The Growth & History of Social Psychology

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Abstract

The relatively young field of social psychology had its start with German theorists who came over from Germany to America to make advancements in the field. With its separation away from similar fields such as anthropology and sociology, social psychology started to implement basic laboratory research to study phenomena. The beginnings of social psychology were deeply rooted in Gestalt principles that layered the foundation for the field. As the field grew, social psychology had a place on the battlefield that helped with many aspects of war. As a major shift from pure overt observation to mental processes, social psychology was becoming a more respectable science and was being accepted by many major universities all across America. Many prominent research institutions were being established around the postwar era that allowed a major shift in how researchers thought of social situations. New “radical” theories were being formulated such as cognitive dissonance theory that looked at how the individual though of their social environment and how the social environment shaped the individual. Many studies were underway that sought to tackle the issue of emotion in social environments. Researchers studied such concepts as aggression, obedience and prosocial behavior. Coming into the present for social psychology, research has shifted to cognitive neuroscience that looks at the effects of hereditary, and brain activity that affect a person’s social environment.

**The Growth & History of Social Psychology**

Psychology is still a very young science. The study of social psychology, which is the study of how individuals behave as a result of other people’s presence, has a fairly short history. Despite this, it is questionable however what actually marks the beginning of social psychology. Those who have an ongoing debate about its beginnings argue that it started with either the first textbooks published by McDougall and Ross or the first empirical study that was published by Norman Triplett (Kruglanski & Stroebe, 2012).

**Psychology comes to America**

A lot of work that contributed to the study and advancement of social psychology that cannot be argued can undoubtedly be marked by the arrival of several important men who arrived in American from Germany after the start of the Second World War. These figure heads included Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Koffka, Max Wertheimer, and Kurt Lewin, who is regarded as the father of social psychology and among others (Kruglanski & Stroebe, 2012). Afterwards, America was the main stage for the study and development of psychology as a science.

While the actual exponential growth of many disciplines of psychology began in America, the actual term social psychology was first used by an Italian journalist and politician by the name of Carlo Cattaneo. He described in his journal the approach that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel took in explaining human endeavors and that the contrast of ideas resulted in new ones. There was no formal collaboration of social psychology in Europe or in Asian countries at the time (Kruglanski & Stroebe, 2012)

**Social Psychology in the Laboratory**

After the start of the Second World War, social psychology started to separate itself slowly away from the fields of anthropology and sociology and started to implement more experimental procedures that were the basis of mainstream psychology. At this time, it was questionable whether social behavior with others could be scientifically studied and measured (Hilton, 2012).

With the use of the basic laboratory in social psychology research there were two methods of study. The laboratory involved experimental procedures and the majority of social psychologists employed college students as participants while field experiments however were harder to manipulate and therefore may have the undesired addition of extraneous variables. Critics of laboratory experiments argue that they often have low external validity which is the lack of real application of results to situations in the real world. Opponents of field research criticize that situations cannot be completely controlled through the manipulation of variables (Harvey & Smith, 1977).

**Roots of Social Psychology**

The very beginnings of social psychology were rooted in Gestalt principles which focused on the whole being more important than the parts and these principles developed in Europe before the war. Gestalt ideas were brought to America by the three main leaders of this movement in the 1930s, Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Köhler, and Max Wertheimer. Even though Gestalt psychology itself was not rejected by the Nazis, other prominent figures came to American for other career opportunities and further advancement of their studies. The ideal concept in psychology at the time, behaviorism, which rejected the study of any and all unobservable mental processes, was slowly coming into the forefront and psychologists were beginning to adopt the studies behavioral processes as well as mental processes (Hilton, 2012).

With different theories and ideas developing in psychology in Germany and America, one can see the different social structures that influenced the birth of these new ideas. There are varying differences in educational systems and social rules as well as differences in the relationships between adult and child that influence styles of thought and new concepts. Often times a child’s education is determined by the amount of freedom they are given when exploring their environment. Influential Germans coming to America after start of Hitler’s regime sparked the beginning of new and radical ideas for the field of social psychology (Lewin, 1997).

Around this time was when Gestalt psychology was formed and its principals were being adopted by many theorists of the time. The first instance of Gestalt effects in visual perception is often considered to be the Phi effect which occurs when two lights flash rapidly in succession. Coincidently enough, the visual arts were developing around the same time as gestalt theory which interested psychologists because these new technologies enabled them to more easily explain Gestalt principles and implement them in psychological research and experiments (Hilton, 2012).

**Field Theory**

Kurt Lewin, who was a gestalt psychologist, was one of the most important theorists in social psychology at that time. He described a person’s interaction with the environment with what is now known as field theory in psychology. Lewin described the field as all behavior that is seen as a change of some state of a field in a given unit of time and that this field that is being researched is referred to as the life space. A person’s life space contains the person and their psychological environment as seen by the person and it was left up to the researcher to study these spaces (Lewin, 1975).

Lewin’s work, which was influenced heavily by Gestalt psychology, further emphasized that the parts of the life space were interdependent. He believed that all of these principles could be explained by mathematical concepts. In his theory, Lewin also describes the concept of contemporaneity, which describes that the life space remains intact through time, is changed by events, and is a product of history. Lewin describes that the importance in field theory is not an individual element within a situation but rather looking at the situation as a whole (Lewin, 1975).

**Development of self-report questionnaires**

Still near the beginnings of social psychology, the line between social psychology and the workings of general psychology were hard to draw. Early research done focused on the judgments of behavior and early work in social judgment research can be related to research done in psychophysics. It was simple enough to measure physical quantities such as length and weight but measuring the perceived size or weight of something was a more difficult concept. Researchers at the time were only able to record data on what the participant reported (Eiser, 2012).

Theorists and researchers later focused on how people perceived others and the effects of the group on the individual. The concept of how people perceived other individual characteristics of another such as physical attributes and behavioral situations is known as social perception. A great deal of early research done on social perception was criticized because they lacked what was a valid measure of skills among participants (Eiser, 2012).

To more accurately record participants’ data on behavioral situations, the use of several self-report questionnaires was implemented where the researcher was not required to assist the participant in measuring their perception of a particular stimulus. Rensis Likert later developed a technique for measuring attitudes where individuals could indicate how strongly they felt about a certain object or situation. A technique that recorded quantifiable data of group members by other group members is known as the sociometric test. Advantages to these types of measurements was that they were easy to administer to large groups and relatively inexpensive. Disadvantages to these types of measurements could include untruthful recording of feelings on the behalf of the participant (Harvey & Smith, 1977).

**Acceptance of Social Psychology**

Many other concepts regarding social similarity and proximity were seriously regarded at this time as serious areas of study within the field of social psychology (Harvey & Smith, 1977). Psychology was beginning to root itself in American culture and society with both increased funding in psychological research and its contribution to many different areas of the military during the First World War. Following the conclusion of the Second World War, because of its usefulness during the war, was regarded as a true science that was adopted at many major universities across America (Hilton, 2012).

The Yale Communication Project was one of the first prominent projects in social psychology that received major funding from organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Science Foundation. As its leader, Carl Hovland was able to successfully draw funds and support to the project post World War II. Another major influence on the growth of social psychology in postwar America was the founding of the Research Center for Group Dynamics founded by Kurt Lewin. Ample funding towards social psychology at this time provided jobs for graduate students at major universities (Hilton, 2012).

**Growth of prominent institutions in Social Psychology**

Lewin who moved from Berlin to the United States in 1995, previously studied child psychology but shifted to the prospects of group dynamics. Before him, researchers were not able to effectively change laboratory environments to fit the social situations researchers were interested in studying. Leon Festinger, who was also a proponent for social psychology, argued that social psychological research should preserve its emphasis on experimentation but argued that variables should be manipulated in a way that still follows traditional American experimental psychology (Hilton, 2012).

Despite being strongly influenced by Gestalt theorists, Lewin’s work revolved around motivation, personality and psychodynamics. Lewin was mainly interested at the time with a person’s life force and their movement through it. He developed concepts that work towards a person’s life space such as need, tension, valence and equilibrium. Such principles went into the creation of his concept of field theory (Hilton, 2012).

Festinger, although greatly influenced by Lewin, developed an opponent theory to Lewin’s field theory that made modifications to concepts about the life space. Fritz Heider, who was a friend of Lewin’s, formed Attribution theory that emphasized analysis of causal attribution processes. Attribution theory soon became a main topic of interest in the field of social psychology (Hilton, 2012).

At the forefront of social psychological research in postwar America was the Yale Social Psychology group headed by Carl Hovland. Initial work done by Hovland was supervised by the influential learning theorist, Clark Hull. Prominent research questions at the time involved fighting morale during wartime. Many research institutions across the country established “war teams” that studied different aspects of war including the psychological health of a soldier and their success on the battlefield. During the Second World War, even Lewin and some of his associates did work for the government on inflation and war bonds. These institutions were the start of experimental social psychology (Hilton, 2012).

During the height of behaviorism in the 1970s, social psychology was facing a crisis of being seen as an irrelevant science. It was mocked by critiques believing it focused too much on the individual and accused of conducting otherwise useless studies that did not yield any important findings (North & Fiske, 2012). Theorists who were at the forefront of experimental psychology and behaviorism such as B.F. Skinner who was known as a “radical” behaviorist up until this time believed that behavior was to only be overtly observed.

Next, there was a major shift in social psychology away from behaviorism to cognitive processes that were in a sense, banned from psychology prior to the cognitive revolution. One of the major problems with behaviorism and experimental psychology was that they could not explain a few things such as language development. As this shift in ideas was taking place, new theories and concepts were focusing more on information-processing rather than pure overt behavior. This new surge of interest in cognitive processes was called “cognitive psychology” (North & Fiske, 2012).

In this new era of social psychology, theorists and researchers were looking toward the computer and how similar was human processing to that of a computer. These new shifts in ideas were the start of social-cognition research. Early work by Nancy Cantor studied memory and one of the first to brand traits as prototypes. Hazel Markus, who received her PhD from the University of Michigan, was the first who classified the self-concept as a self-schema. All earlier theories such as Freudian theory and social learning theory had built the foundation for what psychology was shifting into (North & Fiske, 2012).

**Social Theories**

Like all new things, they are opponents and criticisms. Many argued that social cognition was more cognitive than social and others argued that it was more social than cognitive. Some proponents argued still that social psychology was always ingrained with cognitive principles even if we were not consciously aware of it. Such theories such as cognitive dissonance theory and balance theory both possess cognitive components (North & Fiske, 2012).

As researchers started to study how individuals perceived others as the shift to cognitive processes was taking hold in the 1970s, they came to understand that the average individual had many biases when thinking about and judging their social environment. Two main proponents that continued work into social cognition was Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. Their work centered on the use of heuristics, cognitive shortcuts, which help us to make associations with our environment. Other research on social heuristics looks at the effects of time on social judgments. Such new research included work on the temporal construal theory which characteritizes short-term and long-term decisions (North & Fiske, 2012).

Later research on social attention focused on what held our attention and researchers wanted to know why this was the case. This introduced the concept of social salience which refers to what holds our attention in our social environment. Gestalt principles, which formed some of the very foundation of which social psychology was stands on, introduced some principles into the field. Some may perhaps focus on an item that stand out from the group such as an individual or on object (North & Fiske, 2012).

During the 1980s, research into models of memory were becoming more prominent throughout the field of psychology, One of the most popular models was the Srull-Wyer model, which detailed that behavior was stored into a bin, categorized an individual as likeable or dislikeable, evaluating behaviors and the situation as a whole and then finally making a judgment on the situation. This modeled emphasized that first impressions were the most important interaction between individuals (North & Fiske, 2012).

**Emotions in Social Psychology**

As the field of social psychology was being melded into the cognitive science of today, a challenging question was proposed. How are emotions regarded when it comes to social cognition? Robert Zajonc argued that affective processes work at a more basic level than cognitive ones. He described that there are no “right” or “wrong” feelings but they work vastly different from cognitive decisions and judgments. Richard Lazarus was a major opponent to Zajonc’s theory which stated that emotional appraisal is what caused emotion (North & Fiske, 2012).

A great deal of questions has prompted research dealing with anger and why we become angry. A plethora of emotions along with aggression has been linked to evolutionary survival and plays an important role in our reproduction and defense. These ideas have also been applied to understand why individuals commit such acts as murder, rape and assault. Social influence also plays an important role in aggressive behavior that is displayed (Kenrick & Cohen, 2012).

Prosocial behavior has also been shown to be linked to genetic influences. Individuals are most likely to help when doing so ensures the survival of their kin. We are shown to help those who are more closely related to us even if it puts our own survival at great risk. Women however have been shown to behave prosaically with friends just as much as those that are closely related to them. Activities such as sharing amongst a group can increase its chance for survival if they are assisted by other members of that group (Kenrick & Cohen, 2012).

Much thought has also gone into the concepts of good and evil regarding social psychology. Oftentimes a situation or a crime is largely determined from the perceived perspective of both the victim and the perpetrator. Many theorists believe that labeling different actions as good and evil is a reasonable act. For a large portion of social psychology, the intent on doing something makes all the difference. To some, specifically social psychologists, the categorization of individuals into race, sex, and age or the perceived harm on individuals that took place such as in the Milgrim experiments can be considered evil act, whether intentional or not (Miller, 2004).

**Dual-Process Theories**

The 1970s and 1980s was the time that the foundation of research in social information, heuristics, judgmental biases, social attention and memory were the main focus of social psychologists. With the continued research in biases of social perceptions, cognitive psychologists wonder how society has survived this long and that learning of all of these biases will protect you from committing them as a psychologist. Going into the 1990s, researchers were dubbed “motivated tacticians”. During this time, these “tacticians” were looking at different way to handle individuals in social environments. Developing new ways to look at individuals in social situations spawned a series of “dual-process” models of sociocognitive phenomena that focuses on four main domains, perception of the person, attribution, stereotyping and identifying behavior (North & Fiske, 2012).

The dual-process model of person perception states that individuals form impressions of others based on a continuum from the most basic groups such as race and age to the most distinct attributions such as individualized data. According to the model it is up to the perceiver to decide how to categorize something along this continuum. The dual-process model of attribution states that people first look at another’s behavior and then make inferences about that behavior and have the choice whether to take environmental factors into account. Other models under the premise of this one, such as George Quattrone’s model, state that people first use dispositional anchoring when forming impressions and make adjustments to their impressions later on. The dual-process model of identifying behavior was focused around how people categorized certain behaviors. One theory that was important to this model was the action identification theory. This theory held that people may classify the same actions based on low-level goals for high-level goals. The dual-process model of stereotyping addresses the differences between direct forms of prejudice and more indirect, underlying forms. The Dovidio-Gaertner theory of aversive racism was one of the first theories on stereotyping to contain dual components. Aversive racism focused on the perpetrator and shys away from overt and obvious prejudice but will often go unnoticed by the perpetrator themselves and their negative feelings toward a specific group will prevent them from engaging in social interactions with members of that specific group. Stereotype threat was another dual-processes model that states that if members of a stereotyped group are impacted in a negative manner, their group membership becomes salient (North & Fiske, 2012).

**Future of Social Psychology**

Another major component of social psychology that was focused on in the last half of the 20th century was social neuroscience. Social neuroscience centered around the study of cells, organs, and genes and their influence on the individual. Before, factors involving social implications were ignored in neuroscience and this in turn was ignored by researchers of social influences on individuals (Cacioppo, Bernston, & Decety, 2012). Today in the field of psychology, cognitive neuroscience sparks the most interest for both researchers in the field and newcomers.

The future of social psychology appears to be shifting more strongly toward cognitive processes and research. Advocates of social cognitive neuroscience are no longer interested completely in the overt and observable behavior of a person but what goes on with the environment, their genes and the processes that take place in the brain to influence behavior and have an effect on the individual. The field of psychology has the potential to take many routes from this point onwards. One thing is certain though, the future of psychology is bright and promising.

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