



**INTRODUCTION TO  
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

**School of Social Sciences  
Indira Gandhi National Open University**

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## COURSE INTRODUCTION

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The Course of Introduction to Social Psychology is one of the courses of Second Semester of B A (General) in Psychology. The attempt of this course is to explain you the meaning, concept, processes, theories and relevance of social psychology. It also explains the influences of society and societal relationships on an individual and vice versa.

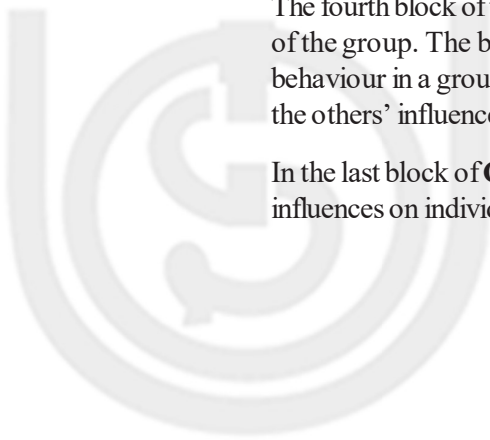
The first block of this course is – **Introduction to Social Psychology** which deals with definition, nature and scope of social psychology. It further highlights the relationship of social psychology with other disciplines. The unit also describes the historical background of social psychology.

The second block of this course is – **Individual Level Processes** which discusses the processes at individual level like, schema and heuristics which explains the modes of social thought. It also mentions the process of social perception and describes the ways in which we perceive others in different social situations.

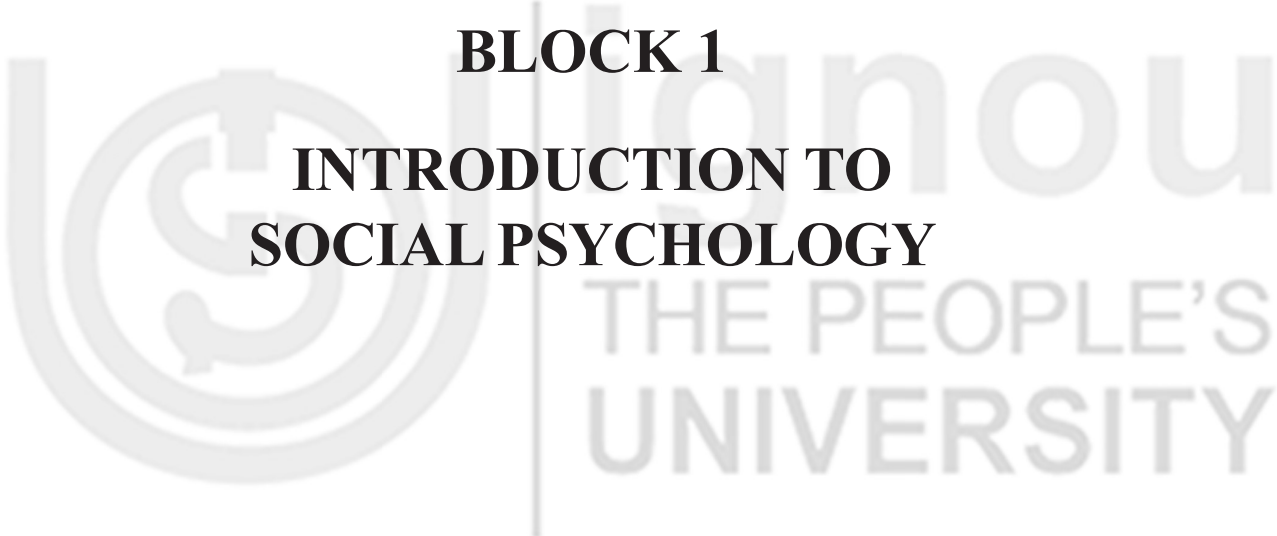
The third block of this course is – **Interpersonal Processes** which deals with the concepts and processes of interpersonal attraction and pro-social behaviour. It also explains the various factors that affect aggression as well as the strategies and techniques to reduce aggression.

The fourth block of this course is – **Group Dynamics** which will deal with the dynamics of the group. The block will explain various elements of a group and how they affect behaviour in a group as well as the various group processes. It will also discuss about the others' influence on our behaviour in a social setting.

In the last block of **Culture, Self and Social Behaviour** the concept of culture and its influences on individual's behaviour will be explained.



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**BLOCK 1**  
**INTRODUCTION TO**  
**SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

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## INTRODUCTION

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This block comprises of a single unit. *The unit* deals with definition, nature and scope of Social Psychology. It further highlights the relationship of social psychology with other disciplines. The unit also describes the historical background of social psychology. It discusses the levels of analysis of social behaviour and various theoretical approaches of social psychology.



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# UNIT 1 SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: NATURE, SCOPE AND APPROACHES\*

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
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    - 1.2.2.3 Social Psychology Studies Individuals' Behaviour in Social Contexts
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  - 1.3.1 Early Years of Social Psychology
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- 1.8 Unit End Questions
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- 1.10 Answers to Self Assessment Questions
- 1.11 Suggested Readings and References

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Define social psychology and explain its nature and scope;
- Explain the relationship of social psychology with other disciplines;
- Describe the historical background of social psychology;
- Illustrate the levels of analysis of social behaviour; and
- Delineate various theoretical approaches of social psychology.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Let us ponder upon some situations, events, issues and people. While going for a job interview we dress up individually; but when we reach the interview venue we find that all the candidates are dressed up in almost similar fashion. In another situation, after the *Nirbhaya* incidence in Delhi on 16 December 2012, thousands of people flooded on the roads of Delhi and other parts of the country protesting against the incidence. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Dalai Lama and many others like them influenced thoughts, feelings and behaviours of the masses in a great manner and led the people's thought toward remarkable social, religious, political and ethical revolutions.

These are few examples from the history of human being where either we are influenced by other people or we influence other people's behaviours. Social psychology is the branch of psychology which studies human behaviour in an array of social situations. In this unit, you will be explained about the Social psychology as branch of psychology, its nature, scope and relationship with other disciplines. You will also be acquainted with the historical background and various theoretical approaches to social psychology. The unit will also discuss the levels of analysis of social behaviour.

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## 1.2 DEFINITION, NATURE AND SCOPE OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Social psychology is an important branch of psychology which studies human interaction, its manifestations, causes, consequences and the various psychological processes involved in it.

### 1.2.1 Definition of Social Psychology

Social psychology is defined as the scientific study of "*how we feel about, think about and behave toward the people around us and how our feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are influenced by those people in the social context*" (Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2017). In a slightly different expression social psychology is defined as *a discipline that uses scientific methods in an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling and behaviour of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others* (Gordon Allport, 1985, p. 3).

### 1.2.2 Nature of Social Psychology

Careful explanation of definitions given above reveals that it has three major components that characterise the nature of social psychology. These characteristics have been further elaborated below:

#### 1.2.2.1 Social Psychology Applies Scientific Methods of Study

Social psychology is scientific in nature. It applies the scientific method of systematic observation, description and measurement to the study of the human behaviour in social context. Social psychological studies refer to the data being collected through direct observation or experiment. Such experiments and observation are carried out carefully and reported in detail so that other investigators can repeat and verify the work.

The scientific social psychology carries out three major activities: description, explanation and prediction of social behaviours. Social psychology provides a scientific account of social behaviour based on direct observation rather than on common beliefs. Social psychology also attempts to explain why people behave in a particular way in a particular



social situation. Such interconnected explanations of social behaviours lead to formation of theories which help in predicting social behaviours and managing them in a desirable direction.

### **1.2.2.2 Social Psychology Studies Individuals' Thought, Feeling and Behaviour**

The varied issues of the field of social psychology include- individuals' thought, feeling and behaviour. Cognition is referred as the manner in which people process information. Social psychology studies cognition that relates to social activities and that helps us in understanding and predicting our social behaviours. Social psychology also studies the feelings we experience as an individual in our social lives. What we think or feel in the social context is finally expressed through our behaviours in social interactions. Social psychology studies these behaviours in the forms of cooperation, helping behaviour, conflict, aggression, etc.

### **1.2.2.3 Social Psychology Studies Individuals' Behaviour in Social Contexts**

Social psychology studies individuals' thoughts, feelings and behaviours in the social contexts. This component of social psychology refers that our behaviour is influenced by the presence of other people and we also influence other people's behaviour. 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 (Gordon Allport, 1985). However, in order to establish general principles of human social behaviour, social psychologists sometimes examine non-social factors also. Kurt Lewin (1936), one of the important early figures in social psychology proposed a model for understanding social behaviour, which says that social behaviour is a function of the interaction of the situation and the individual's characteristics (see box for detail).

#### **Kurt Lewin's Contribution to Social Psychology: A Model for Understanding Social behaviour**

Kurt Lewin (9<sup>th</sup> September, 1890-12<sup>th</sup> February, 1947) was a German-American psychologist and is often recognized as the "founder of social psychology". Social psychologists are interested in the forces that operate on individuals and cause them to engage in specific examples of social behaviour. But social behaviour is typically complex and has many contributing causes. Consequently, explaining social behaviour is a difficult task. To simplify this task, we can assign the multiple causes of social behaviour to one of two broad categories: the situation and the individual. According to a formula first proposed by Kurt Lewin (1936), social behaviour is a function of the interaction of the situation and the individual's characteristics, or

$$\text{Behaviour} = f(\text{social situation} \times \text{individual characteristics})$$

**Fig. 1.1: Kurt Lewin's Model of Social Behaviour**

### **1.2.3 Scope of Social Psychology**

Social psychology concentrates on the individual behaviour in the social context, so the subject matter of social psychology is the interactions of the individual with other individuals and society as well. It is the social world, based upon the relations of human to their fellow beings which furnishes the subject matter of social psychology. The scope of social psychology can be broadly outlined in the following ways:

- People generally express feelings of approval and disapproval, favourability and unfavourability, or likes and dislikes towards different persons, objects or issues that further influence their thought and actions. This phenomenon is termed as

attitudes and social psychologists have been emphasizing upon various aspects of attitude, such as formation of attitude, attitude structure, attitude change, function of attitudes and relationship between attitudes and behaviour.

- One of the emerging areas of social psychology is social cognition, which studies the ways people perceive, ponder and remember information related to social stimuli. Various phenomena studied under social cognition are person perception, attribution process, schema, stereotypes, etc.
- Social influence is a traditional, core area of study in social psychology which refers to the way people affect the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of others.
- Social psychologists are also interested in the question of why people sometimes act in a pro-social way (helping, liking or loving others), but at other times act in an antisocial way (hostility, aggression or prejudice against others).
- Social psychologists have vastly studied various phenomena related to social groups and group dynamics. Groups may be understood in terms of group composition, group structures, group process and the effect this has on individual change and group development, as well as on task performance. Thus, a social psychologist studies almost everything that we do every day in the social context (see box below for detail).

**What do Social Psychologists Study?**

- Social psychologists study why we are often helpful to other people and why we may be unfriendly or aggressive at other times.
- Social psychologists study both the benefits of having good relationships with other people and the costs of being lonely.
- Social psychologists study what factors lead people to purchase one product rather than another.
- Social psychologists study how men and women behave differently in social settings.
- Social psychologists study what makes some people more likely to engage in environmentally friendly behaviours than others.
- Social psychologists study how someone might choose to risk their life to save that of a complete stranger.

**Fig. 1.2: Contributions of Social Psychologists**

**Self Assessment Questions 1**

1) Define social psychology.

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2) How can you say that social psychology is a science?

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3) Describe the nature of social psychology.

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4) Give an account of scope of social psychology.

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### **1.3 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

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Although philosophical analysis of human behaviour in society has always been a major issue of interest for the social thinkers, a systematic empirical approach to the study of social psychology did not appear until the latter part of the nineteenth century. History of social psychology can be outlined in following developmental stages:

#### **1.3.1 Early Years of Social Psychology**

The earliest roots of social psychology are thought to be a group of German scholars who were influenced by the philosopher Hegel. In 1860, Steinthal and Lazarus founded a journal devoted to this (*Völkerpsychologie*) that published theoretical and factual articles on the study of the collective mind. This concept of collective mind was interpreted in conflicting ways: on the one hand a societal way of thinking within the individual and on the other a form of trans-individual mentality that could encompass a whole group of people.

The two earliest textbooks on social psychology were written by the psychologist-William McDougall (1908) in Britain and the sociologist- Ross (1908) in America. However, none of these textbooks were like a modern social psychology textbook and their main topics were principal instincts, primary emotions, nature of sentiments, moral conduct, volition, religious conceptions and structure of character.

At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century social psychology started to systematically measure the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of human beings. A number of laboratories were set up in Europe and United States which started with a psychological laboratory at Leipzig in 1879 set up by Willem Wundt to provide an experimental basis for psychology in Germany. Meantime, the behaviourist John Watson published his classic scientific manifesto for psychology in 1913.

In 1924, inspired by Watson, Floyd Allport published an agenda for social psychology. Building on Watson, Allport argued that social psychology would flourish only if it became an experimental science. Shortly after, Gardner Murphy and Lois Murphy (1931/1937) felt justified in producing a book actually entitled *Experimental Social Psychology*. First experiment in social psychology is often identified as Norman Triplett's (1898) study of how people can put more effort into a task when other people are present as observers or competitors.

### **1.3.2 Formational Years of Social Psychology**

During the 1940s and 1950s, Kurt Lewin and Leon Festinger argued for a scientifically rigorous social psychology. Lewin, known as “the father of social psychology”, developed many of the important ideas of the discipline, including a focus on the dynamic interactions among people. In 1954, Festinger edited a book called *Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences*, which stressed the need of scientific measurement and to use laboratory experiments to systematically test research hypotheses about social behaviour. He also noted that for factual results in these experiments the participants may be kept blind about the purpose of the research.

During the time of World War II, the studies on conformity were conducted by Muzafir Sherif (1936) and Solomon Asch (1952). Studies on obedience were conducted by Stanley Milgram (1974) and Philip Zimbardo (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973).

### **1.3.3 Expansion of Social Psychology**

Social psychology further expanded on other topics. John Darley and Bibb Latané (1968) developed a model to explain the context when people do and do not help others in need. Leonard Berkowitz (1962) started the study of human aggression. Many other social psychologists focused on the process of decision making in group (Janis, 1972). Still other social psychologists, including Gordon Allport and Muzafir Sherif, focused on intergroup relations with the goal of understanding and potentially reducing the occurrence of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination.

In late 20<sup>th</sup> century social psychology expanded into the field of attitudes and significance of cognitive processes in attitudes. Social psychologists also started studying the process of persuasion by which advertisers and other people could present their messages to make them most effective and persuasive (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1963). They focused on the cognitive processes that people use when evaluating messages. Relationship between attitudes and behaviour was also an important aspect which was extensively studied during this period. Leon Festinger's important cognitive dissonance theory was developed during this time and became a model for later researches (Festinger, 1957).

In late 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to advances in information technology focus of social psychology on cognitive process was further substantiated (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). The social cognition approach has been focused on understanding of how our knowledge about our social worlds develops and how it influences our social thinking and behaviours.

Furthermore, the extent to which humans' decision making could be flawed due to both cognitive and motivational processes that were documented (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982).

### **1.3.4 Social Psychology in 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Social psychology has been still expanding into varied areas of social behaviour. Social psychologists have studied impact of social situations on our health and happiness, important roles of evolutionary experiences and cultures on our behaviour. The field of social neuroscience has also emerged, which studies that how our social behaviour, both influences and is influenced by the activities of our brain (Lieberman, 2010). Social psychologists are consistently searching new methods to measure and understand social behaviour and the field continues to evolve.

### **1.3.5 Social Psychology in India**

In 1928, first book on social psychology in India, entitled – *Introduction to Social Psychology* was written by N. N. Sengupta, the first chairman of first department of psychology at the Calcutta University, in association with an eminent sociologist Radhakamal Mukherjee. However, this initial association between social psychology and sociology could not continue and Indian social psychologists, in effect of western research orientations, put out all efforts to establish the identity of psychology as a scientific discipline. Jamuna Prasad, inspired by Bartlett's (1932) reconstructive memory of events, studied the famous earthquake in Bihar in 1934 and collected and analyzed more than 35 thousand rumours and published this work in the *British Journal of Psychology* in 1935. This, and the later work of Durganand Sinha (1952) on similar lines, was reported by Festinger as the basis of formulating his theory of cognitive dissonance.

In the later years, Indian social psychologists continued working in the areas of prejudice, stereotypes and social attitudes. Large scale surveys were conducted taking various attitude measures. Adinarayan conducted studies on racial and communal attitudes (1953) and on caste attitudes (1958). With increasing emphasis on public awareness programmes for health, family planning, agricultural innovations, attitude change became a major topic of research. During these years social psychology was growing in popularity in India as evident from surveys conducted from time to time.

Social psychologists further explored the areas of intergroup relations (Singh, 1981), relative deprivation (Misra, 1982), ingratiation (Pandey, 1986) and leadership (J.B.P. Sinha, 1980) in which influence of social groups on individual behaviour was investigated. More recently, the interest is shifting to study ethnic identities, the rise of depressed classes and related topics. In much of this research, efforts are being made to establish causal linkages between macro-level variables (demographic, social or cultural) and micro-level variables (attitudes, feeling of deprivation, etc.). The approach and methodology remained consistent with individual social psychology of the American variety. Another area which persisted in popularity for long was achievement motivation. A large number of scales were constructed to measure achievement motivation of school and college students. In recent years the work of Ashish Nandy on self, science, nationality and Sudhir Kakar's work on identity and relationships have been somehow indigenous and not directly influenced by what and how of social psychology in America and Europe (see Dalal & Mishra, 2001).



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## 1.4 SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

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Social psychology is related to other social sciences and to other branches of psychology. It also differs from them in important ways.

Social psychology is related to other disciplines in the family of social sciences and to other branches of psychology in many ways. It also differs from them in important ways.

### 1.4.1 Social Psychology and Other Social Sciences

Social scientists study people and the societies in which people live. They are interested in how people relate to one another. The various social sciences focus on different aspects of social life.

- **Social Psychology and Anthropology**

Anthropology is the study of human culture. The field of anthropology and social psychology are inter related. Human culture consists of the shared values, beliefs, and practices of a group of people. These values, beliefs, and practices are passed down from one generation to another. Human beings are not only social animals, they are also cultural animals. In order to understand human behaviour, social psychology requires to understand the cultural context in which that behaviour occurs.

- **Social Psychology and Economics**

You might know that the field of Economics deals with the trends of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services of a particular society. This equally diverts the interest of social psychologists. In fact, some social psychological theories are based on economic principles. For example, social exchange theory predicts commitment to relationships by considering factors such as the costs, rewards, investments, and the number of alternatives available. Economics also calls our attention to large social systems (such as the labour market or money system) and to how these systems shape behaviour. Again, a full understanding of human behaviour requires appreciating not just what goes on inside one person's head and what is happening in his or her immediate environment at the time, but also how the person's behaviour fits into the larger social system.

- **Social Psychology and Political Science**

Political science is the study of political organisations and institutions, especially governments. Social psychologists conduct research on political behaviour. They study political issues such as voting, party identification, liberal versus conservative views, and political advertising. They are also interested in what makes some people better leaders than others.

- **Social Psychology and Sociology**

Sociology is the study of human societies and the groups that form those societies. Although both sociologists and social psychologists are interested in how people behave in societies and groups, they differ in what they focus on. Sociologists focus on the group as a single unit, whereas social psychologists focus on the individual members that make up the group. Some sociologists call themselves social psychologists and the exchange of ideas and findings between the two fields that have sometimes been quite fruitful because they bring different perspectives to the same problems.

## **1.4.2 Social Psychology and Other Branches in Psychology**

Psychology is the study of human behaviour. Psychology is like a big tree that contains many branches. Social psychology is just one of those branches, but it is closely related with some of the other branches.

### **Social Psychology and Biological Psychology**

Everything that people think, do or feel involves some bodily processes such as brain activity or hormones. Biological or physiological psychology and more recently neuroscience have focused on learning about what happens in the brain, nervous system and other aspects of the body. Until recently, this work had little contact with social psychology, but during the 1990s many social psychologists began looking into the biological aspects of social behaviour and that interest has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Social neuroscience and social psychophysiology are now the thriving fields.

### **Social Psychology and Clinical Psychology**

Clinical psychology focuses on abnormal behaviour, whereas social psychology focuses on normal behaviour. Social psychological theory can shed a great deal of light on so called normal behaviour. Both the branches, social and clinical psychology, have had a long tradition of exchanging ideas and stimulating insights into each other's fields. In particular, clinical psychologists have made good use of social psychological theories.

### **Social Psychology and Cognitive Psychology**

Cognitive psychology is the basic study of thought processes, such as how memory works and what events people notice. In recent decades, social psychology has borrowed heavily from cognitive psychology, especially by using their methods for measuring cognitive processes. Social psychologists study that how people think about their social lives, how they think about other people or solve the problems in their social world.

### **Social Psychology and Developmental Psychology**

Developmental psychology is the study of how people change across their lives, from conception and birth to old age and death. In practice, most developmental psychologists study children. Developmental psychology has been studying that at what age children begin to show various patterns of social behaviour. Social psychologists interested in self-regulation, emotion, gender differences, helping behaviour and antisocial behaviour sometimes look to the research on child development to see how these patterns get started.

### **Social Psychology and Personality Psychology**

Personality psychology focuses on important differences between individuals, as well as inner processes. For example, some people are introverted and avoid social contact, whereas other people are extraverted and look for social contact. Social and personality psychology have had a long and close relationship. This relationship has been sometimes complementary (personality psychologists look inside the person, whereas social psychologists look outside at the situation) and sometimes competitive (is it more important to understand the person or the situation?). In recent years, the line between these two fields has become overlapping, as social psychologists have come to recognize the importance of inner processes and personality psychologists have come to recognize the importance of circumstances and situations.

## Self Assessment Questions 2

State whether the following are 'True' or 'False':

- 1) Social psychologists study that how people think about their social lives. ( )
- 2) The social cognition approach do not focus upon understanding of our knowledge towards social world, thinking and behaviours. ( )
- 3) None of the social psychological theories are based on economic principles. ( )
- 4) Both sociologists and social psychologists are interested in how people behave in societies and groups, they differ in what they focus on. ( )

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## 1.5 LEVELS OF ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

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Social psychologists investigate human behaviour but their primary concern is human behaviour in a social context. Further, social psychology analyses human social behaviour at various levels, presented below:

### 1.5.1 Individual-Intrapersonal Level Analysis

Individuals involved are fundamental constituents in any social interaction. As conceptualised in psychology, every individual is unique in his or her biological inheritance, thought process, affect and behaviour. Therefore, the basic level analysis of social behaviour is individual-intrapersonal where the aspects like social cognition, values and attitudes, social deviance and violent behaviours are studies.

### 1.5.2 Interpersonal Interactions

Individuals are affected by others in many ways. In everyday life, communication from others may significantly influence a person's understanding of the social world. Attempts by others at persuasion may change an individual's beliefs about the world and his or her attitudes toward persons, groups or other objects. Social psychologists also study many other interpersonal activities like cooperation and competition, altruism and aggression, prejudice and discrimination, etc.

### 1.5.3 Interaction between Individual and Group

Social psychology further analyses the impact of a group on the behaviours of its individual members. Every individual belongs to many different groups and these groups influence and regulate the behaviours of their members, typically by establishing norms or rules. One result of this is conformity, the process by which a group member adjusts his or her behaviour to bring it into line with group norms. Groups also exert substantial long term influence on their members through socialisation, a process that enables groups to regulate what their members learn. Socialization assumes that the members will be adequately trained to play roles in the group and in the larger society. Significant outcomes of socialisation are acquiring language skills, forming political and religious beliefs and attitudes and our conception of self.

Just as any group influences the behaviour of its members, these members, in turn, may influence the group itself. For instance, individuals contribute to group productivity and group decision making. Moreover, some members may provide leadership, performing functions such as planning, organising, and controlling, necessary for successful group



performance. Without effective leadership, coordination among members will falter and the group will drift or fail.

### 1.5.4 Interaction between Groups

Another concern of social psychology is the impact of one group on the activities and structure of another group. Relations between two groups may be friendly or hostile, cooperative or competitive. These relationships, which are based in part on members' identities and may entail group stereotypes, can affect the structure and activities of each group. Intergroup conflict, with its accompanying tension and hostility, has been a core area of study in social psychology. Conflicts of this type affect the interpersonal relations between groups and within each group. Social psychologists have long studied the emergence, persistence and resolution of intergroup conflict.

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## 1.6 THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Theory is a set of interrelated propositions that organises and explains a set of observed phenomena. In social psychology, no single theory explains all phenomena of interest; rather, it includes many different theories. Various theoretical perspectives of social psychology offer general explanations for a wide array of social behaviours in a variety of situations. The fundamental value of any theoretical perspective lies in its applicability across many situations. It provides a frame of reference for interpreting and comparing a wide range of social situation and behaviour. There are two major theoretical approaches in social psychology: *learning theories and cognitive theories*.

### 1.6.1 Learning Theories

The central idea in learning theory is that a person's current behaviour is determined by his/her prior experience. In any given situation, a person learns certain behaviours that, over time, may become habits. When presented with a similar situation, the person tends to behave in the same habitual way. For example, when a traffic light turns red, we typically stop, because that is how we have learned to respond in the past. As applied to social behaviour by Albert Bandura (1977) and others, this approach has been called social learning theory.

There are three general mechanisms by which learning occurs. *One* is association, or classical conditioning. Classical Conditioning presumes that when a neutral stimulus (conditioned stimulus, CS) is paired with a natural stimulus (unconditioned stimulus, UCS), neutral stimulus alone acquires the ability to elicit the response (conditioned response, CR) which naturally occurs (unconditioned response, UCR) after natural stimulus. Pavlov's dogs learned to salivate at the sound of a bell because they were presented with food every time. After a while, they would salivate to the sound of the bell even in the absence of the meat because they associated the bell with meat. Humans sometimes learn emotions by association (Pavlov, 1927). After a particularly painful visit to a particular place, the mere mention of the place may arouse anxiety.

A *second* learning mechanism is reinforcement, a principle studied by B. F. Skinner (1938) and others. People learn to perform a particular behaviour because it is followed by something that is pleasurable or that satisfies a need (or they learn to avoid behaviour that is followed by unpleasant consequences). A child may learn to help other people because his or her parents praise for sharing toys and smile approvingly when he or she offers to help. Or a student may learn not to contradict his teacher in class because each time he does so, the teacher frowns, looks angry and scolds him.

A *third* mechanism is observational learning. People often learn social attitudes and behaviours simply by watching other people, known technically as “models”. Children learn regional and ethnic speech patterns by listening to the speakers around them. Adolescents may acquire their political attitudes by listening to their parents’ conversations during election campaigns. In observational learning, other people are an important source of information. Observational learning can occur without any external reinforcement. However, whether people actually perform a behaviour that is learned through observation is influenced by the consequences of the action. For example, a little boy may learn a lot about baby dolls from watching his sisters but may be discouraged from playing with them himself because his traditional parents say, “Dolls aren’t for boys”. Imitation or modelling occurs when a person not only observes but actually copies the behaviour of a model. The learning approach seeks the causes of behaviour in the past learning history of the individual.

Another important process based on the principle of reinforcement is social exchange. Social exchange theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) uses the concept of reinforcement to explain stability and change in relations between individuals. This theory assumes that individuals have freedom of choice and often face social situations in which they must choose among alternative actions. Any action provides some rewards and entails some costs. There are many kinds of socially mediated rewards, such as money, goods, services, prestige or status, approval by others, etc. The theory presumes that individuals are hedonistic and they try to maximize rewards and minimize costs. Consequently, they choose actions that produce good profits and avoid actions that produce poor profits. Thus, social exchange theory primarily views social interactions as exchanges of goods and services among persons. If they find that a particular interaction is providing profitable outcomes, they happily participate in the relationship. Furthermore, the attractiveness of a relationship is compared on the basis of the profits it provides against the profits available in other alternative relationships. If a person is participating in a social relationship and receiving certain outcomes, the level of outcomes available in the best alternative relationship is termed that person’s comparison level for alternatives. Concepts of this type apply not only to work relations but also to personal relations. People are more likely to stay with a social relationship when the rewards are high, the costs are low, and the alternatives are unpromising.

Despite its usefulness in illuminating why relationships change and how people learn, learning theories have been criticized on various grounds. *One criticism* is that learning theories portrays individuals primarily as reacting to or imitating environmental stimuli. The theory does not account easily for creativity, innovation, or invention. *A second criticism* is that reinforcement theory largely ignores or downplays other motivations. It characterises social behaviour as hedonistic, with individuals striving to maximize profits from outcomes. Thus, it cannot easily explain selfless behaviour such as altruism and martyrdom. Despite its limitations, reinforcement theory has enjoyed substantial success in explaining why individuals persist in emitting certain behaviours, how they learn new behaviours and how they influence the behaviour of others through exchange.

### **1.6.2 Cognitive Theories**

Another theoretical perspective in social psychology is cognitive theory. Cognitive theory presumes that the mental activities of the individual are important determinants of social behaviour. These mental activities are called *cognitive processes* which include perception, memory, judgment, problem solving and decision making. Cognitive theory does not deny the importance of external stimuli, but it maintains that the link between stimulus and response is not mechanical or automatic. Rather, the individual’s cognitive

processes intervene between external stimuli and behavioural responses. Individuals not only actively interpret the meaning of stimuli but also select the actions to be made in response.

Historically, the cognitive approach to social psychology has been influenced by the ideas of Koffka, Kohler and other theorists in the Gestalt movement of psychology. Central to Gestalt psychology is the principle that people respond to configurations of stimuli rather than to a single, discrete stimulus. In other words, people understand the meaning of a stimulus only by viewing it in the context of an entire system of elements (the gestalt) in which it is embedded. To comprehend the meaning of any element, we must look at the whole of which it is a part.

Modern cognitive theorists depict humans as active in selecting and interpreting stimuli. According to this view, people do more than merely reacting to their environment; they actively structure their world cognitively. Firstly, because they cannot possibly attend to all the complex stimuli that surround them, they select only those stimuli that are important or useful to them and ignore the others. Second, they actively control which categories or concepts they use to interpret the stimuli in the environment.

Central to the cognitive perspective is the concept of cognitive structure, which refers broadly to any form of organisation among cognitions, concepts and beliefs. Because a person's cognitions are interrelated, cognitive theory gives special emphasis to exactly how they are structured and organised in memory and to how they affect a person's judgments.

Social psychologists have proposed that individuals use specific cognitive structures called schemas to make sense of complex information about other persons, groups and situations. The term *schema* refers to the form or basic sketch of what we know about people and things. Whenever we encounter a person for the first time, we usually form an impression of what he or she is like. In doing this, we not only observe the person's behaviour but also rely on our knowledge of similar persons we have met in the past; that is, we use our schema regarding this type of person. Schemas help us process information by enabling us to recognize which personal characteristics are important in the interaction and which are not. They structure and organise information about the person, and they help us remember information better and process it more quickly. Sometimes they fill gaps in knowledge and enable us to make inferences and judgments about others.

One way to study cognitive structure is to observe changes that occur in a person's cognitions when he or she is under challenge or attack. The changes will reveal facts about the underlying structure or organisation of his or her cognitions. An important idea emerging from this approach is the principle of cognitive consistency which maintains that individuals strive to hold ideas that are consistent or congruous with one another, rather than ideas that are inconsistent or incongruous. If a person holds several ideas that are incongruous or inconsistent, he or she will experience internal conflict. In reaction, he or she will likely change one or more ideas, thereby making them consistent and resolving this conflict.

Cognitive theory has made many important contributions to social psychology. It treats such diverse phenomena as self-concept, perception of persons and attribution of causes, attitude change, impression management, and group stereotypes. In these contexts, cognitive theory has produced many insights and striking predictions regarding individual and social behaviour. One limitation of cognitive theory is that it simplifies, and sometimes oversimplifies, the way in which people process information, an inherently complex

phenomenon. Another limitation is that cognitive phenomena are not directly observable; they must be inferred from what people say and do. This means that compelling and definitive tests of theoretical predictions from cognitive theory are sometimes difficult to conduct. However, the cognitive perspective is among the more popular and productive approaches in social psychology.

### **Self Assessment Questions 3**

**State whether the following are ‘True’ or ‘False’:**

- 1) The primary concern of social psychologists is to study human behaviour in a social context. ( )
- 2) Social psychology does not examines the impact of a group on the behaviours of its individual members. ( )
- 3) Cognitive theory presumes that the mental activities of the individual are not important determinants of social behaviour. ( )
- 4) The central idea in learning theory is that a person’s current behaviour is deter-mined by his/her prior experience. ( )

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## **1.7 LET US SUM UP**

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It can be summed up from the above discussion that social psychology is a field which analyses our thoughts, feelings and behaviour toward the people around us. It also explains how others have an influence on our behaviour in the social context. Thus, social psychology concentrates on studying the interactions of individuals with other individuals and society. Foundation of social psychology as specific branch of psychology can be traced back to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the major expansion in the scope of social psychology took place in later half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indigenous studies in social psychology in India have been majorly focused on self and culture, nationality and identity, etc. Although social psychology is closely related with other discipline of social sciences, as well as other branches of psychology; it differs from them in approach.

Social psychologists investigate human social behaviour at various levels. Primarily, these levels are intrapersonal social behaviours, interactions between individuals, interactions between individual and group and interactions between group and group. The two major theoretical approaches in social psychology are learning theories and cognitive theories. Learning theories believe that social behaviour is governed by external events. Its central proposition is that people will be more likely to perform a specific behaviour if it is followed by something pleasurable. Likewise, people will more likely refrain from performing a particular behaviour if it is followed by something aversive. The cognitive approach emphasizes that a person’s behaviour depends on the way he or she perceives the social situation. Cognitive theories argue that the mental activities called cognitive processes, of the individual are important determinants of social behaviour. These mental activities include perception, memory, judgment, problem solving and decision making.

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## **1.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS**

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- 1) Define social psychology and explain the nature and scope of social psychology.
- 2) Present an account of historical development of social psychology.
- 3) Explain that how social psychology is related with other disciplines of social sciences and other branches of psychology.



- 4) Elucidate the levels of analysis of social behaviour in social psychology.
- 5) Discuss learning theories as an approach to study social behaviour.
- 6) Discuss cognitive theories as an approach to study social behaviour.

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## 1.9 GLOSSARY

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<b>Social Psychology</b>	: Social psychology is defined as the scientific study of how we feel about, think about and behave toward the people around us and how our feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are influenced by those people in the social context.
<b>Social Neuroscience</b>	: Social neuroscience is the study of how our social behaviour both influences and is influenced by the activities of our brain.
<b>Classical Conditioning</b>	: Classical conditioning presumes that when a neutral stimulus (conditioned stimulus, CS) is paired with a natural stimulus (unconditioned stimulus, UCS), neutral stimulus alone acquires the ability to elicit the response (conditioned response, CR) which naturally occurs (unconditioned response, UCR) after natural stimulus.
<b>Reinforcement</b>	: Reinforcement is the mechanism by which people learn to perform a particular behaviour because it is followed by something that is pleasurable or that satisfies a need (or they learn to avoid behaviour that is followed by unpleasant consequences).
<b>Observational Learning</b>	: Observational learning presumes that people often learn social attitudes and behaviours simply by watching other people, known technically as “models”.
<b>Social Exchange Theory</b>	: Social exchange theory uses the concept of reinforcement to explain stability and change in social interactions and relations between individuals.
<b>Social Cognitive Theories</b>	: Social cognitive theories emphasise that a person’s behaviour depends on the way he or she perceives the social situation.
<b>Schema</b>	: Schema is a mental representation capturing the general characteristics of a particular class of episodes, events or individuals.
<b>Principle of Cognitive Consistency</b>	: Principle of cognitive consistency maintains that individuals strive to hold ideas that are consistent or congruous with one another, rather than ideas that are inconsistent or incongruous.

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## 1.10 ANSWERS TO SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

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### Self Assessment Questions 1

- 1) Social psychology is defined as the scientific study of “*how we feel about, think about and behave toward the people around us and how our feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are influenced by those people in the social context*” (Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2017).
- 2) Social psychology is scientific in nature. It applies the scientific method of systematic observation, description and measurement to the study of the human behaviour in social context. Social psychological studies refer to the data being collected through direct observation or experiment. Such experiments and observation are carried out carefully and reported in detail so that other investigators can repeat and verify the work.
- 3) The following three major components characterise the nature of social psychology:
  - Social psychology applies scientific methods of study.
  - Social psychology studies individuals’ thought, feeling and behaviour.
  - Social psychology studies individuals’ behaviour in social contexts.
- 4) The scope of social psychology can be broadly outlined in the following ways:
  - Social psychologists emphasize upon various aspects of attitude
  - Social psychology also deals with social cognition.
  - Social influence is a traditional, core area of study in social psychology.
  - Social psychologists are also interested in the question of why people sometimes act in a pro-social way but at other times act in an antisocial way.

### Self Assessment Questions 2

- 1) True
- 2) False
- 3) False
- 4) True

### Self Assessment Questions 3

- 1) True
- 2) False
- 3) False
- 4) True

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## 1.11 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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