

Social Psychology

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Overview of Issue

Social psychology is the scientific study of how people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by other people, whether real, imagined, or implied. Because individuals are rarely truly "alone" in their minds, social psychology has broad implications for understanding human behavior. Levels of analysis range from the macro, sociocultural approach (how does the culture-at-large influence individuals?) to the intermediary group-level and interpersonal perspectives, to the micro, person level (how and why do people differ in their responses?). Social psychologists are trained to be experts in statistics and research methodologies, which encompass cutting-edge methods (social neuroscience, response latency techniques, on-line experiential reports, and immersive virtual environment technologies) as well as traditional methods (laboratory and field experiments, physiological assessments, surveys, interviews, and content analyses of archival data).

Social psychologists are experienced in the measurement of important but difficult-to-measure aspects of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. For example, many social sciences rely strictly on self-reports, but social psychologists pioneered the use of implicit or indirect measures, especially to examine morally tinged constructs that people may be unwilling to admit openly (e.g., prejudice, cheating, illegal, or maladaptive behaviors). Much recent evidence shows that these techniques can predict behavior better than self-reports. In general, social psychologists are attentive to issues of the reliability and validity of measurement and particularly stress the convergence of multiple measures. In contrast, other areas of science are often based on single measurement approaches, such as brain imaging.

Relevance to Homeland Security

Social psychology is a diverse discipline that covers a wide terrain. Content areas that are pertinent to homeland security include intergroup relations, with its focus on understanding prejudice, discrimination, and perceptions of oppression. Social influence and group-processes (e.g., social identity, conformity, and group-based thinking and emotions) are also classic research topics. The scientific study of attitudes and how they influence behavior is central to the discipline; thus, attitude formation, function, and attitude change (e.g., persuasion) are among its purviews.

Social psychological findings stress the importance of *situational context* to understand human behavior, which is often more important than personality or demographic variables. The relevant context is almost always social instead of merely physical. The context may be an immediate or desired audience, such as terrorists' desire to appeal to their base of support as well as to gain global attention and respect. Often the relevant context is an individual's significant group memberships and allegiances, such as terrorists' desire to gain respect for a religious or political cause. Similarly, an individual's personal relationships may serve as context; significant others (about whom the person feels trusting or wary) have enormous influence, such as terrorists' attraction to charismatic leaders, antipathy toward perceived enemy states, and desire to enact revenge for harm-doing to family members and friends.

Recommendations and Applications

Human lives are *social*; from conception to the grave they involve *other people*. The events of September 11, 2001, dramatically illustrated this fact. The terrorists blamed the United States for its foreign policies, but the motives for carrying out their deadly acts were strong enough that they were willing to die for them. Social psychology would emphasize the social context in which these behaviors were enacted, as opposed to the psychopathology of individual personalities. On the home front, the attacks aroused a surge of national pride and patriotism, but they also changed our perceptions of risk (e.g., air traffic dramatically decreased and people of Middle Eastern ancestry were regarded suspiciously). Social psychological findings illuminate the psychological reactions to increased vulnerability, as well as the media's role in influencing our attitudes and behaviors. In sum, social psychology can help to provide answers to difficult and complex questions, such as how to prevent future attacks, how to help Americans cope more effectively, and how to shape social policy in a democratic society.