A. Introducing Social Psychology

Introduction

Some classical studies
Muzaffer Sherif’s studies were called the Robber Cave studies and they greatly added to the discussion of prejudice. They gave new insight and challenged views of prejudice coming from aggression against the other group do to the person’s own disadvantages (scapegoat theory) or of the idea that prejudice was a personality trait of certain people (authoritarian personality).

Sherif found no trace of prejudice personalities or displaced anger, and he added these findings as support for his realistic conflict theory. This theory tells us that competition and conflict between groups over valued resources creates anger and bias between the groups. A common goal between two groups, which only one of the groups could achieve, creates intergroup hostility.

Henri Tajfel, however, questioned whether competitive goals are necessary for this hostility and conducted a study that addressed his questions. The experimental procedure that he used is now known as the minimal group paradigm. These are a set of procedures to create random groups that include intergroup discrimination without the members knowing who belongs to which group.

Neil Macrae conducted studies that demonstrated the rebound effect, which is when one fails to suppress the prejudice. In this study it was used to convey the idea that when one suppresses those prejudiced, they come back even stronger. The rebound effect affects thought as well as behavior.

A study conducted by John Bargh included priming because it brought to mind a stereotype related to the words that were first shown. Participants who were shown words that were related to the elderly took a longer time to walk a certain distance than those who received neutral words. This is another example of how are behavior is affected by our subconscious prejudices.

A definition of social psychology

The core characteristics of social psychology
The classic definition given by Gordon Allport for social psychology is that it is “the attempt to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings”.

Social psychology also makes use of scientific methods such as the experiments, which include deliberately introducing a change to examine the results of that change. Experiments also include both a control and an experimental group.

Sherif’s study did not use a control group. His study was also a field experiment, conducted in a natural setting, rather than a laboratory experiment, which is conducted in a lab.

Allport also stressed the idea that social influence and the impact of others on someone’s thoughts, behaviors, and feelings accompanies social psychology.
The unique perspective of social psychology

The study of the individual and the social
Asch conducted a study to evaluate the social influence on thoughts and behaviors of individuals in a group setting.

What determines one’s behavior includes 1) the biological constitution of people, 2) the traits, and 3) the environment. Social psychology studies how a certain situation and social attitudes affect someone’s behavior. Social psychology also focuses on personality variables as moderators and it emphasizes that a strong social situation can make personality influences less significant.

It has been hard to differentiate social psychology from sociology, but sociologists are responsible for some major contributions to social psychology such as the interdependence theory (interact with whomever can give you the most rewards for the least amount of effort). Because of this, sociologists and social psychologists agree in supporting what is called methodological individualism. This is the assumption that shared action is a result of the motivations and actions of individuals.

Sociology and social psychology differ majorly in that sociologists trace behavior upwards to broader social things in society such as social class or norms. Social psychologists on the other hand, trace downward to more specific things about an individual such as their goals and cognitions.

A brief history of social psychology

The beginning
Social psychology began with the first experiment concerning this topic published in 1898 by Norman Triplett. His experiment demonstrated effects now known as social facilitation. This refers to how the presence of others causes individuals to perform better on familiar, easy tasks and worse on unfamiliar, difficult tasks.

It is still debated whether this was truly the first experiment regarding social psychology. Max Ringelmann studied the maximum performance of workers between 1882 and 1887. Although he wasn't looking for the relation between the group and the individual, he found evidence of social loafing. This concept explains that individuals put in less effort when working with a group than when working alone.

These studies ‘marking’ the beginning of social psychology were not seen as a part of social psychology and thus it’s not sufficient to just mention these experiments as the beginning of social psychology. Floyd Allport (1924), who is considered the leader in the field, gave meaning to the topic of social psychology in his textbook.

The early years
In Thurtstone’s article “Attitudes can be measured”, the first sound method for measuring attitudes was used. He used Sherif’s experimental paradigm because it would allow him to conduct his experiment on groups in a laboratory situation. Sherif discovered that without reference points, light appears to be moving when it is in fact not moving. This was called the autokinetic effect.

Newcomb’s Bennington study conveys that one’s attitudes and beliefs can be influenced by one’s environment and group context. This study was a longitudinal field study illustrating how conservative females could move to become more liberal because of the liberal attitudes in their environment, specifically their college campus.
The years of expansion
World War II and Adolf Hitler further developed and sparked an interested in social psychology. World War II sparked a discussion on attitude change and social influence, and Nazi crimes gave light to issues surrounding compliance and conformity. Furthermore, The information and Education Branch of the US Army studied the impact that army propaganda films had on the soldiers’ attitudes. Carl Hovland, a leader in the field, became really involved with this, and was interested specifically on what caused attitude changes.

Hitler also forced emigration of Jewish and some non-Jewish academics from Germany. Kurt Lewin was among the emigrated and established the Research Center for Group Dynamics. He developed a field theory, which gave light to forces that could affect an individual in a social situation. This field theory determined that the individual is a part of a larger system of social forces.

Fritz Heider, another leader of the field, was also a émigré but didn’t leave because of Hitler but rather because of personal reasons. He inspired two theoretical traditions know as consistency theories and attribution theories which became very important for social psychology. Consistency theories state that people like to have consistency among their cognitions such as their beliefs, attitudes, and values. Attribution theories state that how individuals conclude what causes the behavior shown by others or themselves.

Heider’s balance theory conveyed that people develop tension when there is inconsistency in their beliefs and attitudes thus people strive to have consistency and balance. There has not been a lot of research to test this theory but this theory hasn’t opened the pathway for the development of other theories such as the theory of cognitive dissonance.

Edward Jones, Harold Kelly, and Bernard Weiner translated the attribution theory and made it more accessible to everyone which made the attribution theory much more influential than before. Kelley’s covariation theory refers to how people use their perception to attribute someone’s behavior to certain external or internal factors. People do this by looking at comparison cases.

Lastly, Hitler also influenced the development of social psychology by opening the door to interesting discussions on obedience and authoritarianism. Researchers became interested in studying things such as the authoritarian personality and what factors lead to conformity because of Hitler.

The crisis years
The crisis in social psychology refers to a crisis in which social psychologists questioned what the right way to follow was. The questioned the methods they used and the values they had.

Kenneth Gergen published an article in which he had two really important arguments namely, 1) that our behavior could change when we know more about social psychological principles, and 2) that cultural change could affect our basic motives.

Demand characteristics are cues that tell the participants to act a certain way in a research setting. They would help the participants figure out the hypothesis of the experiment. The participants would often act in favor of that hypothesis in order to be ‘helpful’. This leads to the experimenter expectancy effect, which states that because of the experimenter the participants will unknowingly help the experimenter confirm his hypothesis.
**Overcoming the crisis**

In order to shut down some of the problems conveyed by the critics, social psychology developed further and addressed these problems in the following ways:

- Social psychologists developed more specific areas such as health psychology to illustrate how social psychology could in fact be the solution to some real-life problems;
- Critics thought that social psychology did not result in cumulative knowledge. They were able to fix this with developing meta-analytic procedures. These procedures statistically make clear if other independent studies are reliable to use across different studies;
- Attitudes predict behavior, but in studies that do not contain an accurate measuring of these components, this relationship can be hidden. Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) concluded in their review that in order to find a clear relationship, both components have to be researched with reliable and compatible measures;
- Social psychologists want to minimize the threat of experimenter expectancy effects and demand characteristics and have shaped their experiment designs to do just that. More experiments have been computerized causing the participant to not have to meet the experimenter ruling out the experimenter expectancy effects. Furthermore, Demand characteristics and experimenter expectancy effect do not influence the experiment as strongly as believed because most experiments do not even validate the researcher’s hypothesis.

**Social psychology in Europe**

There was no development in social psychology in Europe until after WWII. Even though there was social psychology in Europe after the war, there was no collaboration between the European researchers and thus no European social psychology. John Lazetta wanted to change this and thus raised money to fund the first European conference on Experimental Social Psychology that later led to the making of the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology in 1966.

Some of the activities that they were a part of included:

- Summer schools;
- Organizing conferences.

The ‘experimental’ was cut out of the name and today this association is known as the **European Association of Social Psychology**. It was formed to further develop social psychology in Europe.

Intergroup behavior and minority influence were the two most important topics that European researchers had the most influence on. The US conducted studies to see how majorities influenced minorities. Moscovici pointed out that this kind of research was incapable of explain occasions where minorities influenced majorities.

**Social psychology today**

Today, perspectives such as the consistency theory and the attribution theory have been left behind and new theories have been introduced.

**Social cognition**, for example, refers to the understanding of how we think and feel about other people and ourselves and how doing this can impact our behavior and judgements in social situations.
**Evolutionary social psychology** is another new perspective that was introduced. It applies the evolutionary theory to social psychology. Evolutionary psychology assumes that the gene that determines a certain behavior will be more dominant in future generations if that behavior is partly genetically determined and increases the chance of producing offspring.

Finally, **social neuroscience** discusses how the biological systems affect our behavior. Brain mapping and psychological hypothesis testing are two approaches that are widely used in social neuroscience. Brain mapping refers to an fMRI and psychological hypothesis testing studies the hypothesis about psychological variables by using the results of the fMRI.