1 INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERRELATED PROCESSES OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

In the fall of 1960, a cohort of young women arrived at Spelman College, a historically Black women's college in Atlanta, Georgia. These 16-, 17-, and 18-year-old recent high school graduates came from a variety of states, seeking fulfillment of the promise of higher education as a means to better their lives. Their largely middle-class families anticipated that their daughters would adjust to life away from home, attend classes, join campus clubs, choose a major, prepare themselves for future careers, and, perhaps, date Morehouse College men. Their college years began on the eve of the civil rights movement, which would transform not only the history of the United States but also the personal lives of these young African American women.

Foot Soldiers: Class of 1964 documents their freshman-year journey and beyond.[1] Arriving from mixed neighborhoods in the North or from segregated ones in the South, these women identified their entire lives as "colored." For those arriving in the southern city for the first time, signs directing them to "colored only" restaurants, store entrances, and bathrooms were unsettling. For others, such symbols of segregation characterized their lifetime experience. For nearly all, their parents had sternly admonished them not to participate in the sort of protests launched a year earlier in Greensboro, North Carolina, when four African American college students refused to vacate seats at a "whites only" lunch counter.

Despite their parents' seeming acquiescence to the existing system of inequality and instructions to their daughters to focus on their studies and remain distant from the unrest, these young women chose another pathway. Taking cues from upper-class students at their college, they asked, "Why do people hate me? They don't know me." They wondered, "Why should people like me be steadily and squarely confronted with discrimination in daily interactions in public places such as stores, restaurants, and other businesses solely for the color of their skin?" Ultimately, they joined the coordinated civil rights protests sweeping the American South.

They picketed. They attended sit-ins. They suffered the wrath of Ku Klux Klan members, police, and even whites who simply feared challenges to the long-standing Jim Crow laws. Yet through nonviolent means, they conveyed their determination and commitment to challenge the existing system of racial inequality and to persuade powerholders to make significant changes. In effect, these young women came to recognize the injustice of discriminatory segregation and to question the legitimacy of the system that permitted such discrimination. Their actions, along with those of many others, including high-status (white) people in positions of power, spurred the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The story of the Spelman women highlights individual-level processes that combine to shape an understanding of a situation, the actions of single as well as multiple individuals

within a particular context, and the consequences of their endeavors that pave the pathway for further social dynamics—and, in the case of the civil rights protest, reshape history. This book focuses on such individual-level processes, embedded in and shaped by the social context, that have consequences for larger groups.

The Spelman freshmen might have thought of themselves in terms of who they are (e.g., colored, high school graduate, Christian) and what they might become (certainly college student but also, perhaps, teacher, civil servant, nurse, or lawyer). These identities, plus their backgrounds and previous experiences, directed their attention to information in their environment about an array of factors, including the beliefs and actions of others, as well as the places to which they had access and those from which they were prohibited. They may have processed that information in different ways, automatically with little conscious effort by relying on existing beliefs, or in a more controlled fashion, taking into account their goals, weighing arguments from their peers and from their parents, considering the benefits and costs of different strategies of action. Certainly, they were exposed to radical ideas about challenging the system by the upper-class women. In their efforts to be similar to and respected by Spelman juniors and seniors, the young freshmen adopted the upper-class students' beliefs about the unfairness of any system allowing discrimination. The emergence of new attitudes among the freshmen—distinct from those of their parents—may have resulted from explicit acts of persuasion or by subtle influence processes owing to the higher status of the women closer to achieving their degrees.

Moreover, they may have experienced an array of emotions associated with new identities and attitudes: indignation in response to (long-standing as well as recent) encounters with discrimination, excitement about joining the protest movement, or frustration at the slow pace of social change but also hope for securing legal changes ensuring civil rights. New attitudes and felt emotions, in turn, propelled participation in various protests, where encounters with more powerful others (e.g., city administrators, police) unfolded. The protests clearly pitted groups, defined by skin color, against each other. Thus, while individual-level processes may have led to (collective) action, as representatives of different groups, the encounters extended beyond the individual to characterize intergroup dynamics as well.

Identity processes, information processing, attitudes, emotions, behaviors, dynamics of status and power, evaluations of fairness, and intergroup processes capture individuals and their relationships to society. These relationships form the core of the domain of social psychology, which *involves the systematic study of the influence of the real, imagined, and implied presence of others on an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors* (Allport 1954). While it is certainly the case that actual others in our environments may encourage us to do some things we ordinarily might not do—like join a protest movement—this definition also allows for the possibility that those not present may have a similar effect. For example, we think about what our rabbi, minister, or imam might want us to do if we witness acts of discrimination. The teachings of our faith or the demands of our moral compass, developed through exposure to the beliefs of our parents, teachers, community leaders, media outlets, and so forth, may influence our actions even though none of the representatives of those groups are present. In this way, influence extends beyond the dynamics between individuals to also include the effect of groups and elements of history and culture (Aronson and Aronson 2018).

While the definition of social psychology seems to propose a unidirectional impact of other people, resources and opportunities, and cultural frameworks on the individual,

as the Spelman example suggests, individuals also influence the social group, the society even, to which they belong. Emphasis in social psychology ultimately rests on the *interaction among individuals, between an individual and a group, or among groups, ensconced in a particular social context, which gives meaning to unfolding behavior.* Research in the area explicates these dynamic processes. Given that people believe, perceive, feel, and act, what social psychology examines pervades many of our routine endeavors. For instance, think about how we meet new people and develop new relationships; defer to our bosses at work; cheer for the home team at a basketball game; stifle our anger toward a teacher scheduling a test the day before Thanksgiving; buy vegetables from the same vendor at the farmer's market even though the number of vendors has expanded; and contribute to reducing our carbon footprint through recycling and conservation activities, which, collectively, helps to reduce the threat of climate change.

Social psychological theoretical approaches pertain to these instances and a wide variety of other concrete social situations. Thus, it should not be difficult to apply the theoretical arguments introduced in the coming chapters to your own experiences and social interactions. For each chapter, we begin with a concrete example, drawn from history, fiction, or current institutional practices. (We also offer an array of additional examples throughout the book, some drawing on our own experiences. For those, we refer to ourselves as Karen or Cathy.) And while each chapter may stand alone, together they weave a story of how individuals come to perceive and act in their social worlds. That weaving involves exploration of key social psychological processes that help us to understand how people construct their realities and ways of doing things in everyday interaction.

Additionally, the story that we develop is one that provides a basis for understanding how even individual actions may contribute to upholding a particular set of social arrangements or, as in the case of the Spelman women, contribute to changing those social arrangements. Our fundamental goal is *to illustrate how individual-level processes contribute to explaining processes of social inequality related to class, race, gender, disability, and so forth within social groups and organizations* (see McLeod, Lawler, and Schwalbe 2014). Generally, we think of **social inequality** as a state of affairs involving an uneven distribution of resources or opportunities in society, creating patterns along lines of socially distinguished groups of people. For example, even though many of the Spelman freshmen in 1960 came from middle-class families, in their everyday encounters, they could readily discern that "colored" people like themselves had fewer opportunities than the white people they encountered. Similarly, being of middle-class standing in terms of family income or wealth is often accompanied by access to particular schools, financial institutions, or even after-school activities to which those who live in poverty are denied. Individuals' positions in a stratified hierarchy in a given society affect how their life changes and how they experience social life.

Sociologists have long discussed causes, consequences, and durability of inequalities based on income, race, gender, and so forth (Neckerman and Torche 2007). Structural factors, stemming from economic, educational, and political arrangements, that affect competition over resources, conflict between social groups, or even repression of members of certain groups stimulate inequalities. Cultural beliefs regarding what entitles people to resources and opportunities further reinforce these inequalities (Valentino and Vaisey 2022). As noted by McLeod, Lawler, et al. (2014:v), inequality also stems from "subtle (and sometimes unconscious processes) of exclusion, othering, and devaluation" and that "sociological social psychologists share a common interest in analyzing how, why, and

under what conditions people come to be seen as different and, as a consequence, to be given unequal access to valued society resources." Thus, as we introduce you to the substance of social psychology, we highlight how fundamental individual-level processes help to create and maintain social inequality as well as how they provide means to stimulate social change to address long-standing inequalities. Beyond this fundamental goal, several key themes also pervade the book.

ROOTS, OVERVIEW, AND KEY THEMES

The definition of **social psychology** presumes that individual-level processes are studied systematically, through social scientific methods. Throughout the book, we refer to patterns of findings that corroborate underlying assumptions of and hypotheses derived from social psychological theorizing in a variety of substantive areas. We offer a primer on such methods in Chapter 2. These methods transcend the roots of social psychology, which is at the intersection of two scientific disciplines. Some areas within social psychology may seem akin to psychology, which emphasizes the individual per se, as exemplified by attention to "internal" processing leading to the development of perceptions, attitudes, emotions, and individual behavior. Psychologists also tend to focus on differences among individuals, owing to personality factors or personal experiences rather than more general group structures or cultural beliefs. The impact of the latter falls under the rubric of a more sociological approach to social psychology. Sociology involves the systematic study of society, including institutions represented in economic, political, and cultural spheres. More sociologically oriented social psychology highlights the importance of social stimuli present in a particular context or implied by larger social factors such as socioeconomic status, minority group status, or social roles. Regardless of the disciplinary source of a particular social psychological process, we seek to elaborate on the connection between the individual and society, where society both influences and is influenced by the individual. As follows we offer you a preview of the book. (We do not pause to define every concept, as each chapter will offer such definitions!)

We begin with a focus on what is uniquely human (compared to other animals): how **individuals construct their social worlds** and how they acquire a sense of themselves (Chapter 3). Such construction provides the basis of meaning. The social self, as Chapter 4 illustrates, consists of multiple **identities** based on who we are, to whom we are connected, and what we do. These identities affect how people perceive social stimuli in situations, make choices, and interact with others. Individuals' perceptions also depend upon background factors and existing beliefs, salience of contextual features, and the like. Such **social cognitions** (Chapter 5) along with **attitudes** that capture our positive or negative assessments of stimuli in our environments (Chapter 6) prompt various individual behaviors as well as the way interaction unfolds. We recognize, however, that people are more than perceivers. They also experience an array of **emotions** (Chapter 7), which likewise fuel action, though sometimes what is felt might not be displayed to others for fear of negative consequences. Constraints on emotional expressions may stem from characteristics of the structure of the relationships in which individuals are embedded. Thus, we examine structural features of groups, defined in terms of **status** (Chapter 8) and **power** (Chapter 9) differences in relationships. Such features shape meanings, perceptions, and emotions and drive behavior. As we will illustrate, status and power processes often reinforce the status

quo of relationships—that is, maintaining existing structural relationships. Evaluations of the **legitimacy** (Chapter 10) and **justice** (Chapter 11) of such structures and the interactions that they cultivate may reinforce the status quo or provide a means to challenge it. The dynamics of perceptual, emotional, structural, and evaluative processes move beyond intragroup processes and extend to **intergroup processes** (Chapter 12) as well.

In our explanations of these social processes, we make an assumption about the nature of the individual, an issue beyond the formal definition of social psychology. We recognize individuals as biological creatures who believe, perceive, feel, and act. Given advances in the past 25 years in identifying biological markers and using neuroimaging techniques, when appropriate, we signal linkages to biophysical or neurological processes underlying the means by which people process information, experience emotions, determine fairness, and the like. Beyond our reliance on systematic research bolstering the understanding of processes involving biological beings, we stress three themes that capture the reciprocal influence between the individual and society and tie together chapters of the book.

There is no single, overarching theory of social psychology. As the description of the chapters of the book suggest, a number of perspectives address different substantive aspects of believing, perceiving, feeling, and behaving. Thus, our first key theme is that those "*areas*" *of social psychology are interrelated*, and we attempt to present them as such in this book. For example, when the Spelman freshmen took on the new identity of protester or civil rights activist, they deviated from the routine activities that accompany the identity of student and in so doing created implications for racial dynamics in the city of Atlanta. Some chapters focus largely on individual-level internal processes, whereas others emphasize the context in which the individual is embedded, described by the structural elements of the group or dynamics between groups. Both are necessary for an understanding of social dynamics.

Indeed, the second theme stresses that *individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors depend upon the social context.* We frequently note that individuals attend to situational information or are embedded in status and power structures. Of course, it is possible that certain behaviors may be disallowed in particular contexts. While it may be acceptable to break down in tears at a funeral, doing so during a college class might be considered inappropriate. Also, it is important to determine *how* patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors vary by different contextual factors. For example, upper-class women at Spelman may have exerted more influence than parents on the freshmen only if the newcomers to the school wished to gain the respect of the juniors and seniors. If they cared less about what the upper-class women thought of them, then the first-year students may have been more likely to heed the advice of their parents to stay away from the protests. In other words, situational factors *condition* or moderate patterns of beliefs, perceptions, feelings, and behaviors. Such factors may stem from cultural dimensions, and thus, when appropriate, we highlight cross-cultural differences in substantive patterns.

Given our goal of illustrating the impact of individual-level processes on patterns of social inequality related to class, race, gender, disability, and the like, our third key theme is that *social psychological processes act as a micro- or individual-level foundation for macro- or group-level phenomena*, such as group structures, organizational cultures, health inequalities, educational patterns, crime rates, social movements, or large-scale social processes in general. Social psychology identifies mechanisms by which individuals sort themselves into categories relevant to the structure of groups or patterns of beliefs representing how an organization or institution carries out its tasks. Social psychological mechanisms also

may account for why certain diseases are more prominent for Black Americans than whites or why certain groups of children do better in school than others.

For example, members of resource-disadvantaged racial groups, compared to whites, are, on average, exposed to greater stresses, a form of negative emotional response to a situation, often stemming from discriminatory interactions; higher levels of stress suppress immune systems and thereby result in the greater likelihood of particular diseases (see McLeod, Erving, and Caputo 2014). In a similar vein, Lareau (2011) illustrates how the belief systems and opportunity structures of parents, defined in terms of class and race, affect the interaction dynamics between parents and their children, which in turn shape children's outlooks and achievements. Despite the unequivocal goals of all parents to raise happy and healthy children, middle-class parents, regardless of race, have more resources to develop children's skills through organized and supervised activities. They are also more likely to encourage language development and reasoning. In contrast, working-class and poor families rely more heavily on the spontaneous growth of their children, assuming that they will gain what they need by engagement with other children independent of organized activities and through parental directives (rather than reasoning). As a consequence, children of the middle (and upper) class grow better equipped to navigate social institutions and meet the demands for critical thinking skills necessary to achieve in college. Colleges are "middle- to upper-class" institutions, and students from poor and working-class backgrounds have more to navigate as they learn the rules and norms of institutions of higher education. In effect, these examples illustrate how micro-level dynamics carry implications for reinforcing social inequalities.

SEGUE: MOVING FROM THE CONTENT OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY TO THE MEANS OF STUDYING IT

The social psychological processes detailed in this book provide different lenses through which you might examine the stories told by the Spelman women in the class of 1964. For example, you might want to focus on how their identities shifted from simply college student to civil rights protester. Alternatively, you could ask questions about what they were thinking during this time and, in this historical context, how they came to decide to join the protests despite the threat of arrest. Doing so may reveal motivations and information that they considered relevant to their decisions to participate. While the documentary film illustrates the viewpoint of the protest participants, what about students who may have believed strongly in civil rights but failed to participate in any sit-ins? How could their behaviors be so inconsistent with their attitudes? Did they not feel the same anger (and fear) as their peers? Were they constrained by the power that their parents or perhaps school administrators wielded over them? You might further wonder how, over 60 years later, the United States still witnesses discriminatory actions in the workplace, in communities, and on the street and spurs students and others to join movements such as Black Lives Matter. What has changed or failed to change to allow the maintenance of inequalities among racial groups? These questions that are focused on a particular historical event, however, transcend the time period. They refer to more abstract issues regarding identity processes, social perceptions, the attitude–behavior relationship, the impact of status or power structures on behavior, intergroup dynamics, and the like. Importantly, thinking abstractly allows consideration of an array of similar concrete issues and the strategies to address them.

As a scientific endeavor, social psychology seeks to bring evidence to bear on questions such as these, posed at both the abstract and concrete levels of analysis. The nature of the question directs attention to the kind of evidence or data relevant to answering it. It is not enough to simply rely upon opinions or hunches, though they may be starting points for thinking about particular issues. Ultimately, it is necessary to do the hard work of collecting and analyzing relevant data. In the next chapter, we outline the scientific method of developing theoretical ideas and testing them using different approaches, including experimentation, surveys, and observations.

END NOTE

1. *Foot Soldiers: Class of 1964*, created and executive produced by Dr. Georgianne Thomas, written, produced, and directed by Alvelyn Sanders (Atlanta, GA: Crawford Media Services, 2012); see https://footsoldiers1964.com/. It was the winner of the Pan African Film Festival–Los Angeles 2013 Best Short Documentary.

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