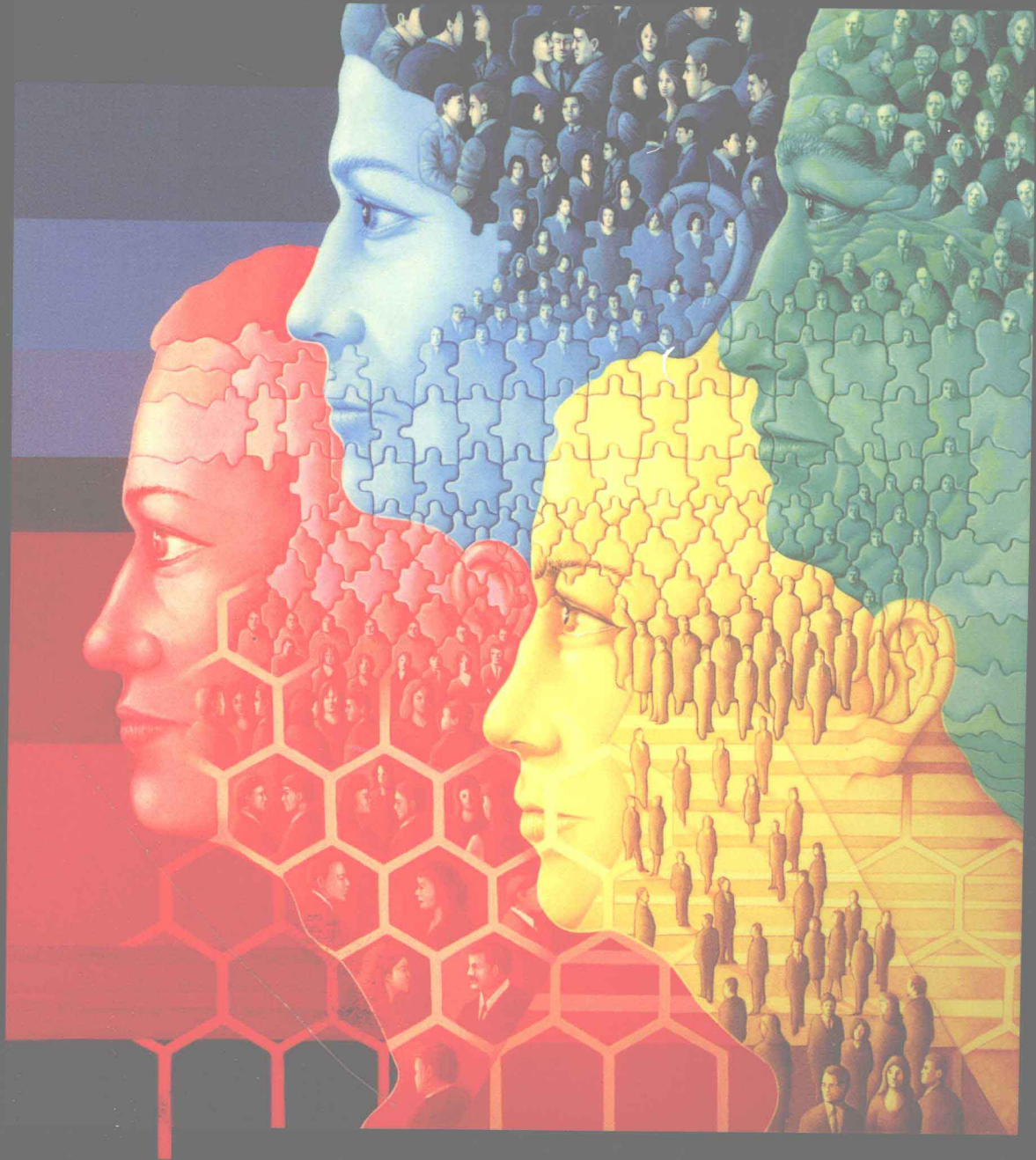


SELF AND SOCIETY



MICHENER

WITH ADDITIONAL READINGS FROM RICHARD TESSLER

Self and Society

Michener

with additional readings from Richard Tessler

WADSWORTH



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ISBN 0-534-20063-X

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"Introduction" from WEST MEETS EAST-AMERICANS ADOPT CHINESE CHILDREN by Richard Tessler, Gail Gamache, Liming Liu. Bergin & Garvey/Greenwood Publishing, 1999, pp. 1-27.

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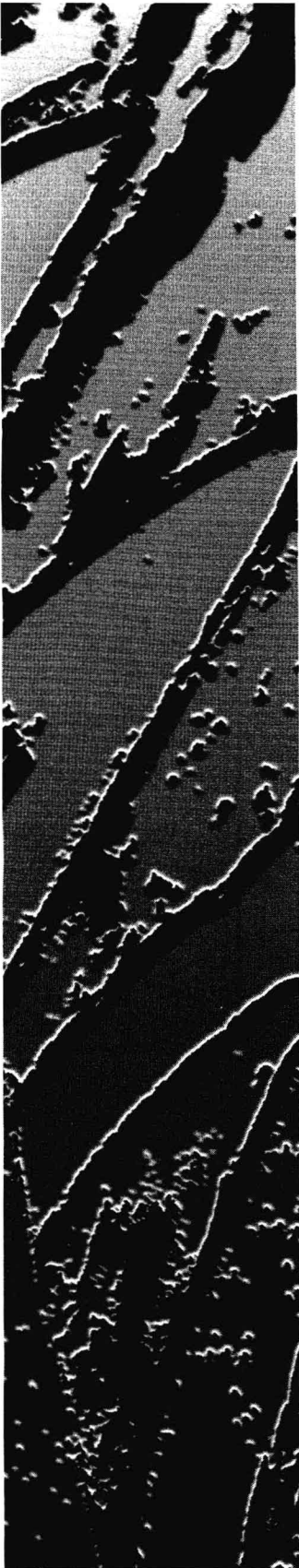
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Social Psychology

Introduction

What Is Social Psychology?

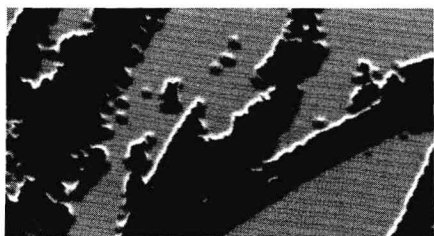
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Introduction

- Why are some people effective leaders and others not?
- What makes people fall in love? What makes them fall out of love?
- Why can people cooperate so easily in some situations but not others?
- What effects do major life events like getting married, having a child, or losing a job have on physical health, mental health, and self-esteem?
- What causes conflict between groups? Why do some conflicts persist far beyond the point where participants can expect to achieve any real gains?
- Why do some people conform to norms and laws and others violate them?
- Why do people present different images of themselves in various social situations? What determines the particular images they present?
- What causes harmful or aggressive behavior? What causes helpful or altruistic behavior?
- Why are some groups so much better at performing their tasks than others?
- Why are some people more persuasive and influential than others? What techniques do they use?
- Why do stereotypes of out-groups persist even in the face of information that obviously contradicts them?

Perhaps questions such as these have puzzled you, just as they have perplexed others down through the ages. You might wonder about these issues simply because you want to understand better the social world around you. Or you might want answers for practical

reasons, such as increasing your effectiveness in day-to-day relations with others.

Answers to questions such as these come from various sources. One such source is personal experience—things we learn by noting what happens when we interact with others in everyday life. Answers obtained by this means are often insightful, but they are usually limited in scope and generality, and occasionally they are even misleading. Another source is informal knowledge or advice from others who describe their own experiences to us. Answers obtained by this means are sometimes reliable, sometimes not. A third source is the conclusions reached by various thinkers—philosophers, novelists, poets, and men and women of practical affairs—who, over the centuries, have written about these issues. Often their answers have filtered down and taken the form of sayings, or aphorisms, that make up commonsense knowledge. We are told, for instance, that punishment is essential to successful child rearing (“Spare the rod and spoil the child”) and that joint effort is an effective way to accomplish large jobs (“Many hands make light work”). Principles such as these reflect certain truths, and they appear to provide guidelines for action in some cases.

Although commonsense knowledge may have some merit, it also has certain drawbacks, not the least of which is that it often contradicts itself. For example, we hear that people who are similar will like one another (“Birds of a feather flock together”) but also that persons who are dissimilar will like each other (“Opposites attract”). We learn that groups are wiser and smarter than individuals (“Two heads are better than one”) but also that problem solving by groups entails many compromises and inevitably produces mediocre results (“A camel is a racehorse designed by a committee”). Each of these contradictory statements may hold true under particular conditions, but without a clear statement of when they apply and when they do not, aphorisms provide little insight regarding relations among people. They provide even less guidance in situations where we must make decisions. For example, when facing a choice that entails risk, which guideline should we use—“Nothing ventured, nothing gained” or “Better safe than sorry”?

If sources such as personal experience and commonsense knowledge have only limited value, how are we to attain an understanding of social interaction and relations among people? Are we forever restricted to intuition and speculation, or is there a better alternative?

One resolution to this problem—the one pursued by social psychologists—is to obtain accurate knowledge about social behavior by applying the methods of science. That is, by taking systematic observations of behavior and formulating theories that are subject to test and potential disconfirmation, we can attain a valid and comprehensive understanding of human social relations.

One goal of this book is to present some of the major findings from systematic research by social psychologists. In this chapter, we lay the foundation for this effort by addressing the following issues:

1. What exactly is “social psychology”? What are the core concerns of the field of social psychology?
2. What broad theoretical perspectives prevail within social psychology today? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each theory?
3. Is social psychology a science? That is, does social psychology have those properties that are the hallmarks of any scientific field?

What Is Social Psychology?

There are various ways to answer the question “What is social psychology?” One is to offer a formal definition of the field. Another is to list in detail the topics investigated by social psychologists. Yet another is to compare and contrast social psychology with its allied fields, psychology and sociology. In this section, we do all of these.

A Formal Definition

We define **social psychology** as the systematic study of the nature and causes of human social behavior. Note certain features of this definition. First, it states that the main concern of social psychology is human

social behavior. This includes many things—the activities of individuals in the presence of others, the processes of social interaction between two or more persons, and the relationships between individuals and the groups to which they belong.

Second, the definition states that social psychology addresses not only the nature of social behavior but also the causes of such behavior. Social psychologists seek to discover the preconditions that cause various social behaviors. Causal relations among variables are important building blocks of theory; and in turn, theory is crucial for the prediction and control of social behavior.

Third, the definition indicates that social psychologists study social behavior in a systematic fashion. In fact, they rely explicitly on research methodologies, including such formal procedures as experimentation, structured observation, and sample surveys. A description of the research methods used by social psychologists appears in Chapter 2.

Core Concerns of Social Psychology

Another way to answer the question “What is social psychology?” is to describe the topics that social psychologists actually study. Social psychologists investigate human behavior, of course, but their primary concern is human behavior in a social context. There are four *core concerns*, or major themes, within social psychology: (1) the impact that one individual has on another; (2) the impact that a group has on its individual members; (3) the impact that individual members have on the groups to which they belong; and (4) the impact that one group has on another group. The four core concerns are shown schematically in Figure 1.1.

Impact of Individuals on Individuals Individuals are affected by others in many ways. In everyday life, *communication* from others may significantly influence a person’s understanding of the social world. Attempts by others at *persuasion* may change an individual’s *beliefs* about the world and his or her *attitudes* toward persons, groups, or other objects. Suppose, for example, that Carol tries to persuade Debbie that all nuclear power plants are dangerous and undesirable,

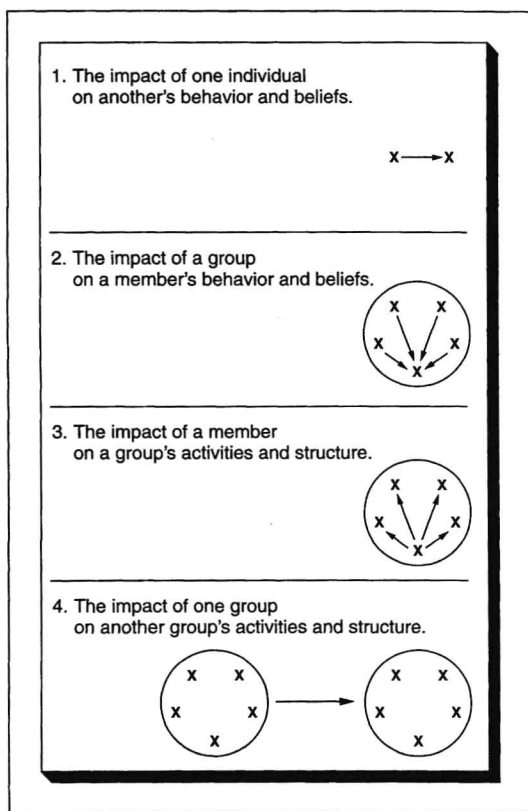


Figure 1.1 The Core Concerns of Social Psychology

and therefore should be closed. If successful, Carol's persuasion attempt would probably change Debbie's beliefs and perhaps affect her future actions (picketing nuclear power plants, advocating nonnuclear sources of power, and the like).

Beyond influence and persuasion, the outcomes obtained by individuals in everyday life are often affected by the actions of others. A person caught in an emergency situation, for instance, may be helped by an altruistic bystander. In another situation, one person may be damaged or wounded by another's aggressive acts. Social psychologists have investigated the nature and origins of both *altruism* and *aggression*, as well as other interpersonal motivations such as cooperation and competition.

Also relevant here are various *interpersonal sentiments*. One individual may develop strong attitudes toward another (liking, disliking, loving, hating) based on who the other is and what he or she does. Debbie, for instance, may like Louis but dislike David and Will. Social psychologists investigate these issues to discover why individuals develop positive attitudes toward some but negative attitudes toward others.

Impact of Groups on Individuals A second concern of social psychology is the impact of a group on the behavior of its individual members. Because individuals belong to many different groups—families, work groups, seminars, and clubs—they spend many hours each week interacting with others. Groups influence and regulate the behavior of their members, typically by establishing norms or rules. One result of this is *conformity*, the process by which a group member adjusts his or her behavior to bring it into line with group norms. For example, college fraternities and sororities have norms—some formal and some informal—that stipulate how members should dress, what meetings they should attend, who they can date and who they should avoid, how they should behave at parties, and the like.

Groups also exert substantial long-term influence on their members through *socialization*, a process that enables groups to regulate what their members learn. Socialization assumes that the members will be adequately trained to enact the roles they play in the group and the larger society. It shapes the knowledge, values, and skills of group members. One product of socialization is language skills; another product is political and religious beliefs and attitudes; yet another is our conception of *self*.

Impact of Individuals on Groups A third concern of social psychology is the impact of individuals on group processes and products. Just as any group influences the behavior of its members, these persons, in turn, may influence the group itself. Individuals contribute to *group productivity* and *group decision making*. In addition, they provide *leadership*, which involves the enactment of various functions

(planning, organizing, controlling) necessary for successful group performance. Without effective leadership, coordination among members will falter and the group drift or fail. In addition, individuals and minority coalitions often *innovate change* in group structure and procedures. Both leadership and innovation, of course, depend on the initiative, insight, and risk-taking ability of individuals.

Impact of Groups on Groups A fourth concern of social psychology is the impact of one group on the activities and structure of another group. Relations between two groups may be friendly or hostile, cooperative or competitive. These relationships, which are based in part on members' identities and may entail group *stereotypes*, can affect the structure and activities of each. Of special interest is *intergroup conflict*, with its accompanying tension and hostility. Violence may flare up, for instance, between two teenage street gangs disputing territorial rights or between racial groups competing for scarce jobs. Conflicts of this type affect the interpersonal relations between groups as well as within each group. Social psychologists have long studied the emergence, persistence, and resolution of intergroup conflict.

Relation to Other Fields

Social psychology bears a close relationship to several other fields, especially sociology and psychology. To understand this relationship, first consider these other fields.

Sociology is the scientific study of human society. It addresses such topics as social institutions (family, religion, and politics), stratification within society (class structure, race and ethnicity, sex roles), basic social processes (socialization, deviance, social control), and the structure of social units (groups, networks, formal organizations, bureaucracies).

In contrast, *psychology* is the scientific study of the individual and individual behavior. Although this behavior may be social in character, it need not be. Psychology addresses such topics as human learning, perception, memory, intelligence, emotion, motivation, and personality.

Social psychology bridges the gap between sociology and psychology. In fact, some view it as an interdisciplinary field. Both sociologists and psychologists have contributed to social psychological knowledge. Social psychologists working in the sociological tradition rely primarily on sample surveys and observational techniques to gather data. These investigators are most interested in the relationship between individuals and the groups to which they belong. They emphasize such processes as socialization, conformity and deviation, social interaction, self-presentation, leadership, recruitment to membership, cooperation and competition, and the like. Social psychologists working in the psychological tradition rely heavily on laboratory experimental methodology. Their primary concern is how an individual's behavior and internal states are affected by social stimuli (often other persons). They emphasize such topics as the self, person perception and attribution, attitudes and attitude change, personality differences in social behavior, social learning and modeling, altruism and aggression, interpersonal attraction, and so on.

Thus sociologically oriented and psychologically oriented social psychologists differ in their outlook and emphasis. As we might expect, this leads them to formulate different theories and to conduct different programs of research. Yet these differences are best viewed as complementary rather than as conflicting. Social psychology as a field is the richer for them.

Theoretical Perspectives in Social Psychology

Yesterday at work, Warren reported to his boss that he would not be able to complete an important project on schedule. To Warren's surprise, the boss became enraged and told him to complete the task by the following Monday—or else! Warren was not entirely sure what to make of this behavior—the boss had shouted at him—but he decided to take the threat seriously. That evening, talking with his girlfriend Alice, Warren announced that he would have to work overtime at the office, so he could not take her to a party on Friday evening as originally planned. Alice immediately got mad at Warren—she definitely

wanted to go and he had promised several times to take her—and threw a paperweight at him. By now, Warren was very distressed and also a little perplexed.

Reflecting on these two events, Warren noticed that they had some characteristics in common. To explain the behavior of his boss and his girlfriend, he formed a general proposition: “If you fail to deliver on promises and thereby block someone’s goals, he or she will get mad at you.” He was happy with this simple formulation until the next day when he read an unusual newspaper story: “MAN IS FIRED FROM JOB, THEN SHOOT HIS DOG IN ANGER.” Warren wondered about this event and then concluded that his own theory needed revision. The new version included several propositions: “If someone’s goals are blocked, he or she will become frustrated. If someone is frustrated, he or she will become aggressive. If someone is aggressive, he or she will attack either the source of the frustration or a convenient surrogate.”

In his own way, Warren is starting to do informally the same thing that social psychologists do more elaborately and systematically. Starting from some observations regarding social behavior, Warren is attempting to formulate a theory to explain the observed facts. As this term is used here, a **theory** is a set of interrelated propositions that organizes and explains a set of observed phenomena. Theories usually pertain not just to some particular event but to whole classes of events. Moreover, as Warren’s example indicates, a theory goes beyond mere observable facts in that it postulates causal relations among variables. If a theory is valid, it enables its user to explain the phenomena under consideration and to make predictions about events not yet observed.

In social psychology, no single theory explains all phenomena of interest; rather, the field includes many different theories. It is useful to distinguish between middle-range theories and theoretical perspectives. **Middle-range theories** are narrow, focused frameworks that identify the conditions that produce a specific social behavior. They are usually scientific-causal in nature; that is, they are formulated in terms of cause and effect. For example, one middle-range theory tries to explain the processes by which persuasion produces attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b). Another middle-range theory tries to specify how majorities and minorities within groups

differ qualitatively in the ways they influence their targets (Moscovici, 1985; Nemeth, 1986). Yet another middle-range theory specifies the conditions under which contact between members of different racial and ethnic groups will cause stereotypes to change or disappear (Rothbart & John, 1985). Throughout this book, we describe many middle-range theories.

In addition to middle-range theories, social psychology includes **theoretical perspectives**. Broader in scope than middle-range theories, theoretical perspectives offer general explanations for a wide array of social behaviors in a variety of situations. These general explanations are rooted in explicit assumptions about human nature. Theoretical perspectives serve an important function for the field of social psychology. By making certain assumptions regarding human nature, a theoretical perspective establishes a vantage from which we can examine a range of social behaviors. Because any perspective highlights certain features and downplays others, it enables us to more clearly “see” certain aspects or features of social behavior. The fundamental value of any theoretical perspective lies in its applicability across many situations; it provides a frame of reference for interpreting and comparing a wide range of social situations and behaviors.

Social psychology includes several distinct theoretical perspectives. Four of the more important ones are (1) role theory, (2) reinforcement theory, (3) cognitive theory, and (4) symbolic interaction theory. In the following sections, we discuss each of these perspectives.

Role Theory

Several months ago, Barbara was invited to participate in a stage production of Molière’s comedy *The Learned Woman*. She was offered the role of Martine, a kitchen servant dismissed from her job for using poor grammar. Barbara enthusiastically accepted the role and learned her part well. The theater group presented the play six times over a period of 3 weeks. Barbara played the role of Martine in the first four shows, but then she got sick. Fortunately, Barbara’s understudy was able to substitute as Martine during the final two shows. Barbara’s performance was very good, but so was the understudy’s. In fact, one reviewer wrote that it was difficult to tell them apart.

Barbara's friend Craig is more interested in football than in theater. A member of the college football team, Craig plays the position of fullback. Although very large and strong, he is a third-string player because he has the unfortunate habit of fumbling the ball, sometimes at the worst possible moment. But Craig believes that with another year's experience and some improvements in his technique, he could perform better than the other fullbacks and win a place in the team's starting lineup.

Although active in different arenas, Craig and Barbara have something in common: They are both performing roles. When Barbara appears on stage, she performs the role of kitchen servant. When Craig appears on the football field, he performs the role of fullback. In both cases, their behavior is guided by role expectations held by other people. Roles consist of a set of rules (that is, expectations held by others) that function as plans or blueprints and guide behavior.

Barbara's role is defined by very specific expectations. Her part calls for her to say certain things and perform certain actions at specified points in the plot. There is virtually no room for her to improvise or deviate from her lines. Craig's role is also fairly specific.

He has to carry out given assignments—running and blocking—on each of the plays by his team. There is some latitude in exactly how he does these things, but not a great deal. Whenever he misses a block, all the coaches and players know it.

In everyday life, we all perform roles. Anyone who holds a job is performing a role. For instance, unlike Barbara's play-acting role as a kitchen servant, an advertising executive's work role does not dictate exactly what lines are to be spoken. But it will certainly specify what goals should be pursued, what tasks must be accomplished, and what performances are required.

The theoretical perspective that best addresses behavior of this type is **role theory** (Biddle, 1979, 1986; Heiss, 1981; Turner, 1990). Role theory holds that a substantial proportion of observable, day-to-day social behavior is simply persons carrying out their roles, much as actors carry out their roles on the stage or ballplayers theirs on the field.

Propositions in Role Theory The following propositions are central to the role theory perspective:

1. People spend much of their lives participating as members of groups and organizations.



To run smoothly, a production like this newscast requires that all the participants perform tasks and enact roles specified by their work group.

2. Within these groups, people occupy distinct positions (fullback, advertising executive, police sergeant, and the like).
3. Each of these positions entails a **role**, which is a set of functions performed by the person for the group. A person's role is defined by expectations (held by other group members) that specify how he or she should perform.
4. Groups often formalize these expectations as **norms**, which are rules specifying how a person should behave, what rewards will result for performance, and what punishments will result for nonperformance.
5. Individuals usually carry out their roles and perform in accordance with prevailing norms. In other words, people are primarily conformists; they try to meet the expectations held by others.
6. Group members check each individual's performance to determine whether it conforms with the norms. If an individual meets the role expectations held by others, then he or she will receive rewards in some form (acceptance, approval, money, and so on). If he or she fails to perform as expected, however, then group members may embarrass, punish, or even expel that individual from the group. The anticipation that others will apply sanctions ensures performance as expected.

Impact of Roles Role theory implies that if we (as analysts) have information about the role expectations for a specified position, we can then predict a significant portion of the behavior of the person occupying that position. According to role theory, to change a person's behavior, it is necessary to change or redefine his or her role. This might be done by changing the role expectations held by others with respect to that person or by shifting that person into an entirely different role (Allen & Van de Vliert, 1982). For example, if the football coach shifted Craig from fullback to tight end, Craig's behavior would change to match the role demands of his new position. Craig himself may experience some strain while adjusting to the new role, but his behavior will change.

Role theory maintains that a person's role determines not only behavior but also beliefs and attitudes. In other words, individuals bring their attitudes into congruence with the expectations that define their

roles. A change in role should lead to a change in attitude. One illustration of this effect appears in a classic study of factory workers by Lieberman (1965). In the initial stage of this study, researchers measured the attitudes of workers toward union and management policies in a midwestern home appliance factory. During the following year, a number of these workers changed roles. Some were promoted to the position of foreman, a managerial role; others were elected to the position of shop steward, a union role.

About a year after the initial measurement, workers' attitudes were reassessed. The attitudes of workers who had become foremen or shop stewards were compared to those of workers who had not changed roles. The recently promoted foremen expressed more positive attitudes than the nonchangers toward the company's management and the company's incentive system, which paid workers in proportion to what they produced. In contrast, recently elected shop stewards expressed more positive attitudes than the nonchangers toward the union and favored an incentive system based on seniority, not productivity. The most efficient explanation of these results is that the workers' attitudes shifted to fit their new roles, as predicted by role theory.

In general, the roles that people occupy not only channel their behavior but also shape their attitudes. Roles can influence the values that people hold and affect the direction of their personal growth and development. We discuss these topics in more depth in Chapters 3, 14, and 18.

Limitations of Role Theory Despite its usefulness, role theory has difficulty explaining certain kinds of social behavior. Foremost among these is *deviant behavior*, which is any behavior that violates or contravenes the norms defining a given role. Most forms of deviant behavior, whether simply a refusal to perform as expected or something more serious like commission of a crime, disrupt interpersonal relations. Deviant behavior poses a challenge to role theory because it contravenes the assumption that people are essentially conformist. Of course, a certain amount of deviant behavior can be explained by the fact that people are sometimes ignorant of the norms. Deviance may also result whenever people face conflicting and/or incompatible expectations from several other

people (Miles, 1977). In general, however, deviant behavior is an unexplained and problematic exception from the standpoint of role theory. In Chapters 13 and 19, we discuss the conditions that cause deviant behavior and the reactions of others to such behavior.

Even critics of role theory acknowledge that a substantial portion of all social behavior can be explained as conformity to established role expectations. But role theory does not and cannot explain how role expectations came to be what they are in the first place. Nor does it explain when and how role expectations change. Without accomplishing these tasks, role theory can provide no more than an incomplete explanation of social behavior.

Reinforcement Theory

Reinforcement theory, another major perspective on social behavior, begins with the premise that social behavior is governed by external events. Its central proposition is that people will more likely perform a specific behavior if it is followed directly by the occurrence of something pleasurable or by the removal of something aversive; likewise, they will more likely refrain from performing a particular behavior if it is followed by the occurrence of something aversive or by the removal of something pleasant.

The use of reinforcement is illustrated by an early study by Verplanck (1955). The study's point was to show that one person can alter the course of a conversation by the selective use of social approval (a reinforcer). Students conducting the study sought out situations in which each could be alone with another person and conduct a conversation. During the first 10 minutes, the student engaged the other in polite but neutral chitchat; the student was careful neither to support nor to reject opinions expressed by the other. During this period, the student privately noted the number of opinions expressed by the other and unobtrusively recorded this information by doodling on a piece of paper.

After this initial period, the student shifted behavior and expressed approval whenever the other ventured an opinion. The student indicated approval with reinforcers like "I agree," "That's so," and "You're right," and by smiling and nodding in agreement. The student continued this pattern of reinforcement

for 10 minutes, all the while noting the number of opinions expressed by the other.

Next, the student shifted behavior again and suspended reinforcement. Any opinions expressed by the other were met with noncommittal remarks or subtle disagreement. As before, the student noted the number of opinions expressed.

The results of the study show that during the "reward period" (when the student expressed approval), the subjects expressed opinions at a higher rate than they had during the initial baseline period. Moreover, during the "extinction period" (when the student suspended approval), about 90% expressed opinions at a lower rate than they had during the "reward period." Overall, the subjects' behavior during the conversation was substantially influenced by social approval.

Some Concepts of Reinforcement Theory

Reinforcement theory has a long tradition within psychology. It began at the turn of the century with research by Pavlov and by Thorndike, and evolved through the work of Allport (1924), Hull (1943), and Skinner (1953, 1971). The reinforcement perspective holds that behavior is determined primarily by external events, not by internal states. Thus the central concepts of reinforcement theory refer to events that are directly observable. Any event that leads to an alteration or change in behavior is called a *stimulus*. For example, a traffic light that changes to red is a stimulus, as is a wailing tornado siren. The change in behavior induced by a stimulus is called a *response*. Drivers respond to red lights by stopping; families respond to tornado sirens by rushing for shelter. A **reinforcement** is any favorable outcome that results from a response; reinforcement strengthens the response—that is, it increases the probability it will be repeated. In Verplanck's study, the students' social approval was a positive reinforcer that strengthened the subjects' response of expressing opinions. Responses that are not reinforced tend to disappear and not be repeated.

Reinforcement is important in some forms of learning, most notably through conditioning (Mazur, 1998). In **conditioning**, a contingency is established between emitting a response and subsequently receiving a reinforcement. If a person emits a particular response and this response is then reinforced, the

connection between these is strengthened; that is, the person will more probably emit the same response in the future in hopes of again receiving reinforcement.

A related process, *stimulus discrimination*, occurs when a person learns the exact conditions under which a response will be reinforced. For example, Karl, a young child, has learned that if his mother rings the dinner bell (a stimulus), he should respond by coming indoors, washing his hands, and sitting in the appropriate place at the table. His mother then puts food on his plate (a reinforcer). He has also learned, however, that if he performs the same response (washing his hands and sitting down at the table) without first hearing the stimulus (dinner bell), his mother merely tells him that he's too early and cannot have food until later. Thus Karl has learned to discriminate among stimulus conditions (bell vs. no bell), and he knows that reinforcement (food) is obtained only by making the response in the presence of a specific stimulus (bell).

Social Learning Theory Although learning based on reinforcement and conditioning is important, it is not the only form of learning. A central proposition of **social learning theory** (Bandura, 1977) is that one person (the learner) can acquire new responses simply by observing the behavior of another person (the *model*). This observational learning process, called **imitation**, is distinguished by the fact that the learner neither performs a response nor receives any reinforcement. Many social responses are learned through imitation. For instance, children learn ethnic and regional speech patterns by imitating adult speakers around them.

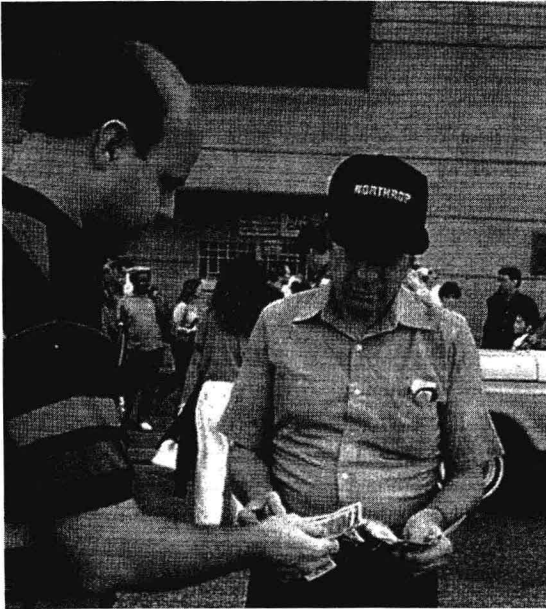
In imitation, the learner watches the model's behavior and thereby comes to understand how to behave in a similar manner. Learning of this type can occur without any external reinforcement. But the issue of whether the learner will actually perform the behaviors learned through observation may hinge on the consequences that performance has for the learner—that is, on whether or not the learner receives reinforcement for performance. A young girl, for example, might observe that her older sister puts on makeup before going out with friends; in fact, if she watches closely enough, she might learn precisely

how to apply makeup the right way. But whether or not the little girl actually puts makeup on herself and wears it around the house may depend heavily on reinforcements she receives for doing so. If she knows, for instance, that her mother strongly disapproves of little girls wearing cosmetics, she may hesitate to use what she has learned from her big sister.

In sum, learning theory holds that individuals acquire new responses through conditioning and imitation. Both conditioning and imitation are important processes in socialization, and they help to explain how persons acquire complex social behaviors. Chapter 3 discusses these processes in more detail.

Social Exchange Theory Another important process based on the principle of reinforcement is social exchange. **Social exchange theory** (Cook, 1987; Homans, 1974; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) uses the concept of reinforcement to explain stability and change in relations between individuals. This theory assumes that individuals have freedom of choice and often face social situations in which they must choose among alternative actions. Any action provides some rewards and entails some costs. There are many kinds of socially mediated rewards—money, goods, services, prestige or status, approval by others, and the like. The theory posits that individuals are hedonistic—they try to maximize rewards and minimize costs. Consequently, they choose actions that produce good profits (profits = rewards – costs) and avoid actions that produce poor profits.

As its name indicates, social exchange theory views social relationships primarily as exchanges of goods and services among persons. People participate in relationships only if they find that these provide profitable outcomes. An individual judges the attractiveness of a relationship by comparing the profits it provides against those available in other, alternative relationships. If a person is participating in a social relationship and receiving certain outcomes, then the level of outcomes available in the best alternative relationship is termed that person's *comparison level for alternatives*. More concretely, suppose an executive is employed by a food products manufacturer when she unexpectedly is offered an attractive job by a competing firm. The new job entails some additional



An exchange taking place—a scalper offers tickets to a football fan for a sold-out game. In transactions of this type, the price is often determined through negotiation between buyer and seller.

responsibilities, but it also pays a considerably higher salary and provides more benefits. This job offer has the effect of substantially increasing the executive's comparison level for alternatives. In this case, exchange theory predicts that she will leave her job for the new one or possibly use the outside offer as a bargaining chip when dealing with her current employer. She likely will stay with her current employer only if he promotes her to a new position with greater rewards.

Concepts of this type apply not only to work relations but also to personal relations. For instance, a study of heterosexual couples in long-term dating relationships shows that rewards and costs can explain whether persons stay in or exit from such relationships (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). Results of this study indicate that individuals are more likely to stay when the partner is physically and personally attractive, when the relationship does not entail undue hassle (high monetary costs, broken promises, arguments), and when romantic involve-

ments with attractive outsiders are not readily available. In other words, they are more likely to stay when the rewards are high, the costs are low, and the comparison level for alternatives is low. Effects of this type are predicted by social exchange theory.

Exchange theory also predicts the conditions under which people try to change or restructure their relationships. Central to this is the concept of **equity** (Adams, 1963; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). A state of equity exists in a relationship when participants feel that the rewards they receive are proportional to the costs they bear. For example, a supervisor may earn more money than a line worker and receive better benefits on the job. But the line worker may nevertheless feel the relationship is equitable because the supervisor bears more responsibility and has a higher level of education.

If, for some reason, a participant feels the allocation of rewards and costs in a relationship is inequitable, then the relationship is potentially unstable. People find inequity difficult to tolerate—they may feel cheated or exploited and become angry. Social exchange theory predicts that people will try to modify an inequitable relationship. Most likely, they will attempt to reallocate costs and rewards so that equity is established.

Limitations of Reinforcement Theory

Despite its usefulness in illuminating why relationships change and how people learn, reinforcement theory has been criticized on various grounds. One criticism is that reinforcement theory portrays individuals primarily as reacting to environmental stimuli, rather than as initiating behavior based on imaginative or creative thought. The theory does not account easily for creativity, innovation, or invention. A second criticism is that reinforcement theory largely ignores or downplays other motivations. It characterizes social behavior as hedonistic, with individuals striving to maximize profits from outcomes. Thus it cannot easily explain selfless behavior such as altruism and martyrdom. Despite its limitations, reinforcement theory has enjoyed substantial success in explaining why individuals persist in emitting certain behaviors, how they learn new behaviors, and how they influence the behavior of others through

exchange. Ideas from reinforcement and exchange theory are discussed throughout this book, especially in Chapters 3, 8, 10, 11, 12, and 14.

Cognitive Theory

Another theoretical perspective within social psychology is **cognitive theory**, the basic premise of which is that the mental activities of the individual are important determinants of social behavior. These mental activities, called **cognitive processes**, include perception, memory, and judgment, as well as problem solving and decision making. Cognitive theory does not deny the importance of external stimuli, but it maintains that the link between stimulus and response is not mechanical or hardwired. Rather, the individual's cognitive processes intervene between external stimuli and behavioral responses. Individuals not only actively interpret the meaning of stimuli but also select the actions to be made in response to stimuli.

Historically, the cognitive approach to social psychology has been influenced by the ideas of Koffka, Kohler, and other theorists in the *gestalt* movement within psychology. Central to *gestalt* psychology is the principle that people respond to configurations of stimuli rather than to a single, discrete stimulus. In other words, people understand the meaning of a stimulus only by viewing it in the context of an entire system of elements in which it is embedded. A chess master, for example, would not assess the importance of a chess piece on the board without considering its location and strategic capabilities vis-à-vis all the other pieces currently on the board. To comprehend the meaning of any element, we must look at the whole of which it is a part.

Modern cognitive theorists (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Markus & Zajonc, 1985; Wyer & Srull, 1984) depict humans as active in selecting and interpreting stimuli. According to this view, people do more than react to their environment; they actively structure their world cognitively. First, because they cannot possibly attend to all the complex stimuli that surround them, they select only those stimuli that are important or useful to them and ignore the others. Second, they actively control what categories or concepts they use to interpret the stimuli in the environment. One

implication of this, of course, is that several individuals can form dramatically different impressions of a complex stimulus in the environment.

Consider, for example, what happens when several people view a vacant house displaying a bright "FOR RENT" sign. When a building contractor passes the house, he pays primary attention to the quality of the house's construction. He sees lumber, bricks, shingles, and glass, as well as some repairs that need to be made. Another person, a potential renter, sees the house very differently. She notes that it is located close to her job and wonders whether the neighborhood is safe and whether the house is expensive to heat in winter. The realtor trying to rent the house construes it in still different terms—cash flow, occupancy rate, depreciation, mortgage, and amortization. One of the preschool kids living in the neighborhood has yet another view; observing that no person has lived in the house for several months, she is convinced the house is haunted.

Cognitive Structure and Schemas Central to this perspective is the concept of **cognitive structure**, which refers broadly to any form of organization among cognitions (concepts and beliefs). Because a person's cognitions are interrelated, cognitive theory gives special emphasis to exactly how they are structured and organized in memory, as well as to how they affect a person's judgments.

Social psychologists have proposed that individuals use specific cognitive structures called **schemas** to make sense of complex information about other persons, groups, and situations. The term "schema" is derived from the Greek word for "form," and it refers to the form or basic sketch of what we know about people and things. For example, our schema for "law student" might be a set of traits thought to be characteristic of such persons: intelligent, analytic and logical, argumentative (perhaps even combative), thorough and workmanlike with an eagle eye for details, strategically skillful in interpersonal relations, and (occasionally) committed to seeing justice done. Our schema, no doubt, reflects our own experience with lawyers and law students, as well as our conception of what traits are necessary for success in the legal profession. That we hold this schema does not