# A Brief Overview of Social and Organizational Psychology

Social and organizational understandings of human behavior have come to be important in psychology more recently than other (arguably more individually focused) areas of study such as human cognition, emotion, psychobiology, and development. Early thoughts leading to the formation of this subfield included Durkheim's pioneering work in sociology, Weber's analyses of social order and processes, and Spencer's extension of Darwinism to explain the survival of the "fittest" social institutions. Shortly before 1910, a split between sociology and social psychology occurred as a result of differing methodological values and content foci. Sociologists, like Ross, emphasized the importance of class, social institutions, and history in understanding humanity, while social psychologists, like McDougall, called for empirical observations meant to illuminate the supposed universal theories of social behavior. Leading up to (and during) World War II, Kurt Lewin made a tremendous impact on the field with his introduction of constructs like action research and group dynamics. Lewin's Field Theory was particularly important, as it called for an examination of behavior as impacted by various environmental forces, or vectors. Like Lewin, many social psychologists focused their efforts in the service of the war, studying morale of troops and psychological warfare, among other relevant topics. After the war, interests in leadership, public opinion, and peace emerged in social psychology. More recently, social processes and individual-group interactions have been the units of analysis as opposed to social content (i.e. isolated behaviors of individuals vs. groups) (Hilgard, 1987, pp. 572-615).

Three recent presentations related to the field of social psychology highlight some of the current trends in this area. The first, given by Jacquelyn Campbell of Johns Hopkins University, concerns assessing women's risks for intimate partner violence (2003). In this lecture, Campbell

began by addressing the seriousness of femicide: it is the number one cause of death in African American women between the ages of 15-34, and the 7th leading cause of premature death for women in the U.S. Since 40-50% of these murders are committed by intimate partners or ex-partners, prevention of intimate partner femicide is a critical social issue.

Campbell's work has focused on establishing the risk factors for intimate partner (IP) femicide and preventing IP femicide. Her latest project has involved a team of 16 researchers in eleven different U.S. cities. Less than 10% of the women contacted refused to be interviewed for this study, and the final N was 720. (Two hundred thirty of these cases were women who had been killed by an IP, 143 were attempted femicide cases, and 356 served as the control group (these women had been abused but there was no history of attempted murder). The women who were still living completed telephone surveys, while proxy informants like a sister were interviewed for those women who had been killed. Comparing the results of attempted and actual femicide cases with control cases, Campbell found some significant predictors of femicide or attempted femicide, including the male partner's unemployment, highly controlling behavior, and status of estrangement from the relationship. The single greatest predictor of femicide, however, was the perpetrator's ownership of a gun or other weapon. In regards to 74% of the femicides, 53% of the attempted femicides, 26% of the abused controls, and only 13% of those in an additional non-abused control group, the male partner owned a gun or other weapon. Campbell's next goals include implementation of these results in the creation of screening instruments for women's shelters and medical centers. Women rating as at-risk for femicide could then be counseled about their risks and assisted in seeking shelter or other support. Campbell's work, then, not only draws on social constructs such as domestic violence; her work is also applicable to the prevention of this social problem.

A second presentation at the University of Michigan also involved women and domestic violence, although this lecture, given by visiting professor Bina Agarwal focused on the protective nature of women's property status in India (2003). Women's economic status, explained Agarwal, has long been a variable of consideration in assessing risk for domestic violence. However, most studies have focused on the employment status of the woman. She calls on researchers to also consider property ownership as a deterrent to violence.

Agarwal's study was conducted in Karela, India, a state chosen because of its matrilineal patterns of inheritance (35% of the women she surveyed owned at least land or a home). Additionally, women in Karela can marry men from within their villages, so social support of their family and friend networks is available to these women throughout much of their lives. Still, due to the sensitive nature of her survey, Agarwal addressed local community leaders before approaching individual families with questionnaires.

Agarwal's results strongly supported her hypothesis: less than 18% of those women owning property had been victims of physical abuse, while 49% of women with no property ownership had been abused. The statistics were even stronger for those women who owned a house—less than 10% of these women had been abused by their husbands. Perhaps even more striking are the results showing that 19% of propertyless women facing long-term domestic violence had left their partners, and 68% of these women had eventually returned to the relationship. On the other hand, for the few women owning property who were physically abused, 75% of them left the relationship, and only 25% of these women had returned. Regression analyses confirmed that household income, employment of the husband, and social support were also associated with less physical violence. But the strongest association was between property status and incidence of abuse. In closing, Agarwal proposed that more studies

explore the link between property status and violence risk. She also suggested that perhaps the greatest gift a parent could give a daughter about to be married would be a studio apartment—a place that would always be hers, to use as she chose. (In discussion, Agarwal commented that such a gift would be a reasonable financial possibility for most middle-class families in India). Agarwal's work, like Campbell's, has obvious social applications.

A third presentation on social issues in psychology concerned how sexual minority harassment (SMH) impacts students at the University of Michigan. Perry Silverschanz (Silverschanz & Konik, 2003) presented results from her study that assessed both personal derogatory comments (directed at sexual minority students) and ambient harassment (non-targeted behaviors such as jokes). She surveyed both heterosexual and sexual minority students across the campus, and 41% of these students reported either witnessing or participating in SMH during the past year. Not surprisingly, sexual minority students reported experiencing more SMH, and most of the incidences were ambient as opposed to personal.

In an effort to draw attention to the potentially negative effects of such harassment, Silverschanz also asked all students about 12 different outcomes related to their personal well-being or academic achievement. She found that heterosexual students reported worse outcomes for 7 of these variables; in other words, heterosexual students exposed to SMH experienced more anxiety, greater school disengagement, and greater use of alcohol. Similarly, sexual minority students experiencing SMH reported worse outcomes on 8 of the 12 variables. And being "out" as a queer student was a protective factor; while these students did not report any more harassment than their "closeted" peers, they did exhibit better outcomes such as less anxiety and depression and greater feelings of safety.

In summary, Silverschanz' work shows that all students—heterosexual and sexual minority alike—may experience SMH, and that worse outcomes are associated with exposure to harassment regardless of the student's sexual orientation. While this data was cross-sectional and limited to the self-reports of a self-selected subject pool, Silverschanz' compelling results do suggest that more research in this area would be a worthwhile endeavor. And, like both of the other presentations described above, Silverschanz' work points to possible applications that could make the prevention of sexual minority harassement—and perhaps even efforts at promoting "outness"—a higher priority on college campuses.

Related to social psychology is the subfield of industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology. This school of thought traces its origins to the work of "efficiency engineers" such as Frederick Taylor, who helped businesses in the 1800s to increase their profits. Personnel management has also been an important focus in this subfield. In World War I, for example, psychologists used models of army proficiency tests to consult with private sector clients about hiring and training employees. Soon after this consulting began, the Psychological Corporation was founded as a referral service for psychologists administering tests developed by the Psych. Corp. Other important contributors to I/O psychology have been Hawthorne and Mayo, whose work was influential in illustrating how employee human relations impact business success, and Lewin, whose group dynamics thinking emphasized a more participatory style of management that incorporated workers' input in decisions. Lewin's Research Center for Group Dynamics still resides at the University of Michigan (Hilgard, 1987, pp. 700-730).

Just as I/O psychology is related to social psychology in its emphasis on group dynamics and social/institutional environments, both are related to other areas such as cognitive psychology and developmental psychology. Macrae and Bodenhausen's recent publication

(2000) is one example of that clearly combines social and cognitive theories. They review an extensive body of literature to illustrate how individuals activate internalized categorical representations of social phenomena when interacting with others, and that stereotyped representations are most readily evoked "when a perceiver lacks the motivation, time, or cognitive capacity to think deeply (and accurately) about others" (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000, p. 105). They further explain that such (unconscious) representations bring about automatic actions over which the actor may have little conscious awareness or control. This work might help to explain some of the sexual minority harassment reported by Silverschanz and Konik (2003). Evidence for conscious category inhibition, however, is also possible, state Macrae and Bodenhausen (2000). If social norms against stereotyping are presented to an individual, it is possible that the person will spontaneously suppress this categorical manner of thinking. More research is needed in this area, and Macrae and Bodenhausen conclude by calling upon different areas of psychology, including neuroscience, to help in the study of social cognition.

Other recent literature in I/O and social psychology demonstrates the integration of various schools of psychological thought. Brief and Weiss (2002), for example, considered the role of affective processes involved in workplace moods and job satisfaction. And Trianis and Suh (2002) wrote about the importance of cultural ecologies in shaping personality; use of the construct of ecology links their writing to biological psychology. While the research described in this paper in no way covers the breadth of social and I/O psychology, much of it touches on the values of interdisciplinary work in these subfields—from mental health/ well-being and sexual minority harassment to cognitive processes (automatic thoughts) and social bias (stereotyping).

References

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