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Preface

The carriers of scientific development are idea and theories. Ideas is what make us tick, is what make us excited – and sometimes even smile. Ideas often capture something new, that presumably most people have not thought about before. Scientific ideas are also often constructive, in that they may bind and connect (often shared) observations into common principles that has the potential to contribute to scientific knowledge. As a classic illustration, if the idea is that people have a willful, conscious part and an unconscious part, and that the former often seeks to regulate the latter, then scientists not familiar with Freudian (or other) theorizing at the time, should feel elated and energized. That is, at the time when psychology just had begun as new discipline, this must have been a crisp, inspiring idea that should have influenced the ways in which numerous scientists perceive, interpret, and understand various forms of human behavior – from slips of the tongue in conversation to aggressive behavior.

Ideas are often a primary building block for theories. Not every idea leads to a theory, but a theory cannot exist without ideas. Ideas are necessary but not sufficient to theoretical development and progress. More than ideas, theories get at the why-and-how of numerous phenomena and trace their implications for many situations. Theories thus organize a wide range of events and phenomena into coherent systems guided by common principles. Both statements were made in the preface of the Handbook of theories of social psychology that we edited some years ago (Van Lange, Kruglanski, & Higgins, 2012). For example, the classic idea by Festinger (1954) that in the absence of objective criteria, people evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing it to others’ options and abilities is one that led to the development of a more comprehensive theory of social comparison. In later accounts, social comparison theory included
not only self-evaluation (to use social information to define and evaluate oneself), a motive assumed by Festinger, but also other motives such as self-enhancement (to use social information to provide self-serving evaluations) and self-improvement (to use social information to learn and improve) (see Suls & Wheeler, 2012; Wood, 1989).

Ideas should flourish in a world in which people do not sanction each other for lack of evidence, being impossible to test, lack of novelty, or lack of application in the “real world”. Sometimes “wild ideas” have a charm and are inspirational, for whatever reason, but are unlikely to make it to a theory. That is in part because theories are evaluated according to much more stringent criteria. Theories may be evaluated in terms of Truth (and testability), Abstraction, Progress, and Applicability, as these serve as the primary Standards (TAPAS) for judging the merits (and limitations) of theories (Van Lange, 2013; see also Kruglanski, 2006).

We focus so much on ideas and theories, because this Handbook of Social Psychology emphasizes Basic Principles. And basic principles are often the product of scientific ideas that may lead to theories if they do well in terms of the stringent criteria explicated in TAPAS. Basic principles are the glue in between ideas and theories. They help a scientist to make ideas explicit to formalize them wherever possible, and often it is a set of basic principles that forms the beginnings of a new theory. Social psychology adopts an inclusive definition of a theory, and most theories tend to be “middle range” (Merton, 1949: 5) and hence “intermediate to minor working hypotheses” rather than grand theoretical edifices. Whether small or large in scope and reach, theories are grounded in basic principles – the focus of the present handbook.

Our Handbook is grounded in the conviction that social psychology has a lot to offer in terms of basic principles. Yet this does not mean that scientists who are often guided and inspired by basic principles have made these very principles explicit in their writings. Therefore,
like the previous editions of this handbook (Higgins & Kruglanski, 1996; Kruglanski & Higgins, 2007), we encouraged authors to explicate the basic principles that underlie their domains of research and theorizing. As the reader will see, the authors amply rose to the challenge and proceeded to explicate the basic principles underlying their work, whether in the text of their contributions or in their summaries. Apart from the basic principles, the chapters often provide a state of the art review of particular programs of research, and sometimes a review of well-established theories that have inspired multiple generations of researchers in social psychology and beyond.

This Handbook includes 30 chapters. The first section called *Principles in Theory* includes 24 chapters that are categorized in terms of four levels of analysis: Intrapersonal processes, interpersonal processes, intragroup processes, and intergroup processes. As the reader will see, although most chapters are relevant to multiple levels, it also true that the principles discussed in these chapters often focus on one of these levels. Also, the basic principles discussed in these chapters capture multiple elements of biological, affective, cognitive, and motivational processes. This may in part reflect a growth in research and theorizing in social psychology, in that they more often than in the past combine motives, address cognition, motivation, and emotion, or seek bridges with broad perspectives such as evolutionary theory or neuroscience.

Further, to highlight the idea that basic principles operate in distinct societal contexts, and that contexts illuminate the workings of these principles, this Handbook has a second section called *Principles in Context*. This section includes six chapters, addressing a context of helping, law, negotiation, organization, political extremism, and sports. As the chapters illustrate, these are contexts in which basic principles of social psychology – whether they are linked to
intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup processes – are very relevant. Clearly, this would also be true for many other contexts, such as a consumer context, an educational context, or an environmental context, but we felt that including these six contexts provide already useful situations in which people live their social lives – where the actual, imaginary, or implied presence of others help us understand how and why basic principles of social psychology come alive.

This Handbook is the third in a series of Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles. The former two were edited by two of us, who invited the first editor to join in, and he enthusiastically agreed. The three of us had worked together on two-volume Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology, and that had been the most inspiring and enjoyable venture. This handbook was similarly inspiring and enjoyable, not only because the editors work so well together, but also because the authors did a truly terrific job. It is of course for the editors impossible to produce and share a completely objective evaluation of the chapters. We are happy to leave that up to the readers, and hope that this handbook, like the previous ones, may be source of scientific inspiration and enjoyment – just as it has been for us.

The editors

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References


