

## THE CLASSROOM AS A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY LABORATORY

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The typical classroom illustrates many common social psychology concepts and phenomena, although often with less-than-desirable results. I give examples of self-handicapping, self-serving bias, belief perseverance, the fundamental attribution error, social categorization, and the overjustification effect as they occur in the classroom. It is possible that alerting instructors and students to these principles may lessen their occurrence.

Social psychology lends itself well to classroom instruction. It is one of the more popular topics in introductory psychology classes and, based on informal discussions, it rarely is deleted by instructors in order to complete the course in one semester. It is the third most frequently listed course in the undergraduate curriculum, trailing only introductory and abnormal courses (Perlman & McCann, 1999a). About one in six departments requires social psychology for the major, but it is the most frequent menu title for departments that have distributional groups of courses (Perlman & McCann, 1999b). Clearly, social psychology is a popular topic with undergraduates and their instructors.

From the advent of the first activities handbook for psychology (Benjamin & Lowman, 1981), social psychology has been one of the leading categories for teaching demonstrations. By including chapters or modules on real-world topics, most social psychology text authors have ensured students' appreciation of social psychology's applications. For

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example, Myers (2002) included modules applying social psychology to clinical and courtroom situations, as well as to more general topics, such as sustaining the future of the world. Baron and Byrne (2003) have a chapter that includes applications to law, medicine, and organizations. Taylor, Peplau, and Sears (2003) have separate social psychological chapters on health, politics, and law. Feldman (2001) applies social psychology to health and wellness, legal and political arenas, and business, organizations, and the environment. Aronson, Wilson, and Akert (1999) included aspects of social psychology and health, the environment, and law, whereas Brehm, Kassin, and Fein (1999) had chapters on social psychology and law, business, and health.

None of these social psychology texts, however, has addressed one of the arenas that most affects (and perhaps most interests) students—the classroom. This omission seems unusual because the classroom dynamics between student and teacher involve many important social psychology phenomena. In this article, I delineate what I believe are several classic social psychology findings and demonstrate how they affect classroom interactions. Furthermore, if forewarned is forearmed, teachers can help their students to anticipate these social psychological patterns and perhaps prevent their occurrence. For example, Beaman, Barnes, Klentz, and McQuirk (1978) found that alerting students to the bystander effect actually increased helping rates compared to a control group of students who did not learn about this phenomenon. Also, research has shown that psychology majors score higher on an attributional complexity scale than natural science majors (Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson, & Reeder, 1986). Finally, people are less likely to use biased hypothesis testing or biased assimilation of new evidence if they consider an opposite explanation before responding (Lord, Lepper, & Preston, 1984). Thus, there is ample evidence that alerting an audience to social psychological phenomena may help them to avoid an error or mistaken judgment.

#### WHY WON'T MY STUDENTS READ THE MATERIAL (OR STUDY FOR THE EXAMS)?

According to the social psychological concept of *self-handicapping*, people act in ways that may undermine their subsequent performances, thereby having anticipatory excuses for potential failures. Berglas and Jones (1978) conducted the classic study of self-handicapping. Students first were given analogies to solve, after which all were told that they had performed well although some of the analogies were unsolvable. Before working on a second set of analogies, the students had the choice of taking a performance-enhancing or performance-impairing drug. Men who

had done well on the unsolvable analogies chose the drug that would hinder their performance, presumably because they had no confidence that they would continue to perform well. According to Hirt, McCrea, and Kimble (2000), subsequent research has shown that men relative to women tend to self-handicap through strategies that actually hamper their performance (e.g., failure to practice or study), whereas both genders tend to claim excuses ahead of time (e.g., stress or physical illness).

Self-handicapping does take place in academic settings. Beck, Koons, and Milgrim (2000) tested over 400 students and found that self-handicapping and procrastination were positively correlated. They also found that self-handicappers relative to non-self-handicappers began studying for tests later, that procrastinators relative to nonprocrastinators studied less, and that grades were lower for both groups. Similarly, Zuckerman, Kieffer, and Knee (1998) found that higher self-handicapping scores correlated with lower GPAs, less time spent on academic work, and less efficient exam preparation.

Why would students self-handicap regarding their classes and exams? To answer this question, consider the consequences of not self-handicapping. Suppose a student maximally prepares for an exam; then, suppose that student fails (or earns a grade that is below expectations). How can this student explain this outcome? The most tenable and disturbing answers are "I'm stupid" or "I'm not smart enough to handle that class."? On the other hand, if the student begins studying the night before an exam or goes out for pizza instead of studying, he or she has a ready-made excuse for not doing well. In other words, self-handicapping prevents a blow to the student's self-image. Likewise, many faculty members wait until the last minute to prepare a class lecture or exam, a conference submission or paper, a grant application, or some other important document. Might we be guilty of self-handicapping in the same manner as our students? Of course, no one sees him- or herself in the negative light of engaging in self-handicapping or anticipatory excuse making. These labels apply to others, but when we describe such activities in ourselves, they are given the benign label of a reason or explanation (Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983).

#### WHY DO MY STUDENTS BELIEVE THEY HAVE PERFORMED SO MUCH BETTER THAN THEY ACTUALLY HAVE?

According to the *self-serving bias*, we have a tendency to attribute our positive outcomes to internal causes (e.g., our traits or characteristics) and our negative outcomes to external causes (e.g., chance, difficulty of a task). For example, Streufert and Streufert (1969) had pairs of participants play a tactical economic game against what they thought was an-

other team (actually a computer, in order to provide standardized success or failure feedback regarding game performance). After playing the game, participants rated how much of the outcome was due to their team or to the other team. Results showed that participants who succeeded at the game gave the lion's share of the credit to their team. Participants who failed, however, tended to say that the other team was responsible for the outcome, thus deflecting the blame for poor play.

McAllister (1996) looked for evidence of self-serving bias in an academic situation. In a laboratory study, he paired students and had them engage in a teaching/learning situation (one student was the teacher, the other was the learner). The learners received false feedback of either 50% or 90% performance. In their attributions for their performance, students took credit in the success condition and blamed the "teacher" in the failure condition. In a follow-up study, McAllister asked students to think back on the most recent course in which they made an A or an F (or their best and worst grade) and make attributions for their performance. The results were virtually identical: students believed that they had made a good grade but that the instructor was the cause of their low grade.

In the same studies, McAllister (1996) examined the teachers' perceptions. In the laboratory study, students serving as the teacher believed that they had a large role in the other student's success, but that the students were more responsible for their own failures. In the second study, McAllister asked actual instructors to think of the most recent course in which they gave a student an A or an F and to make attributions for those grades. Again, the reversal was present: instructors believed that they played a large role in students' successes, but that the students were to blame for their own failures.

Just as with self-handicapping, the self-serving bias can be an adaptive mechanism. If we take credit for our successes but explain away our failures, our self-esteem is left intact. In fact, our self-esteem is probably somewhat inflated. According to the *depressive realism* phenomenon, depressed people actually are more accurate than nondepressed people in their assessments of their abilities and self-images (Taylor, 1989). Thus, it is a simple matter for us (as faculty) to believe that we are excellent teachers and that our students could work harder (or be brighter).

#### WHY CAN'T I CHANGE THE BELIEFS MY STUDENTS HOLD WHEN THEY COME INTO MY CLASS?

Research on *belief perseverance* tells us that people tend to maintain their initial ideas, beliefs, or theories despite disconfirming evidence. They may discredit, ignore, misinterpret, or give the information little weight,

but the effect is the same. Wegner, Coulton, and Wenzlaff (1985) had students ("actors") read two suicide notes and guess which one was genuine. Half the actors received success feedback (24/25 correct) and half received failure feedback (10/25 correct). While the actor was working, another student observed. Afterward, the actor and the observer learned that the feedback was not genuine; it was predetermined and did not reflect actual performance. Then, both students predicted how well the actor would perform on an additional 25 trials. Their predictions were not affected by learning that the feedback was false. Instead, both the actors and observers predicted that "successful" actors would perform better than "failure" actors.

Wegner et al. (1985) devised an interesting twist to their experiment that produced even more surprising evidence of belief perseverance. Using a nearly identical procedure, they informed the actors and observers *beforehand* that the feedback they would receive would be false and not based on the actors' performance. Then, the experiment took place as before. When asked to predict the actors' future performance, the students' predictions still were influenced by the success and failure feedback. Believing that an actor was successful (or unsuccessful) was apparently impossible to ignore in predicting future performance.

Unfortunately, belief perseverance also takes place in the psychology classroom. There is substantial literature dealing with popular misconceptions about psychology, and much of the work shows that taking a psychology course does not remove those misconceptions (e.g., Vaughan, 1977). Gardner and Dalsing (1986) administered a 60-item "test of common beliefs" to over 500 students taking introductory psychology and other psychology classes. Students consistently responded positively to more than 20% of the misconceptions. The only significant drop in misconceptions occurred for students who had taken between 19 hr and 70 hr of psychology courses (at least six courses). Thus, it appears to take repeated exposure for students to overcome belief perseverance.

This evidence suggests that we faculty face a difficult task if we want students to think critically about the beliefs they hold. Of course, we should remember that students are not the only ones guilty of misconceptions (e.g., Gardner & Hund, 1983) or capable of belief perseverance. If we believe we cannot change our students' minds, we too may be guilty of belief perseverance.

#### WHY CAN'T STUDENTS SEPARATE WHAT I TEACH FROM MY PERSONAL OPINIONS?

Much social psychology research has focused on the fundamental attribution error, the tendency we have to focus on personal causes for other

people's behavior and to downplay the influence of the situation. Jones and Harris (1967) conducted a classic study on the fundamental attribution error. They had students read essays dealing with Fidel Castro's rule of Cuba (either pro-Castro or anti-Castro), and then asked these students to infer the attitude of the writer. They told the students that the writer either had chosen the position or had been assigned the position (as in a debate). The results showed that students made pro- or anti-Castro attributions based solely on the content of the essays. Thus, it made no difference whether the writers had chosen or had been assigned their positions.

Coren (1993) found that students made negative attributions about professors delivering hypothetical lectures about biological influences on intelligence (e.g., that the professor was racist) and on cognitive skills (e.g., that the professor was sexist). Burger, Cooper, and Good (1982) showed similar tendencies for elementary school teachers. The researchers had teachers rank students on academic potential early in the school year. During the year, they had the teachers list the reasons for each student's academic successes and failures. When students were successful academically, the teachers tended to make more internal attributions for students they had ranked high in academic potential and more external attributions for students they had ranked low in academic potential. For the students' academic failures, the pattern was reversed.

Thus, evidence supports the notion that students believe that "we (as faculty) are what we teach." We, however, may believe that "students are what they make." We would do well to warn students of the consequences of their behaviors for others' attributions.

#### WHY CAN INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS SOMETIMES TURN ADVERSARIAL?

According to the principle of social categorization, we classify people into groups according to certain social characteristics. As faculty, our ideal vision at the beginning of the semester is that we will be collegial scholars on a mutual path of discovery with our students. The reality near the end of the semester is not exactly what we envisioned, however, as both parties (faculty and students) are eager for the term to end.

Because of social categorization, as soon as the sorting process begins, we form ingroups and outgroups. These groupings, in turn, create an "us versus them" mentality. One vivid example of social categorization occurred in a study by Rabbie and Horwitz (1969) in which they flipped a coin to divide people into two groups. They then had the participants rate both groups and the individuals in the groups on eight characteristics: responsibility, consideration, fearfulness, cordiality, openness, fa-

miliarity, soundness of judgment, and desirability. Rabbie and Horwitz found evidence of ingroup bias: People rated their group higher than the other group and rated individuals in their group higher than individuals in the other group. These ratings occurred despite the fact that the participants had been divided into groups by the mere flip of a coin. It is certainly likely that social categorization is much more powerful when we deal with perceived differences of actual groups—such as faculty and students.

Another outcome of social categorization is the outgroup homogeneity bias, which is the tendency to perceive less variability among outgroup members than within our ingroup. In this regard, Linville, Fischer, and Salovey (1989) had undergraduates and people living in a retirement community rate 100 hypothetical college students and elderly people on eight attributes: friendliness, motivation, interesting, typical mood, irritability, attractiveness, purposefulness, and overall reaction. Each group gave less variable ratings to the other age group than to their own age group.

Faculty may perceive an “us versus them” struggle in the classroom as originating from the students. Do you hear colleagues complaining about how lazy or unmotivated *they all* are? It is entirely possible that *they* (the students) perceive this battle as coming from *our* direction. What do you suppose *they* say about *all of us*?

#### WHY DON'T MY STUDENTS GET AS EXCITED ABOUT THE CLASS MATERIAL AS I DO?

According to the *overjustification effect*, if you give people an external reward for doing something that they already like, they may see their behavior as externally controlled rather than intrinsically appealing. Thus, it is possible that students, by virtue of *having* to learn about psychology, might find it less appealing than if they simply learned about it on their own.

Lepper, Greene, and Nisbett (1973) conducted an often-cited study of the overjustification effect. They matched children on their interest in drawing and then divided them into three groups. All children had the opportunity to draw pictures with markers: A third were shown an award they could win by drawing good pictures, a third were given an unanticipated award after drawing a picture, and a third got no award. Judges who were unaware of the three conditions rated the children's pictures for quality. The children drawing to gain an award drew lower quality pictures. In a follow-up session one to two weeks later, the experimenters observed the children during free-play time (drawing with markers was one of the free-play choices). Children who had originally



drawn pictures for awards spent less time drawing during this subsequent period. Thus, rewarding the children for something they already enjoyed doing produced lower quality output and undermined subsequent motivation to perform the task.

Deci (1971) found similar results in an experiment in which undergraduates solved puzzles, then were paid to solve puzzles, and finally returned to the baseline condition. Are faculty appreciably different? Perhaps not. A few years ago, faculty at my former college formed a voluntary reading group—we meet once a month to discuss a book of mutual interest. Each month, the leader of the group would bring the following month's book to pass around, presumably to pique our interest and curiosity. Within a matter of a few months, we sounded just like our stereotype of students: We quickly examined the book to see how large or small the print was and to find out how many pages it had, complaining if the print was too small or the book too long.

Unfortunately, parents appear unaware of the implications of the overjustification effect. Boggiano and colleagues (1987) had parents read scenarios in which children showed either high or low interest in academic activities and then rate several social control techniques as to how good they would be to maintain the child's enjoyment or interest in the activity. The parents did not differentiate between high and low interest scenarios; in either case, they opted for the use of reward as the control technique of choice. The research on overjustification clearly indicates that reward would be a bad choice for children who already have high interest in academics.

There is hope, however, for mitigating the overjustification effect. Hennessey and Zbikowski (1993) attempted to immunize children against the effect by showing them videotapes of target children discussing their work at school. The targets said that getting rewards was nice, but the real reason that they did their schoolwork was because of how much they enjoyed it. A day later, the children and a control group who had not seen the videotapes took part in an apparently unrelated study. A researcher asked the children to make up a story to accompany a picture book with no words (a measure of creativity). Half of the children from each group were offered a reward and half were not. The children who had watched the videos of the target children showed higher creativity scores than the control group. The control group that was offered a reward produced the least creative stories, thus demonstrating the overjustification effect. Therefore, it appears that focusing on intrinsic motivation may reduce or eliminate the overjustification effect.

As psychology faculty, we may have an advantage in teaching psychology, which is intrinsically interesting in comparison to many of the other subjects that our students take. At the same time, however, we do



teach psychology as math and science. Perhaps we need to remind our students to behave as they did when they were little children, full of curiosity about the world. Presumably they have chosen to study psychology because it interests them, and we need to remind them of that intrinsic interest.

## CONCLUSION

Clearly, the classroom is a social situation. As such, the interaction patterns that take place in the classroom show predictable social psychology phenomena. I have spotlighted several of those phenomena; no doubt there are others. As psychology faculty, we may be uniquely qualified to predict the occurrence of these phenomena and to understand them. Our next task is to look for ways that social psychological research teaches us not only to understand them but also to deal more effectively with them.

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