Chapter 1: What is Social Psychology?

Roots of social influence
- As far as we know, Aristotle was the first to formulate principles of social influence and persuasion
- Aristotle said that man is a "social animal"
- What does it mean to say man is a social animal?
  - See examples on pp. 1-4

Definition of social psychology
- There are many definitions
- SOCIAL INFLUENCE is key
- The influences that people have upon the beliefs and behavior of others

Concerns of social psychology
- How are people influenced?
- Why do people accept influence? (what’s in it for them?)
- What variables increase and decrease the effectiveness of social influence?
- Is the effect permanent or transitory?
- Do the same principles apply to everyone?
Amateur psychologists

- All human beings interact with other human beings so we naturally develop hypotheses about social behavior
- We “test” these hypotheses to our own satisfaction, but it’s not as rigorous and impartial as with careful scientific investigation

Hindsight bias

- This is the tendency to overestimate our ability to predict events, once we know the outcome of an event
- This is one of the reasons that we do experiments even though some of the results may not be surprising
- Everyone is susceptible to this bias – i.e. stating after the game is over that “I knew it all along” that __ team would win.
  – We would’ve given a less accurate prediction before the results were known

Professional psychologists

- Scientific research applies more rigor and impartiality to tests of hypotheses
- Research often demonstrates things we already “know” to be true
- However, when carefully investigated, some things we “know” turn out not to be true
- This is another one of the reasons that we do research

Controlled experimentation

- Professional psychologists have a big advantage over amateurs because they can conduct experiments which control events and draw conclusions based on precise data
- Both amateurs and researchers begin with observation, however, researchers test the hypotheses rather than wait to see/observe how people respond
  – Can create the situation to see what happens and control the influence of irrelevant factors to study the area of interest
Situational effects

- Social psychologists study social situations that affect human behavior.
- Sometimes these situations elicit behavior that appears abnormal.
- We conclude that the abnormal behavior is a result of situational pressures, not a deviant personality (dispositional).
- Aronson’s first law: People who do crazy things are not necessarily crazy.

Susceptibility

- We tend to underestimate our own susceptibility to situational factors.
- People have the tendency to explain unpleasant behavior by attaching a label to the perpetrator (i.e. “crazy,” etc.) and separating out that person from the rest of “us nice people.”
- This impacts on our thinking about social problems, such as racism.

Situational variables are key

- In order to have a functional approach to social problems, it is of paramount importance to understand the impact of situational variables that produce destructive behavior.