

FOUR THEORETICAL LENSES FOR SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Augoustinos, M, Walker, I & Donaghue, N (2006) **Social cognition: An integrated introduction**. 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications (1995). ISBN 978-0-7619-4219-X pbk. Pages 364.

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This book, both a textbook and a monograph, is good because it foregrounds theory, often relatively neglected in mainstream books on social psychology. I liked the first edition (in 1995) and this second edition, entirely reworked, is a whole lot better. The approach is to take four major theoretical perspectives – social cognition, Social Identity Theory (SIT), social representations, and discursive psychology – and compare how each understands particular phenomena, such as attitudes, attribution, prejudice, perception, the self, intergroup relations and ideology. The brief concluding chapter suggests a path towards integration (as the sub-title states) arguing that each of the current streams is limited in terms of concepts, methodology and epistemology. At the same time the authors hold a view critical of individualism and its potentially conservative consequences; here a person cannot be grasped in isolation from social processes. One of their aims is an old Tajfellian objective: to re-establish the social in social psychology.

I will illustrate how the book works in order to point to both strengths and weaknesses. First the authors set out to describe the four theoretical positions. This alone is worth the price tag of the book; the descriptive work is done with clarity and without much fuss. Then they address a standard and central topic such as social perception (chapter 3). They show through the use of illustrative studies, prototypical theorists and various interpretations of research, how the four theoretical versions understand the topic of perception. In this case they show very tidily how mainstream views see categorisation and stereotyping as a form of simplification or heuristics in order to make cognitive overload more manageable. Often it is interpreted as automatically activated and inevitable. However for SIT, stereotypes enhance and elaborate (not simplify) perception, infusing threadbare categories with meaning. For Social Reps, categories (anchoring) emerge from groups and shared social identities and cannot be reduced to cognitive mechanisms alone. For discursive approaches neither categories nor stereotypes are cognitive phenomena inside the head / brain; rather people constitute stereotypes discursively in order to do certain things, such as blame, justify, exonerate. Categorisation is not an automatic natural phenomenon, but a flexible, and often inconsistent outcome of talk. The book does splendid work in demonstrating these contrasting and diverging ideas. The chapter summary boldly expresses these different

theoretical positions. That is one of the strengths of the book. But it does nothing with the divergences. That is a weakness. It simply reports differences in perspectives, and moves on to the following chapter.

If there are sharply diverging views, then how do we resolve them? Who is right and who is wrong? Or are they entirely incompatible “paradigms”, different “language games” that do not even speak of the same things? Are there any methodological or metatheoretical positions that would be able to arbitrate, or settle the matter? And if there are sharp divergences of the sort sketched above, then a simple theoretical integration is not possible without at least tackling impediments. Yet these sorts of issues are not tackled.

What **Social cognition** does do is lay a platform. It is carefully built, and the similarities and differences of four theoretical positions are solidly put together. It pulls together a good deal of work in an engaging and always readable presentation. The chapter on ideology (so often ignored) is particularly useful and well done. But the platform has to be built upon. Theoretical conflicts cannot be wished away by a generous appeal to integration. There is massive work for all of us. In the meanwhile we should thank Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue for their brave efforts.