A Century of Social Psychology: Individuals, Ideas, and Investigations

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter tells an exciting story of intellectual discovery. At the start of the twentieth century, social psychology began addressing age-old philosophical questions using scientific methods. What was the nature of human nature, and did the human condition make it possible for people to work together for good rather than for evil? Social psychology first addressed these questions by looking at the overall impact of groups on individuals and then began to explore more refined questions about social influence and social perception. How do we understand persuasion, stereotypes and prejudice, differences between men and women, and how culture affects thoughts and behavior?

In 1954, in his classic chapter on the historical background of modern social psychology, Gordon Allport nominated Auguste Comte as the founder of social psychology as a science. He noted that Comte, the French philosopher and founder of positivism, had previously, in 1839, identified sociology as a separate discipline. In fact, sociology did not really exist, but Comte saw it coming. Allport notes that ‘one might say that Comte christened sociology many years before it was born’ (Allport, 1968: 6). In the 1850s, during the last years of his life, Comte argued that beyond sociology a ‘true final science’ would emerge. Comte called this science la morale positive, but it was clearly psychology. In fact, combined with sociology it would become social psychology. Social psychology has a history before and after Comte. But it is interesting to know that when it was first conceptualized as a discipline it was seen as being the ultimate one.

If not with Comte, where does social psychology begin? Clearly, ancient philosophers pondered the inherent nature of humankind, the way people interact and influence each other, and the way they govern themselves. In The Republic, Plato argued that men organize themselves and form governments because they cannot achieve all their goals as individuals. They are interdependent. Some kind of social organization is required. Various forms emerge, depending on the situation, including aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. Plato clearly favored aristocracy, where the wise and just govern, and allow individuals to develop their full potential. Whatever the form, social organization and government develop to serve the interests of people in achieving various goals.

As on many other issues, Plato’s younger colleague Aristotle had a different view. He held that people came together and organized groups from instinctual tendencies toward sociability, rather than utilitarian needs for a social contract. He was also more positively disposed toward democracy than Plato. Plato reasoned from his concept of the ideal state that a ruling elite, governed by dispassionate reason and intellect, would be the best form of government. Aristotle had more faith that the combined talents of different individuals, combined with their inherent propensities for
positive affiliations, would produce the better state. Aristotle based his judgments on data, as he understood them. His idea that people naturally came together and that they could be trusted to use their varying talents to create the good society was based on a more generous view of human nature than Plato's. Thus, the differing perspectives of these Greek philosophers defined enduring arguments that have since guided inquiry in social psychology and many other intellectual disciplines. How much of human behavior, particularly social behavior, can be understood as deriving from external constraints and contingencies vs. internal drives and dispositions? How capable are people of using their intellectual capacities wisely and effectively? Are the basic instincts of human beings good or evil? How much of human behavior can we understand and predict from deductive theoretical reasoning, and how much more can we learn from careful observation and induction?

Nearly 2,000 years later, these issues became matters of sharp debate during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. According to Allport (1954), one of the most enduring issues was whether human behavior was governed rationally or irrationally. And if irrationality was dominant, what were the qualities of the irrational forces which guided human behavior?

Among the philosophers who struggled with these questions were Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632–1704), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1782). The earlier thinkers, Machiavelli and Hobbes, were much more pessimistic about the quality of human nature and argued that some kind of social order needed to be imposed simply to constrain human selfishness and aggressiveness. Locke and Rousseau were more optimistic. Locke was particularly influential, with a balanced view of human qualities, and a faith that people could be reasonable, moderate, and cooperative (Allport, 1968: 19). The debate between the optimists and pessimists informed debates between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton at the founding of the American republic in the 1780s, and still persists in the present day.

The emergence of psychology

Plato's and Aristotle's fundamental arguments about the nature of human beings, especially as they related to ideas about the best forms of social organization and government, continued for centuries. Alongside these debates were other philosophical inquiries, also tracing back to the ancients, particularly Socrates and Aristotle, about many other aspects of the human condition. Are people capable of free will, or is behavior determined? What is the nature of human thought and consciousness? Do individuals perceive reality accurately? At the same time, as Comte pointed out, the sciences were also developing. People studied medicine, astronomy, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and physiology, again, with roots dating back to the Greeks and beyond. The scientific method emphasized evaluating philosophical and theoretical propositions against data – data that could be collected by a variety of methods.

When philosophers and scientists both began to tackle the same questions in the late nineteenth century, the 'true final science' of psychology emerged. A pivotal figure in this development was the German neural scientist Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894). He conducted important early research on the nervous system and various aspects of vision, hearing, and perception. The application of long-standing scientific methods to age-old philosophical questions about human behavior and mental processes gave birth to psychology. The year 1875 saw one marker of its emergence, when Wilhelm Wundt established a laboratory in Leipzig, Germany. In the same year, William James, like Wundt, a physician, physiologist, and philosopher, established an informal laboratory in his basement in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the USA, and gave the first psychology course at Harvard University. James is said to have commented that the first lectures on psychology he heard, he gave himself.

Psychology blossomed under the leadership of Wundt, James, and then G. Stanley Hall, who founded the first formal American psychological laboratory at Johns Hopkins University in 1883. In 1890, James published his classic two-volume Principles of Psychology, followed in 1892 by a 'briefer course' version of the same work. He wrote on such topics as sensation, vision, hearing, habit, the brain and neural activity, the self, and the will. While much of the earliest psychology dealt with questions outside the domains of social psychology, it was not long before the scientific method was applied to social questions. For example, Hall (1891) made extensive use of questionnaires in his studies of children's social interaction. In fact, the emergence of modern social psychology is marked by the application of the scientific methods that defined psychology as a whole to questions about social influence and social interaction. Two milestones in the emergence took place before the century ended.

1895: the birth of social psychology

In 1895, Norman Triplett at Indiana University in the USA began his studies of how social forces
Norman Triplett was a cycling enthusiast who pored over statistics from the Racing Board of the League of American Wheelmen. He noticed that riders' times were faster when they were racing against other riders than when they were simply racing against the clock. From these observations he developed a 'theory of dynamogenesis' that held that the presence of competing others released energy in individuals that they could not release on their own. Triplett then proceeded to test his theory with a series of experiments in which participants wound fishing reels alone and in direct competition with others. Triplett (1897) found that participants wound reels faster when competing than when alone and concluded that his theory was supported.

Triplett's work raised more questions than it answered. Was it the mere presence of others that produced enhanced performance? Or was it competition, or perhaps being observed by others (Wheeler, 1970)?

These questions were studied vigorously in the twentieth century, beginning with Floyd Allport during World War I (Allport, 1924). Allport coined the term 'social facilitation' to refer to the observation that the presence of others, for some reason, produced enhanced performance in individuals. Thus, Triplett not only conducted what are regarded as the first experiments in social psychology, but also initiated a rich and enduring line of theoretical and empirical exploration. Interestingly, as with many other social phenomena, social facilitation findings became increasingly complex. Sometimes the presence of others led to poorer performance. The extremely varied empirical landscape in this domain provided a basis for decades of theory and research (Geen and Bushman, 1987; Zajonc, 1965).

Gustave Le Bon also dealt with the impact of the presence of others. His contribution was more sweeping theoretically, but tied to a different kind of data. Rather than conduct experimental laboratory research with quantitative measures, Le Bon simply observed groups of many kinds, particularly those that gather in crowds. He was stunned by the transformation that comes over individuals in a group situation. He held that in crowds people are more emotional, less rational, more prone to extreme behaviors, and easily stimulated by leaders from one kind of extreme feeling to another in short periods of time. Le Bon described a person in a crowd as someone who has lost his or her individuality, whose conscious personality is somehow stripped away, revealing an ugly, aggressive unconscious personality that is widely shared by other group members. As Le Bon tried to explain the transformation of people in crowds, especially the lowering of intellectual functioning and the willingness to follow others with great emotional intensity, he relied heavily on notions of contagion and suggestion. In crowds, he argued, people are highly suggestible and can be led easily by emotional appeals of leaders. Mark Antony's stunning manipulation of the crowd in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar provides a powerful literary example of a leader's manipulating the extreme emotions of a crowd, and dramatically redirecting them from sympathy with the assassin Brutus to outrage ('The noble Brutus hath told you Caesar was ambitious. If it were so, it was a grievous fault, and grievously hath Caesar answered it.').

Le Bon's explanation of suggestion was less compelling than his description of wild mob behavior, but his observations and ideas had a lasting impact. They figured prominently in Freud's volume (1921) on group behavior and have influenced subsequent work on groupthink, deindividuation, and leadership.

Stirrings: the early twentieth century

The general development of psychology, fostered in great part by G. Stanley Hall, brought social psychology along with it, but the field of sociology also contributed to the emergence of social psychology, just as Comte had foreseen. Le Bon's work was perhaps more influential among sociologists and informed important turn-of-the-century work by Charles Horton Cooley, whose book Human Nature and the Social Order (1902) developed the idea of imitation, a concept closely related to Le Bon's concept of suggestion. Imitation is more concerned with behavior, suggestion with thought and cognition.

A few years later, in 1908, sociologically and psychologically oriented treatments of social psychology were represented in two textbooks that contained the phrase 'social psychology' in their titles. E.A. Ross's Social Psychology, like Cooley's book, emphasized the ideas of suggestion or imitation. Social interaction could be largely understood in terms of the basic phenomenon of people influencing the thoughts and actions of others. Ross's ideas were applied especially to issues such as crowds, social movements, social class, marriage, and religion (Pepitone, 1999). William McDougall's Introduction to Social Psychology held that there were many different explanations of social behavior, but that many of them could be subsumed under the general concept of instincts. Among others, McDougall (1908) considered 'the reproductive and the parental
influence of Gardner Murphy is often overlooked. The work of Theodore Solomon Asch and Muzafer Sherif, whose important work will be considered below.

Although social psychology gained momentum from Ross and McDougall, neither their specific concerns with particular societal phenomena nor their concern with instincts remained central in the work of later social psychologists. The field of social psychology was firmly established by the early 1930s. In 1920, Gardner Murphy and Lois Murphy of Columbia University published Experimental Social Psychology, a volume which reviewed over 800 studies of social processes. In 1937, the Murphys and Theodore Newcomb, a Columbia PhD, brought out the encyclopedic revised edition, which reviewed several hundred more studies. The influence of Gardner Murphy is often overlooked in the history of social psychology. Theodore Newcomb was a student of Murphy, as were Solomon Asch and Muzafer Sherif, whose important work will be considered below.

Explorations in social influence: the 1920s and 1930s

It is obviously a matter of interest and taste to identify which of the hundreds of studies reviewed by Murphy et al. (1937) are of lasting importance in understanding the evolution of social psychology. But, surely, the study of social influence was a key line of work in the pre-World War II decades. One early study by H.T. Moore (1921) demonstrated the influence of a reported majority of peers and of experts on participants' preferences between two musical, ethical, and linguistic options. Moore found that their judgments were very frequently reversed in response to either kind of influence, particularly majority influence. To Moore, these findings made sense. In the tradition of Floyd Allport, he argued that the opinions of others serve as stimuli that elicit a conforming response. This interpretation resonated with Ross's earlier emphasis on suggestion and imitation and the views of philosophers who had been pointing for many years to human irrationality. A similar study by Lorge was published in 1936, and again highlighted the impact of prestige and suggestion. He asked students their reactions to the statement that 'a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms are in the physical'. The statement was attributed to either Thomas Jefferson, who actually made it, or Vladimir Lenin. Lorge found that participants were much more likely to agree with the statement when it was attributed to Jefferson. The explanation was Jefferson's greater prestige, among Americans, than Lenin's.

Later, as we shall see, Solomon Asch (1948) took issue with the Moore/Lorge interpretation. He argued that people have a completely different interpretation of what 'a little rebellion' means when mentioned by Lenin as opposed to Jefferson. What changes is the object of judgment, not the judgment of the object (Wheeler, 1970). This debate once again goes back to basic questions - perhaps unresolvable - of human motivation and rationality.

Another important series of studies of interpersonal influence - studies that have become classics in the field - was conducted in the 1930s by Muzafer Sherif to address in part questions debated by McDougall and Floyd Allport in earlier decades. In 1920, McDougall published his book The Group Mind. In it, he argued that certain ideas and feelings in groups have an existence independent of the individuals in the group. In the Watsonian tradition, Allport argued that the term 'group mind' should be banished forever. For him, the unit of analysis should be the individual. There was no sense in positing an unobservable, unverifiable, mystical, and confusing group mind. McDougall came to regret using the term, but the debate about the nature of groups, and what, if anything, exists in groups apart from individuals became
contentious. Sherif quite deliberately stepped onto this battlefield.

In Sherif’s classic experiments, groups of participants were seated in a totally dark room with a single point-source of light in front of them. Because there is no frame of reference for judging the location of the light, it appears to move. How much it appears to move varies considerably with individual judges. Sherif established that groups devise norms that govern the judgments of individuals in the group, that new entrants into the group adopt those norms, and that people take established norms into new groups. Thus, Sherif found that a set of norms that is characteristic of the group exists quite apart from any particular individual. The implications of this research for the group mind controversy aside, Sherif showed how hard people in ambiguous situations work to reduce confusion and define a frame of reference for making judgments. They look to other people for information about reality and, through a process of mutual influence, develop norms and frames of reference. Importantly, Sherif showed that thoughtful, careful laboratory experimentation with relatively small numbers of people could explore basic aspects of group functioning that characterize groups ranging in size from a few individuals to whole cultures.

Two other important studies of interpersonal influence were conducted in the 1930s, before the USA entered World War II. They both show continuing concern with the impact of the group on individuals. The first was conducted by Kurt Lewin and his colleagues, and was inspired by Lewin’s experience as a refugee from Nazi Germany (Lewin et al., 1939). Kurt Lewin is a giant in the history of social psychology, even though he was not a social psychologist at the beginning of his career. Lewin started publishing his work in Germany in 1917 and made major contributions to understanding personality, child development, learning, memory, and perception. His work on conflict was particularly influential. Lewin developed what he called ‘field theory’. In some ways, it was more a language than a set of theoretical propositions. Strongly influenced by physics and topology, Lewin used concepts such as the life space, vectors, region, force field, energy, need, tension system, and valence. Field theory emphasized the way internal and environmental forces combined to influence behavior as people negotiated their way through their perceived world, or ‘life space.’

Lewin was renowned for this linking of theory and data. Deeply concerned with world problems, Lewin wanted to do research that had an impact on important real-world problems. He and his students called their work action research. But Lewin wanted to base applications on theory and data. He is often quoted as saying, ‘there’s nothing so practical as a good theory’.

and the definitive biography of Lewin, written by his close friend and collaborator Alfred Marrow, is called The Practical Theorist.

When Lewin came to the USA in 1933, in the first year of Hitler’s ‘Reich’ in Germany, he left the prestigious Psychological Institute in Berlin for the Department of Home Economics at Cornell. Shortly thereafter, he took an appointment at the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station. It was there that Lewin and his colleagues conducted an important study on social climate and behavior in groups. Clubs composed of groups of eleven-year-old boys were supervised by adults who adopted one of three leadership styles: democratic, autocratic, or laissez-faire. The democratic style produced constructive and independent group norms, marked by focused and energetic work whether the leader was present or absent. Boys in the groups with laissez-faire leadership were generally passive, while groups with autocratic leaders were either aggressive or apathetic. Here was research with a social message. When large and dangerous countries led by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes were threatening world peace and democratic institutions, Lewin’s ‘action research’ spoke to the quality of life in differing social systems.

Research on group norms by Theodore Newcomb (1943) at Bennington College in the late 1930s had less social relevance but dealt with perennial questions of the nature of social norms and social influence. In the 1930s, the newly founded Bennington College, an undergraduate school for women, was an interesting mix of mostly liberal faculty members and mostly conservative students – at least when the young women first enrolled. Newcomb showed that students became considerably more liberal over time, and that the more they were accepted and integrated into the college community, the more liberal they tended to be. Local norms exerted a strong influence on those who became engaged in the community. In a follow-up study nearly thirty years later, Newcomb (1963) showed that the Bennington women remained liberal, particularly when they married husbands who supported their new attitudes.

The work of Sherif and Newcomb clearly demonstrated the power of social norms. It did not answer age-old questions about the role of rational as opposed to irrational processes in producing such dramatic conformity to social norms. These enduring questions would await further research, after World War II.

World War II and studies of group dynamics, attitudes, and person perception

The research by Sherif on group norms and Lewin and his colleagues on leadership showed that social
psychology was alive to important social issues. Once the USA was drawn into World War II, social psychologists became engaged in questions prompted by the need to mobilize the nation for a long conflict. Kurt Lewin again was at the forefront. He was asked by the National Research Council to study ways of persuading women homemakers to serve animal viscera—heart, sweetbreads, and kidneys—to their families. Lewin continued to be interested in group forces and reasoned that influence through group norms would be more influential and more lasting than influence produced by a persuasive message presented in a lecture. Lewin (1943) and later researchers (Bennett, 1955; Radke and Klisurich, 1947) found that changes in attitude and behavioral commitment produced by perceptions of group norms were, in fact, the most dramatic.

At the same time, other psychologists, led by Carl Hovland of Yale University, began exploring attitudes more broadly, with special emphasis on US army propaganda, especially with regard to issues affecting troop morale. In the 1920s, attitude had been thought to be the central concept in the field of social psychology (McGuire, 1968; Thomas and Zaniecki, 1918–20; Watson, 1925). The bulk of Murphy and Murphy's (1931) Experimental Social Psychology concerned attitudes. But attitude research had crested and faded during much of the 1930s, as more work was done on group dynamics and interpersonal influence. Issues of troop morale during the war brought renewed urgency to understanding attitudes. Much of the work that Hovland and his colleagues conducted during the war was summarized in the book Experiments on Mass Communication (Hovland et al., 1949). Their work was focused on such questions as how long the war against Japan in the Pacific would last after the defeat of Nazi Germany in Europe. It explored a wide variety of independent variables, including whether to present information by lectures or films, and whether two-sided or one-sided messages produced more, and more lasting, persuasion.

After the war, Hovland and his colleagues at Yale continued to do groundbreaking research on attitudes. This work culminated in the classic volume, Communication and Persuasion (1953) by Hovland et al. This research studied in detail the paradigm, "Who said what to whom?" How are different audiences affected by different messages from different communicators? Specific questions concerned the credibility of communicators, the organization and structure of messages, whether fear-arousing communications enhanced persuasion, and what audience personality variables affected the success of persuasive messages. The work of the Yale school was guided in part by a model of persuasion based on the theoretical work of the behaviorist Clark Hull, long a member of the Yale faculty, and a mentor of Carl Hovland. Hull had developed the formulation that behavior is a function of drive and habit, or that performance is a function of learning and motivation. Therefore, the key to producing attitude change was to teach an audience a new point of view (learning) and the motivation to accept it. Persuasion could also be seen as following the three steps of paying attention to the message, understanding it, and, finally, accepting or yielding to it. A great deal of creative research was done by focusing on the elements in this formula.

Interestingly, this work was not divorced from the work on group dynamics and group norms that had been so influential prior to World War II. One of the chapters in Communication and Persuasion was "Group Membership and Resistance to Influence." It reported a number of important studies by Harold Kelley on conformity to group norms, and summarized Kelley's seminal theoretical paper on the normative and comparison functions of reference groups.

After the war, at the same time that Hovland and his colleagues developed their highly creative work on communication and persuasion, Kurt Lewin and his successors continued their vigorous exploration of group dynamics. Lewin attracted a group of original and highly productive young scholars to the group dynamics enterprise. One of the most brilliant, Leon Festinger, completed his PhD under Lewin at the University of Iowa before the war. Festinger sought Lewin out for graduate work not because of an interest in social psychology, but because of the power of Lewinian ideas such as force fields, memory, and tension systems, and because of the excitement of tying theory closely to data. Festinger joined Lewin and Dorwin Cartwright in establishing the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) near the end of the war. Among the distinguished social psychologists working at the Center were Kurt Back, Morton Deutsch, Murray Horwitz, Harold Kelley, Albert Pepitone, Stanley Schachter, and John Thibaut (Jones, 1985). In the very early years, there was significant interchange between the MIT Center for Group Dynamics and the newly formed Department of Social Relations at nearby Harvard University (Festinger, 1980). Thus, Gordon Allport and Jerome Bruner were involved in the dynamic intellectual ferment of the immediate postwar period.

In just a few years, due to MIT's waning interest in supporting an endeavor somewhat peripheral to its main concerns, the Center began a move to the University of Michigan. In the midst of this transition, Kurt Lewin suddenly died, and his successors took the leadership role. Major works from the MIT years included Festinger et al.'s (1950) work on affiliation in housing complexes in postwar Cambridge, Massachusetts. Once again,
the influence of Lewin in doing practical research was evident. A housing shortage needed attention.

In addition to the research centers at Yale and Michigan, exploring attitudes and group dynamics, respectively, another significant postwar development was taking place in response to the creative work of Fritz Heider. Heider came to the USA from Hamburg, Germany, in 1930, teaching for a time at Smith College and then moving to the University of Kansas in 1947. Heider was a major figure in the tradition of Gestalt psychology, a perspective that emphasized cognitive and perceptual organization. The term 'Gestalt' comes from the German and means 'shape or form'. Gestalt psychologists, such as Koffka, Kohler, and Wertheimer, emphasized the very active way people process information and organize perceptual elements into coherent wholes, particularly wholes that have 'good fit' and are pleasing (Koffka, 1935). One of its key principles is that the whole is different from the sum of its parts. The parts are integrated into a meaningful and satisfying form. For example, the individual notes in a musical chord combine to make an integrated sound that has its own integrity (Wheeler, 1970).

In the 1940s, Heider wrote two extremely influential papers that extended Gestalt principles into the realms of person perception, attitude organization, and interpersonal relations. In 1944, Heider published the paper 'Social Perception and Phenomenal Causality', the first systematic treatment of attribution processes. Heider argued that perceivers link people's actions to underlying motives or dispositions because there is a good Gestalt or perceptual 'fit' between the way people behave and the nature of their personal qualities. This basic insight into the ways people make causal attributions for personal behavior was more fully developed later in Heider's classic book The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations (1958).

Heider's other paper from the 1940s had even more immediate impact (Jones, 1985). In 'Attitudes and Cognitive Organization', Heider developed balance theory. Again, the emphasis, with some mathematical adornment, was on principles of good perceptual fit. People had both attitudes toward (sentiment relations) and connections to (unit relations) other people, objects, ideas, or events. The organization of these units could be in balance or out of balance. Balance prevails, for example, when person $P$ is linked to an action and likes another person, $O$, who approves of that action. Imbalance exists when two people like each other but are linked in opposite ways to objects, actions, or ideas, or dislike each other but are similarly linked. Balance theory gave rise somewhat later to a strong focus on cognitive consistency.

Another enduring line of research in social psychology also developed in the immediate postwar years. Solomon Asch conducted several extremely important studies of person perception within the Gestalt tradition. Asch, like Heider, had been born in Europe, but moved to New York City when he was thirteen. Like Muzaffer Sherif and Theodore Newcomb, he studied at Columbia with Gardner Murphy. Asch's paper 'Forming Impressions of Personality' (1946) highlighted two findings. The first was that perceivers given information about another individual's personal qualities organized that information into a coherent whole such that one critical piece of information could color the entire impression. People told to form an impression of a person who was 'intelligent, skillful, industrious, warm, determined, practical, and cautious' perceived that individual very differently from one described as 'intelligent, skillful, industrious, cold, determined, practical, and cautious'. The only difference, of course, is the substitution of the word 'cold' for the word 'warm'. But these two traits serve to organize the overall impression such that terms like 'determined' and 'industrious' have a somewhat different meaning. Again, the whole perception is important, and the whole is different from the sum of the parts. Second, the impressions people form are strongly affected by the order in which they receive different pieces of information. People learning that a person is 'intelligent, industrious, impulsive, critical, stubborn, and envious' form a more positive impression than those who learn about someone who is 'envious, stubborn, critical, impulsive, industrious, and intelligent'. The initial traits form the basis for an initial impression, and later information is made to fit that initial impression.

Early research on impression formation and person perception explored questions such as the personal qualities of accurate judges of personality, but Asch's work and that of others (cf. Bruner and Tagiuri, 1954) stimulated a more general consideration of the processes underlying the perception of people.

The 1950s: the era of Leon Festinger

There are a number of giants in the history of social psychology: Floyd Allport, Solomon Asch, Fritz Heider, Muzaffer Sherif, and, perhaps most of all, Kurt Lewin. But, arguably, the work of Leon Festinger has stimulated more theory, research, and controversy than that of anyone else. Festinger graduated from the College of the City of New York at a young age and found Kurt Lewin in Iowa. His talent and his seniority among the many students of Lewin made him, along with Dorwin Cartwright, the leader of the Center for Group Dynamics after Lewin's death. Festinger was enormously energetic and original, and he produced highly creative and influential theory and research in a number of areas. While it is possible to follow the transitions from one
domain of research to another, the sheer range and variety of Festinger's work is extremely impressive.

Festinger's (1950) book on housing and affiliation, with Schachter and Back, was fundamentally a study of 'social pressures in informal groups'. Not surprisingly, in the same year, Festinger (1950) published an important theoretical paper, 'Informal Social Communication'. Festinger argued that the need to define 'social reality' or to achieve 'group locomotion' (a classic Lewinian term meaning 'getting something accomplished') created pressures toward uniformity of opinion within groups. These pressures would be observed in informal social communication, or talk, among group members, and would tend to produce uniformity through opinion change or the rejection of people with deviant opinions from the group.

Festinger's theory produced a great deal of research that he conducted with colleagues such as Gerard, Hymovitch, Kelley, Raven, and Schachter. Perhaps the most important study in this tradition was Schachter's (1951) experiment on deviation and rejection, showing that people expressing a deviant opinion in groups were subject to an enormous amount of social-influence pressure, seen in increased communication, until they are rejected by the group if they refuse to conform. Rejection is seen in cessation of communication — treating the deviant as a nonperson — and the assignment of unpleasant tasks to the deviant.

Four years later, Festinger published his highly original and highly influential paper 'A Theory of Social Comparison Processes'. In the Lewinian tradition, Festinger and his colleagues also published a number of empirical papers supporting the new theory, effectively commandeering an issue of Human Relations. Social-comparison theory can be viewed as an extension of the theory of informal social communication. It argues that people evaluate their abilities as well as their opinions through reference to a social reality. A key difference is that the new theory focused on the individual's need to evaluate opinions and abilities by comparison with similar others rather than the group's need to establish opinion uniformity. This change in focus is reminiscent of issues pertaining to the group mind and the existence of group phenomena independent of the individuals in the group. The shift located Festinger's concerns directly in the mind of the individual person, thereby sidestepping the old questions of the independent nature of groups.

It is of interest that in considering ability as well as opinion evaluation, Festinger returned to the topic of his first publication, in 1940, on level of aspiration. While the consideration of abilities, and the emphasis on individuals, are striking differences, the similarities between the theory of informal social communication and the theory of social-comparison processes are even more impressive. Both theories highlight the importance of similarities among groups of individuals, and the tendency to reject, or cease comparing with, others who cannot be made similar. Social-comparison theory essentially got lost for some time after its appearance, though it re-emerged sporadically during the 1960s and 1970s (Latané, 1966; Suls and Miller, 1977). Now that it is firmly re-established, there is today a varied and vigorous tradition of social comparison research, a tradition linking social-comparison processes to issues of self and social identity (Suls and Wheeler, 2000).

Despite the enduring importance of social comparison theory, and the vitality of research on comparison processes today, Festinger is best known for another contribution. Moving quickly and creatively after the publication of social comparison research, Festinger began studying rumor transmission. This seemed like a natural extension of his interest in communication. In studying rumors about natural disasters, such as earthquakes and floods, Festinger was struck by studies showing that people in areas outside sites of immediate destruction spread rumors about even worse calamities about to come (Festinger, 1975).

Why would people be creating and spreading fear-arousing rumors? Why would they make themselves scared? Festinger had a transforming insight. The people were not making themselves scared. They were already scared, but had no clear justification for their anxious feelings. They had to make up a cognition that fit and justified their emotion. The thought that they were scared did not fit the thought that there was nothing to fear. When cognitions do not fit, there is pressure, Festinger reasoned, to make them fit. Thus was born the idea of cognitive dissonance.

Early research by Brehm (1956) on decision making, research by Festinger et al. (1956) on proselytizing after failed prophecies, and Festinger's (1957) book A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance began an extremely vigorous research tradition which is still active today. As for Festinger himself, after responding to a number of criticisms of dissonance theory, he once again moved on, physically and intellectually and, in 1964, began studying color vision at the New School for Social Research.

The most enduring line of research coming out of dissonance has examined the consequences of behaving inconsistently with attitudes. The classic experiment by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) showed that when participants lied by telling a confederate that an extremely boring task was actually a lot of fun, they subsequently came to believe that the task really was fun to a greater degree if they were paid a smaller ($1) rather than larger ($20) amount of money for saying so. A small incentive provides insufficient justification for the counterattitudinal behavior. Attitude change is necessary to justify the behavior and reduce
dissonance. This and other research provided strong evidence for dissonance theory, even though critics dubbed the original experiment 'the 20 dollar misunderstanding'.

One reason that this line of research was important and controversial was that it cut against the behaviorist tradition which suggested that people should believe what they say the more they are paid (reinforced) for saying it. Those in the behaviorist tradition (Rosenberg, 1965) attacked the empirical base of the dissonance claims, but eventually most social psychologists came to accept the basic finding: there is an inverse relationship between reward for counterattitudinal behavior and subsequent self-justifying attitude change. Later critics accepted the data but offered challenging alternative explanations. A self-perception account (Bern, 1972) held that no dissonance motivation was needed to account for the findings – people were merely inferring their attitude after considering their behavior and the situation in which they performed it. A self-presentation account (Tedeschi et al., 1971) argued that people need only to appear consistent, not feel consistent. And a more recent self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) holds that people simply need to affirm that they are good rather than feel consistent. In contrast to these challenges, a provocative paper by Cooper and Pazio (1984) has strengthened the basic arguments of dissonance theory, pointing to the role of physiological arousal stemming from aversive consequences. A great deal of research on when and why self-justificatory attitude change takes place has kept the cognitive dissonance tradition alive and well.

The 1960s: the return of social influence

Thanks in part to the impact of Leon Festinger's own changes in direction, social-influence and group-dynamics research receded in prominence immediately after World War II. One extremely important exception was the work of Solomon Asch on prestige influence and conformity. As noted above, Asch was influenced by Gestalt principles and, in 1948, he took on the studies by Moore and Lorge from the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that people were not thoughtlessly influenced by majority or expert opinion. In the late 1940s Asch also began his extremely important and influential studies of conformity. Asch (1951) asked naive research participants to make judgments about the length of lines when a unanimous majority of their peers made obviously erroneous judgments about the lines in a face-to-face situation. The question was whether people would simply conform to others' judgments when it was entirely clear that their judgments were wrong. Asch was surprised by the extent to which people did indeed conform. They were much more influenced by majority opinion, even when it was obviously in error, than he thought they would be.

Asch distinguished three processes that might have produced the conformity he observed. First, there might simply be 'distortion of action'. People knew that the majority was wrong but simply went along with it anyway. Second, there might be 'distortion of judgment' whereby people knew that they did not see the lines as the majority did, but figured that the majority must be correct. Finally, in a few cases, there was 'distortion of perception' whereby participants craned their necks and squinted until they actually saw the wrong line as the right one.

Huge quantities of research have been done to explore the details of Asch-like conformity. One of the most important distinctions in this literature is the one between compliance and internalization, that is, simply going along with social pressure without believing what one is saying as opposed to actually coming to believe that others are correct. Herbert Kelman (1961) importantly added to the conceptual overview by suggesting that identification should be set alongside compliance and internalization as a process of opinion change. Sometimes people come to believe something because they identify with an attractive source. They do not fully internalize the opinion into their belief and value system but hold it so long as they are trying to be like the attractive communicator. Reintroducing identification brings back one of the original explanations in Le Bon's (1895) and Freud's (1921) account of leadership and group behavior.

Issues of conformity and blind social influence were put into sharp relief in the early 1960s by Stanley Milgram's (1963, 1965) well-known studies of obedience to authority. Adult, rather than student, research participants were drawn from the New Haven, Connecticut, area. Through strikingly clever experimental theatrics, including highly convincing experimenters and confederates, participants were urged by an experimenter to give what they believed were extremely painful and dangerous electric shocks to a 'learner' in the context of a study on punishment. Would subjects obey the experimenter ordering these shocks, or refuse to continue? Like Asch, Milgram found much more social influence than he, or almost anyone else, thought possible. Exactly why so many people were fully obedient to the experimenter, even though they believed that they might be very seriously harming another person, is still not entirely clear. Probably critical was the experiment's insisting that he was responsible for the outcome of the experiment. Milgram proposed an essentially Lewinian explanation. A series of studies suggested that subjects were caught in a conflicting force field, and that they responded to whichever source – the experimenter or the 'learner' – was closer. The
closer the learner was to the participant, the more the participant could see or hear him, the less they obeyed directives to shock him. Moreover, when the experimenter was more distant, sometimes even phoning in his directives, obedience dropped. The face-to-face (some might say ‘in your face’) nature of the situation seems extremely important, although it is not really clear what elements of the situation create such power. It may be that the participant’s inability to articulate reasons for disobeying are an important element in producing obedience.

The Milgram research had a profound impact on social psychology for reasons quite beyond its empirical or theoretical implications. Observers of, as well as some participants in, the social psychological scene were disquieted by the wide use of deception in many of the experiments. But Milgram’s research set off a firestorm (Baumrind, 1964). Was it ethical to deceive research participants? Was it moral to put them in situations that they had not consented to be in, and to stress, coerce, or embarrass them? These controversies (Kelman, 1968) led to the formulation of strict review procedures endorsed by the APA and administered by the federal government. These review procedures are designed to protect human participants in psychological research. Yet some psychologists feel that they may have had a chilling effect on the whole research enterprise (Festinger, 1980).

One of the arguments psychologists have made in requesting latitude in the procedures they use to conduct research is that they must create situations of high impact in order to study important phenomena. A compelling example of the study of behavior in high-impact situations is the research on bystander intervention in emergencies, or helping behavior, initiated by John Darley and Bibb Latané in the 1960s (Darley and Latané, 1968; Latané and Darley, 1970). Darley and Latané were spurred by the famous case in 1964 of Kitty Genovese in New York City, where thirty-eight bystanders watched while Genovese was stabbed repeatedly and eventually killed in an incident that unfolded over a half-hour. Not one of the observers even called the police, although that would have been very simple. Why didn’t people help?

Darley and Latané explored these questions in a series of experiments that generated a large and lively research tradition on helping and altruism. They suggested a five-step model whereby intervening was dependent on noticing the emergency, interpreting it as a situation where help was needed, accepting responsibility for intervening oneself, knowing the appropriate form of assistance, and, finally, taking action. Studies suggested that misinterpretation and diffusion of responsibility were important variables in affecting people’s behavior in such situations. Importantly, the presence of more than one observer dramatically increased the chances of both those variables depressing the rate of helping.

Research by Jane and Irving Piliavin (Piliavin et al., 1969; Piliavin and Piliavin, 1972) approached helping behavior in terms of rewards and costs, once again bringing a reinforcement perspective to social psychology. Originally focusing on both the rewards and costs of both helping and not helping in various situations, the model evolved toward putting more emphasis on the costs of each course of action, especially helping. The latter variable seems to have most impact.

Research on bystander intervention and helping raised basic questions about human values and human morality once again, questions that have been around since the ancient Greeks. Do people care for their fellow human beings? Can they cooperate, or are they doomed to compete? What mix of altruism and hedonism, or cooperation and competition, can we expect in social interaction? Questions of altruism are alive and well right now (Batson, 1998; Cialdini et al., 1987; Krebs and Miller, 1985). Similarly, questions of cooperation and competition, and, more generally, social justice are alive and well at present, largely due to influential work in the 1960s by Deutsch and Krauss (1960) on threat and cooperation and Lerner on people’s belief in a just world (Lerner and Simmons, 1966). Morton Deutsch was heavily influenced by his mentor Kurt Lewin and productively explored conflict, cooperation, and competition for much of his career. Melvin Lerner’s work on justice helped nurture and develop a tradition of concern with relative deprivation and social justice that had begun with the pioneering work in the 1940s and 1950s of Herbert Hyman (1942) on status and reference groups, Samuel Stouffer and his colleagues on the experiences of the American soldier (Stouffer et al., 1949), and Robert Merton on reference groups and relative deprivation (Merton and Kitt, 1950; cf. Pettigrew, 1967).

Another line of social-influence research beginning in the 1960s concerned the ‘the risky shift’ and group polarization. Le Bon long ago noted the extremes to which people in groups would go, partly as a result of anonymity and diffusion of responsibility to a prestigious leader. Festinger et al. (1952) published a paper showing the kinds of deindividuation in groups that can result from these forces (Pepitone, 1999). Then a series of studies by Wallach, Kogan, and others focused on groups’ tendencies to take more risk than could be expected from the risk-taking propensities of the members of the group (cf. Brown, 1965, 1986). Wallach and Kogan (Wallach et al., 1962) initially favored a diffusion of responsibility explanation of these findings, thus highlighting the broad importance of this phenomenon, already implicated in studies of
obedience to authority, and soon to be applied to understanding bystander intervention. Later work seemed to establish quite clearly that diffusion of responsibility was less important than the fact that risk is a value. As a result, people compete to be as risky as similar others, and they advance and respond to persuasive arguments toward risk-taking (Burnstein, 1982; Goethals and Zanna, 1979).

This line of research was entirely reconceptualized and redirected by an important study by Moscovici and Zavalloni (1969) at the end of the decade. Moscovici and Zavalloni argued that the risky shift was simply one manifestation of the general tendency, identified by Le Bon, for groups to become more extreme. They argued that whenever a cultural value is relevant to a group discussion or group decision, whether that value be risk, democracy, favoring the in-group, or evaluating national icons, the views of group members will become more extreme. The group will polarize. They showed that high-school students in France discussing the French president, Charles de Gaulle, or American tourists produced polarized evaluations, positive in the case of de Gaulle, negative in the case of American tourists.

Thus, the work of the 1960s underscored the rather dramatic lengths to which people would go as a result of influence from others, or as a result of their own group dynamics. The group polarization literature is especially interesting in raising once again decades-old and even century-old questions as to whether people are primarily governed by more rational or less rational, versus more emotional and motivational, processes.

The emergence of European social psychology

It is noteworthy that the Moscovici and Zavalloni (1969) study cited above was conducted in Paris and inaugurated a series of studies by Moscovici and others that became one of the central, distinctly European contributions to social psychology (Moscovici, 1985). These studies emphasized novel forms of social influence overlooked in the North American tradition, particularly minority influence and innovation in groups. In his chapter on the recent history of social psychology in the 1985 Handbook of Social Psychology (Lindsey and Aronson, 1985), Edward E. Jones characterized modern social psychology as largely a North American enterprise. However, starting in the 1960s, with the work of Moscovici, Michael Argyle, Henri Tajfel, and others, a distinctly European social psychology took shape. The year 1969 marked the publication of Argyle's social psychology textbook, Social Interaction, and Tajfel's (1969) chapter, 'Social and Cultural Factors in Perception', in the 1969 Handbook of Social Psychology. Argyle focused principally on interpersonal and small-group interaction, especially nonverbal communication (cf. Argyle and Dean, 1965), while Tajfel was beginning to develop the research that led to the creation of social identity theory (see below).

Interestingly, American social psychologists played a significant role in the development of European social psychology, just as Europeans such as Heider, Lewin, and Asch had played a critical role in developing social psychology in North America, starting in the 1930s. John Thibaut, Harold Kelley, and others maintained close contact with European social psychologists and encouraged them to develop relationships among themselves. Thibaut involved European social psychologists in the founding of the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology in 1965 and facilitated the founding of the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology (EAESP) in 1966, the year after the Society for Experimental Social Psychology was founded in the USA. In 1971, EAESP sponsored the establishment of the European Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. From then on, European social psychology became a force, doing leading research on intergroup relations, value orientations, and bargaining.

The 1970s: the rise of attribution theories

Research and theory on attribution processes that had been germinating since Fritz Heider's (1944) important paper, 'Social Perception and Phenomenal Causality,' took hold strongly in the late 1960s and dominated much of the 1970s. Heider's book (1958) on interpersonal relations flushed out his ideas on attribution and inspired highly influential treatments of attribution by Jones and Davis (1965) and Kelley (1967). In 1972, a group of attribution theorists published Attribution: Perceiving the Causes of Behavior, an edited volume that outlined theoretical treatments of attribution processes that still dominate research on the perception of causality in interpersonal perception (Jones et al., 1972).

Heider's (1958) treatment discussed processes entailed in 'perceiving the other person' and then 'the other person as perceiver'. We perceive others, and they perceive us back. We, in turn, perceive their perceiving us to varying extents. Heider's treatment of the 'naive analysis of action' discussed the way perceivers think about other people's performances, and the ways those performances reflect internal causes, such as other people's motivations (Heider's try variable) and their abilities (his can variable), as opposed to external causes such as task difficulty or luck. This approach led to a general
consideration of the processes involved in making internal as opposed to external attributions, and in inferring personal qualities from behavior.

Jones and Davis's paper, 'From Acts to Dispositions: The Attribution Process in Person Perception', developed Heider's formulations into what became known as 'correspondent-inference theory'. Jones and Davis considered the question of when a perceiver can attribute a behavior to an internal, personal cause. Such an attribution is called a correspondent inference. It holds that a behavior corresponds to an underlying, causal, personal disposition, such as an ability, attitude, or trait, as opposed to some external locus of causality, such as social norms. For example, if a person got angry, the perceiver might make the correspondent inference that he is an angry, hostile person. However, if social norms endorse anger in this situation (perhaps the actor was swindled), it is more difficult to make a correspondent inference.

Harold Kelley's (1967) covariation analysis of attribution processes extended Heider's and Jones and Davis's work to consider especially how perceivers make internal as opposed to external attributions when they have observed an actor's behavior over time. Actions are attributed to causes with which they covary. If something is present when the action is performed and absent when the action is not performed, that something and the action covary. If anger erupts whenever Hank is present but peace prevails when Hank is absent, we attribute the hostility to Hank. For example, if Hank gets mad at everyone and everything, no matter what the circumstances are in which he encounters them, and no one else gets mad in any of those circumstances, the anger is attributed to Hank. However, if Hank gets mad in response to only one provocation, and he gets consistently mad when similarly provoked, and other people get mad in that instance too, then Hank's anger is attributed to the provocation. Research by Leslie Zebrowitz (McArthur, 1972) supported Kelley's model.

In a later paper, Kelley articulated the highly influential discounting and augmentation principles. Possible causes for an action are discounted if there are other plausible explanations for the action. Similar to the Jones and Davis analysis of correspondent inferences, causality is ambiguous when several possible explanations seem plausible. A student's indifference to a college course could not confidently be attributed to low motivation if the teacher is boring. In general, whenever there is some plausible external cause for a behavior, the role of internal personal causes should be discounted. The augmentation principle works in the opposite way. When external factors make a response less likely, personal factors are given more attributional weight.

Decades of research have shown that both discounting and augmentation do exist, as Kelley suggested, but even more impressive and intriguing are the scores, perhaps by now hundreds, of studies showing that people often fail to discount. The original study demonstrating the failure to discount was an attribution of attitudes study by Jones and Harris (1967), which showed that participants attributed pro-Castro attitudes to actors who were required to write pro-Castro essays, even though it was clear that the actors had no choice about the essay they were to write. Jones and Harris explained this finding in terms of Heider's statement that 'behavior in particular has such salient properties it tends to engulf the total field' (Heider, 1958: 54). That is, we simply do not notice or weigh sufficiently situational forces when the behavior itself captures so much attention. A range of other explanations have been offered for the basic findings. The idea that we make attributions to salient plausible causes (Taylor and Fiske, 1975) and the idea that discounting happens more often when people are cognitively busy (Gilbert et al., 1988) have both gained considerable support. The research demonstrating failure to discount was called the "fundamental attribution error" by Ross (1977). It is also widely known as the 'correspondence bias' (Gilbert and Jones, 1986; Gilbert and Malone, 1995), reflecting the correspondent inference theory formulation that people are biased toward attributing behaviors to corresponding personal dispositions. These attributions give people a sense that they can predict and control other people. Gilbert (1998) has written masterfully about the varied and complex sources of error that give rise to this bias.

Closely linked to the correspondence bias is another bias identified by Jones and Nisbett (1972), the actor-observer bias. While observers are prone toward making correspondent inferences, actors do not show a similar bias in interpreting their own behavior. Instead, actors are more apt to attribute their behavior to the external constraints inducing them to perform a particular behavior. Salience again seems to be an important part of the explanation. For observers, actors are salient, and they attribute behavior to dispositions of the actors. For actors, aspects of the environment or situation are salient, and they attribute their own actions to those attributes.

Another vigorous line of attribution research explored how people perceive the causes of success and failure (Weiner et al., 1972). Very much influenced by Heider, this line of research explored how people attribute performances to internal versus external, stable versus unstable, controllable versus uncontrollable, and specific versus global loci of causality.

Overall, attribution theories have generated a tremendous amount of research, and attribution studies are plentiful at this writing. In general, the work has outlined broad principles that people do or, in some cases, should follow in understanding causality, as well as the biases and errors that govern attribution processes. In addition to helping us
understand social thinking, attribution work has also helped psychologists understand and, to some extent, treat psychological problems, such as depression (Abramson et al., 1986) and marital discord (Fincham, 1985).

The 1980s: social cognition, social identity, and the elaboration-likelihood model

Social cognition

The study of attribution in the late 1960s and 1970s can be seen as one part of a larger concern developing during the same time for returning to a detailed exploration of the role of cognitive processes in understanding attitudes, attributions, and intergroup processes. As noted above, questions concerning the human capacity to reason effectively and govern behavior rationally go back to ancient Greek times. They have dominated much of philosophical discourse since the Enlightenment. The two works we mark as the beginning of social psychology, Triplett's work on social facilitation and Le Bon's book on the crowd, paid little heed to the cognitive or rational side of human behavior. Instead they emphasized drives and unmediated stimulus-response contingencies. The same is true of the textbooks of 1908 by Ross and McDougall. The emphasis on stimulus-response contingencies gained more ground with Floyd Allport's Social Psychology textbook (1924). But during this time, the more cognitively oriented approach to social psychology was also alive and well, if pushed out of the spotlight. A major work appeared in 1932, Frederick Bartlett's Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology. His book is perhaps best remembered for the studies of the 'ghost story' in which subjects read a somewhat obscure folk tale and reported to others what they read. Their accounts revealed active efforts to integrate the material into familiar ways of understanding the world that Bartlett called 'schemas'. Bartlett's work was important as an early example of experimental social psychology and as one which looked directly at cognitive processes in social communication and memory. It helped frame Allport and Postman's (1947) discussion of motivation and expectancy in perception, and students of Bartlett conducted studies of rumor transmission that were critical in the germination of cognitive-dissonance theory (Jones, 1985).

The cognitive perspective received a substantial boost from the work of Gestalt psychologists that strongly influenced Asch, Heider, Lewin, and Sherif. As noted earlier, the active organizing of perceptions into 'good fits' informed the way Asch understood conformity and Heider understood phenomenal causality. Lewin combined Gestalt principles with ideas from physics in developing field theory. At least some of the Yale-school attitude researchers emphasized the cognitive aspects of persuasion, often in combination with Hullian perspectives.

A highly influential paper by Miller and Ross reintroduced the cognitive perspective with great force in 1975. Miller and Ross took on the conventional wisdom that apparently self-serving biases in attributions about the self reflected motivational forces, such as the desire to see oneself in a positive light. Their review of the literature helped define opposing sides in a motivation versus cognition debate about understanding a range of social phenomena—for example, the question of whether dissonance findings should be understood in terms of drive or self-attribution (cf. Bem, 1972).

As research in social cognition took hold, a wide range of issues was explored, including person memory, schema development, the role of cognition in persuasion, and social inference. There was an overall focus on the active, but not always accurate, cognitive construction of the social world. The social-cognition perspective reached full flower in 1984 with the publication of Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor's Social Cognition. Defining social cognition as 'the study of how people make sense of other people and themselves' (Fiske and Taylor, 1991: 1), this book and its second edition of 1991 are truly impressive accounts of the entire domain of research in social cognition. The second edition has nearly 150 pages of references. The first edition contrasted the 'naive scientist' with the 'cognitive miser' models of social cognition, the latter emphasizing people's frequent reluctance to employ fully their abilities to perceive others accurately. The second edition suggested a third model, the 'motivated tactician', a person who, when motivated, would be more energetic and effective in using his or her cognitive abilities. Fiske and Taylor argued that although people can seem lazy and gullible, when they have reason, they can be effective social thinkers: 'In short, people are no fools' (Fiske and Taylor, 1991: 136).

In addition to work on attribution, social-cognition researchers have studied social inference, schemas, person memory, and attention and consciousness. The overall importance of social cognition as a defining area of social psychology is signaled in the name of one of the two main social psychology sections of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 'Attitudes and Social Cognition'.

Social-identity theory

Another significant influence in the 1980s was the full flowering of social-identity theory, and its
development into self-categorization theory (Hogg, 2001). Social-identity theory was rooted in a series of studies on social categorization, ethnocentrism, and intergroup relations by Henri Tajfel, conducted during the 1960s and 1970s (Hogg, 2000). Many of these studies explored behavior in the ‘minimal social situation’ in which groups of participants were arbitrarily divided into two groups and subsequently asked to allocate rewards to members of their own group and members of the other group, referred to as the in-group and the out-group. The basic finding was one of strong in-group favoritism. People allocated rewards in such a way that the difference between the outcomes for the in-group and outcomes for the out-group was maximized, in favor of the in-group. This occurred even if participants had to give lower absolute rewards to in-group members. For example, typically they would rather allocate 7 points to an in-group member and 1 point to an out-group member rather than 19 points to an in-group member and 25 to an out-group member (Tajfel et al., 1971).

Social-identity theory holds that self-esteem reflects both personal identity and social identity. The former is based on one’s personal accomplishments while the latter is based on the groups to which one belongs and the value one attaches to those groups. People are motivated to maintain a positive self-evaluation and want to view their individual achievements and personal qualities as favorably as they can, and they similarly want to see the groups that they belong to in the most positive possible light. In addition, social-identity theory holds that people automatically categorize others into groups, and that on the basis of categorization the social world is divided into in-groups and out-groups. Furthermore, people tend to minimize the differences between people within groups, both in-group and out-groups, and accentuate or maximize the differences between individuals in different groups. Finally, people tend to maximize their social identity by doing all that they can, not only to view their own group positively, but also to view members of other groups relatively negatively. These tendencies produce in-group favoritism, as described above, behaviors designed to benefit the in-group and/or harm the out-group.

Later theorizing by Turner (1985) develops the closely related self-categorization theory, which emphasizes ‘depersonalization’, or the tendency to see people in groups in relation to a prototype, a fuzzy set of attributes that define the ideal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of members of those groups. Individuals are not perceived for their unique qualities. Rather, they are assimilated to the prototype of the group to which they belong, and differences between prototypical members of different groups are accentuated, forming the basis for stereotypes (cf. Hogg, 2001).

Social-identity theory holds much in common with social-comparison theory. Social-identity theory focuses on how we evaluate the groups to which we belong. Social comparison focuses on how we evaluate ourselves as individuals within certain groups. Social-identity theory has a distinctly European flavor. Most modern social psychology is American, but the contributions of European, and then Australian, social psychologists, beginning with the work of Argyle, Moscovici, and Tajfel, has had an enormous impact on social psychology in recent years. At the turn of the century, the field of social psychology was becoming much more international.

The elaboration-likelihood model of persuasion

After an enormously creative burst of research on communication and persuasion generated by the Yale school in the decade or so following World War II, attitude research became somewhat less prominent in the 1960s and 1970s. Still, important work was being done on resistance to influence, the role of cognitive consistency in attitudes and attitude change, and the role of situational factors in influencing how people processed or yielded to persuasive attempts. A powerful and highly influential theoretical framing of the persuasion process and persuasion research was developed in the 1980s by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo. Their elaboration-likelihood model (ELM) distinguishes two routes to persuasion. One is a ‘central route’ whereby persuasion is effected by thoughtful processing, or elaboration, of the content of a persuasive message. The other is a ‘peripheral route’ whereby persuasion is effected not by the content of arguments themselves but by other ‘peripheral’ cues that signal to an audience that a message should be yielded to. Similar to the ELM approach to persuasion is Chaiken’s ‘heuristic-processing model’, which distinguishes systematic from heuristic processing, the latter marked by shortcuts and rules of thumb that guide a person toward judging the believability of a message.

For example, in the ELM, the expertise or trustworthiness of a communicator is a peripheral cue that the message should be accepted. Similarly, a high number of arguments in a message is a cue that there is lots of ammunition supporting the message and that it should be believed. Sometimes peripheral cues act independently to affect persuasion. Sometimes they affect how carefully an audience elaborates or processes the actual arguments
The self is one of the oldest topics in social psychology. William James’s classic (1890) chapter on ‘Consciousness of Self’ introduced several of the major issues in the study of the self, and his views remain vibrant and influential today. James dealt with issues of self-presentation, the unity as opposed to multiplicity of the self, self-esteem, and self-awareness. After World War II, important work on self-presentation appeared, notably the paper ‘On Face Work’ and the book *The Presentation of Self* by Erving Goffman (1955, 1959), and the book *Ingratiation* by Edward E. Jones (1964). Then the focus on self-attribution led to a resurgence of interest in the self. Important contributions included Wicklund’s (1975) theory of objective self-awareness, the closely related work by Carver and Scheier (1981) on self-attention and self-regulation, and Higgins’s (1987) work on self-discrepancy. All of these contributions focus on how people react to noting ways that they fall short of meeting ideal standards. Other important contributions include Tesser’s (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model, exploring the divergent reactions of feeling threatened by or basking in the reflected glory of the achievements of others to whom we are close; Steele’s (1988) self-affirmation theory, noted above, which offers a reinterpretation of cognitive-dissonance theory findings; and Linville’s (1987) theory of the beneficial effects of self-complexity. Recent work on self-esteem and self-enhancement is particularly influential at this writing (Kernis and Waschull, 1995; Leary and Baumeister, 2000; Sedikides and Strube, 1997).

Prejudice and stereotypes

Recently, social identity and self-categorization theories have contributed a great deal to understanding the dynamics of both intergroup perception and intergroup interaction. The concepts of categorization, assimilation of perceptions of individuals within groups to prototypes, and accentuation of intergroup differences (Turner, 1999) are powerful explanatory concepts. An important study by Devine (1989) focused attention on the extent to which people automatically and unconsciously categorize people and apply stereotypical thinking to them. She showed that even if people do not believe stereotypes, they affect their perceptions.

Devine’s work dovetails with other work examining the automatic processing of information. For example, Uleman et al.’s (1996) work on spontaneous trait inferences shows that people make dispositional judgments about others immediately on observing their behavior, without a conscious and complex causal analysis. Their work connects once again with questions of rationality. In that vein, Fiske and Neuberg (1990) argue that sometimes people use handy cognitive shortcuts, specifically schemas, in judging others, but at times they pay close attention to the data, and process them carefully. In short, work on intergroup and also interpersonal perception is extremely vital, and it is examining more carefully than ever the relatively thoughtful as opposed to
relatively effortless and unconscious contributions. Recent work has considered the role of language in prejudice and stereotypes (Maass, 1999; Ruscher, 1998), individual differences in prejudice (Duckitt, 2001), and the responses of targets of stereotypes (Steele et al., 2002).

**Evolutionary approaches**

In The Crowd, Gustave Le Bon put forth the view that even though humans had evolved into a superior species they were still capable of revealing their less noble animal ancestry. However, until recently, comparatively little work in social psychology considered the impact of evolution on human social behavior in everyday life. Starting with the publication of E.O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* in 1975, social psychologists began considering evolutionary perspectives with great energy (cf. Buss and Kenrick, 1998; Kenrick, 1994). One prominent example is the work that David Buss and his colleagues have done on human mating strategies, summarized in Buss's *The Evolution of Desire* (1994). Buss has tested a range of theoretical derivations from evolutionary principles, including the ideas that men attach high importance to women's physical attractiveness, since that can be taken as a clue to her fertility, while women attach more importance to men's economic capacity, status, dependability, and commitment, as these are signs that they have the motive and capacity to invest in the women's children (see also Berry, 2000). Other hypotheses have been derived concerning jealousy, casual sex, and points of harmony and conflict between the sexes.

Critics of evolutionary social psychology abound. A basic criticism is that the approach is too deterministic and offers explanations that cannot be convincingly tested, or are better explained in terms of social forces, or both. Perhaps, for example, men attach high importance to physical attractiveness because they have power in nearly every society and do not need to be as pragmatic as women in their choice of mates. Evolutionary theorists argue that there is really no incompatibility between evolutionary and cultural approaches, but the critics disagree. Time will tell what kind of force this perspective remains or becomes in social psychology. At the moment, it appears to be thriving.

**The role of culture**

The theme of cultural differences has been significant in social psychology at least since the work of Muzafer Sherif in the 1930s. As an immigrant from Turkey who had studied sociology and anthropology, Sherif was highly sensitive to the power of culture. This sensitivity informed his studies of group norm formation. Harry Triandis (1972) kept the concern with culture alive during much of the second half of the twentieth century. In recent years, a large number of social psychologists have studied cultural differences in basic social psychological processes, such as self-conception, emotion, and attribution, with particular emphasis on the differences between the individualistic, independent societies of North America and Europe and the interdependent societies of East Asia (Fiske et al., 1998; Kitayama and Markus, 2000). Intriguing findings include differences in the experience of emotions, with American participants experiencing emotions for a longer time and more intensely than their Japanese counterparts (Matsumoto et al., 1988), presumably due to American emphasis on themselves as individuals and their unique internal states. In addition, it appears that there are significant cultural differences in the correspondence bias. People in interdependent cultures are less prone to underestimate the force of situational contingencies on behavior (Fiske et al., 1998).

**Gender**

Questions about sex or gender differences have been explored for some time. Two early publications by Eleanor Maccoby (1966; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974) explored the existing literature in great depth and pointed to reliable differences in aggression, and in verbal, mathematical, and spatial abilities, but precious little else. An influential book by Kay Deaux (1976), *The Behavior of Women and Men*, discussed a variety of differences between the social behavior of women and men — for example, in attributions for success and failure (women are more apt than men to attribute their successes to nonability causal loci) — but emphasized contextual influences and the potential of both sexes to behave flexibly and responsively in different situations. This perspective has been further developed by Deaux and Major (1987) and is discussed in greater depth in the more recent treatment of gender by Deaux and LaFrance (1998). Their emphasis is explicitly not on sex or gender differences but on the interaction of a range of factors in influencing both men and women.

Another productive perspective on gender is the social-role theory of Alice Eagly (1987) and her colleagues. Combining this with meta-analytic techniques, they have explored questions such as gender differences in leadership effectiveness (overall, there are none) and highlighted the crucial role of gender expectations (sometimes called 'gender-role or sex-role spillover') in many domains (Eagly et al., 1995). It seems certain that gender will continue to be rich a field of study in the decades ahead, especially given the concerns of evolutionary social psychology and the study of 'the cultural matrix of social psychology' (Fiske et al., 1998).
Conclusion

Basic questions about social behavior go back to the ancients. Are men and women capable of governing themselves? Is their behavior governed by internal dispositions or the requirements of society and culture? Should we be optimistic or pessimistic about human potential and human performance? Are people rational or irrational? What hope is there for independent thought and action in the face of group pressures?

In reviewing the development of social psychology over the past 100 years or more, we are struck with the tremendous gain in knowledge combined with the intractability of the basic questions of human nature. We have learned a great deal about how people respond to social influence, about group dynamics and intergroup relations, and about social thought. The promise of learning more of real value is great. Further nuances of social behavior will be discovered, and the power of our thinking and methodologies will continue to generate new findings and continue to fascinate. However, basic questions, such as whether we should be more impressed with the shortcomings or the capacities of human social thought, will almost certainly remain unanswered. They are probably unanswerable. But the hunt for answers itself will engage us and enlighten us, and perhaps uplift us, for, if we are lucky, another 100 years.

SUMMARY

This chapter shows how psychology as a whole and then social psychology as part of the whole took shape in the twentieth century as scientific disciplines addressing fundamental philosophical questions of human nature. The earliest work focused on how groups influence individual performance. Later research explored conformity, the formation of norms, and whether people are active and thoughtful or merely reactive to social influence. During World War II research concentrated on urgent problems of persuasion and the ways people perceive each other. In the second half of the century research began on cognitive dissonance and self-justification as well as some of the subtleties of social influence, including how minorities influence majorities. Asch’s studies of conformity to unanimous majorities and Milgram’s studies of obedience to authority made clear the importance of scientific research on human potential and human frailty. Much attention was given to attribution theory and the more general problems of human social thinking. By the end of the century theory and research focused more on gender, stereotypes, culture, and the self. New perspectives, such as evolutionary psychology, competed for attention with more traditional domains of investigation such as social cognition, attitudes, and group behavior.

References


