
UNIT 4 CURRENT TRENDS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND ETHICAL ISSUES

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4.0 INTRODUCTION

From its very beginning mainstream social psychology adopted a cognitive orientation. The central concept of the discipline was attitude, recognised on early on in 1935 as indispensable for social psychology. While all social sciences use this concept, it is social psychology that clarified it, made it measureable and studied it in its own right. A second strand of concern developed under the powerful influence of Kurt Lewin: the study of small groups. Group dynamics investigated the influence of leadership styles on the productivity and cohesion of groups, identified communication patterns, compared individual judgments with group decisions and conformity. In this unit we will be dealing with the application of social psychology to different settings, and the ethical issues related to social psychology.

4.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- 1 Describe the growing influence on application of social psychology to different areas;
- 1 Analyse the growing influence of Cognitive Perspective;
- 1 Explain Multicultural Perspective;
- 1 Define and describe the relationship between Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology;and
- 1 Elucidate the ethical issues in social psychological research.

4.2 SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY APPLICATIONS

Social psychology as it is today with broadening its field by the research work on touching various aspects of life, viz. population psychology, health psychology, environmental psychology, legal system and psychology. It can be used to understand personal health problems as well problems our earth is facing. Social psychology has adopted multicultural perspective to understand behaviour with respect to the cultural and social context.

Dissonance and attribution theory have created the most voluminous body of experimental work. During the late 1960, it was pointed out that the mainstream social psychology had emphasised predominantly individual cognitive processes and had neglected the social context and that it had relied too exclusively on experiments in laboratory settings.

Modern Social psychology has notable features such as that it has broadened its repertoire of methods. It has become much more relevant to the understanding of everyday life with research works focused on its application in various areas. The social phenomena are explained with respect to different social and cultural settings.

The cognitive approach to the explanations which was more or less sidelined by experimental and behavioural approach is again gaining significance. New trends such as socio biology and evolutionary social psychology have broadened the realm of theoretical tools of social psychology.

Practical demands have always far surpassed the theoretical knowledge in social psychology. The 1970 and 1980 were marked by growing concerns with the application of social knowledge. “Applied social psychology is the utilisation of social psychological principles and research methods in real world settings in an effort to solve a variety of individual and societal problems” (Weyant 1986). In this section we will discuss various applications of social psychology.

4.2.1 Population Psychology

Population psychology concentrates on the effects of the rapid expansion of the number of humans on this planet and on efforts to control this expansion. How is it that the number of human beings has grown in this fashion? Sagan (1989) explains the mathematical phenomenon in terms of the ‘Secret of the Persian

Chessboard.” Legend has it that the grand vizier of Persia invented the game of chess played on a board divided into sixty-four squares. The king was pleased by this new game and he told the vizier to select whatever he wished as a reward. The clever inventor pretended to be a modest man who seemed to make only a small request. He asked the king to give him a few grains of wheat—just one grain on the first square of the board, doubling it to two grain on the second square, four grains on the third, and so on for all sixty four squares. The king thought that this was a small reward, and he was relieved that so little had been requested. What was not obvious to the king, or to most of us, is that by the time the doubling continued to the sixty fourth square, the reward would add up to 18.5 quintillion grains of wheat: about 75 billion metric tons— more than the contents of all the king’s granaries. This type of astonishing growth is called exponential increase.

In a similar way, when time passes arithmetically, population grows geometrically each year. The reason why exponential growth comes as a surprise is that we ordinarily think in arithmetic rather than geometric terms. Our thinking is not adapted to the percentage increments. Also, the passage of large segment of time is required for noticeable growth. Some observers argue that continued population growth is essential because it acts as an incentive, resulting in a rise in everyone’s standard of living. Since continued growth of population eats away the development, an attitudinal change is required.

Social psychology is important in changing attitude and enhancing sensitivity. “To bring about change, it is obviously important for psychologists to help increase the quality and quantity of sex education, to bring about changes and reduce situational constraints either to modify dispositional variables or to modify educational messages and contraceptive availability to take account of individual differences” (Baron and Byron, 1994: 546).

4.2.2 Health Psychology

Health psychology is the specialty that studies psychological processes affecting the development, prevention and treatment of physical illnesses. A major obstacle to the prevention of many physical disorders is the reluctance of people to believe that some aspect of their lifestyle requires changing; mainly because information about possible threats to health arouses fear and anxiety, the more relevant such messages are to oneself the less one believes them.

In a study Lieberman & Chaiken (1992) women were given bogus information about medical research that found a link between caffeine and a breast disorder. The threat was either high or low. Women for whom the threat was most relevant (regular coffee drinkers) were less likely to believe either the high threat or the low threat message than were women who did not drink coffee. The study showed that how personal relevance and self-interest interact in affecting people’s response to informational messages.

Psychologists have been studying the effects of stress since World War II. The questions of stress and illness, stress and coping and reduction of the harmful effects of stress have been investigated by psychologists. The most common source of stress are occupational threats, family threats, complaints from a spouse, pressure from a supervisor to work harder etc. One reason that physical illness is likely to occur during times of stress is that the resulting worry and anxiety may interfere with such health related behaviours as eating a balanced diet or exercising.

In addition to this indirect effect the body's immune system functions less well when stress is high. This finding of a direct link between psychological responses and the body's defense against disease has led to the development of the field of psychoneuro-immunology. This interdisciplinary approach studies stress, emotional and behavioural reactions, and the immune system simultaneously. Zimmerman (1990) suggests that the term 'learned helpfulness (as contrasted with learned helplessness) be applied to individuals who know how to solve problems and who feel a sense of control.

Several other personality variables have been studied which predict possibility to develop or not develop sickness, for example neurotic individuals react more negatively to stress than those who are not neurotic and are also more likely to become ill as a result.

Health is also affected by the kind of goals for which we strive.

People also differ in their characteristic feelings of pessimism and optimism. Those with a pessimistic outlook view events uncontrollable.

Type A behaviour pattern (competitiveness, anger, an urgency about time and a workaholic life style) as a personality variable is associated with aggression. Research indicates that people identified as Type A, compared to Type B, have higher blood pressure, produce smallest amounts of HDL-good cholesterol and are twice likely to suffer from heart disease.

It appears that the anger component is a critical factor that leads to coronary problems. Thus, working hard to achieve does not cause heart disease, but failure to achieve elicit a hostile self-schema for the Type A person. This hostility in turn is detrimental to good health.

A familiar concept in health psychology is the importance of social support-physical and psychological comfort from friends and family. The general finding is that people who interact closely with family and friends are better able to avoid illness than those who remain isolated from others, if illness does occur, those who receive social support recover more quickly. It is because there is someone with whom one can talk about unpleasant life events rather than engaging in self-concealment.

When an illness does strike, the person has to make a series of critical choices and decisions- noticing and interpreting symptoms, deciding to take action and coping with medical procedures. Thus, research in health psychology focuses on individual lifestyles and their perceptions and attitudes so that it can contribute for the better personal health just by enthusing right kind of thinking.

4.2.3 Environmental Psychology

Environmental psychology is the field that deals with interaction between physical world and human behaviour. Among the environmental factors affect behaviours are environmental stress, noise, temperature, air pollution, atmospheric electricity etc. The negative effects of human actions on environment include global warming and the ever-mounting problem of waste. Studies designed to control littering suggest that pro-environmental behaviour can be increased by the use of prompts, rewards and legalisations.

4.2.4 Industrial Organisational Psychology

It is an application of social psychology which focuses on understanding behaviours in work settings especially within the field of industries and organisations. Work related attitudes include employees' evaluation of jobs (job satisfaction) and of their organisations. Research has emphasised the determinants and the consequences of these attitudes.

Work motivation is influenced by cognitive factors, the outcomes of performance, and the perception of inequity.

A common problem in organisations is conflict, and psychologists have identified both organisational causes competition over scarce resources, and interpersonal causes such as stereotypes, prejudices, grudges and ineffective communication styles. Organisational conflicts can be reduced or resolved by such techniques as bargaining, super-ordinate goals and the induction of represses incompatible with anger and conflict.

4.2.5 Legal System and Social Psychology

Forensic psychology has produced ample evidence that the reality of our legal system often doesn't live up to its ideals. Witnesses and defendants are influenced by interrogation procedures and media publicity.

Eyewitness testimony is often inaccurate and the behaviours of attorneys and judges can influence verdict. Jurors respond in part on the basis of cognitive reinterpretation of the evidence and on emotional biases for and against specific defendants.

Psychologists working in this area contribute to the social order by their research human cognitive system and communication patterns.

Human cognitive system has limits and it is affected by various things. Legal procedures depend mostly on reports and evidences by eyewitness. But the fact about human memory can be revealing: its limited capacity, constructive processes all need to be paid attention to in court hearings.

Ever increasing demands of psychology in various field call for specialist help to work in these areas. As we earlier said practical demands far surpass theoretical work in social psychology. But in any ways, it is exporting its knowledge and importing various ideas from other sciences and practices.

Self Assessment Questions

- 1) Discuss the application of social psychology to different areas.

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2) How is social psychology applied to Population psychology?

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3) Discuss the application of social psychology to health fields.

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4) How will you apply social psychology to environmental and industrial / organisational fields?

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5) How is social psychology concerned with legal system?

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4.3 GROWING INFLUENCE OF COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

Cognitive factors— attitudes, beliefs, values, inferences, play a key role in social behaviour. Social psychologists have realised that our understanding of virtually all aspects of social behaviours could be greatly enhanced by attention to the cognitive processes that underlie them.

This approach involves efforts to many aspects of social thought and social behaviours, basic knowledge about such issue as (1) how memory operates, (2) What are human reasoning processes, and (3) how new information is integrated into existing mental formworks. Efforts have been made to understand the nature and impact of stereotypes in relation to certain aspects of memory (tendencies to recall only certain types of information) and aspects of social reasoning that can lead people to false conclusions about others. The results of research conducted within this perspective have been show that affect is an important determinant of many forms of social behaviors ranging from helping on the one hand, through aggression and conflict on the other. Researchers have also studied the relation between affect and cognition— how feelings shape thought and how thought shapes feelings.

4.4 MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Social psychology have always been accused of being American. It was pointed out that the predominance of experimental orientation in social psychology is deficient not due to the fact that experimentation is useless as a method but because of the fact that the possibility is lost on the level of experimental research to see the connection between the problem studied and the social context. Multicultural diversity was the need of the hour for social psychology to really be social. The questions were: can the findings of the studies (usually conducted in the U.S.) be generalised to other cultures? Are the principles of behaviours established in the U.S. universally applicable?

Many social psychologists now believe that cultural factors and forces are so powerful that they can influence even the most basic aspects of social behaviours. It is increasingly becoming clear that cultural difference are an important topic in their own right and should receive careful attention in social psychological research.

Why do persons from different cultures react in contrasting ways to various situations? The study of such issues may help clarify those aspects which are universal and those that are culturally determined.

4.5 SOCIOBIOLOGY AND EVOLUTIONARY SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Is social behaviour influenced by biological processes and by genetic factors? Many social psychologists today believe that our preferences, behaviours, emotional reactions and cognitive abilities are affected to some extent by our biological inheritance (Buss 1990, Nisbett 1990). Sociobiology a discipline that is based on the thought that many aspects of social behaviours are the result of evolutionary processes in which patterns of behaviours that contribute to reproduction are strengthened and spread throughout a population. Evolutionary social psychology suggests that social tendencies toward behaviours that are most adaptive from the point of view of survivals increase in strength over time within a given population. But it is also recognised that such tendencies change in response to environmental and social conditions. They can even be altered by cognitive processes. But some of the basic assumptions of sociobiology are questioned. Behaviours can be changed. Tendencies in social behaviours should exist because they are the result of a long evolutionary processor is also rejected.

Self Assessment Questions

- 1) Discuss the growing influence of cognitive perspective in social psychology.

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- 2) Explain social psychology from a multicultural perspective.

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- 3) Explain the various aspects of social psychology from a biological perspective.

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- 4) Explain the evolutionary perspective in social psychology.

4.6 SOME ETHICAL ISSUES IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Untill the mid 20th century few people worried about the ethics of research with human participants. After World War II, however, the discovery of Nazi atrocities such as the dangerous and often fatal medical experiments carried out by doctors in concentration camps on unwilling prisoners come to light.

Concerns were also raised by the discovery of unethical medical experimentation in the United States such as the notorious Tuskegee case In 1932 the U.S. public Health service began a 40- year study in Tuskgee Alabama on 399 poor and semiliterate African American men who had syphilis, a progressive disease that can lead to brain damage and death. The goal was to trace the effects of syphilis on untreated males over many years. The men were told that they were being treated but in fact they were never given medication even though penicillin was available and was effective against the disease. Even as late as sixties, treatment was still being withheld from the survivors while the study continued.

4.6.1 Deception

In the field of social psychology, ethical concerns have been focused on the use of deception by researchers. It might sound inherently contradictory for a discipline that calls itself science and yet use deception as a major research tool. Why is deception so prevalent? Most researchers agree that in many cases it is necessary to disguise key elements of a study in order to avoid having subject's behaviour influenced by what they think to be a true purpose of the study. Deception may appear in following forms: (Geller 1981)

Implicit deception occurs when the actual situation is so different from what the subjects expect that they behave under incorrect assumptions. In the most extreme cases subject do not even know that they are in an experiment when in reality they are.

Technical deception occurs when the equipment and procedures of an experiment are misrepresented. This occurs when subjects are given a cover story about the purpose of the experiment but the real purpose is in fact very different.

Role deception occurs when other people in a study are misrepresented. Another subject may actually be a confederate of the experiment or the experimenter may pose as a fellow student in a classroom.

Deception raises a number of ethical dilemmas. Should people be studied without their knowledge? Should the true purpose of experiments be revealed to subjects? Should research procedures place people under stress? Should researchers induce subjects to behave in way that they otherwise would be unlikely to do? These questions have led to efforts within many professional associations to define ethical behaviours in researches. The American Psychological Association (APA) first developed guidelines for the ethical conduct of psychological research in 1972 and revised these guidelines in 1992. Three important issues in psychological research are: informed consent, debriefing and minimal risk.

4.6.2 Informed Consent

A subject must voluntarily agree to participate in research without any coercion and must understand what the participation involves. This is known as informed consent. The researcher has an obligation to tell the potential subject as much as possible about the study before asking them to participate. Subjects should be informed about the research procedures, any risks or benefits of the research, their right to refuse to participate and their right to withdraw at any time during the research without penalty. Any exception to this general guideline must be approved by the institutional review board after careful examination of the planned research. But these requirements may create problems for a social psychologist. It may be important in some cases to not reveal the true purpose of the research to avoid bias into their responses. Even in simplest research subjects are rarely told the specific hypotheses that are being tested. What would happen if researcher first told subjects that the study is focused on the willingness to help strangers in distress and then tested to see if the subject would help in an emergency? However participants need not be told everything that will happen but they should know that they are in a study.

4.6.3 Debriefing

At the end of their participation in a study subject should always be debriefed. Debriefing means explaining in some detail the purpose and the procedure of the research. Participants should be given an opportunity to ask questions and express their feelings. A friendly discussion between the researcher and the participant can help a subject to recover from any upset the research may have caused and to learn from their research experience. When research deals with very sensitive topics it may be important for the researcher to suggest ways in which participants can learn more about the topic. Sometimes researchers offer to send participants written information about the result of the study once the research findings have been analysed.

4.6.4 Minimal Risk

A third guideline for research is to minimise potential risks to the subjects. Minimal

risk means that the possible risks of participating in the research are no greater than ordinarily encountered in daily life. What kinds of risks can social psychological research pose? One of the most important risks is the invasion of privacy. An individual's right to privacy must be respected and valued.

The other main category of risk in social Psychology comes from stress of various kinds. Subjects must be allowed to make decisions based on adequate information. Finally the subjects should leave the study in essentially the same state of mind and body in which they entered. Social psychological research offers the joy of new discoveries about human experience. The thoughtful use of scientific methods can do much to advance our understanding of social life and social problems.

But psychological research also carries with it the responsibility to treat research participants with sensitivity and high ethical standards and to repay their valuable assistance by sharing results of the research.

Self Assessment Questions

1) What are the ethical issues in social psychology research?

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2) What are the different types of deception n one comes across in social psychology research?

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3) What is informed consent? Why is it necessary?

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4) Explain debriefing.

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

Current social psychology is characterised by the research and applications in various subjects of everyday life. From personal health, environment to law, everything comes within its ken. Its importance is added by the fact that all the parts and problems of human life are based on human thinking and attitudes. Understanding them better will lead to a better socially managed life. Whether the behaviour is concerned with individuals, small groups or our planet, knowing the basic nature of human will give our techniques a far better ground for utilisation. Multicultural perspective, cognitive approach to the problems, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology are some of the recent trends in social psychology.

Research ethics made it mandatory to respect the individuality and privacy of the research participants. There should be no physical and mental harm to those taking part in research. All the social psychological researches should follow APA guidelines.

4.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you mean by applied social psychology?
- 2) What are the various fields in which social psychology can be applied?
- 3) Discuss critically the growing influence of cognitive perspective in social psychology.
- 4) Discuss the biological and evolutionary perspective in social psychology?
- 5) Write a note on ethical issues in social psychology.

4.9 GLOSSARY

Applied social psychology: utilisation of social psychological principles and research methods in real word settings in an effort to solve a variety of individual and societal problems.

Population psychology : concentrates on the effects of the rapid expansion of the number of humans on this planet and on efforts to control this expansion.

Health psychology : the speciality that studies psychological processes affecting the development, prevention and treatment of physical illness.

Environmental psychology : is the field that deals with interaction between physical world and human behaviour.

Industrial and organisational psychology : application of social psychology which focuses on understanding behaviours in work settings especially within the field of industries and organisations.

Sociobiology	: the theory that many aspects of social behaviors are the result of evolutionary processes in which patterns of behaviours that contribute to reproduction are strengthened and spread throughout a population.
Evolutionary social psychology	: social tendencies toward behaviours that are most adaptive from the point of view of survival increase in strength over time within a given population.
Deception	: to disguise key elements of a study in order to avoid having subject's behavior influenced by what they think to be a true purpose of the study.
Informed consent	: A subject must voluntarily agree to participate in research without any coercion and must understand what the participation involves.
Debriefing	: explaining in some detail the purpose and the procedure of the research at the end of study to the participants.
Minimal Risk	: A third guideline for research is to minimise potential risks to the subjects. Minimal risk means that the possible risks of participating in the research are no greater than ordinarily encountered in daily life.

4.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Andreyeva, Galina (1990) *Social Psychology*. Progress Publication: Moscow

Baron, R. A. and Byrne, D. (1997). *Social Psychology*, 8th edition. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon

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