# Social Psychology in Action

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Editors

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## Evidence-Based Interventions from Theory to Practice

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# Introduction: Nothing as Practical as a Good Theory

## "Nothing as Practical as a Good Theory"

The above maxim is often attributed to psychologist Kurt Lewin. Shortly after his death in 1947, the psychological historian E. C. Tolman wrote of Lewin: "Freud the clinician and Lewin the experimentalist – these are the two men whose names will stand out before all others in the history of our psychological era" (Marrow, 1969). Although Freud has become a household name, Lewin's ideas and work are mostly unknown to the general public. Among psychologists, however, Kurt Lewin is well known as one of the founders of modern experimental social psychology and recognized for his early contributions in applying psychological science to real human society.

His interest in the social uses of psychological research is evident not only from his work on "group dynamics"—a term he coined, involving, for example, research on leadership, communication, and group performance—but also from the applied research institutes he established, such as the Committee on Community Interrelations (McCain, 2015). Indeed, for Lewin, research served a double purpose: "to seek deeper explanations of why people behave the way they do *and* to discover how they may learn to behave better" (Marrow, 1969, p. xi; Italics added). Science was, in other words, a way to discover general laws of human functioning as well as a way to solve practical problems, a combination Lewin labeled "action research." To achieve this goal, Lewin proposed, there is nothing as practical as a good theory—a maxim Lewin himself attributed to "a business man" he once met (Lewin, 1943).

For Lewin, social psychological theories were useful guides that could help practitioners by providing them with the tools and confidence needed for action (Sandelands, 1990). However, he also noted that "we will have to watch out that theory never breaks loose from its proper place as a servant, as a tool for human beings" (Lewin, 1943, p. 118). What he meant here is that a theory should never be accepted as providing *definitive* answers on how to address complex social problems, partly because not all theories are *good* theories (e.g., consistent, falsifiable, parsimonious, precise) and because no theory is necessarily *true*. Indeed, "it may be (partly) true, but it may also be (partly) false. A theory is a set of ideas meant to explain observable events. Appropriate scientific methods are needed to test whether or not a theory achieves this aim. Theories thus are the basis to expand our understanding of

the world" (Gieseler, Loschelder and Friese, Chap. 1, p. 6). Instead, theories should be used as practical guides enabling a closer examination of why and under what circumstances interventions may be successful in obtaining a desired behavioral or psychological end-state. As we shall see in the following chapters, applying theoretical insights is difficult and its success depends on many factors, not least the specifics of the applied contexts.

## When Social Psychology Turned Away from (Applying) Theories

With the death of Lewin, the interest in the social uses of social psychological knowledge dwindled (for a discussion see Hill, 2006). Some of the reasons for this lack of interest in applied (social psychological) research were already identified by Lewin in 1943. For example, in these early years, properly developed theory was lacking, as were concise, reliable measures of social behavior. Lewin also recognized that a meaningful application of psychological insights requires detailed knowledge of the specific context within which the application takes place. This made applied research much more time consuming and more expensive than experimental research in the lab. Finally, compared to the general laws of human functioning psychologists were looking for, dealing with nongeneral, applied problems was not looked at with much favor by early social psychologists, or in the words of Singer and Glass (1975, p. 16): "To be a major contribution a study must deal with basic, not applied, problems." As a consequence, social psychology often had a lot to say in general, but little to say in particular (Deutsch, 1975).

Another trend that developed over the years, having a detrimental effect on the usefulness of social psychological knowledge for applied problems, was a focus on "sexy-hypothesis testing" (Fiedler, 2017). Instead of testing and developing social psychological theories, researchers focused on the impact of a single causal factor (often with only two levels) on a single dependent variable with a focus on counter-intuitive outcomes. The predicted effects are binary (i.e., A affects B) rather than quantified in size (i.e., A explains X percent of variance of B). Even more problematic is the observation that quite a few of these studies violated good scientific practices (e.g., Fiedler & Schwarz, 2016). Studies were often conducted with overly small sample sizes and researchers reverted to several questionable research practices in order to publish their results (for a discussion see Gieseler et al., Chap. 1). For example, when the research was written up, researchers regularly failed to report all dependent measures or even conditions relevant for a finding, and reverted to HARKing (hypothesizing after the results are known; Kerr, 1998), leading authors to report unexpected findings as having been predicted from the start. It is highly likely that such practices have contributed to "sexy" but invalid findings in the psychological literature. Perhaps the most prominent example is Bem's (2011) article that claimed to provide evidence for pre-cognition (i.e., the ability to foresee the future).

Many measures have recently been taken to address these problems. Some are at the methodological level, such as journals' demands for higher

statistical power and the reduction of researchers' degrees of freedom in data handling (e.g., through preregistering the study, reporting all measures, conditions, and cases; Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2012). Strong a priori theories that are cumulatively developed are likewise a powerful measure against this development (Fiedler, 2017). For example, if a study builds upon a theory, HARKing is less of an option because the hypothesis is explicitly stated in the theory or at least derived from it. Moreover, within a theoretical tradition degrees of freedom are lower, given that there are often well-established measures and manipulations that are used in the tradition of the theory. New insights in a theoretical tradition are cumulative (i.e., they add to what is already known) and thus less original. However, findings that relate to and extend what is already known are more likely to be true than those validating isolated counter-intuitive hypotheses. This is but one reason why relying on theories in the development of knowledge is important: it contributes to the replicability of findings and thus to valid knowledge (cf. Greenwald, Pratkanis, Leippe, & Baumgardner, 1986).

## The Renaissance of Applying Social Psychological Theories

Because social psychology studies the interaction between situational and dispositional forces that influence every day, *normal* human behavior, such findings have traditionally played an important role in the development of behavioral interventions directed at the amelioration of a wide range of issues across all areas of applied psychology. Indeed, social psychological knowledge is increasingly recognized as central to many of the challenges the individual, the state, and civil society faces. This is evident, for example, in publications by the World Health Organization recognizing the importance of *social determinants* for understanding health behavior (e.g., lifestyles, social norms; CSDH, 2008). As a result, social psychological findings are being applied across public, commercial, and charity sectors, often with the goal to influence people and change their behavior.

To successfully apply social psychological findings, theory is indispensable. Indeed, evidence suggests that interventions with a theoretical basis are more effective than those without a theoretical basis (e.g., Michie & Johnston, 2012; Webb, Joseph, Yardley, & Michie, 2010). Theories are not only used to inform intervention design, for instance, to gain ideas what might help and what might not help to change behavior in a certain domain (Heath, Cooke, & Cameron, 2015). They also help to classify interventions according to the underlying concepts and in this way contribute to their effectiveness and inform the integration of evidence (Michie & Prestwich, 2010). Finally, and perhaps most closely to what Lewin or the business man had in mind: theories can guide practitioners and provide them with the confidence needed for action (Sandelands, 1990).

Social psychological theories play an increasingly important role in attempts to intervene in human behavior. For example, social psychological theorizing has been applied to generate interventions for a wide variety of

fields ranging from pro-environmental behavior such as energy conservation (e.g., Abrahamse, Steg, Vlek, & Rothengatter, 2005) to prosocial behavior such as blood donation (e.g., Masser, White, Hyde, & Terry, 2008). More generally, it has been used to facilitate the understanding of numerous phenomena in the organizational contexts such as leadership (e.g., Ellemers, de Gilder, & Haslam, 2004) or educational settings such as students' conflict regulation (e.g., Darnon, Muller, Schrager, Pannuzzo, & Butera, 2006). Many more examples across a variety of applied settings, such as health, political, or consumer behavior, are presented in each of the chapters of this book.

## The Content of This Book

In this edited volume, we bring together leading scientists in the field of social psychology in order to illustrate how key theories and concepts can be applied to benefit social and practical problems. We dive into social psychological literature to illustrate how key theories and the underlying concepts help to predict and explain behavior. We focus on robust theories and models that have been successfully applied, covering a diverse range of settings: from interventions in the classroom to health behavior, and from financial decision making to the reduction of prejudice and discriminatory behavior. With this volume we hope to inform and benefit professionals involved in behavior change. In addition, we want to prepare students of psychology and human behavior to apply their knowledge in later jobs.

Because theories take center stage in this volume, in Chap. 1 Gieseler, Loschelder, and Friese provide an answer to the fundamental question "*what is a good theory?*". More specifically, this chapter discusses two basic questions: (1) what are criteria for evaluating the quality of a psychological theory, and (2) what are criteria for evaluating the empirical evidence related to a theory. The chapter discusses these criteria by examining one specific theory and accompanying empirical work as an illustrative example—the Strength Model of Self-Control (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Baumeister & Vohs, 2016). Although necessarily incomplete, the discussed criteria can be applied to many theories in (social) psychological research. They are therefore relevant not only to basic research, but also to any applied work that is grounded in theory.

The rest of this book is divided in two main parts. In part I, each chapter discusses a specific social psychological theory and takes a two-step approach. First, a *theoretical part* will define the key concepts and summarize the theory, providing evidence for its reliability and limitations from basic research. A second, *applied part* will summarize research in applied contexts and provide details about one particular study including the respective application setting. The aim of this first part of the book is not only to show that theories make meaningful predictions for real-world contexts, but also what the hurdles and pitfalls in applying a theory and the underlying set of concepts in a certain context are. In part II, the chapters take a slightly different approach. Because real-world problems are often highly complex, with a myriad of factors that may influence the problem under investigation, in this part chapters

will approach specific problems from different angles, using relevant concepts and theory to engage with the applied question. The aim of the second part will be to show how different theoretical insights can be meaningfully combined in order to understand and possibly intervene in a range of social issues.

## Part I

The first part starts with three chapters presenting theories about *motivation*. Keller, Bieleke, and Gollwitzer present the *mindset theory of action phases* (MAP) and *implementation intentions* in Chap. 2. The MAP describes four different phases people go through during goal pursuit and the specific cognitive procedures (or mindsets) activated to cope with the demands of each phase. Implementation intentions are if-then plans that are highly efficient in initiating pursuit goals in difficult situations (e.g., when opportunities are likely to be missed). The chapter presents a field example providing evidence for their effectiveness beyond the lab: in this featured study implementation intentions facilitated sustainable consumption.

Chapter 3, by Guy Roth, presents *self-determination theory*. In contrast to MAP, self-determination theory is not concerned with the process of goal pursuit but with the question whether the source of people's motivation is autonomous or externally controlled—in other words whether the striving is determined by oneself or by others. The theory and the chapter name antecedents and beneficial consequences of autonomous motivation. The external validity of the theory is demonstrated in a featured intervention study showing that training teachers to educate students in a way that facilitates autonomous motivation increases this type of motivation as well as students' performance.

Chapter 4, by Sassenberg and Vliek, targets yet another aspect of motivation, namely the selection of means. It presents *regulatory focus theory*, which provides insights about people's strategies for mean selection during goal striving. In addition, *regulatory fit theory* is discussed, which states that engagement is higher in case there is a fit between people's preferred strategy and the strategic demands of a context (e.g., when people prefer to act carefully and the context requires exactly that strategy). After discussion of several applied contexts, a featured intervention study is described, showing that communication fitting with recipients' preferred self-regulation strategy leads to more physical activity than communication not fitting recipients preferred strategy.

Following these chapters on motivation, Chaps. 5, 6, and 7 focus on a variety of forms of *social influence*. Chapter 5 by Verplanken and Orbell discusses *habits* and how they can be changed despite their rigidity. The authors describe what habits are and what they do, such as effects on information processing, the relationship with intentions, and the "stickiness" of habits. Evidence for the real-world relevance of Verplanken and Orbell's theorizing comes from a study showing that moving (i.e., the change of an individual's

*social* environment) provides a window of opportunity for habit change using the case of sustainable behavior (e.g., energy saving behaviors).

In Chap. 6, Mühlberger and Jonas present theorizing about motivated resistance against social influence (rather than unintended rigidity in the case of habits). The chapter discusses the concept of and theorizing about *reactance*—a motivational state directed toward restoring or securing freedom—that often occurs in response to undesired social influence. Several preconditions and consequences of reactance are discussed, followed by a discussion of several fields of application and an illustration of an applied study of reactance theory to political behavior.

The final chapter relating to social influence comes from Stok and de Ridder. In Chap. 7 they present the *focus theory of normative conduct*. Norms are a means of social influence as they provide individuals with decisional shortcuts on how to behave in certain situations. They either refer to typical behavior (descriptive norms) or appropriate behavior (injunctive norms). The chapter specifies the conditions under which norms assert an influence on people's behavior. Finally, the featured intervention study provides evidence that norms have the power to influence people's pro-environmental behavior, if they are communicated in the right way.

The next three chapters turn to *social groups*. In Chap. 8 Butera and Buchs present *interdependence theory*—a theory making predictions about the implication of the (perceived) requirement to cooperate or to compete while working on a task. Based on this theory the chapter discusses the preconditions for successful cooperation and features a study demonstrating that these conditions indeed assert a positive influence on cooperation in the classroom.

Turning from interpersonal relations (and the interdependence structure) to the relation individuals have to groups as a whole, Scheepers and Ellemers present *social identity theory* in Chap. 9. This theory posits that group memberships contribute to people's self-concepts: the so-called social identity. The chapter presents an overview of work on social identity and its applications to health and organizational settings. The external validity of the theory is demonstrated in two studies describing a social identity-based intervention for improving intergroup relations in an educational setting.

Chapter 10 by Christ and Kauff turns from single groups to *intergroup relations*. It summarizes intergroup contact theory, which states the conditions under which contact between members of different social groups contribute to the improvement of the attitudes toward the respective outgroup. It features two studies demonstrating the successful improvement of attitudes toward outgroup members in heated intergroup conflicts, namely the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the conflict between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda.

The section on single theories and their application is closed by two *social cognitive* theories. Chapter 11 by Wittenbrink, Correll, and Ma takes a different approach to intergroup relations and targets so-called implicit prejudice—that is, the automatically activated attitudes associated with certain groups. The chapter summarizes the social cognitive processes by which these attitudes assert an influence on people's behavior toward members of these groups. A featured study is summarized showing that these attitudes have the

potential (among police officers) to lead to a higher likelihood to shoot an African American compared to a White American suspect.

Finally, in Chap. 12, Bernecker and Job present *mindset theory* (not to be confused with the mindset theory of action phases, MAP) distinguishing between entity mindsets—laypeople's assumption that people's characteristics on a certain domain are stable—and incremental theorists—laypeople's assumption that characteristics are malleable. The implications of these implicit theories across a number of domains are summarized, leading to the conclusion that holding an incremental theory is beneficial in many instances. This is illustrated in a featured intervention study showing the benefits of an incremental mindset for victims of bullying.

### Part II

The final three chapters form the second part of the book. Here several theoretical insights are used in order to understand and possibly intervene in a range of real-world problems. This part starts with Chap. 13 by van der Werf, van Dijk, Wilderjans, van Dillen on how to promote healthy financial behavior (i.e., putting money aside in savings to cover unexpected and necessary expenses). This chapter discusses a number of (social) psychological "hurdles" that may contribute to many people's failure to put money aside for future financial needs. The chapter closes with a discussion of two intervention studies using these insights to improve people's saving behavior.

In Chap. 14, Utz discusses the impact of social media use on people's emotions. The chapter discusses a number of phenomena and theories that can explain why and how social media affect people's emotions and guide their behavior. It features a study demonstrating that the emotions elicited by social media can even guide consumer behavior.

Finally, Chap. 15 by Dinnick and Noor explores what might determine how a group responds to the suffering it has experienced at the hand of another group. It introduces the concept of *intergroup forgiveness* and discusses its potent promise in facilitating conflicting groups to transform from mutual enmity to peaceful coexistence. The authors analyze the role of social identity, victim belief construals (the way the group frames its suffering), and their potential interplay as possible determinants of forgiveness. They review empirical research based on studies conducted with groups caught up in real-life conflict settings (e.g., Israel-Palestine, Northern Ireland). The chapter presents several theory-based intervention studies oriented toward healing fractured intergroup relations.

## Didactic Features

The chapters in this book are equipped with a number of didactic features that should ease the deep level learning of the content and the elaboration of ideas. First, there are boxes in the text that serve different functions. *Definition boxes* give definitions of the main constructs and thereby highlight these

important concepts. Each chapter also includes a short *summary section* at the end, which also highlights key content. *Zooming-in boxes* illustrate topics more in depth and, thus, provide more background or point to relevant other theorizing. Here, other/conflicting theoretical approaches and laboratory or field studies are summarized that may help to integrate the content of the chapter with other theories or content. If you want to zoom-in even further, the list of *recommended readings* at the end of each chapter will provide a guideline where to find more information about the theories and research questions presented in each chapter. *Questions for elaboration* are supposed to stimulate engagement with the text and provide the opportunity to develop the presented literature a bit further. These are often open-ended questions with no definite answer, but sample responses are included at the end of the chapters.

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