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Social Episodes

the study of interaction routines

JOSEPH P. FORGAS

University of Oxford

and University of New South Wales



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Preface

Preface-writing is a most satisfying, yet anxious task in the course of producing a book. Satisfying, since it is usually the last job to be done, and anxious because it is the first section encountered by the reader, which often determines whether he/she will want to go any further.

The topic of this book is the emerging interest of social psychologists in the study of natural interaction sequences, or social episodes. Social episodes are typical, recurring interaction routines within a cultural milieu which we perform with automatic skill many times in our lives: going to see a doctor, a dinner party, academic colloquia, an intimate conversation with your spouse or lectures are examples of such routine episodes. Much of everyday interaction consists of the cooperative acting-out of such episode scripts—yet, surprisingly, social psychologists have shown little interest in the study of such interaction routines until recently. While analyses of interaction situations can be found throughout history, from the writings of Plato through Macchiavelli to Goffman, it is only in the past few years that the tools of *empirical* social psychology have been brought to bear on this problem. For too long, social psychologists have shied away from the study of complex interaction episodes, firstly, because no adequate descriptive methods to study them were available, and secondly, because too much of their interest was taken up with the study of one single episode, that which was created in the laboratory by themselves.

The ferment that characterized social psychology in the seventies, as evidenced by notable contributions in the present series, was a necessary prerequisite for the empirical study of social episodes to become possible. I have tried in this book to merge the unique methodological and statistical sophistication that social psychologists have achieved in the past decades with the freshness of some of the recent ideas affecting the discipline, to try to propose a new approach to the study of natural interaction episodes. In doing so, I have attempted to draw on both lines of social psychology's dual heritage: psychology and sociology. In both of these disciplines, interest in the study of natural interaction episodes has a long and distinguished history. I feel that it is absolutely essential that we anchor the concept of social episodes in that history, in order to establish the continuity between the present approach and that

of numerous foregoing contributions. The first few chapters are thus devoted to discussing the background and origins of the study of social episodes.

The book also contains a methodological chapter, describing four influential research strategies which are applicable to the study of social episodes. New techniques, such as multidimensional scaling (MDS) have a particularly important role to play in such research. Scientific methodology and research on everyday interaction routines are by no means antithetical as commonly assumed, and it is of major importance that the applicability of well-tried empirical techniques to the study of social episodes should be established right from the start.

Numerous empirical studies on how social episodes are cognitively represented, identified and performed are summarized in the second half of the book, many of them original studies carried out by us. This material has implications far beyond the boundaries of social psychology proper. Personality theorists, clinical psychologists and other applied psychologists routinely deal with cognitive representations of social episodes, without having a reliable means of quantifying such episode domains. Many clinical techniques are also based on the manipulation of episode-definition competencies, something which is done without the benefit of relevant quantitative measures. The applicability of some of the techniques described here to areas of applied psychology are considered in some detail in Chapter 9.

The book was in fact completed in two different countries, more than ten thousand miles apart. About half of the manuscript was prepared while I was at the University of Oxford, England, and I must acknowledge my deep gratitude to many people there who have played an essential part in the generation of the ideas presented here. Michael Argyle and Rom Harre are the two foremost. My contacts and numerous discussions with Michael were a great help, and his advice and comments were always appreciated. Rom Harre has probably had a greater influence on me than he ever realized. His book with Paul Secord played the role of a catalyst in the generation of some of my ideas, and his seminars and talks during 1975 and 1976 were a further important influence, although I disagree with some of his propositions, as will transpire later. Peter Warr, of the University of Sheffield has seen some of the studies presented in Chapters 7 and 8 in their early stages, and his comments were most helpful. Gerry Ginsburg, on

sabbatical at Oxford from the University of Nevada, Reno, was a most helpful and friendly influence during his stay in 1976.

The second part of the manuscript was completed in Sydney, Australia, at the University of New South Wales. It was not easy to work on the book and to keep up with my teaching commitments at a new institution. It was made much easier by understanding, help and suggestions from Laurie Brown, and by the resources made available by the Australian Research Grants Commission towards the later parts of the project. Financial assistance from the Light Foundation, St. Catherine's College, Oxford, and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) at earlier stages were also most important. Louise Kahabka has typed the manuscript with great skill and speed and her contribution went well beyond that, to include grammatical as well as stylistic corrections. Susan Morris helped with the proofs and the subject index.

By the curious logic of preface writing, one always mentions the most important, and intimate, helpers last. I could not begin to enumerate the ways in which my wife Letitia has helped me. Besides moral support, understanding and love, which one all too easily takes for granted, she has done an immense amount of work on proof reading the manuscript several times over, correcting my clumsy sentences (but don't blame her if there are still such to be found on these pages), and collating and organizing the references. My gratitude is also due to my parents. I should acknowledge their gentle (and not so gentle) prodding when I didn't do as well in primary school as they thought I should. Perhaps I should also mention the role of our cat, Pudernyak, who kept me amused during the inevitable breaks in writing on long, sunny Sydney mornings.

Needless to say, none of the above mentioned persons or institutions are in any way responsible for the content or the form of this book, except, perhaps, the cat.

Sydney
August, 1979

JOSEPH FORGAS

To Teeshie

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Introduction

Much of our normal everyday behaviour is neatly organized into recurring routines. Getting up in the morning, having breakfast, chatting with an acquaintance on the street or going to see a doctor are all episodes which occur with predictable regularity in our lives. Episodes such as these are so typical that little more than a summary label is needed to recall and define the kinds of behaviours which they entail. Some of these episodes are pleasant ones, others are not; some we look forward to with expectation, others with anxiety. The way we perceive and cognitively represent these episodes says something interesting about us as individuals and the values and customs of our social environment. Yet you would search in vain in textbooks of social psychology for research on the perception of these simple everyday routines: quantitative research into social episodes was practically non-existent until a very few years ago.

In recent years, critics of the variable-manipulating type of experimental social psychology have become increasingly vocal, demanding that more attention be paid to social behaviour as it occurs in everyday life, as against the sometimes absurd manipulations introduced in the laboratory. Many of these critics have provided well-argued and convincing reasons why naturalistic social behaviour, occurring within the framework of routines such as the ones mentioned above, should take pride of place in research. Yet these exhortations have, on the whole, resulted in little change in the kind of work that is carried out in social psychology laboratories, and is published by social psychology journals. Is this reluctance to change due to the academic community's alleged conservatism, or is it caused by some other reason? It seems likely that studies of social episodes have been relatively rare because of the lack of acceptable empirical methodologies.

The aim of this book is to propose a new definition of social episodes as cognitive representations of typical interaction sequences, and to present a first survey and synthesis of this increasingly important area in social psychology. In particular, recent innovative applications of

multidimensional scaling (MDS) techniques to the study of social episodes opened up new possibilities for empirical research, and will be discussed in some detail here (Forgas, 1976a, 1978a,b, 1979a,b).

Interest in naturalistic interaction sequences is thus one of the major themes of social psychology in the seventies. Numerous criticisms of laboratory social psychology in the past decade resulted in the emergence of half a dozen or so new orientations. Some of these relied on research strategies borrowed from other disciplines, such as linguistics, social anthropology and ethology; the methodologies used were also widely different and eclectic. It is argued here that the single common denominator of these new strategies is their shared concern with everyday interactions, or "episodes". The best of this work has managed to merge the methodological sophistication of traditional social psychology with the conceptual originality and freshness of the new ideas affecting the discipline. Another noticeable trend in social psychology in recent years has been the growing interest in problems of social cognition (Carroll and Payne, 1976), and in particular, the study of cognitive representations of everyday social reality. The emerging study of social episodes is closely related to these developments. This book seeks to fill a gap in the academic textbooks of social psychology available today, by presenting a summary and synthesis of the background, theories and recent research conceived within the framework of this new area of social psychology. Social episodes as a term is central to this orientation, and will be used as a basic integrative concept in the book.

The psychological and sociological traditions in social psychology

The study of social episodes can also be viewed as an important development in the recent rapprochement of those two alternative branches of social psychology, the psychological and the social. This bifurcation of the discipline has deep historical roots. McDougall's textbook published in 1908 is the first example of an explicitly psychological approach to social behaviour, even though many of his propositions are long forgotten today. His basic approach, which centres on the individual, and seeks to explain his social behaviour in terms of individual characteristics, is still with us today. Allport's influential definition of social psychology as the study of how the feelings, thoughts and behaviour of the individual are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others (Allport, 1924) has further helped to enshrine the principle that social psychology is the study of the individual.

dual's behaviour as it is affected by others. More recent textbooks can be even more categorical in this respect. Thus, Berkowitz (1975) simply states that social psychology is a study of individuals' reactions to social stimuli. By focusing on the individual, to the relative exclusion of broader and more general social and group forces, psychological social psychology has been notably successful in adapting the quantitative, experimental method of psychology to the study of social behaviour. The price of this achievement has been a sacrifice of social relevance, and a relative ignorance of more complex and general social processes which are not easily recreated in the laboratory.

Yet the sociological approach to social psychology is at least as old as the psychological. The early works of Le Bon and Tarde, and Ross's textbook of social psychology which appeared in the same year as McDougall's, are excellent examples of this sociological approach. Instead of focusing on the individual and his characteristics, sociologically-oriented social psychology sought to understand how external, societal forces come to influence social behaviour. In a sense, the roots of sociological social psychology go even deeper than that, and reach back to the cultural sociology of Max Weber, who, more than any of the other grand theorists in the 19th century, was interested in how an individual's attitudes, beliefs and motivations come to determine his society, and how, in turn, ideologies and beliefs in a culture shape individual behaviour. The work of W. I. Thomas and his famous dictum that if people define situations as real they are real in their consequences further illustrates the sociological perspective on social psychology, with its emphasis on the individual's experience of society as an important determinant of social behaviour. More recently, writers such as Goffman, Lyman and Scott, and Garfinkel have contributed to the development of a social psychology which has more in common with the methods and traditions of sociology than with that of psychology.

For too long, these two traditions have evolved in isolation, without much contact and interpenetration, even though the subject matter they sought to study was the same. One of the most promising developments in the seventies is that this bifurcation of the discipline has finally been recognized, and increasing numbers of social psychologists on both sides of the fence seek to learn about the achievements of the other side. Although the divide is not just one of approach, but more fundamentally, one of methodology, there have been some fruitful attempts to fuse the perspective offered by sociological social psychology with the more developed methodological armoury of psychological

social psychology. It is in this area that social episodes and their study are of interest, since they offer a unique opportunity for applying quantitative, empirical methodology to the study of phenomena hitherto only subjected to descriptive, journalistic analysis.

But there is another way in which the psychological and the sociological approaches to the study of social behaviour can meet halfway in the analysis of social episodes. As mentioned before, the psychological tradition is characterized, above all, by its emphasis on the individual as the focus of analysis. The sociological approach, in contrast, seeks to understand processes which may be broadly described as situational and external to the acting individual. The concept of social episodes straddles this divide. On the one hand, social episodes are socio-cultural units, already established and existing social routines within a defined milieu, and in this sense, they are situational, external to the individual and most appropriately studied using an essentially sociological approach. On the other hand, social episodes are predictors of behaviour only to the extent that individuals are aware of them, and consensual episode definitions will inevitably be modified as a function of the idiosyncratic characteristics of the individuals enacting them. In this sense, a psychological approach, concentrating on individual perceptions, interpretations and performance of social episodes would appear to be the most promising strategy. In either case, the concept of social episodes calls for an integrated, socio-psychological perspective on social behaviour, incorporating both individual and situational variables and both the psychological and the sociological traditions in social psychology.

Situationism in the social sciences

Concern with situations and episodes as valid objects of study has been evident in many areas of social science in recent years, such as personality theory, sociology and social psychology. The emerging research on social episodes is also rooted in recent developments in these disciplines.

In personality theory, the shortcomings of purely trait-based conceptualizations of human behaviour (Vernon, 1964) have resulted first in a renewed interest in situations as determinants of behaviour (Mischel, 1968), and more recently in the development of interactionist models of the person-situation relationship (Mischel, 1973; Ekeham-

mar, 1974). Although individual characteristics in such models can be represented by a wide array of already existing tests measuring personality variables, comparable measures of situational features are not yet available. There is a growing consensus in personality theory, maintaining that the lack of progress in the discipline is caused by the fact that "we lack a satisfactory classification of situations. We need a systematic way of conceptualizing the domain of situations and situational variables before we can make rapid progress in studying the role of situations in determining behaviour" (Frederiksen, 1972, p. 115). Several studies of social episodes to be described here demonstrate that social situations and episodes can be reliably quantified and represented in terms of how individuals perceive them. This approach could be directly relevant to the development of taxonomic systems of situations, currently lacking in personality research.

In social psychology, there is an increasing recognition that many studies of social behaviour and perception may lack external validity because the situational context in which such behaviour or perception normally occurs has been ignored in laboratory research. Traditionally, researchers in social psychology have assumed that the situation and the episode are merely vehicles for the manipulation of independent variables. With the recognition that the laboratory experiment as an episode has its own rules and requirements (Rosenthal, 1966; Wuebben *et al.*, 1974) it became evident that the context provided by the cultural definition of the episode has to be taken into consideration if the external validity of much of the laboratory research in social psychology is to be improved. Studies described in Chapter 8 show that the context provided by the appropriate episode has indeed an important and significant effect on social perception.

Finally, situations and episodes have also been in the forefront of interest in sociology, where Thomas's (1928) original interest in the "definition of the situation" has gained a new lease of life with the spreading influence of such new schools as dramaturgical models, ethnomethodology, and other microsociological approaches (Lyman and Scott, 1972). These schools, although widely differing in their approaches (for a more detailed review see Chapter 4), are all interested in the cues used in the definition and identification of a given episode, and the strategies used to enact social episodes. An empirical approach to some of these problems is also an important characteristic of the research on social episodes.

Scott /
Goffman
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Before a detailed consideration of the conceptual background to the study of social episodes can be undertaken, it will be necessary to outline in a preliminary form (a) the general approach adopted here as related to current methodological controversies in social psychology; (b) to present a rationale for studying social episodes, and (c) to clarify some of the terminology to be used throughout this book.

The general approach

In recent years, criticisms of "traditional" experimental social psychology in the positivist mould have become particularly widespread, and suggestions for alternative approaches are becoming more and more numerous (Argyle, 1969, 1976; Armistead, 1974; Gergen, 1973; Harre and Secord, 1972; McGuire, 1973; Warr, 1973a, 1977). These arguments will be considered in more detail in the following chapter. It is such criticisms of experimentation for its own sake which have led to an increasing interest in naturalistic units of social behaviour, such as social episodes, as legitimate objects of study. Critics of laboratory social psychology argue that the objects of study presently dominating research are often of no intrinsic interest, and are studied simply because they are relevant to some previously established paradigm (e.g. McGuire, 1973). More radical critics also maintain that the empirical methodology developed in social psychology, based on a model borrowed from the natural sciences, is itself mistaken, and not appropriate to the study of social behaviour (e.g. Harre and Secord, 1972; Levine, 1974). The alternatives offered, such as Gergen's (1973) historical approach, Levine's (1974) "adversary" model, or Harre and Secord's (1972) espousal of subjective accounts as sources of data, although intuitively appealing, do not yield the kind of objective data on which the establishment of scientific facts could be based. 很多学者对于社会心理学模型本身是持怀疑态度的，认为其不适合研究社会行为。

In the context of present day social psychology, it seems necessary to state at the outset the position taken in relation to these issues. It is accepted here that the first criticism, pointing out the irrelevance of many traditional areas of investigation, is substantially valid. The interest in social episodes as a topic for investigation reflects an agreement with this criticism. The second, and more extreme criticism, implying the rejection of a whole methodological armoury in favour of a vaguely stated descriptive or journalistic approach to social psychology, on the other hand, does not appear to be a promising alternative. 作者认为，第二种批评，即完全抛弃方法论，转向模糊的描述性或新闻式方法，并不是一种有前景的替代方案。