

THE COMMON AND *UNCOMMON* SENSE OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOR



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The Common and *Uncommon* Sense of Social Behavior

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Preface

When I took my first course in social psychology, one of the assigned readings was a brief paperback. I became so engrossed that I read the entire book in one sitting. I also became permanently interested in the field. Modesty aside, this book is intended to produce the same result among present-day students enrolled in the first course in social psychology. With this goal in mind, I wrote the text in an informal, almost autobiographical style.

Although the coverage includes the major research areas within social psychology, some areas are highlighted more than others. Throughout the text, however, current research and theory are used to introduce each topic, point out the commonsensical and counterintuitive aspects of the topic, relate it to everyday life, and integrate it with previous topics. Given the integrative nature of the coverage, reading chapters sequentially will be the most effective way to cover the material.

Ideally, the text should be used as a supplement to a more traditional text, preferably as an introduction to the other text. For small classes, I suggest reading and discussing this text before reading the main text. For large classes with separate discussion sections, this text may be covered in the small sections while simultaneously providing lecture material based on the main text. It is also possible to use this text as the main one for a first course in social psychology, but it may be necessary to provide additional readings.

I am indebted to those who played a role in the writing of this book. First among these is Claire Verduin, who (seemingly for years) insisted that I write it and who very capably served as the editor. No one writes a book without help (it just seems that way at times), and few people are more helpful than those who provide their expertise as reviewers. I am grateful to Jack Aiello, Rutgers-The State University; Arthur Bohart, California State University, Dominguez Hills; James M. Jones, University of Delaware, Newark; Rowland Miller, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville,

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Frank Dane

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1

In the Beginning

❖ *No man is an island.*

John Donne

Imagine yourself about to be exiled to a desert island. Those who will put you there grant you one request. You may take any one thing with you, except something that would enable you to escape. What would you take? If you are like the idiot I saw last night in a television commercial, you might take a large supply of a certain soft drink. If you are like Sir Isaac Newton, you might take a table of logarithms (I don't know that Newton actually said he would do such a thing, but that's what I've been told). Some of my colleagues might well take that book they have been working on for the last umpteen years. Me, I'd take a friend.

There is nothing so lonely as the absence of any other human being. Indeed, it is almost impossible in our society to be that lonely. Even when we are "alone" we are reminded of the presence of others. We are surrounded by books written by others, music performed and recorded by others, materials manufactured by others; we have memories of others—the list could go on and on. No one has described the social nature of human beings, and the focus of social psychology, more succinctly than the poet John Donne: no person is an island. We cannot escape the influence we have on others, nor can we escape the influence others have on us. This mutual influence, shared by the individual and the people with whom he or she comes into contact, is what social psychology is all about. My goal in writing this book is to provide you with the background you need to begin to understand both the forms this influence takes and the ways of explaining it.

Social psychologists study social behavior, which includes just about everything people do. Much social behavior in the world around us can be understood by applying a little common sense. If this were not true, only the most intelligent of us would be able to function in society. Social psychologists attempt to understand the ways in which common sense principles affect our behavior. As you read this book, you may find yourself thinking "I knew that. This is just common sense." If you do, you are beginning to

understand social psychology, and I have made progress toward my goal.

Social behavior is very complex—so complex that there is a great deal of room for surprises. If this were not true, only those who could tolerate extended boredom would be able to function in society. In addition to affirming many common-sense ideas about social behavior, social psychological research has also produced counterintuitive (seemingly nonsensical) results, the surprises of social behavior. If you occasionally find yourself thinking “I didn’t know that. I thought it worked the other way,” then I have made even more progress toward my goal.

Finally, social behavior is tremendously interesting. Unfortunately, it is sometimes true that being a student of social behavior is more interesting than being a student in a social psychology course. I say “unfortunately” because the two should be the same process. As you read this book, you may find yourself thinking “This is great stuff. How can I find out more about it?” If you do, I will have fully accomplished my goal.

A Little History

The answer to the question “When and where did social psychology begin?” depends on who is being asked. Some authors (for example, Aronson, 1980) begin with Aristotle, who may have started things by claiming people are social animals. Aristotle was not being derogatory by calling us animals; he was instead making the point that we are not the only species that behaves together. What Aristotle thought was different about people was that we do more than simply act together. We form societies, groups of people who understand, follow, and often change the “rules” for acting together. As possibly the first social psychological theorist, Aristotle believed that being social was part of the natural makeup of people, that people could not be people unless they interacted together. An asocial person was, to Aristotle, either a beast or a god, but certainly not a human being.

Other authors (for example, Penner, 1986) begin their discussions of social psychology with Norman Triplett’s (1898) research, which was the first social psychological experiment published in the United States. Triplett noticed that a bicycle racer

who raced against another cyclist was faster than one who raced merely to set a record time. Some people believed the faster times could be explained by physical principles: for instance, the lead cyclist could provide a windbreak for the trailing cyclist. Triplett also thought a windbreak could help a cyclist, but he was more interested in what he termed dynamogenic factors. Triplett believed the mere presence of another person, in the form of a competitor, increased the motivation of a cyclist. To test his idea, he devised an experiment in which he asked children to reel in fishing line as fast as they could. Some of the children worked alone and others worked with another child next to them doing the same thing. Most of the children racing against a competitor were faster than those who worked alone—the same results Triplett noticed in bicycle races. There were a few children who paced themselves during competition, reeling in the fishing line just fast enough to win. (Much later, Al McGuire worked on the same principle when coaching the Marquette basketball team to an NCAA championship: he urged his players to compete as strongly as necessary to win the game—just enough to get the job done.)

I personally think social psychology began at some prehistoric time when one person made the first attempt to understand the reasons for social behavior. I have an image of someone (I call him Grog) desperately trying to haul the carcass of a large animal back to his cave. Another person (I call her Erp) approaches and tries to help him with the carcass. Grog first tries to warn Erp away, thinking she will steal his food. Eventually, Grog realizes he is getting nowhere with the carcass and, warily, he allows Erp to help him drag it back to the cave. Perhaps, after the meal, Grog realizes he needed help and Erp realizes she was able to convince Grog she wanted to help. Social psychology began when each of them thought about how they managed to accomplish what they did and how they were going to be able to do it again.

Modern Social Psychology

It is not necessary to be a theorist like Aristotle to understand social psychology. Nor do you have to be the kind of experimentalist that Triplett was. It is also not necessary to engage in fantasy about prehistoric people. To begin to understand what social psychology

is all about, all you have to do is look around you. Life is replete with examples of social influence.

- Yesterday I watched someone walk into a restaurant looking as though she had just lost her best friend. When she saw someone she knew, her expression changed to resemble more closely that of someone who had won the New York State Lottery.

- I walked into a store specializing in Irish gifts and found a T-shirt on which was written " 'Tis a blessing to be Polish." When I paid for it, the clerk said "You know, you Polish are our second-best customers." A look of panic appeared on her face when I replied "What do you mean, *second-best*?" The look disappeared when she saw the smile on my face.

- This morning I was typing frantically when a friend walked into my office. He watched me for a second, then said "You're busy, I'll come back later." I said "Not really, what's on your mind?"

- A friend of mine, who is not overly fond of the color red, had ordered a blue car. When the salesperson called, she heard him say "Your car came in, and you'll be very happy that we were able to get exactly the shade of red you wanted." She bought it anyway.

- Last week I was walking down Michigan Avenue in Chicago late at night when I noticed a person standing at the intersection. He waited until he saw the "Walk" signal before crossing the street. There wasn't a car in sight.

What do all of these examples have in common? They are all examples of one person's behaviors or thoughts being changed by the behaviors or thoughts of another person. None of the examples are likely to be found on the front page of a daily newspaper, but they are all interesting nonetheless. The first two examples follow what we would expect from common sense. We would expect someone to feel better when seeing some friends, just as we would expect a sales clerk to worry about saying something that might ruin the chance of making a sale. The other three, at first glance, don't make much sense. Why did I say I wasn't busy when I obviously was? Why did my friend buy a car that was the wrong color? Why didn't that man cross the street in defiance of the "Don't Walk" sign as long as there were no cars around? The people in these examples were all subject to social influence. The influence was more direct in some examples (the woman in the Irish gift shop) than in others (the man on Michigan Avenue), but it was at work in all of them.

When we begin to examine social influence from a scientific perspective, we begin to practice social psychology (Shaw & Costanzo, 1982). A scientific perspective is one based on research; therefore, Triplett's experiment is often considered to date the beginning of social psychology. For modern social psychologists, it is not enough to theorize that human beings need other human beings, as Aristotle did. We need to be more certain that an explanation we favor is a good one. To do that, we conduct research. Like Triplett, we think about possible reasons for social behavior and then test those reasons. We also write about what we discover, sometimes in journal articles and sometimes in books such as this one. Through publication, what we learn about social behavior becomes available to everyone. Very often, the results of research match our common sense. Even if that finding were all that social psychological research had to tell us, it would be valuable for confirming that our intuitions are often correct. Sometimes, however, the results of social psychological research contradict what we thought we knew. Such uncommon sense findings are also important. The fewer mistaken ideas we have about how our world works, the easier it is for us to get along in that world.

Topics in Social Psychology

As you will discover as you read further in this book, social psychological research covers an incredibly wide variety of topics. Indeed, nearly every aspect of life is fair game. In later chapters, we will discuss research and theory about the ways personality plays a role in social influence. Some people's personalities, like that of the man waiting for the "Walk" sign on Michigan Avenue, may make them more sensitive to social influence. Other people's personalities, like that of the boor who stays at your party long after you've begun picking up the empty glasses, seem to make them oblivious to the cues other people try to give them.

Research has also focused on how we form impressions and make judgments about ourselves and others. The woman in the Irish gift shop formed one impression of me (probably that I was insulted by being called second best), but quickly altered that impression after seeing my smile. Still more research has been done on why people are sometimes helpful and sometimes aggressive. That research provides us with principles that explain why

some people, like the mythical Grog, might be prejudiced against others, and also how the same people may eventually overcome their prejudices and work cooperatively.

Perhaps more than any other topic, social psychologists have researched how and why we directly attempt to alter the thinking and behavior of others. An abundance of research and theory helps explain why my friend was willing to accept delivery of her car even though she did not like its color. Research on social exchange provides insight into my willingness to contradict my obvious behavior and tell my friend I was not busy. Some research and theory provides us with common and uncommon sense about what happens when we join a group and why we join groups. The effect of the physical environment on altering social influence has also been researched.

Before we begin to discover some of the common and uncommon sense principles of social behavior, however, we need to take the time to understand a little about the research process itself. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, understanding how research is done helps us to interpret the studies others have done. Second, and perhaps more important, understanding the research process helps us to piece together various research results and to draw from them general principles of social behavior. To some extent, you are constantly conducting social psychological research, even though you may not be doing it in exactly the same way as social psychologists do.

