PART I
INTRODUCTION

1
Aims and approaches

The topics of social psychology

Often the closer something is to everyday experience, the more difficult it can be to convince people of the need for its scientific study. The study of the extraordinary has always had a glamour not usually accorded to the study of the ordinary. What happens at the other end of a telescope or microscope, that is the stuff of science. What happens in front of our naked eyes, that is just common knowledge. This is not just a problem for the social and behavioural sciences, although it is now our turn to deal with it: the physical and biological sciences have suffered acutely from this difficulty in the past, and no doubt continue to do so. Yet, if we look at the history of these sciences, we can see that the most revolutionary advances were made when scientists sought directly to explain the obvious. Concepts such as gravity, evolution, infectious disease, were all attempts to account for experiences which were very familiar to scientists and non-scientists alike. These concepts are now themselves so familiar that it is difficult to imagine how the world could have been perceived in any other way, yet already science has moved further on, through questioning once again the basis of what has now become ‘obvious’.

Human social behaviour is about as familiar an object of study as one could possibly imagine. We perceive it and participate in it constantly. Even without the help of social psychologists, we feel we know a very great deal about it, and often with very good reason. We are taught about right and wrong, about human nature, about what is done and what is not done, and the lessons we learn bear more than a fortuitous correspondence to our experience. So where does social psychology fit in? Ideally, what social psychology can do is try to answer questions like why people feel and act towards one another in the ways they do, why they hold particular attitudes, why they explain each other’s behaviour in particular ways, and why they accept particular roles and rules of conduct. But once again the problem of ‘obviousness’ reappears. If one looks at the traditional topic areas of social psychology, it seems almost as though social psychologists are welcomed only as trouble-shooters, called in to help out when things go wrong, to answer questions to which conventional wisdom has no obvious answer. As social psychologists, we are asked why people are racially prejudiced, attack one another, act destructively and self-destructively, are
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easily led and persuaded, fail to help one another and get ‘carried away’ in a
crowd. In short, we are asked to explain apparently irrational behaviour.

In many respects, this is fair enough. Interactions between human beings
have their uglier aspects, and if these can be understood, then possibly
some contribution can be made to the prevention or alleviation of human
misery. Indeed, one could argue more strongly that researchers have a real
responsibility to try and make such a contribution. But there is still a danger.
To be asked, ‘Why do people behave irrationally?’ is to be asked a leading
question. It assumes that the behaviour in question is irrational, not only in
comparison to some logical ideal (for, as we shall see, most social behaviour
would have to be called irrational from this standpoint), but in the sense of
requiring a different kind of explanation from non-problematic ‘sensible’
behaviour. In addition, it assumes that, whatever explanations social
psychologists come up with, these will not be applicable to contexts where
conventional wisdom seems confirmed.

If these assumptions are accepted, then the ordinary and everyday – the
territory of conventional wisdom – are protected from scrutiny. Yet neither
evidence nor logic requires that they be accepted, and hence social
psychology has no obligation to submit to the restrictions which they imply.
Rather, one could argue that it is these very assumptions, and others which
form the basis of so-called common knowledge, that social psychology must
challenge and examine, if it is to make any real contribution, either practical
or conceptual. The topics of social psychology, then, are not merely
different categories of social acts, but also and more vitally the common
everyday assumptions which underly such acts and give them meaning.

Theory and data

Before one starts any investigation, one should have in mind some question
that one wants to answer. This sounds so obvious as not to be worth stating,
but sadly it seems often to be ignored in many research endeavours. The
motto, ‘If it moves, measure it’, characterizes an unfortunately large propor-
tion of what has passed for research in social psychology and related
disciplines. In the short term, following this motto allows one to seem and
feel busy, but in the longer term, it is a recipe for disappointment. But
having said that, it is not always easy to decide on a question. It takes a little
thought. It takes a little theory.

To collect data about how human beings interact with one another is so
easy that it is almost impossible. It is easy because human social interactions
are going on almost all the time, almost anywhere one cares to look. The
streets, so to speak, are paved with gold. The complexity of information
potentially available can be quite overwhelming. To get anywhere, one
must select and categorize, one must act on hunches, one must decide
where the analysis should start and when it should end, in short, one must
Experimentation and observation

Theorize. As Coombs (1964: 5–6) has put it: 'All knowledge is the result of theory – we buy information with assumptions – "facts" are inferences, and so also are data and measurement and scales . . . there is no necessary interpretation of any behavioral example as some particular kind of data.'

In this book I shall be describing a great number of studies where researchers have deliberately set out to test hypotheses derived explicitly from some theory or other. But this is neither the only, nor arguably the most important, aspect of the role of theory in the acquisition of knowledge. Researchers from different theoretical factions may disagree about whose predictions are most accurate, but may still agree about what the measurements they obtain are measurements of. Such agreement is by no means universal, but it is often much more widespread than is agreement over the predictive accuracy of any single model. For example, there have been numerous theories of attitude change, but little questioning of the assumption that attitude change can be measured in terms of changes in individuals' responses on an attitude scale. Yet it is precisely here, in the attribution of meaning to particular scores and measurements, that the fundamental theoretical assumptions are made. Without any such assumptions, we cannot even make a start; but neither can we make real progress unless we recognize such assumptions for what they are.

Experimentation and observation

Just as the questions which researchers ask depend on their theoretical assumptions, so do the methods which they use. Thus, many of the controversies which present themselves as disagreements over methods are in fact disagreements at the level of theory. One of the most heated of these controversies has been over the value of laboratory experimentation in social psychology. On the one side, there are those who argue that the purpose of research is to determine the effects of independent variables on dependent variables, and that the most efficient way to do this is to perform an experiment in a laboratory where the independent variables can be accurately recorded and measured. On the other side are those who argue that laboratory experiments involve situations which bear no relation to any 'real-life' social interactions, and impose artificial restrictions on unrepresentative samples of subjects: to find out what 'really' happens, observations of naturally occurring behavior are the answer.

There is considerable merit in both these positions, and the fairest conclusion one can reach is the unsurprising one that both experimental and observational studies have a great deal to contribute. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the basis of the disagreement. What are experimentalists trying to do? In spite of accusations and occasional protestations to the contrary, they usually are trying to answer questions about 'real-life' social interaction. They choose aspects of 'real-life' behavior and
attempt to reproduce them within a laboratory setting. They also choose situational variables which they suspect might influence such behaviour, and create experimental analogues for these. Of course, the end-product is artificial, but does such artificiality matter, if what one is trying to do is to discover lawful relationships between independent and dependent variables which are generalizable across contexts and often even across cultures? Of course, the subject sample (usually students) is not demographically representative of the general population, but does such unrepresentativeness matter if one is looking for relationships which are generalizable across different kinds of individuals? Such generalizability, however, is more often assumed as an act of faith than put directly to an empirical test.

Generalizability can be just as much of a problem for the observational approach. The data yielded by an observational study are directly relevant to the ‘real-life’ situation in question, and are less likely to be distorted by the subjects’ knowing that they are being observed. This is fine if all one is interested in is just the one particular situation, but once the researcher attempts to extrapolate to other ‘similar’ situations, the conceptual difficulties reappear. How does one decide if two ‘real-life’ situations are in fact similar? Just as in the experimental approach, one needs to make theoretical assumptions about which variables are relevant, and which are the relevant dimensions of similarity. At this point, experimentalists would claim that they are in a better position than observationalists to make such decisions of relevance, since the experiment allows one to look at the effects of a number of variables independently, and assess their relative effectiveness and the degree to which they interact, i.e. depend upon one another. Without intervening to control the different variables in turn, the observationalists have less basis on which to judge which variables are most important.

Where possible, a happy compromise can be the ‘field experiment’. In studies of this kind, subjects do not know that their behaviour is being observed, and instead have to react to what they believe is a naturally occurring event. The problem of extrapolating from the laboratory to the outside world therefore does not arise. At the same time, the experimenter can stage the ‘naturally occurring event’ so that aspects of it are different for different groups of subjects, and so control and manipulate independent variables at least as effectively as in a laboratory. The main limitations of this method are that it is more difficult to obtain these base-line measures of subjects’ attitudes and behaviour before any manipulation takes place, and that the number of responses one can hope to obtain from any single subject is usually quite restricted. These limitations, however, are not necessarily insuperable, granted a certain amount of ingenuity, and, from another point of view, might be positive advantages. The relative value of a field-experiment approach depends to a large extent on how much it matters, in a specific context, that subjects should be unaware that they are participating in a piece of research.
Theory and application

The important issue, however, is not so much how researchers obtain their data, but how they interpret them. Whether one looks at observational, experimental, or field-experimental studies, what researchers attempt to do is usually to treat the observed behaviour of their subjects as an exemplar of a more general class of behaviour, and to treat features of the specific situations as exemplars of more general classes of situational influences. In a large number of cases, they have then attempted to infer causal relationships between these classes of situational variables and the class of behaviour. Thus, researchers will try to say something about the relationships between, for instance, ‘attitude similarity’ and ‘interpersonal attraction’, between ‘threat’ and ‘cooperation’, between ‘ambiguity’ and ‘helping’, or between ‘status’ and ‘discrimination’. Such terms are the building blocks of much social psychological theory, but how good a foundation do they provide? This is an empirical question, which needs to be answered separately for each specific construct. In an experimental approach, it will depend on how well the relevant variables are ‘operationalized’; in other words, how well the variables which the experimenter has chosen to manipulate and measure represent the more general classes of situational influences and the more general classes of behaviour with which the theory is concerned. In an observational approach, it will depend on how well the specific situation and behaviour observed can be classified into the established theoretical categories. The problem is really the same for both approaches; it is merely tackled from opposite sides.

Theoretical advances come when data of any kind force us to rethink such situational and behavioural classifications, and to challenge prior assumptions about their interrelationships, so that our theoretical terms and constructs come to be refined, differentiated, or replaced. Observational studies provide such a challenge by showing what happens ‘out there’. Experiments do so by demonstrating relationships which are more subtle and interdependent than our initial preconceptions would have enabled us to envisage.

Theory and application

The relationship between experimental or observational evidence on the one hand and theory on the other, then, is one of mutual clarification. Theories clarify our understanding of events, whilst empirical findings clarify our explanatory concepts. The very nature of the subject matter being dealt with means that it is vain to look for ‘proof’ or ‘disproof’ of theorems in the kind of absolute categorical sense we might suppose to be more applicable in a discipline like pure mathematics. Even in what conventionally are called the more ‘exact’ sciences, negative findings do not necessarily lead to the rejection of a theory, if no better alternative theory is yet available. The phenomena studied by social psychologists are by definition the outcome of an interaction between personal, interpersonal, social and
environmental factors. The significance of this is not so much that it makes our science more ‘uncertain’ or ‘inexact’ (though this may be true). Rather, it means that we must accept variability as a fact of life, as an intrinsic property of mind, behaviour and society, and not simply as a consequence of measurement error. If we start from the position that all social psychological theories will be correct under some conditions, but that no social psychological theory will be correct under all conditions, we shall not go too far astray. The more generalizable a theory is, the better, by and large. Wider applicability, though, merely establishes greater explanatory usefulness within the context of the problems currently seen as in need of explanation. Whether it constitutes a closer approximation to some idealized universal Truth, is altogether a more metaphysical question.

If we view theories as tools, and improved understanding as the product or at least the goal of research activity, we can dispense with a false dichotomy that has distracted many previous discussions of the nature of social psychology. This is the distinction between ‘basic’ and ‘applied’ research. Search for long enough and you can find extreme examples of studies that seem ‘purely’ theoretical or ‘purely’ applied. The more important question, though, is how to conceptualize the generality of research that is carried on between these two extremes. Where there is variation in proportionate emphasis on theory and application, this is by and large a difference in degree, not in kind. Most applied studies worth talking about are shaped by theory at some level, and most people whose concern is with the refinement of theoretical models hope that such models have something to say about real-life practical issues.

More applied studies, however, need not, and perhaps often should not, be set up with the aim of ‘testing’ one theory or another. Very often, what is needed is straightforward descriptive evidence of what is happening, and how people think and talk about what is happening, within a specific concrete situation. The answers we get hopefully will enable us to understand that situation more fully. They may give us more insight into how to change that situation for the better, but we cannot depend on this, nor should we blame ourselves if the forces that inhibit change are beyond our control. Social psychology may sometimes enable us to design or implement interventions for some purpose of human betterment, but we should not fall into the trap of assuming that this will always be the case, or that our interventions will be the most effective ones.

Take, for example, the issue of deterring young people from taking up smoking, drug-use or other damaging activities. Yes, social psychology does have something to say about the kinds of information, and styles of presentation of information, that might be more persuasive. Yet the size of any change in behaviour we might expect through informational persuasion may be very small so long as environmental factors, such as ease of availability of the substances in question, remain unchecked. It is no failure if the outcome of research is a demonstration of the relative unimportance of
particular variables like individual attitudes and personality in a wider scheme of things. It is no failure if what we gain is a better understanding of why change is often difficult to bring about. Such an understanding can be very useful practically in helping direct resources where they may have the greatest chance of effectiveness. It may also contribute directly to the advancement of theory.

What this points to is a conclusion that application does not just need theory, but that theories need application. Confining one’s attention mainly to the responses of introductory psychology students at English-speaking universities is not something that a science would choose to do, except on grounds of convenience. For many purposes, this restriction may not matter as much as is often supposed. Replicated findings cannot simply be dismissed. On the other hand, doing research in this way may be like living on a small island where there is less and less left to be discovered. It is not so much that effects may prove ungeneralizable (at least where other factors remain reasonably constant) in the transition to applied settings. Rather, it may be that the kinds of questions that are important in one setting may be radically different from those that are important in another. We may have little difficulty in designing an experiment or observational study to look at students’ concern with physical attractiveness in their choice of partner. We may have greater difficulty in designing research on the psychological effects of the fear of starvation.

It may be just such uncomfortable questions that need to be asked, both for their own sake, and as a spur to new theoretical development. Social psychological theories do not come from thin air, but from a concern with understanding social problems, even if these problems are beyond our power alone to solve. Attention to new issues and problems in the outside world may be the source from which new developments in theory can spring. For these reasons, I have deliberately resisted the idea of splitting this book into ‘basic’ and ‘applied’ parts, or worse, having a separate chapter at the end called ‘Applications’. Instead, studies that some would call ‘applied’ are described alongside other studies using traditional experimental procedures, the connection being their shared relevance to common theoretical concerns.

The individual and the social

Social psychology is a discipline which is wide in its scope, but modest in its claims. In that it attempts to study human social behaviour from a scientific viewpoint, it is potentially relevant to an immense variety of phenomena. Yet it is not the only discipline which seeks to study such phenomena, and for this reason the contribution of social psychology to their understanding can only be partial, and complementary to what we can learn from other fields of academic inquiry.

More than a few times during its development, social psychology has
faced criticism from two sides at once. General experimental psychologists have seen social psychology as too ‘soft’, as sacrificing rigour of experimental design in a search for greater realism. At the same time, more qualitatively oriented social scientists have accused us of doing exactly the opposite – sacrificing realism in the search for rigour. Up to a point, both accusations are correct, but this is not something for which we need feel guilty. Compromises are probably inevitable in any attempt to reconcile and integrate different spheres of knowledge, and this is precisely what social psychology aims to do. When it comes down to a choice between defending disciplinary boundaries and gaining a fuller understanding of the human condition, the direction should be clear.

In fact, many of these boundaries are showing signs, if not of crumbling, then at least of opening. Within general psychology, in such fields as cognitive development, personality, memory and psycholinguistics, there is a growing acknowledgement that the processes being studied take the form that they do because of the inherently social nature of human behaviour. To take just one example, language reflects more than the acquisition of vocabulary and syntactic rules. It is a means of communication that involves the ability to take account of the contextually based assumptions likely to be held by other people by whom a verbal message is received. In short, it involves the ability to consider other people as thinking beings.

From the other side, it is sometimes argued that it is not enough for social psychology to study groups and individuals within a given social, geographical, historical, economic and political context: it is up to social psychology also to provide an analysis of that context. This criticism is unfair, and does little justice to what other disciplines, such as sociology, geography and so on, have to offer in their own right. On the other hand, to say that we cannot offer a complete analysis of social context is an inadequate excuse for ignoring that context completely. Social psychology does aim to say something about human social behaviour which transcends the particularities of context, but it cannot succeed if it pretends that such particularities do not exist. There is often a danger of regarding the concerns and preconceptions of a single culture as universal. This danger cannot be ignored in a discipline where so much of the published empirical research derives from what is not just a single culture, but a selected subcategory of members of that culture.

How, then, can the ‘social context’ be brought into psychology? There are two main complementary approaches. The first is to take the view of the individual as ‘perceiver’ or ‘information-processor’, interpreting information provided by the social context. In crude terms, the social context is viewed as a stimulus configuration to be judged, interpreted and remembered much like any other stimulus configuration. As will be seen, a long tradition of social psychological research has pointed to the applicability of ‘basic’ principles of judgement and cognition to more ‘social’ phenomena.
The individual and the social

The second approach is to view people as participants in the social context on which they themselves can have an influence, either as individuals, or as members of groups. What this leads to is a view, on the one hand, of individual experience as a social product (we think and feel as we do because we are social beings) and, on the other hand, of the social context as the product of human thought and action (the world we live in is partly the product of the way we think).

Whereas the first of these approaches provides the main bridge with general experimental psychology, the second provides an invitation for interchange with other social sciences. Traditionally, such interchange has occurred most frequently with sociology, but other opportunities are also promising. A good deal of social psychological research involves people’s attitudes towards, and interpretation of, political issues. Work on inter-group relations is also relevant, directly or indirectly, to questions of the involvement of people within a political process (e.g. Billig, 1976, 1978). The role of individuals as participants in an economic system, and indeed the implicit psychological assumptions of economic theories, are further important topics for study (Lea, Tarpy and Webley, 1986). Social health and preventive medicine is another field where social psychology has its part to play (e.g. Eiser, 1982).

Social psychology, then, is relevant to social issues, and to a potentially even wider range of issues than those that have so far been studied in depth. This relevance does not depend just on some vague expression of concern. It derives from the distinctive methods and theoretical ideas that social psychology has developed, and that this book attempts to describe.
PART II
ATTITUDES

2
Attitudes, attraction and influence

What are attitudes?

The study of attitudes is both the most natural and the most dangerous point from which to start a book on social psychology. The term ‘attitude’ is probably used more frequently than any other in social psychology. There are few theories in which the concept is not explicitly or implicitly introduced, and few experiments in which attitudes are not involved somewhere among the dependent variables. But is it, as Allport (1935) once claimed, social psychology’s most distinctive and indispensable concept?

At one level, we all have a rough idea of what attitudes are. To say that we have a certain attitude towards something or someone is a shorthand way of saying that we have feelings or thoughts of like or dislike, approval or disapproval, attraction or repulsion, trust or distrust and so on. Such feelings will tend to be reflected in what we say and do, and in how we react to what others say and do.

The difficulty is one of sorting out our various intuitions about attitudes into assumptions that are logically essential to the concept of attitude itself, as distinct from those that involve empirical predictions about how attitudes are related to other observable events. Kiesler, Collins and Miller (1969: 4) have said ‘all too often, social psychologists have tried to make their definition of attitude both a definition and a theory of the concept’. To this it might be added that some researchers have attempted to treat logical problems as though they were merely problems of empirical observation.

Let me therefore outline some of the main assumptions implicit in the use of the term ‘attitude’.

(1) Attitudes are subjective experiences. This assumption is basic to most definitions, although some writers, notably Bem (1967, see chapter 4, pp. 101–6), regard people’s statements about their attitudes as inferences from observations of their own behaviour.

(2) Attitudes are experiences of some issue or object. This point is rarely acknowledged explicitly. Not all experiences qualify as attitudes. Attitudes are not simply ‘moods’ or ‘affective reactions’ presumed to be somehow caused by external stimuli. Reference to some issue or object is part of the experience.

(3) Attitudes are experiences of some issue or object in terms of an evaluative dimension. If we have an attitude towards an object we do not simply