Theoretical Perspectives of Social Psychology

Introduction
When taken together, the five primary theoretical perspectives of social psychology — role theory, reinforcement theory, cognitive theory, theory of symbolic interactionism, and evolutionary theory — provide a broad set of perspectives that encompass much of what we know about social life.

Role Theory
Role theory is concerned with social statuses and social roles. Social statuses are positions in society, such as student, mail carrier, mother, or employee. Roles are expectations for how people in particular social statuses should behave. Roles are tied to statuses, such that students are expected to study and mail carriers are expected to deliver mail. Role Theory asserts that people conform to role expectations and much social behavior is people carrying out their roles. Knowing that someone is a mother tells us a lot about how to expect that person to behave. For example, we would expect her to nurture her children, to protect them from harm, to help teach them, and so on. Roles not only affect peoples’ behavior, but also their attitudes. A minister, for example, is expected to both teach the message of his (or her) church and to believe that message. For a minister to not really believe what he is preaching would be just as much a violation of the role of minister as failing to teach it. As individuals change from one role to another in their lives, their behaviors and attitudes tend to change to be consistent with their new roles. For example, someone who viewed high school from the perspective of a student while they were attending high school, will change both their behavior and how they view high school if they become a high school teacher, or a parent of a student in that high school. In other words, while roles may be place or institution specific, they are also contingent upon one’s location within an institution.

Reinforcement Theory
Reinforcement theory emphasizes the observable behavior of people and hence is sometimes called a behaviorist perspective. The focus of this theory is on explaining which behaviors are more or less likely to continue. Reinforcement theory asserts that social behavior is caused by external events, primarily pleasurable rewards. People tend to repeat actions that result in positive rewards, and tend to avoid actions that result in negative punishments. Hence, this theory predicts that we can encourage some behaviors and discourage others by rewarding behaviors we like and punishing those we don’t like. This process is called conditioning. Conditioning occurs when a relationship is established between performing a behavior and receiving reinforcement. Reinforcements may be either positive or negative.

For example, reinforcement theory is sometimes used by family therapists to help parents recognize why their children are misbehaving and then to control that behavior. Often parents unwittingly provide positive reinforcements in response to the unruly behavior of children,
giving a child more attention when they throw a tantrum or act out, and providing less attention when a child is behaving well. By recognizing what they are doing, parents can often reverse their own behavior to change this conditioning. Ignoring a child screaming in a tantrum and rewarding the child when he or she asks politely for something can lead the child to change their behavior.

Social learning theory is related to reinforcement theory. According to social learning theory, people acquire new behaviors through both conditioning and imitation. Imitation provides another way for people to develop new behaviors. So providing examples of good behavior to children by acting politely or by exposing them to other children who are polite should encourage them to mimic those behaviors.

Another related perspective is social exchange theory. Social exchange theory views social interaction as exchanges of goods and services among individuals. This theory views people as rational hedonists who will seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs. Social exchange theory argues that people will persist in relationships in which they receive profitable outcomes, and they judge relationships by comparing them to other alternative relationships. Individuals are most likely to stay in a social relationship when the rewards are high, the costs low, and alternatives appear inferior. Individuals regard a situation as equitable when the rewards they experience are commensurate with the costs they bear. So, if someone else benefits much more from the relationship but also contributes much more to it, this may be seen as equitable. If someone else benefits much more than an individual and contributes much less, however, this creates a sense of inequity and the individual may feel exploited and may seek to end the relationship or begin investing much less effort into it to make it more equitable. In this perspective, a married couple who both have jobs and work hard to share household chores and benefit equally from the marriage would be more likely to stay married than a couple in which the husband and wife benefit equally but one is both unemployed and avoids household responsibilities.

Cognitive Theory
Cognitive theory asserts that mental activities, called cognitive processes, are important for social behavior. In this sense cognitive theory contrasts with the behaviorist view of reinforcement theory. Where reinforcement theory emphasizes observable behavior and tries to find meaning from the behavior itself, cognitive theory attempts to make sense of behaviors based on underlying perceptions and meanings. Cognitive processes include perception, memory, judgment, problem solving, and decision-making. These cognitive processes may be organized into cognitive structures—organized cognitions. One type of cognitive structure is a schema, which refers to a basic sketch of what someone knows about something, and how they organize their understanding of that something. For example, a schema about amusement parks may include long lines, cotton candy, clowns, etc. A schema about a restaurant is likely to include someone seating you at the table, ordering the food, the waiter or waitress bringing the food, and eventually paying for the meal. Schemata help us process information about our world efficiently. They help identify what is important to know about a situation or a person,
they help us remember the information and process it more quickly. Schemata even help us draw inferences about the situation or person based on incomplete information. Our restaurant schema, for example, gives us a pretty good idea of what to expect in most restaurants and even some rules for how we should behave. Unfortunately, schemata, with their preconceptions of people and events, can be a source of bias and stereotypes. Schemata simplify social life at the risk of oversimplifying it. If we have a schema for interacting with people of another race that is different than our schema for interacting with people of the same race as us, then we tend to behave differently toward them.

Cognitive structures may or may not agree with one another. However, the principle of cognitive consistency states that people prefer to have consistent cognitions. If their ideas are inconsistent this tends to cause internal conflict and unease, and the individual is likely to change one or more of their cognitions to become consistent. For example, if someone dislikes country music but likes a particular song by one country singer, we might expect them to begin to like country music more or to like this song less to achieve greater cognitive consistency. Cognitive consistency is the driving force behind several cognitive consistency theories including balance theory and the theory of cognitive dissonance.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism asserts that people communicate using symbols. These symbols may have different meanings for different people. This is because, according to symbolic interactionism, objects have no inherent meaning; rather, their meanings are negotiated through shared understandings. When the meaning of a particular object or act is uncertain or contested, people must negotiate some form of shared meaning in order to effectively communicate and interact with one another. For example, in the United States it is illegal to serve alcohol to a minor. So an adult giving wine to a minor to drink would be regarded as breaking the law. Yet, in many churches, wine is served to members in communion services even when some of the members are minors. This is generally not treated as a crime because of the meaning of the act as a religious ritual. That argument works well enough if you are in a church. But we wouldn’t recommend you try arguing that you are having communion when the police break up your loud house party.

Another important facet of symbolic interactionism is the importance of self. In this perspective, effective communication requires role-taking in which an individual imagines how she or he looks from another person’s perspective. Significant others, people whose opinions and actions are important to the individual, play a particularly important function in this perspective because we value their interpretations more than those of other people. For example, for someone applying for a job, the recruiter is a significant other. For someone on a date, the person they are dating is a significant other. Through interaction with others we come to develop our own sense of self, our own sense of who we are, our identity. Individuals strive to maintain a positive sense of self. But since their self-perception is influenced by interactions with others, they need to meet the standards of others to at least some degree to maintain that positive image of themselves. Our sense of self, then, is socially constructed.
through interactions with others. If our significant others repeatedly compliment us and seem to enjoy our company, we tend to develop a positive self-image. If they repeatedly criticize us and try to avoid us, we tend to develop a negative self-image. Our interactions shape our conception of who we are. For example, if you are repeatedly turned down after interviewing for a job, your sense of self is likely to suffer, as opposed to if you were to get multiple job offers after only applying for a few places.

**Evolutionary Theory**

Evolutionary theory asserts that genes govern social behavior. Both physical characteristics and social behaviors are subject to the process of evolution if they influence the likelihood of individuals passing on their genetic material through reproduction. Thus, individuals who are healthier and more attractive mates will be more likely to have children and pass along their genes. Individuals having those behaviors and physical traits will become more prevalent in the population than individuals lacking those characteristics. What is considered attractive can vary over time and a once desirable trait may become less desirable in some different time. Some social psychologists view evolutionary theory as a unifying theory because it offers an explanation for rational behavior, which is an assumption of social psychological research. In this perspective, people act rationally, by attempting to maximize profits, because those profits aid in perpetuating their gene base. This theory is sometimes used to explain differences in mating behavior by males and females. In this theory, females tend to seek males who are likely to be stable partners who will help care for the children in order to increase the survival rate for their offspring; while males are much more likely to seek out multiple sexual partners to spread their genes more widely (“sow their wild oats” is a phrase that comes to mind here) to have more offspring and thus enhance the chances of their gene pool surviving.