

J. RICHARD EISER

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Attitudes, cognition and
social behaviour

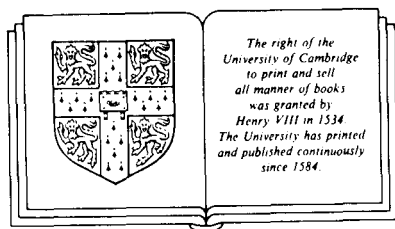
Social psychology

Attitudes, cognition and social behaviour

A revised and updated edition of *Cognitive Social Psychology:
a Guidebook to Theory and Research* (McGraw-Hill, 1980)

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Preface

Social psychology is a lively, growing discipline. Writing a textbook about it is therefore a bit like trying to take a still photograph of a bird in flight. Just to get the target in focus is hard enough. To achieve a balanced composition, and a clear picture of the background, as well, needs a good measure of luck. In this book, I have tried to present a glimpse of where social psychology is going, a hopefully balanced, though undeniably selective, insight into the perspectives which different researchers have adopted, and a broader view of the various empirical and theoretical traditions from which contemporary work derives.

In 1980 my previous textbook, *Cognitive Social Psychology: A Guidebook to Theory and Research*, was published by McGraw-Hill. The present volume includes both a thorough revision and reorganization of my previous work and much completely new material. The change of title is deliberate too. At the end of the seventies, most apparently successful theories in social psychology were placing a heavy emphasis on the primacy of cognition, information-processing and decision-making. The term 'cognitive' took on an imperialistic breadth of application, and a consequential looseness of meaning. In the last six or seven years, however, a noticeable reaction has set in, and some of my own views have changed too. 'Social cognition' has re-emerged as a strong, but more narrowly defined, field of research within social psychology, and at the same time much more attention has been paid to issues such as the impact of mood and emotion and the limitations of human memory and reasoning. In short, cognition is not the only form of psychological functioning upon which an understanding of social behaviour depends. Whereas my own approach remains broadly cognitive, it is by no means exclusively or narrowly so.

Social psychology is an international discipline, although not as international as it ought to be. The literature is still predominantly North American, but not nearly as exclusively so as it was fifteen or twenty years ago. Most North American textbooks contain lamentably little coverage of work conducted outside North America. In this book readers will find accounts of a fair, but not disproportionate, amount of research by authors who happen to work in other countries. However, I have not adopted this approach out of any deliberate attempt to introduce a self-consciously European flavour, but simply because such research deserves inclusion on its merits. Ingroup

favouritism is no substitute for critical appraisal when it comes to judging the value of scientific contributions, whatever their origin. Even so, the health of any discipline depends on an openness to new ideas and on cross-fertilization from different, even sometimes older, traditions. In this respect, I hope that this book will have something distinctive to offer to readers on both sides of the Atlantic (or the Pacific). I have attempted to write an international book, but doubtless it is still not as international as it ought to be.

Whilst European social psychology has gained in prestige and productivity, in the last few years it has sadly lost two of its most eminent and influential figures. Henri Tajfel died in 1982. He first introduced me to social psychology when I was an undergraduate at Oxford. He persuaded me to do postgraduate research at the London School of Economics, and he helped me to my first position at the University of Bristol. He had a vision and a sense of purpose that could truly inspire. I am proud to call myself his student. Jos Jaspars died in 1985. Whereas Henri always seemed to be burning the candle at both ends, Jos was younger and apparently strong and healthy. His sudden death left all who knew him stunned. His was a genuine and generous intellect. He was a devoted teacher, the most constructive of critics, a good friend and a most dependable colleague. This book is a small thank you to each of them.

My thanks are also due to all those who have helped me with my writing of this book: to Marian Gowen for typing the manuscript; to the students of the University of Exeter over the last six years for their comments and questions; and finally to Michael Billig, Rick Budd, Connie Kristiansen, Stephen Reicher, Russell Spears, Arnold Upmeyer, Joop van der Pligt and Paul Webley, and many other friends and colleagues for stimulating discussions.

J. RICHARD EISER

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

1

Aims and approaches

The topics of social psychology

Often the closer something is to everyday experience, the more difficult it can be to convince people of the need for its scientific study. The study of the extraordinary has always had a glamour not usually accorded to the study of the ordinary. What happens at the other end of a telescope or microscope, that is the stuff of science. What happens in front of our naked eyes, that is just common knowledge. This is not just a problem for the social and behavioural sciences, although it is now our turn to deal with it: the physical and biological sciences have suffered acutely from this difficulty in the past, and no doubt continue to do so. Yet, if we look at the history of these sciences, we can see that the most revolutionary advances were made when scientists sought directly to explain the obvious. Concepts such as gravity, evolution, infectious disease, were all attempts to account for experiences which were very familiar to scientists and non-scientists alike. These concepts are now themselves so familiar that it is difficult to imagine how the world could have been perceived in any other way, yet already science has moved further on, through questioning once again the basis of what has now become 'obvious'.

Human social behaviour is about as familiar an object of study as one could possibly imagine. We perceive it and participate in it constantly. Even without the help of social psychologists, we feel we know a very great deal about it, and often with very good reason. We are taught about right and wrong, about human nature, about what is done and what is not done, and the lessons we learn bear more than a fortuitous correspondence to our experience. So where does social psychology fit in? Ideally, what social psychology can do is try to answer questions like *why* people feel and act towards one another in the ways they do, why they hold particular attitudes, why they explain each other's behaviour in particular ways, and why they accept particular roles and rules of conduct. But once again the problem of 'obviousness' reappears. If one looks at the traditional topic areas of social psychology, it seems almost as though social psychologists are welcomed only as trouble-shooters, called in to help out when things go wrong, to answer questions to which conventional wisdom has no obvious answer. As social psychologists, we are asked why people are racially prejudiced, attack one another, act destructively and self-destructively, are

easily led and persuaded, fail to help one another and get 'carried away' in a crowd. In short, we are asked to explain apparently *irrational* behaviour.

In many respects, this is fair enough. Interactions between human beings have their uglier aspects, and if these can be understood, then possibly some contribution can be made to the prevention or alleviation of human misery. Indeed, one could argue more strongly that researchers have a real responsibility to try and make such a contribution. But there is still a danger. To be asked, 'Why do people behave irrationally?' is to be asked a leading question. It assumes that the behaviour in question is irrational, not only in comparison to some logical ideal (for, as we shall see, most social behaviour would have to be called irrational from this standpoint), but in the sense of requiring a different kind of explanation from non-problematic 'sensible' behaviour. In addition, it assumes that, whatever explanations social psychologists come up with, these will *not* be applicable to contexts where conventional wisdom seems confirmed.

If these assumptions are accepted, then the ordinary and everyday – the territory of conventional wisdom – are protected from scrutiny. Yet neither evidence nor logic requires that they be accepted, and hence social psychology has no obligation to submit to the restrictions which they imply. Rather, one could argue that it is these very assumptions, and others which form the basis of so-called common knowledge, that social psychology must challenge and examine, if it is to make any real contribution, either practical or conceptual. The topics of social psychology, then, are not merely different categories of social acts, but also and more vitally the common everyday assumptions which underly such acts and give them meaning.

Theory and data

Before one starts any investigation, one should have in mind some question that one wants to answer. This sounds so obvious as not to be worth stating, but sadly it seems often to be ignored in many research endeavours. The motto, 'If it moves, measure it', characterizes an unfortunately large proportion of what has passed for research in social psychology and related disciplines. In the short term, following this motto allows one to seem and feel busy, but in the longer term, it is a recipe for disappointment. But having said that, it is not always easy to decide on a question. It takes a little thought. It takes a little theory.

To collect data about how human beings interact with one another is so easy that it is almost impossible. It is easy because human social interactions are going on almost all the time, almost anywhere one cares to look. The streets, so to speak, are paved with gold. The complexity of information potentially available can be quite overwhelming. To get anywhere, one must select and categorize, one must act on hunches, one must decide where the analysis should start and when it should end, in short, one must

theorize. As Coombs (1964: 5-6) has put it: 'All knowledge is the result of theory - we buy information with assumptions - "facts" are inferences, and so also are data and measurement and scales . . . there is no necessary interpretation of any behavioral example as some particular kind of data.'

In this book I shall be describing a great number of studies where researchers have deliberately set out to test hypotheses derived explicitly from some theory or other. But this is neither the only, nor arguably the most important, aspect of the role of theory in the acquisition of knowledge. Researchers from different theoretical factions may disagree about whose predictions are most accurate, but may still agree about what the measurements they obtain are measurements *of*. Such agreement is by no means universal, but it is often much more widespread than is agreement over the predictive accuracy of any single model. For example, there have been numerous theories of attitude change, but little questioning of the assumption that attitude change can be measured in terms of changes in individuals' responses on an attitude scale. Yet it is precisely here, in the attribution of meaning to particular scores and measurements, that the fundamental theoretical assumptions are made. Without any such assumptions, we cannot even make a start; but neither can we make real progress unless we recognize such assumptions for what they are.

Experimentation and observation

Just as the questions which researchers ask depend on their theoretical assumptions, so do the methods which they use. Thus, many of the controversies which present themselves as disagreements over methods are in fact disagreements at the level of theory. One of the most heated of these controversies has been over the value of laboratory experimentation in social psychology. On the one side, there are those who argue that the purpose of research is to determine the effects of independent variables on dependent variables, and that the most efficient way to do this is to perform an experiment in a laboratory where the independent variables can be accurately recorded and measured. On the other side are those who argue that laboratory experiments involve situations which bear no relation to any 'real-life' social interactions, and impose artificial restrictions on unrepresentative samples of subjects: to find out what 'really' happens, observations of naturally occurring behaviour are the answer.

There is considerable merit in both these positions, and the fairest conclusion one can reach is the unsurprising one that both experimental and observational studies have a great deal to contribute. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the basis of the disagreement. What are experimentalists trying to do? In spite of accusations and occasional protestations to the contrary, they usually are trying to answer questions about 'real-life' social interaction. They choose aspects of 'real-life' behaviour and

attempt to reproduce them within a laboratory setting. They also choose situational variables which they suspect might influence such behaviour, and create experimental analogues for these. Of course, the end-product is artificial, but does such artificiality matter, if what one is trying to do is to discover lawful relationships between independent and dependent variables which are generalizable across contexts and often even across cultures? Of course, the subject sample (usually students) is not demographically representative of the general population, but does such unrepresentativeness matter if one is looking for relationships which are generalizable across different kinds of individuals? Such generalizability, however, is more often assumed as an act of faith than put directly to an empirical test.

Generalizability can be just as much of a problem for the observational approach. The data yielded by an observational study are directly relevant to the 'real-life' situation in question, and are less likely to be distorted by the subjects' knowing that they are being observed. This is fine if all one is interested in is just the one particular situation, but once the researcher attempts to extrapolate to other 'similar' situations, the conceptual difficulties reappear. How does one decide if two 'real-life' situations are in fact similar? Just as in the experimental approach, one needs to make *theoretical* assumptions about which variables are relevant, and which are the relevant dimensions of similarity. At this point, experimentalists would claim that they are in a better position than observationalists to make such decisions of relevance, since the experiment allows one to look at the effects of a number of variables independently, and assess their relative effectiveness and the degree to which they interact, i.e. depend upon one another. Without intervening to control the different variables in turn, the observationalists have less basis on which to judge which variables are most important.

Where possible, a happy compromise can be the 'field experiment'. In studies of this kind, subjects do not know that their behaviour is being observed, and instead have to react to what they believe is a naturally occurring event. The problem of extrapolating from the laboratory to the outside world therefore does not arise. At the same time, the experimenter can stage the 'naturally occurring event' so that aspects of it are different for different groups of subjects, and so control and manipulate independent variables at least as effectively as in a laboratory. The main limitations of this method are that it is more difficult to obtain these base-line measures of subjects' attitudes and behaviour before any manipulation takes place, and that the number of responses one can hope to obtain from any single subject is usually quite restricted. These limitations, however, are not necessarily insuperable, granted a certain amount of ingenuity, and, from another point of view, might be positive advantages. The relative value of a field-experiment approach depends to a large extent on how much it matters, in a specific context, that subjects should be unaware that they are participating in a piece of research.

The important issue, however, is not so much how researchers obtain their data, but how they interpret them. Whether one looks at observational, experimental, or field-experimental studies, what researchers attempt to do is usually to treat the observed behaviour of their subjects as an exemplar of a more general class of behaviour, and to treat features of the specific situations as exemplars of more general classes of situational influences. In a large number of cases, they have then attempted to infer causal relationships between these classes of situational variables and the class of behaviour. Thus, researchers will try to say something about the relationships between, for instance, 'attitude similarity' and 'interpersonal attraction', between 'threat' and 'cooperation', between 'ambiguity' and 'helping', or between 'status' and 'discrimination'. Such terms are the building blocks of much social psychological theory, but how good a foundation do they provide? This is an empirical question, which needs to be answered separately for each specific construct. In an experimental approach, it will depend on how well the relevant variables are 'operationalized'; in other words, how well the variables which the experimenter has chosen to manipulate and measure represent the more general classes of situational influences and the more general classes of behaviour with which the theory is concerned. In an observational approach, it will depend on how well the specific situation and behaviour observed can be classified into the established theoretical categories. The problem is really the same for both approaches; it is merely tackled from opposite sides.

Theoretical advances come when data of any kind force us to rethink such situational and behavioural classifications, and to challenge prior assumptions about their interrelationships, so that our theoretical terms and constructs come to be refined, differentiated, or replaced. Observational studies provide such a challenge by showing what happens 'out there'. Experiments do so by demonstrating relationships which are more subtle and interdependent than our initial preconceptions would have enabled us to envisage.

Theory and application

The relationship between experimental or observational evidence on the one hand and theory on the other, then, is one of mutual clarification. Theories clarify our understanding of events, whilst empirical findings clarify our explanatory concepts. The very nature of the subject matter being dealt with means that it is vain to look for 'proof' or 'disproof' of theorems in the kind of absolute categorical sense we might suppose to be more applicable in a discipline like pure mathematics. Even in what conventionally are called the more 'exact' sciences, negative findings do not necessarily lead to the rejection of a theory, if no better alternative theory is yet available. The phenomena studied by social psychologists are by definition the outcome of an interaction between personal, interpersonal, social and

environmental factors. The significance of this is not so much that it makes our science more 'uncertain' or 'inexact' (though this may be true). Rather, it means that we must accept variability as a fact of life, as an intrinsic property of mind, behaviour and society, and not simply as a consequence of measurement error. If we start from the position that *all* social psychological theories will be correct under *some* conditions, but that *no* social psychological theory will be correct under *all* conditions, we shall not go too far astray. The more generalizable a theory is, the better, by and large. Wider applicability, though, merely establishes greater explanatory usefulness within the context of the problems currently seen as in need of explanation. Whether it constitutes a closer approximation to some idealized universal Truth, is altogether a more metaphysical question.

If we view theories as tools, and improved understanding as the product or at least the goal of research activity, we can dispense with a false dichotomy that has distracted many previous discussions of the nature of social psychology. This is the distinction between 'basic' and 'applied' research. Search for long enough and you can find extreme examples of studies that seem 'purely' theoretical or 'purely' applied. The more important question, though, is how to conceptualize the generality of research that is carried on between these two extremes. Where there is variation in proportionate emphasis on theory and application, this is by and large a difference in degree, not in kind. Most applied studies worth talking about are shaped by theory at some level, and most people whose concern is with the refinement of theoretical models hope that such models have something to say about real-life practical issues.

More applied studies, however, need not, and perhaps often should not, be set up with the aim of 'testing' one theory or another. Very often, what is needed is straightforward descriptive evidence of what is happening, and how people think and talk about what is happening, within a specific concrete situation. The answers we get hopefully will enable us to understand that situation more fully. They *may* give us more insight into how to change that situation for the better, but we cannot depend on this, nor should we blame ourselves if the forces that inhibit change are beyond our control. Social psychology *may* sometimes enable us to design or implement interventions for some purpose of human betterment, but we should not fall into the trap of assuming that this will always be the case, or that our interventions will be the most effective ones.

Take, for example, the issue of deterring young people from taking up smoking, drug-use or other damaging activities. Yes, social psychology does have something to say about the kinds of information, and styles of presentation of information, that might be more persuasive. Yet the size of any change in behaviour we might expect through informational persuasion may be very small so long as environmental factors, such as ease of availability of the substances in question, remain unchecked. It is no failure if the outcome of research is a demonstration of the relative *unimportance* of

particular variables like individual attitudes and personality in a wider scheme of things. It is no failure if what we gain is a better understanding of why change is often *difficult* to bring about. Such an understanding can be very useful practically in helping direct resources where they may have the greatest chance of effectiveness. It may also contribute directly to the advancement of theory.

What this points to is a conclusion that application does not just need theory, but that theories need application. Confining one's attention mainly to the responses of introductory psychology students at English-speaking universities is not something that a science would *choose* to do, except on grounds of convenience. For many purposes, this restriction may not matter as much as is often supposed. Replicated findings cannot simply be dismissed. On the other hand, doing research in this way may be like living on a small island where there is less and less left to be discovered. It is not so much that *effects* may prove ungeneralizable (at least where other factors remain reasonably constant) in the transition to applied settings. Rather, it may be that the kinds of questions that are important in one setting may be radically different from those that are important in another. We may have little difficulty in designing an experiment or observational study to look at students' concern with physical attractiveness in their choice of partner. We may have greater difficulty in designing research on the psychological effects of the fear of starvation.

It may be just such uncomfortable questions that need to be asked, both for their own sake, and as a spur to new theoretical development. Social psychological theories do not come from thin air, but from a concern with understanding social problems, even if these problems are beyond our power alone to solve. Attention to new issues and problems in the outside world may be the source from which new developments in theory can spring. For these reasons, I have deliberately resisted the idea of splitting this book into 'basic' and 'applied' parts, or worse, having a separate chapter at the end called 'Applications'. Instead, studies that some would call 'applied' are described alongside other studies using traditional experimental procedures, the connection being their shared relevance to common theoretical concerns.

The individual and the social

Social psychology is a discipline which is wide in its scope, but modest in its claims. In that it attempts to study human social behaviour from a scientific viewpoint, it is potentially relevant to an immense variety of phenomena. Yet it is not the only discipline which seeks to study such phenomena, and for this reason the contribution of social psychology to their understanding can only be partial, and complementary to what we can learn from other fields of academic inquiry.

More than a few times during its development, social psychology has

faced criticism from two sides at once. General experimental psychologists have seen social psychology as too 'soft', as sacrificing rigour of experimental design in a search for greater realism. At the same time, more qualitatively oriented social scientists have accused us of doing exactly the opposite – sacrificing realism in the search for rigour. Up to a point, both accusations are correct, but this is not something for which we need feel guilty. Compromises are probably inevitable in any attempt to reconcile and integrate different spheres of knowledge, and this is precisely what social psychology aims to do. When it comes down to a choice between defending disciplinary boundaries and gaining a fuller understanding of the human condition, the direction should be clear.

In fact, many of these boundaries are showing signs, if not of crumbling, then at least of opening. Within general psychology, in such fields as cognitive development, personality, memory and psycholinguistics, there is a growing acknowledgement that the processes being studied take the form that they do because of the inherently *social* nature of human behaviour. To take just one example, language reflects more than the acquisition of vocabulary and syntactic rules. It is a means of *communication* that involves the ability to take account of the contextually based assumptions likely to be held by *other* people by whom a verbal message is received. In short, it involves the ability to consider other people as thinking beings.

From the other side, it is sometimes argued that it is not enough for social psychology to study groups and individuals within a given social, geographical, historical, economic and political context: it is up to social psychology also to provide an analysis of that context. This criticism is unfair, and does little justice to what other disciplines, such as sociology, geography and so on, have to offer in their own right. On the other hand, to say that we cannot offer a complete analysis of social context is an inadequate excuse for ignoring that context completely. Social psychology *does* aim to say something about human social behaviour which transcends the particularities of context, but it cannot succeed if it pretends that such particularities do not exist. There is often a danger of regarding the concerns and preconceptions of a single culture as universal. This danger cannot be ignored in a discipline where so much of the published empirical research derives from what is not just a single culture, but a selected subcategory of members of that culture.

How, then, can the 'social context' be brought into psychology? There are two main complementary approaches. The first is to take the view of the individual as 'perceiver' or 'information-processor', interpreting information *provided by* the social context. In crude terms, the social context is viewed as a stimulus configuration to be judged, interpreted and remembered much like any other stimulus configuration. As will be seen, a long tradition of social psychological research has pointed to the applicability of 'basic' principles of judgement and cognition to more 'social' phenomena.

The second approach is to view people as *participants* in the social context on which they themselves can have an influence, either as individuals, or as members of groups. What this leads to is a view, on the one hand, of individual experience as a social product (we think and feel as we do because we are social beings) and, on the other hand, of the social context as the product of human thought and action (the world we live in is partly the product of the way we think).

Whereas the first of these approaches provides the main bridge with general experimental psychology, the second provides an invitation for interchange with other social sciences. Traditionally, such interchange has occurred most frequently with sociology, but other opportunities are also promising. A good deal of social psychological research involves people's attitudes towards, and interpretation of, political issues. Work on inter-group relations is also relevant, directly or indirectly, to questions of the involvement of people within a political process (e.g. Billig, 1976, 1978). The role of individuals as participants in an economic system, and indeed the implicit psychological assumptions of economic theories, are further important topics for study (Lea, Tarpy and Webley, 1986). Social health and preventive medicine is another field where social psychology has its part to play (e.g. Eiser, 1982).

Social psychology, then, *is* relevant to social issues, and to a potentially even wider range of issues than those that have so far been studied in depth. This relevance does not depend just on some vague expression of concern. It derives from the distinctive methods and theoretical ideas that social psychology has developed, and that this book attempts to describe.