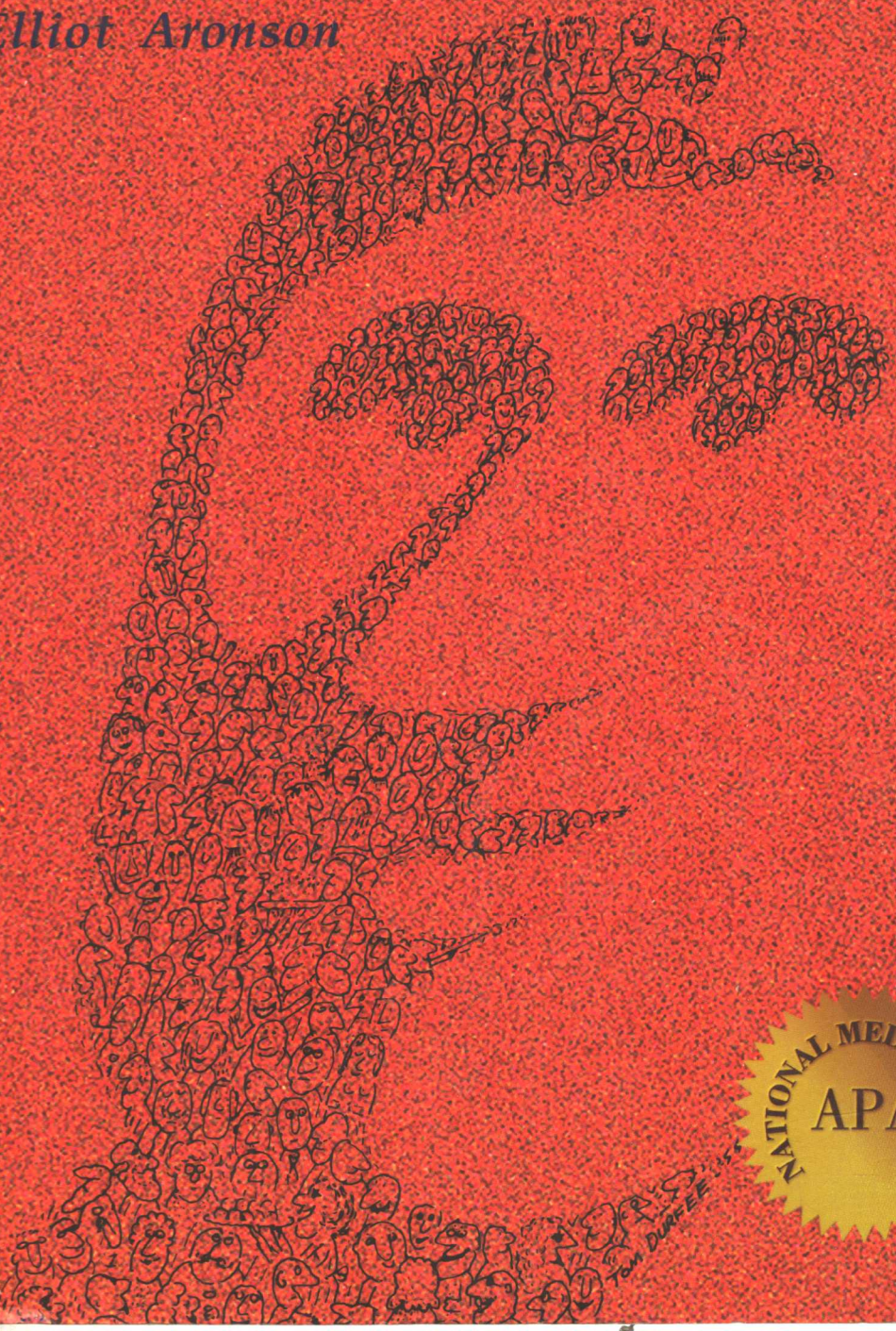
"STILL THE BEST"— *Contemporary Psychology*

Seventh Edition

The Social Animal

Elliot Aronson



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The Social Animal

Elliot Aronson
University of California, Santa Cruz

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Why I Wrote This Book

In 1970–1971, I was invited to spend the year in Stanford, California, at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. During that year, I was given all the support, encouragement, and freedom to do whatever I wanted, and I was assured that I was not responsible to anyone for anything. There, on a beautiful hill, roughly thirty miles from San Francisco (my favorite city), with a whole year in which to do anything my heart desired, I chose to write this book. Surrounded as I was by the beauty of the countryside, and close as I was to the excitement of San Francisco, why did I lock myself in a cubicle and write a book? It's not that I'm crazy, and it's not that I needed the money. If there's a single reason why I wrote this book, it's that I once heard myself tell a large class of sophomores that social psychology is a young science — and it made me feel like a coward.

Let me explain: We social psychologists are fond of saying that social psychology is a young science—and it is a young science. Of

course, astute observers have been making interesting pronouncements and proposing exciting hypotheses about social phenomena at least since the time of Aristotle, but these pronouncements and hypotheses were not seriously tested until well into the twentieth century. The first systematic social psychological experiment (to my knowledge) was conducted by Triplett in 1898 (he measured the effect of competition on performance), but it was not until the late 1930s that experimental social psychology really took off, primarily under the inspiration of Kurt Lewin and his talented students. By the same token it is interesting to note that, although Aristotle first asserted some of the basic principles of social influence and persuasion around 350 B.C., it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that those principles were put to the experimental test by Carl Hovland and his associates.

In another sense, however, to claim that social psychology is a young science is to be guilty of a gigantic cop-out: It's a way of pleading with people not to expect too much from us. Specifically, it can be our way of dodging the responsibility for, and avoiding the risks inherent in, applying our findings to the problems of the world we live in. In this sense, protesting that social psychology is a young science is akin to claiming that we are not yet ready to say anything important, useful, or (if the reader will forgive me for using an overused word) relevant.

The purpose of this volume is unashamedly (but with some trepidation) to spell out the relevance that sociopsychological research might have for some of the problems besetting contemporary society. Most of the data discussed in this volume are based on experiments; most of the illustrations and examples, however, are derived from current social problems—including prejudice, propaganda, war, alienation, aggression, unrest, and political upheaval. This duality reflects two of my own biases—biases that I cherish. The first is that the experimental method is the best way to understand a complex phenomenon. It is a truism of science that the only way to really know the world is to reconstruct it: That is, in order to truly understand what causes what, we must do more than simply observe—rather, we must be responsible for producing the first "what" so that we can be sure that it really caused the second "what." My second bias is that the only way to be certain that the causal relations uncovered in experiments are valid is to bring them out of

the laboratory and into the real world. Thus, as a scientist, I like to work in a laboratory; as a citizen, however, I like to have windows through which I can look out upon the world. Windows, of course, work in both directions: We often derive hypotheses from everyday life. We can best test these hypotheses under the sterile conditions of the laboratory; and in order to try to keep our ideas from becoming sterile, we attempt to take our laboratory findings back out through the window to see if they hold up in the real world.

Implicit in all this is my belief that social psychology is extremely important—that social psychologists can play a vital role in making the world a better place. Indeed, in my more grandiose moments, I nurse the secret belief that social psychologists are in a unique position to have a profound and beneficial impact on our lives by providing an increased understanding of such important phenomena as conformity, persuasion, prejudice, love, and aggression. Now that my secret belief is no longer a secret, I can promise only to try not to force it down the readers' throats on the following pages. Rather, I'll leave it to the readers to decide, after they have finished this volume, whether social psychologists have discovered or can ever discover anything useful, much less anything uniquely important.

Compared to other texts in social psychology, this is a slim volume—and purposely so. It is meant to be a brief introduction to the world of social psychology, not an encyclopedic catalog of research and theory. Because I opted to make it brief, I had to be selective. This means both that there are some traditional topics I chose not to cover and that I have not gone into exhaustive detail with those topics I did choose to cover. Because of my desire to keep the book compact and accessible, it was a difficult book to write. I have had to be more a "news analyst" than a "reporter." For example, there are many controversies that I did not fully describe. Rather, I exercised my own judgment; made an educated (and, I hope, honest) assessment of what is currently the most accurate description of the field, and stated it as clearly as I could.

This decision was made with the student in mind—this book was written for students, not for my colleagues. If I have learned one thing in almost forty years of college teaching, it is that, although a detailed presentation of all positions is useful (and sometimes even fascinating) to one's colleagues, it tends to leave students cold. Students, in effect, ask us what time it is, and we, in effect, present them

with a chart showing the various time zones around the world, a history of time-telling from the sundial to the latest computerized creation, and a detailed description of the anatomy of the grandfather clock. By the time we've finished, they've lost interest in the question. Nothing is safer than to state all sides of all issues, but few things are more boring. Although I have discussed controversial issues, I have not hesitated to draw conclusions. In short, I have attempted to be brief without being unfair, and I have tried to present complex material simply and clearly without oversimplifying. Only the reader can determine how successful I have been in accomplishing either of these goals.

When I finished writing the first edition of this book in 1972, I thought I was done with it. How naive. Early in 1975, I decided, with some reluctance, to revise this book for the first time. A lot had happened in three years. Not only had new and exciting things been discovered in the field of social psychology, but even more important, the world had taken a few major turns since the winter of 1972, when I put the final scrawl on my yellow pad for the first edition. To name just a few of the major events: A brutal, draining, and divisive war came to an end; a vice president and a president of the United States were forced to resign in humiliation; and the women's liberation movement was beginning to have a significant impact on the consciousness of the nation. These were sociopsychological events of the greatest significance. The indolent slob who lives inside me was forced to acknowledge (with a long sigh) that any book that purports to be about our lives—yours and mine—must strive to stay abreast of the times.

Needless to say, it didn't end with one revision. As it turned out, the steady march of events has forced me to revise the book every three or four years. Again, not only do societal events change rapidly, but, social psychology, being a vibrant science, continues to produce interesting new concepts and findings. To fail to keep in touch with this research would be a disservice to the serious student. But here an author must be careful. In our zeal to be thoroughly modern, there is a tendency for textbook writers to neglect perfectly respectable research just because it happens to be more than ten years old.

Here's how it happens: We writers want to retain the classics and we want to add the research that has come out since the last edition. But we don't want the book to get much fatter. Something has to go; and so a lot of research gets swept aside, not always because it has been replaced by something better, only by something newer. This creates the illusion that the field lacks continuity—that is, there's the classic research and the modern research with very little in between. This is terribly misleading.

Over the past twenty-five years, I have tried to deal with this problem by steadfastly refusing to replace a fine "middle-aged" study by a newer one in a given area, unless the newer one adds something important to our understanding of the phenomenon being discussed. My hope is that the revisions of *The Social Animal* retain the compact grace of the original and remain up to date without eliminating or shortchanging the fine research of the recent past.

Acknowledgments

I am indicated on the title page as the sole author of this book, and it is certainly true that I wrote down all the words and did most of the thinking that produced them. Accordingly, if there are any stupidities in this book, they are mine, and if anything you read on these pages makes you angry, I'm the person you should yell at. At the same time, I want to confess that I never do anything entirely by myself: Many people contributed their knowledge and ideas to my word factory, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their generous help.

Vera Aronson and Ellen Berscheid were particularly helpful. They painstakingly went over the original manuscript, page by page and line by line, making numerous suggestions and criticisms that had a significant impact on the final form of this book. Moreover, their enthusiasm for the project was infectious and helped me to climb out of frequent bouts of "writer's despair."

Several other people contributed valuable ideas and suggestions. I cannot possibly cite them all, but the most significant contributors were Nancy Aston, Leonard Berkowitz, David Bradford, John Darley, Richard Easterlin, Jonathan Freedman, James Freel, Robert Helmreich, Michael Kahn, John Kaplan, Judson Mills, and Jev Sikes.

Thanks are also due to Judy Hilton and Faye Gibson, who typed and retyped various drafts of the manuscript as if they really enjoyed doing it; and to Lyn Ellisor, who worked patiently on the bibliographical notes; and to William Ickes, who prepared the indexes. Most of this book was written while I was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, California, and I am deeply grateful to the staff of that fine institution for providing me with the necessary leisure and facilities.

Finally, I am pleased to report that my friend and mentor, Leon Festinger, did not have anything to do with this manuscript—directly. He never read it, and to my knowledge, he was not even aware that I was writing it. He is, however, responsible for its existence. Leon was a wonderful teacher and a demanding role model. I could say that he taught me all I know about social psychology, but that would be a gross understatement. He taught me something much more valuable than that: He taught me how to find out the things that neither I nor anybody else knew.

March 1972

This book is now in its seventh edition. One might say that I have grown old revising it. It is a bittersweet feeling to be able to trace the passage of time by watching the face on the back cover of this book (*my* face!) become increasingly wrinkled and grey-bearded. As indicated above, when I first wrote the book, I was moved to acknowledge my indebtedness to my friend and mentor, Leon Festinger. It goes without saying that I still feel gratitude and affection for that good and great man. If anything, these feelings intensified over the years. I loved being his student—and I guess I will never stop being his student. In 1989, Leon died, marking the end of an important era in social psychology. He is sorely missed, not only by those of us who knew and loved him but also by anyone who has been influenced by

his research and theories; this would include just about anyone who has ever been a student of social psychology.

In addition, as this book and I have grown older, I have become increasingly aware of my indebtedness to *my own* students. While reworking the original manuscript for each revision, it became necessary to examine and reexamine much of my own research and to reformulate many of my ideas. In the process, I have been struck with the realization that these are not simply my own ideas—rather, they are ideas I have developed in collaboration with one or more of a long line of remarkably talented students with whom it has been my privilege to work. Now that I have grown old revising *The Social Animal,* it is easier to see that my students have taught me a great deal. And I mean all my students, from my very first research assistants when I was just starting out in 1960—Merrill Carlsmith, Tony Greenwald, and John M. Darley—to the gifted young people who are my current collaborators.

For the seventh edition, I have benefited greatly from the sustained efforts of my students, Carrie Fried and Andre Kardush-Podell, and from the sage suggestions of my colleague, Anthony Pratkanis.

There is also a sense in which this book is, in part, a family enterprise. This has been especially true in recent years when I have experienced the unique gratification of being deeply influenced by my grown children—each in his/her own fashion. My youngest son, Joshua Aronson, who is an experimental social psychologist, works hard to keep me on my toes regarding recent methodological and theoretical innovations. My oldest son, Hal Aronson, who is an environmental sociologist, helps to keep my focus broader than the confines of the laboratory. And my middle children, Neal Aronson who is a firefighter for the city of Santa Cruz, and Julie Aronson who is an expert on public policy, are in the trenches of human service on a day-to-day basis, reminding me by their example that, ultimately, social psychology must strive to be useful to people in their daily lives.

Finally, as you may have noticed, the dedication of this book reads, "To Vera, of course." The Vera in question is Vera Aronson, who has been my best friend and favorite consultant for almost forty years and who (to my great good fortune) also happens to be my wife. To anyone who knows us well, the phrase "of course" in the dedica-

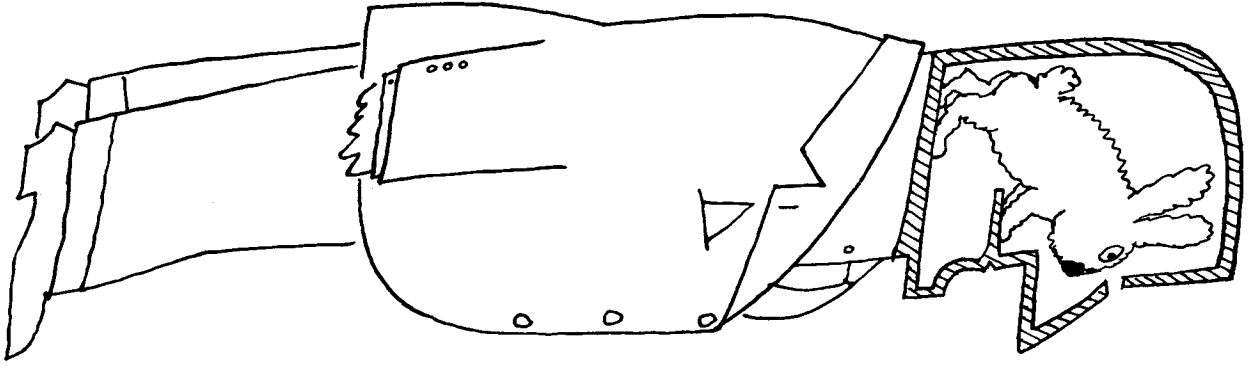
tion is redundant. And because redundancy is an occupational hazard in the teaching game, I must admit (with a blush) that it is almost certainly not the last redundancy you will need to put up with.

August 1994 Elliot Aronson

The Social Animal

Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something in nature that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.

Aristotle
Politics, c. 328 B.C.



Contents

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What Is Social Psychology?

As far as we know, Aristotle was the first person to formulate some of the basic principles of social influence and persuasion; but, although he did say that man is a social animal, he was probably *not* the first person to make that observation. Moreover, chances are he was not the first person to marvel at the truth of that statement while simultaneously puzzling over its triteness and insubstantiality. Although it is certainly true that people are social animals, so are a host of other creatures, from ants and bees to monkeys and apes. What does it mean to say that humans are "social animals"? Let's look at some concrete examples:

> A college student named Sam and four of his acquaintances are watching a presidential candidate make a speech on television. Sam

is favorably impressed; he likes him better than the opposing candidate because of his sincerity. After the speech, one of the other students asserts that she was turned off by the candidate—that she considered him to be a complete phony—and that she prefers the opposing candidate. All of the others are quick to agree with her. Sam looks puzzled and a trifle distressed. Finally, he mumbles to his acquaintances, "I guess he didn't come across as sincere as I would have hoped."

A second-grade teacher stands before her class and asks, "What is the sum of six, nine, four, and eleven?" A boy in the third row puzzles over the question for several seconds, hesitates, raises his hand tentatively, and when called on, haltingly answers, "Thirty?" The teacher nods, smiles at him, says, "Nice work, Ted," and pastes a gold star on his forehead. She then asks the class, "What is the sum of seven, four, eight, three, and ten?" Without wasting a moment, Ted leaps to his feet and shouts, "Thirty-two!"

A four-year-old girl is given a toy drum for her birthday. After pounding on it for a few minutes, she casts it aside and studiously ignores it for the next several weeks. One day a friend comes to visit, picks up the drum, and is about to play with it. Suddenly the young "owner" tears the drum from her friend's grasp and proceeds to play with it as if it had always been her favorite toy.

A ten-year-old girl avidly consumes two bowls of Wheaties daily because an Olympic gymnastics champion endorses the product and implies that she owes her athletic prowess, in part, to the consumption of that particular brand of cereal.

A shopkeeper who has lived his entire life in a small town in Montana has never had any contact with real, live black people, but he "knows" they are shiftless, lazy, and oversexed.

Charlie, a high-school senior, has recently moved to a new city. He used to be quite popular, but not anymore. Although the kids at school are civil to him, they have not been particularly friendly. He is feeling lonely, insecure, and unattractive. One day, during lunch period, he finds himself at a table with two of his female classmates. One of them is warm, attractive, brilliant, and vivacious; he has been