

David J. Stang

# Introduction to Social Psychology



**David J. Stang**

**Introduction to  
Social Psychology**

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# Preface

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As an academic profession, social psychology has come of age. Literally thousands of studies of social behavior have been done, and most social-psychology texts pay homage to this research. They present study after study, attempting to represent and summarize this body of knowledge. Untrained readers of such texts, however, often feel confused and overwhelmed by the rambling vastness of the field. These readers are sometimes disappointed to find that the traditional texts offer little that seems applicable to their own lives and experiences.

Although there are now some texts that recognize the emerging parallel discipline of *applied* social psychology in that they relate academic social-psychology principles to real-world social problems, they are unfortunately few in number, because few text authors have worked in applied settings in the field and have broad, applied interests. Consequently, many students still search in vain for a text that will help them apply social-psychology principles to their own lives, to their personal problems.

This text provides what has been missing: it presents *personal* social psychology. It will help amateur social psychologists better understand their own social behavior. The book does cover traditional academic and applied social psychology, but the focus is on concepts and principles that will be useful in the daily lives of students. Professional social psychologists know that social behavior is interesting, that studying it is enjoyable, and that understanding it is useful. Students of social psychology should know this as well.

In making it personal, this book uses some new ways to present social psychology:

- It draws from both sociologically based and psychologically based social psychology, from both academic and applied disciplines, and from both classic and contemporary research to present a balanced integration of the field.
- It reorganizes some material (for example, traditional presentations of material on helping and hurting, and affiliation) to show conceptual, rather than historic, relations among ideas.
- It introduces some new material in the areas of research and theory (for example, on diffusion of affect) to provide balance and currency.

- It deemphasizes names, dates, methods, and findings and emphasizes what is really important: ideas and understanding.

This book is designed for use in introductory social-psychology courses. It uses chapter summaries, interest boxes, and many illustrations to make the material come alive for many types of students, and it provides a glossary for students who do not have Stang and Wrightsman's *Dictionary of Social Behavior and Social Research Methods* (published at about the same time as this book).

In closing, I would like to acknowledge the following people for their help in completing this book: Wally Lambert and Roger Brown for getting me interested in social psychology as a profession; Larry Wrightsman, Claire Verduin, and Bill Hicks for getting me interested in writing this book; the reviewers—Marilynn B. Brewer from the University of California at Santa Barbara, Alfred Cohn from Hofstra University, Barry Fish from Eastern Michigan University, Harmon M. Hosch from the University of Texas at El Paso, Earl L. Jandron from San Jose State University, William W. Lambert from Cornell University, Marvin E. Shaw from the University of Florida, and Rhoda K. Unger from Montclair State College—for their constructive comments; Wade Martin of Catholic University for his assistance in preparing Chapter 7, Communication; John C. Touhey for his help in preparing the glossary; and the staff at Brooks/Cole—especially Bill Waller, manuscript editor, Stacey C. Sawyer, production editor, and Jennifer Young, production associate—for their suggestions and support.

I would also like to acknowledge my debt to two parents, a dozen typists, two dozen friends, and five dozen students, who all helped to bring this book about, and to thank my teacher, advisor, and partner, Jeanne McManus.

I like social psych. I hope that readers will, too.

*David J. Stang*

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# **Introduction to Social Psychology**



chapter  
**1**

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**Social Psychology:  
Science and  
Common Sense**

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**Introduction**

*What Is Social Psychology?  
Common Sense*

*Social Psychology Can Improve Common Sense  
Common Sense Can Improve Social Psychology*

**Social Psychologists: Amateur and Professional**

*The Amateur Social Psychologist  
The Professional Social Psychologist*

**Explaining Social Behavior**

*The Need for Explanation  
The Process of Explanation  
On "Proof"  
The Social Construction of Reality*

**Personal Explanations**

*Types of Personal Theories  
Characteristics of Personal Theories  
Application Rules*

**Scientific Explanations**

*Assumptions Underlying Scientific Explanations*

**Some Applications of Social Psychology**

*Social Psychology Is Useful  
Psychosocial Death  
Understanding Juries  
Power to the Powerless: Responsibility and the Aged  
Improving Toothbrushing*

**Summary**

**Glossary Terms**

**Further Reading**

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## INTRODUCTION

**What Is Social Psychology?** When you get up in the morning, you may decide what to wear by considering whom you will be seeing that day. Even if you eat breakfast alone, you probably use a napkin rather than your sleeve.

Driving to school, you keep to the right side of the road and stop at stop signs even when the streets are empty. Listening to the car radio, you smile and frown, hum, learn, and agree or disagree as you hear news, music, and talk shows. In class you go to the same seat you usually take and may chat with friends until your instructor begins.

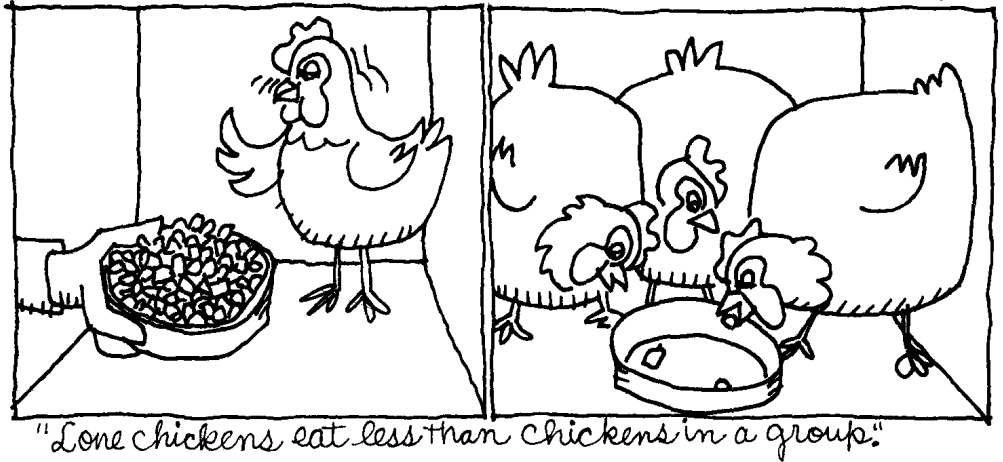
Throughout the day you are influenced by others. **Social psychology**<sup>1</sup> is the study of how your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are affected by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others (Allport, G.W., 1968, p. 3). Social psychologists are interested in why you look in your mirror (trying to see yourself as others see you) or why you stop at a stop sign even with no traffic in sight.

In fact, social psychologists may be interested in any behavior that is influenced by others.

Social psychologists have discovered that people can be swayed surprisingly easily by others. In one experiment, for instance, people delivered what they believed to be 450-volt shocks to complete strangers. Moreover, people often think they have freely chosen to do something when, in fact, their behavior is fully governed by their situation. We have learned that, when people do give situations credit for their actions, they are often wrong. For instance, students who do well on a test congratulate themselves. But when they do poorly, they blame the situation—test, instructor, other students, their health, other courses, or whatever else is convenient. Not that social influence is limited to people. Chickens eat more grain when they are in groups than when alone, and ants dig faster. Cockroaches learn a maze slower when with their colleagues than when alone.

<sup>1</sup>Terms that appear in **boldface** are explained in the glossary at the back of the book.





Most everything we do, then, is somehow influenced by others. Social influence and social behavior are the subject of social psychology and the subject of this book.

**Common Sense.** No doubt about it, **common sense** is valuable. All your life, you have been observing others. In many ways, you are an expert in social behavior. Your common sense summarizes this expert knowledge. It guides you in your interactions with others, helping you understand what they do and predict how they will behave.

In fact, it might seem that making a profession of the study of social behavior is unnecessary. You do not need a scientist to tell you not to spit into the wind. What can a social psychologist tell you that you do not already know? To find out, study Interest Boxes 1-1 and 1-2 (see pp. 6-7).

As you can see from Interest Boxes 1-1 and 1-2, common sense is not perfect. Sometimes, in fact, common sense is just plain wrong. When it is right, it often seems to be contradictory. For example, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," "Out of sight, out of mind." If we examine our common sense carefully, we may find that it is not very good at making precise predictions, but it is fairly good at "explaining" almost everything—*after it happens*. Interest Box 1-3 points out a few contradictions in the personal theories you may hold. And you probably hold other contradictory ideas that are not even on this list (see p. 7).

The realization that personal theories and common sense are sometimes wrong was historically an important breakthrough for science. Social psychologists now generally believe in the **social construction of reality**. This is the idea that most of the things that we assume are "true facts" are merely assumptions or beliefs we have agreed on. For example, for several centuries, people in Europe believed that tomatoes were poisonous. Because this belief was widely held, people assumed it was true, and no one tested it. The toxicity of tomatoes was based on social construction, not on reality.

Our notion of **variables** is a socially constructed reality. There are no "real" variables, only ideas. One division of the world into a set of variables may not correspond exactly to another. For example, in the late 1800s, the idea of intel-