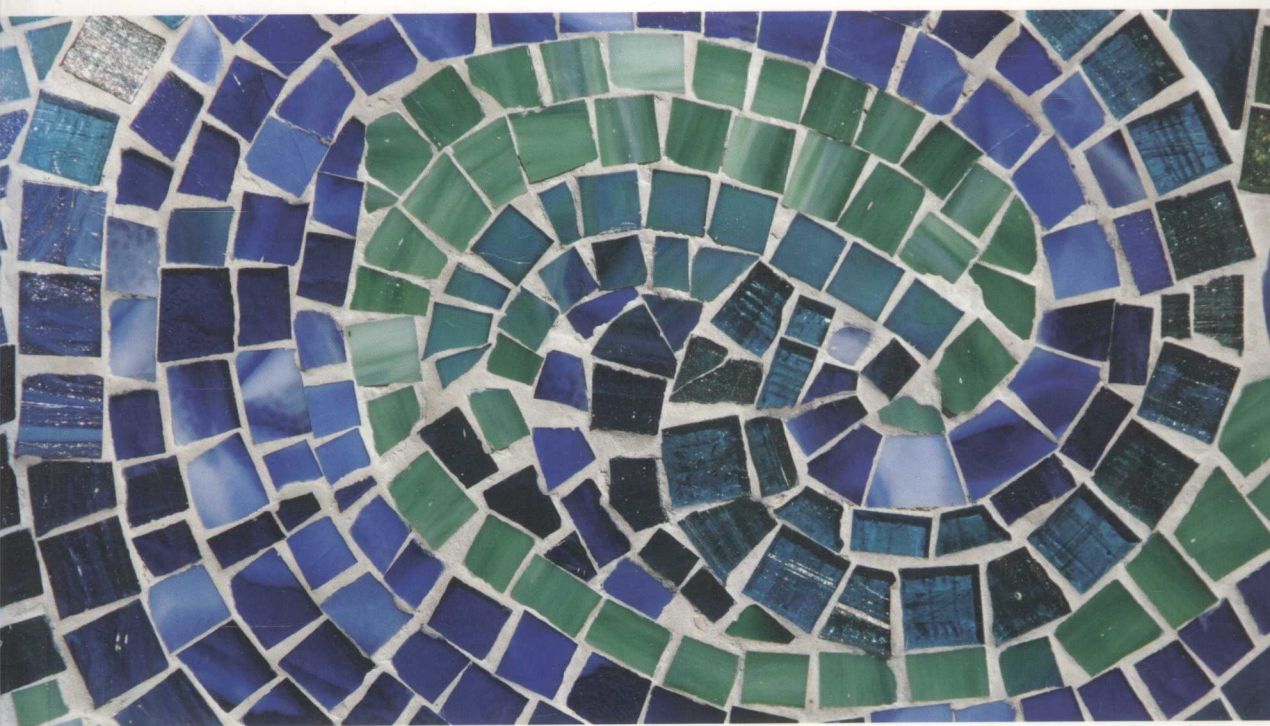


# Applying Social Psychology

From Problems to Solutions



Abraham P. Buunk and Mark Van Vugt





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**SAGE Publications**

Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore



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First published 2008

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SAGE Publications Ltd  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road  
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd  
33 Pekin Street #02-01  
Far East Square  
Singapore 048763

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2007926759**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4129-0282-3  
ISBN 978-1-4129-0283-0 (pbk)

Typeset by C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in Great Britain by The Cromwell Press Ltd, Trowbridge, Wiltshire  
Printed on paper from sustainable resources

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# PREFACE

One of the wonderful experiences in life is that of having a problem and calling an expert, who walks in, takes a look, makes reassuring noises, goes to work and hey presto, your central heating system starts spreading comfort and happiness again. When I returned to academia after a stint as management consultant I realized looking back that I might have fallen somewhat short in providing clients with these wonderful experiences.

Reflecting on what I had actually been using of the knowledge and tools acquired during my training as a social psychologist, I realized that the tools had come in handy but that the application of knowledge/theories hardly figured prominently. I was well equipped to interview people, construct questionnaires and surveys and arrive at an adequate analysis of problems. Yet when it came to providing solutions it seemed I had been mainly relying on common sense combined with the usual role of process consultant. This is a bit like your central heating engineer presenting you with, admittedly, a fine diagnosis of the problem and then offering to hold your hand while you wrestle with finding a way of getting the system to deliver some heat again.

People, groups and organizations are obviously much more complex than the simple systems that keep the house operating: all the more reason to train future practitioners in using the theories and accumulated bodies of knowledge available. Extensive screening of the literature at the time did not throw up the desired textbook/training manual. So I started out developing my own course, which after the usual evolutionary developments has now taken shape as the PATH (Problem-Analysis-Test-Help) model presented in this book.

At first sight this model looks the same as every other problem-solving course. The essential differences the PATH model introduces are twofold:

1. from the very beginning it stresses using theories (plural) that might help to define and delineate the problem and, in the problem-solving phase suggests solutions that consequently have a solid foundation in theory and research; 2. in finding solutions, it examines factors that have a realistic chance of being changed.

In addition to making better use of the available knowledge, the PATH model has the happy side-effect that practising social psychologists are better protected against confusing themselves or their clients.

When in later life I was in charge of a large organization, using consultants from time to time, I was often struck by the difference between the business school alumni and social/organizational psychologists. The first category were strong on analysis and practical solutions they claimed had worked for others. The psychologists were strong

on analysis and nearly always flavoured their solutions with a whiff of how things ought to be. Both groups succeeded in keeping any reference to research and theory well out of sight. This is actually good practice in an applied setting: the average manager/client does not always want to be bothered with academic trivia.

Unfortunately, I am pretty confident that empirically-based theories only played a marginal role for both business school alumni and social/organizational psychologists. In essence this means that contributions from both disciplines do not reach beyond common sense supported by analytical tools. Particularly for the applied social psychologist this is a missed opportunity, as there is a wealth of theoretical/empirical material available through the average textbook. It just needs to be applied. This book sets out a methodology and discipline on *how* to do this.

When students learn to see the usefulness of the textbook materials and apply them systematically, this will not only improve the craft of the applied psychologist and make for happier clients, it will also contribute immensely to the relevance of the text and the motivation and satisfaction of the students.

*Dr Peter Veen, 2007*

# HOW TO USE THIS TEXT

This is the first edition of *Applying Social Psychology*. The authors recognize the value of including certain learning tools to foster the experience of using a textbook for both students and teachers. Accordingly, the authors have decided to incorporate a range of features to illustrate the PATH method and make the book more user-friendly. Many of these features have arisen from feedback on courses in applied social psychology that we and others have taught over the years. We trust that these features will strike a chord with the readers and users of this text. The authors would like to thank Pieterneel Dijkstra for help in preparing these features as well as for editorial assistance.

Key features in the textbook include the following:

1. Further readings  
If you want to find out more about the social psychological theories and research presented, we recommend a list of key readings in applied social psychology at the end of each chapter.
2. Assignments  
Each core chapter contains various assignments that enable students to practise applying social psychology to a diverse range of real-world problems. Each assignment focuses on a particular step in the PATH method. These assignments can be used by teachers to monitor and evaluate student progress or by the students themselves to monitor their own progress in the course.
3. Summaries  
At the end of each chapter a chapter summary is provided. These summarize the sequence of steps within that particular phase of the PATH method.
4. Figures and tables  
The text contains numerous tables and figures to support information in the text.
5. Updated research programmes  
This text contains a diversity of examples of key up-to-date research programmes in applied social psychology to illustrate the various aspects of the PATH method. We discuss research examples from around the world on a wide range of different social problems.
6. Text boxes  
The book contains several text boxes in which well-known social psychologists around the globe discuss why they got interested in applied social psychology and give examples of their applied research programmes.
7. Tests, measurements and instruments  
The text contains various examples of standard tests and measurement scales that are frequently used in applied social psychology. Examples are the self-esteem scale and the SYMLOG group observation instrument.

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### 8. Glossary of key social psychological theories and concepts

For best use of the text, we have identified a list of key social psychological theories and concepts and provide brief summaries of these in text boxes. It is advisable to use a core introductory text in social psychology for further details about theories and relevant research.

### 9. Case studies

Each core chapter contains an example of research into a particular applied social psychology topic. This example serves as an illustration of how to conduct applied social psychology research.



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# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Social psychology is not only a basic social science that studies the nature and determinants of human social behaviour. Social psychology is also an applied discipline of utmost relevance for all kinds of societal problems and issues. Social psychological theories and concepts are frequently used in a wide range of scientific disciplines such as environmental science, movement science, marketing, leisure science, business and management science, preventive medicine, social geography and gerontology, as well as in various subdisciplines of psychology such as clinical, environmental, health, industrial and organizational psychology.

Yet it seems that social psychologists themselves are not always aware of the practical value of their discipline. Most social psychological journals devote relatively little space to applied social psychology. Many traditional applied social psychology topics like aggression, conflict and cooperation in groups, leadership, obedience and helping have either completely disappeared from the literature or they are addressed in the literatures of other disciplines.

We are concerned about this development. Both of us have extensive experience with basic as well as applied social psychology research in a variety of social domains. Based on our own experiences, we believe that social psychology is uniquely placed to combine good theory-driven research with practical relevance. That is basically what Kurt Lewin, the founding father of modern social psychology, envisaged in the 1940s about the development of our discipline. It implies that social psychological processes should not just be studied in the lab, but also in a variety of field settings and with other populations than undergraduate students. It also implies that social psychologists should be interested in (and concerned about) how their findings might contribute to the solution of societal problems.

One major obstacle is that social problems often appear overwhelmingly complex and therefore it may not always be easy to see precisely how social psychology can contribute to their solution. Furthermore, all practical problems are unique in a way, and even if there is a lot of applied research in one specific area, these findings may not necessarily generalize to other domains.

This text presents a novel methodology for applying social psychology to practical social issues and developing an intervention programme. We refer to it as the PATH methodology. PATH is an acronym for the four essential steps in the model – **p**roblem,

## 2 Applying Social Psychology

analysis, test (of model), and help. Each of the chapters in the book discusses one step of the PATH model.

We owe much to the pioneering work done by Peter Veen, who first published a text in the Dutch language in the 1980s with a new method for doing applied social psychology. Many generations of psychology students at Dutch universities were trained in the 'Method Veen'. To acknowledge this legacy, we have asked Veen to write the preface to this book. A completely new version of Veen's book was published in Dutch in 1995 by Abraham Buunk and Peter Veen. Although the present text is heavily inspired by these previous books, it is basically a new text and the first to appear in English with examples of applied social psychology research programmes from around the world.

We hope that our book will inspire many new generations of students across the world in doing social psychology and give them the necessary tools for applying social psychology to pressing social issues. There is much work to be done!

*Abraham P. Buunk, Groningen, 2007*

*Mark Van Vugt, Canterbury, 2007*

# CHAPTER 1

## APPLYING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

### Contents

- **Example of the Application of Social Psychological Theories**
- Problem: Formulating a Problem Definition
- Analysis: Finding Explanations for the Problem
- Test: Developing and Testing the Process Model
- Help: Towards an Intervention Programme
- **Other Relevant Decisions**
- **Applying Social Psychology: The PATH from Problem to Intervention**
- **Problems with Applying Theories**
- Oversimplification
- External Validity
- Contradictory Evidence
- **Conclusion**

# Applying Social Psychology

## EXAMPLE OF THE APPLICATION OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

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Can social psychology help in solving societal problems? And if this is the case, how can social psychology do so? Social psychology is a basic science which tries to build knowledge primarily through **experiments** and **surveys** (see for example Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2002; Brehm, Kassir & Fein, 2005; Hewstone, Stroebe & Jonas, 2005; Hogg & Vaughan, 2005; Kenrick, Neuberg, & Cialdini, 2005; Myers, 2005).

Sometimes, the theories and findings from social psychology may seem a bit remote from the problems in society. However, many if not most societal problems have social psychological aspects (for example crime, racism, environmental pollution), and therefore social psychology may not only help in clarifying such problems, but also contribute to finding solutions. In this chapter we give an example of one such problem to illustrate this point, the debilitating problem of HIV/AIDS in Africa and the lack of support for HIV/AIDS victims. We also show how social psychological knowledge could lead to the development of a theoretical model on which an intervention might be based. Finally, we briefly outline the approach presented in this book, the PATH methodology, through which such models may be developed. This chapter thus summarizes the entire approach.

### Step 1 – Problem: Formulating a Problem Definition

Whilst the increase in safe sex practices has meant the growth in the number of HIV infections has levelled off in the past decade, the number of people with AIDS has been rising all over the world. According to the World Health Organization in 2005 38.6 million people were infected with HIV globally, about 2.5 million more than in 2003. HIV/AIDS is especially a problem in Sub-Saharan Africa, where in 2005 around 26 million people were infected with HIV (WHO, 2005).

Although the possibilities for treatment have improved, HIV/AIDS still is an incurable disease that deeply affects the lives of those involved. In addition, more than any other disease, HIV/AIDS is surrounded by taboos and often leads to the stigmatization and isolation of patients (Dijker, Koomen & Kok, 1997). Patients are often abandoned by their families and friends. For adequate forms of medical and psychosocial help and support of people with HIV/AIDS in poor countries, considerably more money is required than is currently available. Yet while the treatment of people with HIV/AIDS

has steadily improved, the willingness to donate money to help and support people with HIV/AIDS has decreased (Van Vugt, Snyder, Tyler & Biel, 2000).

## Raising Money to Fight AIDS

A team of volunteers from a national HIV/AIDS charity foundation wishes to set up a campaign to raise funds for the purpose of providing medical and psychosocial care for people with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Some team members argue that the campaign should not be too dramatic as it is now generally known how serious it is to be infected with HIV. They are concerned that showing too many depressing stories and pictures of people with HIV/AIDS will adversely affect the willingness to donate money. Others argue that just because there has been less media interest in HIV/AIDS recently, the campaign should highlight the severe and incurable nature of the disease. In doing so, there is a need to emphasize that the victims are not to blame, and that everybody is potentially at risk of contracting HIV. Accordingly, one part of the team wants to actively approach the media, whereas the others are concerned about the lack of media interest in this topic. A related point of debate concerns the campaign slogan. Should it be something positive, like 'Standing Up Against AIDS', or something more dramatic like 'Fighting the Horrors of AIDS'?

One volunteer suggests it would be better as part of the campaign to develop a product which people can buy, like a music CD of African artists, because in that case giving money would look less like charity. Another issue that comes up in the discussion is whether to use television and newspaper advertisements to raise money for the campaign, or to take a more personal, door-to-door, approach. Regarding the latter, should potential donors see a list of contributors and how much they have each contributed? One of the volunteers suggests showing just one large gift to encourage potential donors to match this donation. Other volunteers worry that this might put people off, because it will be difficult to match such an amount.

## The Relevance of Social Psychology

The volunteer team decides to consult a social psychologist to help them develop their campaign. What suggestions should the social psychologist make? This psychologist might have little experience with campaigns to raise money for the fight against HIV/AIDS. Yet he will have conducted research on how to influence people and might know how to apply this to cases such as the HIV/AIDS campaign.

The social psychologist might of course conclude that more research is needed on why people donate money to charities. Given the urgency of the issue, however, this might take too long. Instead, there is an abundant amount of social psychological literature on people's willingness to donate money for charity that the psychologist can consult. Based on this, he might come up with specific suggestions on how to set up the campaign. Yet a better approach would be to first analyse the issue in greater detail and address the relevant causes and conditions for charity giving. Therefore, what he must do first is develop an adequate *problem definition*. This is the P-phase of the PATH methodology.



## 6 Applying Social Psychology

After a series of discussions with the team, the social psychologist defines the problem as follows:

Many people in Africa suffer from HIV/AIDS, and there is insufficient funding to provide adequate forms of medical and psychosocial help and support for these people. Which factors determine potential donors' willingness to donate money for this cause? How can we set up a campaign that would raise money to help people with HIV/AIDS in Africa?

### Step 2 – Analysis: Finding Explanations for the Problem

To identify what factors affect people's willingness to donate money for people with HIV/AIDS in Africa, the social psychologist formulates a broad set of questions that could be answered by the social psychological literature. There are two entries in the literature that immediately flash before him. The first is the literature on *helping*, **altruism**, *cooperation* and **prosocial behaviour** (see for example Batson & Powell, 2003; Van Vugt et al., 2000) which can tell him what motivates people to help others and give money for a good cause. The second is the literature on *social influence*, that can tell him what influence strategies are most effective in getting people to do what you want (see for example Prislin & Wood, 2005), in this case, donating money for people with HIV/AIDS in Africa.

### The Altruism and Prosocial Literatures

The social psychologist decides to focus on the prosocial literature first, and formulates the problem in terms of two general questions:

1. When are people most inclined to help others?
2. What attributes of victims elicit the most helping responses?

He states these questions quite broadly because it is better at this stage to explore the literature more globally in order not to miss any relevant knowledge. Next, he conducts a search on the internet for books on helping with key words such as 'helping', 'altruism', 'cooperation', and 'prosocial behaviour', and finds a number of recent titles, including *The Altruism Question* by the American psychologist Dan Batson (1991), *The Psychology of Helping and Altruism* by the American social scientists David Schroeder, Jane Piliavin, Jack Dovidio, and Louis Penner (2006), the German social psychologist Hans Werner Bierhoff's *Prosocial Behaviour* (2002), and *Cooperation in Modern Society: Promoting the welfare of communities, states, and organizations* by the Dutch, American, and Swedish psychologists Mark Van Vugt, Mark Snyder, Tom Tyler and Anders Biel (2000). These books are all available in the local university library. After consulting the literature, the social psychologist concludes that there are, in fact, three different types of helping:

1. *Emergency intervention*, for example helping someone who is the victim of a robbery or accident.
2. *Organizational helping*, for example volunteering to take on an administrative job at the request of a manager.
3. *Sharing and donating resources*, for example donating money to a charity.