



9. The sociocultural level of analysis

Human behaviour can be fully understood only in the social context. Sociocultural research studies how people think about themselves and other people. The main areas of study in social psychology are:

- the way we make sense of the world around us through attribution
- how and why we conform to social norms
- how individuals behave in groups
- the effect of culture on the behaviour of the individual
- how we learn from our environment.

Learning outcomes

The learning outcomes for this core area of study are given below. They state what you should be able to do after studying this core area.

General learning outcomes

- Outline principles that define the sociocultural level of analysis.
- Explain how principles that define the sociocultural level of analysis may be demonstrated in research.
- Discuss how and why particular research methods are used at the sociocultural level of analysis.
- Discuss ethical considerations related to research studies at the sociocultural level of analysis.

Sociocultural cognition

- Describe the role of situational and dispositional factors in explaining behaviour.
- Discuss two errors in attributions.
- Evaluate social identity theory, making reference to relevant studies.
- Explain the formation of stereotypes and their effect on behaviour.

Social norms

- Explain social learning theory, making reference to two relevant studies.
- Discuss the use of compliance techniques.
- Evaluate research on conformity to group norms.
- Discuss factors influencing conformity.

Cultural norms

- Define the terms “culture” and “cultural norms”.
- Examine the role of two cultural dimensions on behaviour.
- Use one or more examples to explain “emic” and “etic” concepts.

Essential definitions

Attribution is how individuals explain causes of events, others' behaviour, and their own behaviour.

Compliance means adapting one's actions because of perceived pressure to respond to a request.

Conformity is the process by which a member of a group will adjust their attitudes and behaviours to fit the views of the group although the situation doesn't exert direct pressure. There are many reasons why people conform including a need to be accepted by the group or avoiding criticism from others.

Cultural dimensions are distinct value constructs that serve to distinguish one culture from another. The cultural dimensions model developed by Hofstede was based on an extensive study of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture.

Cultural norms are shared and integrated patterns of beliefs and practices that characterize a cultural group. They are transmitted across generations and regulate behaviour in accordance with the group's unique system.

Culture is usually defined as a cumulative set of knowledge, experiences, beliefs and behaviours shared by a group. Culture provides an ordered system of meaning and symbols that helps human beings interpret their experience and guide their social interaction.

Dispositional factors are internal factors that help us explain human behaviour by focusing on characteristics within the individual, for example, an individual's attitude or personality.

Emic concepts are accounts, descriptions and explanations used to understand a culture the way its members understand it, to learn the concepts they use and to try to see the world in the way they do.

Errors in attribution tend to arise because people tend to prefer certain explanations when trying to understand why things happen in the social world.

Etic concepts are accounts and explanations used to understand a culture in scientific terms, by comparing the culture to others and addressing the universals of human behaviour.

Group norms are important regulators of human behaviour since members of a group tend to agree with the group norm. Norms can be defined as a generally accepted way of thinking or behaving in the group.

Situational factors are outside factors coming from the environment or culture that help us explain human behaviour, for example, rewards coming from the immediate environment or indirect pressure to follow the majority.

Social identity theory suggests all individuals belong to a group and are likely to derive their sense of identity, at least in part, from that group. Individuals try to improve their self-esteem by making comparisons with out-groups.

Social learning theory assumes people can learn by observing the behaviour of others and the outcomes of those behaviours, without necessarily repeating those behaviours.

Stereotypes are schemas stemming from applying generalized characteristics or motives to a group of individuals, giving the same characteristics to all people in the group, regardless of the individual characteristics actually present.

Suggestions for addressing the learning outcomes

Principles of the sociocultural level of analysis

- As human beings we are constantly influenced by other people or by requirements of society, even when we think we are acting independently.
- Human behaviour is explained by both social factors and dispositional factors.
- Human beings are social animals and need others for survival.
- Humans have an individual and social identity.

Tajfel's Kandinsky or Klee study (1971).

Principle: Humans have an individual and social identity.

Research method: Experiment, independent samples design.

Tajfel presented a group of boys aged 14–15 years old with 12 slides representing different paintings. Half of the pictures were painted by Kandinsky and the other half by Klee. The boys were asked which paintings they preferred. In an independent samples design experiment, Tajfel randomly assigned 48 boys to 2 groups. The boys thought the grouping was based on their preference for the art of Kandinsky or Klee. Every boy was asked to award points to two boys, one from their own group and one from the other group. Tajfel found that the boys generally awarded more points to members of their own group and tended to make choices that maximized the difference between the profits of the two groups, favouring members of their group. These results suggest boys tended to identify with their group and created a positive social identity by giving their group more points.

Research methods used at the sociocultural level of analysis

- Experiments: Sherif's autokinetic effect illusion study; Asch's study (1951), Bandura et al (1961); Cialdini et al (1974) on the effect of low-balling in a university setting; Parke et al (1977) on the effect of media violence.
- Interview: Mead interviewed 68 young females aged from 9 to 20 on Samoa. Findings from interviews suggested that the passage from childhood to adulthood (adolescence) is a smooth transition.
- Observations: Karen O'Reilly's (2000) qualitative study of British residents on the Costa del Sol in which she used overt observation as one of the methods in her study to gain information about the interaction with Spanish people as well as naturally occurring discussions about integration and language learning; Leon Festinger's (1956) covert observation of a religious cult that believed the world would come to an end.
- Case study method: Janis's study of groupthink (1971). He studied retrospective accounts of individuals close to the decision-making process in several policy decisions.

Ethical considerations at the sociocultural level of analysis

Ethical considerations are relatively the same at each level of analysis, although there are a few that are of particular relevance to the sociocultural level of analysis.

- In some studies participants have experienced high levels of stress that could have been avoided.
- Carrying out covert observations violates the participants' right to informed consent.
- Researchers sometimes use deception about various aspects of the study. Deception is necessary in studies examining socially sensitive topics in order to combat biases such as the social desirability bias and demand characteristics, and to produce valid results. Often, participants are misled about what they believe will happen to them. The consequences of deception can be benign, but can also be extremely stressful.
- The common use of focus groups can lead to problems with confidentiality of a participant's response.
- Reporting findings from etic studies may lead to stereotyped images of certain cultures.

Role of situational and dispositional factors in explaining behaviour

One of the great debates of social psychology is to what extent one's behaviour is determined by dispositional factors, such as one's personality, or determined by situational factors. Often we attribute one's behaviour to dispositional factors, when in fact situational factors may play a more important role. For example, a student may not be doing poorly in class because he is lazy (a disposition), but because he is having problems at home (situational).

- Hartshorne and May (1928).

The researchers conducted a study on honesty in schoolchildren. Children were put in a number of situations in which they had a chance to be dishonest and believed they would not be detected. For example, they were given money to play with that they could have kept; they were asked to report about work done at home; or they were observed taking tests to see who would cheat and who would not. The children were neither consistently honest nor consistently dishonest. This argues that honesty is not a dispositional factor, but is rather influenced by the situation.

- Asch (1951).
- Zimbardo's Stanford prison study.
- Piliavin's (1969) Good Samaritan study.

Errors in attribution

For your exam you have to prepare two errors in attribution. There are several possible attribution errors that you could study but the most common are actor–observer bias, defensive attribution bias, fundamental attribution error and self-serving bias.

- Harre, Brandt and Houkamau (2004): Examination of the actor–observer effect in young drivers' attributions for their own and their friends' risky driving.

Open-ended questions were used to obtain the attributions of 70 young drivers for their own as well as their friends' risky driving behaviour. The aim of the study was to determine if there were self–other differences consistent with the actor–observer effect.

Results indicated that dispositional attributions, for example, showing off or acting cool, was used significantly more for friends than for oneself. On the other hand, situational attributions such as “I was in a hurry” or “I was running late” were used significantly more often to explain one's own behaviour. Participants rated their friends as taking more risks than themselves.

- Jones and Harris (1967): Fundamental attribution error.
- Ross et al (1977): Fundamental attribution error in game show contestants.
- Johnson et al (1964): Self-serving bias in student tutors.
- Bond, Leung and Wan (1982): Cultural differences in self-serving bias.

Social identity theory

Henri Tajfel claimed that people strive to improve their self-image by enhancing their self-esteem. This can be done through personal achievement or through affiliations with successful groups. The theory is based on three components: social categorization, social comparison and internalization of the values and norms of the group.

- Cialdini et al (1976): Basking in Reflected Glory.

This study is a field experiment conducted at seven universities with powerful football teams. It was predicted that students at these schools would be more likely to announce publicly their connection with their universities after their football teams had been successful than after the teams had not been successful. The obtained findings tend to demonstrate the BIRG phenomenon by showing a tendency for university students to more frequently wear school-identifying signs after their school's football team has won than after they have lost. In the second part of the experiment he phoned students several days after their college American football team played. When the team lost a game most students used the pronoun "they" when describing the game. They used psychological distancing to cope with the defeat. They tended to use "we" after their team won.

The command term in the guide asks that you be able to evaluate social identity theory (SIT). Looking at the strengths of the theory, SIT has been applied to a wide range of social conflict and inter-group situations. It is an integrative approach that looks at both psychological and social factors, and does not attribute conflict simply to dispositional factors. However, it also has its limitations. The theory makes the existence of prejudice and inter-group conflict look almost inevitable. Much of the research that has been conducted has been done in artificially constructed experiments, so the ecological validity of the support is in question. Finally, we have many social identities. The theory does not explain why a particular social identity would become prominent and then lead to a behaviour. The theory is not reliably predictive of behaviour, as individual identity will sometimes outweigh the influence of group identity.

- Reicher and Haslam (2006): BBC prison experiment on SIT.
- Sherif (1961): The Robbers Cave Experiment.
- Tajfel et al (1971): Kadinsky versus Klee experiment.
- Bem's theory on the origin of sexuality (1996).
- Maass et al (2006) on the role of SIT in sexual harrassment.

Formation of stereotypes

- Staats and Staats (1958) on the role of classical conditioning.

The researchers told participants to learn word pairs: a nationality name paired with another word. In one group, Dutch was always paired with a favourable word, and Swedish with an unfavourable word. This was reversed for the other group. When participants were asked to rate national groups, this related to the learned pairings.

- Hamilton and Gifford (1976): Illusory correlation.
- Rogers and Frantz (1962) on conformity to group norms in study of length of residence and race attitudes of Europeans in Rhodesia.
- Campbell (1967) on the role of gatekeepers.

The effect of stereotypes on behaviour

- Snyder, Tanke, Berscheid (1977).

University of Minnesota students were recruited for a study on “the acquaintance process”. Men were given fake snapshot and biographical information about their partners. After that they were asked to get acquainted with their partners by phone. Their expectations influenced how they talked to their partners. After the telephone conversations, independent judges listened to tapes of the women’s conversations and had to judge the attractiveness of the women. Women who had been talked to as if they were beautiful tended to sound attractive. They became confident, and socially skilled. Those who had been treated as if they were unattractive soon became withdrawn, lacking in confidence and awkward.

- Allport and Postman (1947) or Cohen (1981) on how stereotypes influence recall.
- Aronson (1995) on stereotype threat and African American performance in standardized testing.
- Spencer et al (1977) on stereotype threat and female performance in maths proficiency exams.

Social learning theory

- Gergely et al (2002).

An adult model pretended to be cold and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders before performing an odd head action. In an independent samples design 14-month-old human infants were divided into two conditions.

Hands-occupied condition—model performed the odd head action while using her hands to hold the blanket around her shoulders.

Hands-free condition—model performed the odd head action with her free hands clearly visible on the table.

Results of the study indicated that 69% of the infants in the hands-free condition imitated the head action whereas only 21% of the infants performed the head action in the hands-occupied group.

- Bandura et al (1963): Bashing Bobo experiment.
- Sabido annual report (2005): Ethiopia: A Case Study Using the Sabido Methodology for Sexual Health.
- Sprafkin et al (1975): Children’s willingness to help can be increased by viewing a televised example of prosocial behaviour.
- Eron’s (1986) longitudinal study of correlation between television viewing and aggression.

Compliance techniques

- Moriarty (1975).

The experiment used an independent samples design. A confederate put a towel on a beach and listened to a radio. Then the confederate left the towel to stroll down to the water. Another confederate came along and stole the radio. In this scenario, 1/20 people risked stopping the crime. When a person was asked to please keep an eye on the radio, then the rate of helping went up to 19/20. In other words, once commitment was made, people were more likely to intervene.

- Cialdini et al (1975) on the door-in-the-face technique for student counsellors.
- Dickerson et al (1992) on the effect of foot-in-the-door technique on water conservation.
- Cialdini et al (1974) on low-balling for getting students up early to lectures.

Evaluate research on conformity to group norms

The classic study of conformity was done by Asch (1951). The Asch paradigm has been used for many later studies of conformity. This learning outcome asks you to be able to evaluate research on conformity. Remember to consider the questions of artificiality and ecological validity in the experimental setting as well as the fact that the predictive validity of the studies are questionable. There are also many different variables that may affect one's conformity to the group (see the next learning outcome). Finally, you might consider the cultural and historical factors that may have influenced the results of the studies. For a list of studies, see the next learning outcome.

Discuss factors influencing conformity

There are several factors that may influence conformity: the unanimity of the group, one's self-esteem, one's desire to be part of a group, gender, and/or cultural dimensions.

- Bond and Smith (1996).

A meta-analysis of 133 studies from 17 countries was conducted to investigate if conformity levels to Asch's paradigm have changed over time and if there were cross-cultural differences. Analysis of US studies indicated that conformity levels had decreased since the 1950s. Analysis of cultural variables tended to show higher levels of conformity in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures.

- Perrin and Spencer (1988) on confidence.
- Stang (1973) on self-esteem.
- Asch (1955) on group size.
- Asch (1956) on unanimity.
- Berry (1967) on the role of cultural dimensions.
- Moscovici and Lage (1976) on minority influence.

The role of cultural dimensions on behaviour

For the exam you need to know two cultural dimensions. The most common ones studied are: **individualism versus collectivism**, power distance, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance and time orientations.

- Petrova et al (2007).

This study was a field experiment aimed at studying how individualism/collectivism has an impact on the level of compliance. The study involved over 3,000 participants. Almost half of them were American students and the rest were Asian students studying at the same university. Results indicated that when participants complied with the initial request this had a stronger impact on subsequent compliance of American participants than on Asian participants.

- Bond and Smith (1996): Effect of individualism/collectivism on level of conformity.
- Levine and Norenzayan (1999): Time orientation and individual behaviour.
- Whiting (1979) on differences in helping behaviour in individualistic versus collectivistic societies.

“Emic” and “etic” concepts

An **etic** approach to cross-cultural research looks for universal behaviour. The approach decides what is to be studied before arriving in the new culture. Etic approaches study the behaviour from an ethnocentric viewpoint with the goal of comparing cultures. An **emic** approach is looking to understand a culture in and of itself. After getting used to a culture, emic researchers then decide how to carry out their research with the help of indigenous researchers.

- Bolton (1999).

Bolton carried out research in Rwanda to determine the level of PTSD and depression among the local population after the genocide. Initial reports by aid workers had determined that the overwhelming majority of the population suffered from the disorder. Bolton worked together with local people to determine a symptom list for what the locals determined to be “abnormal grief responses”. When looking at PTSD through the diagnostic regime of the Rwandan community, levels of PTSD and depression fell to much lower levels.

Other examples of emic studies are:

- Manson (1985): Studies of “depression” and “heartbrokenness” among Hopi Indians.
- Becker (2002): Food phobia in the diagnosis of eating disorders.

Cross-cultural studies use an etic approach, for example:

- LeVine (1990s) on cross-cultural differences in helping behaviour.
- Berry (1967) on differences in conformity.
- Cole and Scribner’s (1974) studies of memory strategies.