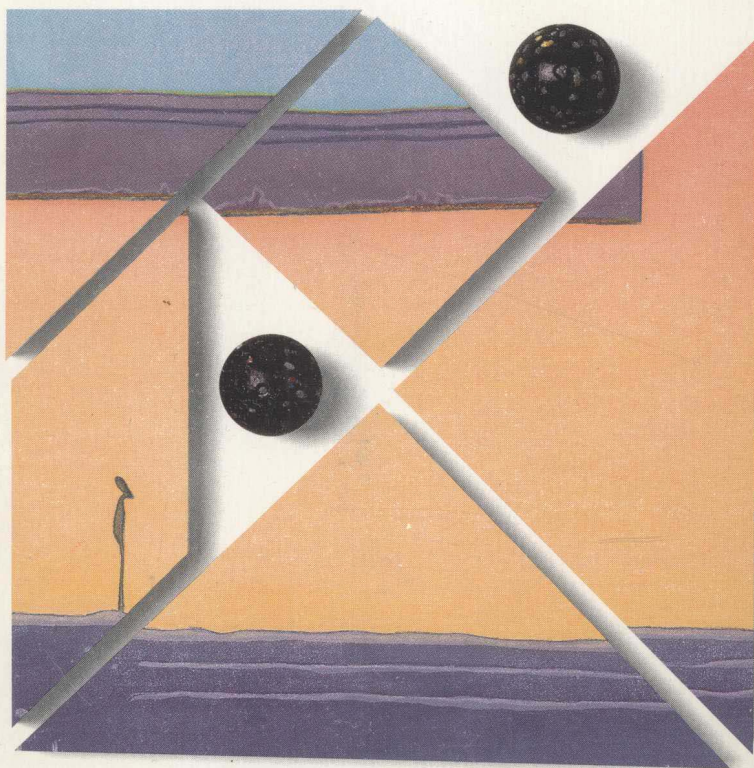


# THE HUMAN PUZZLE

AN INTRODUCTION  
TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY



JACK LEVIN AND WILLIAM C. LEVIN

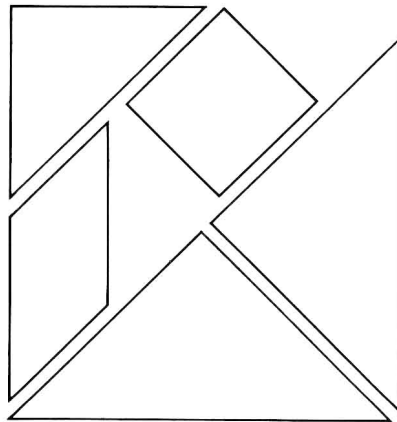


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AN INTRODUCTION  
TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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# Preface

WE ONCE BELIEVED that writing an effective social psychology text for a broad audience of sociologists and psychologists was an exercise in futility. The major obstacle, especially among sociologists, was that the field seemed to lack widely accepted standards of method and substance. This may explain why so few introductory social psychology texts have been written by sociologists and why those that exist have tended to be dominated by only one of several possible theoretical positions. How could one text satisfy so many different approaches and such diverse needs?

Recent changes in our own thinking and in the field of social psychology have changed our minds and have guided our efforts in producing *The Human Puzzle*. We now recognize that this apparent theoretical disorganization can be eliminated by organizing the ideas of social psychology in terms of three major perspectives. We introduce these three perspectives in Chapter 1 and then highlight them in special "Perspective" sections within each chapter. Briefly, they are 1) the effect of the immediate social situation, 2) the effect of social and cultural forces, and 3) the effect of social definition. If we have done our job as we intended, instructors should be able to identify examples of their own perspective throughout the text. More importantly, perhaps, it should also be possible to compare and contrast different approaches in the field, so that students become familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of each.

In the last few years, some important differences dividing social psychol-

ogists have diminished. Many more of them now accept the concept of an *active self in society* as a core or beginning principle. So do we. Indeed, we begin our discussion of the substance of social psychology in Chapter 2 with a major discussion of the self in society. In Chapter 3, we then turn our attention to “the other side of the coin”—the place of others in the development of the self. The relationship between self and others is highlighted in Chapter 4 in the topic of communication and language; and the product of that relationship is examined in Chapter 5 in the concept of role. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 explore important issues and problems—aggression, prejudice, and prosocial behavior—investigated by means of social psychological research. Other issues could have been chosen, but none would likely have been so important as these to the future of the human race.

We never intended to produce a comprehensive and imposing hardcover text; and we didn't. Instead, we wrote the kind of book that we personally prefer to use with our own students: a brief, flexible, and selective introduction to the field, one which can be used alone or in conjunction with more specialized readings. In line with our goal, we attempted to produce a series of essays, rather than all-inclusive summaries, which selectively draw upon a balanced mix of classic as well as up-to-date research. Most importantly, we sought to write a book that was oriented toward students' needs and interests without sacrificing either rigor or credibility. We hoped to impart information about the field of social psychology and, at the same time, to convey the excitement that we feel about it.

We are grateful to the following social psychologists who reviewed the manuscript in various stages of its completion:

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We acknowledge the generous support by Bridgewater State College toward completion of this project in the form of course release and research assistance to William Levin.

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JACK LEVIN AND WILLIAM C. LEVIN

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# CHAPTER 1

## The Human Puzzle

WHILE WE CAN'T PROVE IT, we strongly suspect that the most popular all-time subject for discussion is human behavior. In novels, magazines, poems, songs, television programs, and plays and over the phone, coffee, and the back fence, we exchange information about what people have done, and speculations about why. The range of such information is spectacularly wide, drawing our attention whether it is about the behavior of a neighbor or an entire generation or culture. Some behavior, like the man who has been married six times, seems only mildly interesting compared with those varieties that stretch our ability to believe that people could behave in such ways. How are we to understand a man who kills ten people and apparently feels no guilt? The more we try to make sense of the varieties of human behavior, the more we are impressed by the complexity of the task.

At the very least, human behavior presents us with something of a puzzle. But, unlike the kinds of puzzles with which most people are familiar, the human puzzle is composed of countless pieces which may not be the same shape tomorrow as they are today, simply because people and circumstances change. In addition, unlike normal puzzles, the human puzzle may have many, or even no, satisfactory solutions.

Attempts to understand why we act as we do have come from a variety of fields. Biologists, for example, have suggested that just as genetic instructions determine characteristics for hair color or height, so we are born with

behavioral tendencies. As an extreme example, consider the recent report of twins who were separated immediately after birth and had no contact for 40 years. When reunited in 1979, they were found to drive the same model and color of car, smoke the same brand of cigarettes, and both own dogs named "Toy" (Leo, 1987). Or consider the studies that have suggested that criminal behavior is associated with the appearance of an extra Y chromosome in a person's genetic structure for gender (Witkin et al. 1976).

Theological explanations of human behavior predate the Bible and include a range of ideas such as the belief that madness in people is caused by direct possession of individuals by devils and the current fundamentalist and spiritualist beliefs in divine influence in daily human affairs. Philosophers also have an ancient tradition of concern with human behavior, focusing on issues such as the level at which humans can know and experience the world and the extent to which human understandings of good and evil shape behavior. And psychologists have tried to understand how the mental and emotional characteristics of individuals, such as their personalities or emotional well-being, influence how they act.

## The Social Psychological View

Among the many ways of looking at human behavior, we are specifically interested in the fact that human behavior is *social*. That is, the way people behave is profoundly influenced by the fact that they live in society. *Social psychology* is the study of the individual in his or her social context.

As its name suggests, social psychology is related to both sociology and psychology, but the three disciplines differ in terms of (1) what they wish to explain about human life (their *dependent variables*) and (2) the types of factors they think might be important causes (their *independent variables*). For sociology, the critical dependent variable is the relationship between people, not individual behavior. Sociologists use a range of independent variables to help examine social bonding, including economic, political, and biological forces. For the psychologist, the critical dependent variable is the behavior of the individual and the independent variables are the characteristics of individuals.

For social psychology, the behavior of individuals is the critical depen-

dent variable, while the independent variables have to do with the social contexts of that behavior. In other words, social psychology examines how people's behavior is influenced by the fact that they live among other people. Social psychology, then, is not the combination of all of sociology and psychology. It is a unique field with a specific focus. However, the range of human behaviors with which social psychology is concerned is still quite broad.

As a starting point in examining human behavior from the social psychological perspective, consider the following, each of which is an illustration of behavior discussed in a chapter of this book.

1) Two children from the same family, males who are only one year apart in age, seem to their parents to have been raised in very much the same way. Neither has suffered a traumatic experience nor been given unusual advantages over the other. However, at age seventeen, they could not be less like one another. One is conservative, hard-working, community-minded, and personally ambitious, with specific plans to become a wealthy corporate lawyer or real estate broker. His brother lives exclusively in the present, will only admit to liking loud rock music and sleeping, and refuses to discuss career, college, or any future plans on the grounds that no one can count on there being a future.

2) A woman who has spent most of her adult life fulfilling the traditional female domestic role by caring for her children, husband, and home now finds that her part-time job in a local company is becoming more appealing. She is highly valued as a worker and is offered a full-time position with a raise and promises of more to come. She decides that she wishes to pursue the professional career without giving up any of her domestic involvements, but realizes this course will create conflicts. How can she minimize or eliminate them?

3) After World War II it was discovered that the rumors of Nazi atrocities were not only true, but that the realities of the death camps were many times more horrible than anyone could have believed of the German people. After all, German society had produced some of the most "civilized" expressions of human talent in Western history, including the music of Mozart and Beethoven and the psychoanalytic theories of Freud. The

world was shocked when, in defense of their actions, most Germans who had taken active part in the mass exterminations claimed that they were merely “following orders,” while countless others displayed an exceptional lack of awareness that anything immoral was taking place in the country.

4) A committee formed at a college consisting of students and faculty members conducts an election of officers. The recording secretary of the committee sends all the members the minutes of the first meeting, in which the female head of the committee is referred to as the “chairman.” The entire next meeting is taken up by a debate as to whether the head of the committee should be called the “chairman,” “chairwoman,” “chairperson,” or “chair.” A vote is eventually taken in which the term “chairman” is chosen (in line with the argument that the word “chairman” should be understood to refer to women as well as men), resulting in the resignation from the committee of three of its female members.

5) In New York City some years ago, 38 people watched from their apartment windows as a young woman was stabbed to death by a male attacker. Not a single individual came to her assistance; in fact, no one even bothered to call the police, though the attack lasted approximately 30 minutes.

6) It is common in our culture to define prejudice as, literally, prejudgment; that is, judgment of others without adequate knowledge of them as individuals. It is therefore expected that the level of prejudice towards blacks within a segregated school will decline when the school is integrated. Learning that black people are individuals, not an undifferentiated mass, should teach white children that their stereotypes are unfounded. However, the result of increased interracial contact turns out to be increased levels of prejudice.

7) A woman has accused a man she had been dating of rape. She testifies that during a date she told the man “no” when he began to get too intimate, but he forced himself on her. The defendant argues that the woman had said no, but had not struggled physically against him, suggesting that she really did not mean what she said. The jury finds the defendant not guilty on the grounds that unless a woman reinforces what she says by

physical actions to prevent the sexual contact, her saying “no” may be interpreted by a man to mean “yes.”

We chose these examples of human behavior because they are particularly interesting. Though some of them are clearly extraordinary, such as the behavior of Germans under the Nazi regime, many of the others are far from unusual. Everyone has wondered at the relationship between adult personality and childhood experiences, or has personally witnessed the failure of bystanders to help someone in need. But to describe an instance of such behavior without attempting to explain why it occurred is not adequate. It fails to raise the discussion of human behavior beyond the level of entertainment. How can we make sense of behaviors like these?

### Common Sense and Social Psychology

Most explanations of human behavior are based on *common sense*, that is, what anyone “knows to be true” because it is obvious from personal experience. For example, you don’t have to go into a great deal of fancy reasoning to know that if you drive too fast, you are more likely to have an accident and to be injured in it. Why? Well, personal experience probably has shown any driver that the faster you go, the less time there is to react to others on the road and the less traction there is between the tires and the road surface. It seems unnecessary to collect data and calculate formulas for the relationship between speed and accidents. Most of the time we have no trouble depending upon our common sense. It is often either right or, because everyone shares common-sense explanations, good enough. However, when we try to explain human behavior, common sense can be misleading.

Compare the experiences of two people we know. Both were raised in racially integrated neighborhoods, but one was a wealthy place with a long history of programs to diminish the importance of race in social relations. In the other, integration was resisted for generations; then, when it was forced on the neighborhood by a court-ordered desegregation plan, opposition was violent and prolonged. Our acquaintance from the first neighborhood says that people can get along if they just try, because it is obvious (common sense, that is) that people are basically the same under the skin.



By contrast, our friend from the second neighborhood is as powerfully convinced that people of different races should not mix, and that one only has to use common sense to see that terrible things happen when people try to integrate the races.

The inability of these people to discuss school desegregation without fighting is due to their contrasting notions of what is “apparently true” about human interaction. Because they have had such different experiences on which to base their common-sense notions, there is no common ground for discussion.

We are not trying to suggest that all our common-sense assumptions about human behavior are wrong. But it is clear that common sense is fallible to the extent that it is based upon the *limited* range of an individual's experiences. For another example, we have found that in the Boston area where we work, residents typically overestimate the percentage of Americans who are Catholic. Though the actual figure for the country is around 20 percent, the average guess our students make is near 40 percent, and sometimes as high as 75 percent. This happens because people tend to generalize from their experiences to those of others. The more narrow and specific a person's experience, the less likely that he or she can imagine a range of possible explanations for some event. An extreme case is the woman we know who once was made extremely ill by some bad fish she ate. Ever since, whenever she hears that someone is sick, no matter what the illness, she launches into a lecture about the dangers of eating fish.

A second difficulty with common sense is that it is *subjective*. That is, the process by which an individual comes to believe that something is true cannot be explained to anyone else. If you ask someone how they know something to be true and they answer that “it's just common sense,” they have explained nothing more than if they had said “I just know.” Common sense is commonly not testable. For example, if you ask the person who opposes racial integration why that is the case, he or she is likely to say that the groups can't get along. If you ask how that person knows, the best you can get by way of explanation is that he or she has “seen it.” There is no way to recreate the circumstances in which this individual has gained the information on which the common sense is based. This knowledge, then, is subjective.