

Introduction to social psychology

Dominic Beaulieu-Prévost

Week 1

1

What is social psychology?

The scientific study of the effects of social and cognitive processes on the way individuals perceive, influence and relate to others.

-or-

The scientific study of the thoughts and behaviours of individuals in social contexts.

2

What is social psychology?

• Social processes : influence of others and groups, culture, persuasion, propaganda, norms,...

• Cognitive processes : thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, memories,...

3

Difference with sociology : the object of study

- Social psychology : individuals
- Sociology : groups

Macrosociology	Large groups, societies
Microsociology	Small groups and their interactions
Social psychology	Individuals and interactions with groups
Psychology	Individuals
Biology	From cells to living beings
Biochemistry	The molecules of the living
Chemistry	From atoms to molecules

4

Difference with the psychology of personality : the type of causal explanation

- Social psychology : emphasis on the interindividual similarities and social causes of thoughts and behaviours.
- Psychology of personality : emphasis on interindividual differences and "internal" (or dispositional) causes of thoughts and behaviours.

5

The main themes in social psychology

- Social thinking/perceptions
- Social influence
- Social relations

6

Situations of interest in social psychology

Object of study: The thoughts and behaviours of individuals in social contexts

- First impression (e.g. blind dates)
- Love and friendship
- Eyewitness testimony
- Interviews (clinical, job, police investigations,...)
- Classroom
- Advertisement
- Persuasion and propaganda (war, commercial, political, religious, economical,...)

7

Situations of interest in social psychology

- Relations between social groups (conflicts, genocides, cooperation, racism, sexism,...)
- Sport events, hooligans
- Research context
- Socially relevant behaviours and attitudes (pro-health, pro-environment,...)
- Behaviour of crowds
- Sociocultural identity
- Beliefs
- ...

8

A short history of social psychology

- The first themes
- The rising of nazism (1930-1950)
- The golden age (1950-1970)
- The integration of the cognitive approach (1970-1990)
- And now...

9

The first themes

The effect of a group on individual performances

◦ Norman Triplett (1898)

Observation : Swimmers and cyclists tend to perform better during competitions than during their training.

Study : Children winding line onto fishing reels worked more quickly when in the presence of others than when alone.

10

The first themes

The effect of a group on individual performances

◦ Max Ringelmann (around 1880)

Study : When asked to pull on a rope, adults put less effort into the task when working together instead of alone.

11

The first themes

The effect of a group on individual behaviour

◦ Gustave LeBon (1895) La psychologie des foules

"The crowd: A study of the popular mind"

http://www.gwiep.net/library/LeBon_-_Crowd.html

When the individual becomes the group:

Disindividuation!

LeBon describes the violence, the impulsivity and the irrationality of crowds.

12

The rise of nazism (1930-1950)

- Immigration of european researchers (and artists) in america
- The need to explain the actions attributed to the Nazis

Main topics at that time

- Conformism
- Prejudice
- Propaganda and persuasion
- Social identity
- Social control

13

The golden age of social psychology (1950-1970)

- USA/Vietnam war (1956-1975)
- Establishment of the theoretical backbones of social psychology
- Classical experiments:
 - Asch's study on conformity (1951)
 - Milgram's obedience study (1963)

14

The integration of the cognitive approach (1970-1990)

"New" concepts and new methods:

- Information processing
- Cognitive representations
- Attention and automatic processing
- Memory
- New experimental paradigms

15

And now...

Actual topics of interest

- Rise of religious fundamentalism
- Gay bashing
- War propaganda
- Ethnic cleansing / Ethnic profiling
- Terrorism (as a phenomenon AND as a social representation)
- The effect of mass media on public opinion
- Changes in behaviours and life style
 - pro-environment
 - pro-health
 - pro-equality
- Globalization / Internet
- Urban legends
- ...

16

Social psychology for dummies

Two fundamental axioms

- 1) The construction of reality : Individuals socially construct their own reality.
- 2) The pervasiveness of social influence :Social influence manifests itself in every aspect of social life (even when alone).

17

Social psychology for dummies

Three motivational principles

- 1) People strive for mastery : We seek to understand and predict events in the social world to be able to satisfy our desires/needs.
- 2) People seek connectedness/belonging : We attempt to create and maintain feelings of mutual support, liking, and acceptance from those we care about and value.
- 3) People value "me and mine" : We are motivated to see ourselves and anything connected to us (families, teams, nations, possessions,...) in a positive light.

18

Social psychology for dummies

Three processing principles

- 1) Conservatism : Established views are slow to change.
- 2) Accessibility : Accessible information has the most impact.
- 3) Superficiality vs depth : People generally process information superficially (i.e. automatically, unconsciously) although they can process it in depth (i.e. intentionally, consciously) when motivated enough.

19

A final exercise

1. Identify ways in which this course could be useful to you (on a personal or professional level)
2. Identify personal topics or situations of interest that could be used as examples during the course

20

The end!!

21