

---

# UNIT 1 DEFINITION, CONCEPT AND RESEARCH METHODS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

---

## Structure

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Definition and Concept of Social Psychology
  - 1.2.1 Concept of Social Psychology
  - 1.2.2 Concept of Social Behaviour
  - 1.2.3 Concept of Social Interaction
  - 1.2.4 Concept of Social Influence
  - 1.2.5 Scope of Social Psychology
- 1.3 Research Methods in Social Psychology
  - 1.3.1 Goals of Research in Social Psychology
  - 1.3.2 Sources of Research in Social Psychology
- 1.4 Experimental Methods
  - 1.4.1 Laboratory Method
  - 1.4.2 Field Method
- 1.5 Non-Experimental Methods
  - 1.5.1 Observation Method
  - 1.5.2 Archival Method
  - 1.5.3 Case Study Method
  - 1.5.4 Correlational Method
  - 1.5.5 Survey Method
- 1.6 Other Research Methods
  - 1.6.1 Cross Cultural Method
  - 1.6.2 Research Through Internet
- 1.7 Research Ethics
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.9 Unit End Questions
- 1.10 Suggested Readings
- 1.11 Answers to Self Assessment Questions

---

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

---

In earlier courses you might have got a clear picture about what is psychology, what is the biological basis of our behaviour, how does the human development take place, how research in psychology is done and quantified etc. From this course onwards, we are entering into the ‘social’ world of an individual because most of our behaviours is a result of our interaction with people and their influence on our behaviour. Also most of these interactions involve other people and it mainly occurs in social context and social situation. The branch of psychology which studies the ‘individual behaviour’ in social context is called as ‘social psychology’. Social psychology is a very important branch of psychology,

combining the elements from two strong disciplines – sociology and psychology. Block 1 explains the concept of social psychology and its relevance to individual behaviours. It explains the various definitions of social psychology traces its historical developments and landmarks as well as further explains the relation of social psychology to other discipline. In establishing as a new discipline, social psychology enriched its research, by adopting various research methods – both experimental and non-experimental as well as including modern research through internet. Further the block 1 studies the most important concept of social psychology – social cognition – a process of understanding and predicting the behaviour of self and others i.e. social perception and person perception. It goes on to explore the definition, structure and functional process as well as cognitive and dynamic basis of social perception and person perception.

In this unit, we are going to introduce to you the concepts of social behaviour, social interaction and social influence. Next you see the nature of social psychology in general and the definition of social psychology. Further you will be studying various methods which social psychologists employ in carrying out his / her research about the different social phenomena.

---

## **1.1 OBJECTIVES**

---

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- describe the terms – social behaviour, social interaction and social influence;
- discuss that that the larger part of our life and behaviour is social;
- explain the way needs are satisfied in the social context;
- distinguish between physical and social environment;
- analysis the different types of research methods used in the field of social psychology;
- explore various experimental and non-experimental methods used by social psychologists; and
- identify the merits and demerits of the different methods of research.

---

## **1.2 DEFINITION AND CONCEPT OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

---

The study of individual in the social context is the subject matter of the field of psychology called social psychology. Social psychologists not only try to understand the social behaviour and social influence but have developed many methods to measure the social phenomena like leadership, modeling and prejudice etc. They employ many experimental as well as non-experimental methods to carry out their research in the field of social psychology. As dealing with human life and human problems, social psychologists also take care to follow the ethical code and to avoid common bias in social science research.

The various definitions of social psychology are given:

- Social psychology is the discipline that explores deeply the various aspects of this social interaction.

- Social psychology is a branch of psychology which is concerned with the social aspect of life – how people interaction with and think about others. This branch of knowledge studies human behaviour in all its perspective which further helps in establishing equal relationships and solving social problems.
- Baron and Byrne (2006) define social psychology as the scientific field that seeks to understand the nature and causes of individual behaviour in social situations. In other words, social psychologists seek to understand how we think about and interact with others.
- Social psychology attempts to understand how thoughts, feelings and behaviours of individual are influenced by actual, imagined and implied presence of others.
- Social psychology is the study of how people influence other people.

### 1.2.1 Concept of Social Psychology

It is a truth that human actions do not take place in a vacuum. Every behaviours occur in some ‘physical context’ and most of what we do take place in the presence of others – that is, in an interpersonal context or social context. Moreover, a considerable portion of the behaviour that individuals perform when alone is based on ‘past encounters’ with other people.

Psychology studies behaviour which is a result of individuals thoughts and feelings, but individuals thoughts and feelings are inferred from his expressed or overt behaviour. Behaviours which include learning, problem solving, perceiving are the ‘overt behaviour’, on the other hand, behaviours like dreaming, imaging, memorising represents ‘covert behaviour’.

There is another category of behaviour. Behaviour which is result or caused by or occurs because of others presence or influence is called *social behaviour*. This social behaviour is of great significance to social psychology. Whenever our psychological processes of perceiving, learning, motivating, decision making etc. are influenced by or a result of or related to / or occur in a social context, these processes are called as social perception, social learning, social motivations, group conformity respectively. These behaviours which have a social context and occur in social environment and involve social stimuli are the main subject matter of social psychology.

### 1.2.2 Concept of Social Behaviour

If I ask you to make a list of all the activities which you perform from the time you get up till you sleep, you will observe that about 20% of these activities are just ‘behaviours’ but the remaining 80% of these are ‘social behaviours’. This would make you understand social behaviour in terms of the significance of ‘others’ in our life, as most of our time of the day is spent in interacting with other members of our family or society. A careful look at these ‘**social interaction**’ would make it very clear that in many of these interactions, our behaviour is influenced by others and we influence others behaviour. So our life is not only ‘social’ but our social interactions to a large extent are shaped, influenced and changed as a result of social influence. A major part of our behaviour occurs in a social context, as well as in an environment involving ‘others’.

### 1.2.3 Concept of Social Interaction

Unlike animals that come together either for progeny or protecting themselves from danger, human being is a truly social animal. Each one of us is surrounded by and interacts with at least one or two individuals who are close to us. Human being live, grow and strive within the close interpersonal relationship. Many of our needs are satisfied in this social context. In satisfying the needs one establishes contacts, co-operates with other people and adjusts with other members of the society. Actions that are performed by the individual in relation to the members of the society are called 'Social Actions and Interaction' as these actions affect two or more individuals. This results in action, social actions and interaction. This interaction with others is called 'Social Interaction' and this social interaction is the basis for establishing lasting relationship in life. Two mechanisms underlie every social interaction, these are:

- 1) **Social interaction requires a social contact or social relationship:** Every social situation involves social contact at least between two people without which no interaction can take place. This contact may be direct or indirect and can have negative and positive impact. Positive social contact gives rise to pro-social behaviours like co-operation, organisation as simulation, adjustment, adaptation and accommodation. Negative social contact may retract a person away from entering into social interaction and even if s/he 'has to', it results in unhelpful social behaviours like unhealthy competition, aggression etc.
- 2) **Social interaction involves communication:** Social interaction between any two individuals involves some form of communication that is verbal or non-verbal without which the social interaction cannot take place. As is known, social interaction takes place at three levels, a) Individual to individual, b) Individual to groups, and c) Group to group level.

### 1.2.4 Concept of Social Influence

Each one of us depends on others to satisfy, many of our day to day needs – food, clothing, housing, love, security. This interdependence produces interaction between persons. In the course of this interaction an individual is influenced by parents, friends, teachers and they are also in turn influenced by the person. Thus other people affect and influence our outlook, our belief our values and so on marginally or profoundly. Such influence are exerted directly and deliberately, subtly and implied. The individual behaviour is influenced by this social influence, as for example: Sita is newly married and comes to her in-laws house in a new city. Her behaviour is more likely to be influenced by the directions g etc. which slowly do influence her husband and children. Our social life is thus a process of mutual influence and change which enrich our relationship in a social context.

### 1.2.5 Scope of Social Psychology

Social psychology concentrates on the individual behaviour in the social contact, so the subject matter of social psychology is the interactions of individuals with other individuals and society. It is the social world, based upon the relations of humans to their fellow beings which furnishes the subject matter of social psychology. The scope of social psychology includes:

- 1) Social stimuli example: books, any situation, other people) and social stimulus situations (Flag hosting, Deepawali, Christmas and Ramzan).
- 2) Individual's reactions and experiences which arise from social situations.
- 3) Impact of social environment on the individual social behaviour is a result of four factors:
  - i) Characteristics of other persons;
  - ii) Cognitive processes;
  - iii) Physical environment; and
  - iv) Cultural context.

**Examples:** Whenever two or more people are interacting, their behaviour is guided by the traits of 'the other' person with which they are interacting and depending on the behaviour of the other person (whether dominant, co-operative or submissive), our response to it would differ. Example: child behaving in a docile manner in front of teacher or parent.

Also how we react and interpret and understand the social situation depends to a great extent on how we perceive the social stimuli, what aspects of social situation influences us etc. Example: when two individuals are bitterly, in that one person is not speaking a word and the other is uttering all the bad words, we might sympathize with the first one and interpret the event accordingly.

- 4) The physical context in which an event takes place is also very crucial. For example: when two people belonging to different cultural and ethnic group start fighting during the already riot prone, locality, it will get a different meaning than when the scenario occurs in a normal context.
- 5) Each social behaviour has a specific cultural context and as a result, same behaviour may be interpreted in an entirely different way. Cultural norms of each culture provides that context and so many times the behaviour would be misinterpreted by others who do not belong to that culture – example: women not hiding their face (by their veil) in front of elders would be amounted to insulting the elders, the same behaviour would 'pass off' as normal in other context of urban setting.

### Self Assessment Questions 1

#### Exercise-I

Match the Column I and Column II

A) For the following statements, indicate what type of social situation and words category each statement indicate

#### Column I

- 1) A child smiling and giving his toy to another child
- 2) A stranger looking at you
- 3) Your neighbour smiling at you
- 4) A film

#### Column II

- a) Social behaviour
- b) Non-social behaviour
- c) Social interaction
- d) Social influence

- |  |                     |
|--|---------------------|
| 5) A novel   | e) Social stimuli   |
| 6) Independence day  | f) Social situation |
| 7) Your child learns to use bad words from neighbours sons   |                     |
| 8) Teachers day  |                     |
| 9) Children playing with each other  |                     |
| 10) Children burns his hand  |                     |
| 11) After a scolding a child cries   |                     |
| 12) Child goes and sits near his friend  |                     |
| B) Write down a list of five behaviours of yours which are a result of some social influence. Also name that agent who is exerting the social influence. |                     |
| .....  |                     |
| .....  |                     |
| .....  |                     |
| .....  |                     |
| .....  |                     |

---

### 1.3 RESEARCH METHODS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

---

#### 1.3.1 Goals of Research in Social Psychology

Social psychological research has four goals:

- 1) **Description:** A major goal is to provide careful and systematic descriptions of social behaviour that permit social psychologists to make reliable generalisations about how people act in various social settings. Example: Are men more aggressive than women's.
- 2) **Causal analysis:** Much research in psychology seeks to establish cause and effect relationship, because scientific inquiry in the research is to establish cause and effect relations. Example: Does college education make students more liberal in their social attitudes.
- 3) **Theory building:** Third goal is to develop theories about social behaviour which help social psychologists understand why people behave the way they do. This can further lead to suggest new predictions that can be tested in further research.
- 4) **Application:** Knowledge gained by the above three attempt can help to solve everyday social problems.

#### 1.3.2 Sources of Research in Social Psychology

Social psychology is the scientific study of social behaviour. These are a diverse range of methods available to social psychologists. Any research begins with a hunch or hypothesis (a tentative solution), that the researcher wants to test. There are two ways in which a researcher chooses the hypothesis.

- 1) People often generate hypothesis from previous theories and research. Many studies stem from a researcher's dissatisfaction with existing theories and explanation. Example: Leon Festinger was dissatisfied with 'behaviourism' to explain attitude change. He thus formulated a new approach called the dissonance theory that made specific predictions about when and how people would change their attitude. In this way new research is continuously carried out in order to update the existing theory.
- 2) Theory is not the only way to derive a new hypothesis in social psychology. Researchers often observe a phenomenon in everyday life that they find curious and interesting. The researcher then constructs a theory related to that phenomenon, thus generating new theory. Example: The mere presence of other person that led to better performance lead to the famous phenomena of 'social facilitation'.

The research methods used by social psychology could be divided into two broad categories: 1) Experimental method, and 2) Non-experimental method.

---

## **1.4 EXPERIMENTAL METHODS**

---

An experiment involves manipulating one variable – which we call the Independent Variable (IV) and then seeing whether this has an effect on a second variable, which we refer to as the Dependent Variable (DV). To explain this, we describe an experiment conducted by Scheier and Carver (1977) in which the independent variable 'self awareness' was manipulated by having participants either watch themselves in a mirror or not. These two levels of self awareness high self awareness (mirror present) and low self awareness (mirror not present) formed the two experimental conditions. The prediction was that people in the high self-awareness would show more extreme emotional responses. Participant's self reported emotions were measured. These emotions provided the dependent variable in the experiment.

The experimental method could further be divided into two sub-categories i) Laboratory method, ii) Field method.

### **1.4.1 Laboratory Method**

The majority of experiments are conducted in a laboratory. In some studies, the laboratory is equipped with television, video cameras, computer monitors, microphones and other experimental apparatuses. In other cases, the laboratory is a simple room with a table and chair wherein a participant fills out a questionnaire. The benefit of conducting a laboratory experiment is that conditions could be highly controlled. Putting it in another way, within the confines of the laboratory, everything (example: environment, temperament, instructions given by the researcher) apart from the independent variable can be held constant. This way if changes in the independent variable are accompanied by changes in the dependent variable, we can very confidently say that the changes in the dependent variable are caused by the independent variable. Another benefit of experiments conducted in such a controlled environment is that they can be replicated, which would otherwise be more difficult to create outside the laboratory. Laboratory experiments have been used to study a wide range of social phenomena and have formed the basis for a number of highly influenced theories.

The *Advantages and Disadvantages* of Laboratory method are:

- 1) Although the high degree of control over conditions allows us to infer causality from the finding – it also makes the experiment rather artificial i.e. the experiments lacks external validity.
- 2) Information that participants pickup from the experimental context that leads them to guess what the experimenter is predicting will happen. When this happens it will influence the ‘behaviour’ which the experimenter is looking for because the internal mental processes of the participant cannot be controlled.
- 3) Experimenters themselves may also pose a risk to the validity of an experiment. ‘Experimenter effects’ are subtle cues or signals that are given out by an experimenter who knows the experimental hypothesis – ex: body language, eye movements, tone of voice.

### 1.4.2 Field Method

Experiments are not only confined to the laboratory. They are also conducted in naturalistic settings. For example given a situation; wherein an individual requires help, how many people come forward to help and why? Field experiments have greater external validity (not being artificial but genuine) than laboratory experiment. They are less likely to be influenced by ‘demand characteristics’ a participants typically have no idea that they are taking part in a study.

The Advantage and Disadvantage of Field Method are:

- 1) The situation is not nearly as controlled as in a laboratory situation and so the impact of external influences cannot be ruled out.
- 2) It is also not possible to randomly assign participants to conditions.

---

## 1.5 NON-EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

---

Researchers have three options. They can:

- 1) Ask research participants to report on their behaviour, thoughts or feeling – through self report.
- 2) They can observe questioned participant directly – observation
- 3) They can go to an archive and use data originally collected for other purposes.

Although experiments are the best way of determining cause and effect, there are many circumstances where they are practically not feasible. If we are interested to know how gender, ethnicity or age affects behaviour, we cannot assign participants to different conditions of an experimental method. Moreover, when social psychologists are interested to study psychological phenomenon on a broad societal level (ex: ethnic prejudice), experimental method cannot be used. In such instances a number of non-experimental methods are available to a social psychologist. These are: i) Observation method, ii) Archival method, iii) Case study, iv) Correlational method, and v) Survey method.

### 1.5.1 Observation Method

In social psychology, the observers are trained as social scientists who set out to answer questions about a particular social phenomena by observation and coding it according to a prearranged set of criteria. This method varies according to the

degree to which the observer actively participates in the scene. At one extreme the observer is a non participant. S/he neither participates nor intervenes in any way as for example: a researcher is interested in children's social behaviour may stand outside a playground to observe. Children at play in some situations, by their very nature, require observer participants, who observe, but tries not to alter the situation in any way, for example – to get to know the intricacies of certain social phenomena like rituals, cultural way. The observer can be a participant as a friend or relative. Certain behaviours are difficult to observe as they occur rarely or privately. It is confined to one particular group of people, setting, and activity.

### 1.5.2 Archival Method

Another way that social psychologist can observe social phenomenon without conducting an experiment is to re-analyse existing data. The researcher examines the accumulated document or archives of a culture, for example; diaries, novels, suicide notes, television shows, movies, magazines, newspaper articles, advertising, sexual violence etc.

Archival analysis can tell us a great deal about the society's values and beliefs. It has got two advantages. It is inexpensive and it can study the change over time frame. This is particularly useful when researches are interested in the effect of societal events on behaviours, which have occurred in the past. This research comes under 'archival research' first conducted by Hovland and Sears (1940).

### 1.5.3 Case Study Method

Other non-experimental methods are field studies and case studies. Case study is a study of a particular participant or a small group of participants which involve a detailed and often descriptive investigation. Example: Behaviour of people after the earthquake.

### 1.5.4 Correlation Method

In correlation studies, the researcher carefully observers and records the relationship between (or among) two or more factors technically known as variables. For example: Is physical attractiveness is related to a student's popularity with other students. In a correlation design, the research does not influence the student's behaviour in any way but merely records information.

The hallmark of an experimental design is intervention – with putting people in controlled situation or have confederates. Correlation research asks if there is an association between the variables and whether this association is high (+ve) or low (-ve) or neutral (no correlation). Example: whether or not watching violence on television is related to aggressive behaviour.

The *Advantages and Disadvantage* of Correlational method are:

- 1) Correlation designs enable research to study problems in which intervention is impossible.
- 2) This design is efficient. It allows research to collect more information and relationship.
- 3) No clear cut evidence of cause and effect

### 1.5.5 Survey Method

It is a research method that involves asking participants to respond to a series of questions, through interviews or questionnaires. Poll survey, marketing survey are the best examples. Surveys can be administered to a large, sample with relative ease and at little expense because surveys are gathered from large numbers and researchers can be sure of it is genuinity. The downside to questionnaire is that if they are not very carefully designed they can be misinterpreted by participants. There are also a number of response biases that participants have a tendency to blindly agree with positively worded questions and frequently fail to use the full range of possible responses like 'I don't know' etc.

---

## 1.6 OTHER RESEARCH METHODS

---

As psychology advanced and become global, and started focusing on cross cultural social phenomena, this method became a very important method.

### 1.6.1 Cross Cultural Method

It has two goals (i) demonstrates that a particular psychological process or law is universe and it operates the same way in all human being across various cultures. (ii) explore the differences among human beings, by examining how culture influences the basic social psychological process.

### 1.6.2 Research Through Internet

Recently social psychology has started to conduct research using the internet. The internet offers several advantages to researchers.

- i) Internet makes it easier to recruit participants who come from diverse background distant geographic regions or specific group.
- ii) The information collected from the participants is automatically recorded. This increases efficiency of data collection.
- iii) Internet research is less expensive.
- iv) Internet chat rooms and bulletin boards provide a rich sample of human social behaviour, where people discuss current social issues or hobbies on the online forums and study many topics including communication, prejudice and spread of new ideas. In research:
  - Same subjects can participate in many studies more than once
  - The identity, responses in a frivolous and malicious manner.
  - Impossible to monitor participant's behaviour or undesirable distractions.

#### Self Assessment Questions 2

##### Exercise-II

- 1) Below are given contain topics find out which research method would suit them
  - A child reactions to a stranger.
  - A behaviour of criminal after rehabilitation.
  - Percentage of relapses in alcoholics.

- Studying the celebrity status and suicidal rate among them.
  - Public opinion about homosexual individual.
  - Study of ‘twitter’ or ‘blog’ to check mentally health or unhealthy statements.
  - Studying peoples pro-social or helping behaviour using a confederate.
- 2) Write examples from T.V. and media about violation of ethical standards.
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....

## 1.7 RESEARCH ETHICS

Regardless of the method used to conduct research in social psychology, because it involves people, social psychologist needs to be aware of a number of ethical issues. To ensure that research is not physically or psychologically harmful to participants, in 1972, the American Psychological Association suggested a set of principles for ethical conduct to guide the conduction of research.

- 1) **Participant Welfare:** It is essential that the physical and psychological welfare of participant is protected. Although it is not too difficult to determine the extent of physical harm to the participants, it is indeed difficult to determine the extent of psychological harm. Some experiments may leave a negative psychological impact (fear, stress, anxiety) for example: Eliciting anger may for example lead to temporarily depressed self esteem (Carver and Glass 1978). So efforts should be made to ensure that the negative psychological impact should be inconsequential and short lived.
- 2) **Deception:** In order to avoid the problem caused by ‘demand characteristics’ or subjective bias. It is important that participant is not aware of the aim of the study Milgram (1963) deceived participants by making them believe that they were really administering electric shocks. This was necessary to gauge the participants reactions. Many other experiments use confederates – someone who is a participant but who is actually an actor instructed by the experimenter in order to test a particular hypothesis. However, most deception is of a trival nature, and the participants are told the full purpose of the experiment after completion and there is no evidence that deception causes long term harm.
- 3) **Confidentiality:** Participants in social psychology research is often required to disclose information of a personal or intimate nature. To reassure participants that this information will not be used against them in any way social psychologists need to inform participants that data derived from their participation will be completely confidential. Thus the anonymity of participants is also usually safeguarded by identifying them with a ‘number’ (roll number) rather than name.

- 4) **Informed consent and debriefing:** It is a well known practice to obtain informed consent from individuals prior to their participation in a study. The participants provide their full and voluntary consent in writing or they can withdraw from the experiment. After the experiment, participants need to be fully debriefed, this involve telling them the true purpose of the experiment. It gives experimenters the opportunity to demonstrate the importance and relevance of the research and the participants an opportunity to contribute to the genuine cause to the field (of social psychology) research. One of the important risks is the invasion of privacy, which should be respected and valued. The researcher who studies sensitive topics as sex, drug, alcohol use, illegal behaviour, religion, beliefs. Must be protected the risk involved minimal, should be – possible risk for the participants in the research should not be greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

---

## 1.8 LET US SUM UP

---

In this unit, we have studied the various terms like social behaviour, social interaction and social influence and their significance in understanding the concept of social psychology. We also came to know the scope of social psychology which basically involves social stimuli and social situations. Later we have studied the different definitions of social psychology. Next we concentrated on how a social psychologist conducts its research. Firstly we became aware that the research starts with setting appropriate goals of research i.e. description, casual analysis theory building application and exploring the basic sources of topic generation from earlier research or personal knowledge and experience.

Lastly you were provided with a detailed understanding of various experimental, laboratory, field, non-experimental, observation, archival, case study, correlation and survey methods. Also you would have learnt the new research through internet and how to take care of conducting a fair and scientific research by following ethical code of research.

---

## 1.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

---

- 1) Describe the terms social behaviour, social interaction and social influence and explain their relation to the concept of social psychology.
- 2) Enumerate the goals of researches and its sources.
- 3) What is an experimental method? Describe the types of experimental methods.
- 4) What are the non-experimental methods? Mention the types of non-experimental methods and describe in detail any one method, critically examining its merits and demerits.

---

## 1.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

---

Baron, R.A and Donn Bryne (2006) *Social Psychology*, Prentice Hall of India 10<sup>th</sup> Edition, New Delhi – 110 001.

Crisp, R.J and Rhiannon N., Turner *Essential Social Psychology*, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

---

## 1.11 ANSWERS TO SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

---

### Self Assessment Questions 1 (Exercise I)

- 1) c
- 2) b
- 3) a
- 4) e
- 5) e
- 6) f
- 7) d
- 8) f
- 9) c
- 10) b
- 11) d
- 12) a

### Self Assessment Questions 2 (Exercise II)

- 1) Observation method
- 2) Case study method
- 3) Correlation method
- 4) Archival method
- 5) Survey method