

An Overview of Social Psychology

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What is it that shapes our attitudes? Why are some people such great leaders? How does prejudice develop, and how can we overcome it? These are just a few of the big questions of interest in the field of social psychology. Social psychologists [tackle issues](#) that can have a significant impact on individual health and well-being, from understanding why bullying behavior and aggression take place to analyzing why people sometimes [fail to help](#) individuals in need.

What Is Social Psychology?

According to psychologist [Gordon Allport](#), social psychology is a discipline that uses [scientific methods](#) "to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings." Essentially, social psychology is all about understanding how each person's individual behavior is influenced by the social environment in which that behavior takes place.

You probably already realize that other people can have a dramatic influence on the way you act and the choices you make. Consider how you might behave in a situation if you were all alone versus if there were other people in the room. The decisions you make and the behaviors you exhibit might depend on not only how many people are present but exactly who you are around. For example, you are likely to behave much differently when you are around a group of close friends than you would around a group of colleagues or supervisors from work.

Social psychology looks at a wide range of social topics, including:

- Group behavior
- Social perception
- [Leadership](#)
- [Nonverbal behavior](#)
- Conformity
- Aggression
- [Prejudice](#)

It is important to note that social psychology is not just about looking at social influences. [Social perception](#) and social interaction are also vital to understanding social behavior. The way that we [see other people](#) (and the way we think they see us) can play a powerful role in a wide variety of actions and decisions. Just think for a moment about how you sometimes act differently in a public setting than you might if you were at home by yourself. At home you might be loud and rambunctious, while in public you might be much more subdued and reserved.

Why is this? Because the people around us shape our thoughts, feelings, moods, attitudes, and perceptions. The presence of other people can make a difference in the choices we make and the actions we take.

While social psychology tends to be an academic field, the [research that social psychologists perform](#) can and does have a powerful influence on our understanding of various aspects of mental health and wellbeing. For example, research on conformity has contributed to our understanding of why teenagers sometimes go to such great lengths to fit in with their

social group—sometimes to the detriment of their own health and wellness. As a result, psychologists are able to develop public health programs and treatment approaches aimed at helping teenagers resist potentially harmful behaviors such as smoking, drinking, and substance use.

How Did People Become Interested in Social Psychology?

While Plato referred to the idea of the "crowd mind," and concepts such as [social loafing](#) and social facilitation were introduced in the late 1800s, it wasn't until after World War II that research on social psychology began in earnest.

The horrors of the Holocaust led researchers to study the effects of social influence, [conformity](#), and [obedience](#). What could explain why so many people participated in such terrible and evil actions, social psychologists wondered? Were people only following orders and bowing to social pressure, or were there some other forces at work that led people to engage in such devastating actions? By investigating these questions, social psychologists were able to gain a greater understanding of the power of societal forces such as authority, [compliance](#), and obedience.

Social psychologist Stanley Milgram, for example, was able to demonstrate just how far people are willing to go to obey authority figures. In a series of [now infamous experiments](#), Milgram and his colleagues ordered study participants to deliver what they believed was a potentially dangerous shock to another person. In reality, the shocks were not real and the other individual was only pretending to be hurt by the electrical pulses—but a whopping 65 percent of those who took part in the study delivered the maximum level of shock simply because an authority figure told them to do so.

Social psychology has continued to grow throughout the twentieth century, inspiring research that has contributed to our understanding of social experience and behavior. Our social world makes up such a tremendous part of our lives, so it is no wonder that this topic is so fascinating to many.

How Is Social Psychology Different From Other Disciplines?

It is important to differentiate social psychology from a few similar and related subjects. Social psychology is often confused with folk wisdom, [personality psychology](#), and sociology. What makes social psychology different? Unlike folk wisdom, which relies on anecdotal observations and subjective interpretation, social psychology employs scientific methods and the empirical study of social phenomena. Researchers do not just make guesses or assumptions about how people behave; they devise and carry out experiments that help point out relationships between different variables.

While personality psychology focuses on individual traits, characteristics, and thoughts, social psychology is focused on situations. Social psychologists are interested in the impact that the social environment and group interactions have on [attitudes](#) and behaviors.

Finally, it is important to distinguish between social psychology and sociology. While there are many similarities between the two, sociology tends to look at social behavior and influences at a very broad-based level. Sociologists are interested in the institutions and cultures that influence how people behave. Psychologists instead focus on situational variables that affect social behavior. While psychology and sociology both study similar topics, they are looking at these questions from different perspectives.

A Word From Verywell

What makes social psychology such an important topic? A quick glimpse at the daily news shows just how profoundly social problems can impact people's lives. By better understanding these issues, psychologists can look for ways to prevent, identify, and remedy such problems. Social psychologists focus on societal concerns that have a powerful influence on individual wellbeing as well as the health of society as a whole, including problems such as substance use, crime, prejudice, domestic abuse, public health, bullying, and aggression.

Social psychologists typically do not work directly in the field of mental health, but the results of their research do have a significant influence on how psychologists and mental health professionals treat behaviors that are influenced by social factors. Public health programs, for example, often rely on [persuasion techniques](#) identified by social psychologists to

encourage people to engage in healthy behaviors while avoiding potentially dangerous ones.

Source:

Allport, G. W. (1985). The historical background of social psychology. In G. Lindzey, and E. Aronson, (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 1, (3), 1-46.