonstration see the website implicit.harvard.edu). The evaluative priming task involves subliminally presenting either ingroup or outgroup stimuli before participants are presented with positive or negative stimuli which they have to categorize as quickly as possible. People typically show a bias favouring their own group, responding more quickly to positive words after ingroup priming but negative words after outgroup priming.

There are some important differences between implicit and explicit attitudes. First, because they do not require participants to report their attitudes directly, implicit attitudes are less likely to be influenced by social desirability than are explicit measures. Thus they are particularly interesting to study in the context of proscribed prejudice towards certain social groups. Second, Wilson, Lindsey, and Schooler (2000) proposed that while explicit attitudes change relatively easily, implicit attitudes are like old habits, which are much more difficult to change. Consequently, they argued, attitude change techniques are more likely to change explicit attitudes than implicit attitudes. Third, although explicit and implicit prejudices both influence behaviour, they do so in different ways. While explicit attitude measures are associated with deliberative behaviours (Fazio et al., 1995), implicit measures are associated with subtle, indirect and spontaneous non-verbal behaviours (e.g. McConnell & Leibold, 2001). Implicit attitudes are also thought to be more closely associated with specific brain regions; the IAT is increasingly used in conjunction with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to establish biological correlates of attitudinal associations.

The degree to which implicit and explicit attitudes are related to one another is thought to vary systematically depending on whether participants have the motivation and opportunity to control their explicit attitudes (Fazio & Olson, 2003; Wilson et al., 2000). There should be greater explicit–implicit consistency for issues where there is low motivation to exert control over the attitude compared with socially sensitive issues on which
participants feel the need to respond in a socially desirable manner (Swanson, Rudman, & Greenwald, 2001). In line with this prediction, Turner, Hewstone, and Voci (2007b) have found that implicit and explicit intergroup bias among South Asian and white British participants were correlated only in a context of explicit intergroup conflict, perhaps when participants felt that there was a justifiable reason to openly express negative explicit intergroup attitudes.

**Laboratory Experiments**

The majority of social psychology experiments are conducted in a laboratory, often a designated room in which participants can be tested or observed. In some studies, the laboratory will be equipped with televisions, video cameras, computer monitors, microphones or other experimental apparatus (e.g. Berkowitz & LePage’s 1967 study on the effect of weapons on aggression, in Chapter 10). In other cases, the laboratory is a simple room with a table and chair where participants fill out a questionnaire. The benefit of conducting a laboratory experiment is that conditions can be highly controlled. Within the confines of the laboratory, everything (e.g. environment, temperature, instructions given by the researcher) apart from the independent variable can be held constant. That way, if changes in the independent variable are accompanied by changes in the dependent variable, we can be fairly confident that it is the independent variable that caused changes in the dependent variable, rather than a confounding variable. Experiments can be described as being high on **internal validity**. Because they are conducted in such a controlled environment, they can be replicated. If a researcher uses exactly the same method and finds the same results, there can be greater confidence that the effect is a genuine social phenomenon rather than a chance, one-off finding. Outside the laboratory, on the other hand, it is much more difficult to create exactly the same conditions to replicate a study.

As you’ll see in this book, laboratory experiments have been used to study a wide range of social phenomena and have formed the basis for a number of highly influential theories. The method does, however, have its limitations. First, although the high degree of control over conditions allows us to infer causality from the findings, it also makes the experiment rather artificial. In other words, experiments lack **external validity**. Ultimately, social psychologists are interested in why people behave the way they do as a result of the social context in which they exist, and that social context is not present in the laboratory. As a result, it may not be easy to apply something that occurs in very controlled conditions in a laboratory to behaviour that occurs naturally in the ‘real world’. Having said that, many argue that experiments are the best way to confirm or
refute theories about social behaviour. Once an effect has been established in controlled conditions, researchers can then go on to investigate it in a more applied setting.

Another limitation is susceptibility to demand characteristics (Orne, 1962), information that participants pick up from the experimental context that leads them to guess what the experimenter is predicting will happen. When this happens, they may consciously alter their behaviour to conform to what they believe the researcher is looking for. If this happens, a researcher’s hypothesis might be inadvertently supported by the results of an experiment even when that hypothesis is incorrect. Social psychology experiments are susceptible to problems of this nature because, unlike in the natural sciences, they involve people. Although almost every aspect of the environment in which the participant finds themselves can be controlled, the internal mental processes of participants

An Example of Experimental Control - Nominal Groups

Some would say that what happens when we are in groups defines the essence of social psychology. When we work with others, or sometimes when we are simply in the presence of others, this fundamentally changes who we are, how we think and what we do. Social psychologists aim to understand how groups affect our behaviour, and one possibility is that working in a group has ‘added value’; that is, each individual group member’s contribution is higher than if they were simply working on their own. To test this, however, we cannot simply compare the effectiveness of individuals’ performance on their own with their performance in a group. If we did this, then the effectiveness of the groups may simply be higher because there are more people involved. To investigate the ‘added value’ hypothesis experimenters would have to create what are called ‘nominal groups’. As an example imagine a psychologist is studying the effectiveness of groups of four people in brainstorming. One condition would use real groups, that is four people sitting together face to face discussing ideas and recording them collectively. The other condition would use nominal groups – simply the combination of the four unique ideas produced by four individuals working alone. So a nominal group is the combination of ideas produced by the same number of individuals who would comprise the actual group. Crucially, the nominal group involves no actual group interaction and so provides the perfect control group; in nominal groups the individual group member element is present, but not the actual presence of others. In this way researchers are able to isolate experimentally any difference in performance that arises from the unique, emergent properties of being in a group.
cannot. Experimenters themselves may also pose a risk to the validity of an experiment. **Experimenter effects** are subtle cues or signals that are given out by an experimenter who knows the experimental hypotheses. Although it is unlikely that the experimenter realizes that they are doing so, body language (e.g., hand gestures, eye movements) and vocal cues like the tone of their voice may inadvertently affect the performance or response of participants in the experiment. The best solution to this problem is to use a **double-blind** procedure, where the person running the experiment does not know what the hypotheses are, or does not know which condition (i.e., which level of the independent variable) the participant is in.

**Field Experiments**

Experiments are not always confined to the laboratory. They can also be conducted in naturalistic settings. We describe many field experiments in this book. In Chapter 11, for instance, we describe a study conducted by Bryan and Test (1967) which investigated whether we model our behaviour on the behaviour of others. Specifically, they found that people driving down a road were more likely to stop and help a stranded motorist on the side of the road if they had previously observed another stranded motorist being helped by a passer-by than if they had not observed such a situation. Field experiments have greater external validity than laboratory experiments. They are also less likely to be subject to demand characteristics because participants typically have no idea they are taking part in a study.

The drawback of this type of research is that the situation is not nearly as controlled as a laboratory experiment. This makes it difficult to rule out the impact of external influences. In the case of Bryan and Test’s (1967) experiment, for example, it may have been that the weather was nicer or the traffic calmer when they were running the ‘modelling’ condition. If this was the case, the argument could be made that people stopped to help the stranded motorist because they were in a better mood or less stressed at this particular point in time.

Another problem with field experiments is that it is not always possible to assign participants randomly to conditions; in some studies participants may have selected their own condition. In Chapter 13, we discuss a field experiment conducted by Dutton and Aron (1974) in which male participants were stopped by a female experimenter while crossing either a high rope bridge over a canyon or a low bridge over a stream. They found that men crossing the high bridge were more likely to be attracted to the female while on the high bridge than the low bridge, which they explained in terms of a misattribution of physiological arousal experienced by participants. In this study, however, participants selected their own condition; they had chosen to cross either the low or high bridge. As a consequence, any effect of the independent on the dependent variable may be explained by differences between the participants across experimental conditions. Put another way, one might argue that men who chose to cross the low bridge were less adventurous – and therefore less sexually adventurous and less confident about approaching women – than men crossing the high bridge.
Qualitative Approaches

Although experiments are the best way of determining cause and effect, there are a variety of circumstances where they are not practically feasible. There are, for instance, many situations in which the independent variable cannot be manipulated. If we are interested in how gender, ethnicity or age affects behaviour we cannot randomly assign participants to different conditions. Moreover, for social psychologists who are interested in looking at psychological phenomena on a broader societal level (e.g. Pettigrew’s 1997 investigation of ethnic prejudice across Europe, discussed in Chapter 8), experiments may not be the most informative approach. There are, however, a number of alternative methods available to social psychologists that address these issues.

Archival, correlational and experimental approaches are all examples of the quantitative approach to data collection in social psychology. However, there is also another approach that is based upon an entirely different set of principles. Qualitative research rejects positivism (the idea that the data we collect about the world can ever be truly objective). It is based upon the idea that researchers are not simply passive observers of research, capable of inhibiting the impact of their own attitudes, values, opinions and...
beliefs on their interpretation of the world. As such, in contrast to quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers do not take huge pains to separate themselves, as the observer, from the data collection context. In other words, the researchers are participants in the study, along with the people they are investigating. In qualitative research the researcher, their attitudes, values, opinions and beliefs are embraced as important contextual information that is essential for the interpretation of the data (qualitative researchers argue that despite their attempts to minimize the impact of their own views on the data, quantitative researchers can never achieve this, so their data is less informative because of this). For instance, if a qualitative researcher wanted to investigate norms of a specific group (e.g. bikers) they would take time to meet with members of that group, becoming part of the culture, and adopt the rules and conventions for behaviour in that setting. The argument is that by doing so the researcher has a much better, richer understanding of the behaviour observed, and can interpret it with first-hand knowledge of the context, rules and norms within which it takes place.

Forms of qualitative data collection include structured and semi-structured research interviews, focus groups, observation and reflection on field notes. The data is often categorized once it is transcribed (e.g. in the case of an interview). Sometimes qualitative research is used in combination with quantitative research: for instance, to provide an initial investigation into a new group or social context, observing or participating in the culture at hand, before then formulating quantitative studies based on surveys or experimental laboratory-based approaches. Some of the most used qualitative approaches are ethnographic research (an approach that entails collecting data that aims to develop theory about systems of meaning in different cultures), grounded theory (an approach that is ‘grounded’ in the observations that are used to form the theory) and critical social psychology (the exploration of how language and culture affect how people communicate meaning). A good example of the latter is discursive psychology. It is a form of discourse analysis that aims to understand how language use in natural and laboratory-based settings can teach us about the workings of the human mind. Another approach that rejects the mainstream positivist approach and draws upon philosophical and sociological ideas is social constructionism. This theory argues that meaning and reality are ‘constructed’ through social interaction (and cannot be treated as an independent psychological phenomenon within the individual). It argues that people rationalize their experiences by continually and dynamically updating a model of the world and how it functions, and that this model is constructed through language and social interaction.

RESEARCH ETHICS

Regardless of the method used to conduct research in social psychology, because it involves people social psychologists need to be aware of a number of ethical issues. To ensure that research is not physically or psychologically harmful to participants, in 1972
the American Psychological Association put in place a set of principles for ethical
conduct to guide psychologists when designing their research.

**Participant Welfare:** It is essential that the physical and psychological welfare of par-
ticipants is protected. Although it is not too difficult to determine whether or not a study
causes physical harm to a participant, it is less easy to determine the extent of psychological
harm. For instance, Milgram’s (1963) obedience studies (described in Chapter 5) did not
cause physical harm to participants, but participants may have learnt something not very
pleasant about themselves (that they would cause physical harm to others if instructed to)
which may have had a negative psychological impact. Even in much less controversial
studies, it is often necessary to use procedures that could cause some degree of psycholo-
gical harm. Denigrating participants’ performance on a task in order to elicit anger may,
for example, lead to temporarily depressed self-esteem (e.g. Carver & Glass, 1978, in
Chapter 10). Where this is the case, efforts should be made to ensure that the negative
psychological impact of the research is inconsequential and short-lived.

**Deception:** To avoid the problems caused by demand characteristics, it is important
that participants are blind to the aims of the study. For this reason, many social psycho-
logy studies involve some degree of deception. Milgram (1963), for example, deceived
participants by making them believe that they were really administering electric shocks.
This was necessary in order to see whether participants would really cause harm in order
to obey the experimenter. Many experiments also use a *confederate*, someone who is
ostensibly a participant in the experiment but who is actually an ‘actor’, following a script
designed by the experimenter in order to test a particular hypothesis. Because so many
experiments involve essentially lying to participants, deception is often seen as a contro-
versial aspect of social psychological research. However, most deception is of a trivial
nature, participants are told the full purpose of the experiment after completion, and there
is no evidence that deception causes long-term harm.

** Confidentiality:** Participants in social psychology research are often required to disclose
information of a personal or intimate nature. To reassure participants that this information
will not be used against them in any way, social psychologists need to inform participants
that data derived from their participation will be completely confidential. In other words,
the researcher will not share this information with anyone else. The anonymity of partic-
ipants is also usually safeguarded by identifying them with a number rather than a name.

** Informed Consent and Debriefing:** It is normal practice to obtain informed consent
from individuals prior to their participation in a study. That is, participants provide their
full and voluntary consent in writing. They are also informed that they can withdraw
from the experiment at any time. Following the experiment, participants need to be fully
debriefed. This involves telling them the true purpose of the experiment, and so is partic-
ularly important where deception was involved. It also gives experimenters the opportuni-
ty to demonstrate the importance and relevance of the research, and gives participants
the opportunity to learn something about social psychology.
CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter we provided a brief history of social psychology and the major world events (like the Second World War) that stimulated intense and sustained interest in the scientific study of social behaviour. We summarized the core elements of the scientific method, from independent to dependent variables. We outlined the pros and cons of different approaches to the study of social behaviour, from archival, through correlational, to experimental approaches, as well as qualitative approaches such as discursive psychology. Finally, we discussed the importance of research ethics in the conduct of psychology studies.

So that’s a brief outline of the history, methods and approaches in social psychology. These sorts of studies are central to how social psychologists study thought and behaviour, so we’ll use them quite a bit to illustrate the topics we cover in the chapters that follow. Now you’ll know what we’re talking about when we go on about experiments, dependent variables, confederates and correlations. One final thing before you set off: social psychology is not only critically important for understanding the world in which we live, but its also a whole lot of fun. We hope you find the topics we’ve written about as fascinating as we do. In an age where we’ve mapped the human genome and pretty much worked out everything there is to know about the physical world, the study of peoples’ behaviour is perhaps the final frontier of scientific discovery. We know quite a lot about social thought and action, but there’s a lot we don’t know. Your ideas about social psychology could well be the next big thing.

Try This

Try designing your own experiment. It’s easy – pick something you’re interested in (e.g. some issue that has grabbed your attention in the news, some aspect about human behaviour you’ve always wondered about). Is there a question about the issue you’d like to see answered? First, think about your independent variable – what are you going to expose your participants to, and what’s going to be your control condition? Then, what’s your outcome variable of interest – what’s your dependent measure? Is your study ethical? If you find what you expect, are there any alternative explanations for the findings? (And what would you do differently in a follow-up study?)
Debate This

It’s notable that many psychology experiments utilize undergraduate students as participants. Can we generalize from this sample to the population at large? Can we generalize cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes (i.e. the way we think)? Can we generalize specific beliefs and attitudes? To what extent do you think the specific characteristics of your typical undergraduate psychology student (age, gender, background, etc.) make them unique compared with members of the broader population?

Something for the Weekend

Which methodology is best when it comes to understanding social behaviour? Should we be using qualitative or quantitative approaches? On the one hand quantitative approaches provide clear, numeric, replicable results, and can enable us to make inferences about causality. On the other hand, they can be criticized for being artificial, and only pseudo-objective – can the researcher ever really prevent their own (perhaps implicit) attitudes influencing their interpretation of the data? Qualitative approaches embrace this inherent link between the researcher and the context, and provide much richer data – but they do not conform to all the procedures laid out by quantitative approaches designed to help isolate variables of interest, and establish replicability and causality.

Further Reading

The Essentials


This is a great in-depth account of the emergence, history and development of social psychology as a scientific discipline.

Next Steps


This one will give you a detailed exploration of the different ways that experiments can be constructed to test social psychology hypotheses.
Delving Deeper


If you'd like to know more about field studies and qualitative approaches, this article and this book will give you an excellent grounding.