

Social Psychology

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Abstract

The historical roots, conceptualizations of the discipline, research practices, and institutional support of social psychology are discussed herein. This article attempts to present the discipline and the particular way it looks at phenomena that are simultaneously individual and social. Social psychology is considered as an interdisciplinary science that challenges the distinction between the individual and the social, and is an empirical science with diverse methodology and important applications.

How to Define an Area of Theoretical and Empirical Interest?

Many social psychologists, when asked about their job, must have faced the awkward situation of having to define the discipline to nonpsychologists. People seem to more or less understand what psychology is about (although this representation may be limited to what clinical psychology does) and what sociology does. However, they have difficulty in figuring out what social psychology is. Moreover, in their attempt to explain what they do, social psychologists are often either too precise, describing their own area of expertise, or too broad, speaking about “phenomena relating to people in groups and social categories.” This difficulty is not due to the vagueness of the discipline or to the incapability of social psychologists to give a comprehensive definition of their area. This difficulty is common to the definition of every abstract notion and depends very much on the way a community describes and prescribes the issues that concern it. This difficulty relates to the history of social psychology community, its traditions and practices, and the institutions that support its existence. In other words, it is also difficult to define the content of the category as being ‘American’ or ‘French’ or ‘Greek.’ For this we rely on the consensual and contested understandings of the community of people that define themselves as such, their common history, practices and traditions, and the legal and institutional ways that recognize their existence. Such definitions are both descriptive and prescriptive. Social psychology, therefore, can also be defined by the way social psychologists understand and approach their area of expertise, its historical roots, its empirical traditions and practices, and the way institutions recognize it. In this article these issues are briefly discussed in order to present what social psychology does and to connect it with the social psychological articles in this volume.

Historical Roots and the Development of a New Scientific Endeavor

Before considering the definitions that social psychologists give, it is important to talk about the historical roots of this discipline. Social psychological phenomena were experimentally researched at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth century. Triplett (1898) in the

United States and Ringelmann (1913) in France researched the effect of the presence of others on the outcomes of individual or collective work. Triplett, with the *social facilitation effect* (term attributed to the effect by Floyd Allport in 1924), demonstrated that the mere presence of others increased individual performance, whereas Ringelmann showed that individual members of a group become less productive as the size of their group increases. Both of these phenomena, showing the importance of the presence of others in individual behavior, were further researched by many social psychologists.

These experiments were carried out in a period in which there was a great deal of interest in developing and increasing people’s performance at work. Social psychology is very much linked to societal questions and concerns that lead to empirical research and theoretical developments. In a period of industrial development where the focus was on performance at work, Mayo (1945) proposed that social motives could also increase people’s performance, even under poor working conditions, if workers made sense of the situation as a demonstration of interest on the part of their employers (Hawthorne effect). Thus, the way people make sense of a particular situation impacts their behavior. These early experiments can be considered as the first social psychological investigations where the presence of others (real or symbolic) and the meaning given to a particular situation influenced individual behavior.

The late years of the nineteenth century were also characterized by the work of Le Bon (1895) (*see* Collective Behavior, Social Psychology of; Social Movements: A Social Psychological Perspective; Deindividuation, Psychology of) and Tarde (1890, 1898), who greatly influenced social psychological work on masses and social influence. In this period when the masses came to the forefront of history, the work of Le Bon characterized crowds and collective behavior as irrational in comparison to the rationality of individual behavior, and the work of Tarde restricted influence to imitation. The division between the individual and the collective was established and continues to haunt social psychology. Even so, both scholars claimed that there are phenomena that could not be approached in a similar way to the one used for individual behavior.

For many, Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie* (1900–1920), with its interest in customs, language, and practices, is also viewed as a precursor of modern social psychology (Doise, 1995; Farr, 1996). Wundt’s work influenced many American psychologists who came to Europe between 1865 and 1914.

Farr (1996: p. 36) observes: “the inheritance from Wundt was an experimental psychology that was not social and a social psychology that was not experimental. If psychology first became an experimental science in Germany, then it was social psychology that became an experimental science in America.”

Modern social psychology owes much also to the work of French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who in the second edition of his book on the division of labor in society (1893) asks a profoundly social psychological question: “What explains the fact that while becoming more autonomous, the individual becomes more closely dependent on society?” (cited by Doise, 1995). From the Durkheimian concept of collective representations, Moscovici (1961/76, 2008 for the English edition), later, develops the concept of social representations that continues to attract social psychologists around the world (see Social Representations). Two textbooks of social psychology were published in 1908, in Britain by McDougall and in the United States by Ross, testifying that this new discipline was born. During this period in the United States, Floyd Allport dominated the field, expressing an individualist, positivist, and behaviorist approach to the study of social psychological phenomena.

What we can learn from this brief account of the very early days of social psychology is that, contrary to assumptions (Jones, 1985/1998), the discipline developed on both sides of the Atlantic with scholars trying to understand the relationship between mind and society, the individual and the social. These early days were characterized mainly by behaviorist influences dominant in psychology at the time.

This dominant behaviorist approach was challenged by social psychologists, many of whom fled Europe in between the two world wars and developed a social psychology influenced by the Gestalt. Indeed, in the 1930s many social psychologists moved to the United States and brought with them a tradition of research influenced by the Gestalt, where relationships were the focus of attention. Koffka’s *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, for example, introduced this approach to an American public. A very prominent figure for social psychology was Lewin (1936), who proposed that behavior was a function of the interaction between the person and the environment. He applied this equation in the analysis of group dynamics and was one of the first to point out that a group is not the mere sum of its members. This approach was echoed by other social psychologists like Muzafer Sherif (autokinetic effect, 1935), who showed that norms were developed by groups in response to uncertainty and that they were collective outcomes beyond individual members’ decisions. This approach was also important in the development of Heider’s theory of causal attribution, balance theory, and interpersonal relationships (1958) and Asch’s Impression Formation (1946). The Gestalt theorists established social psychology as an empirical and experimental science, emphasized relationships, and moved the focus of attention from behavior to social perception, albeit “Individualizing the Social” according to Farr (1996). At the same period, George Herbert Mead’s courses, later published (1934) in *Mind, Self and Society*, established symbolic interactionism as an important field in social psychology and introduced the self as a social mediator between the mind and society. In this prewar period, social relationships and interactions emerged and became the focus of attention of social psychological work. Social psychology

oscillates between an emphasis on individual behavior and the importance of the social context in which actions and relationships take place. This is the time when a clear division appeared between what is called a ‘psychological’ social psychology and a ‘sociological’ social psychology. It is also the time when experimentation was linked to social psychology as a defining feature of the discipline.

During World War II, much work was devoted to the study of the attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and adjustment of the soldiers. The *American Soldier* (Stouffer et al., 1949) was an immense research project that sealed the link between social psychology and the military, who continued to fund research and was instrumental in the development of social psychology on both sides of the Atlantic (Moscovici and Markova, 2006). The war created political pressure for action research, and Lewin’s work (1947) on reorienting food habits away from food shortages to help with the war efforts is considered as an application of social psychological work on group dynamics.

Social psychology developed rapidly in the early years after World War II. The world was horrified by the brutality of the war and wanted to understand how this was possible. In the 1950s, Hovland at Yale researched propaganda, and Asch conducted his famous experiments on majority influence (see Persuasion Theories; Attitudes and Attitude Change). Adorno et al. (1950) studied the development of the “authoritarian personality.” Also in 1952, Asch published *Social Psychology*, in which he set the goal for scientific research in psychology “to establish functional relations between conditions in the surroundings and psychological processes and between one psychological process and another” (p. 8). The appearance of Heider’s book on interpersonal relationships (1958) and the famous Robber’s Cave experiments (showing that the type of interdependence between groups impacts on social perception and behaviors) by Sherif et al. (1954) kept alive the Gestalt tradition in social psychology. Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory (1957) surprised the field and reversed the attitude–behavior relationship. This is the time (1966) that the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology (EAESP) was created with the support of American funds and efforts (Moscovici and Markova, 2006).

In the 1970s and the early 1980s, social psychologists continued the postwar tradition and were still interested in understanding prejudice and discrimination. Moreover, the famous Milgram experiment on obedience (see Obedience: Social Psychological Perspectives) made social psychological research and practices well known to the general public. In the presence of movements such as for civil rights, new themes emerged relating to group behavior and social change. Intergroup relations research by Henri Tajfel’s team in Bristol (UK) and minority influence research by Moscovici in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris marked the field and still continue to inspire research (see Intergroup Relations; Social Influence, Social Psychology of). Tajfel and colleagues were interested in understanding social change that occurred when people identified with social groups and acted as their members. They developed the notion of social identity that mediates the relationship between the individual and the group and is responsible for collective behaviors (see Social Identity in Social Psychology; Identity and Identification). In

Europe, in addition to minority influence research, Moscovici developed the concept of social representations from the Durkheimian concept of collective representations in order to understand social change. He was interested in how science becomes common sense, and how social knowledge develops and allows communication, conflict, and consensus to emerge (see Social Representations). Even today, these schools of thought continue to inspire research not only in Europe and the United States but also in Australia and Latin America.

This period also saw the rise of social cognition. This approach soon became dominant and helped social psychology to overcome its behaviorist past. Undoubtedly, social cognition contributed greatly to the study of social perception (see Social Cognition; Stereotypes in Social Psychology; Heuristics in Social Cognition). However, although it allowed psychology to overpass its behaviorist past, soon, by following the metaphor of the computerized mind became too individualized and social psychology was accused of having lost its societal grounding. Social cognition was criticized as ideologically driven, presenting an individual thinker whose cognitions defined the world, a cognitive miser, biased, using shortcuts to perceive and decide (Sampson, 1981). In 1972, Israel and Tajfel edited *The Context of Social Psychology: A Critical Assessment*, in which many prominent scholars tried to explain the distance that separated social psychological work from the social context. The publication of *The Social Dimension* in 1984, edited by Tajfel, was another attempt to find the lost 'social' in social psychology. These debates are still alive today in the social psychological community. It is also in this context that social psychology was challenged by cross-cultural psychology, when, for example, in 1988 Jahoda "accused" social psychology of being blind to cultural context and influences (see Cross-Cultural Psychology). In the same period, social constructionist approaches (see Social Constructionism) challenged the epistemology and methodology of the dominant sociocognitive approach and developed a series of social psychological investigations using qualitative methodology (see Social Psychology: Research Methods).

Our discussion of the current era of social psychology is purposefully brief. It is impossible to do justice to all theoretical accounts and to mention all the scholars who do social psychological research. This can be seen in the different articles of this encyclopedia. Moreover, this brief historical narrative cannot be exhaustive. Interested readers can consult the many historical accounts (e.g., Doise, 1995; Farr, 1996; Papastamou, 2002), and the article Social Psychological Theories, History of. An interesting account of the genesis of social psychology is proposed by Moscovici and Markova (2006) who, along with the theoretical developments, present the institutional construction of social psychology based on archival data. The purpose of our brief presentation is to give the reader the opportunity to trace the steps of social psychology in order to understand its current status and to grasp its domain.

The Domain of Social Psychology

As we have seen, over the years social psychology developed as an empirical, mainly experimental, science, emphasizing

individual behavior and cognitions in context. Two brothers were instrumental in defining the discipline: Floyd and Gordon Allport. In 1924, Floyd Allport published a book on social psychology where he gave the following famous definition of the field (p. 4):

There is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals. Social psychology must not be placed in contradiction to the psychology of individuals; it is a part of the psychology of the individual, whose behavior it studies in relation to that sector of his environment comprised by his fellows ... There is likewise no consciousness except that belonging to individuals. Psychology in all its branches is a science of the individual.

Floyd Allport was clearly suggesting that social psychology is not an interdisciplinary field but a subdiscipline of psychology. His definition was instrumental to individualistic accounts and to the ideologically driven denial of society as anything more than a collection of individuals. Thirty years later, his brother Gordon Allport (1954, p. 5) gave another definition that is perhaps still the most cited definition in textbooks of social psychology:

With few exceptions, social psychologists regard their discipline as an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others.

This definition puts processes of social influence and social perception to the forefront of social psychology. However, the individual still remains preeminent and many collective processes of knowledge production and social action are not included in this account.

The emphasis on the individual can be overcome if one articulates different levels of explanation, as proposed by Doise (1986). He suggested that social psychologists use different levels of explanation to make sense of the phenomena they study: (1) an intraindividual level where phenomena are explained by internal individual processes (see, for instance, categorization); (2) an interindividual and situational level where the dynamics of interaction between individuals explain the phenomena; (3) a positional (or intergroup) level where the explanation focuses on the position and status of individuals as members of groups with asymmetrical relationships; and (4) an ideological level where the explanation is based on the systems of social beliefs, representations, evaluations, and norms. In a more recent account of the levels of explanation, Doise (2012) adds two further levels: one where the explanation concerns biological accounts such as those used in social neuroscience studies, and a societal level, which includes explanations based on norms that function at a societal level such as human rights.

More than a typology of explanations, Doise's contribution to the definition of the domain of social psychology is his claim to articulate the different levels of analysis and explanation in order to avoid reductionist accounts of the different phenomena (see Levels of Analysis in Social Psychology).

Until now we have tried to circumscribe the domain of social psychology by presenting an historical account, famous definitions, and different levels of explanation. The difficulty with social psychology is that it deals with phenomena that are simultaneously psychological and social. What makes them so is perhaps the particular way social psychologists look at them. In 1988, Moscovici suggested that what differentiates social psychology from other disciplines is not its object but its particular gaze to phenomena and to the relations among them. Its particularity is to substitute to the binary relationship between a subject and an object into a three-party relationship: individual subject (Ego), social subject (Alter), and object (see Figure 1). This corresponds to a constant mediation that the social subject (Alter) performs. This relationship between the two subjects (Ego and Alter) impacts their relationship to the object and can be a simple copresence (as in the social facilitation effect presented earlier) or an interaction (as in the case of social influence).

For example, the relationship of an individual to his/her performance could be mediated or moderated (interaction) by the presence of others (real or symbolic). Moreover, interestingly, in the place of Ego and Alter one can substitute the individual with a group. This three-party gaze proposed by Moscovici makes the phenomena simultaneously individual and social. In recent years social psychologists have used this three-party relationship to explain, for instance, minority influence (Mugny, 1982) and politicized collective identity (Simon and Klandermans, 2001). If people look carefully at the work of social psychologists, they will notice that many concepts (like identity) act as mediators and that social psychological hypotheses are often hypotheses of mediation or moderation (see Social Psychology: Research Methods). Moderation and mediation hypotheses always involve three factors. In the case of moderation/interaction, the level of the third factor (the moderator) changes the relationship between the other two factors (the relationship between ego and object). This is a hypothesis of interaction that is usually formulated to answer a 'When' question: *When* would individuals be more prejudiced toward out-group members? When their in-group is of high or of low status? A hypothesis of mediation implies that the relationship between two factors depends on (is created by) a third factor. This hypothesis replies to questions of 'how' and 'why': *Why* people are prejudiced toward out-group members; it is because they identify with their own group that they wish to favor. These are simple examples, but

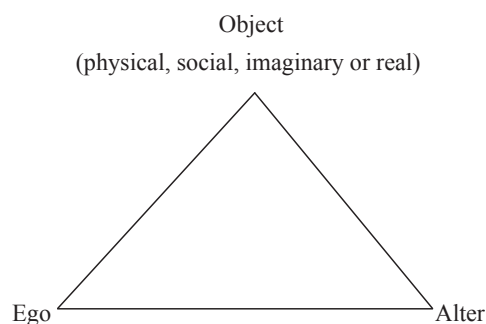


Figure 1 Moscovici's social psychological gaze.

social psychological literature is full of such hypotheses and sophisticated statistical techniques allow their testing (Baron and Kenny, 1986).

From the previous discussion, we could say that the domain of social psychology is characterized by different levels of explanation whose articulation is aimed and by a particular gaze to phenomena that involve relationships of mediation or moderation. Within this framework, social psychological work aims to understand social perception, individual and collective behaviors, processes within groups, processes between groups, intraindividual and interpersonal processes, the production of social knowledge, ideologies and processes of communication, persuasion, and influence in order to understand how individuals and societies develop and change. To do so, social psychologists have elaborated concepts such as attitudes, stereotypes, social categories, beliefs, norms, identities, values, motives, collective memory, and social representations in order to approach different phenomena. There are articles in this encyclopedia concerning all these concepts.

Over the years social psychologists have worked on: intergroup relations, tyranny, sexism, racism, prejudice, leadership, decision making, risk, love and attraction, immigration and ethnicity, acculturation, prosocial behavior at an individual and intergroup level, aggression, conflict, xenophobia, dehumanization, stigma, obedience, collective behavior and action, social movements, mass killings and genocide, obedience, justice issues, and desegregation. For all these themes, there are specialized articles in this encyclopedia. There are also articles of theoretical interest to social psychologists such as about social cognition, social categorization, self-categorization theory, social attribution, essentialism, social constructionism, social representations theory, and cognitive dissonance.

Moreover, besides sociology and psychology that are part of its identity components, social psychology is closely linked to cross-cultural, indigenous, and political psychology. Culture and politics are two different fields within which social psychological phenomena evolve, and often social psychologists are interested in specializing in these areas. Thus, the interested reader can also find articles on cross-cultural and cultural psychology, indigenous psychology, culture and the self, culture and emotions, interpersonal relationships and culture, and political psychology.

Some questions that social psychologists try to answer are:

- How people understand and construct their social reality?
- How they feel in their environment?
- What motivates their actions?
- How and when they act together?
- The consequences of these actions?
- How people and groups influence each other?
- How people and groups produce knowledge norms and artifacts?

Social Psychological Practices, Ethics, and Institutional Recognition

From its very beginnings, social psychology was conceived as an empirical science. Initially, social psychology was mainly

experimental. This practice formed generations of social psychologists and characterized the discipline. There has been, however, criticism about the preponderance of experimentation (see also Gergen, 1973, 1995), and the development of social constructionist approaches opened the field to qualitative methods and epistemology. Moreover, survey methodology has been widely used and sophisticated statistical techniques have been developed to test social psychological hypotheses (for a comprehensive account, see Social Psychology: Research Methods). Nowadays, social psychologists use a variety of methods including techniques of neuroscience. Social psychological research is no longer characterized by a particular methodology. What does characterize the discipline is the importance that is given to empirical findings either to test a theoretical hypothesis or to help develop new theories.

The use of experimentation with human participants raises ethical issues. These concerns are raised in particular because experimental studies have sometimes used deception and not revealed initially to participants the real purpose of the study, in order to create the desired conditions of the social context. Famous studies such as the Milgram experiment and the Stanford Prison experiment by Zimbardo (1973) were criticized for the conditions to which they exposed their participants. Today, ethical concerns are very seriously taken into account, and ethical committees within universities review research projects and make sure that all ethical standards are kept. Important steps are taken to get participants' informed consent and to fully debrief them at the end of the study. Associations and academic societies have been involved in making public ethical codes of conduct (examples of these codes of conduct for research are the American Psychological Association standard 8: research and publication <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx?item=11> and the British Psychological Society http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/code_of_human_research_ethics.pdf see also the site of the European Union <http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/index.cfm?fuseaction=public.topic&id=1433>).

Nowadays, there are also debates about replication issues, and journals devote special editions looking to strengthen the discipline by assuring replication (see, for example, a 2012 special edition of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*). However, for some types of contexts and methodologies, replication is not the important issue. What matters is the understanding of the relationships and the phenomena occurring in a particular context. Social psychology as an alive community of research practice will continue to discuss these issues and enrich the scientific process.

At an institutional level, despite the interdisciplinary nature of social psychology, most scholars work in psychology departments and are trained through a psychology curriculum. Social psychology courses are considered core modules in degrees of psychology. There are many associations and academic societies of social psychology that organize conferences, academic activities, and summer schools for young researchers, such as: *Society for Personality and Social Psychology*, *Society of Experimental Social Psychology*, *European Association of Social Psychology*, *Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues*, *Asian Association of Social Psychology*, *Society of*

Australasian Social Psychology, *Canadian Psychological Association: Social and Personality Section*, *British Psychological Society: Social Psychology Section*, *Association pour la Diffusion de la Psychologie Sociale*, and many national associations. Moreover, social psychologists publish their work in a multitude of journals (for example, *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Journal of Social Psychology*, *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*). The multitude of learning societies and journals testify to the rich scientific environment of social psychology and the depth of institutional support it has.

Social Psychology: An Ongoing Scientific Endeavor

We set out to define social psychology using historical information, definitions, and conceptualizations of its domain by social psychologists, and by research practices and institutional recognition. What makes social psychology distinct is a combination of what it studies, how it studies, and the level of explanation it seeks. Social psychology is interested in understanding how people are transformed by society and how they transform society (Chryssochoou, 2004). It is interesting to study stability and change in societies through the study of processes that involve the interaction of the individual and the social groups. Hopefully, by the end of this article, the reader will understand that social psychology seeks to answer a fundamental question: why there is a conflict, a division between the individual and society. It, therefore, can be the science that challenges this division and as a consequence the ideology that it supports. It is the science whose studies are placed at a mesolevel of analysis that bridges the macrosocietal-cultural level with the micro-individual one. Through interactions, communication and influence processes, and through social actions, individuals and groups produce cognitions and representations that join the individual and the social. As Moscovici (2000, p. 114) puts it: *the field of social psychology consists of social subjects, that is groups and individuals who create their social reality (which is in fact the only reality), control each other and create their bonds of solidarity as well as their differences. Ideologies are their products, communication are their means of exchange and consumption and language is their currency*. Hopefully, the multitude of social psychological work at different levels of analysis will help to disentangle the processes involved and the contents produced in our complex societies.

See also: Attitude Formation and Change; Collective Behavior, Social Psychology of; Cross-Cultural Psychology; Deindividuation, Psychology of; Heuristics in Social Cognition; Identity and Identification, Social Psychology of; Intergroup Relations; Levels of Analysis in Social Psychology;

Obedience: Social Psychological Perspectives; Persuasion Theories; Representations, Social Psychology of; Social Cognition; Social Constructionism; Social Identity in Social Psychology; Social Influence, Social Psychology of; Social Movements: A Social Psychological Perspective; Social Psychological Theory, History of; Social Psychology: Research Methods; Stereotypes in Social Psychology.

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