Social Psychology, Sociological

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Abstract

Sociological social psychology emphasizes the impacts of society on social psychological processes. There are three major perspectives in sociological social psychology: symbolic interaction, social structure and personality, and group processes. The symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes the ways that individuals construct social reality through social interaction. Alternatively, the social structure and personality perspective emphasizes the relatively stable elements of social structure that impact interactions among people such as roles, statuses, and norms. Finally, the group processes perspective focuses on the ways that societal conditions are recreated in small group environments and how interactions in groups contribute to the maintenance of society. These perspectives are being extended to include the study of sociobiology, the intersection of social and biological conditions that impact social psychological process.

Three Faces of Sociological Social Psychology

Social psychology is the study of human behavior in a social context. Utilizing this definition, researchers from several fields may be considered 'social psychologists' but they approach the field in different ways and utilize different perspectives in their approach to the topic. Some psychologists, for instance, focus on the immediate social contexts of interactions in the study of social psychology while others focus on genetic or internal thought processes occurring during those interactions. They also employ specific psychological perspectives such as social learning theory. Sociologists employ different perspectives and methods in the study of human social behavior than psychologists and sociologists emphasize the societal conditions that impact social psychological dynamics. How, for instance, do people's position in society influence interactions in small groups? How do we learn social roles in society? Sociologists employ a cybernetic approach to social psychology in which individuals interact in ways that reproduce society and society impacts individual-level interactions through norms, roles, statuses, and other elements of society (Figure 1).

The three main perspectives in sociological social psychology include symbolic interaction, social structure and personality, and group processes (House, 1977, 1992). Symbolic interactionists traditionally employ qualitative methods to study the social construction of reality, the ways that individual interactions lead to the development of society (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Social psychologists who employ the social structure and personality perspective typically utilize surveys and other quantitative research techniques to assess the impacts of society on individual-level thoughts, feelings, and behaviors once they have been produced. A third group of scholars in sociological social psychology emphasizes the study of societal processes during group interactions. In some cases, researchers examine how social conditions (e.g., status differences) impact interactions within the group. In other cases, these scholars emphasize the study of how status differences develop within groups. In this sense, groups represent a microcosm of larger society.
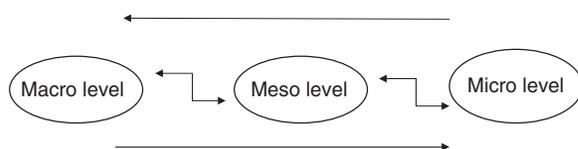
The role of sociobiology in sociological social psychology has been growing over the last decade. Sociobiology is utilized both to understand the relative impacts of genetic dispositions on social psychological processes and to assess how social conditions may impact biological outcomes. Some social scientists have argued that characteristics such as intelligence quotients (IQ), for instance, are genetically determined (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994) while sociologists examine how social conditions impact those things or how humans may define those characteristics as more or less important in society.

Symbolic Interaction

Perhaps the earliest application of the sociological perspective in social psychology comes from the University of Chicago and the work of George Herbert Mead. Mead (1934) and other social psychologists utilizing this perspective employ the pragmatist school of thought from the Scottish moral philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith. This philosophy emphasizes reason and empiricism in the search for truth. As applied to the study of human interaction, symbolic interactionists focus on the study of day-to-day interactions rather than the discovery of abstract principles of large-scale social behavior.

Mead (1934) included elements of social learning theory in the development of symbolic interactionism in that humans learn social reality through observation and reinforcement. Children not only learn basic skills such as reading and writing through these processes but also roles and norms, the building blocks of society. Unlike the psychological applications of behavioralism, Mead emphasized the importance of agency, the ability to make independent decisions within the constraints of social conditions. From this perspective, humans are capable of continuity and change; people can choose to

Figure 1 Linking levels of analysis in sociological social psychology.

learn and follow norms and roles of previous generations but they can also choose to modify those norms and roles or rebel against them altogether. In many cases, change and continuity are going on concurrently with some individuals (or groups of individuals) modifying existing conditions to various degrees.

While Mead is generally considered the father of the symbolic interaction perspective, the expression was coined by Herbert Blumer (1969). Blumer studied under Mead at the University of Chicago where he taught for 27 years (Rohall et al., 2013). He later took an appointment to the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley in 1952. Blumer argued that there are three principles of symbolic interaction. First, people create social reality through interaction among individuals. This principle simply states that there is no inherent meaning in any person, object, or behavior – names or labels and their value come from the negotiation of two or more people. Second, people utilize these names and labels to make decisions in life. It is in this sense that both social and physical elements of the world are socially constructed. Finally, Blumer argued that individuals engage in an interpretive process in which the meaning of a particular interaction may vary based on the background of the participants and other factors. If our social world is socially constructed, any number of factors may lead us to different assessments of a situation, including our unique socialization experiences as well as our application of agency.

Given the fluid nature of social reality, Blumer (1969) and other symbolic interactionists typically employ qualitative methods such as ethnographies and personal interviews to discover how individuals come to construct social reality and the processes that lead people to define and redefine important aspects of society (see, for example, Adler and Adler, 1994). Techniques such as the autoethnography give symbolic interactionists the ability to gain insights into meaning-making processes in everyday life (Anderson, 2008).

Just as we construct our social world, we also construct our sense of self through the same processes. Charles Horton Cooley's (1922) looking-glass self emphasizes how people develop their sense of self based on their perceptions of what other people think of them. Just like a mirror distorts images, however, we have a distorted sense of our self because we rely on our interpretations of people's response to us that may be more or less accurate. If we believe that others see us as good, we will believe that we are good and vice versa. Humans also have the ability to manipulate their self-image through a process called impression management (Goffman, 1959). Goffman argued that humans construct an image of themselves in different social arenas that people utilize to make decisions during those interactions. These images may or may not correspond with our sense of self but individuals generally accept self-presentations unless there is reason to believe otherwise. An individual at a party, for instance, may tell people that she is a doctor and people will generally believe her until there is evidence to show that she knows nothing about medicine, perhaps failing to answer a medical question.

Two significant theoretical strands employing the symbolic interaction perspective include identity and social identity theories and affect control theory. Identity theory focuses on the ways in which individuals construct their sense of self through interaction with other people (Burke and Stets, 1999; Stryker, 2002). Identity is defined as the sum total of an individual's roles, traits, and social categories. Individuals develop their sense of self based on their unique dispositions or set of traits – which may or may not be derived from our genetic makeup – but also statuses, roles, and social categories that derive from society. We develop our sense of self through the unique combination of roles and statuses but also by the ways in which we modify those roles and statuses utilizing agency. A similar theory, social identity theory, emphasizes the influences of group characteristics in identity formation (Hogg and Ridgeway, 2003; Tajfel, 1982). Once a group membership (e.g., race or ethnicity) is incorporated into one's sense of self, it initiates other social processes such as judgment of other social groups relative to one's own group. By accepting roles, statuses, and group affiliations, individuals develop a unique sense of self while maintaining important elements of society.

Affect control theory examines the role of emotions in identity processes. In this theory, people apply three sentiments to each person: relative goodness (evaluation), power (potency), and liveliness (activity) (EPA for short). Roles and statuses in society have differing EPA sentiments and serve as a way to evaluate our performance in those roles and statuses (Heise, 2007). An extensive Web site on affect control theory can be found at: http://www.indiana.edu/~socpsy/ACT/.

While most symbolic interactionists focus on individual-level interactions, some symbolic interactions have begun to apply the paradigm to study large-scale social processes such as cultural production and the use of culture once derived. Collective memory includes the shared beliefs about a person or event in society. They may include the memory of particular events that impact only a small number of people (e.g., something that happened at work) or large-scale social events such as the terrorist attacks in the United States on 9 September 2001. Symbolic interactionists examine how individuals in society come to define such events and categorize them (Fine and Beim, 2007). Examining the common narrative around the famous Lewis and Clarke expedition to the American frontier in the 1700s, Denzin (2007) argues that while most Americans categorize this journey as significant and positive in American history, the narrative of the journey can also be interpreted from the perspective of native Americans and others who may categorize the event as tragic, leading to the decimation of Native American life.

Gary Alan Fine has conducted numerous studies of the production of culture ranging from little league baseball teams to weather forecasting organizations (Fine, 2007, 1979). These studies show how individuals at the organizational level incorporate and manipulate larger cultural norms, values, and beliefs to meet the needs of the individuals within organizations. While some norms continue over time, as taught by existing members of an organization, new members introduce new norms while accepting or modifying some of the existing ones, helping to elaborate on larger processes of cultural change and continuity over time.

Social Structure and Personality

The second perspective in sociological social psychology is often referred to as social structure and personality (House, 1977,

1992). Scholars in the social structure and personality perspective generally concur with symbolic interaction principles but emphasize the relatively stable nature of society. Norms, for instance, may change over time but many of them remain over many years. As such, social psychologists can study their impacts on individuals utilizing quantitative methods like surveys and experiments.

House (1992) puts forth three major principles of the social structure and personality perspective. First, the components principle states that we must be able to identify the elements of society most likely to impact individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. These elements typically include statuses, our relative position in society, roles, expectations about how to act in those statuses, and norms, expectations about how to think, feel, or behave in a particular interaction. Other important components of social structure include social institutions and values. Social institutions are relatively enduring patterns of social behavior in society. Typical examples of institutions include family, work, government, education, and religion. Values are enduring sets of beliefs about the world. These are distinguished from attitudes or public opinion that may be more or less enduring. Many analysts, for instance, argue that Americans have a tendency to value independence and freedom to a greater degree than their peers in other countries (Bellah et al., 1996; Putnam, 2000). These values come from socialization and may impact interpersonal relationships above and beyond individual dispositions.

The proximity principle is based on the idea that people are most impacted by society through their immediate social surroundings (House, 1992). While large-scale events like an economic downturn may have consequences for everyone in society, its immediate impacts are not felt by each individual. Economic downsizing itself, for instance, may have no direct bearing on the mental health of individuals in society except for those individuals who are laid off as a result of the downturn. However, spouses and families of unemployed people may also experience some of its effects (see Dooley et al., 1988; Rohall et al., 2001). Society, from this perspective, primarily impacts social psychological dynamics when it has direct bearing on individuals or indirectly through social relationships with those people.

The psychology principle emphasizes the ways that individuals process proximal experiences. Self-esteem research, for instance, shows that reflected appraisals, our sense of how others view us, are as or more important to individuals' feelings of self-worth than self-perceptions, our observations of our own behavior and its consequences or social comparisons (Schwalbe and Staples, 1991). In this case, our interpretations of others' reactions to us are more important than social conditions themselves.

There are many theories that utilize the social structure and personality paradigm. Life course sociology, for instance, provides a framework for examining the impacts of large-scale social events on individuals in a scientific way (Elder, 1994). There are many facets to life course sociology but they can be distilled into four elements: historical and social contexts, timing, linked lives, and agency. Each birth cohort, people born around the same time period, is exposed to different sets of historical events. However, those events may not impact everyone in a cohort the same way. In his classic study of the Great Depression, Elder (1999, originally 1974) found that only families who were deprived (i.e., lost significant income) appeared to be impacted by the Depression. Further, most of those effects were felt through changing family dynamics. These findings reflect the proximity principle of the social structure and personality perspective in which we experience society – including historical events – through our immediate social environments.

The degree to which social and historical events impact individuals depends, in part, on their relative position in society and when it occurs in their lives. Rosenberg and Pearlin (1978) showed almost no relationship of socioeconomic status and self-esteem among youth (8–11 years of age) but the relationship of these variables became stronger with each successive age group (teenagers and adults). In this case, economic conditions were less relevant to the self-concepts of younger children in the study.

Events impact both people experiencing them and their families and close relationships. This relationship fits under the heading 'linked lives' because they connect or link us to the life events impacting other people. Gartner (2008), for instance, found that people who knew someone injured as a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US were more likely to disapprove of the president than people who did not know of any casualties.

Life course sociology also incorporates the concept of agency. People can react any number of ways in response to the same conditions albeit limited by those conditions. Deluca and Rosenbaum (2001) found, for instance, that students who worked harder generally did better in school compared to students who worked less hard. However, middle-class students appeared to gain more from their hard work than their peers from lower socioeconomic statuses. Agency may help to explain variations in how people respond to the same historical event.

Another theoretical application of the social structure and personality perspective is the stress process (Pearlin, 1989). The stress processes examine the relative impacts of stressors, resources, and social characteristics on mental health. This model tries to understand differential reactions to the same levels or types of stress (e.g., death of a loved one), representing the third principle of the perspective. In this case, people under distress may react differently to it based on access to things like social support or differing levels of mastery or sense of personal control. If someone with low mastery experiences a stressor, she may respond with greater distress (e.g., depression or substance abuse) than someone with higher levels of perceived control, ostensibly because she believes that she will overcome the problem. Similarly, people with greater access to support networks may respond better to stress than people with fewer supports (Figure 2).

The stress process also incorporates elements of the first principle of the social structure and personality perspective by highlighting the ways in which people with different background characteristics process stressful life events. For instance, people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have both higher levels of stress (e.g., financial strains and poor living conditions) and poorer mental health (Aneshensel and Sucoff, 1996). There are also racial and gender differences in the stress process (Kessler and Neighbors, 1986; Robins et al., 1991).
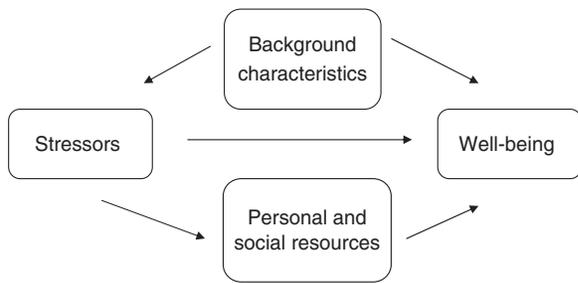
Figure 2 The stress process linking the societal conditions to individual outcomes.

Other applications of the social structure and personality perspective employ multilevel modeling to precisely assess the relative impact of macro- and micro-level conditions that impact individuals in society. These studies employ techniques that allow researchers to separate the relative impacts of actual community conditions from the perceptions of those conditions. Research shows that perceptions of neighborhood conditions (e.g., levels of vandalism, litter, vacant housing) are associated with outcomes like depression (Latkin and Curry, 2003); these findings may reflect the fact that people in those neighborhoods also report fewer social supports to buffer the negative effects of living conditions (Ross and Mirowsky, 2008). Studies that have tried to separate actual community conditions from perceived conditions suggest that most of the impacts of actual community conditions operate through perceived conditions: the impact of living in a poor community appears to operate completely through perceptions of those communities such that people in poor communities report worse perceptions of those communities, which lead to lower levels of well-being (Ross, 2000; Turner et al., 2013). These findings reflect all three principles of the social structure and personality perspective because individuals' positions (i.e., income levels) and proximal environments are processed internally, impacting some people more than others.

Group Processes

The study of group processes emphasizes the ways that basic social processes operate in group contexts. Groups include two or more people who have some level of dependence on each other and small groups are fewer than 20; small groups differ from larger groups in their ability to yield face-to-face interactions among its members. Dyads are two-person groups while triads are three-person groups (Simmel, 1950). This distinction is important because it shows that increasing the size of group exponentially increases the number of relationships while decreasing the levels of intimacy possible in a group. Sociologists distinguish several other types of groups that may impact interactions within those groups. Primary groups include family and close friends who interact on the basis of emotional attachments while secondary groups are those groups we affiliate with to achieve a specific goal or goals (Cooley, 1909). Work groups, teams, and volunteer organizations may provide some emotional bonding but affiliations are more instrumental in nature than in primary groups. An extension of these types of groups is reference groups. Reference groups are ones

that may not include any physical interaction but people still employ them in making decisions. Individuals may pay annual dues to an online organization, symbolizing its importance to the person, but never attend meetings or interact with other members of that group.

Sociologists emphasize the ways in which inequality develops within group contexts and how outside statuses impact group dynamics. Four basic processes involved in the study of inequality are power, status, justice, and legitimacy. Power refers to the ability to obtain what we want despite resistance while status is our relative position in a group. Justice refers to perceptions of fairness when distributing things within a group while legitimacy is the sense that distributions are fair, regardless of how much people get in a group. These processes are typically studied under two major theories: social exchange theory and status characteristics theory, both utilizing social experiments.

Social exchange theory is based on the principle that people enter groups that provide them some benefit and leave groups when they perceive that they are not receiving a benefit from them. This theory is essential to explaining why people affiliate with other people in the first place but it also explains why people end relationships. There are four principles of social exchange theory (Molm and Cook, 1995). First, individuals in a group must have some form of dependence on each other – the theory does not apply to aggregates and acquaintance relationships. Second, within groups, individuals act in a way that will maximize personal benefits for themselves. The third principle, also known as the 'reciprocity principle', states that individuals will continue relationships as long as they receive about as much from a group as they put into it. If one or more members of a group believe that they are contributing more to the group good than they are receiving, they will seek alternative relationships outside of the group. Finally, the 'satiation principle' states that the value of what is exchanged may be reduced over time, thus explaining why people may end relationships even if they perceive them to be reciprocal.

Social exchanges may be direct, between two people, or indirect, exchanges among three or more individuals (Emerson, 1992; Homans, 1946; Molm and Cook, 1995). We may work for someone in order to receive pay but people may also help strangers with the understanding that they may require services from a stranger in the future. In this way, society can be seen as a network of direct and indirect exchanges. Status characteristics theory (sometimes called expectations states theory) employs elements of social exchange theory to understand how inequality develops in groups and how social statuses such as race and gender can impact exchange processes themselves. Robert Bales and other sociologists (Bales, 1965; Borgatta et al., 1954) analyzed interactions within small groups and determined that individuals who contribute most to group goals tend develop leadership status within those groups. Status appeared to be exchanged for service within the group.

Status characteristics theory focuses on the ways that outside characteristics influence status processes within groups (Blau, 1964; Berger et al., 1966, 1972; Lucas, 2003). Different status characteristics may influence the group, depending on the type of status. Specific status characteristics include those statuses that are important under specific conditions while diffuse status characteristics are those statuses that may influence the outcomes of all

exchange relationships. A mechanic may have high status among people who need their cars repaired but have no influence among a group of tennis players. Diffuse characteristics typically include individuals' sex and race that are believed to influence status dynamics in almost any group setting.

Sex status is one of the most widely studied areas of status characteristics theory. Research regularly shows that women receive less status than men in exchange relationships, even when they contribute most to the group (Lucas, 2003; Ridgeway and Diekema, 1989). Individuals develop different performance expectations of its members based on cultural characteristics, even if those characteristics have nothing to do with the group's task. Individuals with low- and high status develop a positive bias toward people who are believed to bring more resources into a group (Ridgeway et al., 1998). However, there are ways in which low-status members such as women can improve their chances of gaining status in groups by, for instance, legitimizing the position of women as leaders in a group setting (Lucas, 2003) or having female leaders emphasize how their work contributes to the good of the group (Ridgeway, 1982). Findings from the status characteristics approach help to elaborate the ways that larger social forces operate in groups and how group interactions help to maintain traditional stereotypes about people with different statuses in society.

Sociobiology

Sociobiology is the study of the relative impact of social and biological factors on individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Sociologists also emphasize the ways that people construct the meaning of their biological world, giving more or less importance to certain traits or attributes (e.g., physical attraction) or/and how individuals come to define something as biologically inherited or not (e.g., sexuality).

Twin research is one major way that sociologists examine the relative impacts of genetic inheritance over social interaction in the production of social life. By comparing monozygotic (identical) twins who share 100% of their DNA with dizygotic (fraternal) twins, siblings, and nonrelated children, researchers can assess the degree to which nature impacts social psychological outcomes over social conditions because nonrelated family members share the same social conditions but not DNA, while identical twins share all of the same genetic traits. Using this technique, Nielson (2006) found shared genetic inheritance was more important for the transmission of verbal IQ and grade point average than shared family environments. However, social influences explained a significant amount of these outcomes and Horwitz et al. (2003) caution that twin studies can overstate genetic influences because identical twins both share a greater genetic as well as environmental background compared to both dizygotic and other siblings.

Gene–environment interactions represent another major way that sociologists and other social scientists assess the relative impacts of biology and social conditions on social psychological outcomes. Under this model, specific genes are thought to impact environmental outcomes and vice versa. Hence, while genes are thought to contribute to individuals' decision-making processes, environmental conditions interact with those genes and genes can also be impacted by social conditions. For instance, Guo et al. (2008) found that high levels of alcohol use among one's peers tend to bring about higher levels of genetic contribution to alcohol use. In other words, environmental conditions appeared to trigger the relationship between genetic disposition and alcohol use. In another study, genetic disposition explained variation in delinquency but these effects were mediated through levels of social control from family, schools, and peers (DeLisi et al., 2008).

Sociologists regularly test assumptions about the biological causes of social behaviors. Research generally shows differences in things like IQ vary among social groups and are thought to be inherited (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). Girls, specifically, report lower math ability and are less likely to pursue careers in mathematics and the sciences. While some analysts believe that differences in math ability are genetically inherited, scholars in the group processes perspective have been able to influence both IQ scores and career aspirations simply by manipulating perceptions of abilities of subjects in experimental settings (see Correll, 2004; Lovaglia et al., 1998; Ridgeway et al., 2009; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). While some emotional expressions such as fear and anger appear to have similar meaning across cultures, the conditions that arouse these and other emotions, their expressions and labels vary from place to place, suggesting both biological and social causes (Ekman, 2007; Kemper, 1987; Thoits, 1989). Sociological research also challenges the stereotypes of gender differences in emotional expression (Simon and Nath, 2004). Finally, while medical diagnoses may be associated with biological causes, their meanings and treatment change over time based on social influences such as the authority of medical professions, interest groups, and other groups like pharmaceutical companies who have a stake in the labeling and treatment of patients (Conrad, 2005).

Conclusions

Sociological social psychology emphasizes the ways that society shapes social psychological processes. From this perspective, society is a network of interaction among people (Blumer, 1969). Society is shaped by individuals' social interaction thereby creating a dialectic in which individuals are shaped by society. The symbolic interaction, social structure and personality, and group processes perspectives utilize this framework to examine the intersection of the individual and society. Even biological outcomes can be impacted by these social processes.

See also: Emotions, Sociology of; Exchange: Social; Interactionism, Symbolic; Macrosociology-Microsociology; Methodological Individualism in Sociology; Phenomenology in Sociology; Prejudice in Society: Psychological Perspectives; Social Identity in Sociology; Sociobiology and Sociology: A New Synthesis; Status and Role, Social Psychology of.

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