

Principles of Social Psychology

NICKY HAYES



PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Nicky Hayes

A volume in the series
Principles of Psychology

Series Editors
Michael W. Eysenck
Simon Green
Nicky Hayes

 **Psychology Press**
Taylor & Francis Group
HOVE AND NEW YORK

Published in 1993 by Psychology Press
27 Church Road, Hove, East Sussex, BN3 2FA
270 Madison Avenue, New York NY 10016

<http://www.psypress.co.uk>

Reprinted 1993, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2003 and 2005

Psychology Press is part of the Taylor & Francis Group

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-86377-258-7 (hbk)

ISBN 0-86377-259-5 (pbk)

ISSN 0965-9706

Subject Index compiled by Jackie McDermott

Cover design by Stuart Walden, Cartoons by Sanz

Printed and bound in the UK by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

This publication has been produced with paper manufactured to strict environmental standards and with pulp derived from sustainable forests.

*To a very dear aunt and uncle,
Jessica and George Saddington*

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the numerous teachers and lecturers in psychology I have met at workshops and conferences organised by the Association for the Teaching of Psychology, and whose comments, advice and support have proved invaluable.

I would particularly like to thank Mike Stanley and Phil Banyard, whose comments on this manuscript have been so helpful; Simon Green, for getting me involved in writing for this series in the first place; and Graham Gibbs of the Behavioural Sciences Department at the University of Huddersfield, whose generous sharing of his expertise with Apple Macintosh computers has enabled me to complete this book much more quickly and efficiently than would otherwise have been possible.

Nicky Hayes

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The contexts of social interaction

1

We are all social animals. All the time, as human beings, we interact with one another. We engage in conversations, contracts, groups, and exchanges of one form or another. And this inclination to engage in social contact with others is as much a part of our evolutionary heritage as the human hand—it shapes and directs the way in which we understand our world.

Social interaction occurs within a *context*, which can influence us on a number of levels. Contexts range from culture through to environment, social groups and families. So we operate within physical, social and cultural contexts, and each of them has a bearing on what we do and how we act.

Physical contexts

Physical contexts influence our behaviour in a number of ways, from the stress induced by overcrowding, to the subtle messages about power and control conveyed by the layout of an office or a classroom. The study of how they affect what we do is the subject matter of *environmental psychology*, which is too large a topic to explore here. In this chapter, though, we are concerned with the social and cultural contexts of human behaviour, and how these affect us.

Social contexts

In beginning this study, it is worth looking at some of the more fundamental social mechanisms which researchers have identified, since these tend to form the basis of what constitutes social action.

Scripts

One of the fundamental mechanisms in everyday social interaction is the concept of the *script*. Although other researchers had worked on similar ideas beforehand, the script was most clearly developed by Schank and

Abelson in 1977. They proposed that much of the social action in which we engage takes the form of planned sequences, where everything is regulated and expected—much like the script of a play.

Suppose, for example, you are eating out at a restaurant. Several different people are involved in your activity, in one way or another—yourself, your companions, the waiter, the bar staff or wine waiter, and possibly others. Regardless of who is involved, though, the sequence of who should do what, and when, is familiar, even if the actual people are strangers. You know roughly what to expect at any given moment, and how you should behave, and the whole process generally happens in an orderly sort of way.

Schank and Abelson argued that this is because all the people involved are acting according to the same, implicitly understood script, and so smoothly regulated social interaction becomes possible.

Roles

If much of everyday life is scripted, like a play, then how do the actors know their lines? The concept of *role* is very important in understanding life, and in many ways it is used in much the same way as when we speak of actors or the theatre. When we are engaging in social life, we take on "roles" which tell us how we should behave towards other people—essentially, we play our parts and other people play theirs.

During the course of an ordinary day, you probably play a number of different roles: long-term roles concerning family relationships (daughter, son, parent, partner); brief, passing ones, such as being a passenger on a bus; and longer-term but still temporary ones, like that of student. Each of these roles involves very specific kinds of behaviour. Think of how you act as a bus passenger, and imagine doing that at home. They'd think there was something wrong with you! Similarly, the behaviour you engage in during your role as "student-in-coffee-bar" is likely to be quite different from your role as "student-in-lectures".

Social roles are always reciprocal—they come in pairs, because the role is always held in relationship to another person. You would play a nurse role, for example, when interacting with someone in another role: you could be a nurse with a patient, or nurse/doctor, or junior nurse/senior nurse. If two nurses of equal status were together, though, their behaviour and conversation would be likely to be much more individual and personal, because their "nurse" role behaviour wouldn't be quite as appropriate in their interaction.

Goffman (1959) argued that the roles we play as part of everyday social life gradually become internalised until they become part of the self—the personality. When we begin to take on something new—like, say, doing

a Saturday job in a shop for the first time—it often feels unreal, as though we are acting the part. But after we have been doing it for a while, it becomes internalised into the self-concept; we play the role automatically, and can adopt that "persona" whenever the social context is appropriate.

We don't just learn our own roles in life—we also learn quite a lot about other people's. We observe others around us, and learn from them. But the learning is vicarious, and we don't necessarily use it straight away; instead, we produce it when it is appropriate. Bandura (Bandura & Walters, 1973) argued that imitation and modelling are important *social-learning* processes, by which we are able to pick up whole patterns of social actions and appropriate role behaviour.

In one famous study, Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo (1973) showed the importance of social-learning. They asked students to participate in a role-playing experiment in which some would play the part of prisoners, and others would take the part of guards. Nobody told the students how to act, so the way they played their roles was entirely up to them. The experiment was conducted as realistically as possible, using a mock-up "prison", and was designed to last for two weeks.

Those who were acting the roles of prisoners rapidly became apathetic and dispirited, while the students acting as guards became aggressive and confrontational. Although they didn't use physical punishment directly, the guards developed a number of ways of humiliating the prisoners, like making them stand in rows and say their numbers over and over again. One prisoner rebelled and refused to co-operate, so he was put in a small closet as punishment. The other prisoners were given the opportunity to free him by making a small token sacrifice (giving up a blanket); but they refused to do so, as they regarded him as a "troublemaker" and didn't want anything to do with him.

In fact, the experimenters had to stop it after six days, because the people who were acting the role of guards had become so strict, and at times so psychologically cruel, that the experiment could not be allowed to continue. The guards behaved in this way not because of their personalities, but because of the situation they were in and the roles they were playing. Many of them, who in their ordinary lives were quite gentle people, were shocked at how they had acted, and hadn't realised they were capable of such behaviour. But their understanding of the role of guard (gleaned mostly from TV and films) was such that they had in fact been much more brutal than real prison guards—who would rapidly have a riot on their hands if they treated their prisoners so badly!

By showing us so clearly how our latent knowledge of other social roles can be brought to the fore when needed, this study tells us quite a lot about the importance of role knowledge in human social behaviour. It also tells

us something about the way in which power and control are portrayed in our society—like the idea that this type of authority is automatically coupled with cruelty or bullying.

Social schemata

Another important concept which has emerged in social psychology is the mechanism of the social schema. This is the idea that social knowledge is stored in whole, flexible frameworks, which guide our actions accordingly. The scripts described by Schank and Abelson (1977) represent one type of framework, the script schema, which we use to guide our behaviour when we are in established social situations requiring a definite sequence of interaction between the parties concerned.

Baron and Byrne (1984) identify three more types of social schema: role-schemata, person schema, and self-schema.

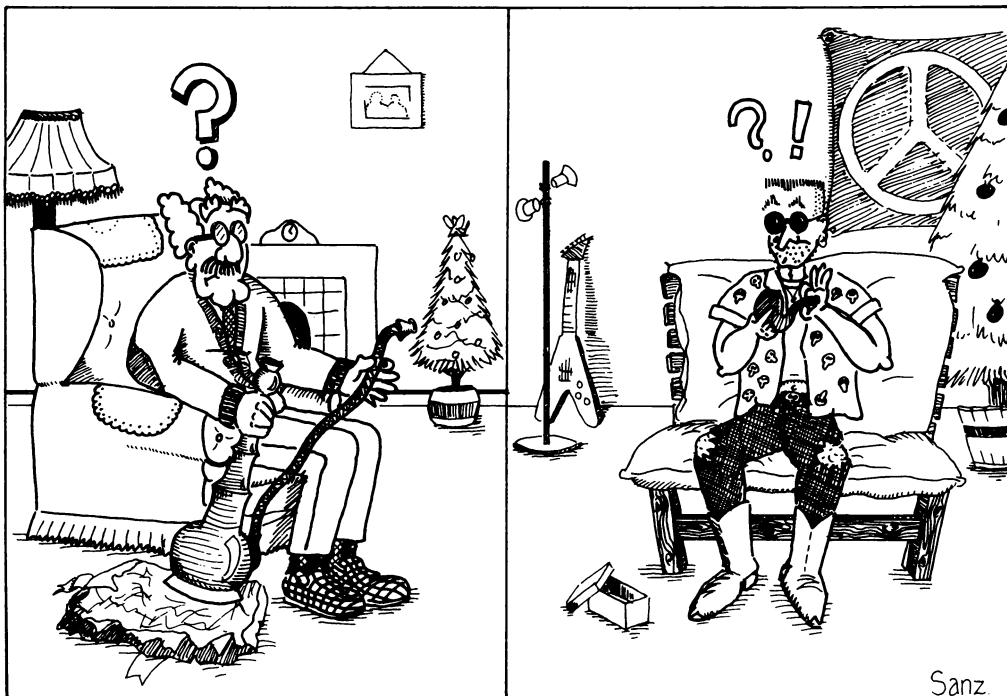
Our understanding of roles isn't just abstract knowledge—we use it to guide what we do and to make sense out of our experience as well. So *role-schemata* are the frameworks we use when we are dealing with other people according to some kind of specified social relationship—like a teacher talking to a student, or vice versa, or a policeman talking to a member of the public.

When we get to know someone rather more deeply, we don't just think of them with respect to the roles they play. We also develop a *person schema*, which absorbs and applies our understanding of that person—their idiosyncracies, and their likes and dislikes, for instance. This schema comes into play when we are dealing with that person, or undertaking some action with respect to them. So if, for example, you are buying a present for your father, your person schema for him would probably guide you to visit different shops and make a completely different selection than if you were buying a gift for your best friend.

The fourth type of social schema described by Baron and Byrne concerns the ideas we have about ourselves—the *self-schema*. We are continually adjusting and modifying our self-concept, and building up a picture of what we are like; based partly on our own past experience, but partly also from observing how we act in social situations and inferring from that.

We use this self-schema in all sorts of ways. Think of buying clothes, for example. You wouldn't be equally likely to buy anything in the shop—some possibilities would be ruled out straight away, on the grounds that they are "not the sort of thing I wear". Your self-schema comes into play as you narrow your choices down to the things which you find acceptable.

The social schemata we apply to situations don't just guide our actions; they can also channel our *cognitions*. For example, we are likely to remem-



ber things differently, depending on which schema or script we have been applying.

In one study, Zadny and Gerard (1974) showed groups of subjects a videotape of two students wandering round a flat, discussing minor offences like theft and drugs. Everybody saw the same video, but one group was told that the students were waiting for a friend; another group that they were looking for drugs; and the third that the students were planning to burgle the flat. When the subjects were asked about the film later, they remembered different things about the video—for example, those who had been told they were watching burglars remembered credit cards lying around the flat, and also noted the things which had been said relating to thefts; whereas the other groups remembered different parts of the conversation.

A schema, of course, is a hypothetical construct—which means it doesn't actually exist, but talking about it as if it did helps us to understand what is going on. It isn't a physical structure in the brain, or anything like that; it's a model we use for making sense out of how the social encounters and social awareness of everyday living seem to happen. By allowing us to group together the different sorts of social knowledge which people use

in everyday interaction, the concept of the social schema can be a useful tool in helping us to organise and structure our social experience, and to make sense out of what is going on around us.

Social interaction takes place within a context, and that context is partly made up of our previous social experiences, stored and applied in the form of social schemata.

Social identity

When we are studying how other people influence our behaviour, it's often useful to look at the groups around us. One important source of information about ourselves and how other people see us comes from the *peer group*—the group of people we see as being like ourselves. They can be very important in influencing how we should behave, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood when the family ceases to be the most important source of social information.

The influence of peer groups doesn't explain everything about social interaction, however. We may have varying ambitions or aspirations, or we may consider ourselves to be fundamentally different from the people immediately around us. Instead (or as well), we may allow our social behaviour to be guided by a *reference group*—a group of people who would show the appropriate behaviour and so could guide us.

So, for instance, an aspiring young athlete is unlikely to take her standards from the people immediately around her, but from the top athletes of the day. Even if she doesn't have any contact with them directly, by taking them as her reference group she can use them as models, and adopt their standards to direct and channel her own behaviour and attitudes.

Tajfel (1982) argued that the process of *social identification* is fundamental to understanding how people interact with one another. We don't just interact with one another as if we were individuals, acting out scripted roles. Instead, we come to identify with the social groups we belong to, and those identifications form a crucial part of the way in which we interact with other people.

You might, for example, identify with a particular social group which you see as predominantly young, radical, and unconventional in dress. And the way you interact with someone who you see as belonging to a different social group (old, conservative in their attitudes, and conventional in their dress) will be coloured by that. You interact with them in a different way than you would interact with someone you perceived as coming from your "own" social group.

Tajfel (1970) devised a series of studies showing just how fundamental this process of social categorisation seems to be. The work involved what

has become known as the *minimal group paradigm*, in which subjects were really given very little information at all as the basis of social comparison, but still used what they had to make social judgements in favour of their own "in-group", and against the "out-group".

In one study (Billig & Tajfel, 1973), subjects were divided into two groups on the basis of tossing a coin. There was very little similarity between the different members of the group, and the people concerned were all aware of how random the process was. But when they were asked to perform a task which involved awarding points to other people, they still showed a preference towards members of their own group. Next, subjects were encouraged not to think in terms of "groups", but to refer to one another using code numbers. This time they didn't show such preferences, even though they knew there were some similarities between them.

Social identification taps into two basic motives in the human being. One is our tendency to group things into categories—and, as we have seen, this tendency applies just as much to the way we see people as it does to how we perceive objects or events. The other is our search for things which will reflect positively on our self-esteem and allow us to think well of ourselves. Although these two basic motives might not seem to be connected, they exert a strong pressure on how we interact with other people.

Sorting people into in-groups or out-groups isn't just a matter of making a set of equal categories. Society isn't organised that way. Some social groups have more prestige or power than others; some command more respect. We compare groups with other groups in society to see how they match up.

Since we are members of social groups, this process of comparison also reflects on how we see ourselves; and naturally, we wish to perceive ourselves as belonging to social groups which can reflect positively on us. If we find we belong to a group which can't do this, we may try to leave the group or distance ourselves from it ("I'm not really like the rest of them"); or we may try to change how the group is perceived, either by comparing it with other, lower-status groups or by working to increase its status directly (Tajfel, 1982).

Tajfel argued that the process of perceiving other people in terms of in-groups and out-groups forms a very fundamental part of human thinking, and underlies many basic social processes—particularly the development of *social norms*, and the existence of *stereotyping* and prejudice. So the social identifications which we make need to be seen as a fundamental part of the context of social interaction.

Cultural contexts

Ethnocentricity

One criticism which has been levelled at psychology in general (and social psychology in particular) is that it has been mainly concerned with only a narrow band of human experience—that of white, middle-class, North Americans. Recently, many psychologists have become concerned about how this *ethnocentricity* may have distorted the subject, producing findings which don't apply across the whole range of human experience; and many have been studying social processes across a far wider range of cultures.

Culture certainly affects many aspects of psychology far more than traditional researchers used to believe. For example, Marsella, Devos, and Hsu (1985) showed how Western concepts of the "self" are often very different from those pertaining in Asian cultures, which results in much of the research in this field being irrelevant to a large part of the human world. It is important for researchers to be aware of how ignoring issues of culture, identity and ethnocentricity may distort research findings. (We'll be looking more closely at this towards the end of this chapter, when we study research into the self-concept.)

Unconscious ethnocentricity often means that researchers make assumptions about their subjects which are not valid. These assumptions can affect what research questions they ask, as well as the interpretations they make of their findings. For example, Stone (1981) described how psychologists and educationalists have tended to assume that children who do badly at school will have lower self-confidence than those who do well. They have gone on from this to take it for granted that this will apply particularly to black girls, since, as a group, black children tend to do less well at school than white ones, and girls less well than boys; so quite a lot of theorising has been based on that assumption.

But when we look at the evidence, the picture looks rather different. Stone reported the findings from tests of self-esteem given to various groups of school children, and showed that black girls actually have *higher* self-confidence than most other groups. It seems that the (rather patronising) attitude of the researchers was to assume that since school achievement was to them the most important focus, so it would also be for the girls; but they themselves were interested in different aspects of life, so their sources of self-esteem were quite different. Under-achievement in school was largely irrelevant (indeed, they half-expected it) so it was irrelevant to their self-esteem.

Although many researchers are attempting to redress these omissions, and a glance at a modern social psychology journal will show far more contributions from researchers across the world than we used to see, there is still much to be done. However, there may also be some findings of social psychology which do apply to all human groups.

Tajfel, for example, used the European experiences of large-scale prejudice and discrimination during the Second World War as his starting point, and he and his followers have performed a number of studies in many different cultural contexts across the world. Many researchers believe that the processes of categorisation and in-group identification described by social identity theory do apply to all human groups, no matter where in the world they may be.

We need, then, to scrutinise social research very closely for cultural bias and ethnocentricity; and to be aware of how this may have affected its findings. But this needn't mean that we have to reject everything which has traditionally been investigated, in much the same way as the modern emphasis on ethical issues in psychological research doesn't mean all our previous knowledge is outdated. We may be able to learn something from the past, even if we are moving the discipline of psychology towards an alternative type of approach.

The social psychology of experiments

New insights often produce a complete revision of research methodology. Partly as a result of the influence of the *behaviourist* school of thought, many investigations into social psychology in the first half of this century involved laboratory studies: subjects were asked to perform relatively distinct tasks under highly controlled conditions. This approach, however, raises problems of *ecological validity*, because people may behave quite differently when they are taking part in a laboratory experiment to how they do in normal life. A study can be said to be ecologically valid only if it truly corresponds to real-life conditions and real-life behaviour.

The problem of ecological validity became apparent as a result of studies showing how two very basic social mechanisms operate in psychological experiments, as well as in the real world. These two mechanisms are generally referred to as *experimenter effects* and *demand characteristics*, and because they are so fundamental to how people interact, they too should be considered as part of the underlying contexts of social behaviour.

Experimenter effects

One of the first of these studies was conducted by Rosenthal and Fode in 1963. They were investigating how the beliefs and ideas of the

experimenter (the person conducting the experiment) in a psychological study might influence the behaviour of the subjects—even if the subjects were animals!

Their "experimenters" were groups of psychology students, who were told that they were going to undertake a maze-learning experiment using laboratory rats. The rats had to learn their way through a maze, and would receive a food reward when they performed the task successfully; the role of the experimenter was to "teach" the rat to get through the maze.

The students were told that the rats they had to work with came from two different breeding populations. One set of rats came from "maze-bright" stock, and could be expected to learn quickly. However, the students were told that there hadn't been enough of those to go round, so some would have to work with "maze-dull" rats. In reality, though, Rosenthal and Fode had selected laboratory rats which were carefully matched.

When the rats' performance was tested a few days later, they had performed as expected. The supposedly maze-bright rats had learned to run through the maze much more quickly than the others. But this wasn't due to any mystical influence—it was because the students who believed their rats would learn quickly had behaved accordingly. They had "encouraged" their rats, giving them more attempts during the practice sessions; they handled them more, so the rats had become more used to people and to the situation; and some had even given their rats pet names. The students handling the supposedly maze-dull rats, however, had treated them more off-handedly.



Rosenthal described this process as a *self-fulfilling prophecy*. The statement about the rats being "bright" or "dull" had come true simply because it had been made. It had fulfilled itself, even though it was not true at the start of the experiment. Simply by predicting what would happen, the experimenters had unconsciously produced the results that they expected.

Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) went on to perform a study in a large American school. Teachers were allowed to "overhear" two researchers name some children who were expected to show unusual promise over the coming year. The children had been deliberately chosen from the middle range of the class; but when the researchers returned a year later, they found the named children had forged ahead with their schoolwork and now were near the top of their classes—simply because of the teachers' expectations.

This research has led to a number of different types of investigation. *Labelling theory*, in sociology and some areas of social psychology, has been concerned with the social processes that result from some children