# Prologue

I vividly remember how my one-year-old daughter responded to seeing me eating a cookie, while shaking my head to make absolutely clear to her that she wouldn't get any of it. Her response was to cry out as if I had just committed murder.

But I remember even more vividly what happened afterwards, when I, obviously failing as a consistent parent, soft-heartedly offered her the cookie: what happened was she ran to me in tears and hugged me intensely, ignoring the cookie altogether.

Isn't that . . . well, *surprising*? After all, I provided my one-year-old with the opportunity to get what she wanted – she just had to take the cookie and eat it – but she didn't take the cookie. Why?

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The explanation I provide in this book is that most of us, most of the time, prioritize our social relationships over the cookie. Indeed, the cookie never was what was at stake in this event. From my daughter's intuitive understanding of our relationship, the cookie was *ours* to eat. She did not cry out because she did not get the cookie, but because I did not go about our relationship the way she intuitively expected me to. I put the relationship at stake when I denied her the cookie; and she ran to me in tears and hugged me afterwards because she prioritized maintaining our relationship over getting the cookie.

It is this particular prioritization of relationships that this book is about. It illustrates the shift I propose in our understanding of what generally moves and motivates us, namely a shift *from self to social relationships*. This shift implies a view of humans as *relational* beings that are, in their very essence, moved and motivated by their need to regulate (that is, generate or maintain) social relationships.[1] As such, social relationships reflect a core aspect of the human essence: that which makes a human being what it fundamentally and necessarily is, and without which it would no

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[1] My analysis is indebted to the lines of thought of many scholars, but in particular relies on Fiske (1991, 1992), Rai and Fiske (2011), and Fiske and Rai (2015).

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longer be what it is.[2] As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1942) beautifully put it in his haunting novel *Flight over Arras*: 'Man is a knot into which relationships are tied.'

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My argument is not that new and not that strange. There exist plenty of pointers in this respect and these will be outlined in the following chapters. For instance, human beings cannot live, survive, and procreate without social relationships. From infancy onwards, relating to others is essential to our development, well-being, and health. Without social relationships, human life becomes cold, empty, and meaningless. Thus, when human beings are faced with love, friendship, solidarity, social loss, mourning, social exclusion, or loneliness, they show their very essence, their true colours. It is telling that our social brains seem to respond to severed relationships as if severe physiological pain is felt and such that fundamental needs temporarily shut down. Loneliness has even been referred to as a silent killer because of its negative effects on mental and physical health. All of these observations already paint a picture of the notion that humans are *relational* beings that are, in their very essence, moved and motivated by others. This is one way to interpret the book's cover featuring Luigi Russolo's *The Solidity of Fog*: As lost and lonely souls hovering together in the fog, which obstructs their connectedness.

One might expect psychological theories of motivation to use this knot of relationships as their point of departure, particularly in subfields devoted to the social origins of motivation. However, this is not quite what one will find. In Western scholarly thought as well as popular culture, 'others' are typically viewed as just one of the many things connected to our *self*: that consciously experienced sense of who we are and through which we think, feel, and act. The engrained view, implicitly or explicitly stated, is that humans are essentially individuals who are moved and motivated by anything that is relevant to their self (such as their self-interest, or other self-motives). The point of departure is the self, not social relationships. What needs to be explained is why people are social; not why people are self-ish. Indeed, such *self-ish* theories, as I call them, implicitly or explicitly assume that others may for sure play some part in moving and motivating us, but this is because others are factors that lead one to protect or promote the self (e.g., threatening or enhancing our self-esteem or self-interest).

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[2] Some might feel safer, philosophically, staying clear from positing any 'essence'. For current purposes, I make use of the notion of essence in order to make explicit theoretical assumptions (see Slife & Williams, 1995).

Against this general backdrop, the premise of this book is very simple: what would a theory of motivation look like if it were to be based on the explicit assumption that individuals essentially regulate social relationships? Asking this question is important for three reasons. First, it offers a clear relational principle that enables theoretical integration of a variety of existing theories, models, and hypotheses across different (sub)disciplines. Second, it offers a clear starting point for a relational interpretation of theories and findings about motivation. And third, it offers a new and integrative theory that puts social relationships first and accords the self a more modest, yet still pivotal, position. This theory proposes a two-step social-motivational process. In the first step, humans can intuitively feel any changes in their network of social relationships, which moves and motivates them; they are indeed the knot in which relationships are tied. In the second step, the culturally construed self helps us cope with how to go about those social relationships in culturally appropriate ways. Both steps in the social-motivational process serve to regulate relationships: the first step determines *when* we are moved and motivated, whereas the second determines *how* we go about it *in situ*. For this reason, I will consistently use the term *social motivation*, which implies instances of motivation for which at least one other relational entity (human or non-human, actual or anticipated) is required for need fulfilment.

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There may be some implicit or explicit resistance to any argument about relational essence. One reason for this may be that the engrained view on social motivation stems largely from theorists from Western countries. Although there is no need to posit a one-to-one correspondence between geography and culture, it is no coincidence that ideas about individualism, autonomy, and individual rationality and responsibility have become interwoven with assumptions of psychological theories of motivation, which implicitly or explicitly put the self at centre stage.[3] Indeed, most theorizing about social motivation takes place in Western cultural settings that normatively value the individualistic, rational, independent self. The result: self-ish theories.

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with such implicit or explicit cultural projection (one has to start somewhere), it does hamper scientific progress when it provides assumptions that may not be valid outside Western cultural contexts. Indeed, accumulating insights in cultural psychology suggest clear limits to what I call a *self-ish* view of social motivation. For instance, viewing one's self as an individual,

[3] See, for instance, Markus and Kitayama (1991, 2004, 2010); Smith, Bond, and Kağitçibaşi (2006); and Smith et al. (2013).

autonomous, rational entity is more of a cultural ideal of what people should do and be like than what they actually do and are like.[4] This is not to say that self-ish explanations of social motivation are wrong – they may be accurate within specific cultural settings. What is wrong, I believe, is to essentialize the self (implicitly or explicitly), because such an assumption has strong implications for what we then believe individuals are moved and motivated by. Self-ish explanations are not utterly wrong, but they do start off on the wrong foot.

In this book I try starting off on the other foot, with three interrelated aims in mind. The first aim is to argue for more *integrative* theorizing about social motivation across otherwise isolated different (sub)fields and (sub)disciplines. The mass production of empirical findings in psychology and beyond is powerful and promising, but requires the development and valuation of 'bigger' theorizing that enables the interpretation of not only sets of localized findings but, to an even greater extent, a range of general patterns of findings across different (sub)fields and (sub)disciplines. To borrow from Wilson (1998), I believe we urgently need theories that seek theoretical integration towards achieving the larger aim of *consilience* (defined as the coming together of knowledge across different fields and disciplines). They are needed to hold together all those innumerable empirical snippets of research that all the factories of knowledge around the world are producing. They are needed to make bigger sense of the rampant empirical fragmentation in and around psychology.

In fact, this is a second way to interpret the cover illustration: as social scientists yearning for sunlight behind the solid fog that surrounds them. To me, the sunlight symbolizes the human essence that we seek to understand, whereas the fog symbolizes everything that obscures it. The challenge is to determine what reflects the sunlight and what obscures it. The main message in this book is that a relational perspective on social motivation exposes the sunlight, but this requires letting go of the (to many quite familiar) self-ish assumptions that resemble our cultural fog. As such, the second aim of the book is to develop a relational perspective on social motivation based in a proposed *shift from self to social relationships*. This means that I will assume individuals, in their essence, to be geared towards relationship regulation.

A relational view enables a new groundwork for the development of an integrative theory of social motivation that puts social relationships first – the *third* and final aim of this book. This synthesis introduces the

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[4]  See, for instance, Heine et al. (1999), Heine (2005), and Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010).

novel notion of *selvations*, defined as individuals' intuitive feeling of any changes in their network of social relationships. In *selvations theory*, selvations trigger the motivational process geared at the generation or maintenance of social relationships, and they do so in order to secure social inclusion in and prevent social exclusion from *one's network of social relationships*. The lead metaphor for this is the spider that can feel any movement in its web so that it can respond to it. In a similar fashion, I propose that most people, most of the time, are moved and motivated by feeling any movement in the social relationships in their social network. Selvations theory outlines this first step of the motivational process by synthesizing, on the basis of relational assumptions, a number of otherwise isolated theories from different (sub)fields and (sub)disciplines. This contributes to a modest but necessary step towards theoretical integration.

Yet selvations theory does not forget, ignore, or otherwise downplay the importance of the self. In the second step of the motivational process, it outlines how the self *translates* selvations into culturally appropriate thought, feeling, and courses of action (which are all experienced through the culturally construed self), and it does so in order to secure social inclusion in and prevent social exclusion from *the larger culture in which one's network of social relationships is embedded*. Thus, it proposes that, for most people and most of the time, it is through the self that they regulate relationships in culturally appropriate ways. The self is like a Rough Guide to relationship regulation in situ. Selvations theory outlines this step of the motivational process by synthesizing, again on the basis of relational assumptions, a number of otherwise isolated theories from different (sub)fields and (sub)disciplines, taking another modest but necessary step towards theoretical integration.

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In outlining what a theory claims, it often helps to specify upfront what it certainly does *not* claim. Four issues stand out. First, selvations theory does not claim that *all* motivation is due to selvations. Human beings obviously have biological needs and instincts, such as those revolving around bodily functions such as hunger and thirst, which do not necessarily require social relationships, or other people for that matter, for their fulfilment. Relationship regulation does. The scope of selvations theory is nevertheless broad: it describes and explains the motivational process that, somewhere along the road, requires dealing with other people. Indeed, selvations serve to guard the integrity of one's network of social relationships; just as biological needs and instincts serve to guard the integrity of one's body. Although a focus

on biological needs and instincts is certainly important in its own right, the current book focuses on selvations.

Second, selvations theory does not claim that self-motives (such as individuals' presumed need for self-esteem, self-enhancement, or self-verification) are unimportant in the motivational process. It simply does not essentialize such motives. In selvations theory, self-motives depend on cultural norms about how to regulate which relationships. For this reason, one can find such an impressive variety of self-understandings around the world (ranging from the self as an autonomous unit to an interdependent or even collective *Gestalt*, and from ideal selves as ambitious and independent to modest and self-sacrificing). By contrast, the need of individuals to regulate relationships is much less variable, for most people and most of the time.

Third, selvations theory does not claim that individuals want to regulate *all* their possible social relationships. It does not paint a picture of human beings as caring for everyone. Individuals want to regulate relationships with those they interact with in their social networks because this provides a *safe haven*, or because it offers a *secure base* from which to explore their broader world (and possibly expand their network). But there are clear limitations to how many relationships one can regulate. Furthermore, individuals prioritize one social relationship over another (e.g., 'family first'), or regulate one relationship by regulating another (e.g., being friendly towards one's former spouse's new partner). The key point here is that although a relational perspective on social motivation may appear to be about dyads, selvations theory explicitly conceptualizes social relationships as part of a social network.

Finally, selvations theory does not claim to be supported by radically new evidence. The novelty and added value of selvations theory lies in how it theoretically integrates existing ideas and models of motivation on the basis of relational assumptions. Some might say that the theory is therefore untested and even speculative. This is true only to a certain extent. The integrative approach to theorizing that I use implies that selvations theory relies on existing and established theories that are supported by empirical research, each in their own and often isolated part of the empirical universe. It is the synthesis itself that is new, which exemplifies the notion that different assumptions have different implications. One such implication is that I hope it contributes to theoretical integration and perhaps even to consilience. Psychology urgently needs a focus on a 'big picture'. Indeed, my personal aim in writing this book is to make explicit what a relational 'big picture' looks like when applied to social motivation; and more specifically, what its different assumptions imply for our understanding of what moves and

motivates us. I further hope that selvations theory will be tried and
tested, developed and extended, and revised and reformulated in the
future. To me, this is what true scientific progress should be like – not
merely empirical productivity, but the ability and willingness to inter-
pret all kinds of different snippets of localized research through inte-
grative theorizing.

PART I

# Assumptions