Teaching Social Psychology Effectively

A Practical Guide

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Abstract

Social psychology is the scientific study of how people think about, influence, and relate to one another – a subfield of psychology that began more than a century ago with experiments on social facilitation and social loafing. In the aftermath of World War II, social psychology subsequently broadened to tackle pressing social issues such as prejudice, genocide, obedience to authority, and school desegregation. In this chapter, we provide a practical guide on how to teach social psychology to undergraduate students, including "action teaching" – a relatively new educational approach in which students take action on social issues as part of the learning process. After discussing the curricular goals of social psychology, the chapter outlines six core ideas that emerge from research and theories in social psychology. Next, it describes several teaching, learning, and assessment strategies, beginning with "backward course design" (a design method in which instructors first identify learning objectives and then work backward to create course content, learning activities, and student assessments to achieve the objectives). The chapter also offers advice on how to address some of the most common challenges and questions that social psychology teachers face: *(1) What if class members vary widely in psychology training? (2) Do the results of social psychology research generalize? (3) Are social psychology findings replicable? (4) How should research ethics be discussed? (5) What's the best way to teach about difficult or controversial topics? (6) How can social psychology be taught effectively online?* Finally, the chapter ends with an annotated list of published and online resources related to teaching, learning, and assessment, all of which should be useful to both new and veteran social psychology instructors.

Introduction

We humans are social animals. Our ancestors hunted, gathered, and found protection in groups. As their descendants, our lives are connected by a web of invisible threads. Social psychology explores these connections as it illuminates our beliefs and our attitudes, our conformity and our individuality, and our capacity to help and love one another and to dislike or harm others.

Social Psychology's Focus

Reduced to its essence, social psychology is *the scientific study of how we think about, influence, and relate to one another:*

- *Social thinking* – Social psychologists observe and experiment with how we view ourselves and others, both consciously and unconsciously (implicitly). How do we explain people's behavior? How do we assess and explain our own behavior?
- *Social influence* – Social psychologists study both the subtle social forces that induce conformity, persuasion, and group behavior and the counterforces that lead us to assert our uniqueness, resist indoctrination, and sway our groups. They also explore the cultural roots of social behavior.
- *Social relations* – Social psychologists plumb the depths of our helping or hurting others. Why do we like or love some people and dislike or distrust others? What explains our individual prejudices and systemic racism? What kindles social conflict, and how can we transform closed fists into open arms?

Moreover, social psychologists shine the light of these concepts on everyday life. Thus, we have a social psychology of health and well-being, of courtroom justice, and of behaviors that enable a sustainable future.

Social Psychology's History

Although humans have been social throughout recorded history, sociality is on the rise, as the Google Ngram in Fig. 1 suggests. In today's world of unprecedented population density and ever-increasing connectedness, our species has devised social media, social security, social services, social work, and, yes, social psychology.

The earliest experiments in social psychology explored *social facilitation* – as in Norman Triplett's (1898) finding that people exert more energy when performing tasks such as bike riding in the presence of others – and of *social loafing*, as in Maximilien Ringelmann's (1913) studies of people's expending less effort in a tug of war when their own contributions were not identifiable.

But as Thomas Pettigrew (in press) notes, it was World War II and its aftermath that led to social psychology's emergence as a robust discipline. European social psychologists Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Köhler, Max Wertheimer, and – most notably – Kurt Lewin immigrated to the United States and leavened the academic loaf. Social psychologists at Yale University and elsewhere studied soldier morale and mass persuasion. Interdisciplinary institutes were founded to conduct social research and national surveys. Gordon Allport's (1954) classic volume, *The Nature of Prejudice*,

Relative Frequency of the Word "Social" in English Language Books

1800   1820   1840   1860   1880   1900   1920   1940   1960   1980   2000
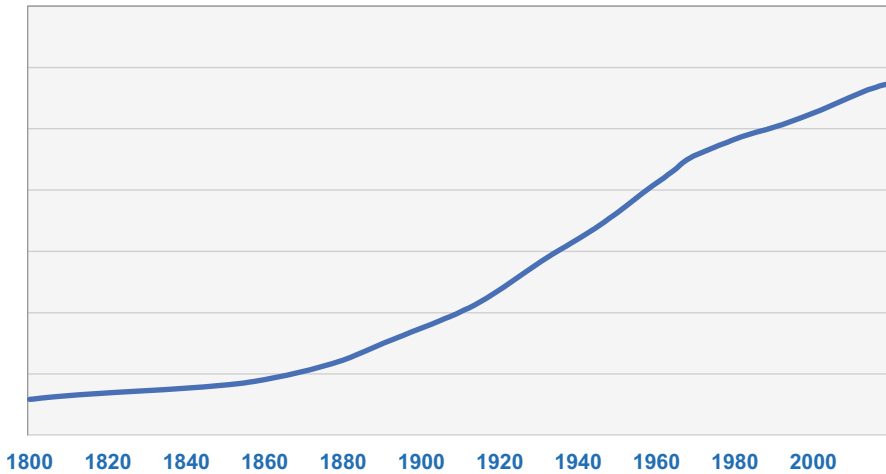
Fig. 1 An increasingly social world
Source: http://books.google.com/ngrams

became, in its 1958 abridged version, a best-selling contribution to public under-standing. In 1954, reports Pettigrew, social psychologists Kenneth Clark, Isidor Chein, and Stuart Cook "supplied the major scientific support" for the US Supreme Court's landmark school desegregation decision.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, the "cognitive revolution" prior-itized studies of social thinking, including automatic processing that fuels our stereotypes and drives our behavior. Simultaneously, European social psychology made the discipline's focus less individualistic by emphasizing the importance of social identity. Social psychology has also grown worldwide, including in Central and South America, Australia, South Africa, and Asia.

Action Teaching

As this brief history suggests, social psychology began with studies on social facilitation and social loafing, but after the upheaval of World War II, researchers increasingly began to tackle pressing social issues such as prejudice, violence, and obedience to authority. Kurt Lewin, who left Nazi Germany for the United States in 1933, was deeply troubled by anti-Semitism and anti-Black prejudice, and in the 1940s, he proposed "action research" as a way to address societal problems while also advancing scientific knowledge (Lewin 1946, 1948). "No action without

Fig. 2 Kurt Lewin, who advocated action research and helped found contemporary social psychology
Source: http://vlp.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/people/data?id=per638

research," wrote Lewin, and "no research without action" (Marrow, 1969, p. 193). This two-track approach to social research had an enduring effect on social psychology that is still visible today in the form of behavioral science-based efforts to address racial injustice (Eberhardt, 2019), climate change (Fielding et al., 2014), the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Bavel et al., 2020), and other social problems (Fig. 2).

Building on Lewin's approach, "action teaching" is the educational counterpart to action research (Plous, 2000). What distinguishes action teaching from traditional pedagogy is that it contributes directly to the betterment of society, while it teaches students about the topic being studied. That is, students don't merely listen to lectures, complete reading assignments, or write term papers – they take actions that promote peace, social justice, sustainable living, and the well-being of others. By incorporating prosocial action into the learning process, action teaching tends to increase student motivation, improve learning outcomes, and provide students with a foundation for future civic action (Velez & Power, 2020).

Although action teaching has been used in a variety of courses and disciplines, it is especially well suited to courses in psychology because the field covers social, cultural, and political topics such as intergroup conflict, stereotyping, climate change, human rights, criminal justice, and the development of empathy. Here are a few examples featured on ActionTeaching.org, a web-based repository of action teaching ideas and resources:

- Psychology students at Buffalo State College learned about culture and the daily life of refugees by teaching a local refugee family how to set up and balance a checking account, handle telephone solicitations, and avoid credit card debt, thereby helping family members while learning from them (Norvilitis, 2010).
- An organizational psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania taught students about the principles of persuasion, negotiation, leadership, and teamwork by challenging students to create fundraising campaigns for the Make-a-Wish Foundation, which serves children with life-threatening medical conditions. Students in classes that included this assignment learned so much and were so engaged that they ended up raising more than $100,000 in donations to the foundation (Grant, 2013).
- Grand Valley State University psychology students learned about research methods and statistics by comparing the effectiveness of different social influence techniques that they employed to solicit volunteers for a local anti-hunger organization. Over a 4-year period, students not only learned first-hand how to collect and analyze psychological data, but the volunteers they signed up decorated more than 13,000 meal bags for children in need of food and emotional support (Jones, 2020).

Depending on the learning objectives and associated curricular goals and constraints, action teaching activities can be used in social psychology classroom demonstrations, student assignments, field experiences, or web-based exercises, and they can take a number of different forms, such as required course assignments, extra-credit assignments, honors work, half-credit courses, lab components, tutorial projects, or independent study opportunities. Action teaching has also been used in online education, where it has the potential to reach thousands of students (for an example, see the sidebar "Action Teaching Assignment: The Day of Compassion"). Regardless of the form that action teaching takes, the central idea is that students contribute to the welfare of others as they learn about course topics, often in highly memorable ways that lead to meaningful and lasting educational outcomes.

Action Teaching Assignment: The Day of Compassion

The "Day of Compassion" is an action teaching assignment that has been used in both online and campus-based social psychology courses since the 1990s (Day of Compassion, 2021). The goal of the assignment is to teach students about compassion and empathy by challenging them to live as compassionately as possible for 24 hours. Specifically, students are asked to spend the day trying their best "to reduce suffering, help other people in need, be considerate and respectful, and avoid causing harm to any living being." After the day is over, students then submit a paper answering questions such as:

- If your behavior was different than normal, which person did you like more: the "Day of Compassion you" or the "normal you"?
- If you preferred the "Day of Compassion you," what are the psychological factors that prevent this "you" from coming out?
- If you wanted to encourage others to behave as you did during the Day of Compassion, what techniques would you use?

Most students find the Day of Compassion assignment to be enlightening, and some describe it as life-changing (Plous, 2009). For example, many students report that they like their "Day of Compassion self" more than their "normal self" and that they intend to continue behaving more compassionately in the future. Others come to realize that compassion is easier and more fun to practice than they had expected. Still others report that their acts of kindness and compassion were reciprocated by those they helped, creating a positive feedback loop in which compassion begat compassion. In the context of a social psychology course, the assignment can be used to teach about prosocial behavior, bystander intervention, conflict resolution, social identity, intergroup bias, and participant-observation research methods, among other topics.

In keeping with the twin goals of action teaching – to promote learning and contribute to the welfare of others – the Day of Compassion tends to generate a wide assortment of prosocial outcomes. For instance, students often report resolving conflicts with estranged friends or family members, helping homeless strangers, rescuing animals, donating money to nonprofit groups, and volunteering time at community organizations. In fact, when the Day of Compassion was assigned in a massive open online course on social psychology (mentioned later in this chapter), thousands of students in dozens of countries spent so much time helping and caring for their friends, colleagues, family members, and community that a BBC News article dubbed the event "the world's most compassionate 24 hours" (Stephens, 2014).

Purposes and Rationale of the Curriculum in Social Psychology

Social psychology courses address two key competencies that the US National Association of Colleges and Employers (2019) has identified as essential for undergraduates' career readiness: critical thinking/problem-solving and global/intercultural fluency. In addition, the teaching of social psychology contributes to liberal education with its three broad aims:

1. *Understanding oneself and others*: Empowering students to accurately understand and interpret behavior with less gut feeling and more evidence-based thinking
2. *Enlarging hearts*: Replacing judgmentalism with empathy and compassion – to respect our social diversity while appreciating our human kinship
3. *Enabling social flourishing*: Educating global citizens to contribute to a thriving, sustainable, peaceful future

As teachers, we strive toward these aims by training students how to think critically when it comes to human behavior – to repeatedly ask *What do you mean?* and *How do you know?* And we seek to equip them with powerful concepts that have wide applicability to everyday life.

To help social psychology instructors move from these broad aims to crafting specific course learning objectives, we recommend consulting the American Psychological Association's (2013) *Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major: Version 2.0* (the current guidelines are scheduled for renewal and revision on or before 2023). APA's guidelines represent a set of expectations for learning and performance by undergraduate students who are majoring in psychology or enrolled in a psychology course, such as social psychology. Five learning goals appear in the *Guidelines 2.0:* knowledge base in psychology, scientific inquiry and critical thinking, ethical and social responsibility in a diverse world, communication, and professional development. These learning goals can be incorporated into a social psychology course that either follows introductory psychology or is taught as an entry-level course without prerequisite coursework (Dunn et al., 2020).

For instance, instructors teaching an introductory social psychology class might state early in the syllabus that students who successfully complete the course will be able to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the major concepts, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and historical trends in social psychology
- Identify and critique research methods in social psychology
- Use critical thinking, skeptical inquiry, and, when possible, the scientific method to identify and solve problems related to social behavior and social thinking
- Apply social psychological theories and principles to understand people's everyday behavior and relationships, including one's own
- Recognize, understand, and respect the complexity of human diversity

These learning objectives are typical in an introductory social psychology class, but there is no single codified set of objectives applicable to all social psychology courses. What is most important is that learning objectives be explicit, clearly written, and closely linked to the required readings, assignments, and classroom activities.

Core Content and Topics of Social Psychology

What are social psychology's core ideas? Our short list includes this half dozen.

Attitudes and Actions Feed Each Other

As but one determinant of our behavior, our internal attitudes are imperfect predictors. Yet an attitude can matter, particularly when it's directly relevant to a behavior, such as exercising, and when we're reminded of it. Persuasion – whether viewed as "education" (by those who believe it) or "propaganda" (by those who don't) – can therefore change our attitudes and sway our behavior.

But our attitudes not only influence our behavior; they are also shaped by it. When we act and accept responsibility for our actions, our attitudes tend to fall in line. The resulting self-persuasion may lead us to believe more strongly in those things for which we have suffered or given public witness.

We Construct Our Social Reality

We humans have an urge to explain behavior – to attribute it to some cause. As intuitive lay scientists, we typically attribute behavior efficiently and with enough accuracy to serve our needs. For example, when people's behavior is distinctive and consistent, we attribute it to their personal traits and attitudes.

But in ways that may go undetected, our attributions and judgments often predictably err. Especially in individualist cultures, we may attribute people's behavior to their dispositions without noticing situational factors that constrain and influence behavior – as when thinking that a shy teacher's classroom talkativeness reflects an extraverted personality. Likewise, we are sometimes biased by our preconceptions; we see what we expect.

We may also misperceive illusory associations and causes. Thus, we may treat others in ways that lead them to fulfill our expectations. And we may be influenced more by vivid, memorable – and, therefore, cognitively available – anecdotes than by statistical reality. Finally, failing to recognize our vulnerability to bias, we may be overconfident and self-serving in our social judgments.

Social Influences Powerfully Guide Our Behavior

Faced with powerful social forces such as norms, expectations, and orders, our actions may diverge from our attitudes and values. Depending on the situation, the very same person may act kindly or viciously, submissively or independently, and

foolishly or wisely. As a result, even good people sometimes do bad things. Evil situations may overwhelm the best of intentions, leading people to accept falsehoods or capitulate to cruelty. And race-based unfair treatment may result not only from bad-apple individuals with explicit prejudice but from systemic injustice and implicit bias.

Cultures matter, too. If you tell social psychologists where in the world you live, how old you are, how educated you are, and what media you read and view, they will predict your likely attitudes toward same-sex relationships, whether you prefer a slim or voluptuous body, and whether you focus relatively more on yourself or on your community.

Persons and Situations Interact

Although powerful situations may override our individual inclinations, we are not passive tumbleweeds blown hither and yon by the social winds. Facing the same situation, some (depending on their dispositions, their cultural experience, and their convictions) may acquiesce, while others may assert themselves. Therefore, people may react to restore their sense of freedom, and a numeric minority may change a group's direction. We are not only the creatures of our social world but also its creators.

As Social Animals, We Have a Deep Need to Belong

We long to connect, to be esteemed, and to bond with others. Separated from significant others, as when physically distancing under COVID-19, we find new ways to socially connect. Ostracism from one's family or friends creates genuine pain. Short of torture, solitary confinement can be the severest punishment. Because of this need to belong, we are driven to bond with friends, fall in love, or check social media (in the United States, on a daily basis; Kunst, 2020). Given supportive, close, enduring relationships – such as a healthy marriage or intimate friendships – we express greater happiness and are at less risk of depression. And, for better and worse, we develop strong ingroup loyalties: We prefer and favor "us" over "them."

Our Social Behavior Has Biological Roots

Many of our social behaviors reflect biological wisdom. As evolutionary psychologists remind us, we share a human kinship – a human nature that inclines us to behave in ways and to exhibit likes and dislikes that helped our ancestors survive and reproduce. Whether dating and mating, caring and sharing, or hating and hurting, our biological nature has prepared us with dispositions that will help send our genes into the future.

Our brain, behavior, and relationships form an interconnected system. Because of this, social neuroscientists can explore brain networks that underlie our experiences of love, rejection, excitement, aggression, and other social and emotional states. We are the products of both "under-the-skin" biological influences and social influences.

Teaching, Learning, and Assessment in Social Psychology: Approaches and Strategies

The assessment of learning outcomes is an essential element of teaching social psychology effectively. For our purposes, assessment can be defined as the measurement and evaluation of how well students are learning key information and skills from the course they are taking (Maki, 2004; Mentkowski et al., 2000). The goal is for social psychology teachers to be able to show various stakeholders (e.g., administrators, colleagues, the students themselves, and their families) that class members are benefitting from their studies. In short, the question is simply this: *How well have students mastered the field's subject matter?*

To assess student mastery, we advise instructors to begin by outlining their course's learning objectives and then employ "backward course design" (Wiggins & McTigue, 2005) to build a framework for the course content and assessments. Identifying the learning goals in advance affords instructors the opportunity to tie course activities and evaluative elements to them, increasing the likelihood that the assessments demonstrate desired results. After identifying the desired learning outcomes, there remain two steps in backward course design (Hard et al., in press):

1. Designing the instructional activities, readings, and other course elements that will best achieve the learning objectives (e.g., lectures, classroom demonstrations, small-group discussions, assigned readings, projects)
2. Finding or creating assessment instruments that accurately measure the degree to which students have met the course's learning objectives (e.g., exams, quizzes, graded papers, oral presentations)

Backward course design, then, encourages instructors to be intentional and goal-oriented in their teaching plan from the start.

Assessing Outcomes Tied to Teaching and Student Learning

Traditional outcome measures, such as exam scores and course grades, have their place, but ideally, social psychology courses should include assessments tied to assignments and activities occurring throughout the course. As many assessment enthusiasts have long advocated, it is generally better to employ *formative assessments* – in-process, low-stakes evaluations of students' understanding and progress during the course – than to focus on high-stakes *summative assessments* that occur at the end of a course unit or the course itself (Dunn et al., 2004, 2012).

One central piece of advice for social psychology educators as they develop assessments for their courses is this: Students will benefit if their instructor helps them to perform well on assessments (Pusateri et al., 2009). Evaluating student learning and performance should never be mysterious; rather, the exercise should be transparent. Here are recommendations on how to achieve transparency where assessment is concerned:

Help Students Understand What Matters

Go beyond providing mere definitions of social phenomena by explaining why an assignment or activity is important when it comes to learning a core concept or phenomenon in social psychology (e.g., the role of confirmation bias in science, politics, and medicine; Nickerson, 1998). To solidify students' grasp of why a concept matters, instructors might also invite students to generate and share examples from their own observations or experiences.

Provide Detailed Instructions

Tell the students exactly what to do and how to do it, and explain concretely how their work will be evaluated. When feasible, it's often helpful to provide a scoring rubric for a given assignment (Greenberg, 2015) and teach students how to critique their own work.

Share Samples or Models from Prior Social Psychology Classes

Share a few examples of successful student work in the past, such as a self-reflection paper (e.g., "When do you conform?"; Asch, 1956) or an application of a social psychological theory to an everyday situation ("How does the just world hypothesis influence the way we react to other people's health problems?"; e.g., Lerner, 1980). Exemplars can illustrate what good work looks like and help students satisfy the goals of an assignment.

Provide Timely Feedback on Student Performance

In the spirit of formative rather than summative assessment, offer clear, detailed, and constructive feedback on the work so that students learn to improve in the future.

Introduce Students to Effective Learning Strategies

Research on learning and cognition reveals a variety of techniques that can promote student learning (for a summary, see Dunlosky et al., 2013). Some of these strategies include:

- *Elaborative processing* – Encourage students to reflect on the meaning of what they are learning. When students actively link new terms, theories, and research results with previously known information, learning tends to deepen and endure (e.g., "How is Asch's conformity paradigm related to yet different from Milgram's research on obedience to authority?"; Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1963).
- *Retrieval practice or the "testing effect"* – Provide repeated opportunities for low-stakes testing in which new course material is recalled from memory. Quizzes can be given during class or online to encourage study, strengthen recall, and prepare students for higher-stakes exams.
- *Distributed practice* – Let students know that they're more likely to retain information when they break their study time into a series of short sessions over a lengthy period of time than when they "cram" all studying into one long study session right before an exam.

- *Metacognition* – Ask students to think about how they are processing course material and applying it to their own life, which should be easy given that social psychology relates directly to daily life and relationships. When students become aware of their own thoughts and reactions to course material, the information is more likely to be remembered down the road.

These basic steps can help students master, integrate, and retain new material as the course unfolds.

Consider High-Impact Practices as Opportunities for Assessment

Kuh (2008) identified several educational practices that have been tied to successful student performance, known as "high-impact practices," or "HIPs." Besides engaging students in active learning opportunities, HIPs also present assessment opportunities for social psychology instructors. In other words, while using HIPs to involve students in deep learning about social psychology, they can also be leveraged as formative assessments. Here are three broad HIP categories:

Writing Intensive Activities Aimed at Different Audiences Students benefit from learning to do different types of writing aimed at distinct audiences. In academic settings, the default option is for students to write descriptive papers for the instructor (e.g., describing the hypothesis, methodology, results, and conclusions of a social psychology experiment). However, various types of reflective writing can be done as well. For example, students might write a personal account of how a psychological phenomenon affects them in daily life (e.g., overconfidence; West & Stanovich, 1997), or they might apply social psychology research findings to a societal issue by writing a mock newspaper letter to the editor (e.g., the effect of affective forecasting biases on materialism; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005).

Collaborative Assignments and Projects Collaborative efforts allow students to learn from and instruct their peers, just as they afford students the opportunity to experience this important aspect of professional work life. To do so, instructors can form teams of 3–5 students to prepare in-class demonstrations of readily replicable social psychological effects (e.g., social loafing; Karau & Williams, 1993). Alternatively, teams of students can conduct conceptual replications of simple social psychology experiments, adding new variables in order to expand understanding of a given effect (e.g., positive affect and problem-solving; Isen, 2004).

Undergraduate Research Depending on class size, collaboration can be taken even further by having an entire class develop hypotheses, research procedures, and stimulus materials and then collect, analyze, and present or write up results. These sorts of undergraduate research activities require considerable organizational effort, yet they provide substantial benefits in terms of professional training as well as reinforcing the idea that cooperation among investigators is a hallmark of

contemporary psychological science. Alternatively, if a department or program has a research participation requirement that includes social psychology, students can learn about the subfield by taking part in relevant studies.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Teaching social psychology is a richly rewarding experience, in large measure because it helps students understand themselves and their social world based on the results of theory-driven empirical research. Nonetheless, social psychology instructors face a number of challenges worth considering. Here are a few of the most common challenges and questions that instructors encounter when teaching introductory social psychology courses, along with suggestions on how to effectively address them.

What If Class Members Vary Widely in Psychology Training?

Because introductory social psychology classes often include students with widely different levels of prior training in psychology, competency in research methods cannot be assumed. Thus, early in the term, instructors should provide an overview of basic research methodology. Key issues are how social psychologists form and test hypotheses, the distinction between correlational and experimental research (and the conclusions that can be drawn from each), the purposes of random sampling and random assignment, and the generalizability of research findings. Students should understand that social psychologists blend the logical positivist tradition with a social constructionist approach that recognizes how researchers' values and expectations can influence the scientific process. These values affect who chooses to become a social psychologist, the research topics those individuals decide to pursue, and how the findings from those inquiries are interpreted (e.g., Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). Students should be encouraged to critically examine the strengths and weaknesses of various research methods, including a consideration of how researchers' values might constrain or buttress social psychologists' understanding of the social world.

Do the Results of Social Psychology Research Generalize?

There are two reasons why the generalizability of social psychology research findings is especially important to cover. First, social psychology research is based heavily on convenience samples that overrepresent college students and people from Western Europe, Canada, and the United States. For example, Henry (2008) examined prejudice research in three top social psychology journals and found that more than 90% of all articles used student samples. Social science research findings are also disproportionately based on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich,

and Democratic) samples (Henrich et al., 2010), and social psychology is no exception. Moreover, Arnett's (2008) analysis of six top psychology journals found that more than two thirds of empirical research articles relied on samples from the United States, whereas the people of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America were only rarely represented. Although the trend toward obtaining participant samples through crowdsourcing is encouraging, these samples also fail to fully represent humankind. For instance, even though participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk are generally older than most college students, they still tend to overrepresent college graduates, employed people, and White people (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Chandler et al., 2014). Thus, we suggest instructors acknowledge these limitations and make students aware of high-quality research from a variety of countries, as well as cross-cultural research spanning collectivist and individualist (or tight and loose) cultures (see Matsumoto & Juang, 2017).

A second reason instructors should attend to generalizability is that it serves as a starting point for discussions of diversity regarding not only race, age, and culture but social class, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, and other attributes. Considering who is included and excluded from research can lead to conversations about how such decisions affect our understanding of the world (Kite & Littleford, 2015). More generally, when instructors include the experiences of people from diverse backgrounds, they help students gain scientifically valid knowledge about human behavior (Trimble et al., 2003). Moreover, discussions of sociocultural diversity invite students to sharpen their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Bowman, 2010; Dunn et al., 2013). Finally, addressing diversity can increase students' civic engagement and help equalize the educational environment for members of marginalized groups because students achieve more when they see themselves and their social groups represented (Bowman, 2011; Elicker et al., 2010).

Are Social Psychology Findings Replicable?

Several years ago, the Open Science Collaboration (2015) published a landmark report calling into question the replicability of social psychology research. Specifically, an international coalition of 270 researchers attempted exact replications of 100 experimental and correlational psychology studies, and the coalition found that 64% of the studies failed to replicate. Indeed, the successful replication rate was especially low for social psychology studies (23% for articles from the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and 29% for social psychology articles in *Psychological Science*). These results suggest that instructors should help students exercise caution with respect to social psychology findings that have yet to be replicated, and they provide an opportunity to discuss how scientific progress works, beginning with information about how to distinguish between exact replications that recreate a study and conceptual replications that test the same hypothesis with a different set of operational definitions (Kite & Whitley, 2018). Instructors

might also explain why it is difficult to know whether findings from an original study or its replication are "true" (Open Science Collaboration, 2015).

Instructors can also use the topic of replication to discuss recent changes being made to strengthen confidence in research results. One such change is greater attention to whether a study's sample size has adequate statistical power for testing the proposed hypotheses. Another is the increased use of preregistration, whereby a study's rationale, methodology, and proposed statistical analyses are peer reviewed prior to data collection (Nosek et al., 2018). At the same time, we recommend assuring students that social psychology textbook authors serve as gatekeepers who endeavor to present research findings that are reliable and well validated. Although errors occasionally creep in, the social psychological theories and findings covered in an introductory course overwhelmingly represent results that can be counted on.

How Should Research Ethics Be Discussed?

The ethical behavior of social psychologists is, of course, germane to the discussion of research practices, and all the more so because social psychology is the home of two prominent psychologists associated with ethically controversial studies: Philip Zimbardo and Stanley Milgram. In Zimbardo's Stanford prison study, several research participants experienced significant distress for hours or days, but the study continued for nearly a week before being shut down (Haney et al., 1973). Likewise, in Milgram's (1974) research on obedience to authority, a number of participants experienced acute distress yet were urged by the experimenter to continue despite their protestations, thus violating the now-established right to withdraw without penalty. Although ethical standards have advanced considerably since the time of these classic studies, both cases offer instructors an excellent chance to discuss the importance of informed consent, US Institutional Review Boards and other ethics committees that regulate research on human participants, post-experimental debriefing procedures, data security, codes of ethical conduct, and other measures designed to protect the health and welfare of research participants.

One unresolved issue in social psychology concerns the use of deception, which is often used to disguise the true purpose of a study and reduce the likelihood that participants will respond artificially to an experimental situation. This deception can range from the creation of fictitious materials distributed in a laboratory experiment (e.g., a news article summarizing made-up research findings) to outright lying (e.g., giving participants false feedback about their personality or abilities). The level of harm caused by such procedures is hard to assess, but most social psychologists would surely agree with Sieber's (1992) conclusion that it is indefensible to use deception to trick people into doing something they would avoid if they fully understood what was happening. As with the other issues we have discussed, a thoughtful consideration of research ethics can situate social psychological research findings in the broader context of risk-benefit analysis. Where the line should be

drawn is ultimately a matter of opinion and conscience, but students need an understanding of the ethical issues at stake in order to reach their own conclusion.

What's the Best Way to Teach About Difficult or Controversial Topics?

The issues discussed so far focus on controversies concerning the scientific method, but social psychology topics themselves can arouse strong emotions – hot button topics that run the gamut from racism to sexual orientation to partner violence and beyond. For example, studies on prejudice and stereotyping suggest that most people exhibit ingroup favoritism and harbor implicit biases toward others with respect to race, gender, age, or other attributes. When students learn that they may hold unconscious biases toward certain groups, many are understandably troubled. Yet when students learn that biases arise in part from a reliance on common cognitive heuristics, and when they are challenged to confront their biases, the result can be greater openness, understanding, and multicultural competency. In fact, providing students with individualized feedback about their biases and how they operate can lead students to accept that they have unconscious racial biases (Casad et al., 2013) and to feel more positively about the learning process in general (Morris & Ashburn-Nardo, 2010). Interestingly, learning about personal biases may be especially helpful for people high in prejudice. For instance, when Adams et al. (2014) asked students to complete the Implicit Association Test followed by teaching modules on conscious and unconscious bias, it turned out that the students who initially displayed the highest levels of bias reported the greatest motivation to control their prejudice.

Students do not always have experience discussing emotional issues in a classroom setting, and some students find the prospect of doing so unsettling or even frightening (Vespia & Filz, 2013). To help them manage difficult conversations, students need to be assured that they are in a safe classroom environment with clearly established ground rules for discussion (ideally, rules that the students have had a voice in creating; Goldstein, 2021). Students and instructors must both be mindful of how privilege affects classroom dynamics – who is in the room, who has social power, and how instructors can make sure that students from underrepresented groups have a voice (Warner et al., 2021). Instructors also need to consider their own level of multicultural competence and take steps to ensure they're prepared to teach about complex emotional topics (Kite & Littleford, 2015).

How Can Social Psychology Be Taught Effectively Online?

Because classroom instruction tends to feel more personal than online instruction, it may seem daunting to teach social psychology online, particularly when it comes to the controversial and emotional topics mentioned earlier. There is no reason, however, that social psychology can't be taught in a supportive, educational, and engaging way online. Indeed, Coursera's massive open online course (MOOC) in

social psychology has enrolled more than a million students since it was first offered in 2013, and Coursera's MOOC on the science of well-being (based heavily on social psychology) has enrolled more than three million. During the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of social psychology courses were taught either partially or wholly online, and even before the pandemic, an estimated 43% of US undergraduates reported taking at least one class online (Snyder et al., 2019). The primary question, then, is not whether social psychology can or will be taught online, but how to do it most effectively. Although research on this question is limited, here are some preliminary recommendations:

Choose a Course Format that Fits Student Needs and Learning Objectives   One of the most important decisions an online instructor faces is whether to teach synchronously (i.e., in live sessions), asynchronously (with materials that students can watch, read, or listen to on their own), or some blend of the two (e.g., alternating live and recorded lectures or recording live lectures for students who prefer to watch them later). In general, synchronous courses are more interactive and responsive to student questions and input – a format well suited to seminars and other small classes – whereas asynchronous and blended formats have the advantage of allowing students greater flexibility in choosing when to watch the class sessions (see Martingano, 2020, for further distinctions).

Harness the Advantages of Online Teaching   Rather than focusing on the limitations of online instruction, concentrate on the pedagogical advantages. For instance:

- Teaching online makes it relatively easy and affordable for instructors to host guest speakers for part or all of a class session, regardless of where guests are located. To take just one example, instructors can discuss a social psychology experiment and then surprise the class with a guest appearance of the experimenter to talk with students about the study.
- Teaching synchronously with a videoconferencing app such as Zoom allows the instructor to conduct anonymous polls to solicit student opinions, assess mid-lecture comprehension, carry out in-class demonstrations, and see if students can predict research findings before learning of experimental outcomes.
- If a synchronous lecture class has teaching assistants and a videoconferencing app with a chat window, instructors can ask TAs to answer any questions that students post during the lecture in real time, thereby clearing up confusion without interrupting the lecture. Teaching assistants can also open each class session a few minutes early with background music that welcomes students or relates to the topic being discussed (e.g., the Dar Williams song *Buzzer* about Stanley Milgram's obedience research).

- In contrast with campus-based courses, asynchronous and blended online courses have the advantage of allowing students to pause videotaped lectures to take notes, replay the videos if something isn't clear, and rewatch lectures to help prepare for upcoming exams.
- One great advantage of MOOCs and other open-access courses is that they enroll students from around the world, thus facilitating cross-cultural dialogue. For example, in the social psychology MOOC mentioned earlier, class members from nearly 200 countries were able to interact with each other, and the class discussion forum included a Coronavirus Pandemic subforum with nearly 500 threads addressing questions such as *How can social psychology be used to reduce the pandemic?* and *What is daily life like in your country, culture, and community?* Similarly, a Black Lives Matter subforum fostered cross-cultural exchange with questions such as:
  - *How much racism is there in your country?*
  - *How can social psychology be used to reduce racism and promote respect for all people?*
  - *If there were any one video, website, book, or article on anti-racism that you wish people around the world would see or read, what would it be, and why?*

As these examples suggest, each mode of online teaching offers unique advantages, some of which would be hard to duplicate in traditional classroom settings.

Master the Technology To make the most of online teaching, it's essential that instructors take time to master the necessary technology. Depending on the course and instructional needs, this mastery might include learning how to administer online exams; edit digital videos; crop and resize images; share online documents; use Moodle, Blackboard, or other learning management systems; and smoothly operate videoconferencing apps such as Zoom, which offer an array of customizable settings and options (Levy, 2021). Although it takes time to learn new technologies, in the long run, many of them save time and have the potential to improve the quality of teaching.

Adapt to the Medium   Just as a movie is more than a filmed play, an effective online course is more than a set of videotaped classroom lectures (Moore, 2016). To hold student attention online, instructors generally need to energize the delivery with faster pacing and more interactivity, theatricality, questions, stories, and audiovisuals than a campus-based class would commonly have. For example, rather than simply quoting from a book, online instructors might occasionally hold up the book like a prop and read from it. Rather than talking about an experiment that randomly assigned participants based on a coin toss, online instructors might toss a coin on camera or share their screen and show students how to conduct random assignment using Randomizer.org. Rather than discussing social traps such as "the dollar auction game" (Teger, 1980), online instructors might auction off a dollar or other unit of currency to members of the class. Finally, a word about pacing: In his book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Bain (2004) reported that effective teachers tended to

vary the rhythm and content of their delivery every 10–12 minutes; in the world of MOOCs and other online courses, however, instructors would be well advised to change gears even more frequently and break up course content so that each videotaped lecture runs only 6–12 minutes (Bhattacharya, 2020; Hickey et al., 2020). In other words, student learning and engagement tend to be better with 5–10 brief videos covering an hour of content than with a single video showing the same hour of content.

Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Resources

Although there are thousands of excellent teaching, learning, and assessment resources available, here are a few we find especially useful for instructors teaching social psychology to undergraduates.

Recommended Reading

American Psychological Association. (2013). *APA guidelines for the undergraduate psychology major: Version 2.0.* http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/about/psymajor-guidelines.pdf

These guidelines are designed to help psychology educators teach and assess student learning related to content-oriented and skills-based goals. Although the guidelines do not focus exclusively on social psychology, they contain a wealth of valuable recommendations for anyone teaching courses in this area.

Pusateri, T., Halonen, J. S., Hill, B., & McCarthy, M. (2009). *The assessment cyberguide for learning goals and outcomes* (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association. http://www.apa.org/ed/governance/bea/assessment-cyberguide-v2.pdf

This online guide offers advice on how to implement a range of assessment activities in psychology courses, including courses in social psychology. The text has four sections that help instructors (1) understand assessment in departmental, institutional, educational, and societal perspectives; (2) design viable assessment plans; (3) maintain a culture of assessment; and (4) apply assessment strategies in psychology.

Myers, D. G. (2005, March 1). Teaching tips from experienced teachers. *APS Observer, 18*(3), pp. 39–40, 48–50. http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/teaching-tips-from-experienced-teachers

This article includes ten valuable teaching tips from master teachers in psychology. Even though the tips are intended mainly for new psychology instructors,

they're useful at any level of experience, and the article includes additional advice from award-winning teachers (gathered by William Buskist) as well as six other suggestions based on David Myers' experience teaching dozens of sections of introductory and social psychology.

Recommended Websites

- *Social Psychology Network*

http://www.socialpsychology.org/

Founded in 1996, Social Psychology Network has received more than 375 million page views and is one of the oldest, largest, and most active Internet gateways in the behavioral and social sciences. The central hub of the Network, SocialPsychology.org, features searchable databases of more than 20,000 classified resources, 16,000 psychology-related news stories, 10,000 members, 2,000 social psychology experts, and 650 career mentors for students from underrepresented groups. All resources in the Network – including thousands of teaching-related links, interactive activities, and student learning aids – are available free of charge.

- *Resources for the Teaching of Social Psychology*

http://jfmueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/crow/

This website offers an annotated collection of more than 6,000 links to activities, exercises, class assignments, online videos, examples, and other resources for teaching social psychology and related courses. The site is organized by topic and curated by social psychologist Jon Mueller.

- *Action Teaching*

http://www.actionteaching.org/

ActionTeaching.org is the world's largest repository of action teaching materials, including a searchable archive of more than 40 award-winning classroom activities, field experiences, student assignments, and web resources that instructors are welcome to freely use or adapt.

- *SPSSI Action Teaching Program*

http://www.spssi.org/action-teaching

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues maintains an Action Teaching Program designed to (1) recognize excellence in action teaching with an annual award honoring innovative teaching that addresses social issues such as climate change, immigration, human rights, or intergroup conflict; and (2) facilitate the development of new action teaching resources by providing grants to develop,

enhance, or measure the impact of an action teaching activity, assignment, field experience, or web-based resource.

- **Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science**

  http://www.psychologicalscience.org/tag/teaching-current-directions

  This compendium offers educators a trove of creative ideas and practical tips for teaching about research topics covered in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* – a peer-reviewed journal published by the Association for Psychological Science. The compendium includes dozens of teaching ideas related to social psychology and other subfields of scientific psychology.

- **The Stanford Prison Experiment**

  http://www.prisonexp.org/

  This website features detailed information on one of the most famous and controversial social psychology studies ever conducted: the Stanford Prison Experiment, a simulation study of prison life in which college-aged participants were randomly assigned to play the role of prisoner or guard over a period of 6 days. The site contains material in seven languages and includes archival documents, photos, videos, related links, critiques of the study, and rebuttals from the principal investigator and others associated with the study.

- **UnderstandingPrejudice.org**

  http://www.understandingprejudice.org/

  UnderstandingPrejudice.org, whose pages have been visited more than 40 million times, offers a "Teacher's Corner" with more than 35 college-level classroom activities and student assignments, a "Reading Room" that includes a prejudice research literature review available in 10 languages, and interactive demonstrations that permit visitors to learn about different forms of prejudice, explore the dynamics of segregation, test their knowledge about US slavery and Native American issues, and compare their score on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory with the average scores of people from 25 different countries.

- **Project Implicit**

  http://www.projectimplicit.net/

  Project Implicit allows visitors to learn about implicit biases and stereotypes that operate outside conscious awareness and to take a variety of online Implicit Association Tests to see whether they themselves hold biases related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, weight, disability, and other social, demographic, and physical characteristics. Project Implicit was founded in 1998 by social psychologists Tony Greenwald, Mahzarin Banaji, and Brian Nosek and has thus far administered more than 25 million tests.

- ***Research Randomizer: Random Sampling and Random Assignment Made Easy***

    http://www.randomizer.org/

    Research Randomizer is a free online resource that provides researchers and students with an easy way to generate random numbers and assign participants to experimental conditions. In addition, the site offers an interactive tutorial that teaches students how random sampling and random assignment work. Thus far, the Research Randomizer tutorial has been completed by more than 100,000 students, and the site has been used to generate more than 30 billion sets of random numbers.

- ***Teaching Resources from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology***

    http://www.spsp.org/resources/teaching

    The Society for Personality and Social Psychology maintains a teaching resource page with a curated list of sample syllabi, teaching aids, textbooks, videos, and links to other websites offering useful ideas and materials for teaching personality and social psychology.

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