Angela M. Sabates

Social Psychology in Christian Perspective

EXPLORING THE HUMAN CONDITION

ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com.

Contents

1

Social Psychology

Methods and Assumptions

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims
his handiwork.

Psalm 19:1

What Is Social Psychology?

Imagine that you are on a road trip with several friends. The four of you have been looking forward to this break after a long school year. The trip starts off with everyone in a happy mood, singing along to the songs on the radio, each of you privately basking in the wonders of your friendship with your delightful travel companions. You can't imagine a time when you would not be such great friends. Midway through the trip, the car suddenly runs out of gas. "No problem," you say, trying to keep the upbeat mood alive in the midst of this setback. "We can just stand out here by the side of the road and motion to other drivers. I'm sure we can get some help in no time."

After about one hour of failed attempts to get help from the passing drivers—who, you're convinced, seem to speed up as they pass you by—it is getting very hot outside. You notice that the mood of your group has changed; you have begun to lose patience and started blaming each other for not ensuring that the car had enough gas to begin this journey.

You then collectively decide that it is time to start walking toward the nearest gas station, but which way should you walk? Some of you say that you should risk going forward in the direction of your trip, assuming that you will pass a gas station before long; others of you say that you should walk in the other direction, where you know for certain that you had passed a gas station about two miles ago. Should you all walk together, or should one of you stay by the car just in case a nice driver stops to help sometime soon?

In the midst of trying to resolve this dilemma, what do you think will happen in the group? Will you increase your mutual efforts to maintain group cohesion, or will the group become increasingly argumentative? Will all members of the group be equally likely to help resolve the group's dilemma ("we're all in this together"), or will some member(s) be more lax, allowing the rest to do most of the work? Will one of you emerge as the group leader and be able to persuade the others of the best course of action? Will your perceptions of one another be altered due to the stress of the situation? And, by the way, why didn't any of those drivers who passed by stop to help?

The seemingly infinite number of potential answers to the above questions demonstrates how human social behavior is arguably among the most complex of all phenomena in science. This complexity often leads to great difficulty when trying to describe, explain and predict various aspects of social behavior. The intricate connection of many personal and situational factors produces the behavior that we observe. The field of social psychology is one attempt at understanding this complexity.

Social psychology is the scientific study of human social interaction, including our perceptions of one another and of social situations. This field is concerned with understanding a broad range of features, including how we persuade one another, how individuals interact within groups, what circumstances lead to both productive and destructive social behavior, and so on. In short, social psychology attempts to explore social influence. Allport (1924), whose definition of social psychology is one of the oldest and most often cited, suggested just how powerful social influence can be when he clarified the idea that this in-

fluence is due not only to the result of the actual presence of others, but also to the implied or *imagined* presence of others. To better understand the goals of the field, consider just a few of the many questions that social psychologists explore:

- Why aren't our behaviors always consistent with our professed attitudes?
- Under what circumstances are we most likely to be persuaded?
- When and whom are we most likely to help?
- How reliable are eyewitness testimonies?
- How do we form impressions of political candidates?
- Are racism and prejudice really declining, or are we just getting better at hiding them?
- Who is attracted to whom, and why?

The relevance of such topics makes the study of social psychology important not only for researchers, but also for the public at large. The findings of social psychology are often applied to real-life dilemmas. For example, research findings about what factors contribute to group violence can be particularly helpful for public officials and community members who are concerned about rioting or gang violence in the schools. Similarly, knowing what factors may impair an eyewitness's accuracy in recalling the events of a crime is helpful both for the police who question such witnesses as well as for jury members' assessments of an eyewitness account in the courtroom.

Specifically for students, the findings of social psychology research can be especially relevant as one considers all the social interactions and dynamics that occur during college life. Surely almost all college students, for example, would be interested in knowing what factors contribute to interpersonal attraction. (By the way, for those of you who are interested, there is more on this in the last chapter.)

Figure 1.1 presents the way in which some of the major areas of research in social psychology are discussed in this text. Also included are just a few relevant questions typically asked in those areas of research. Note how extensive the field is, and also be aware that the different areas are interrelated, each significantly interacting with the others.

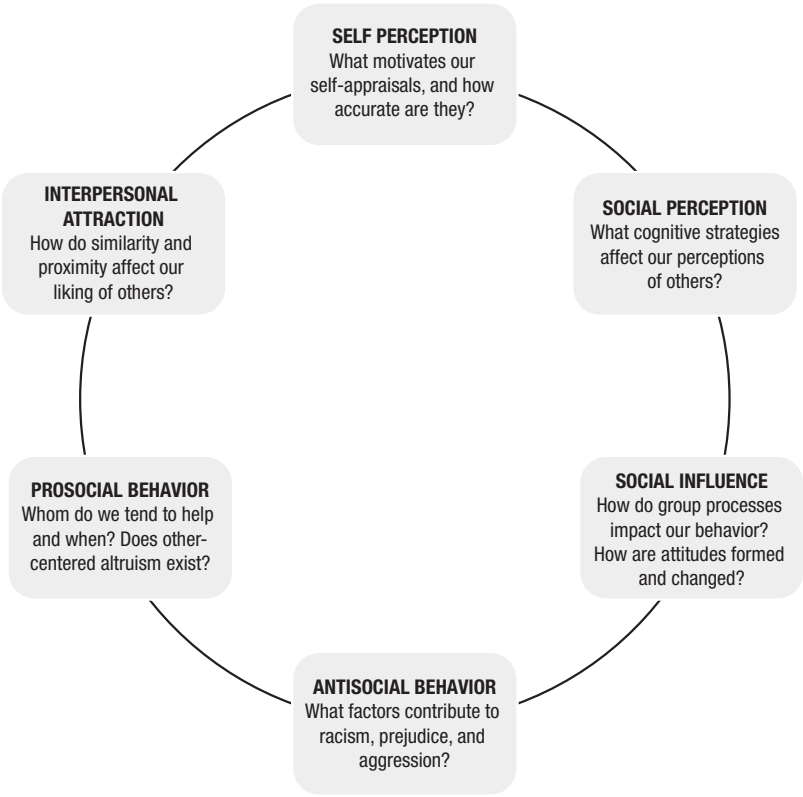

Figure 1.1. Social Psychology: Research and Sample Questions

So far, the empirical research in social psychology has helped provide a greater understanding of the many influences on human social behavior. This text will explore that relevant research, which has indeed added much to our understanding of how humans interact. In addition, this text will explore how the field of social psychology can be enriched when one considers related ideas that stem from a Christian understanding of both the human condition and the ultimate purposes for social interactions. More specifically, it is proposed that if we consider the perspective that humans were created in God's image for relationship with him and others, we could arrive at a richer understanding of human social interaction than if we only used the current naturalist assumptions of social psychology; and further, that Christian ideas of persons are a legitimate and valid starting

point for social psychology research. This Christian approach to social psychology will be fully discussed in chapter two.

This first chapter will focus on the empirical method that social psychologists use to study human interactions, the assumptions that have guided those research efforts and the possible implications of those assumptions. Naturalism, the assumption that is most prevalent in social psychology research, will be reviewed. For the sake of simplicity, *naturalism* refers to the belief that reality comprises material substance, and that the immaterial (e.g., God, soul, mind, etc.) either does not exist or is irrelevant to empirical investigation because it cannot be measured. The view of humans that emerges from this naturalist stance will also be discussed in this chapter. An understanding of such assumptions and their implications helps us understand the possible strengths and limitations of such an approach to the understanding of human social interaction.

Bear in mind that naturalism in psychology is not a new idea. For example, psychologist and philosopher William James noted in his 1890 textbook, *Principles of Psychology,* that psychology was on the naturalistic track, and for the sake of its progress as a science it should be allowed to continue as such. Many historical major theorists in psychology (e.g., Freud, 1929; Skinner, 1971) as well as more contemporary theorists (e.g., Buss, 2005; Tooby & Cosmides, 2003) have likewise espoused a naturalistic view of humanity.

How Do Psychologists Study Social Behavior?

Since social psychologists employ traditional scientific research methods to study human social interaction, it is important to review some of the basic strategies used in the field. This approach to research is based on *empiricism,* which is a key component of the scientific method. Empiricism focuses on gathering evidence through observations and seeks to obtain a more objective understanding of the topic of study than is possible through random, unstructured observations or intuitions.

To illustrate how social psychologists use the scientific approach, let us consider the example of how they explore helping behavior, a prominent topic in the field. The scientific process often begins with a broad

research question such as: What variables affect a person's propensity to help others? From the research question, specific hypotheses are generated. A *hypothesis* is a testable statement that proposes a possible explanation or prediction of some phenomenon or event. Through it, one gives an educated guess about the answer to the research question. To be "testable" in this context means that the validity of the statement can be tested using the experimental method. A hypothesis may include a prediction. For example, researchers may propose that a person is less likely to help others if that person is in a hurry or has some other pressing appointment waiting. So, the experimenters would then test their hypothesis by manipulating the time-pressure variable to see if it has the predicted effect of lessening the chances of helping. In this way, they are exploring cause-effect relationships.

Along with specific hypotheses, social psychologists also develop theories. *Theories* are general explanations based on a large amount of data. Theories provide frameworks from which to understand the various empirical observations and also generate additional hypotheses. They help to organize the myriad research findings by suggesting how they fit into a more cohesive, larger picture. One example of a theory in social psychology is known as *social role theory*. Originally proposed by Eagly (1987), this theory arose as an effort to unify the many empirical observations of the apparent differences in the social behavior of males and females (e.g., levels of aggression, types of helping behavior, etc.). According to this theory, the sex differences seen in social behavior are largely the result of the gender roles that have been ascribed to men and women. Thus, for example, this theory proposes that society's emphasis on males being strong and virile helps explain why males are more likely than females to perform acts of helping that are of a chivalrous or heroic nature (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). In this way, social role theory attempts to provide an overarching framework within which to understand one particular aspect of social behavior.

To review, the scientific process entails the following steps:

1. Begin with a question (usually based on some observations of social behavior).

2. Form a hypothesis (like an educated guess that attempts to answer at least part of the research question).
3. Test the hypothesis (collect data and analyze it).
4. Interpret the results (Do they support your hypothesis? Are they consistent with other empirical observations or theories of social behavior?).
5. Communicate the results.
6. Numerous consistent observations lead to the formulation of theories, which also generate new hypotheses.

Remember that *formulating good hypotheses* and *interpreting the results* in as accurate a way as possible are two main processes necessary for a successful scientific approach. Like other scientists, social psychologists generate hypotheses and systematically test these by making observations in a variety of ways. Psychologists observe social interactions in many different contexts, including both laboratories and real-life social settings such as malls, street corners, political rallies, parties, and so on. You may have even been an unwitting subject in one of those types of studies!

Overall, there are two major types of research in psychology: experimental and correlational. As noted above, the *experimental* approach seeks to explore cause-and-effect relationships between variables by manipulating one or more variables to see what effect that has on another variable or set of variables. The following are examples of the experimental approach.

- **Laboratory experimentation.** You will likely recall from your earlier studies that lab experiments most often involve the manipulation of some (independent) variable(s) to assess its/their effect(s) on another (dependent) variable or set of variables. When social psychologists study helping behavior using this experimental method, they might vary the difficulty of the specific task of helping or the time constraints involved (independent variables) in order to assess how these factors affect the likelihood that the subjects will help (dependent variable).
- **Field experiments.** In these types of studies, social psychologists conduct experiments in natural settings. As with lab experimentation, the researcher will manipulate some independent variables to

see how they affect helping, but this time the experiment takes place in a natural setting such as at a mall or school yard instead of in a lab. This type of experiment might involve, for example, the researcher varying the gender or age of the "person in need" to see how these factors affect the likelihood of helping.

In addition to the experimental approach, the second main type of research in psychology is *correlational.* These types of studies explore how variables co-vary without implying anything about cause and effect. Remember that "correlation does not imply causation"—in other words, two variables could co-vary strongly without one necessarily "causing" the other. Consider, for example, the relationship between gender and helping. A number of researchers (e.g., Huston, Ruggiero, Conner & Geis, 1981) have found that on helping tasks that require great physical strength and the potential of danger to the self, males are generally more likely to offer help. In this case there is a positive correlation between gender and helping with tasks that require great physical strength: as the strength required increases, the chances that the helper will be male increase as well. This does not mean that gender itself actually "causes" helping; the positive relationship simply means that males are more likely to help if the task requires more physical strength (perhaps because of a third variable, i.e., males tend to be taller and stronger than females). Now consider the following examples of studies where the correlational approach may be used:

- **Naturalistic observations.** In these types of studies, social psychologists attempt to observe how human social interaction takes place without any direct experimental intervention. For example, if studying helping behavior this way, a social psychologist might simply stand on a corner of a major intersection or in an airport lobby and look for how people respond to anyone who might genuinely be in need for any reason. Here the experimenter may try to see how the gender of the person in need correlates with the chances of receiving help.
- **Surveys.** Surveys ask direct questions of persons, often about their own behaviors, attitudes or opinions. They are most often used in correlational research. For example, subjects might be asked what

sort of person (older vs. younger, male vs. female, etc.) they think they would be most likely to help. The experimenter may then correlate age and gender of the respondents with the type of person they think they would be most likely to help. They would be able to assess, for example, whether gender is related to the likelihood of helping older vs. younger people or whether no significant relationship exists among the variables.

Another important way in which psychologists study social behavior and cognitions is through the use of *content analysis*. This approach is often used when researchers are looking for themes or specific types of content in written text, verbal interactions or media images. There are different ways in which content analysis can be performed. It involves many steps, often including coding the content and quantifying the data for analysis. For example, suppose researchers were interested in exploring the incidence of sexual images in persuasive television ads. First the researchers would identify what qualifies as a sexual image (e.g., scanty clothing, suggestive language or looks, etc.). The researchers would then decide on a representative sample of television ads to watch. Then they would observe the number of times such images were used in the ads, coding each incidence. These data could then be analyzed to look for trends (e.g., overall prevalence of sexual images, time of day in which sexual images are most prevalent, etc.). Many applications of content analysis are possible. Consider, for example, how researchers could analyze political speeches for specific persuasive tactics, investigate racist content in magazine ads, look for indications of marital contentment in conversations between spouses, and so on.

Table 1.1. Empirical Approaches Most Often Used by Social Psychologists

Experimental	Correlational
1. Lab experiments: manipulate variables in a controlled setting.	**1. Naturalistic observations:** observe social behavior in real-life settings without manipulating variables.
2. Field experiments: manipulate variables in a more natural setting	**2. Surveys:** ask direct questions to look for relationships among variables.

Remember that all of the above-noted ways of studying social behavior use an empirical approach, which is considered to be one of the

hallmarks of any scientific endeavor. Asking good questions (hypotheses) and interpreting the results in the most accurate way possible are two key components of a successful empirical approach.

What Are Some Common Findings in Social Psychology?

Now that you have reviewed the major types of empirical research used in social psychology, we can look at what that research has found. As of the writing of this text, the field of social psychology has been studying human social interaction for over seventy-five years. The data obtained from these studies have provided very useful information regarding general tendencies in social behavior. And, as noted earlier, many of these findings have been applied to various real-life settings. You will see as you read through this text that, especially when the results are considered collectively, there are several very interesting patterns that emerge. Listed here are two of these patterns, which are found quite consistently in research in the U.S. and across several other cultures. Note that these are especially relevant to the discussions in this text and will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

People often tend to act in a self-serving manner (e.g., Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Miller & Ross, 1975). These findings suggest that humans most often seek to maximize their own personal advantage in their interactions with others.

Humans appear to have an intrinsically relational (social) nature (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Cox, 2007). These findings suggest that humans have what is called a "fundamental" need to belong, which means that social connectedness is an essential part of our very being.

Is There a Positive or Negative Focus in Social Psychology Research?

In addition to these two patterns of findings, another interesting pattern can be seen in the focus of much social psychology research. If you consider the sorts of questions that social psychologists have most commonly asked, their emphasis has generally been about how things go *wrong* in human social behavior. This emphasis on asking questions

about problems in social interaction began after the horrors of the Holocaust during World War II, after which social psychology began its main thrust in research. During the 1940s, '50s and '60s, social psychologists studied a number of important questions regarding the potentially destructive effects of social interaction. Many of these studies looked at how obedience, social perception and conformity can lead to devastating consequences and also at how we commonly misperceive one another. Following are just a few of the questions asked by the earlier researchers:

- How does large-scale propaganda encourage hatred for the "enemy" (e.g., WWII propaganda) (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1992)?
- How does frustration lead to aggression (e.g., Miller et al., 1941)?
- How does an "authoritarian personality" encourage anti-Semitic prejudice (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Sanford, 1950)?
- How can people be persuaded to form a quick, false impression of another based on limited information (e.g., Kelley, 1950)?
- How are individuals compelled to follow group norms despite personal convictions or perceptions (e.g., Asch, 1951)?
- How do authority figures convince others to obey their orders to perform aggressive acts on another (e.g., Milgram, 1963)?

Thus, as noted in the *APA Monitor Online* (1999), "the period after World War II was one of searching for problems for social psychologists." This approach made sense in light of the devastating effects of World War II and the subsequent Korean and Vietnam Wars, as well as the difficult conflict that surrounded race issues in the U.S. One could argue that the types of questions that were asked reflected the historical context and also seemed to focus on and presume a primarily negative perspective of human social relations. The image of humans that emerges from this kind of research, whether or not intended, is one of a quite vulnerable being, most often inclined toward errors in perception and almost inevitably manipulated by the social situation. These characteristics make sense in light of how the historical context prompted the questions that were most often asked. From that perspective, the results seem accurate and they help us to better understand the atrocities of the wars and the racial conflict.

Has the focus of research questions in social psychology continued to emphasize what goes wrong as opposed to what also goes right in our dealings with one another? And have you begun to wonder whether reading this textbook is likely to make you depressed about the human condition? As you will see, the relatively negative view of human social interaction still lingers in the field. Nevertheless, recent efforts have begun to look more closely at the human potential for positive social interaction, including exploring compassion, forgiveness and accuracy in social perception.

The emerging field of *positive psychology,* which focuses on exploring human strengths and virtues and increasing subjective, community and institutional well-being, is having an impact on the traditionally negative view of humans that social psychology presented (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Gable & Haidt, 2005). As noted by Seligman, Parks and Steen (2004), positive psychology aims to be a "balanced field that integrates research on positive states and traits with research on suffering and pathology . . . a psychology that concerns itself with repairing weakness as well as nurturing strengths, . . . and a psychology that concerns itself with reducing that which diminishes life as well as building that which makes life worth living" (p. 1380). Gable and Haidt (2005) likewise call for "an understanding of flourishing to complement our understanding of despair" (p. 103).

The positive psychology movement has important implications for research in social psychology. For example, researchers are now exploring more positive aspects of social behavior, such as the positive role of group behavior and the possible empathy-related factors in helping behavior.

Despite the impact of the positive psychology movement, the negative bias in social psychology still prevails. For example, citing the *Psychological Abstracts* from the end of the nineteenth century to the year 2000, Bierhoff (2002) notes that compared with the study of prosocial behavior (e.g., helping, altruism, etc.), social scientists have concentrated much more on the study of antisocial behavior (e.g., aggression, discrimination, etc.). In fact, he notes as one example that the topic of aggression was ten times more likely to be studied than was prosocial behavior, no matter which year is considered within that time span.

Examples of this negative bias in social psychology will be seen

throughout much of the research reviewed in this text. Using helping behavior as an example, you will see that while at first glance the topic of helping behavior seems optimistic enough, you will not get very far in that chapter before you realize that the findings are not very encouraging. In fact, the whole area of helping research in social psychology first began as the result of the highly publicized crime in which neighbors allegedly did not intervene when they heard Kitty Genovese's cries for help while she was being stabbed to death outside of her New York City apartment. As you will read in chapter nine, the validity of this claim that the neighbors were apathetic has been questioned by later researchers (Manning, Levine & Collins, 2007). Nevertheless, the presumed apathy of the neighbors prompted researchers Latané and Darley (1970) to begin the study of helping by asking why people do *not* help. Since that initial study, much of the focus in the helping research has been on impediments to helping such as time constraints (Darely & Batson, 1973), dissimilarity between the helper and the one needing help (Schroeder, Penner, Dovidio & Piliavin, 1995; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce & Neuberg, 1997), and so forth.

With relatively few exceptions, social psychologists have not traditionally focused their research efforts on the many commonplace instances in which people *do* help. Nor have they generally focused on instances when people have made greatly self-sacrificing efforts to help, as in the case of those who risked their own lives to help the Jews during World War II. In fact, the notion that humans are even capable of other-centered helping is not widely supported by researchers. Note that if a scientist starts from the bias of uncovering impediments to helping, then questions about what prompts both everyday helping as well as grand heroic incidents of helping might be seen as either uninteresting, inconsequential or the exception.

Why brothers aren't allowed to perform surgery together.

Source: http://www.webdonuts.com/2012/04/brothers/

Figure 1.2.

The above discussion does

not mean to suggest, of course, that social psychologists always neglect to study what goes right in social interactions. In fact, in the past decade, there has been a significant increase in studying more constructive, prosocial interactions, as you will see. Still, one common assumption that underlies much of the research on social behavior is that humans are essentially self-centered beings who pursue positive social interaction with self-serving goals (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Thus, it is not yet clear whether the *primary* focus of the field will continue to be problems in social functioning and interpreting the social processes that "look good" (e.g., altruism) as ultimately self-serving.

This is all very interesting, you may say, but how does the seemingly negative focus of social psychology's hypotheses affect our ability to get an accurate picture of human social interaction? After all, maybe the things that go wrong in our interactions with others just make for more interesting research than do those things that go right. In addition, social psychologists have accurately demonstrated and helped us understand many things that we can all observe go wrong in our everyday social interactions. So, in that way, the relatively negative image of human social interaction that results from these research questions may indeed be well-founded. And many of the things observed by social psychologists are readily evident in everyday life. For example, you have probably observed that attitudes of racism and prejudice are often prevalent and seem quite difficult to eradicate. You may have also observed that we tend to form first impressions quite quickly based on little information about the person. And those first impressions can often be wrong, yet we are often resistant to change them, even in the face of contrary evidence. And when others confront us with the errors of our thinking, is the usual tendency for us to embrace the other and thank them profusely for correcting our ways, or do we tend to get defensive about what we believe is true, even when presented with evidence to the contrary? Furthermore, haven't we all witnessed and indeed ourselves emphasized self-interest in at least *some* of our dealings with others?

The following chapters certainly provide a very sobering look at what can indeed go wrong in our interactions. In fact, in chapter after chapter, you will see that the view of humans that emerges is often a rather de-

pressing one. If you had to summarize what social psychology findings currently tell us about humans in a single sentence, you could say something like the following: "Mostly self-seeking creatures who simultaneously crave social connections, humans generally overestimate the accuracy of their many error-filled social perceptions, even in the face of contrary evidence." Not a very promising picture, is it? Still, it certainly seems true enough, at least on the surface.

Suppose all those things noted above are true of us to a degree. But what if this negatively toned focus leads to an incomplete picture of humans and our social interactions? Let's return to this question in the next chapter when we can explore in more depth what a Christian view of persons could contribute to our understanding of human social interaction.

What Are Some Advantages and Disadvantages of the Empirical Approach?

Since social psychology research employs the empirical approach, understanding the benefits and potential drawbacks of such an approach can be helpful when interpreting research findings. The rigor of the empirical approach offers numerous benefits toward our understanding of human social interaction. First, it requires testable hypotheses, which help to guard against unfounded "hunches" that are often inaccurate. Second, it allows for the systematic collection of empirical support for or against any particular theory or hypothesis, facilitating explanations and predictions of social behavior. So, for example, research in the two areas of social perception and groups can be compared with relevant research findings in the area of helping to explore how social perception strategies along with group behavior influence the likelihood of helping. New research findings can help inspire later hypotheses and ultimately theories. In short, the systematic nature of the empirical approach offers us a way to gather pieces of evidence that build on each other and help to form increasingly well-developed and accurate ideas regarding human social interaction.

The findings of social psychology have certainly increased our understanding of human social interaction. Yet there are understandably some limitations to the empirical approach of social psychology, just as there are limitations to *all* efforts to investigate any phenomenon.

One potential limitation of the empirical approach is what Molden and Dweck (2006) refer to as "generalized principles of thought and action," which are the focus of social science research. Despite the benefits of this approach, the results actually describe only the "average person," and thus tell us nothing about any particular individual or how they are likely to respond in a given social setting. Suppose, for example, that you read a very compelling study that found a significant tendency for the subjects to be more aggressive after they were provoked by the experimenter. As tempting as it might be, you could not then assume that you—or any specific individuals you know, for that matter—are more likely to be aggressive if provoked. This is true even if numerous studies replicated the results of that first study; you just can't tell how any one individual will act based on the average actions of the respondents in the study.

Another limitation of the scientific approach is noted by Myers (2005) and relates to a broader issue. Psychology, like all the other sciences, cannot tell us about the meaning and purpose of human life or the ultimate goals or moral ideals toward which we should be striving as we live in community. For example, social psychologists (e.g., Dovidio, Eller & Hewstone, 2011) have been able to describe the conditions in which individuals who make conscious efforts to interact with racially diverse others express less racist ideologies than do those who live more segregated existences. Suppose that social psychologists may also observe that less racist attitudes are associated with less violence and discriminatory behavior among the races. They may also be able to demonstrate that those who are racist and carry out discriminatory acts also report on questionnaires that they are not as happy as those who are not racist. Thus, all things being equal, the outcomes are better for everyone if they live in a racially integrated society that makes deliberate attempts at racial reconciliation.

But apart from the better practical outcomes (e.g., peaceful coexistence, more pleasant interactions, greater levels of self-reported happiness, etc.), on what other basis could science then tell us that to love people of all races is itself the "right" or "virtuous" aim? Science could help us to reach those goals once they have been deemed beneficial, but it has no basis for determining those ultimate goals in the first place.

That is generally the purview of religious, philosophical or other moral traditions and standards.

Let's say we agree that despite all that science can tell us, it cannot tell us about the ultimate meaning or goals of human social interaction and that that is indeed not the task of science. Then consider the following questions: If discovering the ultimate purposes of human social interaction is not the task of science, does that necessarily mean that these ultimate aims are not relevant when interpreting the results of the scientific findings? Furthermore, does this necessarily mean that these ideas about ultimate purposes are not relevant to the formulating of the scientist's questions (i.e., hypotheses)? Recall that generating good hypotheses and explaining research findings in the most accurate way possible are both considered to be integral components of the scientific process. Let's see what social psychologists say about this.

How Do Social Psychologists Interpret Their Findings? *A Look at Evolutionary Psychology*

Like other scientists, social psychologists use theories and other related assumptions and observations when interpreting the data obtained through the empirical method. Remember that theories provide organizing frameworks to make sense of the data. Historically, social psychologists have not usually developed metatheories (large unifying theories) to explain social behavior broadly. In fact, Schaller, Simpson and Kenrick (2006) note that one of the main criticisms of social psychology is that it has traditionally consisted of a "long list of interesting, but unrelated, phenomena" (p. 8).

Nevertheless, social psychology has developed alongside several major movements within the field that influenced the thinking of many social psychologists. One of these movements is *behaviorism,* which emphasizes learning principles such as rewards and punishment. Another orientation is the *cognitive approach,* which emphasizes how people think about the social world and their social interactions. The cognitive approach is still often used in social psychology to explore many social phenomena such as how mental shortcuts affect our social perception, how people develop attitudes, and so on.

It is important to note that regardless of the diversity of perspectives in psychology, naturalism has been a common underlying assumption in the majority of research. Working primarily within this framework of naturalism, social psychologists over the last two decades have continued to look for ways to unify the field of psychology so that the diverse findings may be more coherent. One of the most prominent proposals for a metaexplanation of social psychology research findings has been that of *evolutionary psychology* ("EP"; e.g., Barkow, Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Buss, 1995, 2000, 2005). Tooby, Cosmides and Barrett (2005) emphasize the importance of evolutionary theory to the field of psychology by stating that "studying psychology and neuroscience without the analytical tools of evolutionary theory is like attempting to do physics without mathematics" (p. 18). Though evolutionary psychology is certainly the most prevalent metatheory in the field, it is yet unclear whether it can help unify psychology (Confer et al., 2010; Derksen, 2005).

The EP perspective assumes that humans are the products of the evolutionary process proposed by Charles Darwin (1859, 1871). As believed to be the case with all other species, this process originated through randomness and chance, and natural selection determined which features of human behavior, cognition and emotion survived. As espoused by most evolutionary psychologists, humans are thus seen as the products of a natural process whose origin is chance. From this view, human behavior is best explained as the result of psychological mechanisms that exist because they were in some way advantageous for the survival of our primal ancestors.

EP as it has been presented in the psychological literature generally has naturalism as one of its major assumptions. Recall that naturalism refers to the idea that all of reality is the product of natural processes

and that the supernatural is either false, unknowable or not inherently different from natural phenomena or hypotheses (Kolak, 1997). From the vantage point of naturalist evolutionary psychology, ideas regarding human social interaction that emerge from religious traditions would be considered at best irrelevant.

If a researcher supports the evolutionary psychology perspective, does that also mean that he or she must necessarily endorse a naturalist worldview that there was no designer or intent in the origin of life or that all of reality consists solely of natural matter? Not at all! For example, the notion of *theistic evolution,* which is accepted by many Jewish, Muslim and Christian individuals, is based on the idea that God is the originator of life and that to varying degrees he designed the process of evolution to achieve his intents and purposes for all species. There are many scientists who espouse a specifically Christian theistic approach to evolutionary theory.

Buss (1999) notes that one important strength of the EP approach is that it explains all behavior in terms of both *ultimate* and *proximate* causes. *Ultimate* causes refer to those evolutionary factors such as natural selection and the environment of our primal ancestors that explain *why* some behavior exists or occurs. Thus, this is why any behavior or emotion (e.g., anger and aggression, etc.) that increased our primal ancestors' survival and reproductive advantage persists. *Proximate* causes refer to more recent factors such as genetics, behavioral reinforcement and developmental history that explain *how* we eventually develop and display specific behaviors. Ward and Siegert (2002), using the example of child sexual abuse, note that evolutionary psychology does not propose a rigid determinism. That is, the EP view does *not* support genetic determinism, nor does it propose that we are not able to change our actions. Liddle and Shackelford (2011) additionally note that just because EP seeks to study and explain many types of selfish behavior does not mean that it advocates such behaviors.

According to EP, the primary drive for individual survival and reproductive advantage are reflected in the tendency toward self-seeking behavior that would help ensure these goals. Liddle and Shackelford (2011) offer one example of this assumption when discussing motives for al-

truism toward related others. They explore why we often make great sacrifices to help some related others more than others by referring to the underlying assumption of kin selection. "The reason that the costs of altruism are offset when helping genetic kin is that the altruist is benefitting from someone with whom he or she shares genes. Thus, the beneficiary's reproductive success is a means by which the altruist can replicate his or her genes. But if the genetic kin cannot reproduce or is otherwise limited reproductively, the costs are not offset to the same degree, and one might thus expect altruistic behavior to decrease" (p. 129). The authors thus argue that research supports the assumption that lack of reproductive advantage is the main reason why humans are less likely to care for related others who are elderly or ill than we are for those who are healthy and fertile (Fitzgerald & Colarelli, 2009).

EP also maintains that differences in social behavior between individuals arise from the fact that humans learn from one another (Boyd & Richerson, 2005). A culture is one prominent place in which this learning occurs. Cultural groups can perpetuate certain beliefs, and this information accumulates over time. Thus, the sort of information that different cultures foster can lead to different beliefs and behaviors because others in the local environment have them.

Tooby and Cosmides (1992) note that EP sees culture as one of the most important aspects of human nature. The EP approach assumes that cultures evolved because during hominid evolution, our ancestors adopted new social arrangements that helped individuals. For example, all cultures use social exchange and cooperation (e.g., favors between friends, giving gifts, etc.) between two or more individuals for mutual benefit. Tooby and DeVore (1987) state that successful social exchange was critically important for hominid evolution. The early social arrangements also helped the group by maintaining group cohesion in the face of group competition.

As noted earlier, according to EP, generally speaking, whatever we see in our current social interactions is believed to be the result of behaviors that were beneficial for the survival of our ancestors. In other words, traits, emotions, social behaviors, and so on are all adaptations that resulted from the process of natural selection and still linger. EP theorists also note, however, that many human adaptations that were helpful for

our ancestors' environment may not be adaptive in our current environment and may thus lead to destructive ends, including a compromise of our survival. For example, humans may be predisposed to eat fatty foods because this helped our ancestors survive during times when food was scarce. Currently, however, that way of eating often leads to obesity, heart disease and early death.

Tooby and Cosmides (2005) review another related and fundamental premise of EP, which is that the brain is a physical system that functions like a computer whose circuits are designed to generate behavior that is appropriate to your environmental circumstances. Different neural circuits are specialized for solving different adaptive problems. So, in the context of human social interaction, the various so-called *mental modules* in your brain are activated to respond to the specific demands of the social context in a way that is most beneficial for your survival and that of your biological descendants (Hagen, 2005). That is important because then your descendants would be able to pass on your shared genes to successive generations.

As a side note, Hardcastle and Stewart (2002) argue that the bias in neuroscience to consider brain functions as highly localized in specific areas of the brain is not well supported by actual brain research. So while it is true that certain parts of the brain are associated with specific functions, there is far more evidence that specific brain functions are integrated throughout the brain instead of being restricted to highly defined areas (Cabeza & Nyberg, 1997; Buller & Hardcastle, 2000). Regardless, many social psychologists who use the EP approach still refer to mental modules (or so-called psychological mechanisms) in their explanation of social behavior.

As noted by Cosmides and Tooby (1995), social psychologists with an EP view seek to understand the universal, evolved architecture that we all share by virtue of being humans. They further note that the genetic basis for the architecture of the human brain and resultant cognitive capacities are universal, creating what is called by some the *psychic unity of humankind.* This concept refers to how all members of the human species share the same basic, adaptive cognitive capacities and resultant general tendencies in social behavior.

The EP perspective holds that a consistent tendency in humans' social nature would be expected, though allowances would be made for cultural and situational variation in how those tendencies are expressed. For example, Fessler (2004) notes that the EP approach acknowledges that universal human characteristics, such as emotions, may all be the same but be expressed differently in different societies. Hence the fair amount of consistency seen in human social behavior when one looks at the collective findings of the social psychology research would be of no surprise from the evolutionary standpoint. It should be noted, however, that though this consistency in human inclinations would make sense given that we are all part of the same species, there is still disagreement among some evolutionary psychologists regarding whether a consistent human nature even exists (Caporael, 2001).

Among EP theorists, this perspective is presumed relevant to our responses in different social situations (e.g., whether we perceive another as friend or foe, whether or not we help, to what degree we conform to a particular group's demands, whether we obey another or are persuaded by another, etc.). For each of these social situations, an evolutionary psychologist might argue that our responses depend on our brain's capacity to activate the correct mental module that evolved to address that specific kind of social situation, to assess the survival benefit of the range of possible responses, and to then respond accordingly. Indeed, well-known evolutionary psychologist David Buss (1995) has noted that many of the issues related to our ancestors' survival and reproductive capacity are social in their very nature because they entailed interactions among people. Likewise, Brewer and Caporael (1990) argue that many of the behaviors we see in the social world (such as cooperation, loyalty, fear of social exclusion, etc.) have as their origin the idea of the cooperative group, which may have been the primary survival strategy of our ancestors.

Incidentally, it is important to note that evolutionary psychologists do not generally make the claim that current social behavior is primarily the result of *present* concerns for survival. For example, a researcher with the EP approach would not necessarily suggest that you joined that sorority or fraternity so that you would not be killed on Saturday night;

or that you joined that basketball team just so you could avoid the possible dangers that would occur in your life if you didn't join the team. Instead, the focus is on discovering ways in which current social behaviors reflect psychological mechanisms that evolved so that our ancestors could enhance their chances of survival. So, going to the movies with your friends this weekend might emanate from a strategy of group bonding that our ancestors found helpful for survival. Despite this distinction between ultimate and proximal causes, EP still emphasizes explanations of the origins of social behaviors in terms of their adaptive value. This point will be further discussed in chapter two.

Remember the two overall general findings of social psychology research—namely, both our generally self-seeking behavior and our apparent need to relate to others? From the EP perspective, these general findings make sense because they would have been beneficial for our ancestors' survival. This is logical, isn't it? All things being equal, if you look out for your own best interests and that of your biological relatives, you and your family are less likely to be killed. In this way, not only do you survive, but you have a better chance of the continuation of your genetic line of successors. Similarly, with regard to our apparently intrinsic relational nature, it is difficult to survive if you are not a member of some group(s), because group membership greatly increases the likelihood that members will care for and protect each other. And who can deny that survival is indeed an important consideration for virtually everyone? Just consider all the great lengths that people go to in order to recover from medical illness.

As for the instinct to reproduce, don't most people become parents, and don't all cultures consider fertility an asset? The EP view has thus gained much ground as of late as an explanatory model for social psychology research findings as well as a major source of hypothesis generating.

Using the concise set of principles of the EP view, one can systematically explain a wide range of social behaviors. In an effort to identify this broad range of topics studied by evolutionary psychologists, Webster, Jonason and Orozco (2010) reviewed the publication trends of the prominent EP journal, *Evolution and Human Behavior* (and its predecessor, *Ethology and Sociobiology*) from 1979 to 2008. Their results indicated that

despite its diverse topics of study, evolutionary psychology has focused on a core group of topics such as human social and sexual behavior, (facial) attractiveness, kinship, and altruism. Additionally, the researchers noted that in the last decade, there seems to be a shift toward studying topics related to sex, sex differences, faces, attraction and morality.

Interestingly, several social psychologists have more recently suggested that some social interaction does not seem to be about survival as the end aim. Baumeister and Bushman (2007), for example, have stated that there is something fundamentally relational about people that is inherent in their cultural nature. Leary and Cox (2007) have similarly argued that our relational social behavior is of an importance that far surpasses the goal of survival and seems to aim for higher-level meaning. It is not made clear by these authors, however, how using a naturalist perspective as a starting point accounts for these observed desires for higher meaning. By contrast, as shall be seen in the following chapter, a Christian perspective of humans, whether or not based on evolutionary principles, can help account for this observed need for higher-level meaning and purpose. This is because a Christian view of persons as presented here is based on the presupposition that humans were created in God's image precisely for higher-order purpose—namely, to love God and to live in loving community with others.

How Does the Evolutionary Approach Generate Hypotheses?

Thus far you have seen some ways in which the EP view addresses one key component of the empirical method: the interpretation of the data. But how does this approach also generate testable hypotheses? Buss (1995) clarifies that evolutionary psychology has many different levels of theory and specific hypotheses/predictions. Buss argues that at one level is evolutionary theory itself, which is not directly testable and, he says, is "like a law and is assumed to be true" (p. 3). But then there are middle-level evolutionary theories that produce more specific and testable hypotheses. For example, Trivers (1971) first proposed the theory of *reciprocal altruism,* which attempts to explain why it is that people sometimes help others even when helping comes at great personal cost. Trivers

proposed that altruism evolved because the helper may be in a situation one day where he or she may need help. Thus that person would expect help from the one he or she helped before.

From the theory of reciprocal altruism has emerged the hypothesis that people will be more likely to cooperate and help each other out if they sense that the other is behaving likewise. But if the person detects that the other is cheating, then cooperation and altruism will decrease. This has been tested using the prisoner's dilemma studies (e.g., Pruitt, 1967), which will be described in chapter nine in regard to helping behavior.

Other specific hypotheses from the evolutionary psychology approach involve the nature of the psychological mechanisms that drive human behavior. For example, Buss (1995) considers the common finding that men on average do much better than do women on tasks of spatial abilities that involve mental rotation and map reading. Silverman and Eals (1992) argued that these are the particular forms of spatial ability that would have facilitated skill at hunting, which our primal ancestral males focused on. Females, by contrast, focused on gathering. Based on this assumption, Silverman and Eals proposed that women would excel more at certain types of spatial tasks that would have been very beneficial for gathering, such as object memory and location memory. Other testable hypotheses include how humans make cost-benefit analyses in different situations involving romantic relationships (Sedikides, Oliver & Campbell, 1994).

What of the Naturalist View of Humans?

Any major theory or viewpoint in psychology assumes certain things to be true of the human condition. As previously noted, and as will be further discussed in the following chapter, the EP view of humans can be in some ways quite consistent with a Christian view of personhood. Remember that supporting an evolutionary view of humans does not necessitate endorsing a naturalist worldview. Nevertheless, the EP view presented in most of social psychology research is generally based on a naturalist view of reality. In this section, we will look at what sort of view of humans logically emerges from a naturalistic worldview.

A naturalist view of humans generally sees people as concerned ulti-

mately with self-interests. A naturalist approach does not have any real basis for a sense of purpose or meaning to human life as distinct from other animals. This is vaguely reminiscent of Freud's (1929) comment that he could not understand why people kept asking about the meaning of human life and not asking the same question about the meaning of a dog's life. Thus, from this view, even though it is true that humans may have certain abilities (e.g., the capacity for language, abstract thinking and meaningful relationships) that distinguish us from other species, with regard to our significance, we are not otherwise in any logical or significant sense different from our fellow lions, for example. This is especially true of an evolutionary approach that assumes *only* random evolutionary processes and all species sharing the same ultimate goal of survival and reproductive advantage. Stewart-Williams (2011), for example, noted: "There is no reason to think that there is a teleological answer to the question of why we are here; there is only a historical one" (i.e., evolution).

Table 1.2 reviews some of the main assumptions of a naturalist view of personhood as discussed above. Consider some potential negative and positive implications of each of these assumptions. How is each relevant to human social interaction? Remember that supporting an evolutionary view of humans does not necessitate a naturalist worldview.

Table 1.2. Naturalist Assumptions of Personhood

Social Phenomena	Explanation
Origin of human life	Randomness and chance events precipitated human life.
Self-seeking tendencies	Originate from the primary drive for survival and reproductive advantage; we relate to others in a primarily self-seeking way; even seemingly other-centered actions are generally considered ultimately self-centered.
Intrinsic relational nature	The drive to relate to others leads to many advantages (e.g., increased subjective well-being, social prestige, increased chances of survival, etc.). Our relational nature is thus ultimately only an inherent part of our nature because it is instrumental toward the achievement of other goals.
Value, dignity of persons	No specific basis for this apart from cultural, religious, and other moral traditions.
Ultimate goals (teleology) of social interactions	Survival and reproduction; other self-seeking and group-seeking motives (e.g., self-fulfillment, social advantage, etc.)

"So what's the big deal?" you may ask. "What if humans are just the result of natural processes and we have no real ultimate purpose beyond survival?" In fact, it may just be an illusion for us to go about life thinking that we have some special dignity or worth. You may furthermore argue that it is easier to understand social relations as the result of such random natural processes where survival is the ultimate purpose, because at least that theory is succinct and clear. Nevertheless, the lack of any consistent basis for the dignity and worth of humans has a number of important implications for the application of social psychology research.

From a naturalist view, there is also no ultimate ethical perspective for how humans should treat one another in social interactions. After all, if humans are ultimately just animals with special advanced thinking and language capabilities, on what foundation (apart from survival of the species) would a naturalist approach logically distinguish or advocate one way of social conduct from another? This idea that moral values regarding our interactions with each other and the world at large are not based on any transcendent moral standards was further suggested by Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson (1975). He once proposed that the time may be right for "ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and be biologicized" (p. 562).

As noted earlier in this chapter, the scientific method of social psychology does not have any consistent source for making ethical claims because it intends to be a *descriptive* approach instead of a *prescriptive* approach. A naturalist view may be able to describe to some extent what happens in social interactions, but it cannot really prescribe what *should* happen in social interactions among humans unless the data point to specific behaviors and attitudes that may result either in destructive ends—in other words, any compromise of our potential for survival—or in a positive end such as increased subjective well-being. This is a limitation of science that is commonly acknowledged and thought to be perfectly consistent with the definition and proper goals of science.

Despite this limitation, it is probably safe to assume that at least the overwhelming majority of social psychologists would agree with certain ethical concepts such as the notion that racism, hostile aggression and the unwillingness to help when we are able are wrong. In fact, social psy-

chologists also routinely conclude from their findings how the data can be relevant to solving such problems in the broader social context. Consider the example of prejudice and racism. Numerous social psychologists have focused their research efforts on investigating factors related to the propensity for prejudice and ways to ameliorate this negative social phenomenon (e.g., Anderson, 2010; Brewer, 1999; Dovidio, Glick & Rudman, 2005). Whenever social scientists explore how the findings of empirical research can be applied to real-life circumstances, they must move from a more pure scientific endeavor to one that necessarily entails value judgments and interpretations that are not inherent to the data.

So Far . . .

This chapter has reviewed the goals of social psychology as a field of study. In addition, there has been a review of the empirical approach, along with its strengths and drawbacks. The prevailing naturalist premise in the field was also described, along with its implications, especially for a view of personhood. Evolutionary psychology—which often, but not necessarily, proposes a naturalist assumption about reality—was also discussed. After reading this chapter, hopefully you have a more thorough understanding of how a scientist's view of reality has significant implications for the sorts of questions researchers ask as well as the sorts of interpretations of the findings that are considered.

As you read through the text, it is important to keep in mind that the processes of both forming hypotheses and interpreting data may be greatly influenced by particular biases of the researcher. Even though researchers are trying to be as objective as possible, they must interpret and organize the scientific findings. At that level of analysis, it is impossible to refrain from at least some measure of personal bias despite one's best efforts to remain objective. For that reason, it is essential that researchers understand their own underlying assumptions about the human condition and what those assumptions imply for the research process. Hopefully as you read this text, you will become more attuned to your own worldview and assumptions about personhood and better grasp the implications of these for your understanding of social psychology research questions and findings.

The next chapter will explore a possible alternative to a naturalist view of human social interaction. Specifically, a Christian view of personhood is presented in which humans are seen as beings who were created for good, are fallen, but are still capable of being redeemed. As you will see throughout this text, some assumptions and interpretations of social behavior may be shared by both a Christian approach and a naturalistic approach. At other times, some fundamental differences exist. Now let us join together to explore where these different assumptions lead us as we try to understand the complex nature of human social interaction.

Questions to Consider

1. On what basis could a naturalist view of persons inspire hope for more positive human social interaction? When might a naturalist view lead to more distressing views of the potential in human interactions?
2. How self-seeking do you think humans are? On what do you base your opinion?
3. If you were a researcher who held an explicitly Christian theist evolutionary perspective, would your assumptions regarding possible motives for social behavior differ in any way from those of an EP approach that holds naturalist premises? If so, how?

Key Terms

behaviorism
cognitive approach
content analysis
correlational approach
empiricism
evolutionary psychology
experimental approach
field experiments
hypothesis
lab experimentation
naturalism

naturalistic observations
positive psychology
proximate cause
psychic unity of humankind
social psychology
social role theory
surveys
theistic evolution
theories
ultimate cause