



WHAT IS SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY?

This chapter introduces you to the study of social psychology. We begin by explaining how fundamentally social we are, and how our brains and bodies reflect this social nature. We define social psychology and identify the kinds of questions and applications that social psychologists pursue. Next, we explore the past, present, and future of the field of social psychology, with a discussion of the important themes and perspectives that are propelling social psychology today and in the years to come.



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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Explain the important ways in which humans' brains, minds, and bodies reflect the social nature of the species.
- 1.2 Define social psychology and explain the component parts of the definition, along with the problems with common sense.
- 1.3 Summarize the origins of the field of psychology and how it has been growing in breadth, representation, and perspectives.



A man and his many suitors on a recent episode of *The Bachelor*. Millions of viewers wonder which woman the featured bachelor might choose for marriage. The enormous popularity of shows like these illustrates part of the appeal of social psychology—people are fascinated with how we relate to one another.

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A few years from now, you may receive an invitation to a high school or college reunion. You'll probably feel a bit nostalgic, and you'll begin to think about those old school days. What thoughts will come to mind first? Will you remember the poetry you finally began to appreciate in your junior year? Will you think about the excitement you felt when you completed your first chemistry lab? Will a tear form in your eye as you remember how inspiring your social psychology class was?

Perhaps. Especially about that social psych class. But what will probably dominate your thoughts are the people you knew in school and the interactions you had with them—the long and intense discussions about everything; the loves you had, lost, or wanted so desperately to experience; the time you made a fool of yourself at a party; the effort of trying to be accepted by a



Socializing and Social Distancing. People have a deep, fundamental need to form social connections. When social distancing became the norm in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the isolation proved challenging to the mental and physical health of many of us.

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fraternity, sorority, or group of popular people; the day you sat in the pouring rain with your friends while watching a football game.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first spread around the world, many of us suddenly lost the opportunity for these kinds of social interactions, as lockdowns brought our social lives to a grinding halt. Students took classes online, athletes' seasons were canceled or played on empty fields, employees worked from their homes. Socializing

devolved into social distancing. To social psychologists like the authors of this textbook, that term—"social distancing"—seemed especially unfortunate. We certainly understood the need for physical distancing to help protect ourselves and others, but we also knew how critically important it would be for people's mental and even physical health to maintain "social" connection through those grim days, even if those connections had to be limited to Zoom, FaceTime, texting, or forming pods of close friends and family.

The Social Animal

Humans are, fundamentally, social animals. We work, play, live, and love together. We hurt and help each other. We watch others, speculate about them, and predict who will wind up with whom, whether in real life or in popular culture as we can't wait to find out who hooks up with whom on the latest show we're currently bingeing. Many of us text each other about everything we're up to, or we spend lots of time on social networking sites, interacting with countless peers from around the world, adding hundreds or even thousands to our social networks. Our moods can fluctuate with the number of virtual friends who "like" our latest posted photo or video.

Have you ever laughed at a joke you didn't get just because those around you were laughing? Do you present yourself differently depending on which group of people you're with? The power of the social context can also be much more subtle than in these examples, as when others' unspoken and inaccurate expectations about you may have real and enduring impact on your sense of who you are.

Our social networks can fuel entire social movements, leading to sometimes dramatic change in what society considers to be fair and just, such as in how women are treated in the workplace or how police behave toward people of color. Social influence can also lead us down some weird paths. It seems that every few months some new strange challenge or trend pops out of nowhere and suddenly spreads around the world through social networks, and then just about as suddenly, no one does it anymore. And, of course, the whole notion of "influencers" highlights the power of social influence, stemming from people's desire to connect with what is currently seen as popular or "in." This influence can be for the good (as in spreading awareness about charitable organizations or promoting justice), the bad (as in the spread of hate speech and misinformation), and everything in between.

This social nature of people can often be obvious, but it can also work in such deep and subtle ways that it might surprise you. Our brains, our bodies, and our minds reflect the social nature of the human animal.

The Social Brain

We're certainly not one of the largest animals. But compared to the rest of the animal world, the size of the human brain, relative to the size of our bodies, is massive. Why is this? The most



The enormous popularity of "influencers" stems from people's desire to connect with others and with what is currently seen by their peers as popular or trendy.

Casey Flanigan/imageSPACE/Sipa USA/Sipa via AP Images)



It may feel like exactly the wrong thing to do, but research shows that starting a chat with a stranger on the train or the person serving your coffee tends to make you both happier.

Tom Werner/DigitalVision/Getty Images

Social brain hypothesis:

Primates—particularly humans—evolved unusually large brains to manage their unusually complex social worlds.

obvious explanation is that we're smarter, that we've mastered our environments to a degree no other animal has. But recent evidence suggests that it may be due to something more specific and rather surprising: We have such large brains in order to socialize (Dunbar, 2022; von Hippel, 2018).

The remarkable success of our species can be traced to humans' ability to work together in groups, to infer others' intentions, to coordinate with extended networks of other people. Our brains needed to be able to handle these incredibly complex challenges. Only by cooperating with each other in groups could our ancestors survive and thrive against the bigger, stronger, faster, scarier predators around them. Put simply, without teamwork our human ancestors would have

been easy snacks for the stronger animals around them, and we wouldn't be here today. This notion that the unusually large size of humans' brains evolved because of humans' unusually complex social worlds is known as the **social brain hypothesis**.

Long ago, Aristotle observed, "Man is by nature a social animal." Even Aristotle couldn't have imagined the degree to which that is true, that the social nature of humans seems to be written into our very DNA. Indeed, when our brain is basically at rest, not engaging in any active task, its default pattern of neural activity seems to involve social thinking, such as thinking about other people's thoughts and goals. As social neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman put it, "Evolution has made a bet that the best thing for our brains to do in any spare moment is to get ready for what comes next in social terms" (Smith, 2013).

The Social Mind and Body

There may be nothing better—particularly after one's most basic needs of food, shelter, and health are met—than having good friends. According to one economic analysis by Nattavudh Powdthavee (2008), when someone's contact with good friends and relatives increases significantly, it's as if they received an extra \$100,000 a year in terms of increased life satisfaction! Whether or not that figure is accurate, it is clear from a great deal of research that good social relationships make us happier, and they help buffer us against the negative things that life too often throws at us.

Indeed, in the longest study ever conducted on happiness (it began in 1938 and continues today!), the question of what best predicted people's happiness and well-being was answered quite clearly: the quality of people's relationships (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023). And having social interactions with a variety of types of relations—that is, not only friends and family but also colleagues, neighbors, classmates, and so on—is especially linked to people's well-being (Collins et al., 2022).

"People who have the warmest relationships and the people who are most connected to other people in their lives are the people who stay healthier and live longer."—Waldinger & Schulz, 2023

What is more subtle but profoundly important is how much our *bodies* are endangered by social isolation and boosted by social connection. There is a strong and clear connection between social isolation and a broad range of health problems, including cardiovascular disease and mortality risk more generally (Fawaz & Mira, 2022; Vila, 2021). Loneliness, which unfortunately has become more and more widespread in recent decades, is a serious threat to people's physical as

well as mental health (Buecker et al., 2021). According to one review of almost 150 studies, for example, adults without strong social connections were 50% more likely to die prematurely than adults with strong connections (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017).

Given the harm that loneliness tends to cause, one can understand how the social isolation during the lockdowns and distancing triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic was devastating for so many people's mental and physical health (Anderson et al., 2022; Bzdok & Dunbar, 2022). And as much as people experienced Zoom fatigue as they had classes and meetings online, or felt unsatisfied with seeing friends primarily through FaceTime, it turns out that even these seemingly weak substitutes for real connection tended to help people's mental and physical well-being (Rudert & Janke, 2023; Sahi et al., 2021).



Our social relationships and interactions are extremely important to us. Most people seek out and are profoundly affected by other people. This social nature of the human animal is what social psychology is all about.

Jacob Lund/Alamy Stock Photo

"I only ever write about one thing: Being alone. The fear of being alone, the desire to not be alone. . . . The need to hear the words: You are not alone."—Shonda Rhimes, creator of TV shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *Bridgerton*

The good news is that it may be much simpler than people realize to give themselves a boost of happiness through social connection. A growing body of social psychological research shows that going out of one's comfort zones to chat with strangers or to express gratitude to others can have surprisingly beneficial effects. For example, you may think that the barista making your latte or the stranger looking at their phone next to you on the train would be far happier if you kept your mouth shut and didn't bother them, but study after study has shown that taking the plunge and chatting with these people tends to go much better than people predict and makes them feel happier (Atir et al., 2022; Kumar & Epley, 2023; Sandstrom et al., 2022; Schroeder et al., 2022). (We should note that this effect is not simply because happy people are more likely to reach out to strangers; rather, numerous studies have demonstrated this effect when people are randomly assigned to chat up a stranger or not.)

Similarly, people tend to not realize how much better they will feel if they reach out to someone to express gratitude or even just to drop them a friendly note. Actually helping someone else—and sometimes even asking for help from others—can also promote connection and happiness (Lanser & Eisenberger, 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Zhao & Epley, 2022).

"While loneliness has the potential to kill, connection has even more potential to heal."—U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy

What Is Social Psychology?

We are profoundly *social* beings, and this is what social psychology—and this textbook—is all about. We are excited to share with you throughout this book why we think social psychology is so relevant and fascinating. We begin by defining what social psychology is and discussing some of the questions and applications social psychologists pursue.



A well-liked celebrity such as Oprah Winfrey can influence the attitudes and behaviors of millions of people. When Oprah recommends a book, for example, sales of the book are likely to skyrocket.

Amy Sussman/Getty Images

Social psychology:

The scientific study of how individuals think, feel, and behave in a social context.

Defining Social Psychology

Social psychology is the scientific study of how individuals think, feel, and behave in a social context. Let's look at each part of this definition.

Scientific Study. There are many approaches to understanding how people think, feel, and behave. We can learn about human behavior from literature, films, history, and philosophy, to name just a few possibilities. What makes social psychology different from these artistic and humanistic endeavors is that social psychology is a science. It applies the *scientific method* of systematic observation, description, and measurement to the study of the human condition. How and why social psychologists do this is the focus of Chapter 2.

How Individuals Think, Feel, and Behave. Social psychology concerns an amazingly diverse set of topics. People's private, even nonconscious beliefs and attitudes; their most passionate emotions; their heroic, cowardly, or merely mundane public behaviors—these all fall within the broad scope of social psychology. In this way, social psychology differs from other social sciences, such as economics and political science, whose focus tends to be more narrow.

Note the word *individuals* in our definition of social psychology. This word points to another important way in which social psychology differs from some other social sciences. Sociology, for instance, typically classifies people in terms of their nationality, race, socioeconomic class, and other *group factors*. In contrast, social psychology typically focuses on the psychology of the *individual*. Even when social psychologists study groups of people, they usually emphasize the behavior of the individual in the group context.

A Social Context. Here is where the “social” in social psychology comes into play and how social psychology is distinguished from other branches of psychology. As a whole, the discipline of psychology is an immense, sprawling enterprise, concerned with everything from the actions of neurotransmitters in the brain to the actions of dancers in a crowded club. What makes social psychology unique is its emphasis on the social nature of individuals.

However, the “socialness” of social psychology varies. Social psychologists sometimes examine nonsocial factors that affect people's thoughts, emotions, motives, and actions. For example, they may study if hot weather causes people to behave more aggressively. What is social about this is the behavior: people hurting each other. In addition, social psychologists sometimes study people's thoughts or feelings about nonsocial things, such as people's attitudes toward Nike versus Adidas basketball shoes. How can attitudes toward basketball shoes be of interest to social psychologists? One way is if these attitudes are influenced by something social, such as whether LeBron James's endorsement of Nike makes people prefer that brand. Both examples—determining whether heat causes an increase in aggression or whether LeBron James causes an increase in sales of Nike shoes—are *social* psychological pursuits because the thoughts, feelings, or behaviors either (1) *concern other people* or (2) *are influenced by other people*.

The “social context” referred to in the definition of social psychology does not have to be real or present. Even the implied or imagined presence of others can have important effects on individuals (Allport, 1985). For example, simply imagining positive or negative interactions with others can influence people's self-esteem and attitudes about others (Drury et al., 2023; Libby et al., 2011).

Social Psychological Questions and Applications

For those of us fascinated by social behavior, social psychology is a dream come true. Just look at Table 1.1 and consider a small sample of the questions you'll explore in this textbook. As you can see, learning about social psychology is learning about ourselves and our social worlds. And because social psychology is scientific, it provides insights that could not be gained through intuition or experience alone.

The value of social psychology's perspective on human behavior is widely recognized. Courses in social psychology are often required or encouraged for students interested in careers in medicine, business, law, education, and journalism, as well as in psychology and sociology. Although many graduates of social psychology programs hold faculty appointments in colleges or universities, the large majority work elsewhere, such as in medical centers, law firms, government agencies, the military, and a variety of business settings involving management, investment banking, marketing, advertising, human resources, negotiating, user interface and experience, and social networking.

The number and importance of these applications continue to grow. Judges draw on social psychological research to render landmark decisions, and lawyers depend on it to select juries and to support or refute evidence. Businesses use cross-cultural social psychological research to operate in the global marketplace, and they consult research on group dynamics to foster the best conditions for their workforces. Health care professionals recognize the role of social psychological factors in the prevention and treatment of disease. Indeed, we can think of no other field of study that offers expertise that is more relevant to so many different career paths.

Social Psychology and Common Sense

After reading about a theory or finding of social psychology, you may sometimes think, "Of course. I knew that all along. Everyone knows that." This "knew-it-all-along" phenomenon often causes people to question how social psychology is different from common sense or traditional folk wisdom. After all, would any of the following social psychological findings be surprising to you?

- Beauty and brains don't mix. Physically attractive people tend to be seen as less smart than physically unattractive people.
- People will like an activity more if you offer them a large reward for doing it, causing them to associate the activity with the positive reinforcement.

▼ TABLE 1.1

Examples of Social Psychological Questions

Social Cognition: What Affects the Way We Perceive Ourselves and Others? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What effect does social media have on people's self-esteem? (Chapter 3)• How do people in East Asia often differ from North Americans in the way they explain people's behavior? (Chapter 4)• Why can stereotypes be so resistant to change? (Chapter 5)
Social Influence: How Do We Influence Each Other? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why do we often like what we suffer for? (Chapter 6)• How do salespeople sometimes trick us into buying things we never really wanted? (Chapter 7)• Why do people often perform worse in groups than they would have alone? (Chapter 8)
Social Interaction: What Causes Us to Like, Love, Help, and Hurt Others? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How similar or different are the sexes in what they look for in an intimate relationship? (Chapter 9)• When is a bystander more or less likely to help you in an emergency? (Chapter 10)• Does playing violent video games trigger aggressive behavior? (Chapter 11)
Applying Social Psychology: How Does Social Psychology Help Us Understand Questions About Law, Business, and Health? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can interrogators really get people to confess to serious crimes they did not commit? (Chapter 12)• How can business leaders most effectively motivate their employees? (Chapter 13)• How does stress affect one's health, and what are the most effective ways of coping with stressful experiences? (Chapter 14)

- People think that they're more unique than they really are. They tend to underestimate the extent to which others share the same opinions or interests.
- Playing contact sports or violent video games releases aggression and makes people less likely to vent their anger in violent ways.

In a minute, we will have more to say about each of these statements.

Common sense may seem to explain many social psychological findings after the fact. The problem is distinguishing commonsense fact from commonsense myth. After all, for many commonsense notions, there is an equally sensible-sounding notion that says the opposite.



According to social psychological research described in this chapter and elsewhere in the book, how socially connected students feel with their fellow students can have a significant effect on their academic success.

miodrag ignjatovic/E+/Getty Images

Is it “Birds of a feather flock together” or “Opposites attract”? Is it “Two heads are better than one” or “Too many cooks spoil the broth”? We all know that we should go with our instincts and trust our guts, right? But don't we also know that impulsive decisions are dangerous and that patience is rewarded? Which of these commonsense notions are correct? We have no reliable way to answer such questions through common sense or intuition alone.

Social psychology, unlike common sense, uses the scientific method to put its theories to the test. How it does so will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. But before we leave this section, one important word of caution: Those four “findings” listed above? *They are all false.* Although there may be sensible reasons to believe each of the statements to

be true, research indicates otherwise. Therein lies another problem with relying on common sense: Despite offering very compelling predictions and explanations, it is sometimes wildly inaccurate. And even when it is not completely wrong, common sense can be misleading in its simplicity. Often there is no simple answer to a question such as “Does absence make the heart grow fonder?” In reality, the answer is more complex than common sense would suggest, and social psychological research reveals how such an answer depends on a variety of factors.

To emphasize these points and to encourage you to think critically about social psychological issues *before* as well as after learning about them, this textbook contains a feature called “Putting Common Sense to the Test.” Beginning with Chapter 3, each chapter opens with a few statements about social psychological issues that will be covered in that chapter. Some of the statements are true, and some are false. As you read each statement, make a prediction about whether it is true or false and think about why this is your prediction. Marginal notes throughout the chapter will tell you whether the statements are true or false. In reading the chapter, check not only whether your prediction was correct but also whether your reasons for the prediction were accurate. If your intuition wasn't quite on the mark, think about what the right answer is and how the evidence supports that answer. There are few better ways of learning and remembering than through this kind of critical thinking.

The Need to Belong: An Example of a Social Psychology Experiment

The social nature of people runs so deep that even very subtle clues about our social connection with others can have a profound effect on our lives. Think about your first weeks of high school or college. If you're like most students, there probably were times when you felt insecure and wondered if you fit in there. For some groups of students, however, these

fears are especially frequent and strong. Students from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups or women entering programs specializing in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) are especially vulnerable to such doubts. Social psychological research has found that these concerns can interfere with academic performance.

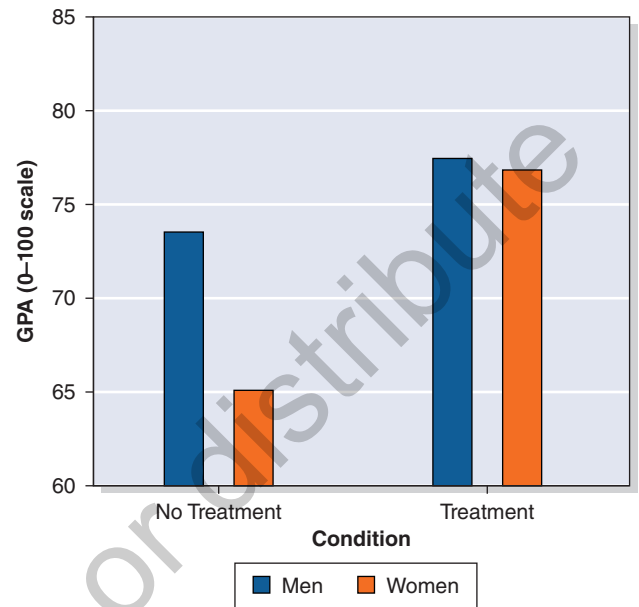
Gregory Walton and his colleagues (2015; Walton & Brady, 2021) are among the social psychologists who have studied this issue (and you'll learn some more about this work in Chapter 5). One of their ambitious studies focused on improving the academic success of women at a prestigious engineering school who were taking courses in majors in which the very large majority of students were men. Women in these majors often report that they feel unwelcome and disrespected. To try to counter these concerns, the researchers conducted an experiment in which they provided some students early in their first semester with a brief bit of information suggesting how typical it is that most students there—regardless of their gender—go through periods of social stress, disrespect, and feeling that they don't belong during their freshman year and that these struggles tend to go away soon after their first year. After reading this information, the students completed a pair of brief writing activities based on this information.

The researchers wanted to assess how these students would do by the end of their first year compared to other students who did not receive any information about social belonging concerns. The results can be seen in Figure 1.1. The bars in this graph illustrate the students' first-year grade point averages (GPAs) as measured on a scale from 0 to 100. The first pair of bars on the left show the GPAs of men and women who did not receive the belongingness intervention. As the difference in height of these two bars indicates, the GPAs of the women were far below those of the men. Compare this to the pair of bars on the right. These are the GPAs of the men and women who received the brief information designed to counter concerns about belonging. With this brief intervention, the women earned GPAs as high as the men. The large gender difference was eliminated, therefore, by just a small amount of social information received early in their first year. This study illustrates the power of the social context—or, more accurately, of the *perceived* social context—on a critically important real-world outcome.

This kind of brief belongingness intervention produced similarly impressive results for Black students at a school in which the large majority of students were White. Black students' academic performance *throughout* college was dramatically improved by the social-belonging intervention early in their first year. Remarkably, in a follow-up about a decade later, the Black participants who had received the intervention reported far greater feelings of satisfaction in their careers, and greater well-being more generally, compared to the Black participants who had not received the intervention. The intervention's immediate benefit of boosting students' feelings of belonging had recurring positive effects that continued to build for years to come (Brady et al., 2020).

▼ FIGURE 1.1

Social Belonging and Grade Point Average (GPA)



Some students early in their first semester at an engineering school were given information designed to reduce their doubts about fitting in and belonging at their school, and other students were not given this information. The bars on the left represent the average first-year grades of the men and women who did not receive the information about belonging. Women's average first-year grades were far worse than the men's in this no-treatment condition. The bars on the right illustrate that the women's underperformance was completely eliminated if they received the information designed to reduce their uncertainty about belonging.

Sources: Walton et al. (2015); Walton & Brady (2021).

Social Psychology: Past, Present, and Future

People have probably been asking social psychological questions for as long as humans could think about each other. Certainly, early philosophers such as Plato offered keen insights into many social psychological issues. But no systematic and scientific study of social psychological issues developed until around the beginning of the 20th century. The field of social psychology is therefore a relatively young one. Recent years have marked a tremendous interest in social psychology and an injection of many new scholars into the field. As social psychology is now in its second century, it is instructive to look briefly at its origins, to take a snapshot of its present, and to imagine its future.

“Psychology has a long past, but only a short history.” —Hermann Ebbinghaus, Summary of Psychology



Racers from around the world compete in the Tour de France. Would these cyclists have raced faster or slower if they were racing individually against the clock rather than racing simultaneously with their competitors? More generally, how does the presence of others affect an individual's performance? The earliest social psychology experiments ever published sought to answer questions such as these.

Jon Sparks/Alamy Stock Photo

The Birth and Infancy of Social Psychology

Like most such honors, the title “founder of social psychology” has many potential recipients, and not everyone agrees on who should prevail (e.g., see Haines & Vaughan, 1979; Stroebe, 2012). Credit for the first published research article in social psychology is often given to the American psychologist Norman Triplett at the end of the 19th century (1897–1898). Triplett's work was noteworthy because after observing that bicyclists tended to race faster when racing in the presence of others than when simply racing against a clock, he designed an experiment to study this phenomenon in a controlled, precise way. This scientific approach to

studying the effects of the social context on individuals' behavior can be seen as marking the birth of social psychology. We'll discuss Triplett's research, along with the studies it inspired, in Chapter 8.

Key to establishing social psychology as a distinct field of study was the publication of a few social psychology textbooks early in the 20th century. In particular, Floyd Allport's (1924) book, with its focus on the interaction of individuals and their social context and its emphasis on the use of experimentation and the scientific method, helped establish social psychology as the discipline it is today.

Social Psychology in Action

What one person would you guess has had the strongest influence on the field of social psychology? Various social psychologists, as well as psychologists outside of social psychology, might be mentioned in response to this question. But someone who was not a psychologist at all may have had the most dramatic impact on the field: Adolf Hitler.

Hitler's rise to power and the horrendous consequences that followed caused people around the world to become desperate for answers to social psychological questions about what causes violence, prejudice, genocide, conformity and obedience, and a host of other social problems and behaviors. In addition, many social psychologists living in Europe in the 1930s fled to the United States and helped establish a critical mass of social psychologists who would give shape to the rapidly maturing field. The years just before, during, and soon after World War II marked an explosion of interest in social psychology. The desire and ability to study the

critically important societal issues of the day quickly became part of the DNA of social psychology, and the application of social psychology to address the most compelling questions in society remains a hallmark of the field.

With its foundation firmly in place by the middle of the 20th century, social psychology entered a period of rapid expansion, and the number and kinds of questions that social psychologists address today continue to accelerate. The sheer range of its investigations is staggering. Just look at the table of contents of this book to get a sense of the amazingly wide variety of topics that social psychologists today study.



Growing Breadth and Representation

An essential force behind the growing breadth and relevance of social psychology is its development of international and multicultural perspectives. Although individuals from many countries helped establish the field, social psychology was dominated by researchers in the United States, along with some pockets in Western Europe and Canada. This aspect of social psychology began to change rapidly in the 1990s and especially in the 21st century, reflecting not only the different geographic and cultural backgrounds of its researchers and participants but also the recognition that many social psychological phenomena once assumed to be universal may actually vary dramatically as a function of culture. You can find evidence of this new appreciation of the role of culture in *every* chapter of this book.

The increased breadth is also evident in how social psychologists bridge connections to other fields of study, both within and outside psychology. These intersections of social psychology and related disciplines and approaches allows social psychologists to address a more diverse set of questions. See Table 1.2 for examples of some of these intersections.

For example, one relatively new area of study that has received a great deal of attention is known as **behavioral economics**. This subfield focuses on how psychology—particularly social and cognitive psychology—relates to economic decision-making. Behavioral economics research has

What determines whether people are likely to volunteer to help others, such as by dedicating their time and energy to build houses for people in need? The application of social psychology to address compelling questions in society such as this is a hallmark of the field.

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Behavioral economics:

An interdisciplinary subfield that focuses on how psychology—particularly social and cognitive psychology—relates to economic decision-making.

▼ TABLE 1.2

Intersections of Social Psychology and Other Fields and Topics

Social psychology intersecting with . . .	Example Research Questions
Cognitive psychology (social cognition research)	How can our perceptions and judgments of others be influenced by information we don't consider relevant or may not even be aware of?
Neuroscience	How do different patterns of brain activity reflect biases in how we react to people of different groups?
Evolutionary approaches	How do the challenges of survival faced by our ancestors millions of years ago predict patterns of human attraction today?
Business and economics (e.g., behavioral economics)	How are so many decisions we make about how to spend money irrational—but predictably so?
Criminal justice	How are eyewitnesses vulnerable to falsely remembering details of a crime based on factors such as race, arousal, or the wording used in a lawyer's questions?
Health	How does social support or rejection affect one's cardiovascular health?
Environmental studies	How can we use principles of persuasion and social influence to promote more environmentally friendly behavior among consumers?



Social psychologists are becoming increasingly interested in cross-cultural research, which helps us break out of our culture-bound perspective. Many of our behaviors differ across cultures. In some cultures, for example, people are expected to negotiate about the price of the products they buy, as in this market in Tunisia. In other cultures, such bargaining would be highly unusual and cause confusion and distress.

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Social neuroscience:

The study of the relationship between neural and social processes.

Evolutionary psychology:

A subfield of psychology that uses the principles of evolution to understand human social behavior.

Behavioral genetics:

A subfield of psychology that examines the role of genetic factors in behavior.

Social cognition:

The processes by which individuals perceive, interpret, think about, and form impressions of other people.

revealed that the traditional economic models were inadequate because they failed to account for the powerful—and often seemingly irrational—role that psychological factors have on people’s economic behavior. People tend to think, for example, that a lottery ticket or a ticket for a wager on a race is worth more when they already own it than when they are given a chance to purchase it. This doesn’t make sense from a purely economic perspective, but by taking into account psychological factors, such as feelings associated with ownership or with different kinds of regret, we can understand and predict such tendencies (Achtayi et al., 2021; Kahneman et al., 2005).

Intersections with biology, evolutionary studies, and genetics are also popular areas of interest in social psychology research today, and examples can be found

throughout this book. **Social neuroscience**—the study of the relationship between neural and social processes—is a thriving subfield lying at the intersection of social psychology and neuroscience. Another prominent interdisciplinary subfield is **evolutionary psychology**, which uses the principles of evolution to understand human behavior. Another area of growth is **behavioral genetics**, which examines the effects of genes on behavior. Advances in this area have triggered new research to investigate such matters as the extent to which political attitudes are at least partially inherited and the roles that genes play in individuals’ sexual identity.

The final three chapters of this textbook focus in depth on applications of social psychology to law and criminal justice (Chapter 12), business and economics (Chapter 13), and health (Chapter 14).

Integration of Emotion, Motivation, and Cognition

One subfield that produces a tremendous amount of research is **social cognition**—an intersection of social and cognitive psychology that studies how we perceive, remember, and interpret information about ourselves and others. In the earlier days of social cognition research, the dominant perspective was called “cold” because it emphasized the role of cognition and deemphasized the role of emotion and motivation in explaining social psychological issues, such as the role of basic information processing in stereotyping. This was contrasted with a “hot” perspective, focusing on emotion and motivation as determinants of our thoughts and actions.

Today there is growing interest in integrating both “hot” and “cold” perspectives, as researchers study how individuals’ emotions and motivations influence their thoughts and actions and vice versa. For example, researchers examine how motivations we aren’t even consciously aware of (such as being motivated to treat others fairly or being motivated to feel superior to others) can bias how we interact with or interpret information about another person (Ditto et al., 2019; Vail et al., 2023).

Motivated Reasoning: Wanting to Be Accurate Versus Wanting to Feel Good. The integration of “hot” and “cold” can be seen in one of the most central conflicts we all experience: (1) We want to be *right*, and (2) we want to *feel good* about ourselves. That is, we want to be accurate in our judgments about ourselves and others, and that often works well for us, but sometimes we may *not* want accuracy if it means we will learn something bad about ourselves or those closest to us.

These goals can pull our cognitive processes in very different directions. We are amazingly capable of paying attention to information we like, for example, but we can protect ourselves

from fully processing information we don't want to accept. This, unfortunately, all too often results in groups of people passionately disagreeing on basic facts and refusing to see any common ground. How we perform the required mental gymnastics to try to satisfy both goals is an important area of research (Cikara, 2021; Cole & Balcetis, 2021; Ditto et al., 2019; Tamir et al., 2020).

Fast and Slow Thinking. Another theme running through many chapters of this book is identifying and distinguishing between fast, automatic thinking versus slower, more controllable thinking. You'll see in many places in this book how many of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are affected dramatically by inferences and judgments we make seemingly without any awareness or thought, and how faster and slower thinking can work together or separately in steering our decisions and actions. This research tries to answer questions such as: How much control do we have over our thoughts and actions, and how vulnerable are we to influences beyond our awareness or control? Are we sometimes influenced by stereotypes even if we are motivated to not believe them? Can we train ourselves to regulate ourselves against automatic impulses?

Cultural Perspectives

Because of the fantastic advances in communication technologies in recent decades and the globalization of the world's economies, it is faster, easier, and more necessary than ever for people from vastly different cultures to interact with one another. This presents enormous challenges and opportunities, and social psychological research on culture has grown tremendously in the wake of these developments.

What is meant by "culture" is not easy to pin down, as many researchers think of culture in very different ways. Broadly speaking, **culture** may be thought of as a system of enduring meanings, beliefs, values, assumptions, institutions, and practices shared by a large group of people and transmitted from one generation to the next. How individuals perceive and derive meaning from their world is influenced profoundly by the beliefs, norms, and practices of the people and institutions around them.

Increasing numbers of social psychologists are evaluating the universal generality or cultural specificity of their theories and findings by conducting **cross-cultural research**, in which they examine similarities and differences across a variety of cultures. Social psychologists also conduct **multicultural research**, in which they examine racial and ethnic groups within cultures.

In *every* chapter of this textbook, you'll see examples of the role that culture plays in shaping our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Let's start with one example. Imagine that you are in charge of admission to a college or university. There of course would be many qualities you would look for in ideal candidates. How important do you think a student's passion (that is, degree of interest, enjoyment, and feelings of competence) for an area of study should be in predicting their success? It may seem obvious to you that the more passionate a student is for an academic interest, the better they are likely to be. It turns out, however, that this may depend on one's cultural context.

As you'll see in several chapters throughout this book, one important way in which cultures vary is the extent to which they emphasize individualism or collectivism. People from individualistic cultures (most commonly found in North America, Australia, and Western Europe) tend to emphasize unique aspects of themselves that are separate from others, whereas col-



Advances in technology enable social psychologists to extend their research in exciting new directions, such as by using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and magnetoencephalography (MEG) to study activity in the brain in response to various thoughts or stimuli.

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Culture: A system of enduring meanings, beliefs, values, assumptions, institutions, and practices shared by a large group of people and transmitted from one generation to the next.

Cross-cultural research: Research designed to compare and contrast people of different cultures.

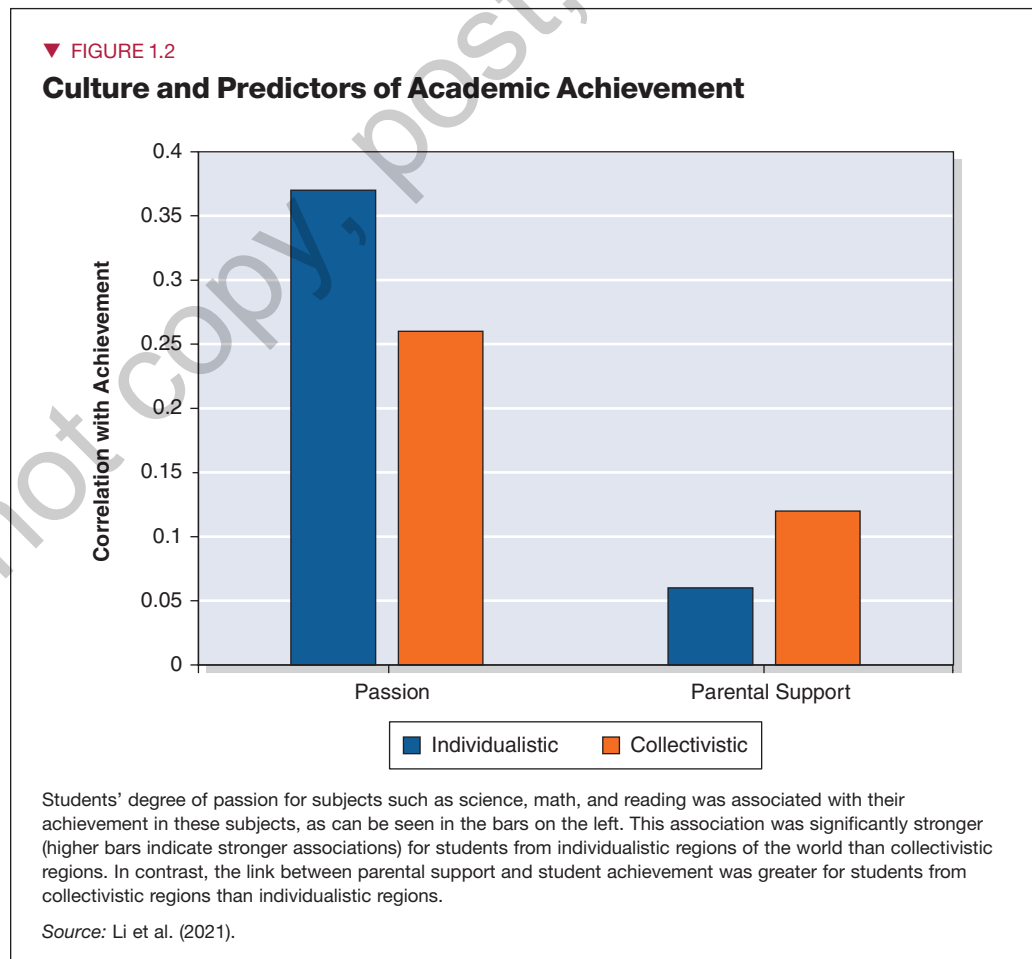
Multicultural research: Research designed to examine racial and ethnic groups within cultures.

lectivists emphasize their interdependence with close others. Xingyu Li and others (2021) believed that a student's degree of academic passion may be a stronger predictor of success in individualistic societies than in collectivistic societies because it is an internal, independent motivation. In contrast, factors associated with connections to close people in their lives, such as how supportive the students' parents are, may play a bigger role in students' success in collectivistic cultures compared to individualistic cultures.

That is exactly what Li and her colleagues found in a series of studies conducted on data from more than a million students across 59 societies around the world. Students' passion for subjects such as science, math, and reading was measured based on how much they indicated interest, enjoyment, and competence in these topics. As can be seen in Figure 1.2, students' degree of passion did indeed predict their academic success in these areas of study, but this was more true for students from individualistic societies (e.g., Australia, United Kingdom, United States) than for students from collectivistic societies (e.g., Colombia, Indonesia, Thailand). In contrast, measures of parental support predicted students' success more in collectivistic societies than it did in individualistic societies.

These results illustrate an interesting cultural difference, but they also highlight the potential for bias, such as if admissions criteria emphasize qualities that are more highly valued (and more predictive of success) in some cultures than others.

Some social psychology textbooks devote a separate chapter to culture. We chose not to do so. Because we believe that cultural influences are inherent in *all* aspects of social psychology, we chose instead to integrate discussions of the role of culture in *every* chapter of the textbook. In this text, we describe studies conducted in dozens of countries, representing



every populated continent on earth. As our knowledge expands, we should be able to see much more clearly both the behavioral differences among cultures and the similarities we all share.

New Technologies and the Online World

Researchers today can see images of the brain at work through noninvasive procedures, and they can measure health-related variables with no more fuss than having participants wear a watch on their wrist. New technologies such as these enable social psychologists to address questions they never could have attempted before.

For example, social psychologists are now using techniques such as *positron emission tomography (PET)*, *event-related potential (ERP)*, *transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS)*, and *functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI)* to study the interplay of the brain and discrete thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The researchers can identify, for instance, how individuals immediately perceive some people as threatening or not, or some situations as rewarding or not. Virtual reality is another developing technology that fuels new research, as it enables social psychologists to conduct fascinating high-tech experiments on issues such as teamwork, aggression, prejudice, altruism, and eyewitness testimony. Because participants in these experiments are immersed in a virtual reality that the experimenters create for them, the researchers can test questions that would be impractical, impossible, or unethical without this technology.

In March 2019, some fans of tech history raised a glass and toasted the 30th anniversary of the invention of the World Wide Web. It is almost impossible to imagine that not that many years ago, there was no such thing as a website, let alone all the things that would soon follow, like Google or Amazon! Sometime when you sit in the back of an Uber on a long ride, use that phone from which you booked the ride to search for a video of Steve Jobs introducing the iPhone for the first time in 2007, and see the audience literally gasp as he demonstrated things like using his finger to scroll. This wasn't that many years ago! The rate of change has been breathtaking.

Awesome is an overused word, but it surely describes the revolution that is taking place in how we access information and communicate with each other. The waves of this revolution have carried social psychology research along with it. Social psychologists around the world can now not only communicate and collaborate much more easily but also gain access to research participants from populations that would otherwise never have been available. These developments have sparked the field's internationalization, perhaps its most exciting course in its second century.

Online communication not only aids research but is also itself becoming a provocative topic of study. As more people interact with each other through social networking sites, online dating services, and endless apps, there is growing interest in studying important questions such as: How has technology affected dating and relationships? What factors contribute to or protect against cyberbullying? Can too much time on social networking sites lead to depression or loneliness? Does the habit of frequently texting or checking one's phone lead to attentional and social problems? How do prejudice, misinformation, and polarization spread on social media, and what can be done to reduce this? How will the growth of artificial intelligence change our lives?

We would be presumptuous—and probably naive—to try to predict how new communication and new technologies will influence the ways that people will interact in the coming years, but it probably is safe to predict that their influence will be great. As more people fall in love online, fall into social isolation, or fall into despair at the loss of individual privacy, social psychology will explore these issues.



Together, and apart. Even when interacting in a group, many of us today are also pulled away by our individual phones, electronic games, laptops, tablets, and so on. How new technologies and living so much of our lives online affect human interaction is becoming increasingly important to social psychology.

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New Standards and Practices for Research

The recent development that has created the most discussion among social psychologists is not about a new topic of research but instead is about *how* our research is done and reported. Inspired in part by a series of high-profile reports of problems with the methods or the ability to repeat the findings of a variety of published studies, an enormous wave of attention and debate has emerged concerning how social psychologists should adopt better, more stringent research and reporting practices. New standards are evolving that require much greater sample sizes (that is, larger numbers of participants in a study) and different approaches to statistical analysis. An **open science** movement calls for greater accountability and accessibility of researchers' data and materials. This is not unique to social psychology, as a similar set of issues has been the focus across many fields, such as medicine, physics, and biology.

We'll say more about this in the next chapter, which is all about how we do research in social psychology. Suffice it to say for now that a variety of new changes in what are considered "best practices" in conducting and reporting research are taking place, and we are confident that they will result in a more rigorous science of social psychology as the field continues to develop. We expect that some of the students reading this textbook today will be among the scholars conducting this research in the years to come.

Open science: A movement to make research materials, methods, hypotheses, and data more transparent, accessible, and easily shared with researchers from other labs.

REVIEW

TOP 10 KEY POINTS IN CHAPTER 1

1. Our brains, bodies, and minds reflect the social nature of the human animal.
2. Loneliness is a growing problem and can lead to significant mental and physical health problems; interactions with others can promote happiness.
3. Social psychology is the scientific study of how individuals think, feel, and behave in a social context.
4. Women in one study achieved greater academic success at an engineering school if they received information early in their first year designed to reduce their concerns about fitting in and belonging in their male-dominated majors. Black boys in another study became less likely to receive disciplinary action in middle and high school if they received information to increase their feeling of social belonging in sixth grade.
5. Social psychology began to emerge as a distinct academic field around the beginning of the 20th century, and it began to flourish as the world needed explanations for the tragic questions and challenges that World War II raised.
6. Social psychology has grown in breadth and relevance in recent decades as it has emphasized international and multicultural perspectives, as well as by intersecting with other fields.
7. Individuals sometimes are faced with a conflict between two motivations that can affect cognitive processes: wanting to be right and wanting to feel good about oneself.
8. Increasing numbers of social psychologists integrate the role of culture in their theories and research, such as in cross-cultural studies that test the universal generality or cultural specificity of various findings.
9. Online communication has fostered collaboration among researchers around the world, enabled researchers to study participants from diverse populations, and inspired researchers to investigate whether various social psychological phenomena are similar or different online versus offline.
10. New developments are emerging in what are considered "best practices" in conducting and reporting research, making social psychological research more methodologically sound and creating greater accessibility of materials, methods, and data.

KEY TERMS

Behavioral economics 11
Behavioral genetics 12
Cross-cultural research 13
Culture 13

Evolutionary psychology 12
Multicultural research 13
Open science 16
Social brain hypothesis 4

Social neuroscience 12
Social psychology 6



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