Cognition almost invariably occurs in the context of other people: the web of face-to-face encounters, personal relationships, and social group memberships that make us who we are. Not only do these social entities very frequently constitute the content of our thoughts and feelings, but they fundamentally shape the processes underlying our cognition and behavior as well. To detail some of the evidence for this broad claim, this chapter describes the interface of situated cognition with social psychology. We make the case that these two fields focus on many of the same empirical and conceptual issues, although sometimes taking different perspectives.

Following a brief section that introduces the field of social psychology, the main body of the chapter is organized under four broad principles that we believe capture major areas of overlap and common interest between situated cognition and social psychology.
What is social psychology?

Social psychology is a discrete area of theory and research that represents one of the half-dozen or so main subdisciplines of psychology (e.g., cognitive, clinical, personality, developmental, social, biological). As such, it has its own scientific journals, conferences, textbooks, traditions, and distinctive foci of interest. The conceptual focus of social psychology is the study of *human behavior in its social context*, or to put it slightly less concisely, the study of how people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by the actual or implied presence of other people. Some specific areas of research interest that fall within this definition include:

- **Social perception**: How people perceive other individuals, interpret their behaviors, and infer their intentions; the role of social group memberships and group stereotypes in this process; how people perceive themselves and the influence of the self-concept on thoughts, emotions, and social behavior.

- **Social influence**: How people’s opinions and behavior are influenced by persuasive messages from others or by conformity processes; how social groups form norms that in turn regulate group members’ behaviors.

- **Social relationships**: How people form close relationships (friendships, romantic attachments) and how relationships affect thoughts, feelings, and behavior; how people cooperate with others in groups that interact to make decisions or perform concrete tasks; when and how people help others or aggress against them.

Social psychology has been greatly influenced by its disciplinary neighbor, cognitive psychology, both in its methodological preference for controlled laboratory experiments as the most highly valued research method, and in the focus of most common theories (Jones, 1998). Social psychological theories for the most part (albeit with important exceptions) are theories
about mental processes that underlie the types of social phenomena outlined above, such as
person perception, social influence, and relationship formation. Of course, mental processes
relevant to social psychology include not only narrowly cognitive processes such as language
comprehension, causal ascription, and problem solving, but also the emotional and motivational
processes that loom large when people interact either in friendly or conflictual ways.

With these characteristic interests and approaches, social psychology frequently finds itself
pulled in two opposing directions. On the one hand, social psychological theories have
frequently been formulated as abstract, disembodied stories about autonomous mental processes,
expressed as “boxologies” with little or no concern for adaptiveness in, or even interfaces with,
real social environments. This is the very approach whose shortcomings, whether realistically
portrayed or caricatured and exaggerated, are so frequently the starting point for rationales and
justifications of the situated cognition approach. As an example, consider social psychological
research on the effects of stereotypes on person perception. Theorists had long assumed that
perception of members of social groups (e.g., women, Asians) inevitably led to activation of
mental representations of generally shared and well-learned stereotypes associated with those
groups, just as perception of words naming common concepts automatically leads to activation
of those concepts. The activation and application of a stereotype is considered an autonomous
cognitive process involving the access and modification of mental representations, taking place
within a perceiver who functions as an uninvolved information-processor, never actually
behaving in the world but simply reporting his or her judgments and opinions. This caricature
represents an almost completely non-situated picture of human cognition.

On the other hand, other forces pull social psychology in exactly the opposite direction,
toward consideration of the situated nature of cognition and behavior. The very definition of
social psychology states that its ultimate concern is with effects of the social situation or context on cognition and behavior. This focus has kept the field from going too far down the road of focusing on autonomous inner processes. The tendency to boxologize the mind has been tempered by a constant focus on the ways in which personal relationships, group memberships, and our self-perceptions constrain and facilitate our cognition. In its emphasis on flexible processing in a social context, social psychology parallels the situated cognition approach in its focus on cognition as the underpinning of adaptive behavior, and its acknowledgement that thought is produced by the interaction between the organism and its environment. Social psychology already embraces many of the central tenets of the situated cognition approach, so research in social psychology can inform the study of situated cognition more broadly. In the domain of stereotyping, for instance, recent research has demonstrated, in contrast to the earlier picture of autonomous and automatic processes, that stereotype activation depends on the perceiver’s active goals and motives. When perceivers have specific reasons to want to know in depth about the other person (Fiske & Neuberg, 1987), or when they are motivated to think well or ill of that person (Sinclair & Kunda, 1999), activated stereotypes can be profoundly altered or suppressed. Person perception can thus be viewed as socially adaptive (e.g., Gilbert, 1998) and as a product of the motivational context. Stereotyping and other processes unfold in ways that facilitate ongoing social interaction, relationship maintenance, and the accomplishment of the perceiver’s social goals in a given social context, rather than in fixed and invariant style. This line of research demonstrates the movement in social psychology toward a model of human social cognition as both situated and adaptive, and suggests ways in which research on social cognition might inform our understanding of situated cognition more broadly.
As a way of organizing our description of theory and research within social psychology that pertains to situated cognition, we adopt four major principles advanced by Smith and Semin (2004). These are intended to capture four interrelated and partially overlapping themes that are common to social psychology and situated cognition. The principles are: (a) Cognition is for the adaptive regulation of action, and mental representations are action-oriented. (b) Cognition is embodied, both constrained and facilitated by our sensori-motor abilities as well as our brains. (c) Cognition and action are situated in the sense of being contingent on specific aspects of the agent’s social environment. (d) Cognition is distributed across brains and the environment and across social agents (e.g., when information is discussed and evaluated in groups). With regard to each of these themes, we briefly review and integrate relevant social psychological research.

**Cognition is action-oriented**

Situated cognition offers the key insight that cognition is for adaptive action, Our minds evolved for the on-line control of behavior under the demands of survival rather than for detached puzzle-solving or abstract cogitation. This principle implies the existence of close connections between cognition, motivation, and action, connections that have been core topics of study in social psychology. We offer three examples.

1. *Motivation shapes cognition.* Cognition is generally not neutral and detached, but is biased by the individual’s motives and goals. Consider a person’s understanding of the meaning of traits (such as *reliable, honest,* or *intelligent*), which are basic components of our impressions of other people as well as ourselves. Research shows that our definitions of such traits are not objective and invariant, but are shaped in self-serving ways by our own perceived standings on those traits (Dunning & Cohen, 1992). As a second example, consider a person who is a member of two social groups that are stereotyped in opposite ways, such as an African-American (poor,
unintelligent) and physician (affluent, intelligent). If such an individual delivers praise to a social perceiver, research shows that features of the positive stereotype are automatically activated, whereas the delivery of criticism triggers activation of the negative stereotype (Sinclair & Kunda, 1999). In other words, the motivation to believe praise and disparage criticism tunes and constrains stereotype activation. A third example: Crowe and Higgins (1997) demonstrated that people in a promotion focus, those pursuing achievement, commit more errors of commission than do people in a prevention focus, those pursuing security and responsibility. That is, promotion-focused people are more willing to commit errors of commission in pursuit of hits, while prevention-focused people are more willing to commit errors of omission. Finally, the fundamental human need to belong shapes our social cognition. People experiencing a heightened need to belong, as after a social rejection, tune their attention and cognition to process social information in the environment more carefully and thoroughly (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). These and numerous other examples of biases in cognition caused by the perceiver’s motivational concerns effectively illustrate how social cognition serves the needs of adaptive action (Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996; Sorrentino & Higgins, 1986; Higgins & Sorrentino, 1990; Brewer & Harasty, 1996; Brewer, 1991).

2. *Time pressure shapes cognition.* Because cognition is for adaptive action, real-world pressures such as time constraints often impinge on cognitive processes. Social psychology has a strong tradition of dual process models which specify how and when we use heuristics and biases to achieve cognitive goals with a minimum of effort, and how and when we employ more effortful processing (see Smith & DeCoster, 2000 for a review). Carrying on a conversation, for example, is an instance of social cognition under time pressure – the pragmatic demands of the situation may limit one’s ability to ponder as deeply as might be desired. It is important to
Social psych/sit cognition

recognize that, although heuristic processing has sometimes been portrayed as sloppy or intrinsically error-prone, it is more fruitfully viewed as adaptive: yielding good-enough results that satisfy pragmatic constraints of real-life, action-demanding situations (Gigerenzer et al., 1999).

3. Mental representations are action-oriented. The situated cognition approach suggests that not only cognitive processing styles but also mental representations should be action-oriented, tuned to the effective and efficient control of action. Social psychological research has supported this hypothesis as well. The “attitude,” a mental representation specifying a perceiver’s positive or negative evaluation of an object or concept, has been considered perhaps the most characteristic and central construct of the field (Allport, 1954). Examples of attitudes include antipathy toward specific social groups (i.e., prejudice), liking for oneself (i.e., self-esteem), and liking or disliking for consumer products, social policies, or abstract ideas (such as tax cuts or abortion rights). Attitudes are fundamentally action-oriented representations: Their main function is to tell the perceiver how to relate to or interact with the object – whether to approach or avoid it, praise or blame it, cherish or damage it. Research shows that when people encounter objects toward which they have strong attitudes, the attitude is automatically activated to color the perception of the object and influence judgments and actions (Fazio et al., 1986).

Our impressions of other people are also action-oriented representations, containing information about how we behave toward or interact with those others (Carlston, 1994; Baldwin, 1992; Holmes, 2000). In fact, different people with whom the perceiver has the same type of relationship tend to be confused with each other in memory – to a greater extent even than different people who share important social characteristics such as age or race – indicating that mental representations of people are structured by the types of actions they call for rather than by
their abstract traits or category memberships (Fiske & Haslam, 1996).

In summary, social psychologists have enthusiastically endorsed the notion that cognition is oriented toward adaptive action (Fiske, 1992), and much research has spelled out concrete implications of this principle in such areas as motivated biases in cognition, effects of time pressure on cognitive processes, and the action-oriented nature of attitudes and other mental representations.

Cognition is embodied

An emphasis on action as the goal of cognitive activity suggests the importance of the body – the vehicle of all action – as a constraint on cognition. Thus, a second major theme of situated cognition is that bodily states and sensori-motor representations play an important role in all cognition. This issue has been explored in at least two domains within social psychology.

1. Sensori-motor aspects of mental representations. Attitudes, mental representations involving evaluations of objects, have close connections to sensori-motor systems related to approach and avoidance. For instance, muscle movements involving approach and avoidance have been shown to influence evaluative judgments of novel objects (e.g., Cacioppo, Priester, & Berntson, 1993). Muscle movements associated with pulling an object closer lead to more positive judgments, while those associated with pushing away lead to negative judgments. Other studies (Neumann & Strack, 2000) present words on a computer screen over a background of a rotating spiral pattern. Rotation in one direction gives an appearance that one is moving toward the screen, while rotation in the other direction generates the appearance of moving away. When the screen appears to be moving closer, people can classify positive words more quickly, and when the screen appears to be moving further away, negative words receive faster responses. These and similar findings suggest that attitudes or evaluations are not just "in the head" but
involve the perceiver's whole body, being linked to movement toward or away from objects in a real physical sense.

Going beyond attitudes, Schubert (2004) showed that making a fist influences people’s automatic processing of words related to the concept of power, suggesting that even such a highly abstract concept involves motoric elements in its representation. Recent research by Livingston and Brewer (2002) as well as by Blair et al. (2002) shows that stereotyping is not purely a matter of the application of abstract knowledge about the characteristics of various social groups, but has strong perceptual elements as well. Stereotypes applied to a given person are affected by that person’s continuously varying perceptual attributes (such as skin tone and facial features) as well as by his or her discrete category membership.

Finally, in a broad theoretical paper, Niedenthal et al. (2005) apply Barsalou’s (1999) model of perceptual symbol systems, sensori-motor based representations, to various types of representations studied in social psychology including attitudes, social judgment, and emotions. The Perceptual Symbol Systems model proposes that knowledge is represented by perceptual “simulators:” mechanisms in the mind that simulate multiple variations on the perceptual experience associated with a cognitive object. For instance, the system stores information about the perceptual experience of a cat’s purr, the feeling of its fur, the appearance of its movements, etc., and can reproduce the core aspects of these experiences in the mind to afford categorization, imagination, planning, etc. Barrett (2005) offers a more detailed and specific account of how embodied conceptual knowledge combines with affective states to produce the experience of emotion, also applying Barsalou’s model.

2. Perception-behavior links. William James (1890) was among the first in psychology to study the “ideomotor” or perception-behavior link. Recent work in diverse areas of psychology
and neuroscience, at both the neural (Rizzolatti & Arbib, 1998) and behavioral (Dimberg et al., 2000) levels, confirms that motor processes are integral to perception. Within social psychology, research suggests that subtle activation of a concept such as “polite” through reading words related to that concept actually influences people’s overt behavior, making them act more polite. In a similar way, exposure to the concept of the elderly causes people to walk more slowly – that is, to behave in a way that is consistent with stereotypes about that social group (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996). People naturally tend to imitate the expressive or incidental behaviors of other people when they interact with them, and this type of imitation generally leads to increased liking (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). All these effects show that action-oriented representations of behaviors are recruited as we perceive other people. In other words, we use our bodies in the process of social perception.

**Cognition is situated**

Cognition has sometimes been understood as implemented by abstract, amodal informational processes that proceed within an organism, isolated from the larger context except for a narrow set of defined “inputs” and “outputs.” The situated cognition approach, of course, rejects this picture of autonomous, context-free inner processes in favor of a view of an organism as involved in intensive moment-to-moment interaction with its environment. As we discussed above, the physical body plays an important role in constraining and affording social cognition, but other aspects of the immediate physical and psychological environment are also important. Again, social psychology, by definition, is concerned with the influence of the situation on cognition. However, a view of cognition as infinitely flexible and responsive to the situation lacks predictive power, unless we can identify those features of the environment that are most important in determining the course of cognition. Social psychology’s perspective
suggests that many of the most important features of the cognitive context are not physical but social. The immediate, interactive conversational context, our relationships with other individuals, and our broader memberships in social groups represent three levels of interpersonal context in which cognition and action are situated.

1. **Communicative context.** Because social interaction is so complex and so fundamental to our experience, the immediate context, whether we are physically alone or with others, is often a communicative context. As a result, some of the most pervasive and most impactful factors that shape our cognition are norms of communication. Extremely subtle situational cues, if they signal communicative relevance of different contents, have been found to influence behavior and cognition. In social psychology, one well-replicated finding is that people explain others’ behavior in terms of the actors’ inner personality characteristics, wants, or beliefs rather than in terms of the demands of social situations (Gilbert, 1998). This tendency has been viewed as automatic, fundamental, linked to the properties of abstract mental processes (Ross, 1977). Yet in one experiment, participants asked to provide causal explanations for a social event on a questionnaire headed “Institute for Personality Research” provided more personal and fewer situational explanations than did participants asked to explain the same phenomena for the “Institute for Social Research” (Norenzayan & Schwarz, 1999). These participants provided explanations that were relevant in the specific social context: a communication with a particular type of researcher. The cooperative norms of communication (Grice, 1975) require a constantly evolving representation of the goals of the self and of the other people in the interaction. A smooth completion of the interaction relies on the participants' ability to attend to the context, and to select and provide situationally appropriate contributions.
2. **Relational context.** Beyond general communicative norms, our relationships with specific individuals have important implications for how we process social information. Research on close relationships, for instance, reveals the somewhat unsurprising result that we tend to idealize our close others. People’s perceptions of their partners’ attributes are closer to the attributes they believe would be ideal than to their partners’ actual attributes as indicated by the partner’s own self-reports. This bias is socially adaptive: the more we idealize our partners—the more inaccurate we are in perceiving their characteristics—the more satisfied we are with our relationships (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). We defend our relationships not only by thinking of our partners as better than they are but by thinking of our alternatives as worse than they are. For example, students in committed heterosexual relationships rate opposite sex targets as less attractive than do their single counterparts (Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990).

Personal relationships regulate cognitive and behavioral processes in other ways as well. Just as owners come to resemble their dogs (Roy & Christenfeld, 2004), we come to resemble our partners psychologically. People tend to choose romantic partners and friends who are already similar to themselves (Luo & Klohnen, 2005), and they also tend to grow closer to their significant others in their attitudes (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). We are also much more likely to be persuaded by people we like than by people we dislike (Cialdini, 1993).

While they have been intensively studied, romantic relationships are not the only relationships that influence cognition. In fact, all the people we interact with affect us in some way. Romantic relationships are generally positive and lasting, but more immediate and less positive relationships, such as power relationships, also influence cognition. White women assigned the role of superior in a group interaction with Black women exhibit more racial bias than do White women assigned to the subordinate role (Richeson & Ambady, 2003). Positions in
the power hierarchy with respect to other individuals affect not only how we think of them but also how we act toward them. These findings illustrate how cognition and action are influenced not only by the physical context in which we perform them but also by the specific individuals with whom we perform them.

3. Group context. The point that our place in the social context is fundamental to our cognition is further emphasized by the extensive literature on effects of social group memberships. The social context is made up not only of our relationships with specific others but also the groups we identify with (Turner et al., 1987), termed “social identities”. Social groups establish norms, or standards for correct and appropriate beliefs, opinions, and behaviors. For example, it may be appropriate to talk about one’s salary woes among a group of friends but not with co-workers. Other norms dictate that men and women ought to differ in their interest in sports or their emotional expressiveness. Such norms influence our behavior all the time, whether other members of the groups are physically present or not. When a social identity is activated by situational reminders of membership or by our own intentional thought, we tend to conform to that group’s norms. For example, Baldwin, Carrell, and Lopez (1990) studied Roman Catholic college students and found that their attitudes and behaviors reported when a photo of the Pope was visible on the wall were more consistent with their religious norms, compared to those of similar students who reported them when no photo was present. Our important group memberships, potentially activated by subtle situational cues, regulate our social attitudes and behavior.

Social identities serve as much more than guides to our own appropriate behavior, however. Because an identity is a group membership that we share with some people but not others, it divides the world into ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and shapes how we think about and behave
toward other people. People on the ‘us’ side of the line, fellow group members, become better liked (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992). We make positive attributions for their behaviors (Pettigrew, 1979), and we treat them better—more fairly and altruistically (Turner, et al, 1987).

Furthermore, just as we tend to think like our significant relationship partners, we tend to think like members of our in-groups. We are more easily persuaded by in-group than by out-group members (Mackie, Worth, & Asuncion, 1990), and we share emotions (Smith, 1993) and attitudes (Norton, Monin, Cooper, & Hogg, 2003) with members of the in-group. We also assume that they are similar to us (Robbins & Krueger, 2005).

People on the ‘them’ side, out-group members, are seen as homogenous (Judd & Park, 1988), and as quite different from ‘us’ (Robbins & Krueger, 2005). They are also seen as competitors rather than cooperators, and are likely to become the targets of discrimination (Brewer, 1979). Both being a member of an in-group (Tesser, 1988), and discriminating against an outgroup can make us feel better about ourselves (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Thus, any activated social identity is an aspect of the social situation that can have profound consequences for how we think and behave, and how we treat the people we interact with. Importantly, other group members need not be physically present for our in-group identities to form an important, perhaps a fundamental, part of the social context in which our cognition and behavior are situated.

Cognition is situated; sometimes this is taken to mean that it is almost infinitely flexible and responsive to the physical and psychological context. This flexibility sometimes makes it difficult to predict exactly how the infinitely variable context will change how we think and behave. A social psychological perspective identifies precisely which features of the environment are particularly important (those that are relevant to immediate conversational
contexts, ongoing interpersonal relationships, or social group memberships) and allows understanding of how those features shape cognition and action.

**Cognition is distributed**

Our final theme is that cognition is distributed: not contained within minds, but implemented by systems that link minds with aspects of the physical and social environment. In other words, cognition is often enabled by information-processing loops that pass through the outside world as well as the mind, via perceptual and motor processes. One familiar illustration of distributed cognition is the fact that most of us would have great difficulty multiplying two 3-digit numbers in our heads, but do it with ease given a pencil and paper. As we manipulate symbols, these external resources become part of an overall cognitive system, functioning as memory storage, offering cues for what digits to process next, and so on.

Treatments of distributed cognition, like this example, have typically focused on how cognition is enabled and scaffolded by features of the *physical* environment. For example, Kirsch (1995) discussed ways in which we utilize space to facilitate cognitive performance, and Hutchins (1995) focused on how pilots’ perceptual systems and minds interact with the design and layout of cockpit instruments to track the speed of airplanes. While some work arising from the situated cognition tradition has examined the way cognition is shared across teams (Hutchins, 1991), group interaction and decision-making has been a central focus of research within social psychology. And in reality, while cognition can certainly be distributed across objects and the physical environment, much of our distributed cognition is actually distributed across other people. Such a distribution occurs whenever people establish and maintain a socially shared system of meaning. While this idea has taken many forms in social psychology (see Thompson, & Fine, 1999 for a review), the ideas that people use symbols such as language to facilitate
interaction and that meanings are dynamically constructed and shared in groups have been driving forces in the study of group cognition in recent years.

1. Distributed cognition in groups. Modern societies rely on committees such as boards, juries, and management teams to do a great deal of their important thinking: making decisions, managing projects, and developing new ideas. This reliance reflects the idea that group cognition should always be more effective than individual cognition: members of a committee can correct each others’ errors, recall relevant information that others cannot, and in general reach more adaptive final decisions. Yet research shows that group performance is frequently worse than that of an equal number of individuals working independently (Levine & Moreland, 1998). What properties of socially distributed cognition account for this pattern? Might distributed cognition offer advantages in any situation? In fact, the literature on group performance has demonstrated that individual minds and interacting groups display many similar properties.

One broad conclusion is that groups tend to show enhanced versions of the very same biases that affect individuals (Hinsz, Vollrath, & Tindale, 1997). Individuals tend to ignore base rate information, over-rely on information about representativeness (Argote, Devadas, and Melone, 1990), and escalate commitment to an action once it has been chosen (Whyte, 1993), but all of these effects tend to be even stronger in groups than in individuals. Individuals also tend to demonstrate a confirmation bias in information processing: They particularly like and attend to information that is consistent with the information or opinions they already have (e.g., Frey, 1986). Similarly, groups have a tendency to attend more to members whose opinions are consistent with the group’s existing opinion. The impact of each member’s opinion decreases as a function of the distance between that opinion and the average opinion of the group (Davis,
1996). Ultimately this process can lead to a destructive uniformity of opinions within the group, to the disregard of relevant evidence, possibly leading to what has been termed “groupthink” (Janis, 1997). The difference between group thinking and individual thinking, then, is generally a matter of degree. Rather than groups being able to correct individual biases, the general findings suggest that groups exaggerate those biases.

Gigone and Hastie (1997) offer a different perspective that also suggests groups and individuals can be thought of in fundamentally similar ways. In their model, individuals come to a group discussion with specific items of evidence or information relevant to a decision, and function as information integrators, combining the implications of those items to arrive at their individual opinions. In turn, group discussion of the issue allows the individual opinions to be integrated into the overall group decision. Gigone and Hastie (1997) do not find that group discussion adds any extra value or emergent quality to the group decision, besides the simple integration of individual opinions. Their studies show that the effects of informational items on the final group decisions are entirely mediated by the opinions of the individual members before any discussion took place. Like the research on biases discussed above, this research suggests that there is little qualitative difference between individual and group-based cognition, with both functioning essentially as simple information integrators.

2. Distributed memory in groups. Despite the fact that cognition distributed across groups is not necessarily better or more accurate than individual cognition, there is no denying that we do distribute our cognition across other people all the time. Rather than remembering things for ourselves, many of us store information about who knows information or has skills that we might need. In effect, we keep much of our memory in other people’s heads. Wegner (1986) called this phenomenon ‘transactive memory’. Transactive memory has been demonstrated to have
important consequences for group performance. For example, training groups together so that they form a robust transactive memory system tends to lead to better group performance, compared to training group members separately and then bringing them together (Moreland & Myakovsky, 2000). Transactive memory thus represents one potential mechanism by which groups might be able to attain better performance than a similar number of isolated individuals, if its benefits outweigh the increased processing biases characteristic of group cognition.

Our understanding of group-level cognition obviously owes much to our knowledge of individual-level cognition. But the reverse is equally true: Distributed cognition, or cognition in groups, has important implications for individual-level cognition. In humans, conscious thought shares important features with group discussion. First, it is mediated and structured by language and therefore is influenced by the socially shared meaning inherent in our linguistic structures. Second, intra-personal thinking, like conversation, is temporally constrained; just as only one person in a group can express an idea at once, we can only explicitly think one thing at a time. Finally and most importantly, it has been argued that individual-level thought follows developmentally from interpersonal communication, which is prior and primary (Vygotsky, 1962/1986). Socially distributed cognition precedes conscious reasoning, so thinking (holding conversations with ourselves) owes much to our ability to have conversations with other people. From this perspective, it is less insightful to say that group cognition is like individual cognition than it is to observe that individual thinking is a lot like thinking in groups. Extending our understanding of how distributed cognition operates between people should inform our understanding of individual thought.
**Conclusion**

As we hope this chapter has made clear, the topics studied by social psychologists overlap to a considerable degree with those that have interested researchers in the situated cognition perspective. The four themes that organized the discussion in this chapter reflect major points of convergence and agreement between these two areas. The two areas also share historical roots. The fundamental ideas of the situated cognition movement go back in various forms to Dewey, Mead, and particularly William James and Frederick Bartlett. These same individuals are considered as important forebears of social psychology, precisely because of the similar concerns of that field with the social situation and its effects on cognition and behavior.

Nevertheless, despite this convergence of interests, it is striking how little interchange there has been between these two areas to date. For example, Edwin Hutchins (a cognitive anthropologist) insightfully described distributed cognition in a navigation team (1995), but totally without citations to highly relevant work from social psychology on group processes, team performance, or transactive memory. Many similar examples exist of researchers from cognitive science, anthropology, or other disciplinary areas investigating topics such as those discussed in this chapter, evidently without realizing that extensive, highly applicable bodies of theory and empirical findings exist within social psychology. On the other side of the fence, social psychologists often continue to develop and apply abstract, disembodied, non-situated information processing models, with little evident awareness of the powerful critiques of such models that have been offered within the situated cognition movement.

A few instances of productive interchange between these fields are beginning to emerge. Semin and Smith (2002) and Smith and Semin (2004) offered descriptions of the overlapping interests of the fields, and as noted above specific models deriving from situated cognition (e.g.,
Barsalou’s model of “simulators” as mental representations) are currently being applied within social psychology (Niedenthal et al., 2005; Barrett, 2006). Increased interchange of this sort seems highly desirable in view of the two fields’ similar substantive and conceptual concerns.

Social psychology may offer one insight above all others to readers interested in situated cognition. That is its emphasis on the social context of behavior – the fact that human behavior in general takes place in, and is adapted to, a rich and complex network of group memberships, personal relationships, social motives, and the socially constituted self. This view represents a valuable supplement to the typical focus on behavior as situated in the physical environment (e.g., Kirsh, 1995). Finally and more concretely, the bodies of empirical and theoretical work in social psychology reviewed in this chapter may be helpful in enriching researchers’ thinking about the nature of situated cognition in general.
References


