

PSYC 325

Fundamentals of Social Psychology

Chapter 1: Introduction to Social Psychology

Outline

- What is Social Psychology?
- The Power of Social Influence
- Where Construals Come from: Basic Human Motives
- Social Psychology and Social Problems

What is Social Psychology?

- Defined as the **scientific study** of the way in which people's thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people
- Social psychologists are interested in studying how and why our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are shaped by our **social environment**

What is Social Psychology?

- Interface between the individual and his/her social world
- How do people perceive, comprehend, and interpret the social world?
- And how does this understanding influence behavior?



What is Social Psychology?

- Individualistic vs. situationist – which perspective is correct?
- Personality is indeed important in determining human behaviour – but equally important is the **social environment**



How Social Psych Differs

- Other disciplines (e.g., anthropology, sociology) are also interested in how people are influenced by their social environment
- Social psychology differs because it is concerned more with how people are influenced by their interpretation, or **construal**, of their social environment

How Social Psych Differs

- Recognizes individual differences but **emphasizes** the power of social influence



- Universal properties of human nature that make everyone susceptible to social influence

Construals

- The way in which people perceive, comprehend, and interpret their social world
- Subjective interpretations of social phenomena

How Social Psych Differs

- Social psych is an **empirically-based science**
 - Ideas and assumptions about social thinking and behaviour are tested by the objective and systematic collection of data using the scientific method



Alternative Ways of Understanding Social Influence

- Folk psychology and common sense
- Unreliable, oversimplified and contradictory
- Philosophy
- Similar questions, different methods
- Sociology
- Personality Psychology

Social Psych vs. Sociology

- Similarity:
 - Both share an interest in **situational and societal influences** on behaviour
- Difference:
 - They differ in their **level of analysis**
 - Social Psychology studies individuals
 - Sociology examines broad societal factors

Social Psych vs. Personality Psych

- Similarity:
 - Both share an **emphasis on individuals** and the reasons for their behaviour
- Difference:
 - Social psych emphasizes psychological processes **shared by most people** that make them susceptible to social influence
 - Personality psych focuses on **individual differences**, or the aspects of people's personalities that make them different from others

The Power of Social Influence

- At the heart of Social Psychology
- A large part of our social environment
- People often underestimate its effects on behaviour



Fundamental Attribution Error

- The tendency to **overestimate** the extent to which a person's behaviour is due to internal, dispositional factors, and to **underestimate** the role of external, situational factors
 - Tendency to explain people's behaviour in terms of their personalities

An example of overcompensating (or the opposite of F.A.E.)



RIGHT! BEING YOUNG AND IMPRESSIONABLE, I'M THE HELPLESS VICTIM OF COUNTLESS BAD INFLUENCES! AN UNWHOLE-SOME CULTURE PANDERS TO MY UNDEVELOPED VALUES AND PUSHES ME TO MALEFICENCE.



Fundamental Attribution Error

- Are people fundamentally bad? Or does the situation cause them to behave badly?



Underestimating Situational Factors

- Study by Liberman et al. (2004)
- Asked students to predict if fellow students would behave competitively or cooperatively in a strategy game
- The students who played were told it was either a “Wall Street Game” or a “Community Game”

Underestimating Situational Factors

❖ Independent variables

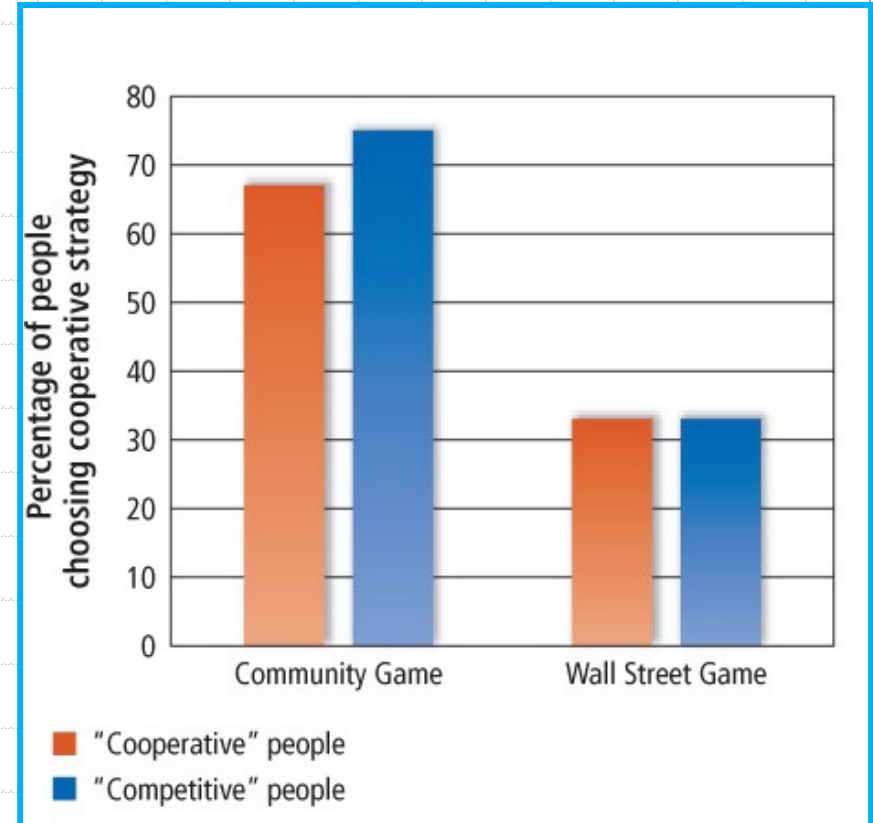
- How students were predicted by others to play (cooperative or competitive)
- Instructions given to players (Wall Street vs. Community Game)

❖ Dependent variable

- Percentage choosing cooperative strategy

Underestimating Situational Factors

- Results:
 - Players were mostly influenced by the name given to the game (the situational factor)



The Subjectivity of the Social Situation

- ❖ Situational factors have a large influence on behaviour, but we must examine them from the perspective of those in it
- ❖ **Construals**, not the objective properties of the situation, are most important

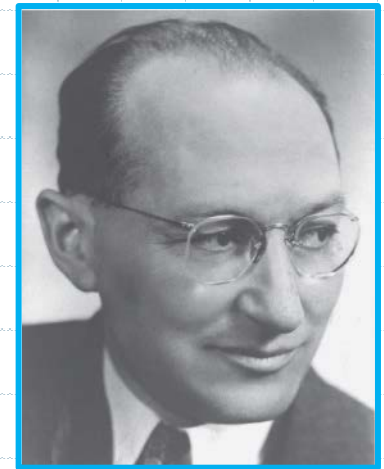
The Subjectivity of the Social Situation

❖ **Example:**

- ❖ A reaction to a friendly greeting will depend on the recipient's construal of the meaning of that greeting
- ❖ A greeting from a car salesman will be interpreted differently than a greeting from a friend

The Subjectivity of the Social Situation

- ❖ The emphasis on subjective perceptions has its roots in a school of psychology called **Gestalt psychology**
- ❖ Kurt Lewin, a founding father of modern experimental social psychology, applied Gestalt principles to social perception



Kurt Lewin

Where Construal Comes From: Basic Human Motives

- Primary motives driving individual construals:
 1. The need to **feel good** about ourselves
 2. The need to be **accurate** about ourselves and our social world
- Tension arises when the two are pitted against one another – which one wins?

Self-esteem?



Truth?

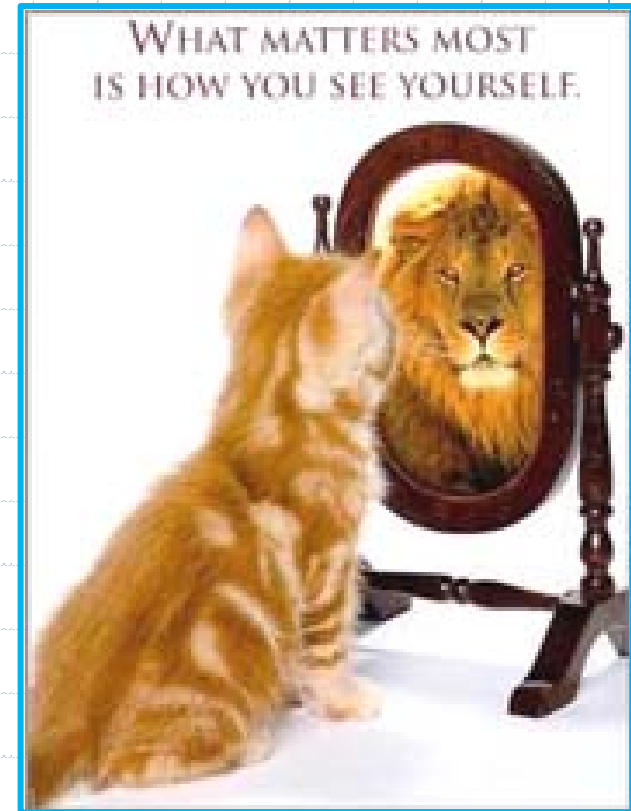
Distortion Strategies

- Used in order to protect self-esteem:
 1. Justifying past behaviour
 2. Justifying suffering



The Self-Esteem Approach

- ❖ **Self-esteem** is an evaluation of one's self-worth
- ❖ Most people have a need to maintain a **positive view** of themselves
- ❖ We may sacrifice the need to be accurate in order to protect our self-esteem

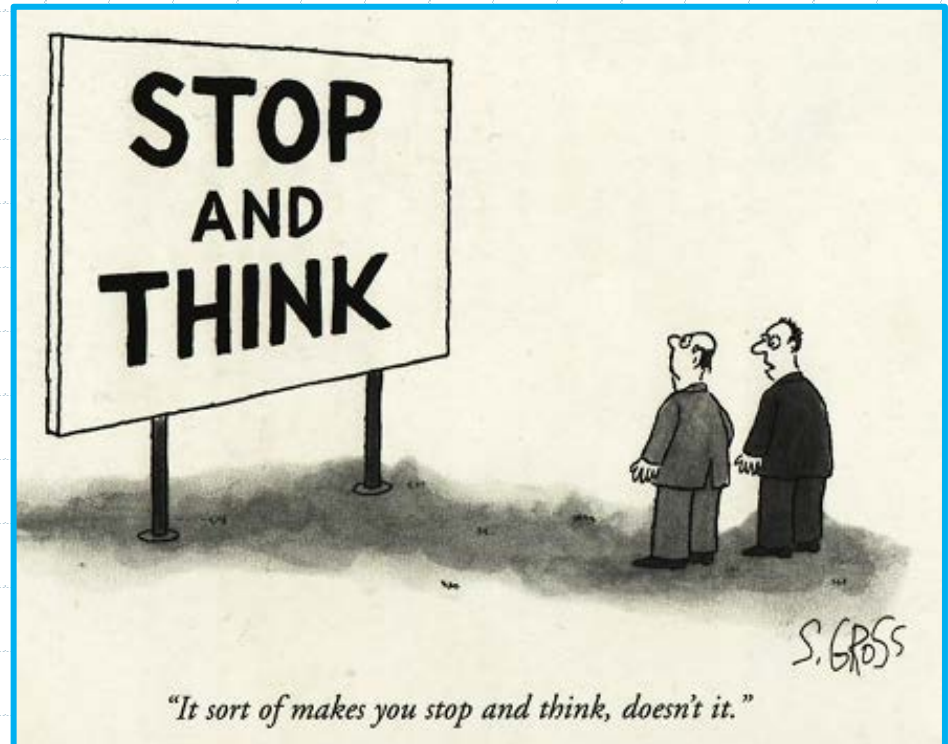


The Self-Esteem Approach: Self-Justification

- ❖ We may **alter our recollections** of past actions of which we are unhappy, upset, or ashamed, in order to feel good about our past actions and decisions
- ❖ We may also **modify our attitudes** about painful situations we have chosen to endure, in order to justify our participation to ourselves
 - ❖ Example: Enduring an embarrassing initiation may cause individuals to **increase** their positive feelings about the club

The Social Cognition Approach

- ❖ **Social Cognition** refers to how people think about themselves and their social world
 - How people select, interpret, remember, and use social information



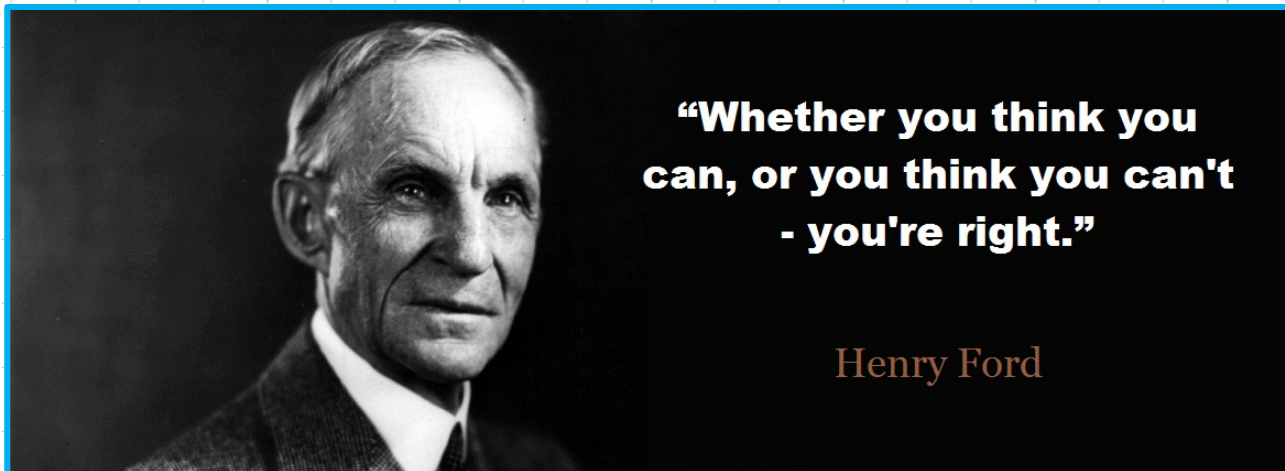
The Social Cognition Approach

- ❖ The incorporation of human cognitive abilities into theories of social behaviour
 - ❖ e.g., reasoning abilities, decision-making, judgments about others, explanations of others' behaviour etc.



The Social Cognition Approach

- ❖ Study found that teachers' (manipulated) expectations of a student's potential influenced the actual performance of that student (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968)
 - i.e., a *self-fulfilling prophecy*



The Evolutionary Approach

- ❖ Incorporates Darwin's theory of natural selection into explanations of behaviour and mental processes
- ❖ **Natural selection** is a process in which heritable traits that promote survival and reproduction in a particular environment are selectively passed on to future generations

The Evolutionary Approach

- ❖ Evolutionary Psychology attempts to explain social behaviour and cognitive abilities in terms of genetically-based traits (**adaptations**) that were naturally selected in our distant past
 - e.g., theories of prosocial and aggressive behaviour, and of interpersonal attraction

Social Psychology and Social Problems

- ❖ Much research has attempted to understand and find solutions to social problems
- ❖ *Sample topics:*
 - Reducing feelings of prejudice
 - Examining the effects of violent television on behaviour
 - Discouraging unhealthy behaviours