**Introduction to Social Psychology**

When we read the newspaper, listen to the TV news, or browse an
online news site, we see hundreds of examples of how people affect
others. The media tells us which Hollywood actors are beautiful. The
public reacts when a fifty-six-year-old woman gives birth to twins. A
former janitor amasses a fortune and leaves it to the school where he
worked.

Social psychologists try to explain how other people influence
our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour; how we form impressions of other
people; and why stereotypes and prejudice flourish. They study how
people manage to persuade, influence, and attract us. Obedience to
authorities, group functioning, and helpfulness are part of social
psychology as well. Social psychology acknowledges that we move in and
out of one another’s lives, directly and indirectly, and all parties
are, in some way, affected.

**Social Psychology: A Working Definition**

Social Psychology is the scientific study of social behavior, how
the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals are influenced by
other people. Most social psychologists seem to focus their attention
on the following central task: Understanding how and why individuals
behave, think and feel as they do in situations involving other
persons.

“Social psychology is the scientific field that seeks to understand the nature and causes of individual behavior and thought in social situations.” In other words, social psychologists seek to understand how we think about and interact with others.



Explanation of the certain aspects of definition

• **Social psychology is Scientific in Nature:** although topics that

social psychologists study are totally different from the topics other natural sciences biology chemistry physics and earth sciences covers but the methods they employ are the similar in nature and orientation. That is why social psychology is called scientific in nature.

• **Social psychology focuses on the Behavior of Individuals:** social

psychologists realize that individuals do not exist in isolation
from social and cultural influences. Their major interest lies in
understanding the factors that shape the individual thoughts and

action of individual human being within social settings.

• **Social psychology Examines the Causes of Social Behavior and**

**Thought:**  social psychologists are principally concerned with
understanding the wide range of conditions that shape the social
behavior and thoughts of individuals their actions, feelings,
beliefs, memories, and inferences with respect to other persons.
Factors which effect the social interaction process are as
following:

o The Actions and Characteristics of Others: meaning what
 others say and do.

o Basic Cognitive Processes: such as memory and reasoning,
 processes that underlie our thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and
 judgment about others.

o Ecological Variables: direct or indirect impact of the
 physical environment such as temperature, crowding privacy
 and related factors.



o Cultural Context: in which social behavior and thoughts
 occur.

o Biological Factors and processes: Those are relevant to
 social behavior including certain aspect of our genetic
 inheritance.

o Evolutionary Psychology: A new branch of psychology that
 seeks to investigate the potential role of genetic factors
 in various aspects of human behavior

**Scope of Social Psychology** is quite broad. Some social psychologists
study perception and attitudes: how people view each other, how they
interpret other people’s behavior, and how their attitudes form and
change. Other social psychologists focus on various types on
interactions between people, including friendship and altruism,
prejudice and aggression, conformity and power. Social psychologists
also study how people act in groups, and how groups affect their
members.

Life space of the average college student

Environment

Classes

&

Roomates

Social Norms

Family

&

Friends

The Law

Job

&

Your

Boss

Person

Academic

&

Financial

Goals

Aspirations

Physical

You Needs

Intimacy

Hopes for

a Social

Life

**Social Psychology and Related Disciplines**

Sociology and psychology are social psychology’s parent disciplines.

**Social Psychology and Sociology**

People often confuse social psychology with sociology. They do share the same interest about studying how people behave in groups but most sociologists study groups from small to large (societies) while most social psychologist study individuals , how one person thinks about others, is influenced by them, relates to them. It also includes how groups affects individual and how and individual affects the group. It is more individualistic in nature.

Social psychologists rely heavily of experiments where they manipulate a factor, such as presence or absence of peer pressure, to see what effects it has of the individual. Whereas the factors sociologists study such as economic class and culture are typically difficult and unethical to manipulate.

**Social Psychology and Personality Psychology**

Both allies in their focus on the individual that is why APA
includes two subfields in same journal (the Journal of Personality and
Social Psychology and Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin). The
difference lies in Social psychology’s social behavior/ character.
Personality psychologists focus on private internal functioning and on
differences between individuals e.g. why some are more aggressive than
others etc. Social psychologists focus on our common humanity on how
people, in general, view and affect one another. They ask how social
situations can lead most people to act kind and cruel, to conform or
be independent, and to feel liking or prejudice. It focuses less on
differences among individuals and more on how people in general view
and affect one another.

Social psychology has shorter history with fewer heroes in its discipline whereas personality psychology is an old and famous discipline with many renowned heroes, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Karen Horney, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers.

**Historical Roots of Social Psychology**

In early 1900’s three major theoretical perspectives were developed by pioneering psychologists, each of which has left a mark on contemporary social psychology.

**1- Psychoanalytic Theory** by Sigmund Freud proposing that behavior is motivated from within by powerful internal drives and impulses such as sexuality and aggression.

**2- Behaviourism paradigm** developed by Ivan Pavlov, J. B. Watson, B. F.
Skinner and others, focused on the observable behavior of humans and
animals. They preferred to study what they could observe and measure
directly, that is, overt behavior and have no interest in feelings and
thought process. Stress on learning which occurs on the basis of past
experience.

**3- Gestalt Psychology** developed by Kohler, Koffka, Kurt Lewin and other European psychologists. Focus was on the way individuals perceive and understand objects, events and people. In their view people perceive situations or events not as made up of many discrete elements but rather as “dynamic wholes.”

All three think them as a whole and solid theoretical paradigm to
define human behavior and deny each other with brutal criticism. But
need arise to have the full and solid definition of certain paradigm
which covers all three to explain human behavior and it was the
independent discipline of social psychology. We can see that social
psychologists recognized that behavior is influenced by personal
motive and by emotional reactions individuals have to situations and
other people (psychoanalytic theory). They also show interest how we
learn to be helpful or to obey authority or to espouse conservative
political views. Or in broad term how does experience shape our
attitudes and behaviors? (Behaviorism) They also apply gestalt
principle of how we perceive and understand our world as a whole.

**The Early Years: Social Psychology Emerges**

1924 was the year when social psychology attains its position as
an independent discipline. In that year an important text named Social
Psychology was published by Floyd H. Allport. He argued that social
behavior results from many different factors, including the presence
of other persons and their specific actions. Also emphasized the value
of experimentation and discussed the actual research that has been
conducted on such topics as conformity, the ability to recognize
other’s emotions from their facial expression, and the impact of
audiences on task performances. The following two decades after the
publication of his book many researches were done on these issues.

Important mile stone researches in the field of social psychology
in this area were done by Muzafar Sherif and Kurt Lewin. Sherif (1935)
studied the impact of social norm - rules indicating how individual
ought to be have- and so contributed basic insights to our

understanding or pressures towards conformity. Kurt Lewin and his
colleagues basically carried out the revealing research on the nature
of leadership and other group processes. Lewin’s influence was so
profound on the field of social psychology that many of his students
join the field and become prominent contributors to the field. Their
names Leon Festinger, Harold Kelley, Morton Deutsch, Stanley
Schachter, Jhon Thibaut were famous psychologists during 1950’s 1960’s
and even 1970’s. Thus social psychology was an active growing field in
1930’s and contributed greater knowledge of social behavior.

**Social Psychology’s Youth: The 1940’s 1950’s and 1960’s**

Spurred by World War II social psychology continued its growth in 1940’s and 1950’s and focus was mainly on how the influence that groups and groups members exert on individual behavior; on the links between personality traits and behavior and on techniques to alter attitudes. This research was important to understand what happened in the war and how it was wined.

One of the most important events of this era was the development of the theory of **Cognitive Dissonance** (Festinger, 1957) proposing that human beings dislike inconsistency and strive to reduce it. The theory argues that people seek to eliminate inconsistencies between their attitudes that they hold or between their attitudes and their behavior. May be this theory seems quite sensible but leads to many unexpected predictions and results e.g., it suggest that offering individuals small rewards for stating views they don’t really hold is often more effective in getting them to change their opinions than offering them larger rewards for the same action.

In 1960’s social psychology had rapid growth and many field
studies and experiments enhanced the knowledge about different social
issues. Some important researches done in 1960’s were Interpersonal
Attraction and Romantic Love, Impression Formation, Attribution and
other aspects of Social Perception and many different aspects of
Social Influences such as Obedience, Conformity and Compliance.

**The 1970’s 1980’s and 1990’s: A Maturing Field**

Researches begun during 1960’s were expanded in this era and several new topics rose to prominence. Among them most important were Attribution (the process through which we seek to understand the causes of other’s behavior - why they act as they do) Gender Differences and Sex Discrimination (investigation of the extent to which the behavior of women and men actually differs, and the impact of negative stereotypes concerning the traits supposedly possessed by both gender). In addition three larger-scale important trends took shape during the 1980’s and 1990’s:

**1-** **Growing Influence of a Cognitive Perspective**.

As social psychologists have recognized the importance of cognitive factors -attitudes, beliefs, values, inferences- in social behavior. They focused their attention on the memory and reasoning in the social behavior set up. They recently sough to determine whether various forms of prejudice may stem at least in part, from the operation of basic cognitive processes, such as the tendency to remember only the information consistent with stereotypes of various groups, or tendencies to process information about one’s own social group from information about other social groups. The research conducted in this perspective in very impressive and added much new information in understating the social behavior.

**2- Growing Emphasis on Application: Using Social Knowledge.**

Recent decades are also marked by this second trend. Increasing number of social psychologists have turned their attention to practical questions concerning Personal Health, The legal Process, Social Behavior in Work Settings and a host of other issues. Kurt Lewin one of the founder’s remarked that there’s nothing as practical as a good theory”, by which he meant that theories of social behavior and thought developed through systematic research often turn out to be extremely useful in solving practical problems.

**3-** **Growing Emphasis on Social Diversity: Adopting a Multicultural Perspective:**

The final trend was the development of Multicultural Perspective: increased recognition of the importance of cultural factors and human diversity. Social psychologists have recognized that study results of one gender cannot be generalized on the other gender same is the case with cultural context , that if a study is done in America it cannot be generalized in Asia as both have certain cultural differences on the part of particular phenomena of study e.g., love, extra marital affairs etc. Due to this recognition many studies are now emphasized on both genders representation so that results can be formulated on the gender differences basis and many cross cultural studies have been done to find out the view about particular phenomena in different cultures.