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***Social
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by Daniel Richardson, PhD

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Social Psychology For Dummies®

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About the Author

Cheat Sheet

Introduction

The world is not short of advice. Self-help books, sermons, parents and celebrities regularly dispense advice on every aspect of your social life. If you want to know how to win friends and influence people, how to capture hearts and change minds, how to believe in yourself or doubt other people, then someone will tell you five easy steps. But social psychology, and this book, offers you something better than advice. It can give you insight.

Social Psychology for Dummies uses the tools of science to understand why people behave as they do. Why they are attracted to some people, but not others? Why they are not convinced by an elegant political argument, but are persuaded by a celebrity endorsement. Where does prejudice come from, and how does it influence our thoughts and actions? In this book, you will see how experimental methods can be used to reveal the inner workings of all of these psychological phenomena. And yes, there is a bit of advice too.

About This Book

Social Psychology for Dummies covers the full range of topics and phenomena that you would discuss in a typical university psychology course. However, it has been written with as little of the jargon and off-putting technical terms as possible. There are no pre-requisites for this book. You will be able to understand it with no exposure to psychology or scientific study before. A healthy curiosity about people is all that you need bring, and the book will provide you with an overview of one of the most exciting and dynamic areas of social science.

Social psychology is about the huge scope of human behaviour, but it is also about *your* behaviour. Wherever possible in this book, I've given you little exercises to try that are modelled on real psychology experiments. If you try them yourself you will be able to *experience* the social phenomena that you are learning about.

And one more thing: the Internet has forever changed the world of science and education. There are remarkable resources on-line for learning about social psychology, such as lecture courses, experiments you can participate in, and high quality blogs written by the scientists themselves as they carry out their research. But as with every aspect of the internet, the trick is knowing where the good stuff is and avoiding the rest. We provide you with an in depth list of the best resources to explore online.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, I've made a few assumptions about you. Don't think too badly of me. In particular, I've assumed that you:

- ✓ Are either a college student studying psychology who wants an accessible guide to social psychology as an adjunct to your course reading, or a general reader who's simply keen to know more about this fascinating area.
- ✓ Have a basic grasp of psychology in general, but are by no means a subject expert.
- ✓ Know that there's quite a lot of psychological research behind all this but don't necessarily want to plough through all of it.

- ✓ Will be highly selective about which parts of the book you read.

Icons Used in This Book

Icons are handy little graphic images that point out particularly important information about social psychology. Throughout this book, you find the following icons, conveniently located along the left margins:



When you see this icon, you can expect to be surprised: It covers a range of widely-held beliefs and widely-believed stories, and hold them up to interrogation. Things aren't always what they seem

...



Remember what follows this icon, as it is vital that you grasp these points to make sense of the rest of the chapter.



This icon directs you towards more detailed, technical information about the concept or experiments we are discussion. They provide nourishment for your inner science nerd.



It's all very well reading about other people's thoughts and behaviour, but these little exercises allow to directly experience psychological phenomena for your self. If you see this icon, then get ready to put your own brain under the microscope!



Useful little wrinkles that help you gain understanding and insight.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or e-book you're reading right now, this product also comes with some access-anywhere goodies on the web. Check out the free Cheat Sheet at

www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/socialpsychology, and for a run down on the historical development of the subject and some other worthwhile articles on social psychology, check out www.dummies.com/extras/socialpsychology.

Where to Go from Here

If you are new to the science of psychology, then you may want to start at the beginning of this book and work your way through to the end. Social psychology covers a bewildering array of topics, methods and ways of understanding human behaviour. Simply turn the page and you're on your way! If you have already taken some psychology classes, or are taking one right now, you can turn to a particular topic to address a specific need or question you have. Use the table of contents and index to help you navigate. Regardless of how you find your way around this book, we're sure you'll enjoy the journey.

Part I
**Getting Started with
Social Psychology**



For Dummies can help you get started with lots of subjects. Visit www.dummies.com to learn more and do more with *For Dummies*.

In this part ...

- ✓ Find out about the basics of social psychology – understand identity, motivation and the power of social forces.
- ✓ Come to grips with the range of disciplines that comprise social psychology, and discover how to get the right answers to the right questions.
- ✓ Understand experiments, operationalisation and the importance of drawing sound conclusions from results.

Chapter 1

Introducing the Science of Social Psychology

In This Chapter

- ▶ Mapping out the territory of social psychology
 - ▶ Understanding the people around you
 - ▶ Exploring relationships, families, groups and cultures
-

Social psychology is a fascinating science. It investigates feelings, thoughts, cultures and the ways that people relate to one another. Before social science, these aspects of human life were discussed only in the context of art, religion and philosophy. But now, humans can generate scientific knowledge about their social selves.

In this chapter, I define the scope of social psychology, the sorts of behaviour, actions and thought processes that it tries to understand, and the tools that it uses. In its quest, social psychology has gobbled up ideas and techniques from the neighbouring sciences such as cognitive psychology, neuroscience and evolutionary biology. Although they have shifted during social psychology's short history, its goals have remained constant: To understand people and their relationships to each other.

Looking Down the Social Psychologists' Microscope

What is the focus of social psychology? Is it thoughts in the mind, people in society or cultures across the world? It is all of these levels together. Imagine a giant microscope looking not at cells or creatures, but people. At the start of this book, I train this microscope on the smallest building blocks of social psychology – the thoughts and attitudes that exist inside people’s heads and govern their behaviour. Then I zoom out to look first at the beliefs people have about other people, and then the ways that they exert power and influence over each other. In the final part of the book I zoom out again, and look at how people interact and relate, forming friendships, families and cultures.

So if it’s not a scale on a microscope, what defines the science of social psychology? The boundaries are continually shifting, as they are in many active and developing sciences. But if you want a short, concise definition of the scope of social psychology, you can do no better than the definition Gordon Allport gave in 1954. He said that social psychology is:

The scientific investigation of how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others.

I’d like to highlight two aspects of this definition:

- ✓ What distinguishes social psychology from the rest of the field is the focus on cause and the effects of the ‘presence of others’.
- ✓ These other people do not have to be physically present. So you can be under the influences of social forces when you’re in the middle of a party or all alone. For example, I discuss conformity, obedience, and persuasion and authority in Chapters [12](#), [13](#) and

[14](#), respectively, the power of stereotypes in Chapter [10](#) and belonging to groups in Chapters [16](#) and [17](#).

To put it bluntly – if it is an aspect of human behaviour that involves more than one person, it is of some interest to social psychologists. Social psychologists want to understand whom you like and whom you love, why you seek to help some people and harm others, what you think of yourself and what you think of other people, and the connections you make between yourself and others. The next sections reveal in more depth the phenomena social psychologist study and the scientific tools that they employ.

Rummaging through the social psychologists' toolkit

Social psychology is an interdisciplinary science. When you socially interact with another person, you are using your visual system to recognise their emotions, your auditory system to process their speech and your memory systems to make sense of what they are saying and predict what they may say next. So to understand this social interaction, social psychologists can draw on the many fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience.

What's more, during this social interaction, your behaviour is a precise and well-learned ballet of coordinated actions – a polite incline of the head to show that you are listening, nodding and murmuring 'uh-huh' at precisely the right moments, and shifting your body posture to show that you accept what the other person says. All of these things you learnt as a child, and all of these things may be slightly different in different cultures. So to fully understand this social interaction, social psychologists may turn to developmental

psychology, cross-cultural psychology or even sociology or anthropology.

In Chapter [2](#) I examine how social psychology connects to these closely related disciplines. Also, I look inside the social psychologists' tool kit to see how they developed their own tools such as surveys, interviews and field studies. But there is one tool that is so important to social psychology that it deserves a chapter of its own: the experiment.

Mastering the power of the experiment

Experiments are the most powerful tool that we have in social psychology, and indeed, in all of science. They allow us to make strong, lasting conclusions. With an experiment, we can distinguish between two things that happen to co-occur, and one thing that causes another. For example, rich people tend to be less kind drivers. They are more likely to cut you up on the road. Is this because if you are a selfish driver, then you are more self-interested throughout your life, and more likely to make money for yourself? Or does having money and owning an expensive car make you a meaner person? The surprising answer, as I discuss in Chapter [15](#), is that money and power can *cause* you to be less considerate towards others. It is only because of carefully designed experiments that we can make that bold claim.

Experiments get their power from careful design and analysis. In Chapter [3](#), I examine what makes a good experiment in social psychology, and what makes a bad one. As you will see, people who study chemistry and physics really have life easy. They are doing a simple science where you have to measure straightforward things like mass, heat and velocity. But in social

psychology we have to measure things such as happiness, prejudice and a sense of belonging. There is no stereotype-o-meter for prejudice in the same way that there is a thermometer for heat. So, as I will show you, social psychologists have to be clever and creative in the ways that they do their science.

Digging for the foundations of social psychology

To understand the way that we do social psychology today, you have to understand the past. As much as social psychology studies phenomena such as conflict, aggression and prejudice, it is also the outcome of events in real life such as the Second World War and the Holocaust. Also, social psychology is a child of psychology itself. In the recent past, psychology conceived of people as very different things – as learning machines, as computers, as social beings and as sets of competing desires. The way that psychology has defined people has had profound consequences for the way that social psychology studies the interaction between people.

On the other hand, one can say that social psychology is one of the youngest sciences that there is. The sort of social understanding that our species has been doing for thousands of years is nothing like a proper *science*. It is not knowledge that has been built up from a systematic method of experimentation and hypothesis testing. Since its inception around 500 years ago, the scientific method has been applied to understanding every facet of the world around us. But it was long after we studied stars, planets, oceans, animals, cells, molecules and atoms that we turned the microscope upon ourselves and our own behaviour. In this sense, social psychology is indeed one of the youngest of the sciences.

No couches here!

This sidebar is the only place in the whole book that I talk about Sigmund Freud. This may seem very strange to non-psychologists, who often assume that he is the dominant figure in psychology. Indeed, if you tell people that you are currently studying psychology, the first thing that they may say is, 'Oh don't analyse me!' (This will quickly become tiresome for you). In fact, Freud is a marginal figure, at best, in contemporary empirical psychology. His ideas had an enormous influence on popular culture and the novels and films at the time. And his ideas on therapy had a lasting influence on psychiatry, although few people follow his original theories now. The traces of his ideas that remain in psychology are often unhelpful. For example, some parenting books tell parents not to hug their young babies too much during the first months of life. The reason for this advice can be traced to Freud's belief that unconditional love from a mother could produce an over-dependent child that never frees itself from the mother's influence. Now we know (from doing the hard work of studies and experiments) that this is nonsense, and parental affection has no such negative effects on an infant. Similarly, there is simply no evidence for most of Freud's specific theories about unconscious drives and the causal influences a parent's actions have upon a child.

In short, Freud was an exceptional thinker but a poor research scientist. He only ever had a small number of patients that he used to generate his ideas, and he never sought to measure their success systematically. There is even evidence to suggest that the small number of his patients he did treat never improved, or even got worse, but Freud continued to push his theories regardless. So, if someone assumes that you are learning how to perform Freudian analysis on them, feel free to tell them it's mostly nonsense. Or tell them to call their mother.

Understanding What People Think and What Makes Them Act

If you are a zoologist and want to understand the social behaviour of ants, you are going to spend a long time on your knees with a magnifying glass, and you're probably

going to get bitten. Social psychologists have a luxury that zoologists do not: we can just ask people what they think and the reasons for their behaviour. We can directly measure people's attitudes. And we rarely get bitten.

As I show you in Part [II](#), social psychologists have developed many sophisticated tools to measure, survey and record people's attitudes towards a whole range of things: people of other races, prayer, ice cream flavours and taxation. But they quickly discovered a big problem. What people say about their attitudes doesn't always - in fact rarely does - tell you what they are actually going to do at all. So the zoologists may have the last laugh after all.

Asking people what they think

Do you think that our society should spend more money helping people who are poor? That seems like a pretty straightforward question. I imagine that you have some opinions and could give me a one-word answer or an hour-long argument. In both cases, you would be reporting what social psychologists call your *explicit attitude*: the opinions and beliefs that you can state out loud.

But here's the problem. In Chapter [4](#), I show you the remarkable number of factors that can change the answer you give to that question. Were you asked by an attractive young person? Did they introduce themselves as being from a homeless charity or the TaxPayers' Alliance? Before asking the question, did they talk to you about your latest tax return, or about a time that you yourself felt the effects of poverty? What were the exact words they used - did they say spending more money on 'poor people' or on 'the welfare state'?

Social psychologists have found time and time again that they can easily influence the explicit attitudes that people report. People may say they have one attitude, but then behave in a completely opposite manner. This leads to a number of practical and scientific questions: how do you measure what people *really* think? Do they even have lasting, stable attitudes that cause them to behave one way or another?

Measuring what people really think

Social psychologists now have the scientific tools to look under the surface of your everyday attitudes. If I ask you, 'Do you think that men and women are equally capable in the workplace' you would probably say yes. In other words, your explicit attitude would be that men and women are equal.

But imagine that I flashed up a picture of a person and you had to press one button to identify them as male, and another as female. I would predict that you would be very slightly slower to press the female button if she was shown wearing a business suit or a fire-fighters outfit than if she was shown in the home or the kitchen. The difference in your button press may be imperceptible to you, a matter of a few milliseconds, but social psychologists have computers that can measure and add up such differences.

Even though most people report explicit attitudes that treat people the same regardless of sex, race or nationality, in experiments like this their millisecond reactions to words or pictures are different depending on if they refer to men or women, Black faces or White faces, and Christian names or Muslim names. These differences are called *implicit attitudes*. In Chapter [5](#), I show you how they are measured and how they can be used to predict people's behaviour. I address the

sometimes uncomfortable question: do these implicit attitudes reflect what people *really* think?

Predicting people's behaviour

When was the last time someone asked you, 'Why did you do that?' Perhaps it was after you pointedly ignored a friend, were unexpectedly kind to a stranger or punched a sibling. The person asking you wanted to know about your attitudes, I imagine, because they assumed that your behaviour was caused by your attitudes. You were angry with the friend, you were attracted to the stranger or mildly irritated with the sibling. This seems like a reasonable, common-sense assumption, but social psychology has discovered remarkable evidence that the assumption has things completely the wrong way round. Often, our behaviours cause our attitudes.

In Chapter [6](#) you will meet cognitive dissonance, one of the most powerful, elegant, and counter-intuitive theories in social psychology. Do you think that you'd be happier with this book if you got it at half the price? If your partner treats you poorly, do you think you'd love them more or less? These seem like obvious questions, but cognitive dissonance makes a series of remarkable predictions that are borne out by careful experimentation.

Who Am I, Who Are You and Why Did They Do That?

Like a collector looking at a butterfly pinned to a board, so far we've focused on the individual outside of its

natural habitat. We've explored the attitudes and beliefs that exist inside individuals' heads, and how this might determine their behaviour. But people, like butterflies, live in a social context in which they interact with each other and the world around them. In Part [III](#) of the book I start to explore how people generate beliefs about themselves and the people around them, and how they understand each other's social behaviour.

As you may have guessed, the opinions people have about others are not always completely fair, objective and rational. In this part of the book we explore how you make judgments about other people, and how stereotypes and prejudice can build up about certain groups and types of people. But first, there is one person who is on the receiving end of more of your prejudice and biased thinking than any other: yourself.

Constructing your sense of self

My favourite recurring scene in the science fiction show *Dr Who* is when he regenerates from an old body to the new. The new actor playing the Doctor would leap up from behind the console of the TARDIS, stare wildly at his hands and run to a mirror. He would then try and figure out who he was, what he was like and whether he liked his new taste in clothes.

Though you aren't a Time Lord (probably) you too have to go through a process of self-discovery and identity formation. This takes more than the five minutes that the Doctor has before the Daleks attack again. In [Chapter 7](#), I explore this process. It begins in childhood, takes a left turn in adolescence and continues into adulthood. You are not just figuring out who you are, but also, importantly, how you fit into the social world. The conclusion that most of us reach during this process is that, actually, I'm a pretty good person.

Loving yourself

You are awesome. You are better than average at most things, you are more moral, more correct in your opinions and you make the right choices. At least, that is what you tend to believe. The problem is, that's what everyone else believes too. And though everyone can't all be better than average, that is what, on average, everyone believes.

No matter how self-deprecating or modest you may seem on the surface, you maintain a pretty good opinion of yourself. In Chapter [8](#), I look at the evidence that you, like everyone else, have a robust set of self-serving biases. You tend to believe that your successes are due to your personal qualities, but your failures are due to your bad luck. Whereas other people have prejudices and subjective opinions, your own views are more like objective facts.

Although you may think I'm making you out to be a horrible egotist, you are perfectly normal and healthy. Indeed, these self-serving biases appear to be a vital part of your psychological 'immune system' that, more or less, keeps you happy and sane no matter what you experience.

Explaining the actions of others

We don't spend our entire lives thinking about ourselves, however. Pick up a gossip magazine, turn on the TV or eavesdrop on a conversation and the chances are you'll hear people trying to figure out other people. Why did your boss snub you in the hallway? Why did one blond, beautiful celebrity dump another beautiful blond celebrity? Why did the waitress give you that funny look?

If you have the misfortune not to have read this book already - and probably even if you have - then you are

likely to reach systematically incorrect explanations for the behaviour of other people. As I demonstrate in Chapter [9](#), in everyday life, you, like everyone else, tend to explain other people's behaviour in terms of their personalities. The boss who snubbed you is rude, the celebrity is in love, and the waitress is a snob.

You tend to leap to these conclusions about personality and overlook explanations in terms of the situation. You don't consider that the boss was just thinking about something else, that the waitress thought she recognised you, and that the blond celebrity has a film coming out and her PR team just need her to be in the magazines. Later, in Part [IV](#) of this book, I try and convince you just how powerful these situational factors are in determining behaviour. But in Chapter [9](#), I explain how this bias towards personality explanations - called the *fundamental attribution error* - dominates your thinking about other people.

Judging and labelling others

The detective Sherlock Holmes was famous for his ability to deduce remarkable things from people at only a glance. He would infer that a visitor to 221b Baker Street, for example, was a schoolmaster from the countryside who suspected his wife of having an affair from the mud on his shoes, a dusting of chalk on his sleeve and the lack of starch in his collar, suggesting a Victorian wife that no longer cared for him.

You may not have the eye for detail and the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes, but that doesn't stop you leaping to generalisations and unfounded conclusions whenever you meet other people.

You are hardwired to categorise and label other people. I explain in Chapter [10](#) how this process of impression