

1-1-1998

Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles

Michael A. Becker

The Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr>

Recommended Citation

Becker, Michael A. (1998) "Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles," *Clinical Sociology Review*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr/vol16/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Clinical Sociology Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

Book Reviews

Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles, edited by E. Tory Higgins and Arie W. Kruglanski. New York: The Guilford Press, 1996. 948 pp. ISBN 1-57230-100-7.

Michael A. Becker

The Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg

The goal of *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles* is an ambitious one—to identify and analyze the basic principles that underlie social behavior. While a substantial volume of work has now accumulated in substantive areas of social psychology, Higgins and Kruglanski believe that the fundamental principles that tie social phenomena together have yet to be “directly analyzed in a comprehensive manner” (p. vii).

In contrast to the organization by content area taken in more traditional texts, the 28 chapters in this handbook are organized into sections based on the five levels at which they examine social behavior: biological, cognitive, personal motivational, interpersonal, and group/cultural. Within each section, four to seven chapters review theory and research relevant to the “broad social-psychological domains” (p. vii) that are the book’s focus. No attempt is made to integrate the chapters beyond the linkages that naturally arise, nor is any level of analysis presented as more basic or central than another.

Representative of the readings on the biological system are chapters on evolutionary social psychology and social psychosomatics. Coverage of the cognitive system includes chapters devoted to mental representation and social hypothesis testing. Self-regulation and mental control are among the personal motivational system topics, while the interpersonal system section includes readings on social support and interpersonal communication, and the group/cultural system section includes chapters on group conflict and social transitions.

Each chapter strives to “provide a comprehensive review of all the significant conceptualizations related to principles in a given domain, as well as a review of the research supporting (or failing to support) each conceptualization” (p. vii). This goal is well accomplished; the readings are

invariably thorough in their coverage and all contain extensive references, yielding comprehensive end-of-chapter bibliographies and an author index of over 6,000 entries.

However, a focus on underlying social psychological principles does not guarantee coverage of substantive areas and, in fact, some topics receive greater attention than others. In large part, the issue is a relative one; most of the major areas receive at least some coverage and many are discussed in depth. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that for everything this volume is, it is not (nor is it intended to be) a comprehensive survey of accumulated social psychological knowledge.

The book's organization guarantees that there be some overlap across chapters, as some phenomena are discussed at more than one level of analysis or from different perspectives within the same level. A detailed subject index is useful for locating information of interest.

The book's focus on basic principles raises two additional issues for clinical sociologists. First, some levels of analysis are more directly relevant than others. Not surprisingly, clinical sociologists should generally find the later sections on personal motivational, interpersonal, and group/cultural systems particularly useful. However, it would be a mistake to ignore earlier chapters, as it is the exposure to the varied analytical approaches that imbues the reader with a renewed appreciation for the complexity and elegance of social behavior.

Second, a focus on basic principles must inevitably be at the expense of application. While all chapters extensively review relevant theory and research, they are uneven in their attention to how this information can be applied to social issues. Nonetheless, by integrating content areas that have heretofore stood separately, the *Handbook* implicitly suggests new and creative solutions to a variety of applied social problems.

Despite these concerns, the *Handbook* is an invaluable resource for clinical sociologists (and other professionals) interested in understanding social behavior. The readings are thoughtful, ambitious, and engaging, and are generally well-written. The focus on the underpinnings of social behavior complements that of more traditional texts and contributes to a framework for viewing social phenomena that has the potential to greatly advance our understanding of the human social experience.