

# COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY



## AN APPROACH TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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# **COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY**

*An Approach  
to Social Psychology*

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*Dedicated to  
Debbie and Emily Julia  
and to  
Wanda and our daughters, Chelle, Janet, and Lisa*

# PREFACE

For all of us, life is somewhat like being at the controls of a speeding car that has no brakes. We find ourselves moving ahead at an incredible rate of speed—forced to make decisions at every crossroad.

What shall I do with my life? What kind of work should I prepare to do? Whom shall I date? Whom shall I marry? What kind of friends do we want? Should we have children now? Should our baby be breast-fed or bottle-fed? When should our child be toilet-trained? What sort of education ought we provide for our children? What kind of society do we want to have for them and for ourselves as well as for other people? How can we convince people that our product or political position is “better”? How can we move ahead on our jobs? How can the performance of our team (at work or in sports) be improved? How can we be happy? What exactly is “retirement”? At what age should we retire? What should we *do* during retirement years?

The questions are endless. They occur at every stage of what some like to call the “life-cycle.” There are countless professions that purport to provide more or less definitive answers to these questions and to an infinite variety of related ones. Clergymen, teachers, social workers, child psychologists, physicians, managers, labor leaders, management consultants, gerontologists—the list goes on and on.

This book, the reader should be warned, does *not* have preprogrammed,

computerized answers to these questions. The field of social psychology, however, does address itself to issues of central importance in understanding them.

This volume constitutes one possible introduction to that field. Our approach is not the only one possible. We have arranged most of the material from the perspective of the human life cycle. But even this can be done in a variety of ways.

We have emphasized, at every stage, problems of human communication as well as the phenomenon of human community. We have also tried to provide an understandable introduction to what we regard as the most useful and important methods, theories, and substantive concerns in the field.

We hope all, or at least much of this will be of interest and value, not only to fledgling social psychologists on the way to a career in this field, but to all those who wish to understand themselves and other people somewhat better.

We would like to thank Ed Stanford of Prentice-Hall for his cooperation in the initial formulation of this project. Susan Taylor and Bill Webber continued to provide such cooperation during the latter stages of the project. Wayne Spohr's encouragement and enthusiasm is also greatly appreciated.

A number of people assisted in the preparation of this book. We are indebted to Elsie Glickert and other sociology staff members for their assistance in preparing early drafts of some of the chapters. We are especially grateful to Rebecca Torstrick for her careful attention to details as the manuscript was being word-processed. We also appreciate the careful attention of Dee Josephson, production editor, and the Prentice-Hall copy-editors.

Finally, we are grateful to our reviewers who provided thoughtful and insightful comments throughout the process: Charles Bolton, Portland State University; Clyde W. Franklin, II, Ohio State University; Richard Felson, State University of New York at Albany. As authors, of course, we are responsible for the contents of this book.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## THE FIELD OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Many people feel that the study of a new field should properly begin with a definition. But as one highly respected professional insists, “There are almost as many definitions of social psychology as there are social psychologists.”<sup>1</sup> For a newcomer to the field, such a statement may be seen as either a threat or an opportunity. It could suggest (1) that the field is characterized by a great deal of disorganization or (2) that it is a field in which a great deal is happening and where an inquiring mind can make important contributions. We happen to believe that the second approach is the more accurate description, although it is probably true that new ideas characteristically germinate in what appears to be the soil of disorganization.

In any event, another author has provided us with what is billed as perhaps the single most widely accepted definition of the field of social psychology: “an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others.”<sup>2</sup>

As we progress, it will become clear that social influence is an important focus of this book, although we construe it in a somewhat broader manner than have other social psychologists. Specifically, if people are to influence other people, it would seem that they must “interact.” Interaction takes place in a social context. It takes a place between individuals who occupy particular social positions in which they may enjoy a certain status and play specific roles. According to another expert, then, “Social Psychology is [therefore] the study of social interaction as a phenomenon in its own right and as a component

of larger social systems.”<sup>3</sup> By the time you have finished reading this book, we hope that you will understand more completely what it is you can expect to learn and what you should not expect to learn from definitions.

For example, take the definition we have just given. It is very broad, and it could easily include a great deal of material usually seen as falling within such different disciplines as sociology, anthropology, and psychology. We agree that these disciplines are relevant to social psychology. However, we are not sure that social psychology needs to be restricted to interaction. Moreover, the preceding definition appears to be a bit unfocused.

Other authors have deliberately refused to define the field of social psychology. For them, it is not a theoretical construct that might require a rigorous definition but simply an historical development that has become a field of study.

Here the point is an interesting one: the boundaries of various intellectual disciplines are seldom defined very precisely. Thus, it is not clear where one must draw the precise boundary between physics and chemistry or precisely how either of these differs from biology and how all of them differ from biochemistry, biophysics, and so on. Similarly, it is not clear how one separates in any formal manner the study of literature from the study of linguistics or the study of either of these from the study of languages, psycholinguistics, or ordinary language philosophy. In short, it is possible to refuse to define a field and to ask the beginner to be patient. Tell him or her, “You will understand what the field is all about after you have seen, in some detail, what it has to offer.”

In this book we try to adopt a third alternative. We shall *not* attempt to provide an all-encompassing definition of the field of social psychology, nor shall we avoid this responsibility completely by asking the reader to be patient. Rather, we shall identify three major themes in social psychology that guide our discussions in this book.

The first of these we refer to as *communication*. By communication, we mean the interactions and transactions that take place between individuals and larger social collectivities. This includes, but is not restricted to, the processes of social influence. The communication perspective entails a broader conception of how people interact with one another and how they interpret and construct meanings in the course of that interaction. The second theme that guides our approach to social psychology concerns individual self and personality and their development. This involves the question of how the biological organism—so to speak—is transformed into a human being. This entails two subsidiary questions: (1) How does a person come to have a sense of himself or herself as an autonomous individual? and (2) Why do certain types of people evolve in different ways? Our third theme is more macrosocietal in orientation. Communication and individual development do not take place in a vacuum. Rather, they occur in different societal and cultural contexts. This third theme concerns how living in different social, cultural, and historical contexts affects communication and developmental processes—it addresses the problem of human community.

Throughout this book, our discussions of substantive topics in social psychology will be informed by these three themes. The remainder of this

chapter is devoted to a discussion of different types of social influence and how they may be related to different social and historical contexts.

## CONFORMITY AND OBEDIENCE

Let us begin by visiting a particularly important study—one conducted many years ago by Solomon E. Asch. You enter his laboratory and find yourself in a room with four other people. Someone shows you a straight line (line *x*) and asks each of you to compare it with three other lines (lines *a*, *b*, and *c*). Your job is to say which of these lines most closely approximates the length of line *x*. Simple enough?

Now, let us say that it is pretty clear that line *x* is the same length as line *b* but that it is considerably shorter than line *a* and longer than line *c*. The first person in your group is asked the question, “Which of the lines (*a*, *b*, or *c*) most closely approximates line *x* in length?” Person 1 responds: “Line *a*.” Persons 2, 3, and 4 give the same answer. What do you say?

Asch found that people would agree with the incorrect judgment as often as 35 percent of the time, and subsequent research has established even higher rates of conformity with what “should” be clearly erroneous answers. Interestingly, when Asch and his colleagues interviewed people who gave incorrect answers after the experiment, he found that many had perceived the lines correctly. However, under the pressure of total group unanimity, they gave the conforming but incorrect response to the experimenter.<sup>4</sup>

Studies like Asch’s indicate that people can influence other people in dramatic and strong ways. Social psychologists are very much interested in how a person’s thoughts and actions are influenced by other people. They are interested in why some people are more influenced than others and what makes some efforts to influence others more successful than other efforts. They have studied processes of social influence with small groups in laboratory situations as well as with large populations through the use of methods like survey research. They have tried to understand the limits of social influence and how it works in everyday situations outside the laboratory in the everyday world.

As an example of social psychologists’ attempts to understand the limits of social influence, consider the following scenario. Returning home from work one day, you begin paging through the newspaper. You see an advertisement asking for people to participate in a psychological experiment. You note that participants in the experiment are paid. You can use the money. Moreover, the prospect of participating in such an experiment is intriguing. So you answer the ad.

A few days later you arrive at the laboratory. The experimenter (Dr. Brown) explains the purpose of the experiment to you and to another older subject (Joe) who apparently has also answered the ad in the newspaper. You are told that the purpose of the experiment is to investigate the effects of punishment on learning. More specifically, Dr. Brown wants to know how much punishment is necessary to maximize learning and whether or not the age of either teacher or learner has an effect on the learning process. Dr. Brown

explains that one of you is to be the teacher while the other is to be the learner. He flips a coin, and it is decided that you are to be the teacher.

You go next into a room where there is a complex instrument panel attached to a shock generator. A shock electrode is administered. Dr. Brown explains that, although these shocks may seem painful, they can cause no permanent tissue damage. Dr. Brown next takes you to the instrument panel attached to the shock generator. He shows you that each of the switches is clearly labeled with the amount of voltage administered if the switch is pulled. You see that each switch increases the shock by an increment of 15 volts. The last switch administers a shock of "450 volts." The switches are grouped into fours. Each group has a label. These range from "slight shock" to "extreme intensity shock" and finally, "danger: severe shock." Beyond this are two groups of switches marked simply "XXX."

As the teacher, you are to read a series of word pairs (e.g., red-apple; run-walk) to the learner. Following a trial run, you are to read the first word of the pair and another four words, one of which is the word originally paired with the first word (e.g., red, mother, syllabus, apple, building). Joe is supposed to repeat the other word of the original pair (e.g., apple). The experimenter explains that you are to administer an increasingly higher level of shock each time Joe (who has been placed in an adjacent room and is now barely visible through a tinted window) gives an incorrect answer. Before delivering the shock, however, you are told to announce the correct word(s) and the level of shock about to be administered. You are to continue this procedure until all the word pairs are learned.

The "learning" experiment begins. Joe makes a number of mistakes and, in a few moments, you are up to 150 volts. You ask Dr. Brown if you are to keep going. Then 165 volts is delivered. You ask Dr. Brown if you are to keep going. Another 165 volts is delivered. You hear the learner cry out in the adjacent room.

"That guy is hollering in there," you say. "He might have a heart condition. You want me to go on?"

Then 180 volts is delivered. You become more concerned.

"He can't stand it. I'm not going to kill that man in there! You hear him hollering? He can't stand it. What if something happens to him? . . . I'm not going to kill him . . . I'm not going to get that man sick in there. You know what I mean? I mean I refuse to take responsibility. He's getting hurt in there. He's in there hollering . . . I mean, who is going to take responsibility if anything happens to that guy?"

Dr. Brown says he will assume responsibility and you jack the voltage up to 195 volts. The screaming continues.

"You see he's hollering," you say to Dr. Brown. "Hear that? Gee—I don't know."

"The experiment requires that you go on," says the experimenter.

"I know it does, sir, but I mean—ugh—he doesn't know what he's in for. He's up to 195 volts."

210 volts is delivered.

225 volts is delivered.

240 volts is delivered.

"Aw no," you say. "You mean I've got to keep going up with the scale? No sir. I'm not going to kill that man! I'm not going to give him 450 volts."

"The experiment requires that you go on."

"I know, but that man's hollering in there. . . ."

You continue to object. But, somehow, you also continue to increase the voltage. At 300 volts, the learner begins to bang on the walls. You question the experimenter again, but push up to 315 volts and ultimately all the way up to the maximum 450 volts. After you have administered the maximum voltage, Dr. Brown explains the real purpose of the experiment to you.

Actually, the experiment had nothing at all to do with learning but rather with obedience. Joe was, in fact, a confederate of Dr. Brown's and was not actually receiving any shocks. The draw by which teacher and learner were selected was fixed so that the confederate would always assume the learner role. The experimenter, a social psychologist by the name of Stanley Milgram, was interested in the extent to which adults in our culture are able to disobey the commands of what seems to be legitimate authority. Milgram was surprised to learn that 66 percent of his subjects would go as far as 450 volts and that the average maximum level delivered was 405 volts.

Milgram was also interested in the factors that would either increase or decrease obedience. He noticed that rates of obedience were highest when the spatial distance between the learner and teacher was the greatest, that is, when the learner was in an adjacent room and voice contact between the two was minimal. Obedience increased as the distance between learner and teacher increased. When they were in separate rooms, as we have seen, 66 percent of the subjects continued until 450 volts had been reached. When the learner and teacher were in the same room, about 40 percent of the subjects went as far as 450 volts. When the teacher physically had to place the learner's hand on a metal plate before administering the shock, about 30 percent went as far as 450 volts.

Obedience was also reduced by reducing the credibility of the authority figure. In one of Milgram's experiments, some subjects were informed that the experimenter was a prestigious Yale psychologist; others were led to believe the experimenter had no university affiliation. Those in the former condition were more obedient. In another set of experiments, Milgram used two teachers. The second teacher was a confederate of the experimenter. When the second teacher refused to continue with the experiments, the subject almost always (90 percent of the time) also refused to continue. The proximity of the experimenter also affected the rate of obedience. Obedience decreased when the experimenter was in another room (some subjects went so far as to lie about the number of shocks they actually administered).

In this connection, it is interesting to note that Asch and some of his followers have shown that conformity can be reduced by breaking up the unanimity of a group. In one experiment, the researchers had a confederate deviate from the dominant perception of the group (i.e., estimate that the line was much shorter or longer than other group members estimated it to be). In this experimental condition, conformity was reduced considerably. Significantly, conformity was reduced even if the nonconforming confederate disagreed with the group in a more incorrect direction (i.e., if he or she selected

a line even farther in length from line a). It is also interesting to note that on matters of opinion (as opposed to perception), dissenters from the group opinion would not reduce conformity unless they dissented in the same direction as the subject.

On the other hand, rates of conformity may be increased in ambiguous situations. If the "facts" are unclear, people will tend to look to others for information and guidance. When subjects in a variant of the experimental design used by Solomon Asch were provided with rulers, conformity was considerably reduced. However, when the lines could not be measured or when the factual state of affairs could not be verified, conforming behavior increased. Conformity also was increased when subjects were presented with matters of opinion rather than perception. Faced with ambiguous social situations, people are more likely to conform to what they perceive to be the expectations of others than to search for the facts themselves.

Studies like those carried out by Asch and Milgram tell us a great deal about some aspects of the nature of social influence. Conformity research illustrates how people may form opinions about critical matters related to national and international affairs. Very few North Americans have direct knowledge of such places as Zimbabwe, Lebanon, the Sudan, or even Nicaragua and Honduras. Rather, our opinions on issues related to such places may be strongly influenced by the statements of others in our immediate environment.

Research on obedience illustrates how authority may justify cruel or unethical behavior. Clearly, the authority and esteem attached to the position of former President Richard M. Nixon provided a part of the basis for John Dean's actions in the Watergate affair. The effects of social influence need not always involve such extreme actions. In a recent experiment, social psychologists arranged a situation in which nurses at a hospital received a call from a doctor requesting them to prepare medication for certain patients. The medication was not on the hospital list of approved drugs, and the dosage to be applied exceeded acceptable levels. Nevertheless, almost all the nurses proceeded to prepare the medication.<sup>6</sup>

### **ARE SOME PEOPLE MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO SOCIAL INFLUENCE THAN OTHERS?**

Many of the studies we have discussed so far indicate how easily and how strongly individuals can be influenced, especially in ambiguous circumstances. This, for some, may lead to a misleading conception that human beings are completely pliable. Most social psychologists would agree, of course, that human beings are social animals, that is, that the meaning and significance of our lives are derived essentially from our social existence. In this sense, social influence processes are fundamental to the nature of human existence and may exert a considerable power over us.

However, to speak of the fundamental nature of social influence processes is not to imply that it is always easy to influence people in desirable or, as in the case of some of the preceding experiments, undesirable ways.



In some senses, it is often very difficult to influence individuals. For example, while Milgram may have succeeded in getting many of the subjects in his experiments to obey the experimenter's instructions, he did not succeed in altering their underlying attitudes or beliefs about obedience or the value of punishment.

Getting people to comply with an instruction or request seems to be a very difficult form of influence than attempting to persuade individuals to change certain basic beliefs or opinions.

There are aspects or qualities of individuals that may mediate or otherwise affect the course of the influence process. Milgram, for example, found that "teachers" who obeyed most readily were more authoritarian than were those who were either reluctant to proceed or refused completely to go on with the experiments. Other research suggests that individuals who have a heightened sense of justice are less likely to proceed as far in administering shocks as are those who are less concerned with others' well-being or with general principles of moral action. (See Chapter 7.)

A number of social psychologists have examined the idea of a conforming personality and have studied particular personality traits that seem to be more or less characteristic of conforming and obedient individuals. One example of research related to conformity entails the idea of fate control. Researchers have shown that individuals who believe that they have a greater mastery of their environment and more control over their destiny are less conformist than are those who believe that they exercise only limited control over their environment and feel that their destiny is determined by factors beyond their own influence.<sup>7</sup>

A good deal of research in the area of conformity has focused on the relationship between behavior and the authoritarian personality. Relying on a Freudian perspective (Chapter 4), certain social psychologists have argued that authoritarianism grows out of child-rearing practices that involve a high degree of strict discipline. Individuals raised by such practices, according to this theory, are unable to deal with ambiguities and tend to rely on instructions from superordinates when dealing with complex and confusing problems. Such individuals are generally less tolerant of others (especially others who are different than themselves) and are more likely to have a high commitment to authority figures.

Other social psychologists have linked conformity with various larger sociological processes.

David Riesman, in his book *The Lonely Crowd*,<sup>8</sup> differentiated three different personality types associated with conformity. The "traditional-directed" individual is one who follows the cultural blueprint passed down from generation to generation. This individual simply adheres to the same rules and standards as his or her parents. "Inner-directed" individuals, according to Riesman, have broken away from the traditions of their parents and grandparents. These individuals are self-motivated. Interestingly, Riesman argues that this personality type was tied to the developing stages of capitalism that required a great deal of individual initiative rather than a simple following of previously established practices. Finally, Riesman points to a third personality type: the "other-directed" individual. Where the inner-directed type is guided by a set