# Toward a Unified Social Psychology:
# The Integrative Social Paradigm

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## Abstract

*The Integrative Social Paradigm (ISP) is introduced as a framework for social psychology. The model has an underlying assumption that there are four interrelated conceptual levels with which social psychology deals: 1) intra-psychic processes (e.g., social cognition, beliefs, attitudes), 2) interpersonal processes (e.g., ongoing interaction, behavioral exchange, communication), 3) group processes (e.g., group decision-making, conformity processes), and 4) personality variables (e.g., self-concept, need to belong, extraversion/introversion). The main postulate of the ISP is that humans are social organisms, and thus all psychological processes serve to facilitate group interaction. Specialization within social psychology should be tempered by an awareness of other perspectives and levels of analysis. Researchers must strive to integrate multiple levels of explanation for each research hypothesis.*

> At length did cross an Albatross,
> Through the fog it came;
> As if it had been a Christian soul,
> We hailed it in God's name.
>
> "God save thee, ancient Mariner!
> From the fields, that plague thee thus!—
> Why look'st thou so?"—With my crossbow
> I shot the ALBATROSS.
>
> Ah! well-a-day! what evil looks
> Had I from old and young!
> Instead of the cross, the Albatross
> About my neck was hung.

From "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Coleridge wrote of the heavenly albatross that came to save a lost ship by guiding it out of a fog. Unexplainably, an ancient mariner killed the albatross, assuring the ship of continued navigational woe.

Similarly, social psychology has renounced grand theoretical frameworks in favor of specialization.

Overly general paradigms are poor scientific tools, but so too are overly specific paradigms. An optimal combination of generality and specificity maximizes a researcher's ability to account for data as well as to enhance his or her ability to generate subsequent hypotheses of merit. In social psychology, those who err on the side of generality have been referred to as "lumpers" and those who err on the side of specificity have been referred to as "splitters." While specificity is desirable in understanding elements of human behavior, human behavior is complex. McGuire (1997) correctly asserted "every hypothesis is usually inadequate but occasionally adequate from some limited perspective, in some specific context" (p. 224). Thus, we can only hope to understand small parts of a larger model within a particular context. This being the nature of social psychological research, social psychologists should seek different perspectives and varying levels of specificity to uncover larger portions of social phenomena and their roles in more complex behaviors.

### Why Integrate?

Kenrick (2001) called for an integrative paradigm between cognitive science, dynamical systems, and evolutionary psychological perspectives. In describing the goal of such integration, he explained that "the ultimate reward maybe a comprehensive paradigm for psychology, fully integrating diverse empirical findings and mini-theories via the blended insights of evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, and dynamical systems theory" (p. 17).

Similarly, social psychologists should seek to create a framework that integrates the different conceptual levels of social psychology into an integrative paradigm. But what is the point of integration for social psychology's conceptual levels?

Kenrick and Trost (1989) suggested that social psychologists find their grand theory in the works of Charles Darwin. They suggested that social psychology and evolutionary biology each held perspectives that were convergent with regard to resource exchange and a selfish individual with regards to close heterosexual relationships. Cacioppo, Bernston, Sheridan, and McClintock (2000) viewed social and biological explanations as separate levels of analysis, and suggested that they be integrated to form a multilevel integrative analysis of human behavior called social neuroscience. Such integration can serve psychological researchers well in examining "how organismic processes are shaped, modulated, and modified by social factors and vice versa" (p. 839).

While biology has a great deal to offer to the field of social psychology, social psychology is rich with its own history, theories, concepts, and methods. Social psychologists can use biology to inform already existing social psychological theories.

Many social psychological phenomena can be explained by similar mechanisms. Tesser (2001) explained that dissonance reduction, self-affirmation, and social comparison could be explained by mechanisms that serve a unitary goal of maintaining self-esteem. He argued that the generality of substitutability was dependent on the role of an individual's affect. Such integration of theory and research cuts across social psychology's conceptual levels. Tesser's explanation subsumed several prominent mini-theories in social psychology.

Oftentimes researchers in various sectors of social psychology notice that similar research is conducted in other domains (i.e., sociology, marketing, etc.) (Thompson & Fine, 1999). Each of these perspectives could inform the other. For example, attitude researchers who study persuasion would be wise to examine the research conducted in groups on prediscussion opinions and group decisions. Conversely, it may not occur to a Professor of Economics who publishes in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* that an article published by an attitude researcher in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* could make a contribution to the professor's research program. If researchers do not look to the far reaches of their own field in their own specialty, then how are higher-level theories expected to truly integrate research findings and maximize the output of social psychology as a field?

The key to the success of social psychology is to create a perspective that integrates different conceptual levels of analysis while maintaining specializations. As a field, social psychology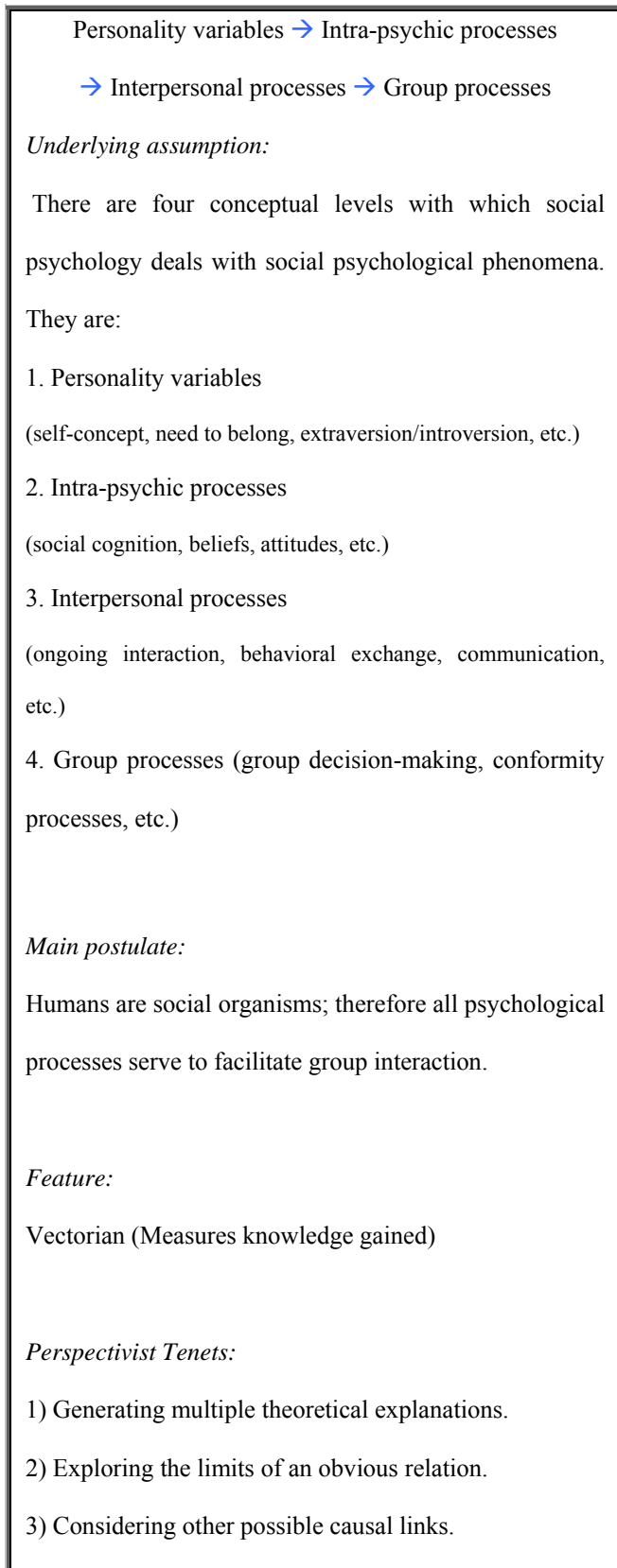 has strength through its diversity of research findings, theories, and methods. There are four different conceptual levels at which social psychology deals with social phenomena. They are intra-psychic processes, interpersonal processes, group processes, and personality variables. These four levels can be viewed as addressing distinct proximate issues, but one ultimate issue—human social behavior. The following conceptual model integrates the four conceptual levels of social psychology, and will be referred to as the Integrative Social Paradigm (ISP).

### *The Model*

The basic outline of the Integrative Social Paradigm (ISP) is shown in Figure 1. The model has an underlying assumption that there are four conceptual levels with which social psychology deals with social psychological phenomena. They are: 1) intra-psychic processes (such as social cognition, beliefs, attitudes, etc.), 2) interpersonal processes (such as ongoing interaction, behavioral exchange, communication, etc.), 3) group processes (such as group decision-making, conformity processes, etc.), and 4) personality variables (such as self-concept, need to belong, extraversion/introversion, etc.). Each conceptual level examines different facets of human social behavior and is related to the others. The main postulate of the ISP is that humans are social organisms, and thus all psychological processes serve to facilitate an individual's social interaction or group interaction.

Personality variables such as self-concept, the need to belong, and extraversion/introversion are tendencies that shape an individual's interactions with the individual's social world. Each individual has a unique set of personality tendencies and these personality tendencies are typically called individual differences. Taylor (1998) stated that much of the current personality research has begun to examine stabilities in how people construe situations and how these individual differences contribute to the accessibility of knowledge. The knowledge accessed subsequently leads to categorization of situations, and these categorizations serve as contextual cues for recalling a particular type of behavior that is deemed appropriate for the situation. Taylor noted that a social view of personality yields two benefits. First, we gain information about the contexts under which dispositions can serve as references for behavior. Second, we gain information about when situations can override dispositions. For example, Higgins (1996) suggested that an individual's motivational conditions and situational constraints would cause variations in his or her specific self-regulatory strategies. Thus, personality research cannot be useful without taking the situation into account.

Figure 1.Integrative Social Paradigm (ISP)

Personality variables → Intra-psychic processes

→ Interpersonal processes → Group processes

*Underlying assumption:*

There are four conceptual levels with which social

psychology deals with social psychological phenomena.

They are:

1. Personality variables

(self-concept, need to belong, extraversion/introversion, etc.)

2. Intra-psychic processes

(social cognition, beliefs, attitudes, etc.)

3. Interpersonal processes

(ongoing interaction, behavioral exchange, communication,

etc.)

4. Group processes (group decision-making, conformity

processes, etc.)

*Main postulate:*

Humans are social organisms; therefore all psychological

processes serve to facilitate group interaction.

*Feature:*

Vectorian (Measures knowledge gained)

*Perspectivist Tenets:*

1) Generating multiple theoretical explanations.

2) Exploring the limits of an obvious relation.

3) Considering other possible causal links.

Jones (1985) believed that strict personality psychologists and strict social psychologists need each other to gain "precision in the prediction of decisions and choices in the complex natural environment" (p. 50). Thus, personality and social research exist in symbiosis. Ross and Nisbett (1991) agreed, and explained that how an individual perceives a situation (construal) must be taken into account in addition to Lewin's situationism (which dictates that social context either produces or constrains behavior). Thus, intra-psychic processes such as social cognition, beliefs, and attitudes shape the application of the personality tendencies to the individual's social world. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) proposed that an individual may or may not even have insight into these introspective processes. This implies that much of the influence of the personality tendencies on intra-psychic processes manifests itself in the form of subtle biases in information processing.

Interpersonal processes such as ongoing interaction, behavioral exchange, and communication are the basis of social behavior—they are an individual's application of his or her own psychological content (personality tendencies and intra-psychic processes) to another person. The work of Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, and Howard (1997) serves as an example of the interface of personality, intra-psychic processes, and interpersonal processes. Dovidio et al. found that White participants' interactions with a Black experimenter could be differentially impacted by implicit racial attitudes and explicit racial attitudes. Being "White" or "Black" most likely had some bearing on personality with the self-concept variable, as Devine (1989) has shown that both Whites and Blacks are aware of stereotypes about Blacks. From this, it follows that the presence of a Black experimenter would at the very least facilitate in-group and out-group distinctions as the Black stereotype is primed and at a minimum a White stereotype of "not Black" would be activated. After this initial categorization, implicit and explicit racial attitudes are primed and influence various forms of behavior (i.e., explicit attitudes influenced evaluation, implicit attitudes influenced nonverbal behavior). In fact, in such interactions it is found that a Black experimenter responds with more hostility to the White's implicit negative stereotype of Blacks because the White presents hostile nonverbal cues upon the stereotype's activation, and thus the Black responds in kind to the White's unknowing affront. In this example, personality tendencies contributed to intra-psychic processes, which contributed to interpersonal processes.

Ultimately, the human experience is a series of interactions with groups of other humans. Group processes, such as group decision-making and

conformity processes, are where an individual takes his or her psychological content and uses the interpersonal processes that they have developed to interact with the social group. Gigone and Hastie (1996) found that people tend to make their own decisions based on the information that is available to the group. Basically, an individual takes his or her prediscussion opinions and attitudes and uses them to evaluate the information that the group presents, ultimately contributing an individual decision to the group's decision.

The relationship of the four conceptual levels of social psychological phenomena is evident in the work of Larson, Christensen, Franz, and Abbot (1998). They discussed a dual-process model in which prediscussion opinions mediate the impact of shared information on group discussion and group discussion itself mediates the impact of unshared information. Thus, prediscussion opinions and attitudes impact the selection of information to be shared in group discussion. The discussion that follows guides the selection of unshared information to be shared. Finally, consistent with Gigone and Hastie (1996), individuals make their own decisions based on the information that the group discussion yielded.

Thus, the four conceptual levels of social psychological phenomena are interrelated. They examine different facets of human behavior. Human behavior is studied in psychology, but what does human behavior do? The ISP answers this question in a simple postulate that ties the model together.

*Main Postulate.* The main postulate of ISP is that humans are social organisms, and therefore all psychological processes serve to facilitate group interaction. The social nature of humans is well-documented, and humans have even been viewed as living in herds (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). Taylor et al. (2000) commented on the usefulness of a group for survival, and noted "those who made effective use of the social group would have been more successful against many threats than those who did not" (p. 412). As evidence that humans are oriented toward the group, attachment has been proposed as an evolved mechanism that serves to orient an individual to a group (Feeney, Noller, & Roberts, 2000). Thus, it stands to reason that all psychological processes serve to facilitate group interaction and ultimately the survival of the individual.

*Feature.* Gilbert (1999) explained the differences between fragmentary science and vectorian science. Fragmentary science views scientific progress as ranging on a continuum from perfect ignorance to perfect knowledge, and measures the distance traveled (knowledge gained) in relationship to the distance remaining (knowledge remaining). Vectorian science views scientific progress as ranging on a continuum from perfect ignorance to imperfect ignorance, and concedes that we will never know everything. It measures success in terms of distance traveled (knowledge gained). Gilbert advocated the use of a vectorian perspective of psychological science.

Programmatic research from the ISP perspective will be vectorian. It will serve to measure its success by knowledge gained. As there is no demonstrably ultimate ending of perfect knowledge, it is futile to seek out such a goal. There will be no unified theory of social psychology that has all of the answers and is "correct," however there will be some comprehensive theories that are better, more robust, and allow more flexibility in the face of changing zeitgeists than others. For instance, if the ISP is found to be a strong, useful paradigm, then it has contributed to science. If it is flexible enough to use to view social psychological research questions even after zeitgeists change in the field (i.e., from group processes to motivation, from motivation to cognition, from cognition to the self, etc.), then ISP will prove to be a powerful research tool.

*Perspectivist Tenets.* McGuire (1997) proposed several relevant ideas from perspectivist epistemology that could be implemented into the ISP. Among them are: 1) generating multiple theoretical explanations, 2) exploring the limits of an obvious relation, and 3) considering other possible causal links. These form the perspectivist tenets of the ISP, and serve to strengthen the social psychologist's theorizing through the availability of information that relates the same social psychological phenomenon to a variety of knowledge bases. A researcher with multiple lines of research at his or her disposal has more explanatory power than one with a limited resource.

By generating multiple theoretical explanations, social psychologists can be more certain that they are appropriately explaining the processes they believe they are explaining. Hendrick and Jones (1972) noted that conceptual variables are difficult to measure and oftentimes researchers do not measure what they believe that they measure. Responsible researchers should generate multiple theories from the separate conceptual levels of social psychology in their explanation of a social psychological phenomenon. As a hypothetical example, primed attitudes (intra-psychic level) may not be to blame for social interaction differences (interpersonal processes) in Dovidio et al. (1997), but it may be in fact that a personality variable contributes. The point is that generating multiple theories only serves to strengthen the explanation that best accounts for a social psychological phenomenon. If it is a good explanation, then testing the alternatives should not detract from the robust explanation. If an alternative is better, then the alternative should be examined and tested. Importantly, a possible answer to

a research question should be subsequently met with additional research questions.

Researchers should also explore the limits of an obvious relation and consider other possible causal links. Petty (1996) argued that a single process assumption (that there is one explanation for why an outcome occurs) rarely captures human social behavior in an appropriate manner. Rather than debating single versus multiple effects of variables and single versus multiple process models, researchers should strive to create a "coherent theory of the variable" (p. 19) that uses multiple processes to account for multiple effects and specifies conditions under which all of this occurs. Scientists should exhaustively examine the problem when conducting research and answering research questions.

### Training Researchers

Arie Kruglanski (2001) suggested that social psychology teach the art of theorizing as part of its training regiment. The idea is that if art can be taught to art students, and if theorizing can be taught to physicists, then social psychologists should be trained to generate theories within their field. Kruglanski lamented that the social psychological research is "profoundly phenomenon driven rather than theory driven" (p. 874). This may be a byproduct of researchers not generating quality theories due to a failure to examine multiple conceptual levels when generating hypotheses and developing theories.

Kruglanski (2001) also stated "There is nothing scientifically or philosophically wrong with sweeping or abstract theorizing. The issue is psychological rather than philosophical: Does one have the guts, is one prepared to take the risk?" (p. 872). This challenge should be accepted by social psychologists. Schools should scramble to create training opportunities in theory-building for social psychologists. The Society for Personality and Social Psychology should seek grant money for theory-building seminars. The ISP is the type of paradigm with which young social psychologists should receive graduate training before entering the field.

### Let's Lump and Split

In order to best conduct social psychological research, we must consider alternative perspectives when generating hypotheses. This is best accomplished by varying the level at which the researcher conceptualizes the research problem. Social psychology has a relatively lengthy (compared to some other psychological subfields) body of research at its disposal, much of which was developed in other subfields (e.g., sociology). Social psychologists are fortunate to have a field that has brought together such diverse perspectives early in its history. This has provided social psychology researchers with the opportunity to use these various conceptual levels to their advantage in the pursuit of scientific progress.

What the ISP proposes is that social psychologists have their cake and eat it too—that they lump *and* split. It is impossible to know all of the findings and their implications in psychology with any worthy degree of intimacy. The field as a whole progresses best when researchers are allowed to specialize. However, the specialization of research does not exonerate researchers from having to be aware of outside, related research that can inform their research programs. Rather, specialization is an added burden for each researcher, who gains the increased responsibility of being familiar with related research while also knowing his or her own field with maximum intimacy. In regard to specific domains, McGlynn (1987) proposed that social, clinical, and counseling psychologists become acquainted with each other's research.

The proposed theoretical framework makes no pretense of simplification in social psychological research and is not reductionistic. The ISP seeks to maintain current specialization of research programs while seeking to expand the levels at which researchers think when answering research questions and generating theories, etc. Social psychology emerged with very general theories and ultimately moved into specialization. It began by examining group processes and ultimately moved into the study of the individual, thanks in part to Floyd Allport's notion that groups were merely the sum of individuals. This set psychology into a mode of studying an individual's behavior, and the field had largely forgotten Lewin's situationism until Ross and Nisbett began to reign the field back in. The overspecialization of social psychology is a detriment to scientific progress if it is not tempered by an awareness of other perspectives and levels of analysis. It is not sufficient to be merely aware, but researchers must strive to integrate multiple levels of explanation for each research hypothesis. The ISP seeks to guide the field of social psychology out of the "fog" of mini-theories and overly specific paradigms. Social psychology must create a unified model with which to explain its findings (Markus, 2004). Time will tell if the ISP is the albatross or the mariner.

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