Chapter 1
Studying Social Psychology

Back in the early 1930s, a professor took several sightseeing tours back and forth across the United States and up and down California’s Pacific Coast. A young couple, a husband and wife, accompanied him. The couple happened to be Chinese; the professor, Richard LaPiere, was White. During the trip, the three stayed at many hotels, guesthouses, and campgrounds, and ate at numerous restaurants. After trying 251 establishments, only once were they denied service, which was highly unusual given the amount of prejudice and discrimination aimed at Asians in America at that time. In fact, before embarking on the trip, LaPiere had worried that he and his friends would not be well treated during their travels (LaPiere, 1934).

What makes this otherwise happily uneventful tale extraordinary is what happened later. The isolated prejudice experienced during the trip puzzled LaPiere, so he resolved to explore people’s social reactions further. Six months after visiting each establishment, the professor sent a questionnaire asking whether “members of the Chinese race” were welcome as guests. Of the many replies he received, over 90% said no, they would not offer service to such guests. All the others were uncertain (“depends upon the circumstances”) except for a single reply indicating that Chinese guests were welcome. In other words, apparently prevailing attitudes did not predict behavior.

Take a few minutes and think about this story. With that one exception, why do you believe that the travelers did not experience any overt signs of prejudice during their trip? Why did the prejudice appear later, and only in writing? Why did the establishments so dramatically change their previous policies, rejecting the same sort of guests they readily entertained, face-to-face, only a short time before? How certain are you of your conclusions?

Introducing and Defining Social Psychology

In answering these and other questions about LaPiere’s experience, you are doing something that you do each and every day: You are thinking about people and speculating about the reasons for their behavior. Like most people, you probably spend much of your waking hours trying to explain why the people you encounter—your
family, your friends, even the strangers you pass on the street—do what they do. You also think about people you do not actually encounter, people you read or hear about, like LaPiere, his traveling companions, and the individuals they encountered so long ago. Of course, you don’t just think about other people; you also wonder about yourself and what motivates your own social behavior.

By thinking about yourself in relation to other people, you are doing social psychology. Indeed, you have always been one sort of social psychologist—a curious observer. My goal throughout this book is to help you move from casual observation to active intervention, to enable you to design and create events—especially experiments—that mimic everyday experience so that you can examine and explain intriguing social behavior like that witnessed by LaPiere and his friends. But I am getting ahead of myself. What exactly is social psychology?

Various definitions for social psychology exist; however, they all tend to identify a similar set of concerns. Social psychology is the scientific study of everyday social behavior—how the thoughts, feelings, and actions of individuals are influenced by situations, the individuals themselves, and other people, whether real or imagined (Allport, 1985). This classic definition of the field is readily applicable to our historic example. How did the people the travelers encountered—inkeepers, waiters, and so on—think and feel about them? Were their thoughts and feelings positive or negative? What role, if any, did the context—asking and paying for services—play? What about race? In the case of our three travelers, their real physical presence led to almost no prejudiced behavior, although a White male accompanied the Chinese couple. Did that matter? Later, simply the imagined presence of “members of the Chinese race” appears to have triggered antisocial responses. Explanatory possibilities abound, but no one knows what specific factors caused the discrepancy between the reactions during and after the trip. We can only speculate.

Although LaPiere’s (1934) study is a classic, provocative piece of research in social psychology, it is fundamentally flawed. Perhaps you have already identified the main problem: LaPiere could not pinpoint what factors caused the warm in-person reception at one point in time and the later cold rejection on paper. Because he lacked control over who participated at the two different points in time, LaPiere could not determine if the people who answered his follow-up questionnaire were the same ones who originally greeted and seated them or gave them a room. Can you think of any other problems with his study?

To combat such flaws and to explain the underlying causes of social behavior, social psychologists rely on research methods. Research methods are tools for observing, measuring, manipulating, and controlling what takes place in social psychological investigations. This book will teach you how to use the research methods social psychologists use. This broad collection of tools allows social psychologists to scientifically determine cause and effect in social situations. I asked you above how confident you were in your ability to explain why attitudes did not predict behavior in LaPiere’s (1934) study. Now that you have thought about LaPiere’s lack of control in the study, are you less confident that you know what caused the attitude–behavior breakdown?
As you will see throughout this book, careful and thoughtful application of research methods allows social psychologists an opportunity to be reasonably confident when it comes to explaining social behavior, especially what factors cause the behavior to occur.

By using various research methods, social psychologists systematically examine situational and personal variables— influential, measurable factors that can take on different values—whose change can affect social perception, judgment, and interaction when people think about one another or gather together. Variables vary in value, which allows social psychologists the opportunity to introduce the presence of a variable in one setting to see how people react and to then compare the effects of its absence on other people in a similar setting.

Situational variables are literally outside people, often in the environment, serving as tangible (e.g., rules, physical boundaries), intangible (e.g., roles, cultural norms, expectations), and even transient (e.g., crowding, temperature, deadlines) influences. In contrast, personal variables include people's physical (e.g., race, gender, height, weight) and dispositional (e.g., a shy or outgoing personality) characteristics, their affective states (i.e., emotions, such as happiness or sadness), and whether they are perceivers (the judges) or being perceived (the judged) by others. On occasion, social psychologists study groups and group processes, how the thought and behavior of individuals is affected by collections of people who share some common quality or interest.

Despite limitations, LaPiere's (1934) pioneering study led to a great deal of subsequent research on how, why, and when attitudes do or do not predict behavior (e.g., Albarracin, Johnson, & Zanna, 2005; Wicker, 1969). To his credit, LaPiere used two research methods—observation and questionnaires—in a real life situation which revealed some interesting findings but did not allow him to determine why a given establishment's attitudes did not predict the behavior of its employees. Both these research methods are considered later in this book (in chapters 5 and 6, respectively).

What could LaPiere have done to better determine what caused the lack of consistency between attitudes and behavior?

Establishing causality: The importance of experimentation in social psychology

Determining causality—what event led to what outcome—seems simple enough. For centuries, scientists argued that a presumed cause must precede any observed effect. Further, a cause must be demonstrated to occur before an effect in such a way that alternative accounts for the effect are unlikely to be true. These simple statements summarize the basic goal of controlled experiments, which are often easier to describe than to satisfactorily craft and carry out. An experiment is a trial or test designed to prove that one explanation for what causes some behavior is superior to others. To
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do so, key aspects of the phenomena under study are systematically varied in order to determine how their presence or absence affects behavior.

LaPiere (1934) could have relied on a more experimental approach to learn why almost no prejudice or discrimination occurred during the actual trip but a considerable amount was disclosed on paper, in the returned questionnaires. Experimental research in social psychology starts with a specific hypothesis indicating how one variable causes a change in another variable. The causal variable is called the independent variable and the effect variable is labeled the dependent variable. Social psychologists create a situation in which to test whether a given independent variable causes change in a given dependent variable. The researcher manipulates the independent variable by creating two or more conditions, distinct experiences corresponding to different qualities of that variable. Unlike other research approaches, experiments possess one defining feature: Participants are assigned at random to one and only one condition, and each person has the same chance as all the others of ending up in any of the conditions.

Let’s leave the LaPiere (1934) study’s causal uncertainty for a bit and review a recent study on a different topic, an aggression experiment illustrating clear causal connections among a hypothesis, an independent variable, and a dependent variable. Klinesmith, Kasser, and McAndrew (2006) hypothesized that men who hold guns experience a hormonal reaction that primes them to behave aggressively. A group of men gave saliva samples from which their testosterone levels were measured. Working alone, each man was seated at a table with paper and either a big handgun or the children’s board game Mouse Trap. They were told to take apart the gun or the game and to write directions for disassembly and assembly on the paper.

After 15 minutes, the men’s saliva was again collected, revealing that testosterone levels spiked in those who handled the gun but remained the same in those taking apart the game. Aggressiveness was measured in the last part of the experiment, where the men’s “taste sensitivity” was examined. Specifically, they were asked to evaluate the taste of a glass of water with a drop of hot sauce in it. They were asked to make a similar drink for the next person in the study, using as much or as little hot sauce as they wished.

What did Klinesmith and colleagues (2006) find? The men who held the gun added three times as much hot sauce to the water for the next person—an aggressive act—compared to those who worked with the game. In other words, higher levels of testosterone caused more hot sauce to be added to the drink to be given to another person.

What were the variables in this study? How did they relate to the hypothesis? The independent variable—the observable cause of the aggression—was the object the men took apart and put back together, and it had two conditions: the gun and the game. By chance, each man either ended up with the gun or the game. Touching the gun was expected to heighten the hormone levels, whereas handling the game was not. The dependent variable was the relative amount of hot sauce put in the glass of water; more sauce (hence, more aggression) was dropped by the high testosterone men who had held the gun.
Klinesmith and colleagues (2006) used the first samples of saliva to demonstrate that all the men had similar levels of testosterone prior to handling the gun or the game, but not after. Thus they ruled out a major alternative explanation for the results, namely that the men had different levels of hormones before the experiment began. The second saliva sample demonstrated that only those men who worked with the gun subsequently displayed higher levels of testosterone. The researchers also made certain that all the men had similar experiences in the same setting. The only thing that ever differed was whether a man was given the gun or the game.

Now that you understand the importance of experiments in social psychology, can you see the problem in determining cause and effect in the now historic attitude study reported by LaPiere (1934)? Although it is still an important milestone report in the study of attitudes, LaPiere’s study was not an experiment. His research lacked the causal clarity associated with experiments like the one reported by Klinesmith and colleagues (2006). LaPiere did not manipulate and measure any variables, nor did he have a working hypothesis that he tried to test. Unfortunately, we know what happened but not necessarily why; put another way, we cannot clearly identity the root cause of why little prejudiced behavior occurred on the cross-country trip although a considerable amount of prejudiced attitudes were revealed following the trip. Note that we are not criticizing LaPiere’s work; rather, we are highlighting the fact that social psychologists prefer to use experiments rather than simple observations or other approaches to form coherent, compelling explanations for the occurrence (or absence) of prejudice and discriminatory behavior (e.g., Whitley & Kite, 2006). Experiments represent an ideal (Wilson, 2005), one that sometimes cannot be met due to particular circumstances, the availability of resources, time constraints, or even ethical issues.

Thus far we have considered a definition for social psychology and reviewed some illustrative research. Besides defining what social psychology is, we also need to know what it is not; that is, we need to compare its research focus with some of the other branches of psychology and the social sciences.

Levels of Explanation: Social Psychology’s Relation to Other Fields of Inquiry

Social psychology is one field of scientific inquiry. Whether within or outside of psychology, different fields rely on different levels of explanation (see Table 1.1). Different levels of explanation tell us different things about people’s behavior. Table 1.1 lists several fields of inquiry ranging from those with a more collective focus (a larger group or groups) to the more individual (solitary person or process) level of analysis. By moving downward in Table 1.1, the focus becomes narrower and the phenomena of interest become more internal and distinct to individuals. Moving upward in the table, the research emphasis becomes broader and more inclusive, increasingly involving
Table 1.1 Explaining Behavior: Selected Fields and Their Levels of Scientific Explanation

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<th>Field of inquiry</th>
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<td><strong>More collective focus</strong></td>
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<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Cultural features and differences of past and present</td>
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<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Societal social structures and customs of groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social psychology</td>
<td>Individual affect, cognition, behavior influencing interactions with other people, groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Personal psychological processes, individual differences between people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developmental psychology</td>
<td>Ages, stages, and life span issues in individuals and groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive psychology</td>
<td>Individual mental structures, cognitive processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroscience</td>
<td>Individual electrochemical processes</td>
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<td><strong>More individual focus</strong></td>
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both individuals and their relations to groups, as well as within- and between-group processes.

Social psychologists are generally interested in the experience of people as individuals, notably how real or imagined others influence them in terms of affect (emotions, feelings), cognition (thoughts, beliefs), and behavior (actions, intentions). After learning about LaPiere’s work, for example, most people are curious to know about the nature of the interactions between the travelers and the people they met. What, for example, were the innkeepers and waiters thinking and feeling when they served the travelers? Similarly, we would like to know the thoughts and feelings of the respondents who later indicated on paper that Chinese guests were unwelcome.

By comparison, psychologists interested in the emerging areas of neuroscience would want to examine the electrochemical activity in the brain during social encounters with minority group members or when thinking about minority groups (see the bottom of Table 1.1). Neuroscientists study neurochemical processes and how these processes affect the cognitive and behavioral responses of individuals. In contrast, a cognitive psychologist would be curious about a slightly higher level of analysis than a neuroscientist. What is the nature of the mental structures, for example, that leads someone to categorize a person as a member of a minority rather than a majority group? Developmental psychologists, in turn, examine social, cognitive, and emotional changes that occur at different ages and stages of development (see Table 1.1).

Sociologists are often interested in some of the same issues that attract the attention of social psychologists. Yet sociologists would be likely to take a different, more collective approach, one involving a search for the general laws of behavior that are based on the nature of social structures and groups. In the context of LaPiere’s research, instead of focusing on the experience of individual service providers, a sociologist would be interested in the nature of relations between different racial or ethnic groups,
the effects of socioeconomic class, and possibly in the ways that owner-managers as a group held different beliefs than hired workers (see Table 1.1). Thus sociology’s level of analysis is more societal, aimed at the effect of social institutions and customs on groups of people rather than individuals (see, e.g., Burke, 2006). Finally, an anthropologist would want to examine the origins and the physical, cultural, and social development of groups of people. In our current example, an anthropologist could examine how perceived differences between racial groups originated and influenced social interaction across time.

Not all academic fields relevant to social psychology are represented in Table 1.1, of course. Instead, my purpose here is to identify social psychology’s unique place as a bridge between individual and collective levels of explanation. Thus social psychological research examines individual processes that people have in common with others, and how those processes regulate a person’s interactions with other people, including groups. But what about processes unique to each person—in other words, how does social psychology relate to the discipline of personality psychology?

Personality psychology’s relation to social psychology

Earlier, I noted that people’s dispositions, their personalities, were often considered by social psychologists. That is true, and social psychologists often consider the role of personality in their work. Personality psychologists often work closely with social psychologists; indeed, many researchers identify themselves as “social-personality psychologists” and many academic organizations and journals (see Appendix A) serve as common resources for both types of researchers.

Still, personality psychology adopts a somewhat different level of analysis than social psychology. Personality psychologists are interested in the private psychological functions of individuals and how these functions lead to differences between individuals (see Table 1.1). The term “individual differences” refers to those qualities found in one person’s personality that causes him or her to be different than other people. One personality psychologist might want to know which of the people LaPiere and his friends encountered were naturally more helpful than the others; another personality researcher would be interested in knowing who among the people who answered LaPiere’s (1934) survey had a truly prejudiced personality. In contrast, a social psychologist is focused on the common experience of all the individuals who encountered the travelers, as well as the shared qualities of those who returned the surveys. In short, what led most people to offer LaPiere and the couple a place to stay, what led most survey respondents to later say Chinese guests were unwelcome?

You may be thinking, “Now wait a minute, isn’t it the case that your personality determines whether your prejudiced feelings lead to a discriminatory action, like denying a couple a place to stay or eat because of their race?” Sometimes, yes; but not always. Social psychologists believe that situations often matter much more when it comes to causing behavior than do people’s personalities, especially at a common level of analysis.
This view may initially seem hard to believe. Yet ample research demonstrates that the power of situations often overrides the effects or role of personality. Indeed, in everyday life, people are repeatedly found to overestimate the influence of personality while underemphasizing the effects of situations as the causes of behavior (see Gilbert, 1998; Malle, 2004; Ross, 1977; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Whether they possessed any number of personality types linked with prejudiced feelings, such as authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) or social dominance (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), for example, the business owners may not have turned away the travelers for sheer economic reasons—money was to be made by housing or feeding them at that moment in time. Alternatively, perhaps the hotel restaurant workers simply did not have the authority to deny anyone service, thus their personalities, prejudiced or otherwise, had no role in guiding their actions. (Remember, we do not know if the persons who actually met LaPiere and his friends were the same ones who answered the later surveys.) Again, we will never really know what the actual causal factors involved were because LaPiere’s (1934) study was not an experiment.

Whether an investigation is an experiment or another approach to research, the social psychologist doing the research is apt to follow an established procedure. This procedure is generally known as the scientific method, the topic of the next section.

**The Scientific Method: Doing Social Psychology**

In daily life, we try to make sense out of people’s actions and intentions in order to make sense out of our social experiences, whether past, present, or future. In this way, we all share the interest of professional social psychologists, individuals who spend their careers trying to understand, explain, and predict the behavior of people in all kinds of social situations. Social psychologists do virtually the same thing you do, with one big exception. Besides formulating questions, they use a variety of formal tools to test whether their assumptions about the causes of behavior are accurate.

How do social psychologists go about conducting scientific research that explains human social behavior? In the first place, there is not one set approach—there are many, so that what works to study one social phenomenon may be ill-suited to another. Social psychologists are flexible and creative when it comes to examining and explaining the nature and consequences of people’s affect, cognition, and behavior. Generally, one shared principle does guide social psychologists: Whenever possible, they rely on the scientific method.

The scientific method is a relatively formalized way of formulating and stating a research question, selecting a research approach and designing a study, collecting data, analyzing the data and drawing conclusions, and sharing the results. The goal of using the scientific method is to systematically identify and argue for one explanation for the behavior of interest over other possible accounts. LaPiere (1934) relied on the scientific method as a framework for his investigation of prejudiced attitudes and
behaviors. Let’s quickly review his research in terms of the scientific method’s five steps, which are listed in Table 1.2.

**Step 1: Formulating a testable hypothesis.** Social psychologists often develop research questions based upon their own experiences, as when something socially interesting or puzzling occurs to them or to other people. Alternatively, they already have an established interest in a research topic or they may decide to study some social phenomenon that has already received a great deal of attention. LaPiere (1934), for example, was already interested in the relationship between people’s social attitudes toward others and their subsequent actions. Based on some early experiences traveling with the Chinese couple, he hypothesized that despite the pervasive prejudicial attitudes towards minority groups, actual discriminatory behavior toward minority group members might not occur. A hypothesis is a testable question, an educated assumption or guess that allows an investigator to predict what outcome will occur under what situation. LaPiere guessed that in spite of prejudiced attitudes, the various workers he and the couple encountered would not turn them away.

**Step 2: Selecting a research approach.** As you will learn throughout this book, social psychologists have a variety of research approaches and designs at their disposal. The main approaches to research used by many social psychologists are listed in Table 1.3. Selecting which one to use depends upon the nature of the hypothesis, of course, as well as the research topic and a host of practical questions. LaPiere’s (1934) study was occurring with real people out in the real world, which meant that his ability to control the situation was quite low. But he did something clever. Instead of relying on only one research approach, he actually used two complementary approaches. First, LaPiere adopted the research approach known as observation (see Table 1.3). Observational research can be conducted in a variety of ways, but it generally involves an investigator carefully watching some social event take place. Simply put, during their trips, LaPiere planned to observe how his friends were received.

What about the second research approach? Remember that besides collecting observations, once the trips were over, LaPiere (1934) sent each establishment a questionnaire to find out whether Chinese guests were welcome. Similar to observational research, questionnaire research embraces a straightforward conclusion: If you want to
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You know what people think or feel, why not ask them directly? You are used to answering questions all the time—some are verbal, but many are written. Like LaPiere, social psychologists use questionnaires to find out people’s opinions towards a wide variety of social issues. Such questionnaires usually contain a number of questions that focus on the same topic.

A distinction should be drawn between survey research and questionnaire research (see Table 1.3). A survey is a questionnaire that is given to a carefully selected sample of people in order to estimate how the larger population from which they were drawn feels about a given social issue. LaPiere (1934) used a questionnaire to assess the attitudes towards Asians only at the places he and his friends visited—he did not attempt to measure the general attitudes of all the workers at the hotels and restaurants in the states they crossed, let alone the entire United States.

Could LaPiere (1934) have adopted a different research approach? Of course. If he did so, LaPiere probably would have had to redesign the whole study because he took advantage of the fact that he was traveling repeatedly across the country with his friends. Table 1.3 contains other approaches that social psychologists use to explore social behavior. For example, he could have relied on another nonexperimental approach by using archival data (see the middle section of Table 1.3). By doing so, he could have read and categorized newspaper accounts of prejudiced or discriminatory behavior aimed at minority group members, especially those of Asian descent. Or, do you think that LaPiere chose well under the circumstances?

Step 3: Data collection. The third step in the scientific method is data collection. The word “data” refers to information that is gathered to test the hypothesis. You already

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know what LaPiere (1934) did. He observed: Whenever the Chinese couple were checking into a hotel or asking for a table in a dining room, LaPiere hung back a bit and watched how they were received. In fact, he took detailed notes—observations—about each and every encounter, but he was not obvious about it. Later, he sent out the questionnaires to all the sites they visited and waited for the responses in the return mail.

Step 4: Analyzing the data and drawing conclusions. Once the data were collected, LaPiere (1934) performed his analyses. As you already know, the nature of the data he collected—the number of times he and his friends were accepted versus turned away, the number of returned questionnaires that indicated that Chinese guests were welcome—were relatively easy to track and tally. They were turned away once and only one of the returned responses said minority group guests were welcome. Although LaPiere’s study used refreshingly basic analyses, most social psychological investigations use more complex and sophisticated analytic methods. In fact, social psychologists, like most other research psychologists, rely on statistical analyses to tease apart cause and effect relationships within the data sets they collect in the course of doing research. A statistic is a piece of information that is described in numerical form. A statistical analysis is a mathematically based technique used to answer a specific question or to search for a pattern within some data. You will learn about planning and selecting basic statistical analyses later, in chapter 11 of this book.

What conclusions did LaPiere (1934) draw based upon his analyses? He observed that for whatever reason—personal, social, or economic, among other possibilities—hotel and restaurant workers were unlikely to behave in a prejudiced manner in face-to-face encounters. However, the same establishments were quite willing to discriminate on paper, to say that they would turn away potential guests who were of Asian descent. As predicted by the hypothesis, people’s actual behavior did not correspond to their expressed attitudes toward minorities. We will return to the implications and shortcomings of LaPiere’s research in the next section of this chapter. Before doing so, however, we need to consider the last step of the scientific method.

Step 5: Sharing the results with the scientific community. Once some research is complete, what happens? Ideally, social psychologists will share what they learned with other social psychologists. Such sharing can occur in many ways. Results can be shared with students in a classroom setting, for example, or a researcher might be invited to deliver a talk, to speak about the findings at a college or university or during a professional conference (see chapter 12). The most appropriate way to share the results, however, is to summarize them in the form of a journal article. Journals are specialized publications found in all scientific disciplines. There are hundreds, possibly thousands, of journals in psychology that publish research on countless specialized questions and topics. Appendix A lists various journals that publish social psychological research.

Journal articles in psychology follow a set of guidelines for presenting research in a concise, clear, and required format (see chapter 12). Quality journals are peer
reviewed, that is, before an article is published it is carefully and thoroughly reviewed by a panel of experts who are knowledgeable about the topic under examination (for discussion of scholarly reviews, see Sternberg, 2006). Peer review is a cornerstone of publication in social psychology, and reviewers carefully screen every article to be certain that its contents are innovative, convincing, and truly noteworthy. An article will not be published until a group of (usually) anonymous expert judges that an author scrupulously followed the scientific method and that his or her conclusions are valid. Rejection is common; most high quality journals accept and publish fewer than 20% of all submissions. Thus peer-reviewed journals are deemed to be the reliable and “authoritative sources of information in their field” (Orne, 1981, p. 3). Without the quality control created by the peer review process, social psychology could not progress because its findings could not be trusted to appropriately shape future research efforts. As with all sciences, progress in social psychology is incremental.

Why? Social Psychology is Social

Why bother studying social psychology? Why do social psychological research? The answer is perhaps obvious in the definition I offered earlier: to learn how individuals think or feel about, influence, or interact with real or imagined others. Besides this connection to others, people are affected by situation, circumstance, and custom. The discipline of social psychology explores behavior by pursuing three related lines of inquiry: social thought, social influence, and social connections.

Social thought

When people read the term “social thought,” they usually think of philosophy or political science. Social psychologists use the term rather literally: how we think about ourselves and other people. The disciplinary label for this area of study is social cognition. The study of social thinking entails a critical evaluation of the origins and functions of people’s attitudes, inferences, and beliefs. Consider some major questions posed by social cognitive researchers: Are your first impressions of other people usually accurate? Are your social judgments prone to predictable errors and biases? How well do you know yourself? Do you have access to privileged self-knowledge that someone who knows you well or meets you for the first time does not?

Social influence

Social thinking occurs mostly inside our heads but it does have profound consequences for our behavior. When social thought gets outside the head, it often affects how we interact with and relate to one another. One of the great lessons of social psychology—a lesson you observed when learning about the LaPiere (1934) study—is that humans are often very concerned with the opinions of others or what others will think of them.

The second major area of social psychological inquiry aims to understand the nature and power of such social influence. Think about social influence this way: How
often do you look to other people to determine what you should do or how you should behave? Simply put, we are influenced by the other people around us. They affect how we think, feel, and act. Social influence is the invisible force that allows us to be persuaded by others to do some things and not others. Of course, we also affect other people's behavior, leading them toward performing some actions and away from others. Social psychological research on social influence concerns gender relations and roles, persuasion processes and attitude or belief change, and effects of group and group membership on behavior, among other topics.

Social connections

Social thought and social influence point to the third line of disciplinary inquiry: the social connections we form with other people. Most of us do not live in isolation, and the essence of social life is engaging in activities or relationships with others. In a real sense, however, social connections represent the best and worst in humanity. We want and need to connect with others, but real and serious problems sometimes arise when we do so. Some connections are positive and constructive, as is the case when we help other people or form close relationships with them. Other connections are negative and problematic, such as harboring a prejudice towards a group and engaging in discriminatory activities. The study of social connections reminds us that conflict between individuals or among groups is a regrettable but real aspect of human experience. The beneficial connections we do form with others remind us how much others contribute to our well-being.

Whether you are interested in studying social thought, social influence, or social connections, note that the social psychological processes in each area all involve some degree of thinking, feeling, and behaving. In the same way, the real or imagined presence of other people also affects how we think, influence, or connect with others. Let's turn to the venues where social psychological research is conducted.

Where? The Lab and the Field

The bulk of social psychological research relies on experimentation (e.g., Higbee, Millard, & Folkman, 1982), and two-thirds of all experimental studies occur in the lab (e.g., Adair, Dushenko, & Lindsay, 1985). Social psychologists often speak of working “in the lab” or “in the field.” What do these phrases mean? Or, more importantly, where is the lab versus the field?

The lab

When social psychologists refer to the lab or laboratory, they do not usually mean a space inhabited by scientific equipment, test tubes, and the like. Rather, the term is used to refer to any place or space—often a room or suite of rooms—that allows psychological research to be carried out in a highly controlled manner. The control is necessary so that everyone taking part in an experiment, for example, experiences the same thing, that no distractions or extraneous variables (e.g., noise) detract from the
impact of the independent variable or cloud the intent of the dependent variable. Most social psychological research is conducted in a room with a few chairs and a table (recall the description of the Klinesmith et al., 2006, aggression experiment, for example). By relying on such spare spaces, social psychologists hope to maximize cause and effect relations by minimizing all other influences.

The focus on control is a strength but it also highlights a pitfall of rigorous experimentation: dissimilarity from everyday experience. Lab settings can seem artificial, less natural, even somewhat removed from people’s normal experiences. Critics of social psychological experiments correctly raise an important concern: How can researchers be sure that people’s social behavior in the lab is anything like the behavior they display out in the hectic pace of the real world? As an antidote to this problem, many social psychologists replicate—that is, repeat and verify—lab-based efforts out in the field.

The field
The “field,” as in field research or field studies, is social psychological research that occurs in settings that lack the control associated with the lab. Field settings not only have a high degree of naturalism in that they mimic everyday life, they often take place during everyday life in everyday settings. Field settings can be in classrooms, offices, shops or malls, on campus, at concerts, in parks—really, anyplace that by its nature reduces the amount of control a researcher can exercise. For this reason, perhaps, field research is sometimes called *naturalistic research* in that settings are “real” and the behavior occurring within them is presumed to be more natural than that associated with the lab. Sometimes independent variables can be manipulated and measured in field settings, other times interesting results are obtained—again, LaPiere’s (1934) results are still provocative even after 70 years—but causal conclusions cannot be drawn from them. Field research can be difficult to do precisely because control is an issue.

On the other hand, field studies often display a quality that some controlled experiments lack: *generalizability*. The findings from field research are often thought to be more generalizable, that is, descriptive of behavior performed by other people at other times and in other places, than those based on lab research. Ironically, social psychologists know the behavior observed in field settings is usually natural and therefore comparable to what we might observe in countless similar settings (e.g., any restaurants or hotels LaPiere or others could have visited elsewhere in the US of the 1930s), but they remain unable to offer causal explanations about it.

Thus there is a fundamental trade-off between social psychological research conducted in the lab or the field. As shown in the top of Figure 1.1, the increasing control associated with the lab provides us with empirical certainty, much more than can ever be found in field settings. The trade-off, however, is shown in the bottom of Figure 1.1: The ability to generalize from one setting to another increases out in the field while it decreases in the lab. The hard truth is that there is no ideal research setting where both control and generalizability can be maximized. Either control must be sacrificed
to obtain more naturalism or generalizability must be reduced so that greater control can be exercised for greater inferential clarity. These issues are revisited in chapter 9.

How do social psychologists deal with the problems posed by the trade-off shown in Figure 1.1? They acknowledge it by doing programmatic research using both lab and field settings (Aronson, Wilson, & Brewer, 1998). Novel hypotheses concerning social behavior are usually first developed and tested in lab settings. As the researchers become more comfortable in making obtained effects “behave,” they design subsequent studies that gradually move out into the field. Findings discovered in the lab are replicated and extended in the field, boundary conditions or limits are identified, and the developing theory is refined. By the same token, interesting and novel observations uncovered in the field are subjected to the rigor of the lab. Such “give-and-take” between the lab and field is essential to the process of advancing knowledge in social psychology.

One more distinction: Basic and applied research

Whether to work in the lab or the field is not the only distinction that social psychologists must consider. There is also the matter of whether their research is considered to be basic or applied. Basic social psychological research is conducted out of pure intellectual interest. The goal of basic research is scientific: to expand the available knowledge base concerning human social behavior. This is the search for “knowledge for its own sake.” Most basic research efforts, especially experiments, are designed to answer a single question (e.g., Why does physical anonymity increase the incidence of antisocial behavior?; Diener, 1976; Zimbardo, 1969). The results from basic research efforts are pored over by researchers who are looking to discover the presence of statistically significant effects (Bickman, 1981; Hedrick, Bickman, & Rog, 1993). Once verified, the results are used to further develop social psychological theory and to design the next round of experiments so that the search for new knowledge can continue.

Applied research in social psychology is typically conducted for a specific purpose, most often to understand or address some socially relevant problem. If a maxim for
applied social research exists, it is “knowledge for a purpose.” As is true for basic efforts, applied research relies on careful methodological practices and statistical analyses. The goals of applied research differ, however. Most applied projects aim to answer multiple questions and the search for statistical significance is often sacrificed for finding practical relationships or effects (e.g., Bickman, 1981; Hedrick et al., 1993). Social psychologists Mark Snyder and Allen Omoto, for example, conduct research on the costs and benefits of volunteerism, which entails giving one’s free time and service to benefit other people, groups, or organizations (e.g., Snyder, Omoto, & Lindsay, 2004). The practical knowledge gained from such applied research can be invaluable when it comes recruiting volunteers to help particular groups (e.g., AIDS/HIV+ individuals, homeless persons) in need (e.g., Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene, & Haugen, 1994; Omoto & Snyder, 1993).

Regrettably, the distinction between basic and applied research is often portrayed as somewhat adversarial, as if one approach is somehow superior to the other (e.g., “basic research is real science,” “applied research improves people’s lives”). As I am sure you can imagine, a similar sort of tension is often cited as existing between lab and field research. The distinction between basic and applied research is not absolute and really more a matter of degrees; one social psychologist’s basic research is seen by another as applied (or vice versa). As one of my teachers once put it, the distinction is more apparent than real and, in any case, both approaches contribute to our understanding of social behavior. As Aronson, Wilson, and Brewer (1998, p. 135) put it, “If the distinctive contribution of experimental social psychology to the general body of knowledge is ever to be realized, an optimal integration of theory-oriented laboratory research with applied field experimentation will be required.” These are wise words to keep in mind as you learn to conduct research in social psychology.

Social Psychologists Today

As you’ve learned in this chapter, social psychology is about people being interested in other people. What better way for you to learn more about the discipline than by researching the people who work in it? And here is an interesting and related fact: Social psychology is a very young discipline, having largely developed following World War II, so that its coming of age as a distinct discipline was in the 1950s. Thus most of the social psychologists you will learn about in this book or whose work you will encounter in introductory social psychology texts are alive and hard at work. In fact, one of the best ways to get a sense of what social psychology is all about is by becoming familiar with the research program of a social psychologist. What follows is an exercise that will help you come to know the background, professional life, theoretical perspective, and publications of one or more professionals.

Because social psychology is an academic field, most social psychologists are employed in college and university settings, and they can be found in psychology or other social science departments. Some social psychologists, however, work for the government or in private industry. Don’t unduly limit your search to academic settings.
Learning About Active Social Psychologists

Each chapter in this book contains one or more active learning exercises designed to provide you with some hands-on research experience. Before you begin to develop your own research topic, however, you should learn about existing research and some of the researchers who conduct it. Here are three related Internet-based activities you can do to learn about the life and work of contemporary social psychologists.

Web site activity. One of the best available web sites dealing with social psychology is the Social Psychology Network, developed and maintained by Professor Scott Plous of Wesleyan University. The site is located at: http://www.socialpsychology.org. This site provides a wealth of information about social psychology—everything from specific research topics to online studies and demonstrations. One of the site’s best features, however, is its listing of over 1,000 profiles of social psychologists. These profiles can be searched by researchers’ names or key words, browsed by research topics (e.g., close relationship, emotions, health, gender), or reviewed alphabetically. Most profiles contain contact information, institutional affiliation, a photo, a short biographical sketch, some description of research and teaching interests, and a list of selected publications, such as recent journal articles and books.

Go to the Social Psychology Network web site and select one or two profiles to read. You might search for a psychologist whose name is familiar, a topic that interests you, or for fun, simply select a profile at random. Read the individual’s profile carefully to learn what you can. Do you see any indication regarding how this person became interested in social psychology? Print out or write down the references for one or two of the researcher’s publications and then go to the library. Look up the references and read them carefully. What makes the research an example of social psychology? What prompted the researcher’s interest in the topic?

Web search activity. Instead of searching the profiles at the Social Psychology Network, you can select a social psychologist to learn more about by examining the lists of references found at the back of this book or by looking through virtually any introductory text in social psychology. Once you have a researcher’s name, use one of the traditional Internet search engines, such as google.com or yahoo.com. Type in the individual’s name and see what materials are found in cyberspace. Depending upon the person, you may receive a list of links to his or her publications, professional appearances at psychology conferences, a home page address,
and information about his or her place of employment. Follow the suggestions above in the web site activity and learn what you can about your researcher’s interests.

*Home page activity.* A third alternative for learning about the work of contemporary social psychologists involves visiting their home pages. Some home pages will be accessible through either of the above activities (the Social Psychology Network profiles often provide links) or by simply visiting the researcher’s institution’s web site. Most psychology departments, for example, maintain faculty profiles with links to the colleagues’ home pages (social psychologists who teach at your institution are fair game, as well!). Go to one and see what you can learn about your chosen social psychologist. Does the home page reveal anything else about the researcher’s current interests in social psychology, including publications?

### Learning Research Methods for Social Psychology

The goal of this book is a straightforward one: to teach you research methods so that you can actually do social psychology—conduct social psychological research—and not merely read about it. In subsequent chapters, you will learn:

- To move from casual speculation to expressing focused questions;
- To search the social psychological literature for relevant theory or research pertaining to topics of interest;
- To turn questions and supporting research into specific hypotheses;
- To design experiments to test competing hypotheses in the search for the best explanation for some social behavior;
- To conduct a social psychology project from conception to completion;
- To select alternative approaches to social psychological research when experiments are not appropriate;
- To share research results with others, either in written or spoken form;
- To add your point of view to our growing knowledge regarding the origins, description, and function of social behavior.

Although you will learn these and other techniques as you read subsequent chapters in this book, it is never too early to begin planning your own research. With this goal in mind, this first chapter closes with a practical, helpful active learning exercise that you can return to again and again as your work proceeds.
Planning a Research Project in Social Psychology

Doing research takes time and effort: Both these qualities determine a project’s likelihood of success. Whenever you plan a research project in social psychology, consider what activities need to be accomplished in light of the time available. Less or more time will affect what you choose to do and often how you will go about doing it. I urge you to keep in mind a maxim a wise psychologist I know relies on where research and writing are concerned: “Things always take longer than they do.”

You may not be ready to actually do this exercise yet, especially if you are just finishing this first chapter. Nonetheless, you should become familiar with what you will need to learn to do. Before you proceed further in this book, then, you should have a clear sense of what must be done in order to bring a research project from conception to fruition. Table 1.4 lists the main activities common to most social psychological investigations. As you can see, this table identifies the activity and where it can be found in this book. Additionally, there is space in Table 1.4 for you to estimate how long each activity will take to complete.

Table 1.4 Research Activities for Doing Social Psychological Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Chapter location</th>
<th>Estimated time to complete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifying a research topic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching the literature</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading the literature</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing an IRB form</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing an approach and performing research:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental research</td>
<td>4 and 10</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonexperimental research</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire/survey research</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing operational definitions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating independent variables</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating dependent variables</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting participants</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verifying validity and reliability</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing and analyzing project data</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing or presenting research results</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>__________ day(s)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exercises

1. Obtain a copy of LaPiere's (1934) article and read it carefully. If you had been there with LaPiere, what changes would you have made to the study? How would you redesign it? What other variables would you consider examining?

2. What do you think would happen if you were to repeat LaPiere’s (1934) study today? Instead of using a Chinese couple as the contact minority, what do you think would happen if you used an African-American couple, a Hispanic or Latino couple, or a gay or lesbian couple? Would prevalent attitudes today predict behavior—why or why not?

3. Generate a list of three or more topics that you would like to examine using research methods from social psychology.