

## **How social is the social psychology of attraction?**

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### **Abstract**

Social psychology is hard to define since the current definition is too similar to the definition of general psychology. Within this literature review, several articles researching the social phenomenon of attraction were critically analyzed on how they interpret social. The articles were analyzed according to a definition of social which is created especially for this study, based on different definitions of social that I deemed valid. The findings suggest that it is apparent that the focus is primarily on the individual rather than a collective experience. The methods used in the articles mostly don't facilitate the required circumstances to create an ecologically valid social situation that would have both an individual component and a collective component. So there is no interplay between the subject and their surroundings that could be observed. Next to this, the social phenomena studied are not conceptualized which makes it hard to assess how social they actually are.

*Keywords:* social psychology, literature review, attraction, Greenwood, social phenomenon

### **How social is the social psychology of attraction?**

Social psychology is one of the biggest branches of psychology and a popular research subject amongst many researchers. A challenge that this branch of psychology faces is that it has been difficult to define social psychology. In his book 'The disappearance of the Social in American Social Psychology', Greenwood (2003) mentions that it is not always clear if there is a distinctive conception of social dimensions of cognition, behavior and emotion in social psychology. According to Greenwood a distinction should be made between social and individual psychological states and behaviors, which could be used to separate social psychology from individual psychology.

Right now it is hard to find a conceptualization of social psychology that would not overlap with existing branches of psychology. An example would be a definition of psychology used by the American Psychology Association: "the supposed collection of behaviors, traits, attitudes, and so forth that characterize an individual or a group" (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). Following Myers (2009), social psychology focusses on how people think about, influence, and relate to one another. Looking at these definitions, it is not clear if a distinction can be made in social or individual behavior, since both could be interpreted as an individual reacting towards external stimuli. This is a problem because there would be no way to validate the fact that social psychology currently constitutes a branch of research on its own. To study this problem, I decided to have a critical look at social psychology using a critical analysis of recent literature, which leads us to the purpose of this analysis. The critical analysis of recent social research will target the question 'How social is social psychology?'. Since this is a broad question, it would be beneficial to pick a specific social phenomenon to narrow it down. In this case, it will be the social phenomenon of attraction. I will address the question 'How social is social psychology, regarding the social phenomenon of attraction?'.

It's important to raise the question whether social psychology has become more or less social because I noticed that Greenwood's (2003) and others' critiques of social psychology have been published more than 20 years ago. I will exam a selection of recent research studying attraction, to see if I can see if I can confirm this trend within my sample.

Thus, this bachelor thesis could add to the discussion regarding the definition of social psychology.

Before I start the analysis, I want to discuss a small overview of studies that have critically assessed social psychology and criticized the fact that social psychology is not social to see if there are any current trends regarding the discussion about social psychology that would help me obtain an answer to the research question.

One of the historical trends I found regarding social psychology is that it was not clear whether social psychology is conceptualized using individual behavior or group experiences. This became apparent in 1924 when the American Psychology Association stated that individual psychology and collective psychology are not mutually exclusive (Bernard, 1924). An example would be Allport noting that social behavior, is a phenomenon that occurs because of external factors influencing individual behavior (Bernard, 1924). Group mind, which is the social phenomenon Allport refers to in his explanation, would be the result of individual behavior influenced by the operating factors (economic influences, biologic influences, environmental pressures etc.) behind the individuals (Bernard, 1924). These factors are expected to influence individuals in such a way that they would indirectly influence social change, resulting in social phenomena like group mind. Greenwood (2003) argues that social psychology is a discipline studying both individual process and groups process. To Greenwood, the two of them are also not mutually exclusive.

Another trend observed by authors such as Steiner (1970), a couple of decades ago, is that, the focus shifted towards a more individual approach in social psychology rather than a collective approach. This could be the result of it not being clear whether social psychology would be the product of an individual approach or collective approach. Steiner (1971) was the first to raise the question ‘‘What happened to the group in social psychology?’’. In the journal of *Experimental Social Psychology* Steiner described the historical development of social psychology. He noted that by the 1960’s social psychology had become more individualistic and that the focus has shifted towards intraindividual events and processes that mediate responses to social situations. He also predicted that, even though social psychology had lost its interest in group processes, the interest in group processes would become a trend again. In the 60’s the focus laid on individual processes and even when there would be a focus on a group of people, the focus would be on how that group moves as a unit in society rather than what happens between the members of the group. This would make it not social. Social

psychologists would not examine the social phenomena in face-to-face groups or small groups, so the focus in most studies was on the individual. There was a recent decline in interest for the actual group research. According to Steiner (1974), the reason for this decline was that social psychological research reflects social trends. Social conflict is what generates interest in studying small groups and because there is no social conflict, there is no interest in studying small groups.

Next to the trend of social psychology becoming more individualistic was the shift towards cognitive approaches. Several researchers agreed on this like Schwarz (1998) and Greenwood(2003). Schwarz (1998) described the development of social psychology as becoming more focused on “Inside-the-head” (p.247) phenomena. Thereby noting that social psychology started to become more like cognitive psychology and that the two of them could eventually become synonymous. According to Greenwood (2003), cognition is characterized as social merely by virtue of the objects to which it is directed (other people and social group). Next, I will discuss and interpret the definition of social for this analysis.

In his article ‘what happened to the group in psychology?’ Steiner (1974) mentions two distinct views within social psychology. Both views agree that psychology must be anchored in observable behavior, however they also agree that social phenomena could exceed human comprehension. Both views result in social phenomena that are not directly observable, but can be used to explain and predict the observable world. The first would be the individualistic orientation which holds that the organism is a relatively self-contained unit, any action of which reflects the internal states or processes of that unit.

This would be a monadic approach, which Steiner (1974) describes as scientists using the behavior of one subject as their scientific subject matter. In his article Gergen (1989) mentions the problem that one view of social psychology is aimed at the observable and individual behavior and not on a possible supraindividual group phenomenon. The second view is a group approach in which the individual is presumed to be an element within a larger system, a group, organization, or society. According to this view, the behavior the individual produces is a result (or a reflection) of society.

Both views, however, maintain that individual behavior must be observed. These views are rather contrasting and do make quite a distinction in the way we can interpret the social aspect of social psychology. Even though they differ in ways of interpreting the group phenomenon, they do both accept the existence of a group phenomenon.

Another perspective, although forwarded a bit earlier, I want to acknowledge is Bloom's (1961). He mentions that most social psychological theories are no more than learning theories to take into account for the individual's adaptation to their social environment. He also mentioned that the task of psychology in general becomes inherently social because we interpret human behavior in terms of culture and that most of the thoughts and behaviors of humans are determined by their culture. I would agree with Bloom (1961) that psychology is inherently social. This also raises a question about how social, social psychology actually is. Is social psychology actually distinct from other areas of psychology? To define social psychology I would like to refrain from the idea that social psychology is just about an individual's response to their environment, since general psychological theories already focus on these human phenomena.

Modern day books on social psychology define social psychology as the study of the dynamic relationship between individuals and the people around them (Stangor, 2023). This states that social psychology is a study about the reaction of the individual to the environment and vice versa. This definition would imply that there has to be at least some form of interaction between an individual and the environment for considering a study to be social psychological. I agree with Stangor (2023) and will use the following definition of social during my analysis, based on the articles of Bloom (1961), Steiner (1974), Gergen (1989) and the definition used by Stangor (2023): In sum, only if a study deals with some supraindividual social phenomena and includes a setting in which a subject has a reaction towards the environment and vice versa, then I will consider it truly social.

In the following part, I will analyze a set of articles researching social phenomena. After that I will critically analyze the 'social' part of the research to see if there are any trends and see if they match with the definition of social I have just mentioned. I will use my analysis of the articles to support my arguments and to formulate different arguments regarding the research question. I will discuss my findings and reflect on my own way of perceiving this issue and my own biases. For the purpose of comparison and consistency I will use articles conducting research on one specific social phenomenon, attraction. I chose this specific phenomenon because it both has an individual component and a supraindividual group component, which makes it suitable for such an analysis, in which I try to examine how the conceptualization of social is currently done and used. Thus, components that could be considered "individual" would be the subjective experience of attractiveness while a

supraindividual (i.e. social) component group could be obtained through the interplay between individuals.

The articles I used are primary sources and most of them are articles dating after 2010. The reason for choosing these articles is to analyze more recent trends and to see the current state of affairs of social psychology and, due to their variety in methods and approaches, they offered be a good basis for a comparison. They have been selected through different types of databases like google scholar and databases accessible through the University of Groningen. The sample contains some more cognitively and social oriented studies on social attraction and other more biologically oriented studying sexual attraction. By no means can my small sample be considered to be representative for all the social research that is conducted on the topic.

### **Critical analysis of social psychological studies on attraction**

In this analysis I want to find out to what extent some social psychological studies on attraction contain both an individual component and group component. In the context of attraction research this would mean that attraction would be a phenomenon that would occur between two individuals and should therefore be analyzed through an interaction rather than something to be explained only by an individual's response to external stimuli.

#### *1.1 Racial preferences*

I will start with the article of Hsu, Lei, & Bodenhausen (2021) regarding racial preferences in attraction. This is a study aimed at specifically white men who either identified as homosexual or heterosexual. At first glance it seems that this study is focused on the individual. While introducing the topic and stating the current state of affairs, the writers noticeably describe attraction using 'self-attributed preferences' and 'physiological arousal' of single individuals. Attraction is measured with both a questionnaire and a measure of physical arousal in response to an erotic video. The hypothesis of their research is that white heterosexual men and gay men have greater racial preferences in sexual attraction for white people of their preferred gender. Therefore, they would show more subjective and genital sexual arousal by white versus black people of their preferred gender. The findings suggest that racial preferences in sexual attraction are reflected in patterns of sexual arousal .

This study is an example of defining the phenomenon of attraction by individual components like racial preferences and the measured sexual arousal of an individual. The researchers could not analyze the group experiences since this study is performed on individuals. They also do not mention a group component regarding attraction when explaining the background of their study. Finding both an individual component and a collective component in this study is not possible, since one component is missing. Hsu et al. don't address the lack of a group component. This adds to the argument that the focus of this experiment is on the individual experience and not on the collective experience.

Nevertheless, at this point I do want to note that the authors of this article are not social psychologists. For example, K.J. Hsu is a professor in Clinical psychology (*Kevin Hsu, Ph.D.*, n.d.), so his primary focus is not on social psychology. Which is why it would be understandable why he does not focus in on the social part of this study. So even though the study contains a social component like attraction, it does not have to mean that the intent of this study was to focus on this. With this in mind, can I even judge the social part of this study, if it was not the focus? I did take this study belonging to social psychology because now-a-days race and attraction are understood as social phenomena and neither are biological or clinical.

In the study of Hsu et al. (2021) attraction was measured as a physical response to an erotic video. I question how similar this experience would be to a real life experience. Does a video emulate the same response as an actual person would? The video is not interactive, so there is no interplay between individuals that could be analyzed. So even though this would differ from a self-report like a questionnaire, it would still be an individual's reaction to a recording that is being measured. The other component of the methodology of Hsu et al. is a questionnaire about the individual preferences, which many would consider inherently individual.

### *1.2 Attraction and leadership*

Rhue, Lynn & Garske (1984) studied the effects of competent behavior on interpersonal attraction and task leadership. With regards to attraction the purpose of this study was to find out whether people felt more attracted to people who showed competent behavior. Their findings regarding attraction are that competent woman are as attractive as competent men.



The study contained an experiment in which the subject was partnered with a confederate who shows a certain amount of competency in solving a puzzle. This experimental setting gives the researchers insight in a collective experience which fits the collective component of attraction. They based their measurement of attraction on a questionnaire using six items answered by the subject. The items contained questions like *‘How interested or willing would you be to date this person?’* or *‘how interested or willing would you be to sit next to this person on a 3-hr bus trip?’*

This measurement focuses, again, on the individual component of attraction. To identify and research a social phenomenon, a small group experiment would be most fitting when it comes to the definition of social used in this thesis. In a small group experiment, a researcher would be able to closely monitor the participants behavior from their scientific point of view while still being able to analyze their subjective experience using questionnaires. Noticeably the experiment is constructed in a way that the interplay between subjects could be analyzed, so it could be considered a small group experiment. However, the intention was not to observe how attraction would occur between two subjects, but rather how one subject would react towards a manipulation. So a collective component of attraction was not researched. If they used another subject instead of a confederate, they could have focused in on the interplay. That way the collective component could have been analyzed as well and that would have made the study of Rhue et al. (1984) more social following the definition I use in this thesis.

### *1.3 Hot and spicy*

Miska, Hemmesch & Buswell (2018) studied the relationship between taste-related terms like ‘spice’ or ‘hot’ and the phenomenon of attraction. In their study the female participants had to eat a snack, either spicy, sweet or neutral, and afterwards they had to rate the attractiveness of a male face that could either be labeled most attractive, neutral or least attractive. The face pictures were collected from and rated on attractiveness by the Chicago Face Databank (Ma, Correll & Wittenbrink, 2015). The pictures were shown on a computer screen and the participant had to rate their attractiveness in a booklet that was developed to record the responses.

Miska et al. (2018) explain the relationship between food flavors, attraction and romantic interest by means of embodied cognition. In social sciences this explains how sensorimotor functions form cognitions. When explaining this concept and giving examples

of how this relates to relational interests, I noticed that instead of measuring ‘attraction’ the authors refer to the rating of attractiveness by others. Which means attraction is only an individual response according to the authors. Apart from this, attraction is not conceptualized further. So not only is the conceptualization of attraction very little, they also make it apparent that they will define attraction only by its individual component. This both supports my argument that social phenomena are not conceptualized properly and my argument that the focus is on the individual rather than a group experience.

Miska et al. (2018) defined embodied cognition by giving examples of how this concept is applied. Like asking people to recall what temperature the room was when they experienced social exclusion. Most would report that the room was colder when they were excluded rather than included. Miska et al. (2018) wanted to apply this same cognitive process using different components like attraction and flavor. Which means they wanted to assess a social phenomenon like attraction by a cognitive process rather than behavioral processes. Here it’d like to refer back to Gergen’s (1989) view on the change towards more cognitive social psychology. Cognitively based formulations delimit the possibilities for social understanding and cause a range of intractable problems. The concept might be based on assumptions that are problematic. Gergen(1989) refers to the mind body problem stating that it’s not clear whether ‘the mind’ refers to the observable and physiological aspects of the brain or a separate phenomenon. When this problem is not resolved, terms, like attitude, are not defined properly. In my eyes, that is what happened here when defining attraction.

It’s also important to consider the background of the authors in this instance. For example, Jenni Miska (*Jenni Miska, Msc.*, n.d.) was trained in experimental psychology, which usually trains research in a quantitative way of doing research. So with that in mind it makes sense that the focus of this study is not on conceptualizing the social phenomenon, but rather the experiment itself.

As I just mentioned, the method used in the study of Miska et al. (2018) was self-report in a booklet constructed for this specific study. Questions raised in the booklet were questions like ‘*how attractive do you find this person?*’ and ‘*how hot/sexy do you find this person?*’ that had to be rated on a 9 point Likert-scale. Two 1-way analysis were used to analyze the results. The findings state that woman in the spicy condition rated the faces as more attractive. In this study attraction is measured just by a way of self-report. In this case I also question the ecological validity of the experiment in this study since seeing a face on a

computer screen is not at all equivalent to seeing someone in real life, especially since the face is not animated. I am aware that creating an ecologically valid situation might have been more complex and costly. The study of Miska et al. (2018) and Hsu et al. (2021) are examples of studies in which the method is not really offering a real life situation, but some artificial stimulus of what they are actually trying to study.

Earlier I stated that to be considered social there has to be both an individual component and a collective component. In the methodologies discussed, that is not the case since both parts consist of just individual responses to a social situation and social settings in which the ecological validity is doubtful. There is no interplay between individuals that could be analyzed. With the exception of Rhue et al. (1984) since they used an experimental setting in which an interplay could be analyzed, but didn't utilize it that way.

#### *1.4 Attraction and Asexuality*

My next argument concerns the conceptualization of attraction. In a study by Su & Zheng (2022) in which they studied the stability and change in asexuality, they used self-reports measures for all the components in their study: Sexual romantic orientation, sexual romantic attraction, sexual desire and asexuality. They recorded these measures in intervals of 3 months to see if any change would occur. The trends suggest that most people who identified as asexual would later on still be asexual, so the amount of experienced attraction would not increase nor decrease.

Noticeably Su & Zheng (2022) do not define or conceptualize the term attraction. In the introduction they clearly define the term sexual orientation as ‘generally defined as the attraction of a person to males, females or both’ (p.01). This is followed by more definitions of the term sexual orientation, but it is not mentioned what attraction means in this context. In the method section it seems as though the authors imply that attraction is conceptualized by the sexual attraction and romantic interest measured in an individual. However, this does not clearly state how attraction is conceptualized. I also want to note that the collective component I deemed necessary to define a social phenomenon does not seem to be present in this conceptualization, since there is no conceptualization of attraction in this study.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to assess how social social psychology is regarding the topic of attraction. When comparing these findings to previous findings regarding this

question, my findings confirm the earlier findings. As Steiner (1974) noticed, social psychology is still focused more on the individual rather than a collective experience and it's still not clear whether social psychology should be defined by individual experiences or collective experiences like Greenwood (2003) mentioned. Next to this I also noticed a trend in studies not facilitating the right methods to assess a social phenomenon.

What I noticed while assessing how 'social' social psychology is, is how difficult it can be to define social since there are many ways in which the term social can be defined. Some would say that any interaction involving two humans would be social, while others would say that a human interacting with external stimuli of any sort would be considered social as well. It would be dependent of one's perspective what could be considered social, making the topic moderately subjective as well.

I criticized the way only self-reports are used in some of the study. By no means does this mean that self-reports and experiments are not useful. Self-reports are essential in defining a social phenomenon especially considering the phenomenon of attraction which has both a collective component and an individual component. Small experiments like Hsu et al. (2021) and Miska et al. (2018) do add value to the findings since they still simulate situations that might be hard to re-create even when they might not be as ecologically valid in my opinion.

When studying the phenomenon of attraction, I noted the lack of conceptualization of this term in the articles I analyzed. I do have to keep in mind that attraction is not always exclusively defined because it was not always the only phenomenon assessed in these studies. However, a consequence of not conceptualizing terms would be that the struggle to define social would remain. In 'Social psychology and the wrong revolution' Gergen (1989) discussed the conceptualization of the mind. He argued that it is not clear if the 'mind' refers to an individual with their own 'mind' or the mind as a part of society that reflects the social atmosphere of someone's environment. These are a few aspects of the assumptions we have to make when researching social phenomena. These assumptions remain a part of the problem and remain unsolved according to Gergen(1989). If we have to assume what a concept entails, then the concept is not properly conceptualized. Gergen(1989) would even go as far as to state that empirical research tries to evade properly conceptualizing their terms.

In my overview of social psychology in the introduction, I noticed that it was not clear whether social psychology was related to individual behavior or collective behavior. While analyzing the article of Hsu et al. (2021) I noticed that the focus is on the individual perspective and that they do not consider a collective component in their analysis of social phenomena. This trend could result in a few possible consequences for psychology. The shift in social psychology from the focus on both groups processes and individual processes to only individual processes could result in a lack of foundation in the theories of social psychology. Meehl (1978) states that one of the problems with modern day psychology is the lack of foundation for theories. This is because the focus usually shifts towards a new trend and because of that, the old theories aren't replicated and investigated more. By shifting from the focus on both collective experiences and individual processes to only the individual processes, one could say that both collective and individual research lack in foundation.

My findings add value to the topic of social psychology being social since they confirm earlier findings, but what does this imply? The trends I noticed imply that little has changed over the years and that no conclusive solutions have been raised to the issue of social psychology not being defined enough. By continuing this way of research, social psychology could end up being considered a soft area of psychology like Meehl (1978) mentioned before. Meehl (1978) states that the subjective nature of social psychology (which I mentioned earlier) and the lack conceptualization make it a soft area of psychology. Next to being considered a soft area of psychology it also implies that modern day researchers do not have their focus on the fundamental ideas behind the science they practice, which some would consider a problem since this is their field of expertise and they don't seem invested enough to properly define it.

### **Conclusion**

The answer to the question 'how social is social psychology regarding the social phenomenon of attraction?' would be that social psychology is currently not that social when comparing the articles to the definition of social I stated earlier. The focus of the articles is primarily on the individual rather than a collective experience next to an individual experience. The methods used in the articles mostly don't facilitate the required circumstances to create an ecologically valid social situation that would have both an individual component and a group component. So there is no interplay between the subject

and their surroundings that could be observed. Next to this, the social phenomena studied are not conceptualized which makes it hard to assess how social they actually are.

My findings suggest that there is still a lot to be discussed when it comes to assessing how social social psychology actually is. As stated earlier, my sample is not representative. Therefore, it would be wise to repeat research regarding this topic either to confirm the idea that social psychology might not be as social as it appears, or to confirm that social psychology does differ from general psychology. By using different social phenomena to analyze this question, the trends found could be generalized more or challenged. This would also give rise to new insights and new questions regarding the topic. Future social psychological research should focus on carefully conceptualizing the social phenomenon they want to research, so it's very clear how they define social. The methods used in this research should be as ecologically valid as attainable and should include an interaction between at least two subjects. This way there is always a dynamic between subjects that could be analyzed. I think these suggestions would be beneficial and would, in turn, bring us closer to properly defining social psychology.

As an undergraduate bachelor student I would say that I am currently well emersed in the current affairs within psychology. I approached the question I raised with my training in quantitative research. One could say that this would be rather controversial since I am not used to writing meta-scientific critique, but I challenge that with the thought that because of my different background, I bring a new perspective. This does not take away that someone with a background in this type of research could produce different results, but a different perspective can also add something to the discussion.

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