

Chapter 5.8

Social Psychology and Instructional Technology

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how principles in social psychology can be applied to instructional technology. Two areas are discussed to explain why individuals would have a positive attitude towards instructional technology but not engage in consistent behaviors. Social psychological research demonstrates attitudes do not necessarily correlate with behaviors. Factors that moderate this relationship include attitude extremity, attitude importance, attitude accessibility, direct experience, attitude specificity, habits, and social norms. Additionally, if individuals cannot comprehend messages, they cannot develop their knowledge of instructional technology even if they wanted. To comprehend messages, individuals have to have the ability (i.e., both knowledge and time) to

thoroughly process them. Examples are provided illustrating each of these concepts. The author hopes by examining the field of social psychology, new ideas, new understanding, and new areas of research can emerge in the field of instructional technology.

INTRODUCTION

It is often useful for outsiders to examine another discipline and suggest ways their field can apply. Therefore, as a social psychologist, I would like to glance at instructional technology and attempt to illustrate how research from social psychology can help instructional and other educational technologists better understand their domain. I will give a brief definition of social psychology along with its contribution of the idea of situationism. Then I will give an example of how

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social psychology can be applied to a perplexing question in instructional technology, why people who like and support instructional technology do not maximize their knowledge of or efficient use of their instructional technology systems. I will demonstrate that social psychological research on attitude-behavior consistency and the theoretical idea that people are motivated tacticians help explain this counterintuitive behavior.

BACKGROUND

Social psychology is defined as “the scientific attempt to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings” (Fiske, 2004, p. 4). A typical social psychology textbook includes chapters on social cognition, person perception, self, attitudes, prejudice, social influence, relationships, helping, and aggression. Issues relating to gender and culture are examined in each chapter. Theories and research from social psychology have helped create and expand the areas of industrial/organizational psychology, health psychology, forensic psychology, and political psychology.

Given that a main theoretical perspective in social psychology is sociocultural (Taylor, 1998), the theoretical paradigm in instructional technology that social psychology would most closely relate to is situated learning theory (Reiser & Dempsey, 2002). In addition, along with the rest of psychology, social psychology underwent a cognitive revolution in the 1970s with social cognition emerging as a main theoretical perspective (Taylor, 1998). Therefore, social psychology may also have applications to instructional technology that have its roots in information processing.

As the definition and the main topics illustrate, social psychology examines how people interact with other people. However, information technology often examines how individuals will interact with objects, and there are differences in how

individuals relate to people versus objects (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). As an individual perceives and interacts with others, others perceive, judge, and respond in return. Although objects may interact with people and respond to their actions, objects do not richly interact, are less likely to change, and are not perceived as causal agents. Nevertheless, there are several areas of psychology, especially ones focusing on intra-individual processes such as social cognition and attitudes that would be most relevant to instructional technology.

A key component of social psychology that relates to many issues in instructional technology is the idea of situationism. Situationism (Ross & Nisbett, 1991) is the perspective that a major cause of social behavior is the situation. Although many types of psychology relate to the importance of the individual, Lewin (1951), often considered the father of modern social psychology, theorized behavior is a function of both personality and environment. Social psychologists recognize the importance of the person, but they also recognize the importance of the situation and are familiar with research that demonstrates how many people underestimate the strength the situation has on people’s behaviors (Jones, 1990).

This idea of situationism has allowed social psychologists to explain why people often behave counterintuitively such as being willing to give electric shocks in near lethal doses to individuals (Milgram, 1974), deliberately changing their answer just to go along with a group (Asch, 1956), and not helping a person who clearly needs assistance (Darley & Latané, 1968). In each case, the situation was powerful enough to override how the individual personality would be prone to behave.

To demonstrate how social psychology could relate to instructional technology, this chapter explores two examples of why people may not maximize their knowledge and efficient use of their instructional technology system. Specifically, the chapter examines why a college instructor would not have a Web site for their course, and why people do not use many of the available shortcuts

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