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## [Introduction to] Our Social World

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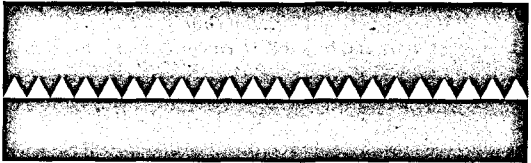
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# **Our Social World**

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## Preface



Ours is a social world. It's awash with some 5.8 billion people, all of whom are busily interacting with one another. On this particular day, how many people are meeting one another for the first time, shaking hands, exchanging bows, and forming first impressions? How many times today will two people be drawn to one another and share the thought that they might become friends or lovers? How many people will decide that they ordered the wrong entrée at lunch? How many times today will someone convince someone else to try a new brand of deodorant, to donate money to a charity, or to hire him or her to do a job? How many groups will form today, how many will dissolve, how many will make excellent decisions, and how many will draw ill-founded conclusions? How many people will hurt each other, help each other, love each other, and kill each other?

These billions of social encounters are the subject matter of social psychology. Like meteorologists predicting the weather, economists charting changes in wages and prices over decades, and physicists identifying the fundamental elements of matter, social psychologists study complex, ever-changing phenomena. These phenomena, however, are social ones: They originate in the countless interactions that take place between people each day. Some of these processes are disturbing—people harming others, people isolated and alone, people failing to reach their potential. Others, though, are uplifting, for they highlight the positive side of human action: loving others, helping people, and working together to achieve important goals. Some are routine and mundane, whereas others are extraordinary and exciting. Social psychologists study such everyday actions as getting to know another person or making a decision in a group, but they also investigate phenomena that have far-reaching ramifications for our society and the world at large: violence, cooperation, prejudice, sexism, and helping. Linking all these topics—the negative, the positive, the mundane, and the earthshaking—is social psychology's fundamental interest in people interacting with other people.



## Why Study Social Psychology?

If you are meeting social psychology for the first time, then you are about to embark on a journey into a new way of looking at yourself and other people. But why make this journey? Where will this social-psychological road take you? One destination is an increased understanding of social psychology's theories and findings. Once, as a neophyte teacher, my enthusiasm for social psychology led me to expect my students to put this goal above all others. I wanted

them to learn everything about social psychology. If a social psychology edition of Trivial Pursuit existed, I would have used it as my final exam. With experience, however, I learned that gaining an overall view of social psychology was more important than learning all the specific details of the field. To help you achieve this goal, this book introduces you to social psychology. It isn't comprehensive; that is, it doesn't review all theory and research in social psychology. Instead, this book provides a general framework for examining social behavior while suggesting avenues for in-depth study.

Knowing the content of the field is important, but social psychology is more than just findings, facts, and theories. I hope that while studying the content of social psychology, you also learn the methods that social psychologists use to develop and test their explanations of social behavior. Social psychology offers a unique perspective on behavior, one that stresses critical thinking and scientific analysis rather than common sense and intuition. As such, it is as much a method—a way of thinking about and studying people—as it is a set of findings and theories. Long after you forget the specific facts and theories of the course, you should be able to look at a social event and say, “Here’s how a social psychologist would explain what happened.”

Another reason for studying social psychology is more practical. By gaining an understanding of social interactions and relationships, you may discover answers to problems you face now or will face in the future. At a personal level, insights gained by studying human interaction can be applied to your daily life, for social psychologists tend to study processes we have all experienced. For example, have you ever wondered why you sometimes let other people talk you into doing things you don't want to do? Why you like some people right off the bat but dislike others from the moment you see them? Why you have problems maintaining friendships or love relationships? Why you can or can't take charge in groups? Researchers don't have all the answers, but many people gain a deeper understanding of their own actions and interpersonal relations by applying social psychology in their everyday lives.

Social psychology also proves useful in many professional, business, and vocational settings. No matter what your professional goals, a fundamental knowledge of social interaction is helpful. Just about any time people work with other people, social-psychological processes shape their actions and outcomes. Because researchers study such phenomena as communication between people, the ways we perceive and understand each other, leadership and decision-making processes in groups, competition and cooperation, and persuasion, social psychology yields many practical suggestions for improving interpersonal relations in work settings.

Enjoyment is the final reason for studying social psychology. Learning about social interaction should not be painful and depressing, but exciting, satisfying, and even amusing. I must confess that I am embarrassingly fond of social psychology. I don't consider it simply a scientific discipline or my vocation, but a hobby and source of recreation. I am so enthusiastic about the field that I want you not only to learn its principles and findings and recognize its tremendous practical value, but also to have fun while doing so.



## **How to Study Social Psychology**

This book does not just present social psychology; rather, it teaches social psychology by discussing ideas in a logical framework that gives you a conceptual context for absorbing the information. But if you don't use the book ac-

tively, your journey into social psychology won't be as smooth as it could be. The following are features of the text, together with suggestions for taking advantage of them:

- *Outlines and previews.* When you are studying a new area, it helps to organize the information in your own way. As you read each chapter, you will understand the material better if you can fit each bit of incoming information into an overall conceptual context. Therefore, you should build an organizational framework *before* you read the chapter. To help you accomplish this, each chapter begins with an outline of its contents. By taking a minute or two to study this outline, you can get a general idea of the organization behind the topics.
- *Cases.* A single case is used as a unifying example in each chapter. The cases are not fictitious: They describe real individuals or groups, and all descriptions are based on published descriptions of the incident and the individuals involved. The cases are included to provide a concrete example of the theoretical ideas discussed.
- *Chapter sections.* One problem with learning by reading is that your motivation dwindles long before you run out of material to read. One way to solve this problem is to read the chapter in chunks. An entire chapter may be too much to read at one time; the smaller sections within a chapter are much more digestible. Each section stands as a unit and includes a table that summarizes the material.
- *Summaries and additional sources.* After reading a chapter, be sure to study the final summary. Following the summary is a section that contains a list of sources to consult for more information about specific topics that were discussed within the chapter. As noted earlier, at certain points within the chapter, tabular summaries are also provided. If you look over the summary table and don't remember an entry, then you aren't reading the chapter as carefully as you should.
- *Headings and boldface terms.* Take advantage of the section headings and of the glossary terms listed in the margins. Headings do all sorts of good things: They indicate what you are about to encounter, they help you organize the information in the text, and they serve as memory aids when you try to retrieve information. So try to use the headings when you study the material: If you don't actively use them, they don't help much. Second, major terms are printed in **boldface type** and are defined in the margin. Use these boldface terms to identify critical ideas.
- *Figures and data tables.* Visual information, combined with the verbal information in the text, improves learning. Figures, in particular, serve as "spatial mnemonics"—visual devices that aid memory by arranging the material in an organized pattern. Study those figures, because when the time comes to remember the material, you will be able to "see" the material mentally by recalling the figure.
- *Application and In Depth sections.* Social psychology can be applied in many settings. These applications are mentioned throughout the text, but they are given extra attention at the end of each chapter in special "Application" sections. Each chapter also includes one "In Depth" section that examines some theoretical or empirical issue in more detail than is possible in the text itself.
- *Citations.* In some cases, researchers and theorists are mentioned by name in the text. In most cases, however, the citations are placed in parentheses rather than directly in the text.

I hope these features make your journey through social psychology easier, more efficient, and more enjoyable. Once you open your mind to social psychology, I think you will be mesmerized by its delights. On behalf of all my colleagues, I warmly welcome you to the field.

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**Acknowledgments**

I could not have written *Our Social World* without the contributions and support of many colleagues, friends, family members, and students. The list of people who deserve thanks is very long, but it begins with the social psychologists who have nurtured our science. The pages of this book are filled only because thousands of people have crafted theories about social behavior and tested these theories through research. Hundreds of these social psychologists were willing to let me quote extensively from their work or present their findings in graphic or tabular form, and I appreciate very much their willingness to share their findings. Sincere thanks are also extended to the many social psychologists scattered across the country who offered myriad useful suggestions for improving earlier drafts of this book. They include Scott Allison, University of Richmond; John H. Harvey, University of Iowa; Roland Havis, Richard Bland College; Dale O. Jorgenson, California State University, Long Beach; Jon A. Krosnick, Ohio State University; Mark R. Leary, Wake Forest University; Christopher Leone, University of North Florida; Douglas Moore, Temple University; Judith Nye, Monmouth College; Tom Pyszczynski, University of Colorado; Dean Keith Simonton, University of California, Davis; Mark Stasson, Virginia Commonwealth University; and Craig Smith, Vanderbilt University. Mark Leary deserves special thanks because he read and critiqued the entire manuscript. I have lost track of how much of the book was my idea and how much was his.

Many others helped me by taking on some of the numerous tasks associated with creating a book. *Our Social World* is the fourth book I've published with Brooks/Cole, and I am always impressed by their professionalism and skill. Marianne Taflinger nurtured the project as it changed from a revision of an earlier text into a completely new book, and she always gave me the latitude I needed to develop creative ways of presenting material. With admirable skill, Laurie Jackson, my production editor, transformed the 1,200 manuscript pages, 128 figures, and 100 or so tables into a polished product. Many others, including May Clark, Tessa McGlasson, Katherine Minerva, Virge Perelli-Minetti, Bob Podstepny, Lisa Torri, and Bob Western, also deserve kudos. And here in Richmond, Diane Hunter was indispensable in linking my office to Brooks/Cole via Federal Express and the U.S. Mail.

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*Donelson R. Forsyth*