Preface

Social psychology is a subfield of study that bridges psychology, with its focus on individual perception and behavior, and sociology, with its emphasis on linking individual thought and action to broader social structures. Almost all of the social psychological literature is research-based. Thus, the field of social psychology has been defined largely by the research studies it has generated.

Most social psychology textbooks are psychological in orientation and do not discuss research by sociological social psychologists. Of those social psychology textbooks that are sociological in orientation, most focus solely on symbolic interactionism (one type of sociological social psychology) and the qualitative/ethnographic research conducted within this tradition. There are some other, more comprehensive, social psychology textbooks written by sociologists. However, these books either have a strong psychological bent or are topical in orientation and minimize the distinctions between different theoretical frameworks within sociological social psychology and the kinds of studies they have generated. They emphasize breadth over depth of coverage.

What Makes This Book Unique

This book is broad in its scope and has been designed to reflect the diverse nature of research within sociological social psychology. However, at the same time, it emphasizes depth of understanding. To this end, each chapter includes detailed examples and illustrations of the concepts, theories, methodologies, and types of social psychological research covered.
There are three distinct research traditions (or “faces”) of social psychology within contemporary sociology—symbolic interactionist, social structure and personality (House, 1977) and group processes and structure (Berger, 1992; Harrod, Welch, and Kushkowski, 2009).

**Symbolic Interactionist (SI):** Social psychological research conducted within the symbolic interactionist tradition focuses on face-to-face interactions in natural settings and on the ways in which meanings are socially constructed.

**Social Structure and Personality (SSP):** This variant of sociological social psychology focuses on the link between the statuses people occupy (e.g., their gender, race/ethnicity, and social class) and their opportunities, aspirations, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors.

**Group Processes and Structure (GPS):** Studies within this research tradition focus on perception and behavior in small group encounters and on relations between groups. Because these studies are sociological in orientation, they emphasize the effects of societal characteristics on the nature and content of people’s interactions in group settings.

Unlike other textbooks on sociological social psychology that recognize these distinctions, we have organized the initial set of chapters by research tradition (“face” of sociological social psychology), rather than by topic, and emphasize the different theoretical frameworks within which social psychological analyses are conducted within each orientation. We also make clear the link between “face” of sociological social psychology, theory, and methodology.

Qualitative research (favored by symbolic interactionists) and quantitative research (used by sociological social psychologists working within SSP and GPS) serve very different purposes. We provide a more detailed discussion of the difference between these two kinds of research than other textbooks and identify when and why particular methods are used by sociological
social psychologists. Here, and throughout the rest of the book, we give examples of both classic and contemporary studies from within each of the three “faces” of sociological social psychology so that students gain a full understanding of the diverse nature of research in the field. Throughout the text, we illustrate how different theoretical perspectives have guided research within sociological social psychology and emphasize the strong empirical basis of this field of study.

As we describe the different faces of sociological social psychology and the research they have generated, we emphasize core sociological ideas and their applications. At various points in each chapter, we ask students to step back from the academic discussion to consider how particular theoretical perspectives and concepts within a given face of sociological social psychology apply to their personal experiences or to the lives of others.

Once students have learned about the three faces of sociological social psychology, the breadth of the research they have generated, and how they can be applied to everyday situations, we discuss the utility of integrating research from across traditions when studying particular topics. We view this as toward the end, rather than as the starting point of, the learning process. By beginning with the foundations of each of the three research orientations or faces, and their unique foci, this book is structured to provide students with an in-depth and thorough understanding of the field of sociological social psychology; how and why social psychologists trained in sociology ask particular kinds of questions; the types of research they are involved in; and how their findings have been, or can be, applied to contemporary societal patterns and problems.

Although this book does not focus on psychological social psychology, we discuss some classic studies within this tradition that are relevant to the topics and issues addressed by
Moreover, by making clear the distinction between sociological and psychological social psychology in our introductory chapter, we show how the research questions asked, and answered, by social psychologists working within all three research orientations within sociological social psychology (SI, SSP, and GPS) reflect the key themes of their home discipline.

In general, the book’s chapters are cumulative in their organization, such that theoretical frameworks, concepts, and methods that appear early on in the text are revisited and applied in the later chapters. In teaching our social psychology courses, we have found that this integrated approach to knowledge building works well, especially when it comes to the discussion of theories and research findings that are complex or in opposition to common ways of viewing the world.

Features

This book has a number of features that can be used either in or outside of the classroom to enhance students’ understanding of research within sociological social psychology and how it pertains to people’s everyday lives. At various points within each chapter there are individual and group exercises that facilitate the application of social psychological perspectives, methodologies, and research findings. In many chapters, we also present news articles that discuss, or indirectly illustrate, the concepts and studies covered.

In addition, throughout the book, we have embedded standard measures of key social psychological concepts for students to complete within the text. Benchmark scores from one or more studies within the literature are included, with which students can compare their own results.
Providing samples of commonly used measures is a strategy we have found to be effective in cultivating student interest in the field and in increasing their understanding of the relevance of social psychological research to their lives. The measures presented in the book include the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn and McPartland 1954), the Public Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier and Buss 1975), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), the Embarrassability Scale (Modigliani, 1966), the Passionate Love Scale (Hatfield and Sprecher 1986), the Color Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (Neville, Lilly, Dudran, Lee and Browne 2000) and measures of perspective taking (Davis 1980), social support (Turner and Turner 2005), relationship commitment (Sprecher 1988), attitudes toward divorce (Amato and Rogers 1999), and delinquency (Harris 2009).

Finally, each chapter ends with a set of questions for review and reflection, designed to help students to synthesize, apply, and critically evaluate the material presented in the chapter. These questions are relatively broad in focus and are thus appropriate for group discussion as well as for exam preparation.

Goals of the Book

Since sociological social psychology focuses on social relationships and why people think and act as they do, it is inherently interesting. The goal of this book is to introduce students to this field of study and to the wealth of information about social life it provides. In acknowledgment of the diversity of the field, its methods, and applications, this book is also designed to:

- familiarize students with the three “faces” of sociological social psychology and the kinds of research they have generated;
- illustrate the utility of applying multiple perspectives, and methods, to particular topics;
- introduce students to the social psychological literature pertaining to a number of topics of interest to sociologists;
- facilitate students’ abilities to apply social psychological perspectives and findings to various topics and social problems; and
- provide students with the tools needed to analyze their own experiences from a sociological perspective.

Students: When the semester is over, and you have finished this book and your social psychology course, you might go back and think about this last statement. How has your perspective changed over the course of the semester? What have you gained from learning about sociological social psychology?

As you begin reading this book, you will see the relevance of sociological social psychology to yourself and the people with whom you share your life. As human beings, we balance multiple levels of expectations (self, others, societal) and plan patterns of action within this context. Sociological social psychology provides us with frameworks for identifying and understanding the nature of these expectations and their consequences. Thus, there is no field of study more relevant to our day-to-day experiences. Together, the three “faces” of sociological social psychology yield substantial insight into the nature of human social behavior at both a general and a personal level.