1
An Introduction to Social Psychology
Core Questions

1. What is social psychology?
2. What are the big questions within social psychology?
3. Is science a valid way to learn about complex social behavior?
4. How can social psychology make my life better now?

- A man on the street suddenly appears to have a seizure, but none of the people around you seem concerned. What would you do—stop to help or just keep walking?
- You and seven other people seated around a table are all looking at several lines on a board. A man asks each person in the group to identify which line is the longest, and you can tell immediately that it’s the fourth line. However, the first person to answer says it’s the second line—and so does everyone else. Your turn to answer is coming up. What would you do—say what you think is correct or go along with the group to avoid social embarrassment?
- After volunteering to help a research study on memory and learning, you’re told that you have to give another volunteer higher levels of electric shocks each time he or she gets a question wrong—even if this person starts crying out that he or she has a heart condition. What would you do?

These scenes aren’t from the popular reality television show, What Would You Do? on ABC. They are real experiments in social psychology. So what do you think that you would do in each situation? If you are like most people, you probably answered, “I would help the man who collapsed even if no one else appeared concerned,” “I would report the correct line despite everyone else,” and “I would not administer painful electric shocks to an innocent person!” Your beliefs about yourself would probably be noble, flattering, self-esteem enhancing—and they might be wrong.

When these situations were presented to real people in controlled experiments, a high percentage did not help the man who had a seizure when other people were around (Darley & Latané, 1968). Many people did cave to peer pressure when reporting the length of the line (Asch, 1956).
And a frightening number of people delivered what they believed were increasingly severe levels of painful electric shocks (Milgram, 1963, 1974). Would your behavior be different from theirs?

Get ready for an exciting ride of self-discovery as you enter the strange, fascinating, revealing—and perhaps familiar—world of social psychology.

WHAT IS SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY?

LO 1.1: Explain what social psychology is and what social psychologists do.

When most people think about psychology, two images come to mind. The first and most common is probably people with mental illnesses or personal problems in a therapy setting, perhaps talking about their concerns while they recline on a couch. The second might be scientists in lab coats, watching mice run through mazes and timing how quickly they find a reward of cheese. Both images represent important chapters in psychology’s story, but neither one is social psychology.

Defining Social Psychology

Social psychology is the scientific study of how people influence each other’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Social influence can be obvious; a robber with a gun clearly wants to influence you to hand over your money. But it can also be subtle; advertisers try to influence you with simple images or jingles that get stuck in your head. We can even be influenced by people who are not physically present; the memory of our parents’ or friends’ proud smiles and wishes for our future may change how we act in morally ambiguous situations. In addition, we are often influenced without even realizing it by our culture, national standards, social expectations, and our local community norms.

Social Thinking, Social Influence, and Social Behavior. Social psychology focuses on three main areas: social thinking, social influence, and social behavior. Each of these overlapping areas of study is displayed in Figure 1.1. The circles overlap because, in our everyday lives, these three forces blend together as they influence us. The first section of this book covers social thinking, including topics such as how we define the self and how we think about people in the world around us. The second section covers social influence and asks questions about conformity, prejudice, and persuasion. Third, chapters on social behavior discuss helping, aggression, and romantic relationships. This book thus explores each part individually and then reunites them in several mini-chapters on various applied psychology topics.

Social psychology is popular as both a college course and as a career path. But, it is still a young science compared to many other disciplines; it’s only been around for about 100 years, give or take a few decades. The American Psychological Association has a separate division for social and personality psychology, and there are two separate professional organizations just for social psychologists (the Society for Personality and Social Psychology and the Society of Experimental Social Psychology). There are over 200 textbooks just on social psychology (including this one!), and 185 schools offered graduate degrees in social psychology at the time this book was published—and that’s counting only programs in the United States!
Social psychologists are active around the world, and collaborations across different cultures are becoming more frequent now that we can communicate and share data electronically. It is an exciting time to be engaged with social psychology, both personally and professionally. Who knows? By the end of this book, you may even want to become a social psychologist.

**Similar, but Different, Fields That Study Human Social Behavior.** Another way to understand the field of social psychology is to compare and contrast it with other academic disciplines that study human social relationships. For example, sociology also studies social behaviors but does so from a group level. Sociologists focus on how groups change over time, how cultures evolve, how stereotypes affect social norms, and so on. Social psychologists study the same concepts but measure their effects on individuals. While a sociologist might consider examples of how a particular subculture is geared toward cooperation or aggression, social psychology will measure how cooperative or aggressive each person is and attempt to investigate causes and outcomes on the individual level.

Another field that’s similar is anthropology, which is the study of culture and human behavior over time. Anthropologists typically focus on one particular culture at a time and try to understand it by describing it in detail—that is why their research methods are typically observational. In contrast, social psychology’s research methods again usually focus on individual behaviors and ideally make use of experimental methods (see Chapter 2 for more on research methods). Thus, an anthropologist might observe a particular village of children in terms of their aggressive behavior and consider how culture affects aggression. A social psychologist might form a hypothesis about what increases aggression and then attempt to manipulate aggression (temporarily and safely, of course) through experimental research designs.

Finally, even within psychology, there are divisions and subfields that focus on different aspects of human behavior. When most people think of psychology, they think of clinical or counseling psychology, which helps people who have mental illnesses or problematic thoughts and behaviors to be healthier. If mental illness and unhealthy patterns are considered “abnormal psychology,” then social psychology is the focus on “normal” behaviors seen in everyone. Importantly, this means that social psychology focuses on negative, problematic behaviors such as aggression, discrimination, and so forth—but it also includes positive behaviors such as empathy, cooperation, creativity, positive self-esteem, systematic group decision making, and overcoming social obstacles. Throughout its history, social psychologists have consistently studied what is now called positive psychology, the scientific study of human strengths and virtues.

**How Social Psychology Was Born: A Brief History**

If there’s a birthplace for psychology, it’s Germany and Austria. About 150 years ago, Wilhelm Wundt started the first scientific laboratory specifically designed to apply the scientific method to understanding human thought and experience. Due to this pioneering research, many now consider Wundt the informal “father of psychology.” About 20 years later, Sigmund Freud was becoming famous in Vienna, Austria, for his controversial theories about how childhood experiences change adult personality and how our hidden thoughts come out in dreams.
Both Wundt and Freud were asking questions about personality, individual perceptions of the world, and how culture affects thought. Over the next few decades, most Europeans who considered themselves psychologists were interested in explaining abnormal behavior (like Freud) or in basic thought processes like sensory perceptions or memory (like Wundt). Meanwhile, most psychologists in the United States studied nonhuman animals (usually pigeons and rats) because their behavior was easy to observe and measure. These “behaviorists” believed that this more scientific approach would be a better strategy for understanding human behavior than speculating about hidden, internal concepts such as the superego or collective unconscious or even more familiar concepts such as personality, prejudice, or persuasion. But World Wars I and II changed the trajectory of psychology forever.

Kurt Lewin: Social Psychology’s Pioneer

If Wilhelm Wundt is the “father of psychology,” then perhaps the “father of social psychology” is Kurt Lewin. Lewin was born in Poland and came from a conventional, Jewish, middle-class family that valued education (see Marrow, 1969). However, Lewin did not start out as a great student. Instead, he was an absent-minded, habitually late, mechanically inclined tinkerer who loved long, friendly conversations. He began to show some academic promise late in high school and first considered becoming a country doctor. But Lewin’s interests wandered across many topics (which should be comforting to anyone reading this book who is struggling to find a career path). He was also a courageous college activist who organized students to teach working-class people—including women, which was controversial at the time—for free. Those were dangerous activities, especially for a Jewish student.

World War I arrived as a shock when it gave the world its first taste of industrialized warfare. That war started with lances carried by soldiers charging forward on horses and ended with long-distance snipers, terrifying tanks, planes dropping bombs, and the horror of poison gas spreading with the wind across a battlefield. Having completed most of his studies, Lewin joined the German army, where he became a trench soldier for 4 years. He was wounded and awarded the Iron Cross, but his brother died in that conflict. Germany lost the war. As the Nazis then rose to power in the buildup to World War II, Lewin sensed the growing danger and urged his mother to flee with him to America. She refused, confident that Germany would respect a mother who had lost one son and claimed a second as a wounded war hero. Sadly, she probably died in one of the concentration camps.

As a World War I soldier, Lewin had published his thoughts about what today we call “social perception.” He observed that the land that many soldiers experienced as a terrifying battlefield was merely a pleasant nature scene to a civilian viewing it from a distance. Nothing had changed except the individual’s perceptions. Lewin also pointed out that burning fine furniture made sense for a soldier trying to survive a bitterly cold night but it was a terrible, destructive deed in peacetime. One of social psychology’s central insights is that the same behavior can have different meanings depending on the situation and the private viewpoint of the individual.

After the first war, Lewin became a teacher who inspired loyalty in colleagues and students in ways that would have astonished Wilhelm Wundt and Sigmund Freud. Lewin encouraged everyone to “express different (and differing) opinions [and] never imposed either discipline or loyalty on his students and colleagues” (Marrow, 1969, p. 27). Instead, Lewin won people’s respect without trying to by listening carefully, honoring their perceptions,
and then connecting their ideas to his own intellectual enthusiasms. A simple conversation with Kurt Lewin could become a memorable experience. British psychologist Eric Trist described Lewin as having “a sense of musical delight in ideas.” He also reported once having to push Lewin onto a moving train that he was about to miss because he was too distracted by their conversation (Marrow, 1969, p. 69).

The shadow of World War I and the growing cruelty of anti-Semitism in Europe propelled Lewin (and several influential colleagues) to immigrate to the United States. He became one of the first people to experimentally study how people’s behavior changes based on their group environment. For example, Lewin asked young boys to work on group projects with adult leaders who exhibited three very different leadership styles: (1) democratic, where the leader provided a lot of structure but the boys were allowed to give input; (2) laissez-faire, where the leader was generally absent and provided no guidance at all; and (3) authoritarian or fascist, where the leader commanded the boys with orders and maintained tight control.

If those three comparison groups sound familiar, it is because Lewin was both personally and professionally interested in comparing the democratic leadership of the United States—Lewin’s newly adopted home—to the fascist regime of Hitler. As Lewin hoped and hypothesized, when the boys worked under the democratic leader, they were the happiest and performed good-quality work—although they also were less efficient than the authoritarian-led group at finishing their work (Lewin, 1939).

Lewin’s equation: $B = f(P, E)$

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<tr>
<th>TABLE 1.1</th>
<th>Many Important Social Psychologists Have Been Women and/or People of Color</th>
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<td>Mary Whiton Calkins</td>
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<td>Muzafar Sherif</td>
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Behavior (B) is a function of both personality (P) and the environment (E). Social psychologists use these two criteria to predict behavior but usually start with "environment" and use "personality" to get even more specific.

Lewin unfortunately died in 1947, only a few years after the war ended. However, the effects of war on Lewin's pioneering work are reflected in the chapter contents of this and every other social psychology textbook: aggression, prejudice, persuasion, and pro-social behavior. Lewin's famous conclusion was that every person's behavior is based on "the state of the person and at the same time on the environment" (Lewin, 1936, p. 12). These two factors are your personality (P) and the demands of your current situation or environment (E). Lewin used scientific methods to apply those two factors to socially relevant topics—and he inspired many others to follow his lead.

**Different Perspectives: Women and People of Color Join Social Psychology**

Valuing diversity is important to social psychologists; it has to be. Half of the human race is female, so gender diversity is critical. There are approximately 200 countries in the world with unique identities and multiple subcultures. Social psychologists are compelled to study the influence of culture on individual thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. We feature entire chapters about prejudice, cooperation, persuasion, and so on. Psychology evolved out of particular cultural and historical contexts. Consequently, social psychology has had to put forth extra effort to advance diversity among the people in our research studies. What’s the point of trying to learn something about human nature if the data apply to only a tiny sliver of humanity?

Diversity also means making sure that the researchers themselves come from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. Robert Guthrie (1976/2004) examined psychology's history of diversity—or, sometimes, the lack of it—in a book (colorfully!) titled *Even the Rat Was White*. The positive effects of diversity can be highlighted by briefly considering some of the women and people of color who have had an important role in advancing theory and research in social psychology (see Table 1.1). Of course, many more examples could have been used to make this point; this list is just a few highlights.

Born during the American Civil War, Mary Whiton Calkins fought to study psychology at Harvard even though the school had a policy blocking women from enrolling. Despite several obstacles based on sexist policies at the time, she succeeded in achieving a prestigious career, including the publication of four books and over a hundred research papers. She focused on memory, the concept of the self, and social justice. Calkins later became the first female president of the American Psychological Association and of the American Philosophical Association.

Mamie Phipps Clark and Kenneth Clark were a married African American couple who became nationally known when their research led them to be expert witnesses in one of the cases related to *Brown v. Board of Education* (see Benjamin & Crouse, 2002). This was the Supreme Court case in the United States dealing with desegregation of public schools. The Clarks' research, known as "the doll studies," highlighted the problems of internalized racism and negative self-esteem in some children at the time (see Chapter 9 for more). Kenneth Clark became the first African American president of the American Psychological Association.

Perhaps the most famous study on prejudice was conducted by Muzafer Sherif, who was born in Turkey in 1906. Sherif's study brought young boys to a "summer camp" run by psychologists where they were led to form prejudices toward each other—and Sherif then studied how to reduce those prejudices (see Chapter 9). Alice Eagly has
also devoted her research career to studying how to understand and reduce prejudice, with a particular focus on sexism (this theory is also covered in Chapter 9). Her model of sexism, called social role theory, continues to inspire research today and is used to understand several applied problems, such as how to get girls and women more involved in science, technology, and math careers.

Shelly Taylor and Susan Fiske together wrote the book *Social Cognition*. Social cognition is a subarea of social psychology in which researchers try to understand how individuals think about and remember other people and social situations. Their work resulted in the idea that most of us are “cognitive misers,” meaning we only think as hard as we have to. For more about cognitive misers and social cognition in general, read Chapter 4.

Finally, both Claude Steele and Mahzarin Banaji are important social psychologists in the lines of research attempting to understand how culture and stereotypes affect people of color. Steele, an African American professor who served as the provost at the University of California, Berkeley, introduced the idea of stereotype threat. He wondered whether students of color were performing worse on some college-level tests because of stereotypes and anxiety. Banaji is interested in how stereotypes and prejudice might affect all of us without us even realizing it, and she helped to develop one of the most controversial tests to measure prejudice in the field of social psychology. You can learn more about both of these researchers and their ideas in Chapter 9.

**The Main Ideas**

- Social psychology is a subfield of psychology that scientifically studies how individual thought and behavior are influenced by the other people in our world.
- Social psychology can be broken up into topics focused on social thinking, social influence, and social behavior, and each topic has concepts that can be applied to everyday people in the real world.
- Kurt Lewin is considered by many to be the “father of social psychology,” and he believed individual behaviors are determined by both someone’s personality and by the social situation or environment.
- Many other important social psychologists have been women and/or people of color, including the Clarks, Sherif, Eagly, Taylor, Fiske, Steele, Banaji, and more.

**CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE**

- If World War II and the Holocaust had never happened, would psychology be where it is today? Would social psychology exist or be as popular if the world hadn’t been inspired to understand the events leading up to and ending that war? What other topics might be considered more important?
- Lewin suggested that behavior is determined by both personality and the given social situation or environment. Which do you think is more influential? When you consider your own behavior across a variety of situations (such as in class, at a religious event, or when you’re hanging out with friends), is your behavior fairly consistent due to a strong personality, or do you change how you act to better fit it with what’s expected, given the environment?
- One of Lewin’s most famous studies explored how members of groups change based on their leader. When you are the leader of a group, what kind of style do you tend to have? Do you think your leadership style affects the members of your group in a positive or negative way?
WHAT ARE THE BIG QUESTIONS WITHIN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY?

LO 1.2: Analyze important questions about social thought and behavior.

Social psychology’s central mission is to understand how our thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by other people. To achieve its mission, social psychologists have focused attention on the big questions listed in Figure 1.2. It’s important to know that the entire field cannot be encapsulated into only these questions—there are many other research topics not specifically covered here. But, thinking about these questions might help you see at least some of the major issues that have led to advances in theory and application.

Each of the questions in Figure 1.2 is somewhat subjective and philosophical—and social psychology’s methods are designed to answer objective, specific questions. Social psychology probably can’t answer these big questions directly. However, every day, we discover dozens of small answers. Sometimes you can only see these big questions by reading carefully between the lines of scientific reports, but make no mistake: Social psychologists are chasing down the answers. Keep these big questions in mind throughout this text because they serve a practical purpose: They help you understand what motivates many social psychologists and what we hope to accomplish.

![Figure 1.2](image-url)
Big Question 1: Which Is More Influential—Personality or the Environment?

Kurt Lewin, the observant trench soldier with “a musical delight in ideas,” created a simple intellectual framework that has endured for a century. Lewin’s framework continues to help modern social psychologists design small experiments that answer this first big question. Lewin proposed that behavior (B) is a function (f) of both personality (P) and the situation or environment (E), leading to the equation $B = f(P, E)$. You can think of that equation as meaning that behavior is influenced by both personality and the environment . . . but is one more influential than the other?

First, think about the “P” in Lewin’s equation. When you describe your own personality, what traits come to mind? Are you shy, agreeable, and cooperative? Or are you extraverted, argumentative, and competitive? Your personality can tell us how you are likely to act across many different situations. If you tend to talk a lot and enjoy attention, this pattern probably follows you in many areas of your life. But does your personality determine your behavior in every situation? No. A great deal of human behavior is governed by specific social expectations about the situation or environment. So, what about the “E” in Lewin’s equation?

Even people who tend to be loud and energetic may become quiet and still in certain environments. For example, quiet and stillness are the social norm during many religious ceremonies—so noisy people will modify their behavior to that norm even if they don’t belong or believe in that particular faith. On the other hand, someone attending a church, synagogue, or mosque with noisy, energetic worship is likely to be a bit more demonstrative in that setting. The same is true of your classroom behavior. A professor who only lectures will invite different standards of behavior than a professor who seeks discussion, disagreement, and active participation.

In real life, both “P” and “E” influence how you act most of the time, an interaction between variables. **Interactions**, or the combination of several influences on an outcome, are often the most exciting part of social psychology, and you’ll see them in many places throughout this book. Social psychologists study how both “P” and “E” constantly interact to influence how any person is likely to think, feel, and act. This question will be addressed in several chapters in the book, including Chapters 3, 5, and 7.

Big Question 2: Are We Shaped More by Biological Factors (“Nature”) or by Environmental Factors (“Nurture”)?

A parallel question to “personality or the environment” is our second big question, which also asks about the origins of thought and behavior but in a slightly different way. One of the most pervasive debates within all of psychology—not just social psychology—is framed as the “nature versus nurture” debate. This question will be addressed in several chapters throughout the book.

**Nature** refers to influences on our thoughts and behaviors that come from biology or physiology, such as genetics, hormones, or brain differences among different types of people. These biological influences are largely out of our control. On the other hand, **nurture** refers to influences on our thoughts and behaviors that come from our life circumstances, how we were raised, experiences we’ve had, and our environment in general. The nature versus nurture question can be applied to personality, for example. If you are relatively extraverted, is that because you come from a long line of extraverted relatives and it genetically runs in your family? Or is it because as a child, you were rewarded for being extraverted by getting more positive attention from teachers and peers?
Many psychologists will actually note that pitting "nature" and "nurture" against each other is what we call a **false dichotomy**, which means a situation presented as two opposing and mutually exclusive options when really there are other ways to think about what's going on. For example, most behaviors are probably influenced by *both* nature and nurture, and it's a question of degree of influence. In addition, sometimes the two "sides" of this debate influence each other. More physically attractive people may have been lucky to get a certain set of genes that make them beautiful—but their good looks probably also led to more social praise, popularity, and other opportunities; thus, both nature and nurture have influenced their fate.

### Big Question 3: Are People Basically Good or Basically Evil?

For social psychologists, figuring out whether humans are basically good or evil is both a practical and a philosophical question. For example, imagine someone you don't know well discovers he left his wallet at home and asks you to borrow some money. Do you believe that this person tends to be good (and thus trustworthy about your money) or evil (and thus unlikely to ever repay you)? What you believe about yourself and others is an important social question. Without laws and social punishments for crime, would human society turn into an animalistic anarchy?

Exploring whether people are good or evil is a popular topic in literature and movies, such as the classic *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954), in which a group of young boys on a deserted island become savage murderers. Good and evil were explored in almost the same way by social psychologists in a famous experiment. It was called the Robbers Cave study (Sherif, 1956), and it had just as much drama, tension, and uncertainty—and it also involved quickly escalating dynamics among a group of young boys in an isolated environment. Fortunately, some social psychological interventions transformed the boys' dangerous brush with evil and violence back into a pleasant summer camp experience before anyone got seriously hurt. But these innocent, well-raised young boys were stockpiling rocks in socks and preparing for a major conflict before the social psychologists stepped in (you'll read more about this study in Chapter 9).

The Robbers Cave study highlights how social psychologists use smaller, more manageable questions to study bigger questions about good, evil, and human nature. We study thoughts and behaviors that might predict “evil” acts such as harmful aggression and blind obedience to charismatic leaders. These topics are covered in Chapters 7 and 11. However, social psychologists also explore the sources of human goodness. For example, perhaps people are actually more civilized than the boys in *Lord of the Flies*. Even famously evil people are occasionally good, hopeful, and loving. We will explore this happier part of human nature in Chapter 10, where we discuss altruism and helping behaviors.

### Big Question 4: How Do People Decide Whether to Maintain Romantic Relationships?

One of the most important parts of anyone's social encounters is probably their romantic relationships. Throughout middle school, high school, and college, many of us experiment with dating different kinds of people to see what seems like a good match.
Even if we don’t actually date others, most of us will certainly be attracted to some people more than others.

The scientific study of attraction, how we decide whom to date, and whether we want to commit to a particular relationship is a large area of focus within social psychology. Entire conferences occur across the world every year on just the study of relationships and sexual behaviors. You can read an entire chapter devoted to this subject in this book (see Chapter 12), where we’ll cover variables that predict attraction and several theories regarding how relationship dynamics unfold once two people form a romantic relationship.

**Big Question 5: What Are the Benefits and Drawbacks of Living in Groups?**

We are intensely social animals. It is so important that our most severe prison punishment (besides death) is sending someone to solitary confinement. The impulse to connect with others can be seen directly in public parks or restaurants, as people sit and laugh together, or indirectly through social media outlets as people connect electronically. Even people living in distant rural communities find ways to regularly connect with others.

We are social animals, and connecting with others consumes enormous amounts of time and energy. Why is group living so important to us? There are certainly huge advantages to forming groups. Other people validate us and help us understand our own sense of self through comparisons to each other, agreeing (or disagreeing) with us, and so on. Cooperating leads us to combine resources to help our survival. Working together also provides the opportunity to make better decisions due to the opportunity to use different people’s skills.

Living and working in groups has benefits, but it also involves risks. For example, sometimes group members can reinforce individual opinions that can lead to risky or even foolish decisions. Groups get worse when a conspiracy of silence frightens the most thoughtful members of a group or when a leader makes followers reluctant to voice doubts. In addition, when people feel like they can hide in groups, they might display behaviors they wouldn’t enact if they felt they could be tied back to them personally. They might also decide not to put in as much effort, coasting on the work of team members instead.

Several chapters in this book discuss how groups affect both our good and our bad decisions and outcomes within a social world, and Chapter 8 focuses especially on group dynamics.
Big Question 6: How Much Are Thoughts and Behaviors Influenced by Culture?

Can you identify ways that your values and sense of self are influenced by your own culture? Whether we notice it or not, being raised in certain cultures affects our view of the world and of other people in it. Some cultures value independence and competition, sending the message that people who work hard will be personally rewarded. Other cultures value cooperation and self-sacrifice, with social norms that ask individuals to put the needs of their group first.

Cultural norms and values are usually communicated in subtle, informal, and implicit ways. Parents, for example, will praise or punish their children for certain types of behaviors. Culture affects almost everyone; cultural differences in social patterns of thought or behavior will come up repeatedly throughout this book. You will see the influence of culture in chapters about personality, aggression, stereotypes and prejudice, group dynamics, and more. While not everyone in a culture will act exactly the same, people from some cultures may tend to display different behavioral patterns. Time and situations eventually reveal those cultural differences. Subcultures arise within cultures as you can probably see within different majors and social groups on campus. It would be a mistake to say that culture influences people in definite, predestined ways—but it would also be a mistake to deny the influence of culture at all. Cultural influence is such an important topic that it will come up many times throughout this book.

Big Question 7: Why Do Stereotypes and Prejudices Exist and Persist?

An extremely important question within social psychology is why stereotypes and prejudices exist in individuals. Theories that try to answer this question will be covered in Chapter 9. The theories allow us to ask more specific questions: Is it a basic human tendency to group and label people into different categories? If so, why? Do particular stereotypes pop up across different parts of the world and different cultures?
An equally important question is whether stereotypes and prejudices can be reduced or even eliminated. How can people who are racist, sexist, homophobic, and so on change their views of the world to be more respectful of all types of people? How can social psychology help? What motivates people to discriminate against each other—and what can be done about it? These questions have been asked for hundreds of years by philosophers, but the scientific methodologies used by social psychology now offer intriguing and exciting ideas for a more hopeful future.

Big Question 8: How Do Media Outlets Shape Our Thoughts and Behaviors?

Most of us are exposed to hundreds of media messages every day, through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, television, advertisements, and so on. It’s virtually impossible to escape exposure to these forms of media—and most of us don’t even try because we enjoy the entertainment. But how are these media messages changing our thoughts and behaviors?

Again, many examples of exposure to media messages will be covered throughout this book. Research has examined whether watching violent television shows makes children more violent. Studies have investigated whether people who use Facebook more are happier or more secure with their friendships and life choices. And of course, how certain types of people are portrayed in the media can contribute to stereotypes. As much as media outlets can be fun distractions from the stress and pressures of daily life, they also might be influencing us in ways we don’t realize—and in ways that we might not like to admit.

Big Question 9: Do People Think Logically or Intuitively?

The big question about how we think is also becoming clearer thanks to many small, easy-to-conduct experiments. How we think is another big yet practical question that plays out in our everyday decisions. Do you rely on logic and objective evidence, or do you trust your intuition? This is an important question for everyone, but especially relevant for traditional-aged college students facing several consequential life decisions about careers, personal values, and long-term relationships.

You can probably think of some decisions that seemed like a great idea at the time, but afterward you thought, “I should have known better.” Are we motivated to be logical and correct, or do other motivations creep into our decision making? Those questions can be made small enough to put to scientific tests—and that’s just what social psychologists have been doing for several decades. Chapter 4 focuses on social thinking, but findings on this question about logic versus intuition will keep popping up as explanations in later chapters as well. For example, the mini-chapter about “behavioral economics” explores real-life questions such as how people make decisions when money is tight but the risk/reward ratio is promising. In addition, Chapter 6 covers research regarding whether we are more likely to be persuaded by logical arguments or by intuitive, emotional attempts to pull at our heartstrings.

Big Question 10: Are Humans Special?

This is really a three-part question.

First, are humans “special” compared to one another? Social psychology answers this question with a “yes” in almost every experiment because it is rare that any two
participants in a study behave in exactly the same way. For example, when you read about the famous Stanford Prison experiment, notice that the trend was for guards to abuse prisoners. However, “personality types” emerged within the group of prisoners and the group of guards. One guard was mean and macho; another tried to help the prisoners. One prisoner was obedient and submissive; another played the role of the rebel. Identifying such individual differences—and there are many—is how social psychology affirms that each individual is special.

The second way of asking whether humans are special is by comparing humans in different cultures. The Center of Intercultural Competence identifies several cultural differences. For example, while the Inuits use at least 10 different words to describe snow, the Zulu employ 39 words to describe shades of green. Gestures also can have significantly different meanings. Using the thumb and forefinger to form an O means “Everything’s okay” in Western Europe and the United States. But it means “now we can talk about money” in Japan—and it is an indecent sexual sign in Spain, Eastern Europe, and Russia. Social psychologists recognize human specialness at a cultural level.

The third way of asking whether humans are special is by comparing humans to other species. Social psychology does this through comparative social psychology, species-level comparisons of social behavior. Here, the story of human specialness turns in a different direction. Are humans special because they are social? Well, ants demonstrate sophisticated levels of role specialization and cooperation, and wolves employ strategy as they hunt in packs. Do humans hold a patent on goodness? Well, honeybees sacrifice their lives to save the hive; vampire bats will regurgitate precious blood meals for hungry roost mates—but only if they deem the recipient as deserving. What about self-awareness? Surely, that is something that only humans can experience—after all, does your dog think about what it means to be a dog and not a human? Well, not so fast. Dolphins, elephants, chimpanzees—and humans—have all scientifically demonstrated self-awareness. So no, the human animal is not always special in the ways that we like to think make us special. You’ll read more about this in Chapter 3.

Yes, every person is unique but somehow similar to others. Yes, each culture is slightly different but similar in some ways to other cultures. No, humans are not unique as a social, caring, self-aware species. Of course, humans may be much better than other species at some of these things. But other species surpass humans by running faster, smelling better, and even mating more efficiently. If all this suggests that the social psychology of humans is a complicated business, then you’re right. Unraveling the complicated interactions between people is what makes social psychology fun, fascinating, and difficult.

The Main Ideas

- One way to think about important topics in psychology is to consider the “big questions” asked by the field.
- This book provides evidence on both sides of these questions, but research is still needed to fully understand the complicated nature of human social experiences.
- Social psychology asks these questions because they are interesting from a philosophical or academic perspective but also because they actually affect people’s everyday lives.
CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- Go back to each of the “big questions” asked in this section. Think about times in your own life when you’ve thought or behaved in a way that seems to confirm one side of the debate or the other. Now, try to identify a time in your life that confirms the other side of the question. Do you think your behaviors in general provide support for answers to these questions? What about when you think of other people’s behaviors?

- Many popular books and movies focus on utopias (perfect societies) or dystopias (malfunctioning societies). Examples of dystopias are *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954), *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), or *Divergent* (Roth, 2011). Why do people like this kind of story? Is it because it makes us feel good—our society is better by comparison—or because it serves as a warning, reminding us of what society could become?

- Which of the “big questions” posed here is the most interesting to you, personally, and why?

IS SCIENCE A VALID WAY TO LEARN ABOUT COMPLEX SOCIAL BEHAVIOR?

LO 1.3: Describe how the science of social psychology provides insight into our behavior, as well as social benefits.

You probably would have liked Kurt Lewin. He was known to miss an occasional class when, after the war, he was teaching at the University of Iowa. The reason? He was deeply involved in a conversation with students at a local café. Perhaps Lewin fit the stereotype of the absent-minded but passionate professor. His brain was full of a brilliant idea and all sorts of ways to make it work. His vision could be summed up in just two words: action research, the application of scientific principles to problem solving.

But is science—and experiments in particular—the best way to learn about social psychology? What about the social psychology of graffiti artists, the social commentary of thoughtful politicians, and the social insights from playwrights, movie producers, and film documentaries? Scientific social psychologists love those things! In fact, some of the high-level scientific conferences are occasionally spiced up with performances by social psychologists who perform in rock bands, read poetry, and make films. But science is special, just as those other ways of knowing are special. It’s one of your jobs, as a college-educated citizen, to understand what is distinctive and valuable about each of those ways of knowing.

Throughout this book, we bring your attention to the use of the scientific method to answer questions in social psychology in two ways. First, when we talk about how answers were found using different research methods, you’ll see a symbol in the margin that looks like gears. Second, each chapter has a feature that highlights one particular study in detail due to interesting or innovative research methodology.

Experiments Can Isolate Causality

Experiments accomplish something better than any other research approach: They can isolate a causal variable. Experiments do that by using what you can think of as a toolbox of techniques that are all developed to help answer questions about cause-effect relationships. As an undergraduate student, you basically learn that the toolbox exists and you hopefully get to use a few of the tools on a real research project. As a graduate
student, you become an expert at using specific tools to solve specific research problems. You may even get to invent some new tools for new problems that come up.

You may be familiar with some of the research tools (and we will review them more thoroughly in the next chapter). One of the most popular (because it solves so many research problems) is called random assignment to groups. This tool isolates causal variables by making all groups in a particular experiment equal before any treatment or intervention takes place. It doesn’t take long to use that tool, but you’ll waste a lot of time if you don’t use it. If it’s true that each group in a study is equal to each other except for a single difference based on the experimental manipulation, then any differences in the outcome must have been caused by the manipulation. Again, we’ll go through several examples of this setup in the next chapter.

Another tool is using single-blind or double-blind experiments. That research tool isolates causal variables by making sure that the experimenter does not accidentally bias the outcome of the experiment. In a single-blind procedure, the participants don’t know which group they are in. In a double-blind procedure, neither the participants nor the researchers know which group the participants are in until after the study is done. That way, no one’s expectations or hopes can influence the outcomes.

Isolating causality is a tricky business under the best circumstances. We need to use all the appropriate tools available if we really want to learn something about social psychology. As you read through the next chapter on research methods, think about the utility of each tool and technique, and try to think about how you might design your own experiment regarding a question that’s important in your own life.

Proving Ourselves Wrong: The Falsification Principle

Weird, right? First, social psychologists come up with an explanation for something. It could be a hypothesis about which personalities are likely to fall in love, how prejudice is communicated, or when people will help one another in an emergency. And then, instead of trying to prove that their idea is a great idea, they immediately try to prove that it is a terrible idea.

Sir Karl Popper (1959) called this approach falsification, the ability to test whether a hypothesis can be disproved. Like a reality show, social psychologists are most likely to believe the last theory still standing after all the others have been proven wrong—not by judges sitting in chairs offering opinions but by open scientific methods that are known and reported to everyone, ideally without bias.

For example, for several decades, the magician called “The Amazing Randi” has offered a prize of one million dollars to anyone who can demonstrate psychic phenomena under controlled scientific conditions. His hypothesis is that there is no such thing as psychic powers. Can anyone prove him wrong? He has tested many applicants in a variety of public settings, and he still hasn’t parted with his one million dollars. He is, in his own colorful way, using the falsification principle to test his hypothesis that psychic phenomena are bogus. It requires only one (!) demonstration by any real psychic to falsify his hypothesis and claim the prize.
Just one! So far, there is no evidence that such a person exists. There are three difficulties for all the “psychics” who have come forward. As a magician, the Amazing Randi knows (a) the tricks of the trade, (b) how easily people are distracted, and (c) that people enjoy deceiving themselves.

There’s something wonderful about the falsification principle: healthy skepticism. We don’t mean cynical assumptions that the whole world stinks. Healthy skepticism encourages you to think twice before following a link that promises you $10 million from a foreign prince in desperate circumstances if you will only send him a few hundred dollars to clear his paperwork. Healthy skepticism questions unlikely assertions such as, “I know we just met five minutes ago but I’m already in love with you and want to get married. Will you come up to my apartment so we can talk it over?” Falsification insists that such statements be tested before you even start to consider believing them. Like you, social psychologists believe in healthy skepticism.

Beyond Experiments: Other Methods and Analysis

Blame Kurt Lewin, if you must, but most social psychologists are trained as experimenters. His experiments, and those of his students, were so compelling that generations of social psychologists became more or less addicted to experiments. It’s hard to describe how much fun experiments can be. But we’d like to give it a try because it happens every semester and in the most unlikely setting: statistics class.

Students come to their first statistics class nervous and worried and then, about two thirds of the way into the course, they become ridiculously excited. Why? Because they are just about to click on the last step in a computer program that will statistically analyze their data. Everything changes when you feel as if you own the idea that is being tested. You start to love statistics the way a custom carpenter comes to love a particular chisel or the way a tennis player loves the right racquet. You come to love the tools that allow you to be creative. One student looked at the data flashing on her screen and called out, “Professor! Come quick! You have to tell me if this means what I think it means!” It’s a great moment to be a teacher and, having taught for enough years, Tom and Wind know how to set this moment up. We can predict it and watch for it like a midwife about to deliver a baby.

Experimental techniques are not the only tool we have. We will describe other methods frequently used by social psychologists in the next chapter. For now, you only need to understand that (a) case studies (single instances or examples) have often directed the path of psychological science, (b) archival research (data originally gathered for a different purpose) can tell us things that experiments will never reveal, (c) observational studies can reveal behaviors in their natural environments, and (d) surveys can help us by asking people for their personal and hidden views. In addition, sometimes ethical concerns prohibit us from conducting true experiments.

Doing social psychology is much more fun than reading about it, and your professor can help you experience it. Having fun as a researcher is relatively easy; however, the joy of true discovery can be fairly rare. It involves a coming-together of knowledge created by multiple experiments, case studies, archival data, and any other sources of information. Like a well-designed computer game, there are levels of achievement within the science of social psychology. Only a few scientists get to enjoy an epic win; for the rest of us, it’s enough that we are able to admire them and write about them in textbooks.
The Main Ideas

- Experiments are the preferred scientific methodology for studies because they can isolate causal variables.
- An important aspect of good research ideas is falsification, the ability to test whether a hypothesis can be disproved.
- Experiments are just one of the many ways that social psychologists use the scientific method to analyze data; other methods are surveys, case studies, archival data, and more (see the next chapter for details).

CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- Do you have any friends or family members who claim to have psychic powers—or have you suspected that you have them yourself? What is a scientific way to test whether they are really present?
- Politicians debate the value of spending millions of tax dollars on funding research within social psychology. What is your view on this issue? Is funding research in social psychology worthwhile? Should tax dollars and government resources be increased, or decreased, and why?

HOW CAN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY MAKE MY LIFE BETTER NOW?

LO 1.4: Apply social psychology concepts to your own life and experiences.

As the story about statistics demonstrates, any topic becomes more interesting if you can see how it applies to you, personally. Being able to relate to theoretical ideas also makes them easier to remember later (Craik & Lockhart, 1972), something that will come in handy when you have to take exams in this class. For example, at the beginning of this chapter, we asked you to consider several situations that came from famous psychological studies and to consider what you would have done if you had been a participant or encountered that situation in your regular life. Below are some more specific suggestions about how to approach social psychology.

Apply Each Topic to Your Own Life

Take a quick look at this book's table of contents. Are there some chapters that seem more exciting to you than others? That may be because you can already see places where social psychology applies to your own life. Most of us are very interested in romantic attraction and dating partners, for example; Chapter 12 covers a wide variety of theories and scientific studies on this topic. Unfortunately, most of us have also been the victim—or the perpetrator—of stereotypes and prejudice, the focus of Chapter 9. This might be based on race, gender, or sexual orientation, but it could also be based on your family's last name, your hometown, what kinds of activities you enjoyed in school (e.g., “jocks” versus “band geeks”), and a wide variety of other concepts that humans have decided are meaningful.

As we go through each chapter, we suggest you make it a habit to apply the theories and concepts to yourself or to other people in your life. For example, what is your hypothesis about why so many high school students in different settings separate themselves
into the same sorts of groups? How would you test your hypothesis? Can you see variables or circumstances that might affect what happens in social situations that haven’t been previously considered? If so, perhaps you have a future in social psychology.

**Use the Self-Report Scales to Compare Yourself to Others**

Many of the studies in this book used self-report scales that we provide (at least one in each chapter, starting in Chapter 2). We hope you will jot down the numbers that represent you. Reading and thinking about the actual items within a scale will add to your understanding of the underlying concept. In Chapter 3, for example, you will see one of the most popular scales in all of social psychology, a measure of self-esteem. Really understanding what “self-esteem” is comes from a close examination of the subcomponents of the larger concept, such as being aware of your good qualities and feeling equal to other people.

However, maybe a more exciting reason to offer you these scales is so that you can actually fill them out and score them for yourself. By actually taking the scale, you can think about how participants felt when they were in the studies that created and used the scales. You can also see where you fall on the measure. (Do you have a high score? A low score? How do you compare with your classmates and with people at other colleges?) This all contributes to self-knowledge. In this way, after reading this book, you’ll not only gain insight into the world of social psychology on a theoretical level but also gain insight into yourself, on a very practical and personal level.

**Critically Analyze Your Opinions After Each Section**

Finally, each section of every chapter in the book presents several critical thinking questions. Critical thinking is the ability to analyze, apply, and explore ideas in new and open-minded ways. Critically analyzing what you learn will also help you to remember it (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). But again, remember that social psychology progresses through the scientific method, which requires skeptical questioning of what we think we observe and know. Only by having the next generation of thinkers see new hypotheses and new applications can the field improve with a greater understanding of the human social experience.

Albert Einstein, one of the world’s most important intellectuals and scientists, is famous for the quotation shown in the caption above. We hope this book allows you to comprehend a little more of the mystery of our social world.

**The Main Ideas**

- Being able to personally relate to theoretical ideas and to critically analyze them also makes them easier to remember later.
- This book offers several opportunities for readers to apply concepts to themselves, including self-report scales to measure certain topics.
- Social psychology can only progress when new thinkers approach topics with scientific thinking and friendly skepticism.
Critical Thinking Challenge

- Social psychology claims to provide insight into important topics that apply to real people’s lives. However, most findings in the field are published in academic journals that only other scientists read. How can social psychologists do a better job of sharing their research with everyday people or with people or organizations that could use the research findings to actually improve the world?

- The beginning of this book discussed a reality show called What Would You Do? in which people are put into situations that are manipulated and then recorded without their knowledge to appear later on TV. What are the ethical implications of this type of program? Once people learn that they were essentially “tricked,” do you think they can learn from the experience? Do you think that participants in social psychology research studies can do the same thing—learn from the experience?

- Again, look over the table of contents of this book. Do you think there are important topics that are missing? Are there aspects of the social experience that you think social psychology needs to address or spend more time studying?

Chapter Summary

What is social psychology?

Social psychology is the scientific study of how people influence each other’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It includes the study of (1) social thinking, such as how we define the “self” and how we perceive the world; (2) social influence, such as how we can persuade other people, why we conform, and the dynamics of stereotypes and prejudice; and (3) social behavior, such as helping, aggression, and romantic relationships. All of these areas of social psychology can be applied to a variety of settings.

Social psychology can also be understood by comparing it to similar but different academic fields. Sociology is also the study of social behaviors, but it focuses on analysis of entire groups instead of on individuals within groups (which is how social psychology approaches research). Anthropology is the study of human cultures. Most anthropologists will study a particular culture in depth by observing it in detail; in contrast, social psychologists will study individuals in different cultures using alternative research methods such as experiments or surveys. Finally, while clinical and/or counseling psychology focus on helping people with mental illnesses or who are having unhealthy thoughts and behaviors, social psychology studies “everyday” thoughts and behaviors throughout life, including both negative behaviors (such as discrimination or aggression) and positive behaviors (such as helping or cooperation).

The field of social psychology was pioneered by Kurt Lewin, whom many people consider the “father of social psychology.” Lewin was a Jewish man greatly influenced by both World Wars I and II, and when he immigrated to the United States, he devoted his academic career to understanding social dynamics. Lewin famously suggested that each person’s social behaviors are influenced by both personality and the social environment. Many other influential social psychologists followed in his footsteps. Some of these later social psychologists were women and/or people of color, which highlights the importance of diversity of perspective in the field.

What are the big questions within social psychology?

The field of social psychology is highly varied, and many important questions cannot be distilled into simple questions. However, by considering the “big questions” listed here, students of social psychology can see several of the major themes or ideas that are studied and can have insight into the motivations or goals that many researchers have. These questions are simplified versions of complicated ideas and do not encompass the entire field. In addition, no research study can find a single or simple answer to these questions, but each study helps us understand one more piece of the puzzle. Ten important “big questions” in social psychology are the following:

1. Which is more influential—personality or the environment?
2. Are we shaped more by biological factors (“nature”) or by environmental factors (“nurture”)?
3. Are people basically good or basically evil?
4. How do people decide whether to maintain romantic relationships?
5. What are the benefits and drawbacks of living in groups?
6. How much are thoughts and behaviors influenced by culture?
7. Why do stereotypes and prejudices exist and persist?
8. How do media outlets shape our thoughts and behaviors?
9. Do people think logically or intuitively?
10. Are humans special?
As a little girl, I had no friends at all. I was strange. Other children didn't understand me, and I didn't understand them. Why did people lie? Why did some TV and movies portray certain races positively and others negatively? Why did some of the kids have boyfriends or girlfriends and others didn't? Why did some of the kids bully me while others simply ignored me? Even as a young child, I started to study human interactions in an attempt to understand people's perceptions and behaviors. It wasn't until high school when I realized that there was an entire field of science dedicated to answering these questions: psychology. And psychology wasn't just about mental health and therapy—it was also about prejudice, conformity, helping, and so much more. Social psychology really mattered to me, which is why I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life understanding it. And, by the way, I now have lots of friends, a life partner, and a career that's more fun than it is work. All thanks to social psychology. [WG]

I dropped out of college when I was a first-year student in Wisconsin and didn't make it back until I restarted my first year at the age of 29. It was strange and sometimes embarrassing to be so much older...
than all of the students and even some of my professors at the community college in rural Illinois. But I decided that when I didn’t know the meaning of a word or understand a concept, I would raise my hand and ask. At first, I asked some questions that probably made me look pretty stupid, but I no longer cared about that. Instead, I discovered that it didn’t take very long until I started asking much better questions and that professors liked discussing the material with me. That was exciting. I shifted my major from business to psychology when I moved to a 4-year college. To my complete surprise, there were two courses that helped me understand the arc of my own life, the lives of those around me, and how to make sense of the larger world: statistics and social psychology. [TH]

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Explain what social psychology is and what social psychologists do.

Analyze important questions about social thought and behavior.

- social psychology
- sociology
- anthropology
- clinical or counseling psychology
- positive psychology

- interactions
- nature
- nurture
- false dichotomy
- comparative social psychology

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Describe how the science of social psychology provides insight into our behavior, as well as social benefits.

Apply social psychology concepts to your own life and experiences.

- action research 15
- causal variable 15
- random assignment to groups 16
- double-blind experiment 16
- single-blind experiment 16
- falsification 16

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