

# Chapter 1

# Introducing Social Psychology



## Chapter Outline and Learning Objectives

### Defining Social Psychology

**LO 1.1** Define social psychology and distinguish it from other disciplines.

Social Psychology, Philosophy, Science, and Common Sense

How Social Psychology Differs From Its Closest Cousins

### The Power of the Situation

**LO 1.2** Summarize why it matters how people explain and interpret events, as well as their own and others' behavior.

Underestimating the Power of the Situation

The Importance of Construal

### Where Construals Come From: Basic Human Motives

**LO 1.3** Explain what happens when people's need to feel good about themselves conflicts with their need to be accurate.

The Self-Esteem Motive: The Need to Feel Good About Ourselves

The Social Cognition Motive: The Need to Be Accurate

### Why Study Social Psychology?

**LO 1.4** Explain why the study of social psychology is important.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Revel Interactive	Survey What Do You Think?	
	SURVEY	RESULTS
	Do you consider yourself good at predicting how people around you will behave and react under different circumstances?	
	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	

It is a pleasure to be your tour guides as we take you on a journey through the world of social psychology. As we embark on this journey, our hope is to convey our excitement about social psychology—what it is and why it matters. Not only do we, the authors, enjoy teaching this stuff (which we’ve been doing, combined, for more than 100 years), we also love contributing to the growth and development of this field. In addition to being teachers, each of us is a scientist who has contributed to the knowledge base that makes up our discipline. Thus, not only are we leading this tour, we also helped create some of its attractions. We will travel to fascinating and exotic places like prejudice, love, propaganda, education, conformity, aggression, compassion... all the rich variety and surprise of human social life. Ready? OK, let’s go!

Let’s begin with a few examples of the heroic, touching, tragic, and puzzling things that people do:

- Jorge Munoz is a school bus driver during the day but works a different “job” at night: Feeding the hungry. When he gets home from his last school bus run, he and his family cook meals for dozens of people using donated food and their own money. They then serve the food to people down on their luck who line up at a street corner in Queens, New York. Over a 4-year period Munoz has fed more than 70,000 people. Why does he do it? “When they smile,” Munoz says, “That’s the way I get paid.” (<http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=1606>)
- Kristen has known Martin for 2 months and feels that she is madly in love with him. “We’re soul mates!” she tells her best friend. “He’s the one!” “What are you thinking?” says the best friend. “He’s completely wrong for you! He’s as different from you as can be—different background, religion, politics; you even like different movies.” “I’m not worried,” says Kristen. “Opposites attract. I know that’s true; I read it on Wikipedia!”
- Janine and her brother Oscar are arguing about fraternities. Janine’s college didn’t have any, but Oscar is at a large state university in the Midwest, where he has joined Alpha Beta. He went through a severe and scary hazing ritual to join, and Janine cannot understand why he loves these guys so much. “They make the pledges do such stupid stuff,” she says. “They humiliate you and force you to get sick drunk and practically freeze to death in the middle of the night. How can you possibly be happy living there?” “You don’t get it,” Oscar replies. “Alpha Beta is the best of all fraternities. My frat brothers just seem more fun than most other guys.”
- Abraham Biggs Jr., age 19, had been posting to an online discussion board for 2 years. Unhappy about his future and that a relationship had ended, Biggs announced on camera that he was going to commit suicide. He took an overdose of drugs and linked to a live video feed from his bedroom. None of his hundreds of observers called the police for more than 10 hours; some egged him on. Paramedics reached him too late, and Biggs died.

- In the mid-1970s, several hundred members of the Peoples Temple, a California-based religious cult, immigrated to Guyana under the guidance of their leader, the Reverend Jim Jones, where they founded an interracial community called Jonestown. But within a few years some members wanted out, an outside investigation was about to get Jones in trouble, and the group's solidarity was waning. Jones grew despondent and, summoning everyone in the community, spoke to them about the beauty of dying and the certainty that everyone would meet again in another place. The residents willingly lined up in front of a vat containing a mixture of Kool-Aid and cyanide, and drank the lethal concoction. (The legacy of this massacre is the term "drinking the Kool-Aid," referring to a person's blind belief in ideology.) A total of 914 people died, including 80 babies and the Reverend Jones.

Why do many people help complete strangers? Is Kristen right that opposites attract or is she just kidding herself? Why did Oscar come to love his fraternity brothers despite the hazing they had put him through? Why would people watch a troubled young man commit suicide in front of their eyes, when, by simply flagging the video to alert the website, they might have averted a tragedy? How could hundreds of people be induced to kill their own children and then commit suicide?

All of these stories—the good, the bad, the ugly—pose fascinating questions about human behavior. In this book, we will show you how social psychologists go about answering them.

## Defining Social Psychology

### LO 1.1 Define social psychology and distinguish it from other disciplines.

The task of the psychologist is to understand and predict human behavior. To do so, social psychologists focus on the influence other people have on us. More formally, **social psychology** is the scientific study of the way in which people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people (Allport, 1985). When we think of social influence, the kinds of examples that readily come to mind are direct attempts at persuasion, whereby one person deliberately tries to change another person's behavior or attitude. This is what happens when advertisers use sophisticated techniques to persuade us to buy a particular brand of deodorant, or when our friends try to get us to do something we don't really want to do ("Come on, have another beer!"), or when the bullies use force or threats to get what they want.

The study of direct attempts at **social influence** is a major part of social psychology and will be discussed in our chapters on conformity, attitudes, and group processes. To the social psychologist, however, social influence is much broader than attempts by one person to change another person's behavior. Social influence shapes

### Social Psychology

The scientific study of the way in which people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people

### Social Influence

The effect that the words, actions, or mere presence of other people have on our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behavior



Our thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by our immediate surroundings, including the presence of other people—even mere strangers.

## Try It!

### Conflicting Social Influences

Think of situations in which you feel conflicting interpersonal pressures. For example, your close friends would like you to do one thing (for e.g., watching a movie), but your romantic partner would like you to do something entirely different (for

e.g., going out for dinner). Have you found yourself in such situations in which conflicting pressures from your partner versus your friends? How do you decide how to act in these situations?

our thoughts and feelings as well as our overt acts, and takes many forms other than deliberate attempts at persuasion. For example, we are often influenced merely by the *presence* of other people, including perfect strangers who are not interacting with us. Other people don't even have to be present: We are governed by the imaginary approval or disapproval of our parents, friends, and teachers and by how we expect others to react to us. Sometimes these influences conflict with one another, and social psychologists are especially interested in what happens in the mind of an individual when they do. For example, conflicts frequently occur when young people go off to college and find themselves torn between the beliefs and values they learned at home and the beliefs and values of their professors or peers. (See the Try It! above) We will spend the rest of this introductory chapter expanding on these issues, so that you will get an idea of what social psychology is, what it isn't, and how it differs from other, related disciplines.

### Social Psychology, Philosophy, Science, and Common Sense

Throughout history, philosophy has provided many insights about human nature. Indeed, the work of philosophers is part of the foundation of contemporary psychology. Psychologists have looked to philosophers for insights into the nature of consciousness (e.g., Dennett, 1991) and how people form beliefs about the social world (e.g., Gilbert, 1991). Sometimes, however, even great thinkers find themselves in disagreement with one another. When this occurs, how are we supposed to know who is right?

We social psychologists address many of the same questions that philosophers do, but we attempt to look at these questions scientifically—even questions concerning that great human mystery, love. In 1663, the Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza offered a highly original insight. In sharp disagreement with the hedonistic philosopher Aristippus, he proposed that if we fall in love with someone whom we formerly hated, that love will be stronger than if hatred had not preceded it. Spinoza's proposition was beautifully stated, but that doesn't mean it is true. These are *empirical* questions, meaning that their answers should be derived from experimentation or measurement rather than by personal opinion (Aronson, 1999; Wilson, 2015).

Now let's take another look at the examples that opened this chapter. Why did these people behave the way they did? One way to answer would simply be to ask them. We could ask Jorge Munoz why he spends so much time and money feeding the poor; we could ask the people who observed Abraham Biggs's suicide why they didn't call the police; we could ask Oscar why he enjoys fraternity life. The problem with this approach is that people are often unaware of the reasons behind their own responses and feelings (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 2002). People might come up with plenty of justifications for not calling the police to rescue Biggs, but those justifications might not be the *reason* they did nothing.

Another approach is to rely on common sense or folk wisdom. Social psychologists are not opposed to folk wisdom—far from it. The primary problem with relying



entirely on such sources is that they often disagree with one another. Consider what folk wisdom has to say about the factors that influence how much we like other people. We know that “birds of a feather flock together.” Of course, we say, thinking of the many examples of our pleasure in hanging out with people who share our backgrounds and interests. But folk wisdom also tells us—as it persuaded lovestruck Kristen—that “opposites attract.” Of course, we say, thinking of all the times we were attracted to people with different backgrounds and interests. Well, which is it? Similarly, are we to believe that “out of sight is out of mind” or that “absence makes the heart grow fonder”?

Social psychologists would suggest that there are some conditions under which birds of a feather do flock together, and other conditions under which opposites do attract. Similarly, in some conditions absence does make the heart grow fonder, and in others “out of sight” does mean out of mind. But it’s not enough to say both proverbs can be true. Part of the job of the social psychologist is to do the research that specifies the *conditions* under which one or another is most likely to take place.

Thus, in explaining why two people like each other—or any other topic of interest—social psychologists would want to know which of many possible explanations is the most likely. To do this, we have devised an array of scientific methods to test our assumptions, guesses, and ideas about human social behavior, empirically and systematically rather than by relying on folk wisdom, common sense, or the opinions and insights of philosophers, novelists, political pundits, and our grandmothers. Doing experiments in social psychology presents many challenges, primarily because we are attempting to predict the behavior of highly sophisticated organisms in complex situations. As scientists, our goal is to find objective answers to such questions as: What are the factors that cause aggression? What causes prejudice, and how might we reduce it? What variables cause two people to like or love each other? Why do certain kinds of political advertisements work better than others? In Chapter 2 we discuss the scientific methods social psychologists use to answer questions such as these.

## How Social Psychology Differs From Its Closest Cousins

Social psychology is related to other disciplines in the physical and social sciences, including biology, neuroscience, sociology, economics, and political science. Each examines the determinants of human behavior, but important differences set social psychology apart—most notably in its level of analysis. For biologists and neuroscientists, the level of analysis might be genes, hormones, or physiological processes in the brain. Although social psychologists sometimes draw on this approach to study the relationship between the brain and social behavior, their emphasis is, as we will see, more on how people interpret the social world.

Other social psychologists draw on the major theory of biology—evolutionary theory—to generate hypotheses about social behavior. In biology, evolutionary theory is used to explain how different species acquired physical traits, such as long necks.



NATO-led soldiers inspect the site of a suicide attack in Afghanistan. What causes a person to become a suicide bomber? Popular theories say such people must be mentally ill, alienated loners, or psychopaths. But social psychologists would try to understand the circumstances and situations that drive otherwise healthy, well-educated, bright people to commit murder and suicide for the sake of a religious or political goal.

## Evolutionary Psychology

The attempt to explain social behavior in terms of genetic factors that have evolved over time according to the principles of natural selection

In an environment where food is scarce, giraffes that happened to have long necks could feed on foliage that other animals couldn't reach. These giraffes were more likely to survive and reproduce offspring than were giraffes with shorter necks, the story goes, such that the "long neck" gene became dominant in subsequent generations.

But what about social behaviors, such as the tendency to be aggressive toward a member of one's own species or the tendency to be helpful to others? Is it possible that social behaviors also have genetic determinants that evolve through the process of natural selection, and if so, is this true in human beings as well as other animals? These are the questions posed by **evolutionary psychology**, which attempts to explain social behavior in terms of genetic factors that have evolved over time according to the principles of natural selection. The core idea is that evolution occurs very slowly, such that social behaviors that are prevalent today, such as aggression and helping behavior, are a result, at least in part, of adaptations to environments in our distant past (Brown & Cross, 2017; Buss, 2005; Neuberg, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2010). We will discuss in upcoming chapters how evolutionary theory explains social behavior (e.g., Chapter 10 on interpersonal attraction, Chapter 11 on prosocial behavior, and Chapter 12 on aggression).

We note here that a lively debate has arisen over the testability of evolutionary hypotheses. Because current behaviors are thought to be adaptations to environmental conditions that existed thousands of years ago, psychologists make their best guesses about what those conditions were and how specific kinds of behaviors gave people a reproductive advantage. But these hypotheses are obviously impossible to test with the experimental method. And just because hypotheses sound plausible does not mean they are true. For example, some scientists now believe that giraffes did not acquire a long neck to eat leaves in tall trees. Instead, they suggest, long necks first evolved in male giraffes to gain an advantage in fights with other males over access to females (Simmons & Scheepers, 1996). Which of these explanations is true? It's hard to tell. Evolutionary explanations can't be tested directly, because after all, they involve hypotheses about what happened thousands of years ago. They can, however, suggest novel hypotheses about why people do what they do in today's world, which can then be put to the test, as we will see in later chapters.

Well, if we aren't going to rely solely on an evolutionary or biological approach, how else might we explain why people do what they do, such as in the examples that opened this chapter? If you are like most people, when you read these examples you assumed that the individuals involved had some weaknesses, strengths, and personality traits that led them to respond as they did. Some people are leaders and others are followers; some people are public-spirited and others are selfish; some are brave and others are cowardly. Perhaps the people who failed to get help for Abraham Biggs were lazy, timid, selfish, or heartless. Given what you know about their behavior, would you loan them your car or trust them to take care of your new puppy?

Explaining people's behavior in terms of their traits is the work of personality psychologists, who generally focus on *individual differences*, that is, the aspects of people's personalities that make them different from others. Research on personality increases our understanding of human behavior, but social psychologists believe that explaining behavior primarily through personality traits ignores a critical part of the story: the powerful role played by social influence.

Consider again the tragedy at Jonestown. Remember that it was not just a handful of people who committed suicide there, but almost 100% of them. It is highly improbable that they were all mentally ill or had the same constellation of personality traits. If we want a richer, more thorough explanation of this tragic event, we need to understand what kind of power and influence a charismatic figure like Jim Jones possessed, the nature of the impact of living in a closed society cut off from other points of view, and other factors that could have caused mentally healthy people to obey him. In fact, as social psychologists have shown, the social conditions at Jonestown were such

that virtually anyone—even strong, nondepressed individuals like you or us—would have succumbed to Jones’s influence.

Here is a more mundane example. Suppose you go to a party and see a great-looking fellow student you have been hoping to get to know better. The student is looking uncomfortable, however—standing alone, not making eye contact, not talking to anyone who comes over. You decide you’re not so interested; this person seems pretty aloof, even arrogant. But a few weeks later you see the student again, now being super social and witty, the center of attention. So what is this person “really” like? Aloof and arrogant or charming and welcoming? It’s the wrong question; the answer is both and neither. All of us are capable of being shy in some situations and outgoing in others. A much more interesting question is: What factors were different in these two situations that had such a profound effect on the student’s behavior? That is a social psychological question. (See the Try It!)

For personality and clinical psychologists, the level of the analysis is the individual. For the social psychologist, the level of analysis is the individual in the context of a social situation—particularly the individual’s **construal** of that situation. The word *construal*, which means how people perceive, comprehend, and interpret the social world, is a favorite among social psychologists, because it conveys how important it is to get inside people’s heads and understand how they see the world, and how those construals are shaped by the social context. For example, to understand why people intentionally hurt one another, the social psychologist focuses on how people construe a specific social situation: Do they do so in a way that makes them feel frustrated? Does frustration always precede aggression? If people are feeling frustrated, under what conditions will they vent their frustration with an aggressive act and under what conditions will they restrain themselves? (See Chapter 12.)

Other social sciences are more concerned with social, economic, political, and historical factors that influence events. Sociology, rather than focusing on the individual,



Personality psychologists study qualities of the individual that might make a person shy, conventional, rebellious, and willing to wear a turquoise wig in public or a yellow shirt in a sea of blue. Social psychologists study the powerful role of social influence on how all of us behave.

### Construal

The way in which people perceive, comprehend, and interpret the social world

## Try It!

### Social Situations and Shyness

1. Think of a friend who is known to be shy because they do not talk much at social gatherings. Now, instead of viewing this friend as “a shy person,” try to think of this friend as someone who is afraid that their words might be misunderstood by people.
2. List the situations that you think are most likely to bring out your friend’s shy behavior.
3. List the situations that might bring forth a more outgoing behavior on your friend’s part. Being with a small group of friends he or she is at ease with? Being with a new person, but one who shares your friend’s interests?
4. Set up a social environment that you think might make your friend comfortable. Pay close attention to the effect that it has on your friend’s behavior—or yours.





The people in this photo can be studied from a variety of perspectives: as individuals or as members of a family, a social class, an occupation, a culture, or a region. Sociologists study the group or institution; social psychologists study the influence of those groups and institutions on individual behavior.

focuses on such topics as social class, social structure, and social institutions. Of course, because society is made up of collections of people, some overlap is bound to exist between the domains of sociology and those of social psychology. The major difference is that in sociology, *the level of analysis is the group, institution, or society at large*, whereas the level of analysis in social psychology is the individual within a group, institution, or society. So although sociologists, like social psychologists, are interested in causes of aggression, sociologists are more likely to be concerned with why a particular society (or group within a society) produces different levels of violence in its members. Why is the murder rate in the United States so much higher than in Canada or Europe? Within the United States, why is the murder rate higher in some geographic regions than in others? How do changes in society relate to changes in aggressive behavior?

Social psychology differs from other social sciences not only in the level of analysis, but also in what is being explained. *The goal of social psychology is to identify psychological properties that make almost everyone susceptible to social influence, regardless of social class or culture.* The laws governing the relationship between frustration and aggression, for example, are hypothesized to be true of

most people in most places, not just members of one gender, social class, culture, age group, or ethnicity.

However, because social psychology is a young science that developed mostly in the United States, some of its findings have not yet been tested in other cultures to see if they are universal. Nonetheless, our goal is to discover such laws. And increasingly, as methods and theories developed by American social psychologists are adopted by European, Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and South American social psychologists, we are learning more about the extent to which these laws are universal, as well as cultural differences in the way these laws are expressed, as well as cultural influences on how people interpret the social world (see Chapter 2). *Cross-cultural research* is therefore extremely valuable, because it sharpens theories, either by demonstrating their universality or by leading us to discover additional variables that help us improve our understanding and prediction of human behavior. We will offer many examples of cross-cultural research in this book.

In sum, social psychology is located between its closest cousins, sociology and personality psychology (see Table 1.1). Social psychology and sociology share an interest in the way the situation and the larger society influence behavior. Social psychology and personality psychology share an interest in the psychology of the individual. But social psychologists work in the overlap between those two disciplines: They emphasize the psychological processes shared by most people around the world that make them susceptible to social influence.

**Table 1.1** Social Psychology Compared to Related Disciplines

Biology and Neuroscience	Personality Psychology	Social Psychology	Sociology
The study of genes, hormones, or physiological processes in the brain	The study of the characteristics that make individuals unique and different from one another	The study of the psychological processes people have in common that make them susceptible to social influence	The study of groups, organizations, and societies, rather than individuals



## Review Questions

1. A social psychologist would tend to look for explanations of a young man's violent behavior *primarily* in terms of:
  - a. his aggressive personality traits.
  - b. possible genetic contributions.
  - c. how his peer group behaves.
  - d. what his father taught him.
2. Social psychologists would be interested in all of the following topics except:
  - a. Whether conscientious individuals are more responsive to punishment.
  - b. How behaviors of one's peer group might affect the way they act.
  - c. How the presence of others may shape the way we think about ourselves.
  - d. How performance of a group task can be influenced by the members in that group.
3. Which of the following is true about evolutionary psychology?
  - a. Most of our behaviors are rooted in biology and are unaffected by social situations.
  - b. Though inspirational, evolutionary theories can hardly be tested by conducting experiments.
  - c. Social behaviors do not have an evolutionary origin at all.
  - d. Many unexplained social phenomena can be explained by evolutionary hypotheses.
4. Which of the following is true about social psychology and personality psychology?
  - a. Personality psychology tests how situations influence individuals, whereas social psychology examines how individuals affect the situations.
  - b. Social psychology focuses on individual differences, whereas personality psychology focuses on how people behave in different situations.
  - c. Social psychology focuses on the influence of situations, which is typically not the main focus of personality psychology.
  - d. Social psychology is more closely related to clinical psychology, whereas personality psychology is more closely related to evolutionary psychology.
5. Which of the following is NOT one of the goals of social psychology?
  - a. To understand how people affect each other's behavior.
  - b. To understand people's construal processes in social situations.
  - c. To understand the biological roots for individual differences.
  - d. To understand how people from different cultures and social backgrounds think and behave.
6. Social psychology appears to have the largest overlap with which one of the following disciplines?
  - a. Biology and Neuroscience
  - b. Personality Psychology
  - c. Clinical Psychology
  - d. Sociology

## The Power of the Situation

**LO 1.2** Summarize why it matters how people explain and interpret events, as well as their own and others' behavior.

Suppose you go to a restaurant with a group of friends. The server comes over to take your order, but you are having a hard time deciding which pie you want. While you are hesitating, she impatiently taps her pen against her notepad, rolls her eyes toward the ceiling, scowls at you, and finally snaps, "Hey, I haven't got all day!" Like most people, you would probably think that she is a nasty or unpleasant person.

But suppose, while you are deciding whether to complain about her to the manager, a regular customer tells you that your "crabby" server is a single parent who was kept awake all night by the moaning of her youngest child, who was terribly sick; that her car broke down on her way to work and she has no idea where she will find the money to have it repaired; that when she finally arrived at the restaurant, she learned that her coworker was too drunk to work, requiring her to cover twice the usual number of tables; and that the short-order cook keeps screaming at her because she is not picking up the orders fast enough. Given all that information, you might now conclude that she is not a nasty person but an ordinary human under enormous stress.

This small story has huge implications. Most Americans will explain someone's behavior in terms of personality; they focus on the fish, and not the water the fish swims in. The fact that they fail to take the situation into account has a profound impact on how human beings relate to one another—such as, in the case of the server, whether they feel sympathy and tolerance or impatience and anger.

### Fundamental Attribution Error

The tendency to overestimate the extent to which people's behavior is due to internal, dispositional factors and to underestimate the role of situational factors

## Underestimating the Power of the Situation

The social psychologist is up against a formidable barrier known as the **fundamental attribution error**, which is the tendency to explain our own and other people's behavior entirely in terms of personality traits and to underestimate the power of social influence and the immediate situation. We are going to give you the basics of this phenomenon here, because you will be encountering it throughout this book.

Explaining behavior in terms of personality can give us a feeling of false security. When people try to explain repugnant or bizarre behavior, such as the people of Jonestown taking their own lives and killing their own children, they find it tempting and, in a strange way, comforting to write off the victims as flawed human beings. Doing so gives them the feeling that it could never happen to them. Ironically, this way of thinking actually increases our vulnerability to destructive social influences by making us less aware of our own susceptibility to them. Moreover, by failing to fully appreciate the power of the situation, we tend to oversimplify the problem, which can lead us to blame the victim in situations where the individual was overpowered by social forces too difficult for most of us to resist, as in the Jonestown tragedy.

To take a more everyday example, imagine a situation in which two people are playing a game and they must choose one of two strategies: They can play competitively and try to win as much money as possible and make sure their partner loses as much as possible, or they can play cooperatively and try to make sure they both win some money. How do you think each of your friends would play this game?

Few people find this question hard to answer; we all have a feeling for the relative competitiveness of our friends. Accordingly, you might say, "I am certain that my friend Jennifer, who is a hard-nosed business major, would play this game more competitively than my friend Anna, who is a soft-hearted, generous person." But how accurate are you likely to be? Should you be thinking about the game itself rather than who is playing it?

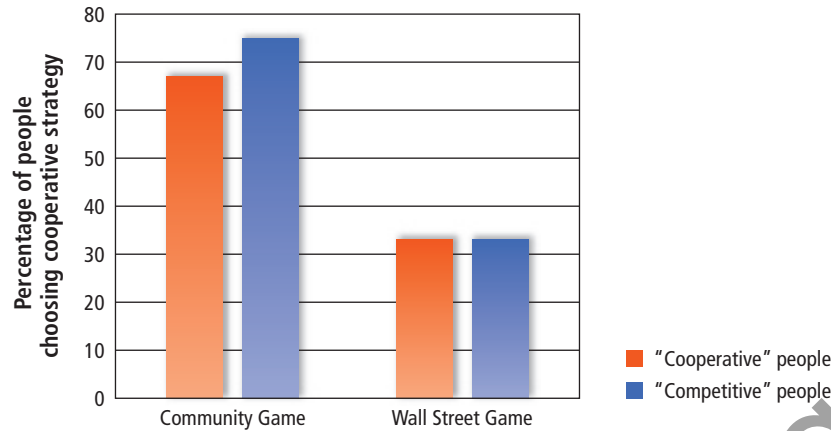
To find out, researchers at Stanford University conducted the following experiment (Lieberman, Samuels, & Ross, 2004). They described the game to resident assistants (RAs) in a student dorm and asked them to come up with a list of undergrads whom they thought were either especially cooperative or especially competitive. As expected, the RAs easily identified students who fit each category. Next, the researchers invited these students to play the game in a psychology experiment. There was one added twist: The researchers varied a seemingly minor aspect of the social situation—what the game was called. They told half the participants that they would be playing the Wall Street Game and the other half that they would be playing the Community Game. Everything else about the game was identical. People who were judged as either competitive or cooperative played a game that was called either the Wall Street Game or the Community Game, resulting in four conditions: cooperative people playing the Wall Street Game, cooperative people playing the Community Game, competitive people playing the Wall Street Game, or competitive people playing the Community Game.

Again, most of us go through life assuming that what really counts is an individual's true character, not something about the individual's immediate situation and certainly not something as trivial as what a game is called, right? Not so fast! As you can see in Figure 1.1, the name of the game made a tremendous difference in how people behaved. When it was called the Wall Street Game, approximately two-thirds of the students responded competitively; when it was called the Community Game, only a third responded competitively. The name of the game sent a powerful message about how the players should behave. But a student's alleged personality trait made no measurable difference in the student's behavior. The students labeled *competitive* were no more likely to adopt the competitive strategy than those who were labeled *cooperative*. We will see this pattern of results throughout this book: Aspects of the social

### Figure 1.1 Why the Name of the Game Matters

In this experiment, when the name of the game was the “Community Game,” players were far more likely to behave cooperatively than when it was called the “Wall Street Game”—regardless of their own cooperative or competitive personality traits. The game’s title conveyed social norms that trumped personality and shaped the players’ behavior.

(Data from Liberman, Samuels, & Ross, 2004)



situation that may seem minor can overwhelm the differences in people’s personalities (Ross & Ward, 1996).

If merely assigning a name to a game in a psychology experiment has such a large impact on the behavior of the players, what do you think the impact would be conveying to students in a classroom that the activity they were doing was competitive or cooperative? Suppose you are a seventh-grade history teacher. In one of your classes, you structure the learning experience so that it resembles the situation implied by the term “Wall Street Game.” You encourage competition, you tell your students to raise their hands as quickly as possible and to jeer at any incorrect answers given by other students. In your other class, you structure the learning situation such that the students are rewarded for cooperating with one another, for listening well, for encouraging one another and pulling together to learn the material. What do you suppose the effect these different situations might have on the performance of your students, on their enjoyment of school, and on their feelings about one another? Such an experiment will be discussed in Chapter 13 (Aronson & Patnoe, 2011).

Of course personality differences do exist and frequently are of great importance, but social and environmental situations are so powerful that they have dramatic effects on almost everyone. This is the domain of the social psychologist.

## The Importance of Construal

It is one thing to say that the social situation has profound effects on human behavior, but what exactly do we mean by the social situation? One strategy for defining it would be to specify the objective properties of the situation, such as how rewarding it is to people, and then document the behaviors that follow from these objective properties.

This is the approach taken by **behaviorism**, a school of psychology maintaining that to

### Behaviorism

A school of psychology maintaining that to understand human behavior, one need only consider the reinforcing properties of the environment

### Watch WHAT WOULD YOU DO?





**Watch** SURVIVAL TIPS! USING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY TO NAVIGATE YOUR WORLD**Gestalt Psychology**

A school of psychology stressing the importance of studying the subjective way in which an object appears in people's minds rather than the objective, physical attributes of the object

**Figure 1.2**

An illustration of the Gestalt approach to perception is optical illusions, such as the one shown in the picture below. Is this a picture of a duck looking to the left or a rabbit looking the right? Objectively it is neither; rather, it is how you are *construing* it at any particular point in time.



understand human behavior, one need only consider the reinforcing properties of the environment: When behavior is followed by a reward (such as money, attention, praise, or other benefits), it is likely to continue; when behavior is followed by a punishment (such as pain, loss, or angry shouts), it is likely to stop, or become extinguished. Dogs come when they are called because they have learned that compliance is followed by positive reinforcement (e.g., food or petting); children memorize their multiplication tables more quickly if you praise them, smile at them, and paste a gold star on their foreheads following cor-

rect answers. Behavioral psychologists, notably the pioneering behaviorist B. F. Skinner (1938), believed that all behavior could be understood by examining the rewards and punishments in the organism's environment.

Behaviorism has many strengths, and its principles explain some behavior very well. (See Chapter 10.) However, because the early behaviorists did not concern themselves with cognition, thinking, and feeling—concepts they considered too vague and mentalistic and not sufficiently anchored to observable behavior—they overlooked phenomena that are vital to the human social experience. Most especially, they overlooked the importance of *how people interpret their environments*.

For social psychologists, people's behavior is not influenced directly by the situation but rather, as we mentioned earlier, by their construal of it (Griffin & Ross, 1991; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). For example, if a person approaches you, slaps you on the back, and asks you how you are feeling, your response will depend not on what that person has done, but on how you *construe* (i.e., interpret) that behavior. You might construe these actions differently depending on whether they come from a close friend who is concerned about your health, a casual acquaintance who is just passing the time of day, or a car salesperson attempting to be nice for the purpose of selling you a used car. And your answer will vary also, even if the question about your health were worded the same and asked in the same tone of voice. You would be unlikely to say, "Actually, I'm feeling pretty worried about this kidney pain" to a salesperson, but you might tell your close friend.

The emphasis on construal has its roots in an approach called **Gestalt psychology**. First proposed as a theory of how people perceive the physical world, Gestalt psychology holds that we should study the subjective way in which an object appears in people's minds (the *gestalt*, or whole) rather than the way in which the objective, physical attributes of the object combine. An illustration of this point is

how people perceive optical illusions like the one shown in Figure 1.2. What do you see in that figure? Do you see a duck looking to the left or a rabbit looking the right? Objectively it is neither; rather, it is how you are *construing* it at any particular point in time. That is, according to Gestalt psychology, one must focus on the phenomenology of the perceivers—on how an object appears to them—instead of on its objective components.

The Gestalt approach was formulated by German psychologists in the first part of the twentieth century. In the late 1930s, several of these psychologists fled to the United States to escape the Nazi regime. Among the émigrés was Kurt Lewin, generally considered the founding father of modern experimental social psychology. As a young German Jewish professor in the 1930s, Lewin experienced the anti-Semitism rampant in Nazi Germany. The experience profoundly affected his thinking, and once he moved to the United States, Lewin helped shape American social psychology, directing it toward a deep interest in exploring the causes and cures of prejudice and ethnic stereotyping.

As a theorist, Lewin took the bold step of applying Gestalt principles beyond the perception of objects—such as the duck/rabbit picture above—to how we perceive the social world. It is often more important to understand how people perceive, comprehend, and interpret each other's behavior, he said, than it is to understand its objective properties (Lewin, 1943). "If an individual sits in a room trusting that the ceiling will not come down," he said, "should only his 'subjective probability' be taken into account for predicting behavior or should we also consider the 'objective probability' of the ceiling's coming down as determined by engineers? To my mind, only the first has to be taken into account" (p. 308).

Social psychologists soon began to focus on the importance of how people construe their environments. Fritz Heider (1958), another early founder of social psychology, observed, "Generally, a person reacts to what he thinks the other person is perceiving, feeling, and thinking, in addition to what the other person may be doing" (p. 1). We are busy guessing all the time about the other person's state of mind, motives, and thoughts. We may be right—but often we are wrong.

That is why construal has major implications. In a murder trial, when the prosecution presents compelling evidence it believes will prove the defendant guilty, the verdict always hinges on precisely how each jury member construes that evidence. These construals rest on a variety of events and perceptions that often bear no objective relevance to the case. During cross-examination, did a key witness come across as being too remote or too arrogant? Did the prosecutor appear to be smug, obnoxious, or uncertain?

A special kind of construal is what Lee Ross calls **naïve realism**, that is, the conviction that we perceive things "as they really are," underestimating how much we are interpreting or "spinning" what we see. People with opposite political views, for example, often can't even agree on the facts; both sides think that they are "seeing as it really is," when in fact both are probably letting their beliefs color their interpretation of the facts. We tend to believe, therefore, that if other people see the same things differently, it must be because *they* are biased (Ehrlinger, Gilovich, & Ross, 2005; Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Ross, 2010). Ross has been working closely with Israeli and Palestinian negotiators who are trying to resolve the decade's long conflict between Israel and Palestine. These negotiations frequently run aground because of naïve realism; each side assumes that other reasonable people see things the same way they do. "[E]ven when each side recognizes that the other side perceives the issues differently," says Ross, "each thinks that the other side is biased while they themselves are objective and that their own perceptions of reality should provide the basis for settlement" (Ross, 2010). So both sides resist compromise, fearing that their "biased" opponent will benefit more than they.



Kurt Lewin (1890–1947).

### Naïve Realism

The conviction that we perceive things "as they really are," underestimating how much we are interpreting or "spinning" what we see



Research by social psychologists on construal shows why negotiation between nations can be so difficult: Each side thinks that it sees the issues clearly but that the other side is “biased.”

In a simple experiment, Ross took peace proposals created by Israeli negotiators, labeled them as Palestinian proposals, and asked Israeli citizens to judge them. The Israelis liked the Palestinian proposal attributed to Israel more than they liked the Israeli proposal attributed to the Palestinians. Ross (2010) concludes, “If your own proposal isn’t going to be attractive to you when it comes from the other side, what chance is there that the *other* side’s proposal is going to be attractive when it comes from the other side?” The hope is that once negotiators on both sides become fully aware of this phenomenon and how it impedes conflict resolution, a reasonable compromise will be more likely.

You can see that construals range from the simple (as in the question “How do you see it?”) to the remarkably complex (international negotiations). And they affect all of us in our everyday lives. Imagine that Jason is a college student who admires Maria from afar. As a budding social psychologist, you

have the job of predicting whether or not Jason will ask Maria to have dinner with him. To do this, you need to begin by viewing Maria’s behavior through Jason’s eyes—that is, by seeing how Jason interprets her behavior. If she smiles at him, does Jason construe her behavior as mere politeness, the kind of politeness she would extend to any of the dozens of nerds and losers in their class? Or does he view her smile as an encouraging sign that inspires him to ask her out? If she ignores him, does Jason figure that she’s playing hard to get, or does he take it as a sign that she’s not interested in him? To predict what Jason will do, it is not enough to know Maria’s behavior; we must know how Jason construes her behavior. But how are these construals formed? Stay tuned.

#trending

## Medals for Sustainability!

Countries have time and again recognized the power of construal in getting their citizens to interpret proposed initiatives in a favorable light by putting positive labels on initiatives they wish to implement. Recently, Japan, the host country of the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, introduced the “Tokyo 2020 Medal Project” as the official “Nationwide Participation Programme” and promised the world to deliver the “most innovative Olympic games ever organized”. The ingenious idea of using precious metals extracted from used or discarded electronics to create the Olympic medals was soon revealed and collections toward this project started in April 2017. In a span of two years, the citizens of the country willfully donated approximately 6.21 million used mobile phones and other electronics, which in turn also saved Japan millions in operating costs. With a total of 1,621 municipalities participating in this initiative, over 5,000 gold, silver, and bronze medals were

produced using 100 percent of the metals contributed by the people of Japan.

The obvious explanation for this successful recycling effort is related to how the Japanese construed these solicitations by the authorities who hoped that this initiative would raise awareness about the amount of e-waste generated annually all around the world. Instead of publicizing the donation drive in dull formal statements, the “Everyone’s Medal” program was promoted as a community effort which would enable Japanese citizens to contribute to the Games and a successful hosting of the event in a much more personal manner. As a result, the campaign boasted of a 90 percent nationwide participation rate, which further went to prove how a tiny tweak in communication can bolster an altered construal and ultimately one’s willingness to help.



## Review Questions

- You are crossing the road when a car jumps the red light and almost hits you. You assume that the person is a reckless driver, but the driver is actually on his way to the hospital with a sick person in his car. Your assumption about the other person is an example of
  - Personality construction.
  - Fundamental attribution error.
  - Random guess.
  - None of the above.
- Which of the following statements is true about Wall Street Game?
  - Calling it “Community Game” makes people more cooperative and calling it “Wall Street Game” makes people more competitive.
  - Calling it either “Community Game” or “Wall Street Game” has minimal effects on people’s cooperative behaviors.
  - Calling it “Community Game” does not make people more cooperative while calling it “Wall Street Game” makes people more competitive.
  - Calling it “Community Game” makes people more cooperative while calling it “Wall Street Game” does not make people more competitive.
- A person approaches you at the bus stop. He asks you if you would be willing to give him \$2 for taking the next bus as he has just lost his wallet. According to social psychologists, which of the following reasons will most likely influence your decision?
  - The person’s physical appeal.
  - The person’s gender.
  - The person’s age.
  - Your construal about the situation.
- Gestalt psychology states that:
  - Our views on most objects are biased.
  - We tend to construe situations objectively.
  - We perceive the world through subjective phenomenology.
  - All of the above.
- “Naïve Realism” refers to:
  - A type of bias observed primarily in younger people.
  - Our tendency to misbelieve that our views are always objective.
  - A notion that most people are unrealistic.
  - A tendency to naively believe things are accurate when in fact they are not.

## Where Construals Come From: Basic Human Motives

**LO 1.3** Explain what happens when people’s need to feel good about themselves conflicts with their need to be accurate.

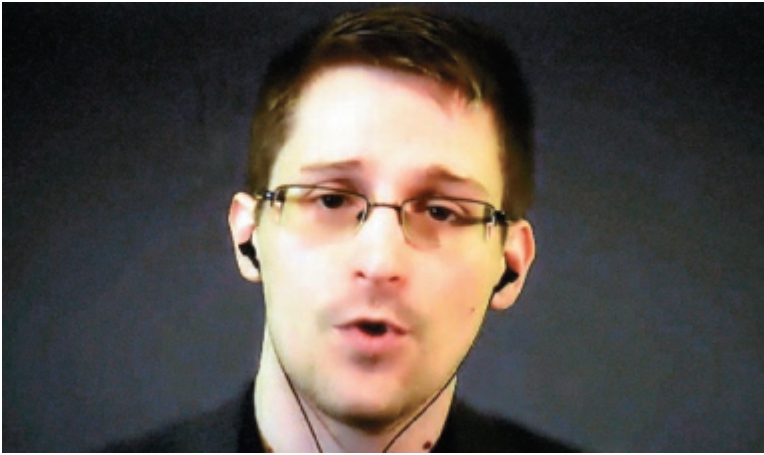
How will Jason determine why Maria smiled at him? If it is true that subjective and not objective situations influence people, we need to understand how people arrive at their subjective impressions of the world. What are people trying to accomplish when they interpret the social world? Are they concerned with making an interpretation that places them in the most positive light (e.g., Jason’s deciding that “Maria is ignoring me just to make me jealous”) or with making the most accurate interpretation, even if it is unflattering (e.g., “Painful as it may be, I must admit that she would rather go out with a sea slug than with me”)? Social psychologists seek to understand the fundamental motives that determine why we construe the social world the way we do.

We human beings are complex organisms. At any given moment, various intersecting motives underlie our thoughts and behaviors, including hunger, thirst, fear, a desire for control, and the promise of love and other rewards. (See Chapters 10 and 11.) Social psychologists emphasize the importance of two central motives in steering people’s construals: *the need to feel good about ourselves* and *the need to be accurate*. Sometimes, each of these motives pulls us in the same direction. Often, though, these motives tug us in opposite directions, where to perceive the world accurately requires us to admit that we have behaved foolishly or immorally.

Leon Festinger, one of social psychology’s most innovative theorists, realized that it is precisely when these two motives pull in opposite directions that we can gain our most valuable insights into the workings of the mind. To illustrate, imagine that you are the president of the United States and your country is engaged in a difficult and costly war. You have poured hundreds of billions of dollars into that war, and it has



Leon Festinger (1919–1989) wrote: “If the empirical world looks complicated, if people seem to react in bewilderingly different ways to similar forces, and if I cannot see the operation of universal underlying dynamics, then that is my fault. I have asked the wrong questions; I have, at a theoretical level, sliced up the world incorrectly. The underlying dynamics are there, and I have to find the theoretical apparatus that will enable me to reveal these uniformities” (Festinger, 1980, p. 246). Finding and illuminating those underlying dynamics is the goal of social psychology.



This is Edward Snowden, a former computing contractor for the National Security Agency. Snowden's release in 2013 of thousands of classified documents related to the U.S. government's surveillance programs led the Department of Justice to charge him with espionage. Some have argued that Snowden is a spy, a traitor, and a criminal who should be brought back to the United States from his asylum in Russia to face trial. Others view him as a whistle-blower, a patriot, and a hero fighting to protect privacy rights and inform the American public of what its government is up to (in fact, here you see him pictured receiving a German peace prize, a prize he was only able to accept via Skype). Each side is sure that they are right. Where do differing construals come from, and what are their consequences?

consumed tens of thousands of American lives as well as thousands more lives of innocent civilians. The war seems to be at a stalemate; no end is in sight. You frequently wake up in the middle of the night, bathed in the cold sweat of conflict: On the one hand, you deplore all the carnage that is going on; on the other hand, you don't want to go down in history as the first American president to lose a war.

Some of your advisers tell you that they can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and that if you intensify the bombing or add thousands more troops, the enemy will soon capitulate and the war will be over. This would be a great outcome for you: Not only will you have succeeded in achieving your military and political aims, but history will consider you to have been a great leader as well. Other advisers, however, believe that intensifying the bombing will only strengthen the enemy's resolve; they advise you to sue for peace.

Which advisers are you likely to believe? President Lyndon Johnson faced this exact dilemma in the 1960s, with the war in Vietnam; so did George W. Bush in 2003, when the war in Iraq

did not end in 6 weeks as he had predicted; so did Barack Obama and Donald Trump, in 2009 and 2017, respectively, in deciding whether to invest more troops in the war in Afghanistan. Most presidents have chosen to believe their advisers who suggest escalating the war, because if they succeed in winning, the victory justifies the human and financial cost; but withdrawing not only means going down in history as a president who lost a war, but also having to justify the fact that all those lives and all that money have been spent in vain. As you can see, the need to feel good about our decisions can fly in the face of the need to be accurate, and can have catastrophic consequences (Draper, 2008; McClellan, 2008; Woodward, 2010). In Johnson's case, the decision to increase the bombing *did* strengthen the enemy's resolve, thereby prolonging the war in Vietnam.

## The Self-Esteem Motive: The Need to Feel Good About Ourselves

### Self-Esteem

People's evaluations of their own self-worth—that is, the extent to which they view themselves as good, competent, and decent

Most people have a strong need to maintain reasonably high **self-esteem**—that is, to see themselves as good, competent, and decent (Aronson, 1998, 2007; Baumeister, 1993; Tavis & Aronson, 2007). Given the choice between distorting the world to feel good about themselves and representing the world accurately, people often take the first option. They put a slightly different spin on the matter, one that puts them in the best possible light. You might consider your friend Roger to be a nice guy but an awful slob—somehow he's always got stains on his shirt and empty food cartons all over his kitchen. Roger, though, probably describes himself as being casual and "laid back."

Self-esteem is obviously a beneficial thing, but when it causes people to justify their actions rather than learn from them, it can impede change and self-improvement. Suppose a couple gets divorced after 10 years of a marriage made difficult by the husband's irrational jealousy. Rather than admitting the truth—that his jealousy and possessiveness drove his wife away—the husband blames the breakup of his marriage on her; she was not responsive enough to his needs. His interpretation serves a purpose: It makes him feel better about himself (Simpson, 2010). The consequence of this distortion, of course, is that learning from experience becomes unlikely. In his next

marriage, the husband will probably recreate the same problems. Acknowledging our deficiencies is difficult, even when the cost is failing to learn from our mistakes.

**SUFFERING AND SELF-JUSTIFICATION** Moreover, the need to maintain our self-esteem can have paradoxical effects. Let's go back to one of our early scenarios: Oscar and the hazing he went through to join his fraternity. Personality psychologists might suggest that only extraverts who have a high tolerance for embarrassment would want to be in a fraternity. Behavioral psychologists would predict that Oscar would dislike anyone or anything that caused him pain and humiliation. Social psychologists, however, have found that the major reason that Oscar and his fellow pledges like their fraternity brothers so much was *because* of the degrading hazing rituals.

Here's how it works. Suppose Oscar freely chose to go through a severe hazing to become a member of the fraternity but later discovers unpleasant things about his fraternity brothers. If he were completely honest with himself he would conclude, "I'm an idiot; I went through all of that pain and embarrassment only to live in a house with a bunch of jerks." But saying "I'm an idiot" is not exactly the best way to maintain one's self-esteem, so instead Oscar puts a positive spin on his situation. "My fraternity brothers aren't perfect, but they are there when I need them and this house sure has great parties." He justifies the pain and embarrassment of the hazing by viewing his fraternity as positively as he can.

An outside observer like his sister Janine, however, can see the downside of fraternity life more clearly. The fraternity dues make a significant dent in Oscar's budget, the frequent parties take a toll on the amount of studying he can do, and consequently his grades suffer. But Oscar is motivated to see these negatives as trivial; indeed, he considers them a small price to pay for the sense of brotherhood he feels. He focuses on the good parts of living in the fraternity, and he dismisses the bad parts as inconsequential.

The take-home message is that human beings are motivated to maintain a positive picture of themselves, in part by justifying their behavior, and that under certain specifiable conditions, this leads them to do things that at first glance might seem surprising or paradoxical. They might prefer people and things for whom they have suffered to people and things they associate with ease and pleasure.

## The Social Cognition Motive: The Need to Be Accurate

Even when people are bending the facts to see themselves as favorably as they can, most do not live in a fantasy world. After all, it would not be advisable to sit in our rooms thinking that it's simply a matter of time before we become a movie star, lead singer in a rock band, the best player on a World Cup soccer team, or President of the United States, all the while eating, drinking, and smoking as much as we want because surely we will live to be 100. We might say that people bend reality but don't completely break it. Yes, we try to see ourselves in a favorable light, but we are also quite good at scoping out the nature of the social world. That is, we are skilled at **social cognition**, which is the study of how people select, interpret, remember, and use information to make judgments and decisions (Fiske & Taylor, 2017; Markus &



These first-year students are being "welcomed" to their university by seniors who subject them to hazing. Hazing is sometimes silly, but it is often dangerous as well (and even fatal), leading college campuses to crack down on the practice. One difficulty faced by such efforts is that for all of its downsides, hazing can also build group cohesiveness. Does this explanation sound far-fetched? In Chapter 6 we will see a series of laboratory experiments that indeed show that people often come to love what they suffer for.

### Social Cognition

How people think about themselves and the social world; more specifically, how people select, interpret, remember, and use social information to make judgments and decisions



We rely on a series of expectations and other mental short-cuts in making judgments about the world around us, from important life decisions to which cereal to buy at the store, a conclusion with which advertisers and marketers are very well aware.



Zajonc, 1985; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Researchers who investigate processes of social cognition begin with the assumption that all people try to view the world as accurately as possible. They regard human beings as amateur sleuths who are doing their best to understand and predict their social world.

Just as the need to preserve self-esteem can occasionally run aground, however, so too can the need to be accurate. People are not perfect in their effort to understand and predict, because they almost never know all the facts they need to judge a given situation completely accurately. Whether it is a relatively simple decision, such as which breakfast cereal offers the best combination of healthfulness and tastiness, or a slightly more complex decision, such as our desire to buy the best car we can for under \$20,000, or a much more complex decision, such as choosing a partner who will make us deliriously happy for the rest of our lives, it is usually impossible to gather all the relevant information in advance. Moreover, we make countless decisions every day. No one has the time and stamina to gather all the facts for each of them.

Does this sound overblown? Aren't most decisions fairly easy? Let's take a closer look. Which breakfast cereal is better for you, Lucky Charms or Quaker Granola with oats and raisins? If you are like most of our students, you answered, "Quaker Granola." After all, Lucky Charms is a kids' cereal, full of sugar and cute little marshmallows, with a picture of a leprechaun on the box. Quaker Granola cereal boxes have pictures of healthy granola and fruit, and doesn't *natural* mean "good for you"? If that's the way you reasoned, you have fallen into a common cognitive trap: You have generalized from the cover to the product. A careful reading of the ingredients in small print will reveal that, per one cup serving, Quaker Granola has 400 calories, 20 grams of sugar, and 12 grams of fat. In contrast, a cup of Lucky Charms has 147 calories, 13 grams of sugar, and 1 gram of fat. Even in the simple world of cereals, things are not always what they seem.

Thus, even when we are trying to perceive the social world as accurately as we can, there are many ways in which we can go wrong, ending up with the wrong impressions.

## Review Questions

1. Which of the following is true about social cognition?
  - a. Most people would rather ignore reality completely to feel better about themselves.
  - b. Most people try to have an accurate view of the world but often do not have enough information to make accurate judgments.
  - c. Most people try to have an accurate view of the world, and most people's world view is close to a 100 percent accurate.
  - d. Most people are not concerned with having accurate information when they make decisions or interpret a situation.

2. Which of the following is most true about people with high self-esteem?
  - a. Most people change the way they interpret events in order to preserve their self-esteem.
  - b. Few people care about maintaining their high self-esteem.
  - c. Most people will do things that are against their morals or against the law in order to preserve their self-esteem.
  - d. Most people prefer to see the world accurately, even if this means damaging their self-esteem.
3. According to the social cognition approach,
  - a. People almost always form accurate impressions about the social world.
  - b. People rarely form accurate impressions of the social world.
  - c. When viewing the social world, people's main goal is to feel good about themselves.
  - d. Even when people are trying to perceive the social world as accurately as they can, there are many ways in which they can go wrong, ending up with the wrong impressions.

## Why Study Social Psychology?

### LO 1.4 Explain why the study of social psychology is important.

We defined social psychology as the scientific study of social influence. But why do we want to understand social influence in the first place? What difference does it make whether our behavior has its roots in the desire to be accurate or to bolster our self-esteem?

The basic answer is simple: We are curious. Social psychologists are fascinated by human social behavior and want to understand it on the deepest possible level. In a sense, all of us are social psychologists. We all live in a social environment, and we are all more than mildly curious about such issues as how we become influenced, how we influence others, and why we fall in love with some people, dislike others, and are indifferent to still others. You don't have to be with people literally to be in a social environment. Social media is a social psychologist's dream laboratory because it's all there: love, anger, bullying, bragging, affection, flirting, wounds, quarrels, friending and unfriending, pride and prejudice.

Many social psychologists have another reason for studying the causes of social behavior: to contribute to the solution of social problems. This goal was present at the founding of the discipline. Kurt Lewin, having barely escaped the horrors of Nazi Germany, brought to the United States his passionate interest in understanding how the transformation of his country had happened. Ever since, social psychologists have been keenly interested in their own contemporary social challenges, as you will discover reading this book. Their efforts have ranged from reducing violence and prejudice to increasing altruism and tolerance (Chapters 11 and 13). They study such pressing issues as how to induce people to conserve natural resources like water and energy, practice safe sex, or eat healthier food (Chapter 7). They study the effects of violence in the media (Chapter 12). They work to find effective strategies to resolve conflicts within groups—whether at work or in juries—and between nations (Chapter 9). They explore ways to raise children's intelligence through environmental interventions and better



Social psychology can help us study social problems and find ways to solve them. Social psychologists might study whether children who watch violence on television become more aggressive themselves—and, if so, what kind of intervention might be beneficial.

**Watch** WHY IS SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY IMPORTANT?

We are now ready to begin our tour of social psychology in earnest. So far, we have been emphasizing the central theme of social psychology: the enormous power of most social situations. As researchers, our job is to ask the right questions and to find a way to capture the power of the social situation and bring it into the laboratory for detailed study. If we are adept at doing that, we will arrive at truths about human behavior that are close to being universal. And then we may be able to bring our laboratory findings into the real world—for the ultimate betterment of our society.

## Summary

### LO 1.1 Define social psychology and distinguish it from other disciplines.

- **Defining Social Psychology** Social psychology is defined as the scientific study of the way in which people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people. Social psychologists are interested in understanding how and why the social environment shapes the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the individual.
- **Social Psychology, Philosophy, Science, and Common Sense** Social psychologists approach the understanding of social influence differently from philosophers, journalists, or the layperson. Social psychologists develop explanations of social influence through empirical methods, such as experiments in which the variables being studied are carefully controlled. The goal of the science of social psychology is to discover universal laws of human behavior, which is why cross-cultural research is often essential.
- **How Social Psychology Differs From Its Closest Cousins** Some social psychologists attempt to explain social behavior in terms of genetic factors that have evolved over time according to the principles of natural selection, adopting the approach of *evolutionary psychology*. Such ideas are hard to

school programs, and reduce the high school dropout rate of minority students. They study happier topics, too, such as passion, liking, and love—and what sustains them (Chapter 10).

Throughout this book, we will examine many other examples of the application of social psychology to real-world problems. For interested readers, we have included three final chapters on health, the environment, and law. We hope that by understanding the fundamental causes of behavior as social psychologists study them, you will also be better able to change your own self-defeating or misguided behavior, improve your relationships, and make better decisions.

test experimentally but can generate novel hypotheses about social behavior that can be tested scientifically. When trying to explain social behavior, personality psychologists explain the behavior in terms of the person's individual character traits. Although social psychologists would agree that personalities vary, they explain social behavior in terms of the *power of the social situation* to shape how one acts. *The level of analysis for social psychology is the individual in the context of a social situation.* In contrast, the level of analysis for sociologists is the group, institution, or society at large. Social psychologists seek to identify universal properties of human nature that make everyone susceptible to social influence regardless of their social class, gender, or culture.

### LO 1.2 Summarize why it matters how people explain and interpret events, as well as their own and others' behavior.

- **The Power of the Situation** Individual behavior is powerfully influenced by the social environment, but many people don't want to believe this.
- **Underestimating the Power of the Situation** Social psychologists must contend with the *fundamental attribution error*, the tendency to explain



our own and other people's behavior entirely in terms of personality traits and to underestimate the power of social influence. But social psychologists have shown time and again that social and environmental situations are usually more powerful than personality differences in determining an individual's behavior.

- **The Importance of Construal** Social psychologists have shown that the relationship between individuals and situations is a two-way street, so it is important to understand not only how situations influence individuals, but also how people *perceive and interpret* the social world and the behavior of others. These perceptions are more influential than objective aspects of the situation itself. The term *construal* refers to the world as it is interpreted by the individual.

**LO 1.3 Explain what happens when people's need to feel good about themselves conflicts with their need to be accurate.**

- **Where Construals Come From: Basic Human Motives** The way in which an individual construes (perceives, comprehends, and interprets) a situation is largely shaped by two basic human motives: *the need to feel good about ourselves* and *the need to be accurate*. At times these two motives tug in opposite directions; for

example, when an accurate view of how we acted in a situation would reveal that we behaved selfishly.

- **The Self-Esteem Motive: The Need to Feel Good About Ourselves** Most people have a strong need to see themselves as good, competent, and decent. People often distort their perception of the world to preserve their self-esteem.
- **The Social Cognition Motive: The Need to Be Accurate** Social cognition is the study of how human beings think about the world: how they select, interpret, remember, and use information to make judgments and decisions. Individuals are viewed as trying to gain accurate understandings so that they can make effective judgments and decisions that range from which cereal to eat to whom they marry. In actuality, individuals typically act on the basis of incomplete and inaccurately interpreted information.

**LO 1.4 Explain why the study of social psychology is important.**

- Why do social psychologists want to understand social influence? Because they are fascinated by human social behavior and want to understand it on the deepest possible level. Many social psychologists also want to contribute to the solution of social problems.

Revel Interactive	Shared Writing <b>What Do You Think?</b>
	<p>In this chapter you read about the fundamental attribution error. How might understanding the FAE help you do a better job predicting the future behavior of those around you?</p>

## Test Yourself

1. Social psychology is the scientific study of
  - a. feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of people in social situations.
  - b. individual differences such as personality.
  - c. how people's social behaviors are shaped by their survival needs.
  - d. our cognitive processes such as memory and sensation.
2. For social psychologists, one of the likely explanations for why people in different cultures behave differently is because they
  - a. have different genetic makeup.
  - b. are influenced by different social factors.
  - c. have different evolutionary origins.
  - d. possess different personality traits.

3. Which one of the following statements is FALSE?
- Personality psychology investigates individual differences.
  - Evolutionary psychology explains why we behave differently in social situations.
  - Biology and neuroscience focus on individuals in a social context.
  - All of the above.
4. Which of the following is an example of fundamental attribution error?
- "He is a lazy person and therefore he is late."
  - "He is late to work due to heavy traffic congestion on the roads."
  - "He did not talk during the party because he did not know anyone there."
  - None of the above.
5. What are the main differences between what social psychologists and personality psychologists examine?
- Social psychology focuses on what makes one person unique, while personality psychology focuses on the shared features that make cultures different or similar to each other.
  - Social psychology focuses on individual differences. Personality psychology looks at how most people would behave in a situation.
  - Social psychology examines similarities in the ways that social influences can affect most people, whereas personality psychology examines the differences between individuals.
  - Social psychology focuses on personality traits whereas personality psychology examines the reasons that these personality traits came to be.
6. What do social psychology and sociology have in common?
- They both examine demographic trends in society.
  - They both study national institutions.
  - They both are concerned with personality differences.
  - They both are concerned with group processes.
7. Construal refers to the way in which
- People objectively deconstruct social reality.
  - People communicate and exchange information.
  - People perceive, comprehend, and interpret the social world.
  - People test their own subjective theories.
8. Which of the following about Gestalt psychology is TRUE?
- It was first proposed as a theory of how people perceive social world.
  - It was first proposed as a theory of how people learn information.
  - It was first proposed as a theory of how people develop mental models.
  - None of the above.
9. Which of the following statements about self-esteem is TRUE?
- We tend to interpret social situations in a way that helps us preserve our self-esteem.
  - Self-esteem is primarily a personality psychology concept.
  - Self-esteem is the main factor driving fundamental attribution error.
  - None of the above.
10. Kimberly is late for a company meeting. To predict whether her supervisor will be angry at her, which question would a social psychologist be most likely to ask Kimberly's supervisor?
- Are you an extraverted person?
  - Was Kimberly late in the previous week?
  - What do you think is the reason for Kimberly being late?
  - Is Kimberly generally a likeable individual?