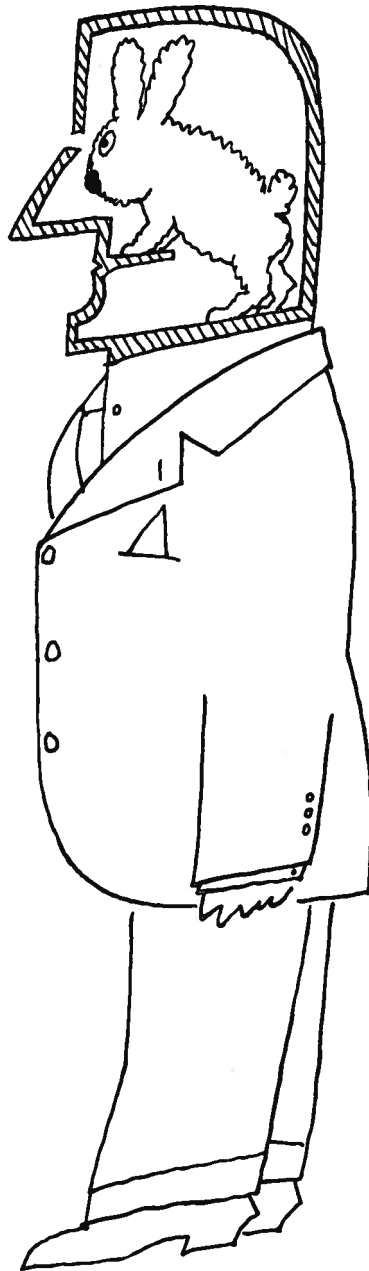




Saul Steinberg, *Untitled drawing*, ink on paper.
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What Is Social Psychology?

As far as we know, Aristotle was the first serious thinker to formulate some of the basic principles of social influence and persuasion. However, although he did say that man is a social animal, it is unlikely that he was the first person to make that observation. Moreover, chances are he was not the first person to marvel at the truth of that statement while simultaneously puzzling over its triteness and insubstantiality. Although it is certainly true that humans are social animals, so are a host of other creatures, from ants and bees to monkeys and apes. What does it mean to say that humans are “social animals”? Let’s look at some concrete examples:

A college student named Sam and four of his acquaintances are watching a presidential candidate make a speech on television. Sam is favorably impressed; he likes him better than the opposing candidate because of his sincerity. After the speech, one of the other students asserts that she was turned off by the candidate, that she considered him to be a complete phony, and that she prefers the opposing candidate. All of the others are quick to agree with her. Sam looks puzzled and a trifle distressed. Finally, he mumbles to his acquaintances, “I guess he didn’t come across as sincere as I would have hoped.”

A second-grade teacher stands before her class and asks, “What is the sum of six, nine, four, and eleven?” A girl in the third row puzzles over the question for several seconds, hesitates, raises

her hand tentatively, and when called on, haltingly answers, "Thirty?" The teacher nods, smiles at her, says, "Nice work, Carol," and pastes a gold star on her forehead. She then asks the class, "What is the sum of seven, four, eight, three, and ten?" Without wasting a moment, Carol leaps to her feet and shouts, "Thirty-two!"

A 4-year-old boy is given a toy drum for his birthday. After pounding on it for a few minutes, he casts it aside and studiously ignores it for the next several weeks. One day a friend comes to visit, picks up the drum, and is about to play with it. Suddenly the young "owner" tears the drum from his friend's grasp and proceeds to play with it as if it had always been his favorite toy.

A 10-year-old girl avidly consumes two bowls of Wheaties daily because an Olympic gymnastics champion endorses the product and implies that she owes her athletic prowess, in part, to the consumption of that particular brand of cereal.

A shopkeeper who has lived his entire life in a small town in Montana has never had any contact with real, live black people, but he "knows" they are unintelligent, lazy, and oversexed.

Charlie, a high-school senior, has recently moved to a new city. He used to be quite popular, but not anymore. Although the kids at school are civil to him, they have not been particularly friendly. He is feeling lonely, insecure, and unattractive. One day, during lunch period, he finds himself at a table with two of his female classmates. One of them is warm, attractive, intelligent, and vivacious; he has been admiring her and daydreaming about her. For several weeks he has been longing for an opportunity to talk to her. The other young woman is not nearly as appealing. Charlie ignores the vivacious woman of his dreams and begins an earnest conversation with her companion.

A college student named Debbie, receives a "Dear Jane" letter from her longtime boyfriend. Although Debbie has always prided herself on keeping fit and eating sensibly, the rejection sets her on an eating binge, during which she consumes several boxes of Oreos, Mallomars, and Fig Newtons in the space of a

weekend. Moreover, although a straight-A student, near the top of her class in the Engineering Department, she flunks an exam in calculus that she normally would have aced.

During the war in Vietnam, a few hundred Kent State University students were demonstrating against that war—a common occurrence on college campuses during that troubled time in our history. For some unexplained reason, the Ohio National Guard, assigned to keep the peace on that campus, opened fire, killing four of the students. Following the tragedy, a local high-school teacher asserted that the slain students deserved to die. She made this statement even though she was well aware of the fact that at least two of the victims were not participating in the demonstration but were peacefully walking across campus at the time of the shooting. Indeed, she went on to say, "Anyone who appears on the streets of a city like Kent with long hair, dirty clothes, or barefooted deserves to be shot."¹

When the Reverend Jim Jones sounded the alert, more than 900 members of the People's Temple settlement in Guyana gathered before him. He knew that some of the members of a congressional investigation party had been murdered and that the sanctity and isolation of Jonestown would soon be violated. Jones proclaimed that it was time for them to die. Vats of poison were prepared, and amid only scattered shouts of protest or acts of resistance, mothers and fathers administered the fatal mixture to their infants and children, drank it themselves, and lay down, arm in arm, waiting to die.

On April 20, 1999, the corridors and classrooms of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, reverberated with the sound of gunshots. Two students, armed with assault weapons and explosives, had gone on a rampage, killing a teacher and several of their fellow students. They then turned their guns on themselves. After the smoke had cleared, 15 people were dead (including the shooters) and 23 were hospitalized, many with severe wounds.

Mary has just turned 9. For her birthday, she received a Suzie Homemaker baking and cooking set complete with "her own little oven." Her parents chose this present because she seems

very interested in culinary things and is forever helping Mommy set the table, prepare the meals, and clean the house. "Isn't it wonderful," says Mary's father, "how at age nine she is already interested in being a housewife? Little girls must have housewifery built into their genes. Those feminists don't know what they're talking about."

My boyhood friend, George Woods, is an African American. When he and I were growing up together in Massachusetts in the 1940s, he thought of himself as a "colored boy" and felt inferior to his white friends.² There were many reasons for this feeling. That George was treated like an inferior by the white community had a direct influence upon him, of course; a number of other forces influenced him less directly. In those days, George could entertain himself by turning on the radio and listening to *Amos 'n' Andy*, an enormously popular radio show in which black adults were portrayed as naive children, as stupid, lazy, and illiterate, but rather cute—not unlike friendly, domesticated animals. The black characters were, of course, played by white actors. In films, George could see the stereotyped "colored man," usually a chauffeur or some other menial. A standard plot would have the colored man accompany the white hero into a haunted house, where they heard a strange and ominous noise: The camera would pan in on the colored man's face; his eyes growing large with fright, he would scream, "Feets, do your stuff!" and dash through the door, not taking time to open it first. We can only guess what George experienced while viewing these films in the company of his white friends.

Things change. For example, although discrimination and unfairness are still very much a part of our society, George Woods's grandchildren, growing up in the 21st century, do not face exactly the same tribulations as George himself did. The mass media now depict blacks in roles that are not exclusively menial. In the latter part of the 20th century pride in being black began to emerge, along with an interest in, and enthusiasm about African American history and culture. Society is influencing George's grandchildren in a much different way than it influenced George.

Although things change, we should not be complacent in the belief that all changes move in a linear, humanistic direction. On August

30, 1936, during the Spanish Civil War, a single plane bombed Madrid. There were several casualties, but no one was killed. The world was profoundly shocked by the idea of a congested city being attacked from the air. Newspaper editorials around the world expressed the general horror and indignation of the citizenry. Only 9 years later, U.S. planes dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. More than 200,000 people were killed and countless thousands suffered severe injuries. Shortly thereafter, a poll indicated that only 4.5 percent of the U.S. population felt we should not have used those weapons, and an astonishing 22.7 percent felt we should have used many more of them before Japan had a chance to surrender.³ Clearly, something had happened during those 9 years to influence opinion.

A Definition

What is **social psychology**? Many definitions are possible. Instead of listing some of these definitions, it might be more informative to let the subject matter define the field. The examples presented on the preceding pages are all illustrations of sociopsychological situations. As diverse as these situations may be, they do contain one common factor: social influence. The opinion of Sam's friends on the merits of the presidential candidate influenced Sam's judgment (or at least his public statement regarding that judgment). The rewards emanating from the teacher influenced the speed and vigor of Carol's classroom responses. The 4-year-old seemed to find his toy drum more attractive because of the inadvertent influence of his friend's interest. The Olympic athlete's influence on our Wheaties-eating youngster, on the other hand, was far from inadvertent; rather, it was intentionally designed to motivate her to convince her parents to buy Wheaties. The Montana shopkeeper was certainly not born with an unflattering stereotype of black people in his head; somebody somehow put it there. Debbie's eating binge and poor performance had something to do with her having been rejected—but precisely how does that work? That Charlie ignored the woman of his dreams almost certainly has something to do with his fear of rejection, the way he was feeling about himself, and his implicit assumption about the relative likelihood of being rejected by either of the two women. Being rejected can have far-reaching consequences, as Debbie's behavior suggests. It may

also be that rejection and humiliation played a role in the rampage killings at Columbine High School. Exactly how the high-school teacher in Kent, Ohio, came to believe that innocent people deserved to die is a fascinating and frightening question; for now, let us simply say that this belief was probably influenced by her own indirect complicity in the tragic events on campus. A still more disturbing question arises from the events in Jonestown and Columbine: What forces could induce parents to poison their own children and then take their own lives? What is it that induces teenagers to kill their classmates? Again, these are complex questions to which I hope to provide some insights as this text unfolds.

Turning to little Mary and her Suzie Homemaker set, it is conceivable, as Mary's father says, that "housewifery" is genetic; it is far more likely that, from infancy on, Mary was rewarded and encouraged every time she expressed an interest in such traditionally feminine things as cooking, sewing, and dolls—to a far greater extent than if she expressed an interest in football, boxing, or chemistry. It is also reasonable to assume that, if Mary's kid brother had shown an interest in "housewifery," he would not have received a toy kitchen set for his birthday. Also, as with young George Woods, who felt inferior to his playmates, Mary's self-image could have been shaped by the mass media, which have tended to depict women in traditionally "feminine" roles: housewife, secretary, nurse, schoolteacher. If we compare the young George Woods with his grandchildren, we see that the self-images of minority-group members can change, and these changes can influence and be influenced by changes in the mass media and changes in the attitudes of the general population. This, of course, is graphically illustrated by the opinions of Americans about the use of nuclear weapons in 1945.

The key phrase in the preceding paragraph is **social influence**. And this becomes our working definition of *social psychology*: the influences that people have upon the beliefs, feelings, and behavior of others. Using this as our definition, we will attempt to understand many of the phenomena described in the preceding illustrations. How are people influenced? Why do they accept influence or, put another way, what's in it for them? What are the variables that increase or decrease the effectiveness of social influence? Does such influence have a permanent effect or is it merely transitory? What are the vari-

ables that increase or decrease the permanence of the effects of social influence? Can the same principles be applied equally to the attitudes of the high-school teacher in Kent, Ohio, and to the toy preferences of young children? How does one person come to like another person? Is it through these same processes that we come to like our new sports car or a box of Wheaties? How does a person develop prejudices against an ethnic or racial group? Is it akin to liking—but in reverse—or does it involve an entirely different set of psychological processes?

Most people are interested in questions of this sort. Because all human beings spend a good deal of our time interacting with other people—being influenced by them, influencing them, being delighted, amused, saddened, and angered by them—it is natural that we develop hypotheses about social behavior. In that sense, we are all amateur social psychologists. Although most amateur social psychologists test these hypotheses to their own satisfaction, these "tests" lack the rigor and impartiality of careful scientific investigation. Often, the results of scientific research are identical with what most people "know" to be true. This is not surprising; conventional wisdom is usually based upon shrewd observation that has stood the test of time.

In fact, when you are reading the results of the experiments in this volume, you may occasionally find yourself thinking: "That's obvious—why did they spend time and money to 'discover' that one?" There are several reasons why we do experiments, even though the results often seem unsurprising. For one thing, we are all susceptible to the **hindsight bias**, which refers to our tendency to overestimate our powers of prediction once we know the outcome of a given event. For example, research has shown that on the day after an election, when people are asked which candidates they would have picked to win, they almost always believe they would have picked the actual winners—even though the day before the election, their predictions wouldn't have been nearly as accurate.⁴ Similarly, the outcome of an experiment almost always seems more predictable once we have the results in hand than if we had been asked to predict the results without the benefit of hindsight.

In addition, it is important to conduct research—even if the results seem obvious—because many of the things we "know" to be true turn out to be false when carefully investigated. For example, it

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seems reasonable to assume that people who are threatened with severe punishment for engaging in a certain behavior might eventually learn to despise that behavior. But when tested empirically this assumption turns out to be wrong. People who are threatened with mild punishment develop a dislike for the forbidden behavior; people who are severely threatened show, if anything, a slight increase in liking for the forbidden behavior. Likewise, most of us, from our own experience, would guess that, if we overheard someone saying nice things about us (behind our backs), we would tend to like that person—all other things being equal. This turns out to be true. But what is equally true is that we tend to like that person even more if some of the remarks we overhear are anything but nice. More will be said about these phenomena in the following chapters.

In our attempt to understand human social behavior, professional social psychologists have a great advantage over most amateur social psychologists. Although, like the amateurs, we professionals usually begin with careful observation, we can go far beyond that. We do not need to wait for things to happen so that we can observe how people respond; we can, in fact, make things happen. That is, social psychologists can conduct an experiment in which scores of people are subjected to particular events (for example, a severe threat or a mild threat; overhearing nice things or overhearing a combination of nice and nasty things). Moreover, we can do this in situations in which everything can be held constant, except the particular events being investigated. Professional social psychologists can, therefore, draw conclusions based on data far more precise and numerous than those available to the amateur social psychologist, who must depend upon observations of events that occur randomly and under complex circumstances where many things are happening at once.

Nearly all the data presented in this book are based upon experimental evidence. It is important, for this reason, that the reader (1) understands what constitutes an experiment in social psychology and (2) understands the advantages, disadvantages, ethical problems, excitements, headaches, and heartaches that are associated with this adventure. Although an understanding of the experimental method is important, it is by no means essential to an understanding of the substantive material presented here. Therefore, the chapter "Social Psychology as a Science" is the final one in this book. As a reader, you can peruse this chapter before reading on (if you prefer to un-

derstand the technicalities before delving into the substantive material), or you can read it at any point on your journey through the book—whenever your interest is piqued.

People Who Do Crazy Things Are Not Necessarily Crazy

The social psychologist studies social situations that affect people's behavior. Occasionally, these natural situations become focused into pressures so great that they cause people to behave in ways easily classifiable as abnormal. When I say people, I mean very large numbers of people. To my mind, it does not increase our understanding of human behavior to classify these people as psychotic. It is much more useful to try to understand the nature of the situation and the processes that were operating to produce the behavior. This leads us to Aronson's first law:

People who do crazy things are not necessarily crazy.

Let us take, as an illustration, the Ohio schoolteacher who asserted that the four Kent State students deserved to die. I don't think she was alone in this belief—and although all the people who hold this belief may be insane, I seriously doubt it. Moreover, I doubt that classifying them as psychotic does much to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Kent State slayings, the rumor spread that the slain girls were pregnant anyway—so that it was a blessing they died—and that all four of the students were so filthy and so covered with lice that the mortuary attendants became nauseated while examining the bodies. These rumors, of course, were totally false. But, according to James Michener,⁵ they spread like wildfire. Were all the people who believed and spread these rumors insane? Later in this book, we will examine the processes that produce this kind of behavior, to which most of us are susceptible, under the right sociopsychological conditions.

One of my former students, Ellen Berscheid,⁶ has observed that people have a tendency to explain unpleasant behavior by attaching a label to the perpetrator ("crazy," "sadistic," or whatever), thereby excluding that person from the rest of "us nice people." In that way, we need not worry about the unpleasant behavior because it has nothing

to do with us nice folks. According to Berscheid, the danger in this kind of thinking is that it tends to make us smug about our own susceptibility to situational pressures that could produce unpleasant behavior, and it leads to a rather simple-minded approach to the solution of social problems. Specifically, such a simple-minded solution might include the development of a set of diagnostic tests to determine who is a liar, who is a sadist, who is corrupt, who is a maniac. Social action might then consist of identifying these people and relegating them to the appropriate institutions. Of course, this is not to say that psychosis does not exist or that psychotics should never be institutionalized. Nor am I saying that all people are the same and respond exactly as crazily to the same intense social pressures. To repeat, what I am saying is that some situational variables can move a great proportion of us "normal" adults to behave in very unappetizing ways. It is of paramount importance that we attempt to understand these variables and the processes that produce unpleasant or destructive behavior.

An illustration might be useful. Think of a prison. Consider the guards. What are they like? Chances are that most people would imagine prison guards to be tough, callous, unfeeling people. Some might even consider them to be cruel, tyrannical, and sadistic. People who take this kind of dispositional view of the world might suggest that people become guards to have an opportunity to exercise their cruelty with relative impunity. Now picture the prisoners. What are they like? Rebellious? Docile? No matter what specific pictures exist inside our heads, the point is that there are pictures there—and most of us believe that the prisoners and the guards are quite different from us in character and personality.

video - This may be true, but it may be more complicated. In a dramatic demonstration, Philip Zimbardo and his colleagues created a simulated prison in the basement of the Psychology Department at Stanford University. Into this "prison" he brought a group of normal, mature, stable, intelligent, young men. By flipping a coin, Zimbardo designated one-half of them prisoners and one-half of them guards, and they lived as such for several days. What happened? Let's allow Zimbardo to tell us in his own words:

At the end of only six days we had to close down our mock prison because what we saw was frightening. It was no longer apparent to us or most of the subjects where they ended and

their roles began. The majority had indeed become "prisoners" or "guards," no longer able to clearly differentiate between role-playing and self. There were dramatic changes in virtually every aspect of their behavior, thinking and feeling. In less than a week, the experience of imprisonment undid (temporarily) a lifetime of learning; human values were suspended, self-concepts were challenged, and the ugliest, most base, pathological side of human nature surfaced. We were horrified because we saw some boys ("guards") treat other boys as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while other boys ("prisoners") became servile, dehumanized robots who thought only of escape, of their own individual survival, and of their mounting hatred of the guards.⁷

* Social psychology helps us understand just how vulnerable human beings are to social influence. The question is thus not whether or not but rather to what degree we are influenced by others and under what conditions.