Chapter 13: Social Psychology

- Orson Welles
    - 23 year old radio host re-enacting 'War of the Worlds'
    - declared at least four times that the segment was not real leading up to its broadcast, yet people still responded in a panicked and desperate manner
        - did not seek out *alternative explanations* or other programs which would have *falsified* the prospect of an alien invasion
        - many listeners fell prey to *confirmation bias*
    - demonstrates the power of *social influence*

What is social psychology?

Social Psychology: the study of how people influence others' behaviour, beliefs and attitudes (for both good and bad); helps us understand why interpersonal influence is so powerful

- e.g. why we sometimes act heroically in the presence of others, but other times succumb to group pressure
- sheds light on why we're prone to accept irrational/pseudoscientific beliefs
- research shows that we tend to believe others are vulnerable to social influence, but we don't believe that we are

Key point: how and why we underestimate the impact of social influence on others' behaviour

Humans as a social species

- social psychology is important because humans are a social species, research suggesting we evolved in relatively small and tight social bands (Barchas), and even in modern times we tend to gravitate to small groups
- in forming cliques/groups that include people - in-group members - we by extension exclude others - out-group members

Gravitating to each other - to a point

- Robin Dunbar
    - anthropologist famous for the number 150, the approximate size of most human social groups
    - also close to the average number of people that each of us know reasonably well
    - argued that the size of our cortex relative to the rest of our brain places limits on how many people with whom we can closely associate
        - smaller cortices=smaller number of relations
    - our highly social brains are probably predisposed to forming intimate interpersonal networks that are - only so - large

The need to belong: Why we form groups

- deprivation of social contact usually leads to loneliness
- Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary
    - need-to-belong theory
    - humans have a biologically based need for interpersonal connections
- Stanley Schacter
    - small pilot study discovering the power of the above social need
    - five male volunteers lived alone in separate rooms for an extended period of time, all becoming miserable and lasting anywhere from 20 minutes to two days in isolation
        - the lone holdout made it to 8 days, but felt extremely anxious
- inmates in solitary confinement experience more psychological symptoms than do other inmates
    - however, may be more emotionally maladjusted to begin with
- social isolation may also lead us to behave in self-destructive ways and impair our mental functioning
    - Jean Twenge
        - gave undergraduates bogus feedback from a personality measure: will be alone or accident prone later in life
        - students who received isolation feedback more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours, and such feedback may even impair performance on IQ tests
- brain imaging shows that being cut off from social contact can actually 'hurt', literally and figuratively
    - Kip Williams
        - participants playing a ball tossing game with computerised others in an fMRI scanner experienced activation in the cingulate cortex when they began to be excluded from play, an area that becomes active during physical pain
            - the pain-killer Tylenol may even blunt the activity of the cingulate cortex in response to social rejection
- John Cacioppo
    - long-term loneliness can exert negative effects on psychological adjustment
- data is correlational, but increases in depression don't predict increases in loneliness, suggesting loneliness may contribute to depression
- loneliness also predicts cognitive decline and perhaps heightened risk for Alzheimer's disease

How we came to be this way: Evolution and social behaviour

- mistake to conclude that all social influence is negative

- virtually all are adaptive under most circumstances and help to regulate cultural practices, and most have been naturally selected because they've served us well over the course of evolution
- core premise: social influence processes work for us well most of the time, but they can occasionally backfire on us if we're not careful - that is, they become maladaptive when they're *blind or unquestioning*
    - irrational group behaviour = by-product of adaptive processes gone terribly wrong
    - a problem when we accept social influence without evaluating it critically e.g. listening to a persuasive leader

Social comparison: Where do I stand?

- Leon Festinger
    - social comparison theory: theory that we seek to evaluate our abilities and beliefs by comparing them with those of others
        - others provide us with helpful information about ourselves, and helps us understand ourselves and our social worlds
    - e.g. to determine if you're a good student, compare marks to others
- social comparison comes in two 'flavours'
    - upward social comparison
        - compare ourselves with people who seem superior to us in some way
        - *"If they can achieve that, then so can I"; even though we are 'inferior', allows us to buffer our self-concepts
            - e.g. will overestimate someone's intelligence if they outperform us on an intelligence test
    - downward social comparison
        - compare ourselves with others who seem inferior to us in some way
        - *feel superior to our peers who are less competent in an important domain
        - may account for popularity of reality tv
    - *both can boost our self-concepts
- likely to engage in social comparison when a situation is ambiguous

Social contagion

- We also often look to others when a situation is ambiguous and we're not sure what to do
- The problem with this arises when others are thinking and behaving irrationally, as it may lead us to do the same, because social behaviour is *contagious*
- <u>Mass hysteria: Irrationality at a group level</u>
    - mass hysteria: outbreak of irrational behaviour that is spread by social contagion

        - may lead to collective delusions - people simultaneously come to be convinced of bizarre things that are false e.g. UFO sightings up when societal consciousness of space travel up
            - observations by Kenneth Arnold triggered beginnings of 'flying saucers', term introduced by the media
                - many sightings of 'saucers' began *after* his story was told, even though he first described them as 'sausage' in shape
            - 'windshield pitting' in Seattle in 1954; attributed to secret nuclear tests, but really had been there all along
            - NB: shared societal beliefs can influence interpretations of reality
- Urban legends
    - urban legends: false stories repeated so many times that people believe them to be true
    - Gordon Allport and Leo Postman
        - rumours tend to grow less accurate with repeated retellings, oversimplification making for a good story
    - while most are false, many people still believe them, often because they're surprising, yet plausible
    - most popular ones contain material relevant to the emotion of disgust, as it may arouse curiosity

Social facilitation: From bicyclists to cockroaches

Social facilitation: enhancement of performance brought about by the presence of others (Robert Zajonc)

- Norman Triplett
    - first social psychological study
    - bicycle racers speed up when racing against others, not merely against the clock (difference of 8.6 miles per hour)
- Robert Zajonc
    - cockroaches ran faster and made less errors in a maze when being observed by other cockroaches compared to being alone
- occurs only on tasks we find easy

Social disruption: a worsening of performance in the presence of others

- occurs on tasks we find difficult
- experienced pool players played better in the presence of others, but the less experienced played worse
- NB: social influence can be positive *or* negative depending on the situation
- distraction can limit the amount of working memory we can dedicate to solving a problem

The fundamental attribution error: The great lesson of social psychology

Attribution: process of assigning causes to behaviour

    - can be internal (inside the person) or external (outside the person)
- a great deal of behaviour can be explained by external situational factors, such as social pressure

Fundamental attribution error: tendency to overestimate the impact of dispositional influences on other people's behaviour (Lee Ross)

    - dispositional influences = enduring characteristics, such as personality traits or intelligence
    - underestimate the impact of situational influences, attributing too little of behaviour to what's going on around
    - e.g. a boss who fires is callous, not looking out for well being of other employees
- likely occurs because we are unaware of all the situational factors impinging on others' behaviour at a given moment
- less likely to commit it if we have been in the same situation ourselves (Balcetis & Dunning), or have been encouraged to feel empathetic towards those we're observing (Regan & Totten)
- tend to commit it only when explaining others' behaviors; for causes of our own behaviour, we're more likely to invoke situational influences, because we're well aware of the situational factors affecting us
    - the difference is not large and usually holds only when describing people we know well

Evidence for the fundamental attribution error

- Edward E Jones and Victor Harris
    - randomly assigned students to debate either for a pro-Castro or anti-Castro position (in regards to Cuba) in front of other debaters
    - asked other debaters to evaluate each debater's *true* attitudes towards Castro
    - fell prey to FAE, as they assumed that what the debaters said reflected their true position, even though they knew that the assignment to the conditions was entirely random (they did not take the situation into account when evaluating attitudes)

The fundamental attribution error: Cultural influences

- FAE is influenced by culture
- Japanese and Chinese people less prone, as they're more likely to view behaviours in context compared to Western cultures, seeing behaviour as a mix of both dispositional and situational influences
- e.g. Chinese people less likely to exhibit dispositional explanations for the behaviour of mass murderers, whereas U.S. people show the opposite pattern; this difference extends to inanimate objects