

Social psychology: The standard version

Book review

Hewstone, M, Stroebe, W & Stephenson, G M (1996) **Introduction to social psychology: A European perspective** (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 698 pages. ISBN 0631-18585-2.

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The bookshelves of social psychology are brimming over with undergraduate texts. New publications are being churned out and old faithfuls updated at an impressive rate. Each seeks to outdo the other in becoming glossier, more user-friendly, and more relevant to “real life issues” than the next. The consumer may well feel spoiled for choice. Yet, on closer inspection one observes that, just like different brands of cola on the supermarket shelf, not much separates these texts: they all include the traditional topics such as attitudes, love and attraction and intergroup processes; they all discuss the same “classic” experiments; their empiricist style is the same; and they even include many of the same photographs. Nowadays, these text also come standard with “test banks”, instructor manuals, and other ancillaries.

The first edition of an **Introduction to social psychology** carved a niche for itself in the textbook market by trading on the divide between American and European approaches to the subject. The “European perspective” of the text was marked by the “geographical location of [the] contributors, the literature they cite, and to a lesser extent their conception of social psychology” (Hewstone, Stroebe, Codol & Stephenson, 1988:xv). Judging by the success of the text - which was reprinted seven times, and translated into five other languages - there was a large gap in the market for a textbook expounding a European perspective.

The second edition of the **Introduction to social psychology** should be as highly successful and widely prescribed as the first. While retaining the “European focus” and its advanced level of coverage, the text has been transformed from a rather plain book to a super glossy typeset wonder, replete with just the type of photographs which should capture the attention of the average undergraduate student. In addition, the new text includes many pedagogical aids which direct the student to “Discussion points”, “Further reading”, and “Key studies” of original papers which have been reprinted in the **Blackwell reader in social psychology**. An instructors manual is now also available. An enormous amount of effort has gone into upgrading the **Introduction to social psychology** from a textbook to a teaching package which will provide the

student with the easy access to original landmark papers as well as the most recent thinking in social psychology.

Both the breath and depth of coverage in the 600 pages of text are impressive. The book consists of eighteen chapters which are organized into five parts: Introduction; Construction of the social world; Emotion, communication and relationships; Social groups; and Epilogue. The introduction includes chapters on the history and methodology of social psychology as well as chapters on evolutionary and developmental social psychology. The chapters on history and methodology are rather conventional accounts which remain largely unchanged from the first edition. Durkin's discussion of developmental social psychology provides an appropriate introduction as it highlights the fact that human development takes place within the context of social relationships, and encourages the reader to consider the developmental origins of the social psychological phenomena which are discussed throughout the book. The new chapter by John Archer on evolutionary social psychology applies the theory of natural selection to altruism and competition, and to sexual selection and reproduction. Although the arguments are fairly interesting they are spoiled to an extent by monologic style which glosses over the major theoretical and political difficulties with evolutionary approaches.

Part II, Construction of the social world, contains two chapters on social cognition, one on attribution theory, and two chapters on attitudes. These chapters remain largely unchanged from the first edition except for the inclusion of a new chapter on social cognition which focuses on cognitive processing and decision making, and a reworking of the attribution chapter. Don't let the word "construction" in the title of this part mislead: these chapters do not grapple with theoretical dilemmas surrounding social construction and the interface between individual and society. On the contrary, the traditional, but highly problematic, interactionist information processing perspective is adopted uncritically, and the chapters consist of discussions of studies which support on or other of the "little theories" in social psychology. All standard models of the person as a social cognizer, theories of cognitive processing and attribution, and attitude measurement and theories are included. The reader cannot but be impressed, however, with the clear and well organized discussion of the topics, the level of coverage, and the manner in which the very latest literature is integrated into the discussion. The authors are clearly experts, highly conversant with their topics.

Besides the chapters on prosocial and aggressive behaviour, Part III has been substantially revised. New chapters on emotion and attraction have been included, and the chapter on communication had been reworked. Although there does not seem to be anything specifically European about the social psychological accounts of emotion and attraction, the omission of these conventional topics from the first edition was an obvious oversight. I found Weimann and Giles's chapter on communication the most interesting and readable of the lot. The chapter has a better narrative flow, for instead of listing studies and counter studies, the authors work towards a new object of social psychological analysis - i.e., joint (relational) activity. They develop a focus on "communicative competence" - the pragmatic use of social knowledge and skills in relationships - by working through a functional approach to communication (focussing on control and affiliation). All the chapters in this section, like the book as a whole, are well written scholarly accounts which provide broad innovative overviews of their field.

Part IV contains the most recognizably European content. This section contains three chapters, Group performance, Social influence, and Intergroup relations, which move beyond most American accounts by including topics such as minority influence and social identity theory. The chapter on group performance takes a decidedly “humanengineering” perspective in its focus on productivity and performance, and presentation of formulae such as: “actual performance = potential performance - process loss”. The chapter provides a taxonomic account (and some theory) of the different conditions under which the actual performance of individuals in the presence of others and groups themselves may be enhanced or reduced. The chapter on social influence covers all the standard topics (conformity, minority influence, group polarization, and obedience) and studies (Sherif, Asch, Moscovici, Milgram) in a clear and concise manner. Rupert Brown’s chapter on intergroup relations also develops a standard narrative which runs from personality accounts, through realistic group conflict theory, to Social identity theory. However, bar his disposing of personality theories as “lay” or “popular”, his account of social identity theory is carefully considered, and the chapter as a whole is excellent.

The final part of the book consists of a single chapter by Geoffrey Stephenson on applied social psychology. Stephenson contrasts the natural and social science models of applying social psychology, but clearly favours the latter which is not “limited to tinkering, advising or consulting ... [but which can] ensure that a more complete understanding is achieved of the character and operation of the institutions in question” (p572). This social science model is then demonstrated in applications to health, criminal justice and the environment. This is a useful chapter for the student as it provides some indication of how the theories of social psychology can be used in everyday life and how one may build a career in social psychology.

Overall, the text is scholarly and well argued. It considers the field of social psychology in depth and provides a sound and reasonably advanced introduction to social psychology. However, despite its self-proclaimed European perspective, the text did not strike me as very different from all those others which have been developed to meet the requirements of the US educational system. Perhaps there is no longer much by which to distinguish European and American social psychology: all introductory texts consider the same classic studies and even some American texts now consider minority influence and mention social identity theory. With increasing globalization of markets, social psychology is becoming increasingly standardized and homogenous. The second edition of an **Introduction to social psychology**, reflects and reproduces this trend. Consequently, the arguably most important recent European developments in social psychology - by scholars such as Harré, Billig and Shotter - don’t get a mention in the text. The standardization of social psychology has led to a fixation on interactionist, cognitivist models and an impoverishment of the European perspective of social psychology.

Fortunately, the genre of social psychological textbook is expanding, and as the standard version of social psychology becomes more orthodox, alternative and subversive accounts are being presented in textbooks. Although the postmodernist textbook, **Social psychology: A critical agenda**, by Stainton Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson, and Stainton Rogers (1995) tends to gloss over substantive theory in meeting its critical agenda, it is nonetheless an excellent text which includes topics such as identity, common sense, and gender and sexuality which are sorely missing from the

Introduction to social psychology. Wetherell's (1996) **Identities, groups, and social issues**, is, in my opinion, the best text presently available. This text has a distinctly European flavour as it rejects the standard version of *the* social psychology of this or that in favour of a dialectical approach which aims to equip the student with the skills to develop their own perspective. Experimental, psychodynamic and social constructionist approaches are brought to bear on topics such as group processes, racism, attitudes, work, and life histories.

In comparison with these alternative approaches, the **Introduction to social psychology** is lacking certain topics, empiricist, and theoretically circumscribed. Nevertheless, what it does, it does well, and is valuable not only as a textbook for training students, but being such a thorough and up-to-date compendium, it can serve as a reference manual for teachers and supervisors. If you are in the market for a mainstream social psychology textbook, this one is well worth considering.

REFERENCES.

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