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Social psychology

Attitudes, cognition and social behaviour

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J. Richard Eiser
University of Exeter

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For Chris,
for David and Benjamin,
and for my friends everywhere

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Preface

Social psychology is a lively, growing discipline. Writing a textbook about it is therefore a bit like trying to take a still photograph of a bird in flight. Just to get the target in focus is hard enough. To achieve a balanced composition, and a clear picture of the background, as well, needs a good measure of luck. In this book, I have tried to present a glimpse of where social psychology is going, a hopefully balanced, though undeniably selective, insight into the perspectives which different researchers have adopted, and a broader view of the various empirical and theoretical traditions from which contemporary work derives.

In 1980 my previous textbook, *Cognitive Social Psychology: A Guidebook to Theory and Research*, was published by McGraw-Hill. The present volume includes both a thorough revision and reorganization of my previous work and much completely new material. The change of title is deliberate too. At the end of the seventies, most apparently successful theories in social psychology were placing a heavy emphasis on the primacy of cognition, information-processing and decision-making. The term 'cognitive' took on an imperialistic breadth of application, and a consequential looseness of meaning. In the last six or seven years, however, a noticeable reaction has set in, and some of my own views have changed too. 'Social cognition' has re-emerged as a strong, but more narrowly defined, field of research within social psychology, and at the same time much more attention has been paid to issues such as the impact of mood and emotion and the limitations of human memory and reasoning. In short, cognition is not the only form of psychological functioning upon which an understanding of social behaviour depends. Whereas my own approach remains broadly cognitive, it is by no means exclusively or narrowly so.

Social psychology is an international discipline, although not as international as it ought to be. The literature is still predominantly North American, but not nearly as exclusively so as it was fifteen or twenty years ago. Most North American textbooks contain lamentably little coverage of work conducted outside North America. In this book readers will find accounts of a fair, but not disproportionate, amount of research by authors who happen to work in other countries. However, I have not adopted this approach out of any deliberate attempt to introduce a self-consciously European flavour, but simply because such research deserves inclusion on its merits. Ingroup

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favouritism is no substitute for critical appraisal when it comes to judging the value of scientific contributions, whatever their origin. Even so, the health of any discipline depends on an openness to new ideas and on cross-fertilization from different, even sometimes older, traditions. In this respect, I hope that this book will have something distinctive to offer to readers on both sides of the Atlantic (or the Pacific). I have attempted to write an international book, but doubtless it is still not as international as it ought to be.

Whilst European social psychology has gained in prestige and productivity, in the last few years it has sadly lost two of its most eminent and influential figures. Henri Tajfel died in 1982. He first introduced me to social psychology when I was an undergraduate at Oxford. He persuaded me to do postgraduate research at the London School of Economics, and he helped me to my first position at the University of Bristol. He had a vision and a sense of purpose that could truly inspire. I am proud to call myself his student. Jos Jaspars died in 1985. Whereas Henri always seemed to be burning the candle at both ends, Jos was younger and apparently strong and healthy. His sudden death left all who knew him stunned. His was a genuine and generous intellect. He was a devoted teacher, the most constructive of critics, a good friend and a most dependable colleague. This book is a small thank you to each of them.

My thanks are also due to all those who have helped me with my writing of this book: to Marian Gowen for typing the manuscript; to the students of the University of Exeter over the last six years for their comments and questions; and finally to Michael Billig, Rick Budd, Connie Kristiansen, Stephen Reicher, Russell Spears, Arnold Upmeyer, Joop van der Pligt and Paul Webley, and many other friends and colleagues for stimulating discussions.

J. RICHARD EISER
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