Social Psychology and *The Great Gatsby*

People are fascinating. But why do they do the things they do? Everything people do is influenced by those around them, and in turn is influential to others. Social psychology is “the scientific study of the way in which people’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by other people” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 3; ch. 1). What sets social psychology apart from sociology and anthropology is that social psychology focuses on how people are influenced by their way of perceiving and interpreting the world. Social psychology “studies the psychological processes people have in common with one another that make them susceptible to social influence” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 10; ch. 1). These psychological principles and processes applied to *The Great Gatsby* shed a deeper understanding of the characters, their motivations, and their effects on each other. Characters’ motivations can be unveiled through the tenets of the Social Comparison Theory, counterfactual thinking, and cognitive dissonance.

One means of explaining behavior is the Social Comparison Theory. This theory holds that “people learn about their own abilities and attitudes by comparing themselves to others” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 137; ch. 5). People compare themselves with different groups of people for different purposes. In order to feel better about themselves, people will engage in downward social comparison which pits themselves against someone who is worse than they are on a certain trait or ability. In order to raise the bar for themselves, people engage in upward
social comparison which compares themselves against someone who is better than they are on a certain trait or ability.

When Nick and Tom go to the city with Myrtle’s crowd, Myrtle uses downward social comparison to feel better about herself. “‘I married him because I thought he was a gentleman,’ she said finally. ‘I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn’t fit to lick my shoe’” (Fitzgerald 35). This illustrates her comparison between herself and her husband: he doesn’t know about breeding, whereas she does, and so he is therefore below her and “wasn’t fit to lick [her] shoe.” She wants to feel better about herself because she wants to feel that she deserves someone like Tom, and deserves to be seeking an extramarital affair. Pitting herself against her husband elevates her in her mind, excusing her from responsibility for the affair.

Nick also had implemented downward social comparison. When he first entered the apartment with Tom and Myrtle, he described the objects in the living room in a way that portrays a negative attitude:

The living room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it, so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles. The only picture was an over-enlarged photograph, apparently a hen sitting on a blurred rock. Looked at from a distance, however, the hen resolved itself into a bonnet, and the countenance of a stout old lady beamed down into the room. Several old copies of *Town Tattle* lay on the table together with a copy of *Simon Called Peter*, and some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway. (Fitzgerald 29)

Nick focuses on these negative elements because he is employing downward social comparison. By pointing out these details, it implies that Nick is different from them. His apartment is not
like this one, and because of the negative tone, the implication is that Nick’s is better. The presence of these two instances of downward social comparison within the same chapter set up the characters on a social ladder: there is downward social comparison from Nick to Myrtle, then from Myrtle to Wilson. The trajectory these comparisons present is one that leaves Wilson at the very bottom of the social ladder.

Another illustration of the Social Comparison Theory is when Gatsby implements upward social comparison upon meeting Dan Cody. “To young Gatz, resting on his oars and looking up at the railed deck, that yacht represented all the beauty and glamour in the world” (Fitzgerald 100-101). Gatsby used upward social comparison to vault himself to where he wanted to be. Dan Cody and his possessions were everything Gatz decided he wanted and needed to be, so this upward social comparison to Cody presented the opportunity for Gatz to climb the social ladder and ultimately become Gatsby. He saw himself as socially beneath Cody, but used Cody’s possessions as a measuring stick of where he felt he could and should be.

Counterfactual thinking is a principle of social psychology that helps explain some of the emotional responses to events. When an event had the potential to be satisfying and fulfilling, but ended up just shy of the expectations, people can implement counterfactual thinking, which is “mentally changing some aspect of the past as a way of imagining what might have been” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 73; ch. 3). This behavior can have a big impact on the emotional response to the actual event in that people dwell on how close they were to realizing the desired potential, but were prevented, leading to frustration, anger, or a myriad of similar emotions. “The easier it is to mentally undo an outcome, the stronger the emotional reaction to it” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 73; ch. 3). Thinking of all the ways it could have gone right, or the small
things that could have been done differently to achieve maximum fulfillment increases distress over the real events.

    Gatsby is a prime example of employing counterfactual thinking. Throughout the novel, he seems to be living in the past or at least striving to recapture the past so he can rejuvenate the life with Daisy that might have been.

    He came back from France when Tom and Daisy were still on their wedding trip, and made a miserable but irresistible journey to Louisville on the last of his army pay. He stayed there a week, walking the streets where their footsteps had clicked together through the November night and revisiting the out-of-the-way places to which they had driven in her white car…He left feeling that if he had searched harder, he might have found her—that he was leaving her behind. (Fitzgerald 152-3)

Gatsby felt that if he had done some things differently, he would have had Daisy. Here, he wishes he could have simply looked harder for her in Louisville on his “miserable but irresistible” journey to their past, then he would have found her and achieved his desired outcome, or the previous relationship with Daisy. Counterfactual thinking can lead to detrimental outcomes because the person is more prone to dwell on the events, becoming less willing to accept the events and move on, hindering progression.

    A major social psychological principle that is portrayed in The Great Gatsby is cognitive dissonance. This is a feeling of discomfort that occurs when people encounter inconsistent cognitions. This discomfort is especially caused by performing an action that goes against their customary, typically positive self-conception. People have an innate desire to view themselves in a positive light. When they do things that are contrary to their idea of themselves as a good person and subscribe to actions that are inconsistent with what a good person would do,
dissonance is strong. “Dissonance is most powerful and most upsetting when people behave in ways that threaten their self-esteem. This is upsetting precisely because it forces us to confront the discrepancy between who we think we are and how we have in fact behaved” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 150; ch. 6). An interesting outcome of the strong desire to think highly of ourselves is the tendency to misrepresent facts. “The reason people view the world the way they do can often be traced to this underlying need to maintain a favorable image of themselves. Given the choice between distorting the world to feel good about themselves and representing the world accurately, people often take the first option” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 15; ch. 1). Cognitive dissonance is common and represented strongly throughout *The Great Gatsby* because it is a natural occurrence and a hard one to avoid. “Acknowledging major deficiencies in ourselves is very difficult, even when the cost is seeing the world inaccurately. The consequence of this distortion, of course, is that learning from experience becomes very unlikely” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 15; ch. 1).

There are three ways to reduce dissonance: by “changing the behavior to bring it in line with the dissonant cognition, by attempting to justify the behavior through changing one of the dissonant cognitions, or by attempting to justify the behavior by adding new cognitions” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 151; ch. 6). Basically, people will accept, reject, or manipulate the cognition to suit their purposes.

Gatsby offers an illustration of rejecting a dissonant cognition: “Afterward, he kept looking at the child with surprise. I don’t think he had ever really believed in its existence before” (Fitzgerald 117). The cognition is that Daisy has a daughter. This induces dissonance in Gatsby because he could more easily justify a relationship with Daisy and feel good about himself when he didn’t take into account the fact that she had a daughter. Gatsby’s dissonance
reducing technique is to reject the cognition. He knew Daisy had a child, but completely ignored the cognition and hoped reality would fall in line with his desires.

There are many instances in the novel where characters choose to reduce dissonance by accepting the cognition. This is illustrated when Tom learns new information about Daisy and Myrtle. “Tom was feeling the hot whips of panic. His wife and his mistress, until an hour ago secure and inviolate, were slipping precipitately from his control” (Fitzgerald 125). Tom experiences dissonance here because his self-image included an idea of himself as one in control, with the ability to cheat without consequence. He chooses to accept and then confront the new cognition that he isn’t in control by openly challenging Gatsby and Daisy about it in the apartment. Tom says to Gatsby: “‘What kind of row are you trying to cause in my house anyhow?’” (Fitzgerald 130). He tries to reassert his dominance by acknowledging the fact that his power had momentarily slipped away from him.

When Gatsby was first pursuing romance with Daisy, he also offers an example of accepting a dissonant cognition. “He might have despised himself, for he had certainly taken her under false pretenses…but he didn’t despise himself and it didn’t turn out as he had imagined” (Fitzgerald 149). Gatsby was experiencing cognitive dissonance because he knew he had elicited Daisy’s feelings for him under false pretenses and he anticipated “despising himself.” But he didn’t despise himself because of his successful reduction of his cognitive dissonance. He experienced dissonance over the fact that he was creating and presenting a façade, but he reduced that dissonance by changing his behavior to fall in line with the cognition; namely, he took that façade and made that more of “who he was” than whatever he had been before. He accepted the cognition of the façade and made it primary identity.
The last cognitive dissonance reducing strategy is to manipulate the properties of the dissonant cognition. Tom illustrates this when he offers an explanation for his extramarital wanderings: “‘And what’s more, I love Daisy too. Once in a while I go off on a spree and make a fool of myself, but I always come back, and in my heart I love her all the time’” (Fitzgerald 132). Tom is making up for his infidelity by saying that in his heart he has always loved Daisy. He’s justifying his actions by saying that the behavior doesn’t matter in comparison to the feeling in his heart. This illustrates a manipulation of a dissonant cognition; he doesn’t accept or reject the idea, but adds to it. He adds the cognition “it is okay to cheat because I loved her the whole time.”

When Mr. Gatz comes for Gatsby’s funeral he states his strategy for reducing his dissonance. “‘It was a madman,’ he said. ‘He must have been mad’” (Fitzgerald 168). Mr. Gatz is confronted with the reality that his son was murdered. In order to justify the murder, Mr. Gatz added the cognition that only a madman could have killed his son. He doesn’t want to acknowledge or know of any reason why any sane man would have the desire or right to kill his son, because that would go against his positive self-image of himself as a good father who raised a good son. He goes on to reminisce about his son, emphasizing the positive qualities, demonstrating his lack of desire to change his cognition about his son to include a logical reason for his homicide.

Tom again presents a depiction of manipulating a dissonant cognition when he and Nick discuss his relationship with Myrtle. “‘Terrible place, isn’t it,’ said Tom… ‘It does her good to get away.’ ‘Doesn’t her husband object?’ ‘Wilson? He thinks she goes to see her sister in New York. He’s so dumb he doesn’t know he’s alive’” (Fitzgerald 26). Tom is justifying the affair by making himself out to be the good guy who elevates Myrtle above the “terrible place” she lives
in with her husband. Tom manipulates the cognition that affairs are immoral by adding the
cognition that the affair “does her good.” Tom further bolsters his self-image with the cognition
that since Wilson is dumb, he and Myrtle are justified since they are smart enough to get away
with it. Tom implies the cognition “It serves Wilson right to have his wife cheat on him because
he’s not smart enough to catch her.”

Sometimes a mixture of two dissonance-reducing techniques serves a better purpose than
strictly adhering to only one. Daisy finds herself in a situation of high dissonance when Tom and
Gatsby are both contending for her love, and her admittance of her love. “She hesitated. Her eyes
fell on Jordan and me with a sort of appeal, as though she realized at last what she was doing—
and as though she had never, all along, intended doing anything at all. But it was done now. It
was too late” (Fitzgerald 133). Cheating is wrong. In order to think of herself as a good person,
Daisy had changed the dissonant cognition to “it’s not wrong as long as I’m not caught” or “I
won’t leave my family” or “I only loved Gatsby” but when it all came out in the open, she had to
switch dissonance-reducing techniques. “I did love him once—but I loved you too…Even alone
I can’t say I never loved Tom,’ she admitted in a pitiful voice. ‘It wouldn’t be true’” (Fitzgerald
133). She switched to changing her behavior to fall in line with cognition: the behavior is
admitting that she loved both of them. The situations changed for Daisy and thus, her
dissonance-reducing strategies had to change. When dissonance occurred due to her rekindled
love for Gatsby while she was already married to Tom, she could justify her actions based on her
keeping it undetected. When she was caught and confronted, she was then motivated to preserve
a positive self-image and portray herself in a favorable light to all of the outside parties present.
This new situation led to her additional cognition: “it is okay that I cheated because I was in love
with both of them. Love is sufficient motivation for any behavior.”
Another interesting occurrence of switching dissonance-reducing techniques is when Gatsby is grappling with Daisy’s confession of her love for Tom. “’I don’t think she ever loved him,’ Gatsby turned around from a window and looked at me challengingly. ‘You must remember, old sport, she was very excited this afternoon. He told her those things in a way that frightened her—that made it look as if I was some kind of cheap sharper. And the result was she hardly knew what she was saying’” (Fitzgerald 152). Gatsby is struggling between the cognition that Daisy loves him completely, which fortifies his positive self-image, and the new cognition that she had said she loved both him and Tom. At first, Gatsby rejects the cognition altogether. He refuses to believe she ever loved Tom. But then he switches tactics and deals with these conflicting cognitions by tailoring the new cognition to fit his hopes. He justifies Daisy’s confession by stating that she was “excited” and that Tom had “frightened” her into it so that she didn’t know what she was saying. His added cognition is that Daisy had to have not been in her right mind in order for her to go against his idea that she had only loved him.

Understanding some of the tenets of social psychology enhances the reading of *The Great Gatsby* because it offers explanations for characters’ behaviors and mental processes that help construct their separate perspectives. It is important to take characters’ motivation into account when determining the reasons for their actions. “During the past half-century, social psychologists have discovered that one of the most powerful determinants of human behavior stems from our need to preserve a stable, positive self-image” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 150; ch. 6). The characters’ desire to maintain a positive self-image is explained by the Social Comparison Theory by the attitude of “I’m better than they are.” Counterfactual thinking shows the drive of preserving a positive self image by the attitude of “I would have achieved this but for such-and-such.” Cognitive dissonance portrays the characters’ need to feel positively with the
attitude “I am still a good person.” The characters’ behaviors consistently reflect this drive for a positive self-image. “An understanding of this phenomenon can shed a great deal of light on some otherwise mystifying thoughts and actions” (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 15; ch. 1).

Without a basic understanding of these principles, the actions and attitudes of the characters in The Great Gatsby could seem like happenstance or simply poor choices. To realize their drive to think well of themselves is to acknowledge and better understand the interplay between the characters and their social surroundings.
Works Cited
