

# Social Psychology

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To the memory of Pam Hill.

For Kyla, Tom, Jed and Toby – of course!

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# Preface

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This book provides an introduction to social psychology through consideration of theory, concepts and important empirical research. The aim is to provide a simple, clear and readable introduction to the empirical discipline of social psychology. The emphasis is on social psychology as a scientific area of enquiry using numerous techniques of empirical research, including the laboratory experiment. A decision was taken by the authors to present each chapter in a way that makes use of summary diagrams to help the reader remember the central theories, concepts and ideas in social psychology.

The emphasis of the chapter on social development is on childhood: however, adolescence and adulthood have been given adequate consideration. The chapter on pro-social and anti-social behaviour has been written to reflect not only the growing interest by social psychologists in this area, but the high degree of relevance such behaviour has for contemporary society.

A theme that runs through all the chapters of this book, apart from Chapter 1, is an ‘application’ section. Social psychology has enjoyed application to help society deal with and understand a range of social issues and social problems. Applications in this book range across education, health, organizational behaviour, mental illness, and the legal context. The wide range of areas that social psychology affects evidences the value of theory and research underpinned by a rigorous scientific methodology.

This book is intended to appeal to all students of social psychology encountering the discipline for the first time. In particular, it should prove invaluable for those studying for GCE ‘A’ Level, first year undergraduates studying psychology, and students of social psychology where psychology is not their main area of study. Finally, I hope the interested layperson will also find the book of interest.

This book has taken longer than anticipated, partly due to other demands on the first author’s time, but also because of the untimely death of Pam Hill. Pam completed three chapters – Social Cognition I, Non-Verbal Communication and Interpersonal Behaviour, and Social Influence. Pam had made a start on a further chapter, but was unable to complete it.

This book would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of numerous colleagues and friends. In particular I would like to thank Isobel Ford for continual support, encouragement and help when motivation flagged.

Donald Pennington

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- Social psychology and everyday life
- The scope of social psychology
- Assumptions about human behaviour
- Historical perspective
- Social psychology as science
- Methods of investigation
- Validity of experiments
- The social psychology of experiments
- Ethics and values in social psychological research
- About this book
- Summary
- Suggestions for further reading

## 1.1 Social psychology and everyday life

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The cover of this book is taken from a painting by L. S. Lowry of people in a park; take a careful look at the cover. You will see numerous people, older and younger, engaged in social interaction. But these people all seem a little ‘strange’ in one way or another, for example, the man with one leg, or the woman at the bottom left with only one eye open. In the middle towards the right, is what seems like an older woman, with a bent back looking at the ground. Lowry chose to depict people in a social setting in a way that arrests our attention. This picture was chosen as the cover of a social psychology text book for two main reasons: first, the picture reflects a basic principle of social psychology that each person constructs a different social reality. This means that how we perceive, understand and imagine ourselves and other people to be is often different from one person to another. Second, the picture serves to remind us that other people have an important influence on how we think, feel and behave.

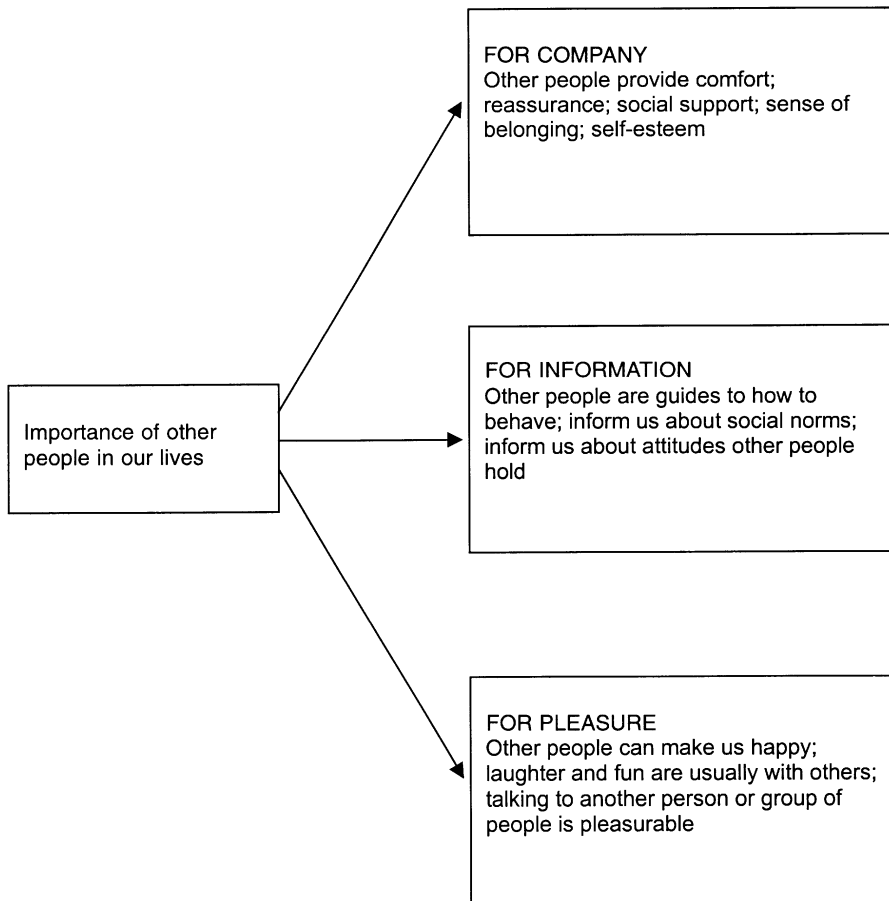
How we experience and enjoy life is strongly affected and determined by other people: how we think about ourselves and how others think and react to us are important determinants of both how we feel and behave. Specific social situations also influence our behaviour, for example, behaviour appropriate at a party would be largely inappropriate at an interview or our place of work. Social behaviour, our

actions in the presence of one or numerous other people, is governed both by perceptions and social norms. Much of the time we are unaware of these influences. The discipline of social psychology – the scientific study of social behaviour, thought and feelings – offers insight and understanding based upon theory and sound evidence.

In everyday life we depend upon, interact with, influence and are influenced by many people. The presence of others is comforting; brief encounters with strangers are common when, for example, we go shopping. Relationships reveal a wide diversity from acquaintances, work-mates, friends through to lovers and marriage partners. Some people we interact with just once and never see again; others become well known to us through work or social activities. A small number of people are very special to us, such as spouses and close friends, who are permanent features of our lives. As a baby and young child our dependence upon others is total; not only do parents or caretakers provide for our physical needs but they also socialise us. As we get older we are able to interact, with confidence and ease, with peers and adults. Inadequate socialisation, as will be seen in [Chapter 2](#), is regarded by many social psychologists as a critical factor explaining anti-social behaviour and low self-esteem in an individual. In later life, as adults, we depend upon people for company (being alone for long periods of time is often a very distressing experience), for information (in the form of, for example, how we are expected to behave in a specific social situation) and for pleasure (simply talking to somebody we are close to is enjoyable in itself and, when worried, may relieve us of a mental burden). This is summarised in [Figure 1.1](#).

Acting appropriately, assessing ourselves and others, knowing when to succumb to the influence of other people and when to attempt to influence others round to our way of thinking, are all common features of everyday life. To function effectively in these ways means we are all social psychologists in a sense. Without intuition, common sense and shared understanding our ability effectively to engage in our social world would be greatly impaired, resulting in socially clumsy, ineffective and inappropriate actions. Social psychology attempts to assess the soundness and validity of these common-sense notions. Sometimes, as we shall see in this book, social psychological research yields surprising results: empirical evidence occasionally overturns what we commonly believe to be the case.

The aims of both the lay-person and professional social psychologist are the same: both are attempting to understand and predict the behaviour of others and ourselves in the diversity of social situations that can and do confront us. Without prediction and understanding, organised society, of any sort, would soon disintegrate and collapse. If we or others behaved unpredictably without control or order, we would find



**Figure 1.1:** Some examples of the importance of other people in our lives

it almost impossible to interact in a sensible way with other people. We often make mistakes by misjudging people and how they will behave; common sense is often a good guide but one which lacks objective, rigorous, empirical support. As a result, our experience of the world is inevitably biased and subjective. The scientific study of social behaviour, thought, and feelings attempts to provide an unbiased and objective means of understanding and predicting human social behaviour. If social psychology can offer greater understanding and prediction it should enable us to achieve greater control over our own lives.

## 1.2 The scope of social psychology

Gordon Allport (1985), one of the founders of modern social psychology, offers the following definition of social psychology: ‘Social psychology is

the scientific study of the way in which people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people.' This definition serves to highlight five aspects of social psychology that you will encounter again and again in the following ten chapters of this book. First, this definition firmly establishes the discipline as one proceeding and progressing by scientific enquiry. More will be said about this in [Section 1.5](#) of this chapter. Here it is sufficient to say that social psychology gains knowledge through empirical enquiry by formulating and testing theories. Throughout this book the results of empirical research, largely from experimental methods, are referred to and described to demonstrate how they offer support or refutation of a theory. Second, social psychology concerns itself with what cannot be directly observed – thoughts and feelings – but which we know affect our social lives in all sorts of ways. Cognitive social psychology is broadly concerned with our social thinking and has become a dominant area of enquiry in the last 20 years. Social thought refers to such constructs as attitudes, values, beliefs, self-esteem, social perception, and personal and social identity.

Third, including how people feel reflects the central role that our emotional lives play in our interactions with other people. Friendships and more intimate relationships have strong affective components, and how we feel about ourselves in relation to self-esteem or self-perception is often critical for our general mental health. Fourth, the focus on behaviour in this definition recognises that this is all that can be directly and objectively observed. We cannot see what people think and feel; it is only a person's actual behaviour that leads us to infer another person's thoughts and feelings. The influential *behaviourist* approach in psychology staunchly adheres to this principle. Fifth, people may influence how we think, feel and behave through our social interaction or by simply thinking or imagining them to be present. For example, before deciding what birthday present to buy a close friend, you will most likely think about what their likes and dislikes are. What you imagine these to be will influence the present you buy.

Representing social psychology as the scientific study of social behaviour, thought and feelings, avoids imposing boundaries on legitimate areas of enquiry. This is necessary since the interests of social psychologists range from detailed enquiries into thought processes (social cognition) through to broader considerations of the individual in a societal context (sociological social psychology). Uniting these widely different perspectives is the attempt to understand how people interact and influence each other.

Perusal of the chapter headings in this book will give you some idea of the scope of social psychology. These chapters do not exhaust the areas of study but, in our view, represent the essential and fundamental

areas of enquiry. To do justice adequately to the full range and scope of social psychology would require a volume many times this size. Specialist books, dealing with particular areas or topics can be more profitably read by the student once he or she has a general foundation in social psychology. This book aims to provide a sound and representative account of social psychology.

### 1.3 Assumptions about human behaviour

In general conversation we often say 'it is in his nature to behave like that' or 'being like that comes naturally to her'. In everyday usage the words 'nature' or 'naturally' are ill-defined and ambiguous. In psychology, however, such a characterisation would be taken to mean the person's behaviour is biological in origin and results from the action of inherited genes.

Two positions are possible, both representing long traditions in psychology and philosophy: first, behaviour and characteristics such as intelligence and personality are entirely a result of *genetic make-up*. Second, behaviour and human characteristics result entirely from our *experience* of the world, from birth onwards. Few, if any, psychologists would now argue solely for a nature or nurture (experience) position; most now agree that human behaviour and characteristics are a result of the *interaction* of these two influences. Controversy still rages, however, often in a bitter and emotional way, over the relative contribution of each in determining a person's intelligence. Apart from the problem of no adequate, agreed-upon definition of intelligence (cynics say IQ is simply the ability to do IQ tests), evidence for one viewpoint or another is less than clear.

In social psychology the contemporary approach claiming biology to be important, by drawing upon Darwin's theory of evolution, is known as *socio-biology* (Wilson, 1975). The claim is a relatively simply one, but difficult to substantiate satisfactorily with respect to human social behaviour: if human beings are solely a product of evolution then many social behaviours will have evolved in a similar way. Parental behaviour, aggression and altruism are claimed by socio-biologists to be a product of evolution rather than environmental experiences. One of the fundamental problems is that human beings inherit their genetic make-up and also a society and culture which are continually evolving. Perhaps with non-human primates and other animals it is easier to see the biological and evolutionary contribution since animal 'societies' do not progress and change in any way comparable to that of humans. In the topics that are dealt with throughout this book the nature/nurture theme will arise many times. Mostly reference will be made to animal

studies; however, relevance and applicability to human social behaviour will be provided as appropriate.

The view that social behaviour can be explained in biological and/or evolutionary terms is one that dates back to the beginnings of modern social psychology. McDougall (1908) attempted an explanation of *all* social behaviour in terms of instincts. Two logical flaws caused the demise of this approach: first, the number of instincts could be extended indefinitely so that every social behaviour could have an instinct attached to it. Second, saying people have an instinct to be altruistic, for example, does not explain the causes of altruistic behaviour, but simply renames the behaviour. What is not explained is why people have instincts and how so many instincts could have evolved. The discipline of ethology offers a more sensible and circumscribed approach to the role of instincts in animal – both human and non-human – social behaviour.

## 1.4 Historical perspective

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Social psychology, like other areas of psychology, emerged as an empirical discipline from strong philosophical roots that can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. Much of the philosophical work of Plato and Aristotle concerns itself with speculations about human thought and behaviour. Plato, for example, recognised that when individuals come together as a crowd, they can be transformed into an irrational mob. This was taken up by Gustav Le Bon in 1908, who wrote about the *group mind*, and how individual behaviour is transformed to crowd behaviour. Le Bon's theorising has influenced our understanding of crowd psychology to the present day.

The identification of social psychology as an independent area of enquiry was, perhaps, established through two text books which appeared in 1908 and 1924, together with important, early experiments at the turn of the century. In 1908 William McDougall published a book entitled *Social Psychology*, this was not empirically based but put forward the view that social behaviour was a direct result of *instincts* that we inherit. Such a view has not endured in modern social psychology. Floyd Allport published a text in 1924 which emphasised the importance of experimentation and presented research conducted in such areas as conformity, recognition of emotion in facial expressions, and how individuals perform a task in front of an audience (to become known as social facilitation – see [Chapter 10](#)). Many of the themes that Allport considered, together with the use of evidence from empirical research, set the scene for the development of social psychology as a scientific discipline of enquiry.

The first experiments in social psychology can be traced back to Triplett (1898) and Ringelmann (1913). Triplett conducted an experiment to investigate whether the presence of other people enhances or inhibits an individual's performance of a task. For example, Triplett asked schoolchildren to wind fishing line onto reels in the presence and absence of other people. He found that performance was enhanced by the presence of others. This early research represents the first experiments in a major area of inquiry in social psychology called **social facilitation**. Ringelmann (1913) conducted a study in 1880 investigating the amount of effort a person expends on a task either alone or working with others. He found, using tasks such as pulling a rope or pushing a cart, that a person puts in less effort when working with others than when alone. Contemporary research has looked at this in terms of **social loafing**.

The rise of Nazi Germany and the persecution of Jews in the 1930s and early 1940s had a profound impact on the development of social psychology. Many psychologists fled Europe in the 1930s to live in North America and Great Britain. Furthermore, the rise of Nazism and the persecution and slaughter of Jews raised profound questions about human behaviour, which social psychologists investigated. For example, Sherif's (1936) famous summer camp study with teenage boys vividly demonstrated how conflict develops between groups (see [Chapter 10](#)). Adorno *et al.* (1950) developed the idea of an *authoritarian personality* in an attempt to understand and explain prejudice and blind obedience to authority. Stanley Milgram's famous experiments investigating obedience to authority were conceived to help understand why so many Germans had blindly obeyed orders which resulted in the Holocaust.

Some of the classic and highly influential experiments in social psychology were conducted in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. These laid the foundation and set the scene for modern social psychology. These early pioneers identified key areas of study such as intergroup behaviour, social influence, prejudice and discrimination, individual and group performance which have been the subject of theorising, empirical enquiry and continual debate. As you will see in the chapters that follow, social psychology has adopted an increasingly cognitive perspective, while at the same time wishing to demonstrate application to such areas as health, work behaviour and the legal process.

## 1.5 Social psychology as science

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Earlier it was pointed out that to function effectively with other people and in different social situations we need to be what might be called



intuitive social psychologists. Our experiences of others and ourselves in different social situations provide us with knowledge about why people behave as they do, as well as expectations about future social behaviour. Unfortunately, this common-sense or intuitive approach has a major shortcoming: each of us has different experiences of people and social situations, which leads to personal knowledge becoming idiosyncratic. Different people may explain the same behaviour differently, have different expectations and make different predictions about likely future behaviour. Social psychology as science attempts to provide objective and verifiable knowledge about human social behaviour, and hence escapes the dangers of idiosyncratic personal knowledge.

### 1.5.1 Scientific enquiry

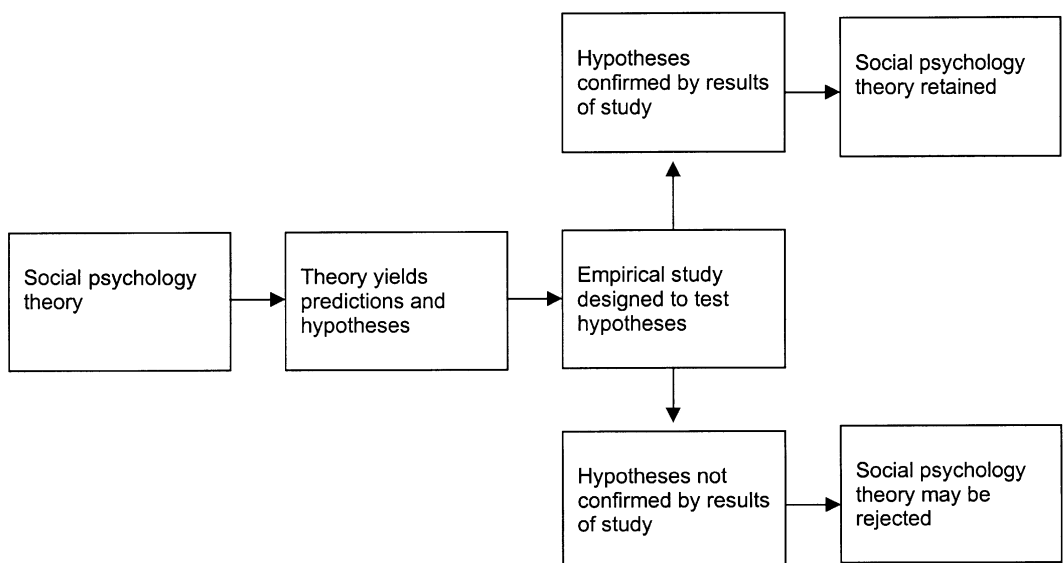
Controversy exists within the philosophy of science over how scientific enquiry proceeds. However, few would disagree that science is characterised by theory, hypothesis and observation. How these are related will be considered below. It is worth noting from the outset that the relationship between these three elements is often a source of dispute.

A theory is a generalisation concerning how we think the world or some part of it is. A theory offers a way of imposing order and sense on the world and does so by offering a set of rules or regulations to explain a number of facts or observations. For example, a theory might be propounded claiming that people who are prejudiced make friends with others who are also prejudiced. Our first question of such a theory would be to ask what supportive evidence exists, then we could decide whether the theory is supported or to be rejected.

Theories operate at a level of abstraction, allowing many hypotheses or empirically testable predictions to be derived. So, for example, we may derive the hypothesis that men who are prejudiced against women will tend to have male friends who are also sexist. Alternatively, we may derive the prediction that people prejudiced towards Jews will have friends who are prejudiced towards Chinese (this is permissible since our theory was very general – too general perhaps !). To test the validity of one or both of these predications we would need, first, to devise some *reliable* measure of the specific type(s) of prejudice, then see if the relationship between prejudiced people and their friends was as we predicted. If so, this would count as evidence supporting our theory, if not evidence against the theory would have been obtained.

Karl Popper, a highly influential philosopher of science, has argued that a scientific theory cannot logically be proved true, but it can be refuted. In fact, Popper claims that in order for a theory to be

scientific it must, in principle, be capable of empirical refutation. A theory can never be accepted as true since there is no guarantee, logically, that the future will be the same as the past. We all expect the sun to rise tomorrow, but there is no logical reason why it should. When observations disconfirm a theory it has, logically speaking, been refuted. Few scientists apply such stringent criteria; for a theory to be refuted *numerous* counter-observations are required. Of course, this does pose the problem of knowing how many counter-observations are needed. No hard and fast rules exist, unfortunately. Evidence consistent with a theory offers support for that theory but nothing more; it does not and cannot prove a theory to be true. This may seem surprising since we are usually told science provides objective, true knowledge. However, because of the relationship between theory, hypothesis and observations, science may offer objective knowledge but whether it is true (ultimately) or not is another matter. Perhaps the best that can be claimed for science is it offers a way of discovering what is false, not what is true. [Figure 1.2](#) provides a summary of the scientific process; showing how theory, prediction, empirical investigation and results fit together.



**Figure 1.2:** The scientific process of theory, hypothesis, empirical enquiry and consequences for the theory

### 1.5.2 Theory and research in social psychology

Social psychology is an empirical discipline. This not only means, as outlined above, that predictions are tested by empirical enquiry, but also that studies can be *replicated*. Provided the researcher can clearly state the hypothesis, and describe how observations were made and data collected, it is possible for another researcher to conduct a similar study. Replication enables the researcher to have greater confidence in accepting the implications of the data for the theory, as long as replications produce consistent data.

Where do theories come from and how are they constructed in social psychology? Many introductory texts will tell you theories are constructed from observations and facts. The story goes something like this: numerous observations lead to a regularity or number of regularities being noticed, these regularities lead to a theory. Take our previous example: on numerous occasions, suppose people we regard as prejudiced have friends who are also prejudiced. The role of the social psychologist is to determine the extent to which this ‘theory’ holds. Such an account, simplified as it is, places the derivation of theories from observations and facts, making these observations and facts neutral, objective and free from theory in the first place. Unfortunately matters are not as simple or clear-cut, ‘facts’ are often determined by the theoretical perspective in the first place, and theories often guide the researcher towards establishing what are and are not the facts. Thomas Kuhn, another important philosopher of science, has shown this to be the case in the ‘pure’ sciences, such as physics. There is no reason to think this does not apply to psychology generally and social psychology in particular.

While the relationship between observation and theory is complex, both are necessary to the scientific discipline of social psychology. Throughout this book you will find different theories described and empirical evidence cited as either supporting or questioning the validity of the theory.

You may wonder, especially after reading this book, how it is that there are so many different theories in social psychology. Generally speaking, the days when such psychologists as Freud, Skinner and McDougall constructed ‘grand’ theories attempting to explain all human behaviour have passed. This has been replaced by what might be called ‘mini’ theories or *limited domain theories*, theories limited to a specific domain of human social behaviour. Hence, there are theories about child development, prejudice, aggression and social influence, to name but a few areas in social psychology. Grand theories present

problems of testability and general applicability; limited domain theories are more easily tested but have the drawback of segmenting social behaviour into compartments. Such compartmentalisation is an unrealistic representation of the interlinking and continuity that exist between different social behaviours and our social life in general.

This may seem less than satisfactory to someone encountering social psychology for the first time; however, a parallel may be drawn between this state of affairs and how the sciences of physics and astronomy were in their infancy. Historians of science argue that science progresses by the emergence of new theories which incorporate a number of other more limited theories. Gradually, theories come to explain more, becoming more 'grand' in their scale. Optimists amongst philosophers of psychology argue that the same process is happening in psychology. As social psychology progresses, new theories will emerge which combine numerous earlier theories. Since social psychology as an empirical, scientific discipline is only about 100 years old, it is too early to expect grand theories to have developed.

While some of these issues may be hard to grasp, it is important to keep two points in mind: first, although social psychology may appear fragmented on first encounter, there is coherence. Second, empirical enquiry, especially in the form of experiments, is vital for assessing the validity of a theory.

### 1.5.3 Alternative approaches

British and European social psychology has established a tradition of asking fundamental questions about the appropriateness and validity of applying a scientific method to the study of human social behaviour. Much of the research reported and discussed in this book is based on the laboratory experiment; *positivism* is a philosophical view based on the assumption that such a method is the only way to produce objective evidence and test a theory. Alternative approaches in social psychology (for example, Harré, 1979; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) have started from the position that social psychology cannot be objective since people are studying and researching themselves. This is quite different, it is argued, from biology or chemistry where objectivity can be attained.

The *ethogenic* approach of Harré (1979) or the *discourse* approach of Potter and Wetherell (1987) both emphasise the importance of studying the person in their social and everyday context. Attempting to study human social behaviour in artificial settings, such as a laboratory, is meaningless and results obtained are of little value, according to these approaches. The research methods employed in the ethogenic or

discourse tradition focus much more on the individual through in-depth case studies or analysis of naturalistic accounts given by people in their everyday social life. People's experiences and subjective views are of paramount importance to the understanding of human social behaviour.

More recently Stainton Rogers *et al.* (1995), in offering alternative methods for the study and understanding of social behaviour, claim that objective reality in the human social domain cannot be achieved. Their argument is that objective measurement of social behaviour requires a definition. In providing a definition, 'scientific' social psychology merely substitutes a person's own meanings with those of the psychologist.

One of the major challenges that these alternative approaches have had difficulty in facing is how to turn the findings and methods into practical use, for example, to reduce prejudice, to counter the undesirable effects of stereotypes, and to help groups of people to function more effectively. The scientific and experimental approach in social psychology has endured partly because it has been able to apply findings and theory to help tackle social problems that a society may face. Perhaps the test of these alternative approaches will be whether they too can offer valuable, practical application.

## 1.6 Methods of investigation

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Social psychology employs numerous methods of scientific investigation; these include: laboratory experiments, field research, correlational studies, archival research, case studies, and meta-analysis. It should be noted that none of these methods is better than another. Laboratory experiments offer a high degree of control of variables, but findings are often difficult to generalise to everyday social life. By contrast, field experiments, as their name implies, are conducted in real-life settings and hence have obvious relevance to everyday life. Here, though, the social psychologist has much less control over variables and, as a consequence, can never be as certain as with laboratory experiments that variables found to influence behaviour are indeed the ones that *do* influence behaviour. It may be that an extraneous or uncontrolled variable, not thought of by the social psychologist, is able to explain the observed behaviour.

In what follows we will take a more detailed look at laboratory experiments, field research and correlational studies since most of the research detailed throughout this book uses these three methods. Some consideration will also be given to the other three methods of investigation mentioned above.

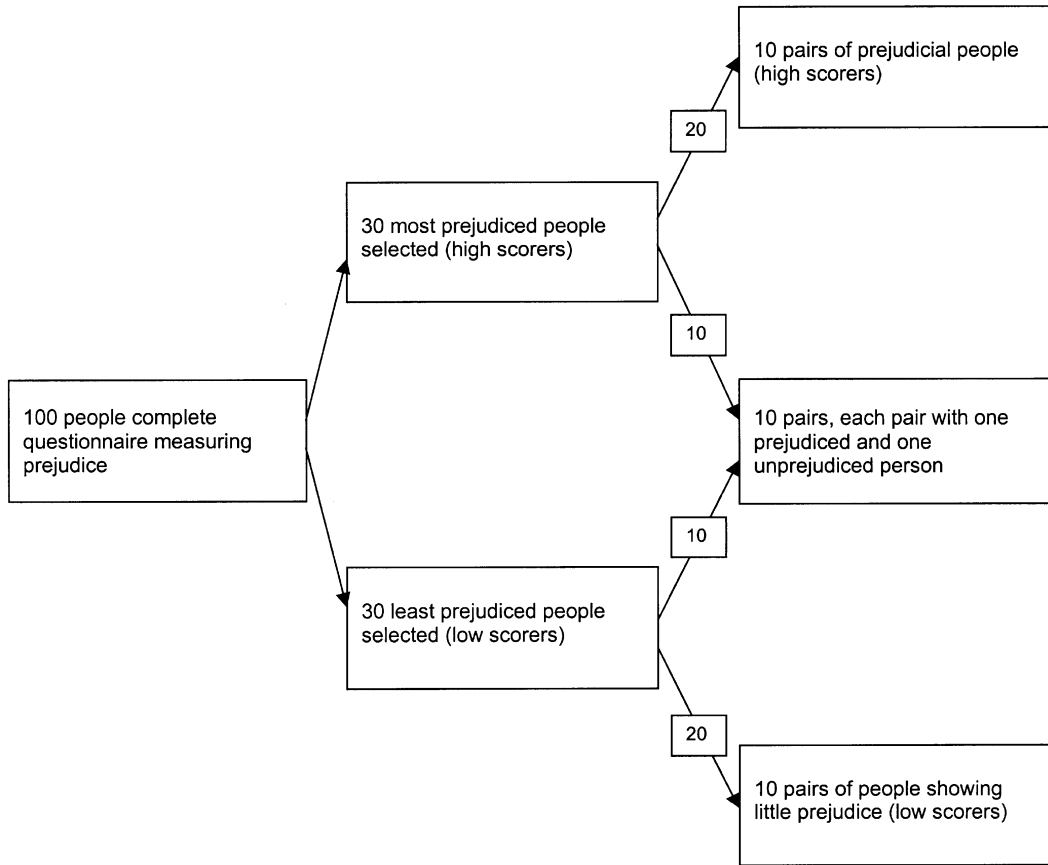
### 1.6.1 The laboratory experiment

The laboratory experiment offers the highest degree of control over variables; however, it is not intended to replicate real-life situations. The primary aim is to establish, as far as possible, the effect upon behaviour of manipulating a certain variable, or number of variables.

Supposing we wished to conduct a laboratory experiment to test the theory that prejudiced people chose prejudiced friends. Many experiments could be devised, but let us consider the following: our theory would lead us to predict that, on first acquaintance, prejudiced people get on better with, and hence like, other people who share the same or similar prejudices on first acquaintance. Specifically, prejudiced people will like and be attracted to similarly prejudiced rather than unprejudiced strangers. The following experiment would test this: 100 people complete a questionnaire designed to measure prejudiced attitudes, the 30 highest and 30 lowest scores are selected. Splitting each group, randomly, into sub-groups of 10 we could arrange for prejudiced people to converse with another prejudiced person for, say, 15 minutes. We could also arrange pairs of people such that unprejudiced people talked to other unprejudiced people, and prejudiced people talked to unprejudiced people. There would be 10 pairs of participants for each type of dyad, as shown in [Figure 1.3](#). The experimenter is manipulating how dyads (groups of two people) are constituted: the variable manipulated by the experimenter is called the *independent* variable.

Some measure or measures of attraction and liking would have to be taken. We could, for example, measure the amount of eye-contact taking place within the differently constituted dyads. Since eye-contact is a good indicator of whether we like somebody or not (see [Chapter 6](#)), we would expect higher levels for prejudiced dyads than in the other two types of pairings. Another measure of liking would be to ask participants, on a previously devised questionnaire, how much they enjoyed talking to their partner, would like to talk to the person again, etc. These measures of the variables of liking and attraction are called the *dependent* variables.

*Controlled* variables are another important class of variables the experimenter must consider. The experimenter may want to control for age, for example, (just use people in a given age-band), sex (all male, all female, or mixed groups of participants), skin colour or any other variable which may seem important. This can be crucial. Suppose we did find higher levels of eye-contact with the prejudiced dyads, we would take this as support for our theory. However, if prejudiced dyads were all females and unprejudiced dyads all males, doubt would be cast



**Figure 1.3:** Design of experiment showing constitution of the three types of dyads

on our interpretation of the data since research has consistently shown females to engage in more eye-contact than males. With this design of experiment we would have what is known as a *confounding* variable: sex of dyad has been confounded with prejudice of each person in the dyad. It would be impossible to claim that eye-contact was high because participants were prejudiced, it could be because the participants were females.

Laboratory experiments allow cause–effect relationships to be established, but only if the experiment is carefully designed to control for important variables, avoids confounding of the independent with another, uncontrolled, variable and if the dependent variables provide reliable and valid measures. As you can appreciate, laboratory experiments require a great deal of careful planning. Problems of laboratory experiments will be dealt with later in this chapter (see [Section 1.8](#)).

### 1.6.2 Field research

Field research is not conducted in a grassy field but in the field of a real-life social setting, i.e. anywhere where people are going about their normal day-to-day activities. There are three main types of field research: *naturalistic observation*, the *natural experiment* and the *field experiment*. The researcher has little or no control over events with the former two types, with the latter, the field experiment, control over some variables is possible but not as much as in the laboratory experiment. The main advantage of field research is that findings can be generalised to other social situations; the main drawback is lack of control which may bring dangers of confounding variables. Generalisability of findings is achieved at the expense of loss of control and precision.

*Naturalistic observation* involves going into a social setting and simply observing the behaviours that take place, without attempting or intending to influence the situation or the behaviours in any way. An ethical code must be adhered to, while public social behaviour is there for anybody to see, any naturalistic observation must not intrude or violate the privacy people are entitled to. It is usually necessary for the observer to decide beforehand which behaviours to record and measure. It is impossible to observe and record everything that takes place, even between just two people in conversation – try it some time and you will very quickly realise this! Naturalistic observation is a useful method for pilot studies, generating ideas for further research and understanding how people interact. This method is not very good for testing predictions derived from a theory since the researcher has no control over what takes place.

The *natural experiment* capitalises on real-life social events which offer a test of a theory or hypothesis. The most famous example of this is reported in the book *When Prophecy Fails* by Festinger *et al.* (1956). These researchers heard of a spiritual group, headed by a woman called Mrs Keech, who believed herself to be in contact with aliens from outer space. The group expected the world to end on a particular date. Some of the researchers joined the group, becoming *participant observers*, to discover how the attitudes of the real members changed after the ‘doomsday’ date had passed and the world had not ended. Festinger predicted, from his theory of cognitive dissonance (see [Chapter 3](#)), that members of the group should show greater belief and conviction in Mrs Keech *after* the date on which the world was supposed to end. By becoming members of the group the researchers were able to observe, at first hand, the behaviour and expressed attitudes both before and after the doomsday date. Results were consistent with the predictions of cognitive dissonance theory.



A *field experiment* is like conducting a laboratory experiment but in a real-life social setting. All the planning and preparation of a laboratory experiment is required – manipulation of the independent variable, measures of dependent variables and deciding which variables to control for. In the field experiment the researcher is trying to influence how people behave, testing predictions derived from a theory. For example, a field experiment could be devised to answer the question: are people more willing to take risks when they see somebody else (a model) taking a risk than in the absence of another risk taker? A field experiment could be conducted at a pedestrian crossing at traffic lights, and by counting the numbers of pedestrians crossing when the light (for the pedestrian) is on red. In the *control* condition, researchers could simply observe the number who cross when they are not supposed to. In the experimental condition one of the researchers would act as a ‘model’ and cross the light at red. A second researcher would count the number of people who also crossed. If repeated many times, at different traffic lights, with the finding that more were found to cross in the presence of a model, we might conclude the data supported the hypothesis.

Field experiments offer the advantage of a real-life setting but have less control over the situation than laboratory experiments. Variables like the weather, number of people in the street, time of day, day of the week, etc., may all influence behaviour and be potential confounding variables. Field experiments are very popular in social psychology, as you will see, but require more careful planning than you might at first think.

Using naturally occurring social events as social psychology experiments often requires the researchers to become participant observers. There is a penalty for this: researchers may, inadvertently or otherwise, influence the attitudes and behaviours of those in the group. Another problem is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to predict when an event suitable for social psychological research is going to take place. Often a researcher will only get very short notice and may be unprepared or less well prepared than he or she would like to be. The main advantages are that naturally occurring events provide social situations which could not practically or ethically be conducted in a laboratory or field experiment.

### 1.6.3 Correlational studies

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Correlational research has two aims: to assess (a) whether two or more variables are related; and (b) the type of relationship existing between the two variables. Consider again our example of prejudiced people

having prejudiced friends, this could be investigated using correlational research as follows. To test our theory a questionnaire could be administered, say, to 100 people and the 20 highest scorers selected as our pool of prejudiced people. These 20 people would then be asked to name a friend; the researcher would then administer the same questionnaire to these 20 friends. Support for our theory would be obtained if the 20 friends also scored high on the questionnaire.

A statistical procedure, resulting in a *correlation coefficient* provides a means of assessing this. A correlation coefficient can take on any value between  $-1.00$  and  $+1.00$ . A correlation of  $+1.00$  would tell us that a perfect *positive* relationship exists between the two variables. With our example this would mean prejudiced people's scores on the questionnaire are exactly the same as the scores of their friends. Rarely are correlations this high in social psychology; a correlation of  $+0.75$  would be taken to indicate support for the theory. A correlation of  $-1.00$ , by contrast, would indicate a perfect *negative* relationship between two variables. This would mean, with our example, that people with high scores on the questionnaire had friends who scored very *low* on the same questionnaire, i.e. were unprejudiced. Perfect negative correlations are also very rare, again a correlation of around  $-0.75$  would be a good indication of such a negative relationship. A correlation coefficient around zero indicates that *no* relationship exists between the two variables. Knowing somebody was prejudiced would not allow us to predict if their friends were or were not prejudiced. A low correlation (around zero) may not, however, mean our theory is incorrect; it could be that the questionnaire we had used was an inappropriate measure or did not measure prejudice adequately.

Correlation research has the advantage of being relatively straightforward and easy to carry out. As long as the people to whom you want to administer the questionnaire can be identified and you have some confidence in the questionnaire itself, little further planning or expenditure of time is required. This type of research does have a major drawback though: *it cannot provide evidence for cause and effect*. The problem is this: suppose we find a high positive correlation between prejudiced people and their friends, this allows us to say prejudiced people have prejudiced friends, but it does not tell us why. Do these people (cause) choose them (effect)? Often it may seem intuitively obvious what is cause and what is effect, but the correlation coefficient can never provide evidence to support our intuitions. Evidence of cause and effect is best achieved through the use of laboratory experiments, since it is clear that the independent variable directly influences the dependent variable (as long, of course, as the experiment is properly designed).

#### 1.6.4 Archival research and case studies

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*Archival research* makes use of official documents, biographies, analysis of articles in newspapers and the television, etc. This type of research is usually conducted to find evidence for an hypothesis or theoretical construct. Perhaps the most famous use of archival records was that undertaken by Janis (1972) when looking at faulty group decision-making. Janis used the term *groupthink* to describe decision-making groups who did not properly consider alternatives and work through the full consequences of a decision ([Chapter 11](#) deals with this more fully). Janis (1972) used various types of archival research to establish that the then President Kennedy was a member of a group which made decisions to invade Cuba with disastrous consequences. Archival research is valuable, but it may be easy for a researcher to look for material to confirm his or her hypothesis rather than look for disconfirming evidence as well. Another shortcoming of this approach is that the researcher can only work with the material that is available. This ranges from extensive and reliable, to skimpy and unreliable.

*Case studies* are in-depth enquiries or investigations of a person or group of people. They may often be conducted over a relatively long period of time so that *change* in a person can be observed and recorded. Case studies use a range of techniques for collecting data; these include structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Also, standardised questionnaires may be used, or even simple observation of a person or group of people. Case studies are often used in social psychology to generate ideas or hypotheses for more formal research. However, case studies in themselves may be valuable in providing detailed information with a high degree of insight into the person or group of people. Case studies suffer from the danger of subjectivity on the part of the researcher, especially when the social psychologist is seeking confirming evidence for an hypothesis or a theoretical construct. The danger here is that the perceptual processes of the psychologist may be biased by knowledge of what he or she is looking for. This may result in ambiguous material or behaviour being interpreted to confirm the hypothesis. Finally, it is difficult to generalise the findings from a case study more widely to other people or groups.

#### 1.6.5 Meta-analysis

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The findings of just one experiment in social psychology are unlikely to be taken as conclusive evidence so that we can generalise to everybody

or the appropriate population of people on which the sample in the experiment was based. *Meta-analysis* (Rosenthal, 1991) provides a methodology for combining the results of a number of different, but related, studies to summarise and assess the strength of the evidence. When a number of empirical studies in the same area of social psychology all produce similar results, meta-analysis gives confidence in the findings or the theory for which the results provide supporting evidence. *Replication* is crucial to establishing a high level of confidence in findings or a theory. In published research it is not often that exact replications of other research are undertaken. Replications which represent variations on a theme are more common. It is here that meta-analysis is valuable.

In this section we have considered a range of methods of investigation commonly used in social psychological research. As you can see, no one method is ideal and controversy does exist over whether a scientific approach is the right one for studying and attempting to understand human social behaviour.

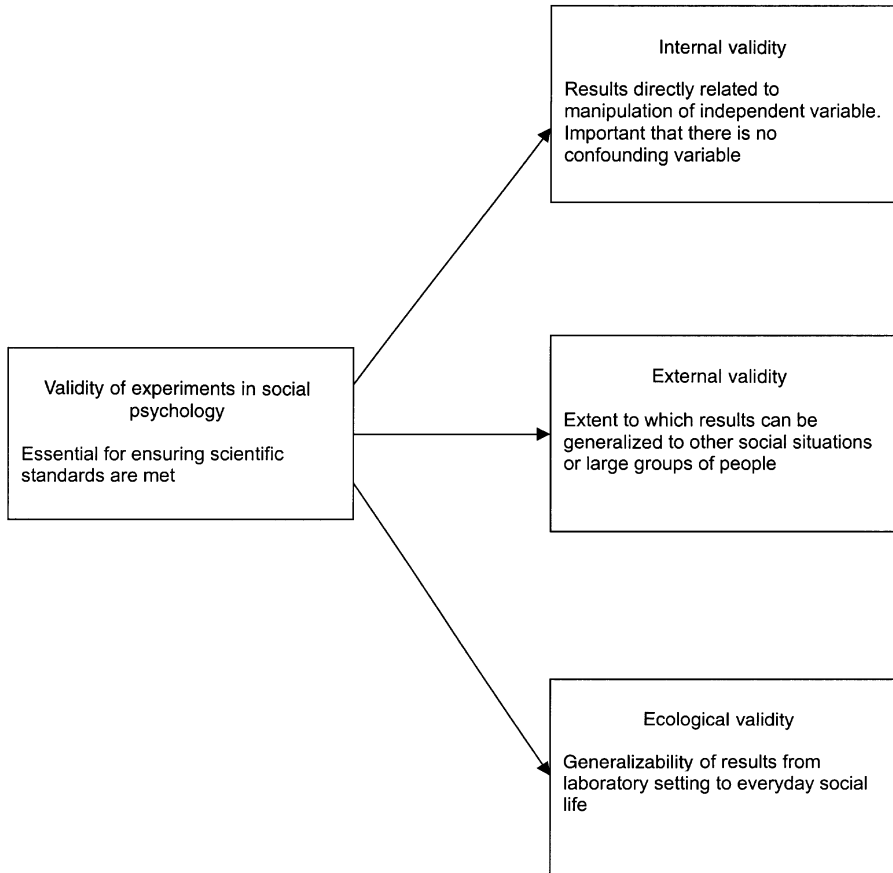
## 1.7 Validity of experiments

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Experiments are powerful tools in the process of scientific enquiry, and because of this we need to be sure they can stand up to certain questions asked of them – questions to do with *validity*. There are three types of validity – internal, external and ecological. Social psychology experiments are unlikely to be valid in all these three ways; however, without internal validity an experiment is meaningless (Campbell and Stanley, 1966). These types of validity are summarised in [Figure 1.4](#) and the strengths and weaknesses of each are indicated.

An experiment has *internal validity* if the results (measures of the dependent variables) can be clearly and confidently related to the manipulations of the independent variable. A confounding variable, you will remember, is where both the independent variable and some other variable not controlled by the experimenter are both capable of explaining the results. An experiment with a confounding variable has *low* internal validity. No experiment can be devised to control for all possible variables; randomly assigning participants to different experimental conditions ensures variables such as age, sex, personality, etc., are equally distributed among each of the conditions. This avoids, as far as it is possible, confounding variables.

*External validity* refers to the generalisability of results from one specific experiment to other experiments, people and measures. The question asked is: ‘Can different experiments, using different procedures, participants and measuring instruments, produce results consistent with that



**Figure 1.4:** Different types of validity that need to be considered when evaluating experiments in social psychology

of the original experiment?’ If the answer is yes, an experiment can be said to be externally valid. This type of validity is important since support for a theory from numerous different experiments gives us more confidence in the theory than if support comes from only one experiment. Internal and external validity may stand in opposition to one another: an internally valid experiment is where very high control over external variables is achieved. However, such very high control might make the experiment so unique as to prevent generalisation to other situations.

*Ecological validity* refers to the generalisability of results from the experimental situation to the ‘real’ world. Laboratory experiments are conducted in artificial environments where many, if not most, aspects

of everyday social life are absent or controlled. A laboratory experiment has ecological validity if the results are relevant and apply to similar situations in everyday life. For example, we will see in [Chapter 6](#) that knowing patterns of non-verbal behaviour occurring between two people in conversation has proved useful for identifying both how people fail socially and how they may be helped to be more socially skilled. Such knowledge has been obtained by analysing video recordings of people interacting in a social psychology laboratory. When reading an experiment described in this book, ask yourself whether it has relevance to you or other people's social lives. If you are able to see ways in which it is relevant it will, in all probability, have good ecological validity.

## 1.8 The social psychology of experiments

A physicist conducting an experiment does so on inanimate matter, and an interaction between the physicist and the material he or she is working on is not thought to take place. Things are very different in social psychology, since the subject matter is other people and people do interact with the experimenter. In view of this, the social psychology experiment is itself a social situation and one which has attracted much research in attempts to identify sources of error and bias. Three main sources have been identified; demand characteristics, experimenter effects and participant (subject) effects.

*Demand characteristics* are aspects of any social situation providing tacit or implicit cues concerning the behaviour expected. If you go to a party, for example, you would be expected to socialise with others, not sit in a corner quietly on your own getting drunk! According to Orne (1962) the primary demand characteristic of social psychology experiments is that of being a good participant. This involves co-operating with the experimenter and providing him or her with the results wanted. This may seem innocuous, but it is not when participants try to puzzle out for themselves what the experiment is about and then act in a way to confirm the hypothesis the psychologist is attempting to test. Participants may do this by trying to be helpful to the experimenter. If this happens, the whole point of the experiment and the validity of the data are undermined. For an experiment to produce valid results participants should respond to the specific experimental conditions in a natural and spontaneous way, ignoring or in ignorance of what the experiment is actually about. To avoid demand characteristics as much as possible, the researcher may conduct pilot studies in which post-experimental interviews are given to participants to discover if there are obvious cues being picked up which could be eradicated. In the final

analysis there can be no guarantee that an experiment is without demand characteristics.

*Experimenter effects* occur when results are influenced or distorted, either intentionally or unintentionally, by the characteristics or behaviour of the experimenter (Rosenthal, 1969). These include influences both on the participants taking part in the experiment and on the data. Unintentional errors of observation, recording or computation may be made to provide results consistent with the hypothesis under test. In extreme and rare cases data may be faked, for example, the Cyril Burt scandal (Mackintosh, 1995), where it was shown that Burt made up IQ scores in twin studies in order to support a genetic explanation of intelligence.

Rosenthal (1969) identified three types of experimenter effects: biosocial, psychological and situational. *Biosocial* effects are aspects of the experimenter about which little can be done, for example, age, sex, race and physical appearance. An attractive female experimenter may obtain different responses from participants than an unattractive male experimenter. The way round this is to have a number of experimenters, rather than just one, conducting the research. *Psychological* factors are to do with the general attitude and personality of the experimenter: is the experimenter friendly or cold when giving instructions to participants? Does the experimenter have an introvert or extrovert personality? Again using numerous experimenters goes some way to overcoming this problem; in addition, a prearranged strategy, rehearsed beforehand, on how to interact with the participants should be devised.

The most important and extensively researched is the *situational* factor; this revolves around the issue of knowing the hypothesis the experiment is designed to test. Rosenthal (1969) found a tendency for experimenters to produce results consistent with an hypothesis when this should not happen. Such *experimenter expectancy* effects were demonstrated by Rosenthal and Fode (1963) in a study where students were asked to train rats to run a maze. Half the students were told they had 'maze-bright' rats (would learn a maze quickly) and the other half told they had 'maze-dull' rats (would only learn slowly). In fact, Rosenthal and Fode gave rats of equal capability, neither dull nor bright, to both groups of students. The researchers found students who believed they had maze-bright rats produced results showing better performance than students who believed they had maze-dull rats. To avoid expectancy effects experimenters should be 'blind' to the hypothesis under test, or if this is not possible, a number of experimenters should be used but not told which experimental condition they are running at any one time.

*Participant (or subject) effects* are many and varied. We have already encountered the problem of the ‘helpful participant’; but participants may come along with a negative or hostile attitude attempting to disrupt or act in opposite ways to normal. Perhaps the most widespread effect is that of *evaluation apprehension*. People who know little about scientific psychology or encounter it through participation in an experiment often believe psychologists have immediate and deep insight into one’s mind. Not only is this wrong but it may lead the person to behave in ways he or she would not normally. Evaluation apprehension may result in the participant attempting to present him or herself in a good light – as likeable, happy and fully understanding the experimenter’s instructions. Often participants are afraid or embarrassed to ask questions when unclear about what they are being asked to do. The experimenter has a duty to make the person both feel at ease and clearly understand what the task requires of him or her.

In summary, the social psychologist must make great efforts to overcome or not fall victim to these social psychological aspects of the experiment. Both awareness and ensuring certain procedures are adhered to will help alleviate the worst of these problems, which challenge the validity of the experiment in social psychology. [Figure 1.5](#) provides a summary of these three effects.

## 1.9 Ethics and values in social psychological research

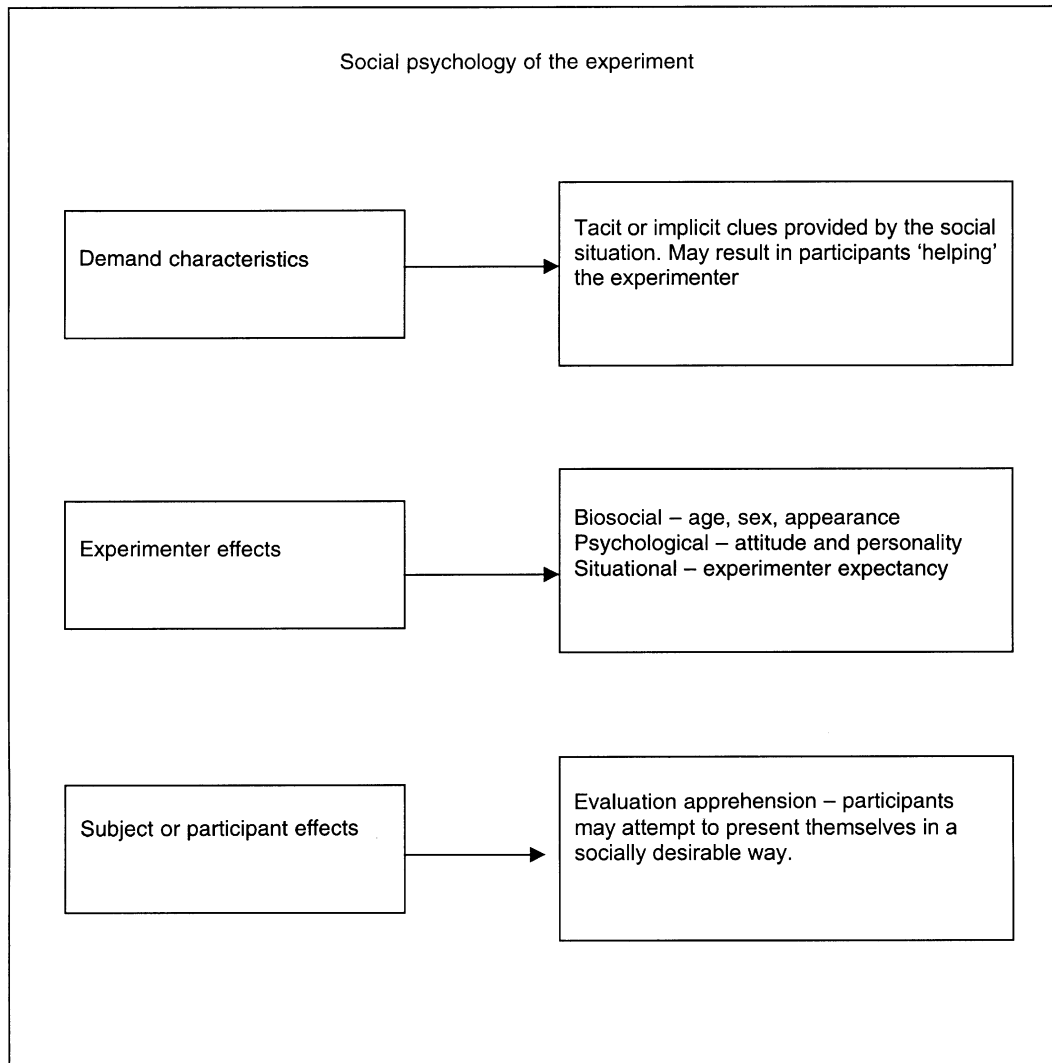
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In all their work psychologists shall conduct themselves in a manner that does not bring into disrepute the discipline and profession of psychology. They shall value integrity, impartiality and respect for persons and evidence and shall seek to establish the highest ethical standards in their work. Because of their concern for valid evidence, they shall ensure that research is carried out in keeping with the highest standards of scientific integrity.

(*A Code of Conduct for Psychologists* published by the British Psychological Society, July 1998)

The above extract summarises quite clearly what is expected of psychologists, and taken together with the British Psychological Society’s *Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants* serves to emphasise the critical importance of ethics and values in psychological research. Throughout this book the word ‘participants’ is used instead of the more common ‘subjects’. This is because the authors





**Figure 1.5:** Demand characteristics, experimenter effects and participant (subject) effects as sources of potential bias and error in the social psychology experiment

believe that the dignity and self-determined behaviour of people are better represented by the word ‘participants’. The use of the word ‘subjects’ may imply that people are passive and only respond when requested to.

Some experiments conducted by social psychologists, perhaps already known to you, have caused widespread controversy because some people have regarded them as unethical and claim that they should not have been conducted in the first place. Milgram’s (1965)

experiments on obedience, where ‘teachers’ believed that they were giving increasingly dangerous levels of electric shocks to a ‘learner’ are widely cited in this context. These experiments are described in some detail in [Chapter 8](#); you can make up your own mind. However, the problem is not an easy one to resolve; does the pursuit of knowledge condone the means by which it is achieved? At what point do we say someone is suffering unjustifiable personal harm or mental distress from taking part in an experiment? Most experiments conducted in social psychology do involve deceiving participants in one way or another.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, you wished to find out how people look at each other when in conversation. To measure looking and eye-contact you could place two people in a laboratory equipped with closed-circuit television so you could take a video recording and analyse looking behaviour at a later time. Your dilemma, as the researcher, is this: two people turn up, you take them into the laboratory, sit them down and instruct them to converse with each other for 15 minutes. One participant says, ‘What’s this all about?’ You say you are studying how two people get acquainted, this satisfies the inquirer and the two people then have a conversation. Now consider the other option open to you as the experimenter: the participant also asks, ‘What’s this all about?’, you tell the truth and say it is an investigation concerned with looking behaviour between two people in conversation. Now the participants know what the study is about, but how might this knowledge affect their behaviour? It is bound to make each one conscious of how he or she looks at the other person when in conversation and so make it difficult for them to act normally. Self-consciousness may result in participants avoiding looking at each other altogether, looking at each other all the time or looking in ‘abnormal’ ways. Ideally, the experimenter wants to observe and measure spontaneous looking behaviour, and telling the truth may seriously threaten this. Given the objectives of the experiment, therefore, it may be necessary to deceive participants so they are not sensitised to the behaviours being observed.

Is there a way in which research could be carried out without the use of deception? Kelman (1967) proposes that people should be asked to role play. Participants would be told about the experiment and asked what they would do in such a situation. The trouble with such an ‘as if’ approach is that people often behave in ways different from how they say they would behave (see [Chapter 3](#) on the relationship between attitudes and behaviour). Furthermore, people asked to act or think as if they were not in possession of a certain piece of knowledge find it difficult to ignore what they already know (Pennington, 1981). Kelman’s

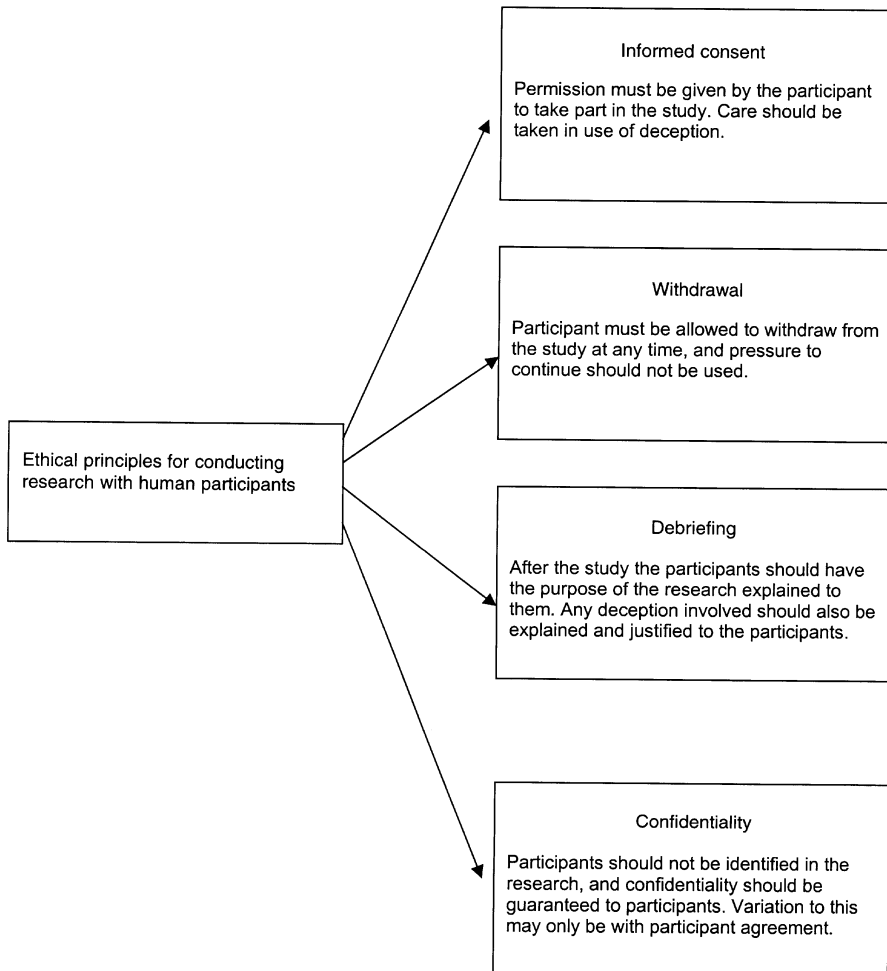
suggestion is interesting but, unfortunately, it is difficult to find a real substitute for spontaneous behaviour.

One concern of using deception in social psychological research is that harm may come to the people deceived (Baumrind, 1985). Participants may get upset in the experiment, or may have their self-esteem damaged through knowing, for example, that they might have harmed another person. Sharpe *et al.* (1992) report that participants deceived in an experiment regard this as acceptable if the research has potential value to the good of society and the research is difficult to conduct in another, non-deceptive way. Nevertheless, social psychologists must take great care when using deception in their research.

*Informed consent* and the option of *withdrawal* from participation in an experiment are essential, especially where deception has been used and participants are feeling uncomfortable and may not want to continue. In addition, a full *debriefing* at the end of the experiment allows the social psychologist to explain what the research is about and why, if employed, deception was essential. When debriefing, the experimenter should ensure that participants leave the laboratory feeling more or less satisfied and in a positive state of mind. If a participant chooses to withdraw from an experiment, the researcher should respect this and, if requested, destroy the data obtained from the participant. Finally, the research should guarantee *confidentiality* to participants in their research. This means that participants should not be identified, unless this was part of the research and agreed by the participant beforehand.

Field studies raise further ethical problems: first, people are not usually asked if they wish, for example, to be observed. The researcher may stage some event in a public place and observe the responses of the passers-by. Second, unwitting participants in a field experiment are not usually debriefed; it is usually accepted that it is best for the people who have been observed to remain ignorant of the fact they have just taken part in an experiment. Field experiments pose more ethical problems for social psychology than do laboratory experiments. At the very least they must conform to the highest ethical standards and not make fools of, or upset, people.

Social psychological research may be unique in the use of deception of people through the scientific method. Some have argued that no matter what the justification, deception should never be used because it betrays the trust between researcher and people researched (Baumrind, 1979). The safeguards detailed above, summarised in [Figure 1.6](#), go some way to protecting participants where deception is regarded as essential to use in the pursuit of knowledge and in trying to help society tackle the social problems that it faces.



**Figure 1.6:** Ethical principles of informed consent, withdrawal, debriefing and confidentiality required of research in social psychology, after BPS principles

## 1.10 About this book

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### 1.10.1 Themes in social psychology

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Two themes recur throughout the chapters that follow: these are spontaneous versus deliberative thought and behaviour; and individual versus social identity. *Spontaneous versus deliberative* thought and behaviour reflects a growing recognition and understanding by social psychologists that people use both strategies at different times depending

upon circumstances. For example, when you do not have time to consider the best course of action you will think spontaneously or automatically. However, such a strategy may lead to bias or error in judgement, and procedures which encourage a person to think more deeply before deciding or behaving in a certain way often lead to error or bias being reduced.

*Individual versus social identity* recognises that people sometimes think about themselves solely in terms of being an individual – here personality characteristics, feelings and thoughts are of central importance. In contrast, people are members of numerous different social groups and have a ‘collective’ or social identity. This allows people to identify with and accept the values and norms that any one social group, such as being a psychology student, brings with it. Social psychological understanding of social identity has, for example, provided important insights into both understanding and helping to reduce prejudice and conflict (see [Chapter 10](#)).

### 1.10.2 Organisation of this book

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In what follows, we have attempted to provide coverage of the key areas in social psychology. To do so, recognition has been given to both traditional and up-to-date theory, concepts and research. This book is intended to serve as a general introduction, with critical evaluation of modern social psychology. Any introductory text makes numerous trade-offs, and it is hoped that the ones made here have been to your benefit. The next chapter, [Chapter 2](#), considers social development from a life-span perspective. Many texts in social psychology do not discuss this issue but we think it important that students of social psychology reading about the discipline, for perhaps the first time, have an understanding of how the individual develops and changes as a social being throughout their life. [Chapters 3 to 5](#) focus more on the individual by considering attitudes and attitude change, and social cognition. The remaining five chapters, [Chapters 7 to 10](#), place emphasis on people in social interactions. The final chapter, [Chapter 11](#), looks at how people in groups perform compared to individual performance.

At the start of each chapter you will find an outline of the contents, and a scan of these will give you a good idea of the areas of social psychology being presented. Towards the end of each chapter is an ‘Applications’ section which provides you with an example of how theory and research in social psychology have been applied to understanding and changing people’s social cognition or behaviour. Applications to education, health, reducing prejudice, and people at work are made. Following this, a summary of the main points of the

chapter is given, together with suggestions for further reading. A few comments have been made about these suggestions for further reading to help you decide which might be the most appropriate for you to pursue.

Finally, liberal use has been made of figures in all chapters. These both highlight results of research and provide helpful summaries of key ideas and concepts that are referred to in the text. We hope you find this book valuable and accessible in providing you with an up-to-date introduction to social psychology.

### 1.11 Summary

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- Our enjoyment of life is strongly influenced by other people. Social psychology seeks to establish the validity of our common-sense views of social behaviour.
- Allport (1985) defines social psychology as ‘the scientific study of the way in which people’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours are influenced by the real or imagined presence of others’.
- The aims of scientific, social psychology are to understand, explain and predict human social behaviour and thought.
- Social psychology emerged as an independent area of scientific enquiry at the beginning of the twentieth century. Early experimentation concerned the effects of the presence of other people on individual performance. Social psychology was strongly influenced by the inhumanity of human behaviour before and during the Second World War.
- Social psychology uses empirical methods of enquiry both to test and construct theories about human social behaviour. Some psychologists question the appropriateness of using scientific methods to help understand and explain social behaviour. These psychologists emphasise the importance of studying people in their everyday social context.
- The main methods of investigation used by social psychology include: laboratory experiments, field research, correlational studies, archival research, case studies and meta-analysis.
- Correlational studies cannot provide proof of cause–effect relationships between variables; laboratory experiments offer a high degree of control, but may be difficult to generalise to real life; field research has high ecological validity but findings may inadvertently be influenced by the researcher.
- Internal, external and ecological validity of experiments can be assessed; without good internal validity an experiment has little value. There may be a trade-off between internal and external validity: the former may be achieved at the expense of the latter.
- Social psychology experiments are themselves a special kind of social situation, as such, they may be affected by demand characteristics, experimenter effects, and participant effects.