

Social Cognition

AN INTEGRATED INTRODUCTION 3RD EDITION

MARTHA **AUGUSTINOS** IAIN **WALKER** & NGAIRE **DONAGHUE**



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Introduction

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Michael Leunig's cartoon, *The Understandascope*, captures the essence of something profound and, in this case, paradoxical. We see a sole figure, peering through a telescope-like device at a mass of people interacting below. In the background there is a city of buildings, with a plane flying by. Although the cartoon pre-dates September 11, 2001, it is hard to avoid seeing the plane as though it is flying toward one of the skyscrapers. The people in the foreground are all interacting with one another, presumably arguing, telling jokes, chatting up, deciding whether to go to a lecture or what to have for dinner, and all the other things people do in everyday life. High on the hill, the sole figure peering through the Understandascope observes all this and, aided by the wonderful contraption, understands it all. If only it were so easy.

The aim of social psychology is to understand the social nature of being human. Social cognition is an area of social psychology, with the narrower aim of understanding how



Figure 1.1 *The Understandascope* by Michael Leunig

humans come to understand the social world and their position in it. In many ways, the social psychologist is the solitary figure in Leunig's cartoon, trying and hoping to understand humanity with the aid of some theoretical and methodological contraptions. Unfortunately, that endeavour and hope are thwarted by the paradox within Leunig's cartoon.

The solitary figure is separated from the mass below, set apart as though unafflicted by being human and unaffiliated with anything human. In peering through the Understandascope, the figure fails to recognize that he (and the figure does seem to be drawn as 'he', and that only highlights the point we are making here) is inseparable from those below, and indeed that any understanding that comes through the Understandascope is not given to him as if divinely, but rather depends on his interpretation of the information provided. His understanding is the joint product of the Understandascope and himself. Furthermore, if the Understandascope genuinely does provide understanding of what it is to be human, it ought to provide that understanding regardless of which group of humans it is focused on, and even – perhaps especially – when it is focused backward on the viewer.

In all these ways, Leunig's cartoon neatly captures the nature of social psychology as an intellectual discipline, and says something about social psychologists as well. The technology of social psychology, impressively built up over more than a century, is like the Understandascope – capable of providing insightful information, but not insight itself. Unfortunately, social psychology over the past century has focused its technology almost solely on just one group of humans, the ubiquitous psychology undergraduate student, as though such people can represent all of humanity. Even more unfortunately, social psychology has rarely put itself and its practitioners in front of the Understandascope. It has proceeded on the 'God Trick' assumption that we social psychologists can, by standing on a distant hill and observing from a distance, remove ourselves from the realm of what it is we are trying to understand. This is clearly absurd.

The solitary figure in Leunig's cartoon seems dismayed. It is not clear, though, whether that dismay is because of what he sees through the Understandascope (a sea of mostly angry-looking people) or because of his understanding of what those mostly angry-looking people are angry about. Is it the anger itself, or the understanding that there is little or no alternative to the anger, that is dismaying? Once again, Leunig's cartoon captures nicely a common characteristic of social psychology and social psychologists. The index of any standard social psychology textbook is replete with references to the nasty, brutish aspects of humans. There is, in stark contrast, little about the upbeat, the stuff that might put a smile on the face of the solitary figure. The same is true of this book. That is not to say that the upbeat is less important. Rather, it is more a reflection of the urgency of understanding humans' propensity to be nasty to one another. But lurking quietly in the background of social psychology is an often tacit assumption that by understanding the nasty and the brutish, we can better go about producing social change for the better. We share this view, and wish that social psychology more explicitly wrestled with an agenda for social change rather than being content with trying to understand.

In this book, we set out to examine what we see are the primary ways in which social psychologists have gone about building a systematic understanding of how humans come



to understand the social world. Although social psychologists are all largely concerned with understanding the same social phenomena, there are remarkable divergences in how they describe, and certainly in how they understand, those phenomena. These divergences mark the boundaries between four major perspectives we cover in the book – social cognition, social identity theory, social representations and discursive psychology. In the book, we attempt to demarcate those perspectives, and then consider how each perspective understands phenomena such as attitudes, identity and prejudice. Our position is that an adequate social psychological account of *any* phenomenon – from the perception of the ordinary and mundane routine of everyday life to the genocidal behaviours of members of one group against another – must incorporate and integrate perspectives that range from the cognitive and intra-individual to the societal and ideological. Throughout, we try to turn the Understascope on the discipline itself, and ultimately try to sketch how to focus it a little more sharply through the development of a broader, more integrative understanding, for the benefit of the discipline and for those we study.

Defining *Social* Psychology

Social psychology is an odd discipline. Born in the social sciences baby-boom of the late 19th century, it traces its genealogy directly to parental disciplines in psychology and sociology, and more distantly to the ancient Greek philosophers. Embedded within the family tree are notable as well as disreputable ancestors: the Enlightenment movement was central in enabling contemporary Western conceptualizations of the self-contained, independent individual; two world wars provided fertile grounds for the development of a technological hardware able to be applied in peacetime for other purposes; without the rise of liberalism, a discipline such as social psychology would be inconceivable; and social psychology's concern with groups and the crowd is largely attributable – along with much of the discipline of sociology – to the worries of middle-class sensibilities about the rise of the masses consequent upon rapid industrialization in the 19th century.

Perhaps stretching the birth metaphor too far, social psychology is something of a bastard discipline. Its parents – psychology and sociology – have never had much of a relationship with one another, and both often disavow their progeny, perhaps because of guilt about their flirtation with something they each rejected, and perhaps because of a lingering, wistful attachment to what might have been. As a bastard discipline, social psychology has had to find its own way in the world, to work hard to establish its own identity, to develop its own ways of understanding the world and its place in it, and to strive not to be tarnished with the same ill-repute that sometimes afflicts its parents. In finding its own way, it has made some wrong turns, travelled down some blind alleys, and flirted with some dangerous characters.

Definitely stretching the metaphor well beyond breaking point, we might continue by claiming that social psychology is still a developing, adolescent discipline, still hung up



about some of its earlier, still unresolved, complexes, and still struggling with a confusing array of possibilities. Social psychology has still not established its own mature identity. Struggling with identity conflicts about theory and method that are the legacy of its bastard heritage, it still wrestles with multiple 'possible selves'. Multiplicity is not necessarily a bad thing – indeed, we would argue that it is a virtue. But some of the possible selves claim they cannot exist beside others, that they are mutually incompatible. Perhaps they can be sorted, with some effort and imagination, into a coherent, integrated whole self; perhaps they just need to learn how to engage in parallel play in the same sandpit; perhaps they need a divorce or a restraining order.

Somewhat oxymoronically, social psychology has never fully grasped what *social* encompasses. Early influential social psychologists defined social psychology in such a way that the *social* was always separated from the individual. For example, Gordon Allport defined social psychology as:

The attempt to understand how the thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others. (Allport, 1985, p. 3)

This definition establishes the individual and the social as separate, antinomical, and sometimes even antithetical. Such a definition allows, and even encourages, a focus on *either* the individual *or* the social, and sometimes a focus on how one affects the other. What such a definition disallows is a conceptualization in which the individual and the social are inextricably inseparable, in which the individual constitutes and is simultaneously constituted by the social.

Considering the individual and the social as fundamentally inseparable radically alters the understandings of human experience that are developed by social psychologists. This also constitutes, or rather *ought* to constitute, the unique, interstitial position of social psychology – unifying the individualism of psychology and the 'institutionalism' of sociology.

The Crisis in Social Psychology

As with all adolescents, social psychology experienced a 'crisis'. Almost five decades ago, Kenneth Ring (1967) published a provocative article taking to task the social psychology of his time for being frivolous, and for being more concerned with demonstrating a cute, clever experimental manipulation of the latest theoretical toy than with making serious progress in the task of building a body of worthwhile knowledge. Ring's article heralded the start of what came to be known as the 'crisis' in social psychology (Cartwright, 1979; Elms, 1975; Gergen, 1973; McGuire, 1973; Pepitone, 1976, 1981; Sampson, 1977, 1981; Tajfel, 1972; Taylor & Brown, 1979). The enthusiasm with which an earlier experimental social psychology was met became dampened by critics who described a general feeling of discontent with the discipline's direction. While experimentation deliberately and purposively



controls for the 'contaminating variables' of the real world, it was argued that the artificiality of this contrived environment did not and could not adequately simulate human social experience. Furthermore, experimentation led to its own class of problem, such as demand characteristics (Orne, 1969) and experimenter bias (Rosenthal, 1969). Other possible sources of bias were identified, such as the political ideological, cultural and biographical backgrounds of researchers (Innes & Fraser, 1971).

Expressions of discontent were not only directed at the fetishism of laboratory experimentation. On a more epistemological level, Gergen (1973) claimed that social psychology could never be a science because the subject matter with which it deals (human social behaviour) is largely culturally and historically specific, and is itself changed because we social psychologists study it. Unlike the physical sciences, general laws of human behaviour cannot be established definitively, because these fluctuate with changing cultural and historical circumstances. Social psychology is, therefore, predominantly a 'historical inquiry'. For some, the location of the crisis was in the unchallenged epistemological assumption that the individual is 'the centre of all things', and thus should be the principal unit and focus of research and analysis. In particular, Hogan and Emler (1978), Pepitone (1976, 1981) and Sampson (1977, 1988) argued that most of social psychology's theories (dissonance theory, game theory, equity theory, attitude theories, and theories of personality and socialization) are imbued with the thesis of self-contained individualism.

The individualization of social psychology is largely attributed to the joint forces of experimentation and positivism that came to dominate the discipline and cloak it in scientific respectability. These forces also led to the demise of interest in collective phenomena in which early psychologists such as Wundt and McDougall had been interested (Farr, 1989). Along with the sociologist Durkheim (1898), these early psychologists believed that cultural phenomena such as language, myths, religion and nationalism could not be reduced to the individual level of analysis. In particular, Wundt believed that such higher cognitive processes could not be adequately studied by the experimental tradition which he founded.

The conflict and tension between the individual (psychological) and collective (sociological) levels of analysis have had a long history and are documented in the famous debate between Tarde and Durkheim (Doise, 1986). Those who have provided a critical history of social psychology are in agreement that the dominance of the former tradition over the latter can partly be attributed to the behaviourist views of Floyd Allport, who was highly critical of collective concepts such as McDougall's notion of 'group mind' (Cartwright, 1979; Farr, 1989; Graumann, 1986; Pepitone, 1981). Allport's methodological individualism is obvious in his famous statement: 'There is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of the individual. Social psychology . . . is a part of the psychology of the individual' (1924, p. 4). Allport was insistent that collective phenomena such as crowd behaviour and public opinion were nothing more than the sum of the actions and attitudes of the individuals who comprise the collectivity. His methodological individualism was a



powerful force which helped shape the subsequent nature of the most dominant theories and methods in North American social psychology.

Little has been written of the 'crisis' since the late 1970s. For some, it was a minor distraction and little more than a 'dummy-spit' in the normal course of business. Jones (1985), for example, calls it a 'minor perturbation' in the development of the science of social psychology. For others, it has brought to the fore the limitations of social psychology's methods, its epistemology, and even its research questions (Gergen, 1985; Manicas & Secord, 1983). One of Ring's criticisms was that debates and issues in social psychology are never really resolved. Rather, they just fade away from centre-stage because people lose interest in them, not because we now know more than before. Indeed, in many ways, the crisis itself faded from centre-stage not because the questions being raised about the enterprise of social psychology received any satisfactory answers, but simply because the discipline lost interest. We believe that the crisis was of epistemology, not just confidence, and that the epistemological problems of the 1960s and 1970s are just as problematic in the early part of the 21st century, particularly with respect to the most dominant perspective of the moment – social cognition.

Social Cognition

Social psychology has always prided itself on never succumbing to the behaviourist revolution which so debased and derailed the rest of psychology. During the heydays of behaviourism, social psychologists continued researching internal mental constructs such as attitudes, values and stereotypes. But in avoiding the excesses and pitfalls of behaviourism during the 1950s and 1960s, social psychology became increasingly drawn to the information processing metaphor of the person which came to dominate cognitive science. Just as with behaviourism, cognitivism is associated with its own excesses. Today, the dominant perspective in North American social psychology is known as *social cognition*. Some have argued that the 'social' is a misnomer and that the only things social about social cognition are the objects of its study – people, groups, events. It has an impressive armament of mini theories, concepts and experimental procedures borrowed from cognitive psychology, and more recently, the neurosciences. But despite all its hardware, for many it has been unable to satisfy the doubts and the questions that the crisis raised.

Currently, research and theory in social cognition are driven by an overwhelming individualistic orientation that forgets that the contents of cognition originate in social life, in human interaction and communication. Unfortunately, the models central to social cognition focus primarily on cognitive processes and increasingly on neural substrates of the brain, at the expense of content and context. As such, societal, collective, shared, interactive and symbolic features of human thought, experience and interaction are often ignored and forgotten. Contemporary social cognition research is individualistic because it searches within the cognitive and perceptual domain of the person to understand social phenomena



such as attitudes, attributions and identity. Social cognition will never explain adequately the totality of human experience so long as it remains at the individual level of analysis alone. However, unlike some critics, we also argue that mainstream social cognition research *is* relevant and does have much to offer alternative social psychologies that have emerged and gained momentum more recently. Indeed, we will argue that a reconciliation and integration of individual and social accounts can lead to a fuller, more reflexive, and dynamic understanding of human experience.

What is this 'social' with which we suggest social cognition ought to be integrated? It comes largely from three other approaches, each of which had their origins in European social psychology. First is the approach provided by Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). SIT provides an analysis of identity based on group belongingness. In contrast to North American social psychology, the group has been more valorized than the individual in European social psychology. People are conceptualized first and foremost as social beings, deriving from their group memberships a sense of who they are, how they should behave and what they should believe. Society, as a collectivity, is comprised of the complex web of intergroup relations which characterize any socio-historical period. As social identity theorists are so keen to emphasize, social identity theory reinstates the social (or group) within the individual.

The second of the European perspectives we discuss, social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984), also emphasizes the centrality of social group membership, but focuses more upon how this membership shapes and constitutes an individual's consciousness. Social representations refer to the stock of common-sense theories and knowledge people have of the social world. The theory is interested not only in mapping the contents of this common sense and how this may differ between different social groups, but also in studying how representations are used by individuals and groups to understand and construct a common and shared reality.

Third, and most recent of the predominantly European perspectives, is discursive psychology. Having its origins in the postmodern and social constructionist critique of positivist science, discursive psychology emphasizes the centrality of discourse and rhetoric in human interaction. By focusing on what people say rather than on what people think, discursive psychology challenges the cognitivist assumptions underlying not only the social cognition mainstream, but also social identity theory and the theory of social representations.

Aims of this Book

Our aim in this book is to examine some of the different theoretical and methodological accomplishments of our bastard discipline, to examine some of the different possible selves competing to define the identity of social psychology, and to begin to try to sort all these into some sort of coherent, integrated whole. This is no easy task, but we see a mature, integrated identity, rather than a divorce, as something worth working for.



We draw upon the four major and influential perspectives that have contemporary currency in social psychology – social cognition, social identity, social representations and discursive psychology. These perspectives have largely developed in parallel, rarely considering one another. However, they each deal, in their own ways, with the same phenomena. Throughout this book, we attempt to articulate a consideration of how these approaches might be integrated into a perspective that spans levels of analysis from the intraindividual to the societal. It should be noted at the outset that the four perspectives are not equivalent. Two of them – social identity and social representations – are systematized into formal theories. The other two are not systematized much at all, and are each best thought of as perspectives.

Organization of this Book

Following this brief introduction, the book is organized into three main parts. The first comprises a large chapter (Chapter 2) in which we present four foundational perspectives – social cognition, social identity, social representations and discursive psychology. These are presented fairly independently of one another and fairly uncritically in their own terms. Our presentation sets out the major defining features of each perspective, and illustrative examples of research done within that perspective. These four perspectives set the foundations, and the tone, for the remainder of the book. Some students may find this chapter in its entirety a heavy slog and too much material to take in at once. If so, then we recommend that each theoretical perspective is read as a ‘stand-alone’ section serving as a background to the corresponding section in each of the topic chapters in Part Two of the book. Indeed, we have written and structured the book with this kind of cross-referencing in mind. Definitions of key terms that are associated with each theoretical perspective are provided at the end of the book for easy referencing. We hope that this list of keywords will facilitate students’ understanding of the central tenets of each approach.

In Part Two of the book, we present chapters on six major topics in social psychology from the point of view of each perspective in turn. These topics comprise social perception (Chapter 3), attitudes (Chapter 4), attributions (Chapter 5), self and identity (Chapter 6), prejudice (Chapter 7) and ideology (Chapter 8). The first five of these topics are central and defining areas in the field, and are invariably included in most social psychology textbooks. The last topic – ideology – has been less central but is one we believe is of great significance to how we understand human experience and social life. In all these chapters, we aim to provide an account of how each perspective addresses the topic, and to point to commonalities and divergences across the perspectives. This is handled somewhat differently in each of the chapters, partly because the topics themselves and the research that supports them lend themselves differently to integrative coverage. Unlike many other textbooks, we do not attempt to provide a comprehensive coverage of all that has been written on any one of these topics – this is not an encyclopedia. Rather, we present research and theory because of their illustrative power.



In doing so, we hope to sketch some sort of initial integrated perspective. Throughout all the chapters, an over-riding aim is to re-establish the primacy of the *social* in social psychology. Again, each of these chapters is designed to be self-contained, although some cross-referencing with theoretical principles in Chapter 2 may be necessary, especially for perspectives which are less mainstream, such as social representations theory and discursive psychology.

Chapter 3 deals with social perception. Categorization processes are central to almost all theorizing in social psychology, regardless of perspective. However, different perspectives conceptualize categorization in starkly different ways. The social cognitive perspective has a considerable theoretical investment in the notion of schemas, and has amassed a vast array of empirical evidence demonstrating the operation of schematic thought. Much of the recent empirical attention in this area has focused on the unconscious operation of schematic, or categorical, thinking. We make the case that social cognitive research conceptualizes schemas in markedly similar ways to the conceptualizations of a representation by social representations researchers. Categorization is also a central premise of social identity theory – it is impossible to think of identity without some sense of how self is categorized as the same as, and different from, others. Finally, discursive psychology also considers categorization, and category memberships, as critically important. It differs from the other perspectives, though, in seeing categories as something achieved through talk-in-interaction.

Chapter 4 addresses possibly the most theorized and researched concept in social psychology – attitudes. In this chapter, we detail the way in which the attitude construct has traditionally been defined and theorized within social psychology. We consider the functional approach to attitudes, and discuss how various theoretical perspectives have dealt with one of the most problematic issues in the field – the relationship between attitudes and behaviour. Following this, we discuss research that has investigated the cognitive organization of attitudes, including how attitudes are activated and accessed. We criticize traditional attitude research for its individualized and asocial treatment of the attitude construct. In light of this, we present research on attitudes as social identity phenomena and attitudes as social representations. Finally, we consider the discursive approach to the contextual variability and linguistic construction of attitudes.

Another central and dominant topic within cognitive social psychology, attributions, is the subject matter of Chapter 5. We outline the three major theoretical contributions to attribution theory: Heider's (1958) pioneering work, Jones and Davis's (1965) theory of correspondent inferences and Kelley's (1967) covariation model. We detail the various attributional biases documented within the literature and canvass various explanations of these biases. We then describe research on intergroup attributions. These clearly highlight the role of social identities in the construction of explanations for positive and negative behaviours performed by ingroup and outgroup members, and show clearly why attributions must be considered as social and cultural phenomena, not just as individual cognitive phenomena. This ties closely to a social representational view of attributions as shared world-views. Our treatment of the interactive construction of explanations in talk, and of the inseparability of description and explanation, rounds off this chapter.



The 'self' almost defines the focus of psychology as an intellectual enterprise, and 'the self in social context' almost captures the focus of all of social psychology. We consider four different approaches to 'self and identity' in Chapter 6. Social cognitive approaches focus especially on the self as a knowledge structure (i.e., as a schema), and, within this framework, on different sorts of 'selves' and the discrepancies between them (real self, positive ideal self, etc.). The social identity perspective challenges this individualized sense of self, which forces a consideration of the necessary social context of self, on the relationships between self and group, and on the unavoidable politics of self and identity. Social representations research reminds us that 'self' is a historical and cultural construction, and that what we in the West take to be obvious in the way we think about ourselves is actually quite unusual. The constructed and contingent nature of 'self' as an interactional category is also the focus of discursive approaches.

Chapter 7 applies many of the constructs dealt with in earlier chapters to the study of prejudice and intergroup relations. We start by reviewing theory and research that locates the source of prejudice in the functioning of the abnormal personality. This is followed by two other prolific social cognitive traditions that approach prejudice as an attitude and as a schema, respectively. The relatively asocial focus on individuals as the origin of prejudice is criticized by the social identity perspective, which argues for a radically different conceptualization of stereotyping and intergroup differentiation. The social representation approach draws attention to the shared, political and cultural construction of group identities, embedded in which are valorizations, descriptions and explanations of self and other. Finally, discursive approaches emphasize how the processes taken to be relatively fixed by the other approaches are, in fact, highly contingent on local interaction.

The final content chapter in the book is on ideology. Ideology is one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences, and is arguably social psychology's greatest challenge. We define the social psychological study of ideology as the study of the social psychological processes and mechanisms by which certain representations and constructions of the world serve to legitimate, rationalize and reproduce the existing institutional, social and power relations within any society. Given the reluctance of social psychological theories to consider collective and societal explanations for a range of cognitive phenomena, we claim that the system-serving and justificatory functions of certain values, beliefs, stereotypes, representations and attributions have been seriously neglected. Ideology, however, should not be viewed solely as a cognitive construct. More recently, ideology has been located in linguistic and discursive repertoires as well as in certain material and behavioural practices. This chapter reviews different approaches to the study of ideology within social psychology, examining in turn ideology as (false) consciousness, ideology as discourse, and ideology as material practices. We focus especially on an analysis of individualism and liberalism, two ideologies which are central to modern Western democracies and also central to modern Western social psychology.

Many readers – students and colleagues – may find it odd to find a chapter on ideology in a social psychology text. It is indeed odd – not odd that it should be included, but odd that it is always excluded. Ideology, we contend, is of central significance to how we understand human experience and contemporary social life. It is also critical to *any*



social psychological enterprise, equally those which attempt to engage with the world in order to change it and those that abstract themselves from the world in an attempt to understand the world 'objectively'. Social psychologists of almost all persuasions have prided themselves – rightly so – with wanting to change the world, not just understand it. Any theory of, or attempt at, social change is necessarily ideological. Any attempt to be objectively distant from the world is likewise ideologically-based, as well as politically conservative.

Finally, in Part Three of the book we conclude with some brief thoughts and reflections regarding our attempts to bring together what are often perceived to be disparate traditions of research within the discipline. We also consider the future trajectory of social psychology as a discipline in light of recent developments in the field.

Concluding Comments

Since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1995 there has been a veritable explosion in research coming under the rubric of 'social cognition'. This has been equally matched by a proliferation of work in the social identity/self-categorization tradition and in social representations and discursive psychology. Our dilemma has thus been how to adequately cover all this material in a way that is accessible and representative of the current 'state of play' in the discipline. In doing so, we have needed to change the structure of the book from the first edition so that we can do justice to the four theoretical approaches. We hope that the new topic structure that we have adopted for this edition lends itself to better coverage of each area, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the different approaches to studying these social psychological concepts.

As with the previous edition, some of our colleagues from different theoretical camps will be horrified to see critical perspectives jointly included in a book purportedly about 'social cognition'. After all, many of these researchers have been at pains to differentiate themselves from one another. All perspectives contained in this book, however, have one fundamental thing in common: they all attempt to understand how we orient ourselves in the social world we inhabit, how we come to understand and construct our world, and what consequences these understandings and constructions have for us. Moreover, more critical approaches have themselves developed in response to the crisis in social psychology which we described earlier. While many in the discipline largely ignored the crisis, others have been busily developing alternative conceptual and methodological frameworks. In presenting an attempt at integration, we hope to preserve the value of all approaches, and hope to avoid the peril of destroying them all in the process of creating a drab grey admixture of everything. Ultimately, we hope that this book ignites student interest and enthusiasm in our discipline and encourages wider intellectual debate about what social psychology is and should be.



