

# 1

## CHAPTER

Daniel M. Wegner  
Daniel T. Gilbert

## Social Psychology—The Science of Human Experience

Once upon a time, people believed the earth was smack dab in the middle of everything and that all the planets revolved around it. Then came Copernicus, who argued that if this were true, something was deeply wrong with the rest of the universe because the observed motions of all the planets just didn't add up. After considerable head scratching, Copernicus concluded that the earth was not at the center of things and the sun was. Knowing this didn't actually change the universe, of course, but it did allow all of its movements to suddenly make sense.

The field of social psychology also has a center. Those of us who constitute the field know that the social interaction of individuals is its intellectual core, and we can all quote Allport approvingly when explaining this to others. How could it be otherwise? If social psychologists primarily cared about things that were neither social nor psychological, then their journals and departments and learned societies would be seriously mislabeled, and all new T-shirts would have to be printed. As tragic as this would be, many of us have had the sneaking suspicion at one time or another that the motions don't quite add up—that if sociality is indeed the center around which our scientific endeavors turn, then something is wrong with the rest of the universe. In this essay, we will argue that the universe is just fine, thank you, and that the problem is actually this: social psychology's center is not where we think.

Where is it? Astronomy teaches us at least two things about centers. First, it teaches us that centers are not always easy to find. The Milky Way

*H. Bless and J.P. Forgas (Eds.) The Message W. Hiri: The Role of Subjective Experience in Social Cognition + Behavior. Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2000*

galaxy, for example, seems to have at its center an unobservable black hole that, by virtue of its unobservability, is very hard to see. Second, astronomy teaches us that one way to locate a center (especially an invisible one) is to look for the thing that everything else seems to be drawn toward. We believe that the center around which modern social psychology actually turns is the *understanding of subjective experience*. Sometimes it is concerned with things social and sometimes it is not, but far more than any other field of psychology and far more than any other science, social psychology is intimately concerned with the scientific understanding of what it is like to be a person—why our existence at this moment in time and space *feels* the way it does. We would go so far as to say that social psychology is not the science of sociality, but the science of experience. This claim sounds grandiose only because it is, but it is also simple and (we hope) compelling, once you get the idea. Here's the idea.

### □ Sociality: The Official Story

The phrase *social psychology* is usually understood to circumscribe a subfield of psychology that has its place among a variety of other subfields, such as developmental psychology, personality psychology, cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, and the like. Just as one can look at psychological phenomena in light of their development over time, or in light of the differences between individuals who exemplify the phenomena to different degrees, one can also look at phenomena in light of their sociality. People are not alone in the world, and as Triplett's very first social psychology experiment demonstrated, the fact that we have company makes a difference to almost everything worth studying. Social psychology, the story goes, captures a chunk of the variance in the puzzle of human psychology by considering how social situations emerge, unfold, and affect the thoughts, feelings, and actions of their participants.

This is a very lovely story whose only real weakness is its utter failure to conform to the facts. An hour's browse through social psychology's major journals reveals a jarring discrepancy between the official account of the field and the actual state of affairs. Indeed, as one turns the pages, one begins to get the sense that this thing called social psychology is not a subfield of psychology at all, but rather, a *whole field of psychology*—a kind of parallel universe in which just about every issue of interest to any other kind of psychologist receives its own special treatment and spin. Although this is true to some extent of many of psychology's so-called subfields, social psychology is especially remarkable for the range of its sweep. While claiming as its own all the explicitly social topics—such as interaction, relationships, and groups—social psychology also offers thor-

ough treatments of topics such as emotion, perception, cognition, culture, attitudes, personality, mental disorders, development, motivation, health, law, memory, and more. The official story is about sociality, but even a cursory reading of the field's literature suggests that the official story is woefully incomplete, and that social psychology's reach is far greater than its name would suggest. Social psychology was once the science of the social, but in the last few decades, it has become a science of many, many things that are nonsocial as well.

A curious byproduct of social psychology's expansion has been a kind of urban blight at its official core. Topics such as social interaction, relationships, and groups—which are clearly “downtown” social psychology in the official story of the field—have suffered massive decay over the last few decades, with occasional paving and heroic attempts at urban renewal, but no truly sustained growth. As the field's interests have outgrown the downtown area and spilled into the suburbs, the center of social psychology has become a collection of office buildings in which some work and few live. Chapters in textbooks on these downtown topics are sparse, research publications in our best journals on these topics are rare, books on these topics are vastly outnumbered by books on almost everything else, and the prospect of shiny new futures for these areas seems somewhat dim. Commentators who have noticed this shift in the field's demographics have often issued calls for urban renewal, urging us all to take up residence once again in the official center of the city. We, on the other hand, believe that social psychology's downtown area has lost the bulk of its residents for good, and that clarion calls to return will not bring them back. Why? Because social psychology is no longer a city, but a nation, no longer a subfield, but a complete field—an alternative psychology that lives beside, and not within, the psychology spawned by Wundt. And the theme of this new and whole psychology is not sociality, but the scientific understanding of experience.

### □ Experience: The Real Story

Philosophers are fond of remarking on the abject loneliness of human consciousness. One cannot experience the consciousness of others, the observation goes, and others cannot experience one's consciousness either, so it is perfectly reasonable for all of us to wonder what consciousness is and whether anyone other than ourselves actually has it. The question of whether other minds exist, and what it is like to be them if they do, has proved intellectually intractable, and while modern philosophers occasionally reprise the traditional sport of flinging themselves at the problem, most have left more blood than dents on its surface. The trouble is

that knowledge of other minds can never be satisfactory in the same way that knowledge of our own minds can. Cogito is so inarguably true that Descartes derived all other truths from it; but if "I think" is an axiom, then "you think" is merely a hypothesis.

The inscrutability of other minds is particularly acute when we grasp at understanding the experience of creatures different from ourselves—as in Nagel's (1974) celebrated essay on what it is like to be a bat. The question of what it is like to be a human, however, is something with which most of us are far more likely to be occupied, and it is thus all the more profoundly puzzling. We can cast a single vote for answers to this question—our own—but we never know beyond that quite how to understand other minds. Each of us is the only object in existence that we will ever truly know what it is like to be.

Humanistic psychology was, at least in part, a response to this unsatisfying state of affairs. Maslow (1966) suggested that people could be understood in either a scientific or an experiential way. Scientific understanding means considering people as though they were somewhat more complicated versions of the other three-dimensional objects that inhabit the physical world, making careful observations of people's actions, developing detailed descriptions of their attributes, and then using those observations and descriptions to make predictions about what they will do next. Maslow argued that this approach was appropriate for the understanding of the behavior of kites or sofas or lava flows, but that when it came to people, it fell oddly flat, because knowing a person in this way does not satisfy our hunger to know what it is like to *be* that person.

Maslow contrasted scientific understanding with experiential understanding, and he urged humanists to get vicarious—to feel what others were feeling and to think what others were thinking in order to bring themselves closer to others than the privacy of human experience would normally allow. He encouraged humanists to make the other person's experience their own, reverberating with it, reveling in it, suffering it, enjoying it, and most importantly, appreciating it in a way that the detached scientist could not. Alas, when all the touching and feeling was over, humanism proved to be a blind alley in the intellectual history of psychology because it valued the subjective by devaluing the objective. Maslow complained bitterly that scientific understanding was the enemy of experiential understanding, and this antiscientific attitude meant that humanism developed no methodology, accumulated no body of knowledge, made no discoveries, and left no legacy (save for the brief popularity of the name *Rollo*). Without the scientific approach, it seems, our experiential understanding of other minds is as transient and insignificant as the taste of a new pinot grigio. Humanism had lots of mouthfeel but no finish. The humanists were right to argue that the other person's experi-

ence was the critical object of psychological inquiry, but they were wrong to suggest that nothing about it could be understood from the objective stance. In pointing out the problem and invalidating the method for solution, humanism left a gaping hole in the center of the scientific world.

Social psychology has filled that hole, perhaps unwittingly, by becoming the science of what it is like to be a human and attempting to provide a scientific answer to the problem of other minds. Disguised as the people who investigate social life, we have been secretly investigating inner life instead, and getting away with it only because the two are so intimately connected. Our secret obsession with experience is revealed by our opinions about what's hot and what's not. The social psychology articles we most appreciate and remember are those that transport us into the mind of the subject as he or she faces some special predicament. Such papers inevitably enable us to imagine *being* the subject and to see just how funny or tense or heartbreaking or dull the view is from there. The classic experiments of Milgram, Asch, Festinger, Schacter, Latane and Darley, and others have little in common, save for their ability to make us grasp the experience of the person in the experimental setting. They are often only vaguely social, and can also seem a bit inelegant and incomplete as science. Yet they make us squirm and sigh and worry, as they very quickly render in our own minds the experience of the poor soul who has been "brought into the lab." The work that we celebrate as a field weaves together the objective and the subjective, providing the outsider's view of the insider's view, and when it does this superbly, its other flaws are generously overlooked.

We do not mean to suggest that social psychologists have no legitimate interest in studies of pure mechanism, or in studies that examine behavior alone. Such studies do appeal to us sometimes, but they do so largely to the extent that they promise to illuminate the individual's experience of the world. A theory providing mathematical functions that relate the size of a dinner party to the size of the waiter's tip tells us little about what it is like to be either. But it does provide a handy way to summarize some complex relations, and it isn't so far removed from the experience of social loafing that we can't make the leap ourselves. Nonetheless, given the choice between a formal model of these relations and an insightful description of that crucial moment in the diner's mental life when he reaches for his wallet, pauses, and thinks, "Ah, somebody else will get it," social psychologists will favor the latter every time. As a rule, we would rather not get too involved with theories that treat human behavior as though it were the motion of billiard balls—not because such theories provide the wrong answers, but because they answer the wrong questions. The mechanisms that are so often the focus of cognitive psychology and brain science are fine in their place, but their place isn't our place,

because by themselves they don't tell us what we want to know. We want to know lots of things, of course, but mostly, we want to know what it's like *in there*.

Our secret obsession with experience is revealed in other ways as well. When a reporter calls a university's department of psychology and asks a question about this or that, to whom is the question referred? In most cases, the referrals end up in the lap of the resident social psychologist. We are the people inside psychology who talk to people outside psychology about what the field knows—we're the front end. Why? Because while many fields have evolved toward greater formalism, social psychology's official language remains ordinary language, and its official measure remains the verbal report. Like novelists, we offer theories built of words that have the power to transport our listeners into the experience of the people those theories describe. Unlike novelists, we take an objective approach to the subjective, carefully recording and counting people's responses to our questions, and looking for patterns in their answers. We don't always trust what people tell us, of course, but we always trust that what they tell us tells us something. When they say they are feeling sad because their lives are a hopeless mess, we are skeptical about the accuracy of their causal analyses. But we are not skeptical about the quality of the experience itself. The person may not know *why* she is in pain, but she is the world's foremost and sole authority on *whether* she is in pain. The most advanced neurological measure cannot tell us what the candid subject can, namely, "What does it feel like to be you, here and now?"

## □ Some Objections Anticipated

As Copernicus and his scope man Galileo soon learned, centers have a great deal of symbolic utility, and thus people naturally object to having them relocated without prior approval. We cannot anticipate or defend all reasonable objections to our claim, but let us set aside three obvious ones to start. They are: (a) it leaves things out, (b) it doesn't leave anything out, and (c) it was all said long ago by people with better clothes.

First, doesn't this new description of social psychology leave some of the field's most exciting topics standing in the yard? We all know, for example, that there is great interest among social psychologists these days in topics such as automaticity, unconscious process, and implicit everything. If social psychology is the science of experience, then why is the general category of "unexperienced stuff" among its hottest concerns? The problem here is merely semantic. Unconscious process is the flip side of conscious experience; in fact, only someone who was deeply interested

in the nature of experience would bother to develop a theory of unconscious process at all. Behaviorism, for instance, was the one school of psychology that was able to abandon the unconscious successfully, but it was able to do this only because it had abandoned the conscious about 15 minutes earlier. Just as we learn about a phenomenon by studying its boundary conditions, we learn about human experience by discovering where it starts and stops. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how a science of experience could talk about how and when things appear in consciousness without also talking about how and when things do not.

The second objection is the complement of the first. If social psychology is the science of both the experienced and the unexperienced, then isn't it the science of everything? And with no one left in the yard, isn't the living room a bit too crowded? We do not think social psychology is the science of everything. One may study vertebrates and invertebrates and still not study jazz, Twinkies, or internal combustion. The biologist who studies vertebrates and invertebrates is using the concept of *skeleton* to parse and study the animal kingdom. Similarly, social psychologists may ask questions about what is inside or outside of experience, how it comes to be that way, and what effect it has—and they may do all this without ever studying the effects of family size on academic underachievement. What gets ignored is the study of people as objects whose attributes can be described, classified, and used to predict behavior. Research on IQ is a nice example. Isn't it curious that social psychologists have generally not been involved with research on a subject that clearly has both social and psychological components? Not really, because modern research on intelligence generally considers people as objects that contain a specific amount of some attribute (smarts), and then asks how they got that amount (genes and environment) and how having that amount influences their behavior (test taking). This work is invaluable, but it does not attract social psychologists because it does not speak to us about the experience of being the person who is bursting with brainpower or trying unsuccessfully to complete just one good thought. It gives us no *feel* for brightness or dullness. In short, plenty of useful questions and answers lie outside the psychology of human experience. Indeed, one of the things we like best about our claim is that it explains why some things that are nominally outside the field of social psychology seem as though they ought to be in, and why some things that are nominally in seem as though they should not be.

If we accept the argument that that a science of experience can have proper boundaries and that these boundaries look suspiciously like the city limits of modern day social psychology, we might still worry that all this talk of experience is merely another way of saying what was said decades ago—an anachronistic appeal for a cognitive, rather than a be-

haviorist, psychology. Isn't this just the cognitive revolution warmed over? We think it is much more than that. The cognitive revolution's great achievement was that it inserted a C between S and R. Cognition mediates the link from stimulus to response. Of course, C is a hard thing to study, and the cognitive revolutionaries justified giving everyone such hard homework by arguing that knowledge of C would ultimately help us predict R from S. Cognitive psychology would be better than behaviorist psychology, the pitch went, because it would do what behaviorist psychology had wanted done, but it would do it more effectively.

Which it did. But notice two things. First, C is not E. One can believe that what happens inside the machine that changes Ss into Rs is important without ever investigating how it feels to be that machine. Indeed, having a C between one's S and one's R is just as important when the system is a starfish or a pickle slicer as when it is a person. One can develop a psychology of that which mediates the S to R transition without ever noticing that the mediator is awake and enjoying it immensely. Many well-known cognitive models do just that, and these are the models that put social psychologists to sleep. Social psychology does not merely teach us that we should be concerned with what happens inside the person's head; it teaches us that we should be concerned with how these events seem. Brain events and mind events have or lack qualia—that is, they are felt or not felt—and their feltness is the heart of the matter for social psychologists.

The second thing to notice is this: if C isn't E, then R isn't E either. For all its glorious changes, the cognitive revolution remained faithful to the behaviorist mission of studying psychology as a means to predicting behavior. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. Social psychologists like to predict behavior too—sometimes. And sometimes not. But because social psychology has the understanding of other minds as its intellectual end, it does not need to justify that understanding by appealing to its utility as a predictor of action. Our colleagues in economics are often perplexed by all our mentalistic chatter, and they wonder why we worry about all the messy mind stuff and brain stuff when a fancy equation often does a perfectly fine job of predicting behavior in the aggregate. The reason is that social psychology is not in the business of saying what people will *do* so much as it is in the business of saying what people *are experiencing*. The equation predicts the motions of bodies in space, but it does not give us the view from inside, and thus we just can't get worked up about it.

We study experience because it is the thing about which we want to know, and for a while that made social psychology a rather lonely place to be. But as it happens, scientists in various allied fields are now heading in our direction. The consciousness train has pulled into the station, her-

alded by the publication of hundreds of new books in the past dozen years that draw on philosophy, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology in the pursuit of new understandings of the inner life of humans. Nobel-winning biologists now proclaim consciousness as the single most important unanswered question in modern science, and famous physicists argue with famous mathematicians about the role that quantum uncertainty might play in producing it. This explosion of interest across many fields is one indication among many that the social psychological approach is a good one. It may well turn out that the understanding of experience is the fundamental requirement for the understanding of human beings, and that the essential center of social psychology is the essential center of human science. We welcome the company, of course, but we should not let them forget that we were here first.

## □ Conclusion

So here's an experience you may have had. You explain your research to an interested colleague, a curious student, or a lost tourist, and at the end of your speech they seem mildly puzzled. "Its all very nice, of course," they say, "but what's *social* about it?" From where we sit, this question seems about as sensible as asking someone named Smith why he doesn't shoe horses, or complaining because one's floppy disk is pretty darn stiff. Social psychology is the name of the tribe from which we are descended. It is a proud name, a good name, and we like it a whole big bunch. But it isn't particularly descriptive of the enterprise as it is actually happening at the cusp of the twenty-first century. Were the field up for a rechristening, it might consider something like *qualiology* or *experiential psychology* or even *experimental subjectology*. But it is called social psychology, and thus some identity confusion is to be expected. Someone picking up this book, for instance, might think that they were holding an edited volume on an new idea at the periphery of the field without realizing that the idea is old and that the book stands precisely at the field's center. It remains to be seen whether knowing where our center is makes any difference to the way we think and talk and operate. For now, it should at least provide some solace to those of us who have worried that, despite our address, we were really somewhere else.

## □ References

- Maslow, A. (1966). *The psychology of science*. South Bend, IN: Gateway.  
Nagel, T. (1974). What is it like to be a bat? *Philosophical Review*, 83, 435–450.