Social Animal

Elliot Aronson

Sixth Edition

The Social Animal

Elliot Aronson
University of California, Santa Cruz

W. H. Freeman and Company
New York

Cover drawing by Tom Durfee.

Chapter-opening drawings by Saul Steinberg from
The Passport, The Labyrinth, The New World, and *The Catalogue.*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Aronson, Elliot.
The social animal / Elliot Aronson. — 6th ed.
p. cm. — (A Series of books in psychology)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7167-2165-1. — ISBN 0-7167-2166-X (pbk.)
1. Social psychology. I. Title. II. Series.
HM251.A79 1991
302—dc20 91-22061
CIP

Printed in the United States of America

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 VB 9 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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 30 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.

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 catalogue 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 this, 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 nothing else in fifteen years of teaching, I have learned 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 digital 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 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 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 are sociopsychological events of the greatest significance. The indolent slob who lives inside me began to acknowledge (with a long sigh) that any book that purports to be about us and our lives must stay abreast of the times.

And alas, it didn't end with one revision. As it turned out, the steady march of events has forced me to revise the book just about every four years. Again, not only do societal events change rapidly, but, social psychology, being a vibrant and alive science, continues to produce interesting new concepts and research. To fail to keep in touch with this research would be a disservice to the serious student. But here, an author must be careful. As my friend Marilynn Brewer has pointed out, 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 10 years old.

Here's how it happens: We 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 is swept aside, not necessarily because it has been replaced by something *better* but 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 20 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. My hope is that 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.

In the current edition, I have added a new chapter on social cognition to keep abreast of the past decade's most prolific areas of research. I have also decided, with some reluctance, to eliminate the chapter on interpersonal sensitivity. This decision was based on the gradual decline in the popularity of sensitivity training groups in our culture over the past decade. These groups, which excited a wide range of people in the 1960s and 1970s with the hope that interpersonal problems could be addressed through dialogue and open communication, seem to have lost some of their luster in the more acquisitive atmosphere of the 1980s. Not all "progress" is for the better, however, and the core material of that chapter has been retained (folded into the chapter on liking and loving) in the hope that some readers might still harbor some interest in working toward harmony in their intimate interpersonal relations.

Acknowledgments

On the title page I am credited 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; 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 sixth edition. 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 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.

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 own 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 of my students—from my very first research assistants in 1960, J. Merrill Carlsmith and John M. Darley, to the brilliant young people who are currently collaborating with me on research and who have played a significant role in the revision of the sixth edition of this book, Ruth Thibodeau and Carrie Fried. It is a great pleasure to acknowledge my indebtedness to all of you.

For the sixth edition, I have also benefited from the many helpful suggestions of Joshua Aronson, Hal Aronson, Jeff Stone, and Chris Dickerson. I am especially grateful to my friend and colleague Anthony Pratkanis, who wrote the first draft of the chapter on social cognition with the special brand of enthusiasm that he brings to every project he undertakes.

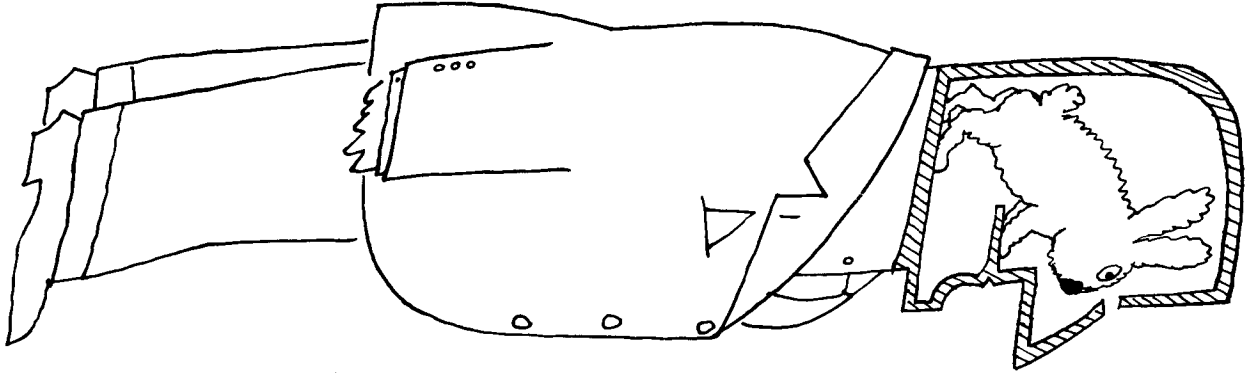
As you may have noticed, the dedication of this book reads, "To Vera, of course." The Vera in question is Vera Aronson, who has been my best friend for almost forty years and who (to my great good fortune) also happens to be my wife. To anyone who knows us well, the phrase "of course" in the dedication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

September 1991 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

1
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 admiring her and daydreaming about her. For several weeks he has been longing for an opportunity to talk to her. The other young woman is not nearly as appealing. Charlie ignores the vivacious

woman of his dreams and begins an earnest conversation with her companion.

Following the 1970 tragedy at Kent State University, in which four students were shot and killed by Ohio National Guardsmen while demonstrating against the war in Southeast Asia, a high-school teacher from Kent, Ohio, asserted that the slain students deserved to die. She made this statement even though she was well aware of the fact that at least two of the victims were not participating in the demonstration but were peacefully walking across campus at the time of the shooting. Indeed, she went on to say, "Anyone who appears on the streets of a city like Kent with long hair, dirty clothes, or barefooted deserves to be shot."[1]

When the Reverend Jim Jones sounded the alert, over 900 members of the People's Temple settlement in Guyana gathered before him. He knew that some of the members of a congressional investigation party had been murdered and that the sanctity and isolation of Jonestown would soon be violated. Jones proclaimed that it was time for them to die. Vats of poison were prepared, and amidst only scattered shouts of protest or acts of resistance, mothers and fathers administered the fatal mixture to their infants and children, drank it themselves, and lay down, arm in arm, waiting to die.

Mary has just turned nine. For her birthday, she received a Suzie Homemaker baking and cooking set, complete with "her own little oven." Her parents chose this present because she seems very interested in culinary things and is forever helping mommy set the table, prepare the meals, and clean the house. "Isn't it wonderful," says Mary's father, "how at age nine she is already interested in being a housewife? Little girls must have housewifery built into their genes. Those feminists don't know what they're talking about."

George Woods is black. When he and I were growing up together in Massachusetts in the 1940s, he considered himself a "colored boy" and felt inferior to his white friends. There were many reasons for this feeling. That George was treated like an inferior by the white community had a direct influence upon him, of course; a number of other forces influenced him less directly. In