

David G. Myers

EXPLORING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY



Exploring Social Psychology



David G. Myers

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About the Author



David G. Myers is the John Dirk Werkman Professor of Psychology at Michigan's Hope College, where students have voted him "Outstanding Professor." Myers' love of teaching psychology is manifest in his writings for the lay public. His articles have appeared in two dozen magazines, and he has authored or coauthored 10 books, most recently *The Pursuit of Happiness: Who Is Happy—and Why* (William Morrow, 1992).

Also an award-winning researcher, Myers received the Gordon Allport Prize from Division 9 of the American Psychological Association for his work on group polarization. His scientific articles have appeared in more than two dozen journals, including *Science*, *American Scientist*, and *Psychological Bulletin*. He has served his discipline as consulting editor to the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* and the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

In his spare time he has chaired his city's Human Relations Commission, helped found a community action agency which assists impoverished families, and given talks to dozens of collegiate and religious groups. David and Carol Myers are parents of two sons and a daughter.

Foreword



When social psychology works best, it touches the soul of society and the heartbeat of its individuals. Of course, it is an academic discipline with its own history, heroes, theories, methodologies, and jargon. As such, in recent years it has gradually moved to a central position within the field of psychology. In earlier days, it was looked upon as a peripheral curiosity, more akin to cultural anthropology than hard-nosed brass instrument and animal psychology that dominated a psychology proudly branded “Made in the U.S.A.,” at least until the 1960s. As cognitive psychology has restored the mind and tongue to behaving organisms, social psychology has put them into a meaningful and lively social context. And as other domains of psychology have come to recognize the importance of the social setting and interpersonal dynamics in understanding the whys of human thought, feeling, and action, they too have added a social dimension to their studies. So we now have social-cognition, social-learning, social-developmental, social-personality, and many other hyphenated alliances that enrich the study of the individual. That person, though usually taken alone as the unit of psychology’s research focus, is more fascinating when seen as part of the complex social fabric from which human nature is woven.

But what is unique among social psychologists is that their concern for experimental rigor and creativity in the laboratory equals their concerns for real-world relevance and viable interventions that may improve the quality of our lives. Virtually all of the most significant areas of application and extensions of psychology out of academia into the everyday life of ordinary people have come from, and are continuing to be energized by, social psychologists. What are those realms of social-psychologically inspired contributions to the human condition? Let us count but a few: health psychology, psychology and law, organizational behavior, environmental psychology, political psychology, peace psychology, and sports psychology. When a former president of the American Psychological Association urged his colleagues to “give psychology away” to the public, it was primarily the social psychologists who took his message to heart and went to work in the field of everyday little hassles and big-time troubles. So while some of us are proud to uncover a significant statistical effect in a laboratory test of key hypotheses derived from a theory, others are deriving joy from showing politicians how to negotiate more effectively, companies how to structure energy conservation programs, or the elderly how to take more control and personal responsibility over their lives.

We all recall the admonition of our inspirational leader, Kurt Lewin, who told us that there is nothing so practical as a good theory. But we now add to that intellectual call to arms that there is nothing as valuable as theoretically inspired practical applications. Furthermore, there is no reason not to embrace all of it—the abstract theory that unifies our singular observations and points us in new directions, the ingenious experimental test, the convincing demonstration of a social phenomenon, or the perceptive application of what we know to solving social problems facing our society and the world.

Despite this range of interests among social psychologists, most would agree on the basic “lessons” of social psychology that emerge from a variety of sources. Five principles can be identified. First, the power of the situation influences individual and group behavior more than we recognize in our individualistic, dispositionally oriented, culture. The second principle concerns the subjective construction of social reality, by which we mean that the social situation is a shared construal of a reality that does not exist “out there,” but is created in our minds and passed on in gossip, rumors, ritual, folklore, school lessons, and racist tracts, among other sources of social communication. The third lesson is about the irrationality of some human behavior and the concurrent fallibility of human intuition—even among the best and brightest of us. Because we have shown that the presence of others, whether in groups of friends or coworkers, or in unstructured settings of strangers, influences the decisions and actions of individuals, our fourth lesson centers on group dynamism. Finally, social psychologists add the principle that it is possible to study complex social situations and generate practical solutions to some emerging problems, as well as apply what we already know to improve personal and societal functioning.

But such lessons are not merely the stuff of textbooks, they are the stuffing, or stories of life itself. Let me share a personal tale with you about the first two lessons, which, now that I think of it, also slips over into the rest of them.

Growing up in a South Bronx ghetto as a poor, sickly kid, I somehow learned the tactics and strategies of survival, known collectively as “street smarts.” At first they were put to use to avoid being beaten up by the big tough guys through righteous utilization of ingratiation tactics and sensitivity to nonphysical sources of power. Then they worked to make me popular with the girls at school, which in turn enhanced my status with the less verbal neighboring big shots. By the time I got to junior high school, I was being chosen as class president, captain of this or that, and was generally looked to for advice and leadership. However, a strange thing happened along the path through adolescence. In 1948 my family moved to North Hollywood, California, for my junior year of high school. The initial wonder at being in this western paradise soon became a living nightmare. I was unable to make a single friend during the entire year, not one date. Nobody would even sit near me in the cafeteria! I was totally confused, bewildered, and of course very lonely. So much so that I became asthmatic. I became so with such intensity that my family used this newfound sickness as the excuse it needed to leave the polluted palms and general disillusionment we all felt to return to the dirty but comprehensible reality of the Bronx. Still more remarkable, within six months I

was elected as the most popular boy in the senior class, "Jimmy Monroe" or James Monroe High School!

I was talking about this double transformation to my friend in homeroom class 12-H-3, Stanley Milgram, and we acknowledged that it wasn't me that had changed but the situation in which I was being judged by my peers, either as an alien New York Italian stereotype or a charming, reliable friend. We wondered how far someone could be changed by such divergent situations, and what was the stable constant in personality. "Just how much of what we see in others is in the eye of the beholder and the mouth of the judges?" Stanley wrote the senior class squibs for the Year Book and helped me to reclaim my California-lost ego by penning, "Phil's our vice president, tall and thin, with his blue eyes all the girls he'll win." So my Bronx street smarts were still working, at least sometimes, in some situations, for some people. Naturally, thereafter we both were heard to repeat loud and clear whenever asked about our predictions of what someone was like or might do: "It all depends on the situation."

Stanley went on to study conformity with Solomon Asch, a major contributor to early social psychology. At Yale, where we were on the faculty together for a short while, Milgram then conducted a series of now-classic studies on obedience to authority that have become the most cited experiments in our field because of their definitive demonstration of the power of the situation to corrupt good people into evil deeds. My way was not too divergent, since I studied how anonymity can lower restraints against antisocial acts and how putting normal, healthy young men in a mock prison ended up with their behaving in abnormal, pathological ways.

The irrationality lesson? It was the prejudice toward me created by applying an ill-fitting stereotype of being Mafia-like because of my ethnic identity and urban origins—by otherwise nice, intelligent white kids. The influence of the group prevented individual students from breaking through the constraints imposed by prejudiced thinking and group norms, even when their personal experience diverged from the hostile base rate. As a student at Brooklyn College I studied prejudice between allegedly liberal Whites and Blacks in their self-segregated seating patterns in the school cafeteria and also Black versus Puerto Rican prejudices in my neighborhood. Then when I became president of my White-Christian fraternity, I arranged to have it opened to Jews, Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and whoever made the new grade as a "good brother"—a first step in putting personal principles into social action.

You can see now why I feel that social psychology is not merely about the social life of the individual; for me, it is at the core of our lives. People are always crucial to the plot development of our most important personal stories.

The *McGraw-Hill Series in Social Psychology* has become a celebration of that basic theme. We have gathered some of the best researchers, theorists, teachers, and social change agents to write their stories about some aspect of our exciting field which they know best. They are encouraged to do so not just for their colleagues, as they do often in professional journals and monographs, but rather for intelligent undergraduates. With that youthful audience in mind, we all have

tried to tap into their natural curiosity about human nature, to trigger their critical thinking, to touch their concerns for understanding the complexity of social life all about them, and to inspire them toward socially responsible utilization of their knowledge.

No one achieves those lofty goals better than the author of this text, David Myers. David writes with a clarity, precision of style, and graceful eloquence unmatched in all of psychology. He is the author of the best-selling introductory psychology textbook and also the best-selling social psychology text, a rare feat of effective writing and mind-boggling focused energy. What sets him apart from his talented peers is David's clear vision of his audience, to whom he talks as if they were welcomed guests at his dining table. We see him sharing his wealth of knowledge of psychology and of literature, posing just the right questions to peak their interest, or calling up the apt metaphor that clarifies a complex thought, and always integrating it all within a compelling story. In designing this newest addition to our Social Psychology Series, the psychology editor, Christopher Rogers (a rare jewel in almost any setting), and I wanted to free David from the traditional constraints of generic chapters of prescribed lengths and standard structures. David Myers has succeeded beyond our most ambitious expectations in bursting free to write 31 stories, or modules, that together form *Exploring Social Psychology*. Each one is a treat to read, and all gain from rereading, even for jaded old-timers like me. These 30-odd "magical modules," as I have come to think of them, offer both new and experienced readers of social psychology a feast—not in its overwhelming opulence but in a thoughtful series of compact, beautifully organized presentations of single flavors or themes. Whole sets of research are skillfully summarized, the right questions are posed, the perceptive conclusions extracted, and the meaningful implications adroitly drawn. Part of the task of a consulting editor is typically to recommend where text can be deleted, chapters chopped down, or the whole shortened in any way possible. This is the first time that I have had to insist that an author write more, because it was evident that David Myers had more tales to tell, and this was the place for his rhetoric to flow.

Popular magazine writers are cautioned against writing "puff pieces" extolling only virtues of their featured subjects; so I too must recognize that principle of not seeming indiscriminating in being so bullish on Myers' *Exploring Social Psychology*. The book does have a flaw. Its major flaw is that it is not the first social psychology book that I read as an undergraduate. Had it been, I would have known instantly and with absolute certainty that there is no more exciting adventure than to become one of them, a social psychologist with stories to learn from others and stories to pass on to all who are willing to listen at our feast of knowledge. Just as Allan Funt has shown us with his *Candid Camera Classics* that it is possible to learn while laughing, David Myers demonstrates the corollary: That it is possible to be entertained while becoming educated. So read and enjoy this master of the trade who offers you his best ever table setting, replete with wonderful tales accompanying every course.

PHILIP G. ZIMBARDO
Series Consulting Editor

Preface



This is a book I have secretly wanted to write. I have long believed that what is wrong with all psychology textbooks (including those which I have written) is their overlong chapters. Few can read a 40-page chapter in a single sitting without their eyes glazing and their mind wandering. So why not organize the discipline into digestible chunks—say, forty 15-page chapters rather than fifteen 40-page chapters—that a student *could* read in a sitting, before laying the book down with a sense of completion?

Thus when McGraw-Hill psychology editor Chris Rogers first suggested over bowls of New England clam chowder that I abbreviate and restructure my 15-chapter 600-page *Social Psychology* into a series of crisply written 10-page modules, I said Eureka! At last a publisher willing to break convention by packaging the material in a form ideally suited to students' attention spans. By presenting concepts and findings in smaller bites, we also hoped not to overload students' capacities to absorb new information. And by keeping *Exploring Social Psychology* slim and economical, we sought to enable instructors to supplement it with other reading suitable for their teaching of introductory or social psychology.

As the playful module titles suggest, I have also broken with convention by introducing social psychology in an essay format. Each module is written in the spirit of Thoreau's admonition that "anything living is easily and naturally expressed in popular language." My aim in the parent *Social Psychology*, and even more so here, is to write in a voice that is both solidly scientific and warmly human, factually rigorous and intellectually provocative. I hope to reveal social psychology as an investigative reporter might, by providing a current summary of important social phenomena, by showing how social psychologists uncover and explain such phenomena, and by reflecting on their human significance.

In selecting material I have represented social psychology's scope, highlighting its scientific study of how we *think about, influence, and relate* to one another. I also emphasize material that casts social psychology in the intellectual tradition of the liberal arts. By the teaching of great literature, philosophy, and science, liberal education seeks to expand our thinking and awareness and to liberate us from the confines of the present. Social psychology can contribute to these goals. Many undergraduate social psychology students are not psychology majors; virtually all will enter other professions. By focusing on humanly significant issues such as belief and illusion, independence and interdependence, love and hate, one can present social psychology in ways that inform and stimulate all students.

A comprehensive teaching package accompanies *Exploring Social Psychology*. Martin Bolt has adapted his acclaimed *Teacher's Resource Manual* and Ann Weber's fine test-item file to fit this brief book. In collaboration with Allen Funt and Philip Zimbardo, McGraw-Hill has developed *Candid Camera Classics in Social Psychology*, a videodisc (also available on videotape) of 15 three- to five-minute clips from the original "Candid Camera" shows.

Acknowledgments

I remain indebted to the community of scholars who have guided and critiqued the evolution of this material through four editions of *Social Psychology*. These caring colleagues, acknowledged individually there, have enabled a better book than I, alone, could have created.

Special credit for this new book goes, of course, to psychology editor Christopher Rogers, whose brainchild it is. My thanks to Chris for his creativity and confidence and to series editor Philip Zimbardo for his encouragement. As my friendship with Phil has grown, I have come to admire his gifts as one of psychology's premier communicators.

As in all five of my published social psychology books with McGraw-Hill, I again pay tribute to three significant people. Were it not for the invitation of McGraw-Hill's Nelson Black, it surely never would have occurred to me to try my hand at text writing. James Belser has patiently guided the process of converting all my McGraw-Hill books from manuscript into finished text. Finally, poet Jack Ridl, my Hope College colleague and writing coach, helped shape the voice you will hear in these pages.

To all in this supporting cast, I am indebted. Working with all these people has made my work a stimulating, gratifying experience.

DAVID G. MYERS

Contents



<i>FOREWORD</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>PREFACE</i>	<i>xiii</i>
INTRODUCING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY	1
MODULE 1 <i>DOING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY</i>	3
MODULE 2 <i>DID YOU KNOW IT ALL ALONG?</i>	15
SOCIAL THINKING	21
MODULE 3 <i>INTUITION: THE POWER AND LIMITS OF OUR INNER KNOWING</i>	23
MODULE 4 <i>REASONS FOR UNREASON</i>	31
MODULE 5 <i>CLINICAL INTUITION: THE PERILS OF PSYCHOLOGIZING</i>	45
MODULE 6 <i>THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR</i>	53
MODULE 7 <i>A NEW LOOK AT PRIDE</i>	62
MODULE 8 <i>THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING</i>	75
MODULE 9 <i>BEHAVIOR AND BELIEF</i>	82
MODULE 10 <i>WHO IS MISERABLE—AND WHY?</i>	93
MODULE 11 <i>WHO IS HAPPY—AND WHY?</i>	105
SOCIAL INFLUENCE	115
MODULE 12 <i>EAST MEETS WEST: INDIVIDUALISM, COLLECTIVISM, AND COMMUNITARIANISM</i>	117
MODULE 13 <i>GENDER AND GENES</i>	126

MODULE 14	<i>HOW NICE PEOPLE GET CORRUPTED</i>	137
MODULE 15	<i>TWO ROUTES TO PERSUASION</i>	150
MODULE 16	<i>INDOCTRINATION AND INOCULATION</i>	162
MODULE 17	<i>THE MERE PRESENCE OF OTHERS</i>	172
MODULE 18	<i>MANY HANDS MAKE DIMINISHED RESPONSIBILITY</i>	180
MODULE 19	<i>DOING TOGETHER WHAT WE WOULD NEVER DO ALONE</i>	186
MODULE 20	<i>HOW GROUPS INTENSIFY DECISIONS</i>	193
MODULE 21	<i>POWER TO THE PERSON</i>	206
SOCIAL RELATIONS		217
MODULE 22	<i>THE DISLIKE OF DIVERSITY</i>	219
MODULE 23	<i>THE ROOTS OF PREJUDICE</i>	230
MODULE 24	<i>THE NATURE AND NURTURE OF AGGRESSION</i>	244
MODULE 25	<i>DO THE MEDIA INFLUENCE SOCIAL BEHAVIOR?</i>	257
MODULE 26	<i>CAUSES OF CONFLICT</i>	269
MODULE 27	<i>BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS</i>	281
MODULE 28	<i>WHO LIKES WHOM?</i>	294
MODULE 29	<i>THE UPS AND DOWNS OF LOVE</i>	307
MODULE 30	<i>WHEN DO PEOPLE HELP?</i>	320
EPILOGUE: BIG IDEAS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION		329
REFERENCES FOR EXPLORING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY		335
PERMISSIONS ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		408
INDEXES		
	<i>Name Index</i>	411
	<i>Subject Index</i>	421



*Introducing
Social
Psychology*

MODULE

1

Doing Social Psychology



“Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads,” said the novelist Herman Melville. Social psychology—the science that studies our human connections—aims to illuminate those threads. It does so by asking questions, questions that you, too, may wonder about:

- How and what do people *think* of one another? How reasonable are the ideas we form of ourselves? of our friends? of strangers? How tight are the links between what we think and what we do?
- How, and how much, do people *influence* one another? How strong are the invisible threads that pull us? Are we creatures of our gender roles? our groups? our cultures? How can we resist social pressure, even sway the majority?
- What shapes the way we *relate* to one another? What leads people sometimes to hurt and sometimes to help? What kindles social conflict? And how might we transform the closed fists of aggression into the open arms of compassion?

Some common threads run through these questions: They all deal with how we view and affect one another. And that is what social psychology is all about. Social psychologists explore such questions using the scientific method. They study attitudes and beliefs, conformity and independence, love and hate. To put it formally, **social psychology** is *the scientific study of how people think about, influence, and relate to one another.*

Unlike other scientific disciplines, social psychology has 5.5 billion amateur practitioners. Few of us have firsthand experience in nuclear physics, but we are the very subject matter of social psychology. As we observe people, we form ideas about how human beings think about, influence, and relate to one another. Professional social psychologists do the same, only more painstakingly, often with experiments that create miniature social dramas that pin down cause and effect.

Most of what you will learn about social-psychological research methods you will absorb as you read later modules. But let us go backstage now and take a brief look at how social psychology is done. This glimpse behind the scenes will be just enough, I trust, for you to appreciate findings discussed later.

Social-psychological research varies by location. It can take place in the laboratory (a controlled situation) or in the **field** (everyday situations outside the laboratory). And it varies by method—being either **correlational** (asking whether two factors are naturally associated) or **experimental** (manipulating some factor to see its effect on another). If you want to be a critical reader of popularly reported psychological research, it will pay you to understand the difference between correlational and experimental research.

To illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of correlational and experimental procedures, consider a practical question: Is college a good financial investment? Surely you have heard the claims about the economic benefits of going to college. Are they something more than a sales pitch? How might we separate fact from falsehood in assessing the impact of college upon lifetime earnings?

CORRELATIONAL RESEARCH: DETECTING NATURAL ASSOCIATIONS

First, we might discern whether any relation—or *correlation*, as we say—exists between educational level and earnings. If college is a good financial investment, then college graduates should, on average, earn more than those who don't attend. Sure enough, Figure 1-1 shows that college graduates have a whopping income advantage. So can we now agree with college recruiters that higher education is the gateway to economic success?

Before we answer yes, let's take a closer look. We know that formal education correlates with earnings; that's beyond question. But does this necessarily mean that education *causes* higher incomes? Perhaps you can identify factors other than education that might explain the education-earnings correlation. (We call these factors *variables* because people will vary on them.) What about family social status? What about intellectual

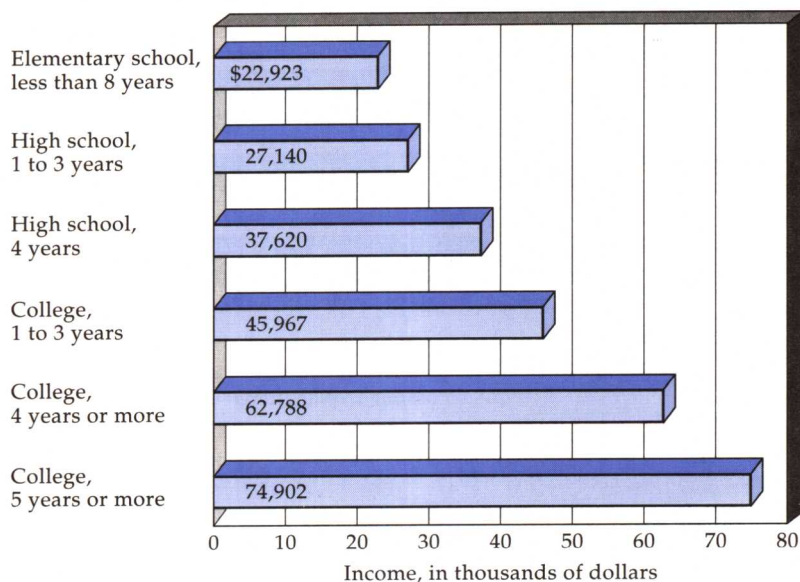


FIGURE 1-1
Income of families, by education of head of household.

ability and achievement drive? Might these not already be higher in those who go to college? Perhaps the higher earnings come from some combination of these variables, and not the college degree. Or perhaps education and earnings correlate because those who have money can most easily afford college in the first place.

Correlation versus Causation

The education-earnings question illustrates the most irresistible thinking error made by both amateur and professional social psychologists. When two factors like education and earnings go together, it is terribly tempting to conclude that one is causing the other.

Consider two examples of the correlation-causation issue in psychology. If a particular style of child rearing correlates with the personality traits of children exposed to it, what does this tell us? If parents who often spank or even abuse their children often have unruly children, what does this tell us? With every correlation, there are three possible explanations (Figure 1-2). The effect of the parents on the child ($x \rightarrow y$) is one. Perhaps physically punitive parents are more likely to have aggressive children because the parents' own example teaches such behavior. You might, however, be surprised at the strength of the evidence for children affect-