This book unfolds around its definition of social psychology: the scientific study of how we think about (Part Two), influence (Part Three), and relate to (Part Four) one another.

These modules on social thinking examine the interplay between our sense of self and our social worlds, for example, by showing how self-interest colors our social judgments.

Succeeding modules explore the amazing and sometimes rather amusing ways we form beliefs about our social worlds. We have quite remarkable powers of intuition (or what social psychologists call automatic information processing), yet in at least a half-dozen ways our intuition often fails us. Knowing these ways not only beckons us to humility, but also can help us sharpen our thinking, keeping it more closely in touch with reality.

We will explore the links between attitudes and behaviors: Do our attitudes determine our behaviors? Do our behaviors determine our attitudes? Or does it work both ways?

Finally, we will apply these concepts and findings to clinical psychology, by showing where clinical intuition may go astray but also how social psychologists might assist a clinician’s explanation and treatment of depression, loneliness, and anxiety.
No topic in psychology today is more heavily researched than the self. In 2008 the word “self” appeared in 10,328 book and article summaries in PsycINFO (the online archive of psychological research)—more than twelve times the number that appeared in 1970. How, and how accurately, do we know ourselves? What determines our self-concept?

**At the Center of Our Worlds: Our Sense of Self**

You have many ways to complete the sentence “I am ______.” (What five answers might you give?) Taken together, your answers define your self-concept.

The most important aspect of yourself is your self. You know who you are, your gender, whose feelings and memories you experience.

The elements of your self-concept, the specific beliefs by which you define yourself, are your self-schemas (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Schemas are mental templates by which we organize our worlds. Our self-schemas—our perceiving ourselves as athletic, overweight, smart,
or whatever—powerfully affect how we perceive, remember, and evaluate other people and ourselves. If athletics is central to your self-concept (if being an athlete is one of your self-schemas), then you will tend to notice others’ athletic skills. You will quickly recall sports-related experiences. And you will welcome information that is consistent with your self-schema (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984). The self-schemas that make up our self-concepts help us organize and retrieve our experiences.

Our sense of self is central to our lives—so much so that we tend to see ourselves as center stage and to overestimate the extent to which others notice us. For example, we overestimate our conspicuousness. This spotlight effect means that we tend to see ourselves at center stage, so we intuitively overestimate the extent to which others’ attention is aimed at us.

Thomas Gilovich, Victoria Medvec, and Kenneth Savitsky (2000) explored the spotlight effect by having individual Cornell University students don embarrassing Barry Manilow T-shirts before entering a room with other students. The self-conscious T-shirt wearers guessed that nearly half their peers would notice the shirt. Actually, only 23 percent did.

What’s true of our dorky clothes and bad hair is also true of our emotions: our anxiety, irritation, disgust, deceit, or attraction (Gilovich & others, 1998). Fewer people notice than we presume. Keenly aware of our own emotions, we often have an illusion that they are transparent to others. The same goes for our social blunders and public mental slips. But research shows that what we agonize over, others may hardly notice and soon forget (Savitsky & others, 2001). The more self-conscious we are, the more we believe this illusion of transparency (Vorauer & Ross, 1999).

SELF AND CULTURE

How did you complete the “I am ______” statement on page 23? Did you give information about your personal traits, such as “I am honest,” “I am tall,” or “I am outgoing”? Or did you also describe your social identity, such as “I am a Pisces,” “I am a MacDonald,” or “I am a Muslim”?

For some people, especially those in industrialized Western cultures, individualism prevails. Identity is self-contained. Adolescence is a time of separating from parents, becoming self-reliant, and defining one’s personal, independent self. One’s identity—as a unique individual with particular abilities, traits, values, and dreams—remains fairly constant.

The psychology of Western cultures assumes that your life will be enriched by believing in your power of personal control. Western literature,
from *The Iliad* to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, celebrates the self-reliant individual. Movie plots feature rugged heroes who buck the establishment. Songs proclaiming “I Gotta Be Me” declare that “The Greatest Love of All” is loving oneself (Schoeneman, 1994) and state without irony that ‘I Believe the World Should Revolve Around Me.” Individualism flourishes when people experience affluence, mobility, urbanism, and mass media (Freeman, 1997; Marshall, 1997; Triandis, 1994).

Most cultures native to Asia, Africa, and Central and South America place a greater value on collectivism. They nurture what Shinobu Kitayama and Hazel Markus (1995) call the *interdependent self*. In these cultures, people are more self-critical and have less need for positive self-regard (Heine & others, 1999). Malaysians, Indians, Japanese, and traditional Kenyans such as the Maasai, for example, are much more likely than Australians, Americans, and the British to complete the “I am” statement with their group identities (Kanagawa & others, 2001; Ma & Schoeneman, 1997). When speaking, people using the languages of collectivist countries say “I” less often (Kashima & Kashima, 1998, 2003). A person might say “Went to the movie” rather than “I went to the movie.”

Pigeonholing cultures as solely individualist or collectivist over-simplifies, because within any culture individualism varies from person to person (Oyserman & others, 2002a, 2002b). There are individualist Chinese and collectivist Americans, and most of us sometimes behave communally, sometimes individualistically (Bandura, 2004). Individualism-collectivism also varies across a country’s regions and political views. In the United States, Hawaiians and those living in the deep South exhibit greater collectivism than do those in Mountain West states such as Oregon and Montana (Vandello & Cohen, 1999). Conservatives tend to be economic individualists (“don’t tax or regulate me”) and moral collectivists (“legislate against immorality”). Liberals, on the other hand, tend to be economic collectivists (supporting national health care) and moral individualists (“keep your laws off my body”). Despite individual and subcultural variations, researchers continue to regard individualism and collectivism as genuine cultural variables (Schimmack & others, 2005).

If you grew up in a Western culture, you were probably told to “express yourself”—through writing, the choices you make, the products you buy, and perhaps through your tattoos or piercings. When asked about the purpose of language, American students were more likely to explain that it allows self-expression, whereas Korean students focused on how language allows communication with others. American students were also more likely to see their choices as expressions of themselves and to evaluate their choices more favorably (Kim & Sherman, 2007). The individualized latté—“decaf, single shot, skinny, extra hot”—that seems just right at a North American espresso shop would seem strange in Seoul, note Heejung Kim and Hazel Markus (1999). In Korea, people
place less value on expressing their uniqueness and more on tradition and shared practices (Choi & Choi, 2002). Korean advertisements tend to feature people together; they seldom highlight personal choice or freedom (Markus, 2001; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008).

With an interdependent self, one has a greater sense of belonging. If they were uprooted and cut off from family, colleagues, and loyal friends, interdependent people would lose the social connections that define who they are. They have not one self but many selves: self-with-parents, self-at-work, self-with-friends (Cross & others, 1992). As Figure 3-1 and Table 3-1 suggest, the interdependent self is embedded in social memberships.

**FIGURE 3-1**
Self-construal as independent or interdependent. The independent self acknowledges relationships with others. But the interdependent self is more deeply embedded in others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

**TABLE 3-1 SELF-CONCEPT: INDEPENDENT OR INTERDEPENDENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Interdependent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity is</td>
<td>Personal, defined by individual traits and goals</td>
<td>Social, defined by connections with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What matters</td>
<td>Me—personal achievement and fulfillment; my rights and liberties</td>
<td>We—group goals and solidarity; our social responsibilities and relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapproves of</td>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>Egotism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrative motto</td>
<td>“To thine own self be true”</td>
<td>“No one is an island”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultures that support</td>
<td>Individualistic Western</td>
<td>Collectivistic Asian and Third World</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conversation is less direct and more polite (Holtgraves, 1997), and people focus more on gaining social approval (Lalwani & others, 2006). The goal of social life is to harmonize with and support one’s communities, not—as it is in more individualistic societies—to enhance one’s individual self.

**Culture and Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem in collectivist cultures correlates closely with “what others think of me and my group.” Self-concept is malleable (context-specific) rather than stable (enduring across situations). In one study, four in five Canadian students but only one in three Chinese and Japanese students agreed that “the beliefs that you hold about who you are (your inner self) remain the same across different activity domains” (Tafarodi & others, 2004).

For those in individualistic cultures, self-esteem is more personal and less relational. Threaten our personal identity and we’ll feel angrier and gloomier than when someone threatens our collective identity (Gaertner & others, 1999).

So when, do you suppose, are university students in collectivist Japan and individualist United States most likely to report positive emotions such as happiness and elation? For Japanese students, happiness comes with positive social engagement—with feeling close, friendly, and respectful. For American students, it more often comes with disengaged emotions—with feeling effective, superior, and proud (Kitayama & Markus, 2000). Conflict in collectivist cultures often takes place between groups; individualist cultures breed more conflict (and crime and divorce) between individuals (Triandis, 2000).

When Kitayama (1999), after ten years of teaching and researching in America, visited his Japanese alma mater, Kyoto University, graduate students were “astounded” when he explained the Western idea of the independent self. “I persisted in explaining this Western notion of self-concept—one that my American students understood intuitively—and finally began to persuade them that, indeed, many Americans do have such a disconnected notion of self. Still, one of them, sighing deeply, said at the end, ‘Could this really be true?’”

**SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

“Know thyself,” admonished an ancient Greek oracle. We certainly try. We readily form beliefs about ourselves, and we Western cultures don’t hesitate to explain why we feel and act as we do. But how well do we actually know ourselves?

“There is one thing, and only one in the whole universe which we know more about than we could learn from external observation,” noted
C. S. Lewis (1952, pp. 18–19). “That one thing is [ourselves]. We have, so to speak, inside information; we are in the know.” Indeed. Yet sometimes we think we know, but our inside information is wrong. That is the unavoidable conclusion of some fascinating research.

**Explaining Our Behavior**

Why did you choose where to go to college? Why did you lash out at your roommate? Why did you fall in love with that special person? Sometimes we know. Sometimes we don’t. Asked why we have felt or acted as we have, we produce plausible answers. Yet, when causes are subtle, our self-explanations are often wrong. We may dismiss factors that matter and inflate others that don’t. People may misattribute their rainy-day gloom to life’s emptiness (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). And people routinely deny being influenced by the media, which, they readily acknowledge, affects others.

Also thought provoking are studies in which people recorded their moods every day for two or three months (Stone & others, 1985; Weiss & Brown, 1976; Wilson & others, 1982). They also recorded factors that might affect their moods: the day of the week, the weather, the amount they slept, and so forth. At the end of each study, the people judged how much each factor had affected their moods. Even with their attention on their daily moods, there was little relationship between their perceptions of how well a factor predicted their mood and how well it really did. For example, people thought they would experience more negative moods on Mondays, but in fact their moods were no more negative on Mondays than other weekdays. This raises a disconcerting question: How much insight do we really have into what makes us happy or unhappy? As Daniel Gilbert notes in *Stumbling on Happiness* (2007), not much: We are remarkably bad predictors of what will make us happy.

**Predicting Our Behavior**

People also err when predicting their behavior. Dating couples tend to predict the longevity of their relationships through rose-colored glasses. Their friends and family often know better, report Tara MacDonald and Michael Ross (1997). Among University of Waterloo students, their roommates were better predictors of whether their romances would survive than they were. Medical residents weren’t very good at predicting whether they would do well on a surgical skills exam, but their peers in the program predicted one another’s performance with startling accuracy (Lutsky & others, 1993). So if you’re in love and want to know whether it will last, don’t listen to your heart—ask your roommate. And if you want to predict your routine daily behaviors—how much time you will spend laughing, on the phone, or watching TV, for example—your
close friends’ estimates will likely prove at least as accurate as your own (Vazire & Mehl, 2008).

One of the most common errors in behavior prediction is underestimating how long it will take to complete a task (called the **planning fallacy**). The Big Dig freeway construction project in Boston was supposed to take 10 years and actually took 20 years. The Sydney Opera House was supposed to be completed in 6 years; it took 16. In one study, college students writing a senior thesis paper were asked to predict when they would complete the project. On average, students finished three weeks later than their “most realistic” estimate—and a week later than their “worst-case scenario” estimate (Buehler & others, 2002)! However, friends and teachers were able to predict just how late these papers would be. Just as you should ask your friends how long your relationship is likely to survive, if you want to know when you will finish your term paper, ask your roommate or your mom. You could also do what Microsoft does: Managers automatically add 30 percent onto a software developer’s estimate of completion—and 50 percent if the project involves a new operating system (Dunning, 2006).

**Predicting Our Feelings**

Many of life’s big decisions involve predicting our future feelings. Would marrying this person lead to lifelong contentment? Would entering this profession make for satisfying work? Would going on this vacation produce a happy experience? Or would the likelier results be divorce, job burnout, and holiday disappointment?

Sometimes we know how we will feel—if we fail that exam, win that big game, or soothe our tensions with a half-hour jog. We know what exhilarates us and what makes us anxious or bored. Other times we may mispredict our responses. Asked how they would feel if asked sexually harassing questions on a job interview, most women studied by Julie Woodzicka and Marianne LaFrance (2001) said they would feel angry. When actually asked such questions, however, women more often experienced fear.

Studies of “affective forecasting” reveal that people have greatest difficulty predicting the **intensity** and the **duration** of their future emotions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). People have mispredicted how they would feel some time after a romantic breakup, receiving a gift, losing an election, winning a game, and being insulted (Gilbert & Ebert, 2002; Loewenstein & Schkade, 1999). Some examples:

- When male youths are sexually aroused by erotic photographs, then exposed to a passionate date scenario in which their date asks them to “stop,” they admit that they might not stop. If not shown sexually arousing pictures first, they more often deny the possibility of being sexually aggressive. When not aroused, one
easily mispredicts how one will feel and act when aroused—a phenomenon that leads to unexpected professions of love during lust, to unintended pregnancies, and to repeat offenses among sex abusers who have sincerely vowed “never again.”

- Hungry shoppers do more impulse buying (“Those doughnuts would be delicious!”) than do shoppers who have just enjoyed a quarter-pound blueberry muffin (Gilbert & Wilson, 2000). When we are hungry, we mispredict how gross those deep-fried doughnuts will seem when we are sated. When stuffed, we may underestimate how yummy a doughnut might be with a late-night glass of milk—a purchase whose appeal quickly fades when we have eaten one or two.

- Undergraduates who experienced a romantic breakup were less upset afterward than they predicted they would be (Eastwick & others, 2007). Their distress lasted just about as long as they thought it would, but the heartbroken students were not as hard-hit as they imagined they would be. European track athletes similarly overestimated how badly they would feel if they failed to reach their goal in an upcoming meet (van Dijk & others, 2008).

- When natural disasters like hurricanes occur, people predict that their sadness will be greater if more people are killed. But after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, students’ sadness was similar whether it was believed that 50 people had been killed or 1,000 had been killed (Dunn & Ashton-James, 2008). What did influence how sad people felt? Seeing pictures of victims.

- People overestimate how much their well-being would be affected by warmer winters, weight loss, more television channels, or more free time. Even extreme events, such as winning a state lottery or suffering a paralyzing accident, affect long-term happiness less than most people suppose.

Our intuitive theory seems to be: We want. We get. We are happy. If that were true, this chapter would have fewer words. In reality, note Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson (2000), we often “miswant.” People who imagine an idyllic desert island holiday with sun, surf, and sand may be disappointed when they discover “how much they require daily structure, intellectual stimulation, or regular infusions of Pop Tarts.” We think that if our candidate or team wins we will be delighted for a long while. But study after study reveals that the emotional traces of such good tidings evaporate more rapidly than we expect.

Moreover, we are especially prone to impact bias after negative events. When Gilbert and his colleagues (1998) asked assistant professors to predict their happiness a few years after achieving tenure or
not, most believed a favorable outcome was important for their future happiness: “Losing my job would crush my life’s ambitions. It would be terrible.” Yet when surveyed several years after the event, those denied tenure were about as happy as those who received it. Impact bias is important, say Wilson and Gilbert (2005), because people’s “affective forecasts”—their predictions of their future emotions—influence their decisions. If people overestimate the intensity and the duration of the pleasure they will gain from purchasing a new car or undergoing cosmetic surgery, then they may make ill-advised investments in that new Mercedes or extreme makeover.

Let’s make this personal. Gilbert and Wilson invite us to imagine how we might feel a year after losing our nondominant hands. Compared with today, how happy would you be?

Thinking about that, you perhaps focused on what the calamity would mean: no clapping, no shoe tying, no competitive basketball, no speedy keyboarding. Although you likely would forever regret the loss, your general happiness some time after the event would be influenced by “two things: (a) the event, and (b) everything else” (Gilbert & Wilson, 2000). In focusing on the negative event, we discount the importance of everything else that contributes to happiness and so overpredict our enduring misery. “Nothing that you focus on will make as much difference as you think,” write researchers David Schkade and Daniel Kahneman (1998).

Moreover, say Wilson and Gilbert (2003), people neglect the speed and the power of their psychological immune system, which includes their strategies for rationalizing, discounting, forgiving, and limiting emotional trauma. Being largely ignorant of our psychological immune system (a phenomenon Gilbert and Wilson call immune neglect), we adapt to disabilities, romantic breakups, exam failures, tenure denials, and personal and team defeats more readily than we would expect. Ironically, as Gilbert and his colleagues report (2004), major negative events (which activate our psychological defenses) can be less enduringly distressing than minor irritations (which don’t activate our defenses). We are, under most circumstances, amazingly resilient.

The Wisdom and Illusions of Self-Analysis

To a striking extent, then, our intuitions are often dead wrong about what has influenced us and what we will feel and do. But let’s not overstate the case. When the causes of our behavior are conspicuous and the correct explanation fits our intuition, our self-perceptions will be accurate (Gavanski & Hoffman, 1987). When the causes of behavior are obvious to an observer, they are usually obvious to us as well.

We are unaware of much that goes on in our minds. Perception and memory studies show that we are more aware of the results of our thinking than of its process. For example, we experience the results of our
mind’s unconscious workings when we set a mental clock to record the passage of time or to awaken us at an appointed hour, or when we somehow achieve a spontaneous creative insight after a problem has unconsciously “incubated.” Similarly, creative scientists and artists often cannot report the thought processes that produced their insights, although they have superb knowledge of the results.

Timothy Wilson (1985, 2002) offers a bold idea: The mental processes that control our social behavior are distinct from the mental processes through which we explain our behavior. Our rational explanations may therefore omit the unconscious attitudes that actually guide our behavior. In nine experiments, Wilson and his colleagues (1989, 2008) found that the attitudes people consciously expressed toward things or people usually predicted their subsequent behavior reasonably well. Their attitude reports became useless, however, if the participants were first asked to analyze their feelings. For example, dating couples’ level of happiness with their relationship accurately predicted whether they would still be dating several months later. But participants first listed all the reasons they could think of why their relationship was good or bad before rating their happiness were mislead—their happiness ratings were useless in predicting the future of the relationship! Apparently, the process of dissecting the relationship drew attention to easily verbalized factors that were actually not as important as harder-to-verbalize happiness. We are often “strangers to ourselves,” Wilson concluded (2002).

Such findings illustrate that we have a dual attitude system, say Wilson and his colleagues (2000). Our unconscious, automatic, implicit attitudes regarding someone or something often differ from our consciously controlled, explicit attitudes (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Nosek, 2007). From childhood, for example, we may retain a habitual, automatic fear or dislike of people for whom we now consciously verbalize respect and appreciation. Although explicit attitudes may change with relative ease, notes Wilson, “implicit attitudes, like old habits, change more slowly.” With repeated practice, however, new habitual attitudes can replace old ones.

Murray Millar and Abraham Tesser (1992) have argued that Wilson overstates our ignorance of self. Their research suggests that, yes, drawing people’s attention to reasons diminishes the usefulness of attitude reports in predicting behaviors that are driven by feelings. They argue that if, instead of having people analyze their romantic relationships, Wilson had first asked them to get more in touch with their feelings (“How do you feel when you are with and apart from your partner?”), the attitude reports might have been more insightful. Other decisions people make—say, choosing which school to attend based on considerations of cost, career advancement, and so forth—seem more cognitively driven. For these, an analysis of reasons rather than feelings may be most
useful. Although the heart has its reasons, sometimes the mind’s own reasons are decisive.

This research on the limits of our self-knowledge has two practical implications. The first is for psychological inquiry. *Self-reports are often untrustworthy.* Errors in self-understanding limit the scientific usefulness of subjective personal reports.

The second implication is for our everyday lives. The sincerity with which people report and interpret their experiences is no guarantee of the validity of those reports. Personal testimonies are powerfully persuasive. But they may also be wrong. Keeping this potential for error in mind can help us feel less intimidated by others and be less gullible.

**CONCEPTS TO REMEMBER**

self-concept A person’s answers to the question, “Who am I?”

self-schema Beliefs about self that organize and guide the processing of self-relevant information.

individualism The concept of giving priority to one’s own goals over group goals and defining one’s identity in terms of personal attributes rather than group identifications.

collectivism Giving priority to the goals of one’s groups (often one’s extended family or work group) and defining one’s identity accordingly.

planning fallacy The tendency to underestimate how long it will take to complete a task.

dual attitudes Differing implicit (automatic) and explicit (consciously controlled) attitudes toward the same object. Verbalized explicit attitudes may change with education and persuasion; implicit attitudes change slowly, with practice that forms new habits.