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Being Human:
Relationships and You
A Social Psychological Analysis

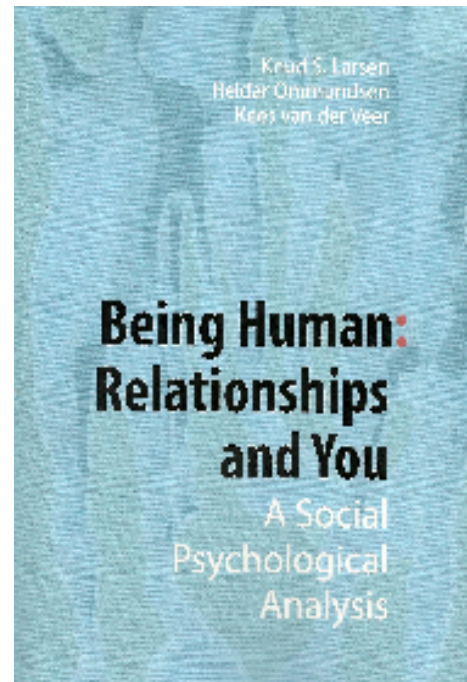
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It would be redundant to say that the world we live in is not perfect. Our social life is often plagued by prejudice and discrimination, our social contacts frequently end up in some form of aggression, different persons or groups constantly try to persuade us to do things that serve them and may end up being harmful for us. At a larger scale history tends to repeat itself and the atrocities of the past - wars, torture, terrorism and genocide, to name just a few of the most damaging - describe the society of today as they did in the last centuries. On the other hand we encounter in our daily lives instances of cooperation and altruism, we see some people sacrificing themselves for the good of others and, at a macro level, see how nations try to work together in order to fight worldwide threats like global warming. The social world we live in is definitively a world of contrasts. How can we explain this "diversity"? How to make sense of crime and also of heroism? How do we make sense of ourselves? These are all central questions for the discipline of social psychology.

Answers for questions like the above and for many other similar interrogations are put forward in the book "Being Human: Relationships and You. A Social Psychological Analysis". Aimed to be a useful resource for students and scholars in social psychology, and more broadly in psychology, this text will certainly be of interest for social scientists in general and for all readers concerned with the intricacies of our social and psychological life. The book emerged from a collaborative effort between a US author, Knud Larsen (Oregon State University), and two European authors, Reidar Ommundsen (University of Oslo) and Kees van der Veer (VU University

Amsterdam). Therefore this reading has a rare and valuable feature, that of making links between American and European social psychology, usually acknowledged as two relatively dissimilar directions of theory and practice. Without ignoring the specificities, "Being Human: Relationships and You" is an excellent example of how the two lines of thought are actually articulated, of how common issues have preoccupied scientists from both the USA and Europe and, most importantly, how sustained dialogue can only enrich our understanding of socio-psychological phenomena.

The book has other important advantages as well. It is clearly written, using a professional yet accessible language and therefore easy to read even by a non-specialist public. It contains a wealth of information in terms of social psychological concepts and theories, studies and practical examples and it excels in reviewing the most recent literature without losing sight of historical landmarks. Organised in twelve chapters, the book offers a comprehensive review of major theories and topics of interest within social psychology from its birth at the beginning of the twentieth century and up to the present moment. Following a short introduction, the first chapter "The Theoretical Domain and Methods of Social Psychology" is an essential reading for all those interested to explore the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of social psychology. The second chapter is concerned with the "Cultural and Social Dimensions of the Self", from the emergence of the self and its development to components of self and how each of them is constituted by our social experiences. "Attraction and Relationships" is the third chapter of the book, covering key issues in attachment theory, interpersonal attraction and romantic love. Looking closely at how we think about the social world, the fourth chapter, "Social Cognition", reviews an important body of evidence accumulated over decades of research about how we process information and the biases we come to manifest in this process. The next part on "Attitude Formation and Behaviour" explores the convoluted relationship between the attitudes we hold and the way we act or not in agreement with them, one of the oldest interrogations within the field of social psychology. Chapter six discusses "The Influences of Group Membership", from social influences and groupthink to leadership, conflict and cooperation in groups. Taking a closer look at processes of social influence, chapter seven pays attention to three key phenomena studied by the discipline: "Conformity, Compliance and Obedience". As a logical continuation, "Persuasion" is examined in chapter eight, starting with the traditional Yale model and continuing with more recent evidence on how persuasion is employed in everyday life, in advertising and in the activity of cults. Chapter nine, entitled "Hostile Inter-group Behaviour: Prejudice, Stereotypes, and Discrimination", consists of a comprehensive discussion about how the three operate in society, past and present, and how we can fight against prejudice

through increased cooperation. In chapters ten and eleven two different images are contrasted - "Aggression" and "Altruism and Prosocial Behaviour" - in terms of their mechanisms and consequences for our lives. Finally, chapter twelve ends the book with a discussion of "Morality" and its three interrelated facets: competition, justice and cooperation.

In all chapters, the authors discuss key theoretical perspectives (like learning theory, cultural variations, evolutionary accounts, equity and exchange theories, etc.) and use them to explain a variety of empirical data. Almost everything social psychology textbooks traditionally cover and more can be found in "Being Human: Relationships and You". From the social self to the bystander effect, from obedience experiments to health and stress, the authors found ingenious ways of organising and accommodating such diverse topics and sometimes the contradictory evidence resulting from empirical studies. Using concise presentations of studies, without more technical details than necessary, and spicing up the presentation with humour or personal experiences, they manage to convey the message that social psychology is a practical and applied discipline. In order to show how theories or pieces of evidence are useful in the discussion of more than one topic, connections are often made between chapters. Furthermore, all chapters end with summaries of two-four pages, an excellent synthesis of all major ideas presented and a precious help for those readers who need to remember what has been already covered. On several occasions what is presented by the end of the discussion are ideas about how we can encourage prosocial behaviours and cooperation, how to reduce prejudice and discourage violence and discrimination. Also a constant of the book is the concern with the cultural context of theories and findings. More or less explicitly all chapters include comments about the cultural variability of socio-psychological phenomena without disregarding the commonalities that bring together all members of the human race. As the authors conclude on this issue, "our cultures define the content of our psychology, but our common human condition produces a similar process of acquiring this psychological knowledge or content" (p.35).

What is specific about the book "Being Human: Relationships and You", one of its greatest advantages and the reason why it makes for such a pleasant and captivating reading, is the fact that, at every step, we are reminded of how relevant social psychology is, from explaining minor everyday life events and up to the major changes and movements shaping the existence of our societies and our planet. Theories are inspected up until their final consequences. "How is a theoretical position relevant for a better understanding of our life?" and also, the other way around: "How can particular aspects of our lives be theorised and explained?" Theory easily slides into practice and vice versa keeping the reader focused and

interested at all times. This is possible mainly because of the excellent use of examples in the book. From exemplary to common instances of social behaviour, from Biblical stories to an analysis of historical events, everything can constitute an illustration and invite careful reflection on the part of the reader, demonstrating at the same time how deeply connected social psychology is to other disciplines, from social to biological sciences. As a consequence, through reading the book we frequently get practical advice (for example how should one call for help in emergency situations) and generally become more aware of how to put the information we gain to good use. Outside of the general public, scholars and students can also benefit from practicing their critical judgement skills. From the first chapter, dedicated to introducing social psychology as a practice and a science, readers are encouraged to reflect critically upon what we currently know as “social psychological theory” and its underlining (and undeclared) set of assumptions and principles. Suggesting that psychology is in fact the history of society (p.26), the authors invite us to consider how ideology can determine *what* we investigate, *how* we investigate and how we use the results of our scientific investigations. In the end, the discipline “reflects our specific historical time and what we think, hope and fear” (p.27) and it is by being aware of this that we can come to improve our thinking and methods as social psychologists.

In concluding, the book “Being Human: Relationships and You. A Social Psychological Analysis” has a number of merits. Due to its style it makes theory and research accessible in a professional manner, always pointing to the fact that social psychology is not “just a science” but deals with issues that constitute the mere substance of our existence as humans. The authors adopt a critical position towards many instances of harmful social manifestations like aggression, the bystander effect, obedience and manipulation, etc., and demonstrate how knowledge of social psychology can make us more conscious of them and, through a social inoculation effect, even make us strong enough to resist them. The deeper message of this book is that of cooperation, the importance of engaging in open dialogue and using our resources to improve our life and the lives of others. Deeper knowledge of how this might be possible is probably the most important contribution social psychology has to offer in supporting our efforts for building a better future.