Perspectivist Social Psychology: A Work in Progress

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This book presents an edited collection of new essays inspired by William J. McGuire's work on perspectivist social psychology on the occasion of his retirement from Yale University. The essays contained herein address the past, present, and especially the future of theory and research on social psychology. The authors are friends, colleagues, students, and admirers of Bill McGuire, and all have undertaken to illustrate the benefits of applying perspectivist social psychological methods to their own problem areas.

Drawing our subtitle from McGuire's classic (1973) article, the focus of this book is on Perspectivism in Social Psychology: The Yin and Yang of Scientific Progress. McGuire, who is justly regarded as one of the pioneers of cognitively oriented social psychology, has contributed enormously to unifying the scientific study of social cognition. His dynamic theory of thought systems, for instance, integrates areas of attitude change, language, social cognition, stereotyping, ideology, and political psychology (see McGuire, 1999). His perspectivist metatheory, which provides dozens of heuristics and guiding principles for the creative generation and rigorous assessment of hypotheses, is similarly applicable to social cognition and all of its subfields (see McGuire, 1997). The "working premise" of the perspectivist is that "all knowledge representations are imperfect but all catch some aspect of the known" (McGuire, 1999, p. 400). If one accepts that all knowledge—including scientific knowledge—is contextualized or situated, that is, it is knowledge from some perspective, then the task of the researcher is to creatively generate and critically assess multiple hypotheses, each of which presumably has some domain of truthful application. What results is an expansive search for the enabling and boundary conditions of as many worthwhile hypotheses as possible. The unifying theme of the book, accordingly, is that of a perspectivist approach to the study of thought systems, which reflects McGuire's practical, systematic approach to social cognition broadly defined.

It is a rare psychology book that gives equal billing to theory, methodology, and empirical data, but McGuire's work has consistently balanced these scientific ideals, and all of the contributors to this volume subscribe to these same ideals. Because it is such a significant (and McGuirean) challenge to cover the past, present, and future of any social psychological theme in a single chapter, we invited a select group of top social psychological researchers from
around the world. They were asked to write theoretical and empirical chapters that will serve as important orienting stimuli for future research in the interrelated subfields of social cognition. They were also asked to provide personal reflections on their own ways of doing social psychology. These reflections serve as prologues for each chapter that follows the introductory section of the book. The author prologues are, in many ways, the most fitting tribute to McGuire, who has written extensively on conceptual, methodological, and practical issues in the conduct of psychological research.

The book is organized according to the following topical themes, which reflect substantive research programs initiated by McGuire and further advanced by the accomplished researchers who have contributed chapters:

1. Attitudes, persuasion, and social influence
2. Information processing, affect, and behavior
3. Language and the self-concept
4. Stereotyping, prejudice, and intergroup relations in society
5. Political communication and mass media
6. Theory and metatheory in social psychological science

The timeliness and uniqueness of this project derive from the fact that, at a time when social cognition research is becoming ever more specialized and geographically dispersed, this book (a) brings together psychologists from Europe, Israel, and North America; (b) balances and integrates issues of theory, method, and data; (c) highlights commonalities and shared assumptions of relatively diverse subfields of social cognition; and (d) points the way toward a future agenda for research. The volume should be particularly valuable for graduate students and young scholars, because it is planned at a time when historical perspective, theory-method integration, and the "big picture" are in danger of losing out to professional specialization, concentration, and pressures for publication.

The primary audience for this work consists of psychologists and those in related fields (cognitive science, sociology, political science, communications, marketing, and organizational behavior) who share interests in social cognition and the dynamic operation of thought systems. The chapters include topics of interest for anyone who relishes theoretical and methodological innovations in social cognition. Because the contributors are commenting on the past, present, and future of social cognition, the essays will be of great interest to contemporary colleagues and friends of Bill McGuire as well as to graduate students and young scholars.

Attitudes, Persuasion, and Social Influence

McGuire's work has probably had its most profound impact in the study of persuasion and attitude change, including his groundbreaking empirical work on cognitive responses, belief systems, and resistance to persuasion (McGuire, 1964) and the remarkably ambitious, integrative handbook chapters that served to reorient the study of attitude change around
concepts of input and output steps and their mediating cognitive processes (McGuire, 1968, 1985). The influence of this work on subsequent social psychological treatments can scarcely be exaggerated (e.g., Cialdini, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1981; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981; Pratkanis, Breckler, & Greenwald, 1989). Thus, our first substantive section addresses theoretical and empirical progress that has been made in understanding attitude change, persuasion, and social influence.

Petty, Tormala, and Rucker explore the utility of McGuire's contextualist (later referred to as perspectivist) framework for understanding the literature on attitude change, especially the topic of resistance to persuasion, in chapter 4. In chapter 5, Hastie and Rawson address an issue that is central to McGuire and McGuire's (1991) dynamic theory of thought systems, namely, the remote ramifications of belief change in thought systems. Original empirical studies, inspired by the McGuire's theory, are reported to illustrate some of the statics and dynamics of these thought systems. In chapter 6, Prentice applies McGuire's theorizing about attitude systems to the study of values and their relations to other aspects of the person. She reviews two lines of research, one that examines the relation of values to choices and evaluations of well-being and a second that examines their relation to material possessions and sociopolitical attitudes.

Information Processing, Affect, and Behavior

McGuire has been referred to as the “father of social cognition” (Wyer, 1991, p. vii), so it is fitting that our second section addresses issues of information processing, especially insofar as cognition (or information processing) relates to the other two components of attitudes, namely affect (or evaluation) and behavior (e.g., Breckler, 1984; McGuire, 1985). McGuire's studies of information processing began with his “probabilogical model” and its accompanying “syllogistic analysis” of relations among beliefs (McGuire, 1960); his contributions were fruitfully advanced by, among others, Anderson (1971) and Wyer (1970, 1972, 1975). Later research on the dynamic theory of thought systems (McGuire, 1990; McGuire & McGuire, 1991) and on positive-negative asymmetries in thinking about the self-concept (McGuire & McGuire, 1992, 1996) further strengthened our understanding of social cognition, and these themes are taken up by contributors to this volume.

The seventh chapter, by Cacioppo, addresses asymmetries in affect-laden information processing. Specifically, he reviews recent work on the autonomie differentiation of emotion, which indicates that negative emotions are associated with greater visceral activation in comparison with positive emotions. In chapter 8, Wyer integrates traditional research on belief and attitude change and recent work on social comprehension and verification processes, as well as research on communication, persuasion, and the spontaneous activation of thoughts about oneself and others in social contexts. Kreitler, in chapter 9, explores theoretical and empirical bases of the cognitive guidance of health-related behavior, identifying the major problems that have remained unresolved and spelling out directions for future research. In chapter 10, Banaji
argues that oppositional thinking as prescribed by perspectivism would have enabled researchers of implicit social cognition to anticipate two surprising conclusions: (a) implicit and explicit attitudes are often dissociated from one another, but there are specifiable conditions under which clear associations are observable, and (b) implicit attitudes often appear to be relatively stable, but they can be highly malleable in response to social situations.

**Language and the Self-Concept**

McGuire's contributions to social cognition led organically to interests in the use of natural language, especially the use of state versus action verbs (McGuire & McGuire, 1986), and changes in the spontaneous self-concept (McGuire & McGuire, 1988; McGuire, McGuire, & Cheever, 1986; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). These convergent research programs have influenced a number of researchers, including Greenwald and Pratkanis (1984), Hardin and Banaji (1993), Markus and Nurius (1986), Prentice (1990), and Semin and Fiedler (1989). Current perspectives on language and the self-concept (and their reciprocal influences) are offered in this volume by Semin in chapter 11 and Hardin in chapter 12.

Semin reviews different facets of the language that people use when they are describing themselves and others in varying contexts (e.g., home, school, and work). He provides a comprehensive review of the linguistic category model and argues persuasively for the diagnostic value of analyzing features of language to uncover general social psychological processes in the description of self and others. Hardin adopts a thoroughly perspectivist approach—which he interprets in the context of pragmatist philosophy of science—to the study of the self. Specifically, he argues that self-conceptions not only arise from important social relationships, but they also serve to affirm those relationships.

**Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Intergroup Relations in Society**

Although McGuire's own work has seldom, if ever, focused on issues of stereotyping, prejudice, and intergroup relations, his impact can be felt in these areas as well. Research on the numerical distinctiveness of the self-concept, including effects of gender (McGuire, McGuire, & Winton, 1979) and ethnicity (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978), has been used to understand social identification among minority groups in society (e.g., Deaux & Major, 1987; Lord & Saenz, 1985; Turner, 1987). McGuire's perspectivist methodology has generally proved useful to researchers of stereotyping and intergroup relations, and so has his approach to ideological belief systems in particular (e.g., Converse, 1964; Doise, 1986; Hunyady, 1998; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002).

In chapter 13, Doise adopts a historical perspective, linking the work of McGuire and his generation of social psychologists to the history of the last hundred years on multiple levels, including the personal, interpersonal, group, and system levels of analysis. In chapter 14, Hunyady uses McGuirean qualitative methods to explore longitudinal changes in the structure of stereotypes.
in European society, revealing that stereotypical categories fit mosaic-like into a comprehensive view of society. In chapter 15, Eagly builds on McGuire's (1990) dynamic theory of thought systems to argue that in the examination of prejudice, it is useful to distinguish between the perceived likelihood that group members will have particular characteristics and the perceived desirability of their having these characteristics. Jost, in chapter 16, illustrates the use of several of McGuire's (1997) perspectivist strategies in the study of intergroup relations, including accounting for deviations from the general trend, pursuing the contrary of a banal hypothesis, reconciling conflicting outcomes, considering nonmonotonic relations, and "quixotically defending a theory."

**Political Communication and Mass Media**

McGuire's influence on the field of political psychology has grown more direct over the years. His work on attitude change—especially his partitioning of independent variables into source, message, channel, receiver, and target factors (see McGuire, 1968, 1985)—has had an enormous impact on the study of public opinion, political perception, leader communication, and political advertising. Although a persistent theme in McGuire's work is that television and other mass media are not as successful at influencing people as is often assumed (see McGuire, 1986), he has been as clear as anyone at delineating the circumstances under which social influence may be expected. McGuire's most direct contribution to political psychology is the (1993) volume that he edited with Iyengar entitled *Explorations in Political Psychology*.

In chapter 17, Sears reviews several decades of research on racial politics from the perspective of symbolic racism theory. He argues that, recent changes notwithstanding, the fundamental pattern in intergroup relations has been one of continuity in which Black–White conflict has been the dominant theme. Iyengar writes in chapter 18 that to an extent not previously seen, the use—and even manipulation—of the mass media to promote political objectives is now not only standard practice but is in fact essential to political survival. Consequently, as Iyengar points out, McGuire's work on communication and persuasion has become central to the study of American politics.

**Theory and Metatheory in Social Psychological Science**

McGuire is unique, even in the context of his most eminent contemporaries, for having made major contributions not only to theory and research in social psychology but also to metatheory and the philosophy of social psychological science (see McGuire, 1999). In this respect, he inspires comparisons to both Kurt Lewin and Donald Campbell (see Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, concerning the latter comparison). McGuire (1983) at first referred to the complete set of epistemological tenets and methodological tactics as "contextualism," but over time he settled on the preferred term "perspectivism" (McGuire, 1989, 1999). This is a book about perspectivism, insofar as most or all of the chapters
describe empirical research programs that have been approached or consolidated through perspectivist means. In the final section, the focus is even more squarely on the contributions of perspectivist metatheory.

In chapter 19, Ellsworth meditates on the first of McGuire's (1973) methodological koan, “The Sound of One Hand Clapping . . . and the Wrong Hand,” arguing that since 1973, social psychology has moved away from narrow hypothesis-testing approaches. Ellsworth worries that the new, descriptive, qualitative research is often not designed in such a way that it will ever generate hypotheses and that the old hypothesis-testing mode has increasingly moved toward the strategy of confirmation rather than disconfirmation of hypotheses. In chapter 20, Greenwald argues provocatively that illusory competition among theories causes wasted effort in scientific psychology. Specifically, he claims that lengthy episodes of intertheory competition in cognitive psychology have resulted in (a) no decisive choice among competing theories and (b) little product in the form of intellectual advances or useful applications.

In chapter 21, Anderson lays out the tenets of his “unified theory,” which rests on the axiom of purposiveness and is implemented through cognitive algebra. Extensive experimental work on his information integration theory demonstrates that approach-avoidance tendencies obey exact algebraic models in social psychology and in several other fields, including developmental psychology, psychophysics, and judgment and decision-making. Higgins, in chapter 22, proposes an eighth methodological koan to be added to McGuire’s (1973) list of seven. Higgins’ observation is that a variable anointed as “special” tends to demand special treatment; he argues that this tendency is often functional but can impede progress in social psychology by leading researchers to overlook general principles that underlie many different phenomena.

The Future of Perspectivism

With the two exceptions of Wyer and Srull's (1991) volume in the Advances in Social Cognition series and McGuire's own (1999) collection of papers entitled Constructing Social Psychology: Creative and Critical Processes, there has been no previous comprehensive, book-length treatment of perspectivism and its application to core topics in social psychology. Our hope is that this book will help to inspire others to follow perspectivist methods in social science. McGuire's own views have been summarized extremely well in his (1989) chapter, his (1997) Annual Review of Psychology chapter, and his (1999) volume of collected essays. In the appendix of this book, we have reproduced a set of McGuire's famous "perspectivist worksheets," which should be useful for students (at any level) who are seeking to inject their own research programs with the kind of creativity and precision that has characterized 40 years of work by William J. McGuire and the scores of collaborators, students, and scientists who have been heavily influenced by him. The remaining chapters in this book, written by some of the most illustrious social psychologists still working, should provide proof enough of the promise of perspectivism. It is the job of future generations to fulfill that promise and to push our science forward.
in our own individual ways, as McGuire (1999) invites us to do, with “glances at paths made by travelers who have gone before” (p. 432).

References


