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Awad, Sarah H.

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From a Social Psychology of obedience and conformity to that of agency and social change

Sarah H. Awad

Aalborg University, Denmark

Introducing psychology to first year students comes with the dual challenges of presenting it in a clear and compelling manner while also prompting students to think critically about the theories with which they are presented. Many of social psychology's "greatest hits," including the Milgram experiment, the Stanford Prison study, and Sherif's examination of intergroup conflict, tend to focus on the darker side of human behavior. However, if we were to think of social psychology as a discipline that mutually influences and is influenced by contemporary socio-political contexts, then we need to introduce the science as not only studying how individuals are inclined to adapt, conform, and assimilate to the world as is, but also how and under which conditions individuals are agents for social change. The following suggestions are ideas for revisiting the content and way of presenting social psychology to first year students in lectures and seminars.

The suggestions presented are based on the premise that most classical experiments of social psychology were triggered by contemporary history of their time. The findings of those studies have become part of our theoretical knowledge and have shaped much of our understanding of how individuals interact in groups and, in some cases, modified the patterns of behavior upon which this knowledge was based. This 'feedback loop' between science and society implies that the kind of psychological knowledge we disseminate has the potential to modify or dissolve patterns of behavior, increase alternatives to social action, or alter certain social conditions (Gergen, 1973).

Many classic studies in social psychology were undertaken to help understand and explain historical incidents of tyranny, prejudice, and failure to help others in crises. For example, Asch (1951) has shown how individuals are inclined to conform with the majority against their own logical reasoning. Sherif (1956) has shown how individuals in competing groups could be prejudiced and hostile towards each other. Milgram (1963) has shown how individuals could be obedient to authority to the extent of torturing others, and Zimbardo (2007) has shown how when individuals are given authority roles they can humiliate and abuse their colleagues.

This has shaped the way we understand human behavior and led to a "conformity bias" in some of the content of introductory courses where individuals are presented as conformists blindly following authority, incapable of addressing, let alone changing, their own circumstances (Reicher & Haslam, 2013; Smith & Haslam 2017). This could be re-balanced by including more alternative views in course content that highlight human capacity for resistance, solidarity, deviance, and change.

First, classic theories and experiments could be supplemented with qualitative empirical theories that tackle a wider understanding of human behavior. For example, Le Bon's (1895/1947) classic crowd theory explains how individuals become irrational and lose their self-awareness and accountability when submerged in a group. A supplementary view that focuses more on solidarity within groups and the potential of collectives to bring about positive change is that of Drury & Reicher's (2009) elaborated social identity model. This model proposes shared identity as what constructs the norm of a crowd. This shared new identity, power, and energy give the crowd a transformative potential.

Another addition could be including contemporary experiments that tackle the capacity of individuals to exercise agency despite of and because of situational influences (See Swann & Jetten, 2017), as well as theories that problematize social reproduction, supplementing the science of 'order' of social influence with a science of 'movement,' analysing processes of social change (Moscovici, 1972). For

example, Moscovici's social representation theory (1984) posits the continuous construction process of knowledge within societies.

In addition, discussing nuanced approaches to classical studies such as those of Asch, Milgram, and Zimbardo could be helpful to emphasize cases where participants did not conform and where experimental conditions enabled agency and resistance. While the main results from these studies emphasize the inevitability of conformity, obedience and the effect of de-individuation overwhelming reason, there was also evidence of resistance and conditions that enabled social solidarity against authority (See Smith & Haslam, 2017; Swann & Jetten, 2017).

The **second** suggestion has to do with the way the course is tested. Instead of exams focused on content recall, exams could be oriented towards a problem and action-based learning philosophy, where students apply their knowledge on issues or problems in their experienced world and propose ways of analyzing them, as well as potential interventions. By letting students choose the social phenomena to study, and choose the theories to analyze it, we are allowing them to create their own psychology, that responds to current needs, instead of re-producing the social psychology they have learned as is.

The **third** suggestion tackles the seminar room as a space of reflection and critical thinking. Students can be prompted to consider the contexts of experiments and theories, and whether and how experiments would yield different results in different contexts. When and under which conditions are normative behaviors changed? Questioning when course theories apply and analyzing if and how current world events fit into established theories would build important aspects of critical thinking. Seminars could benefit from discussing case studies and exposing students to conflicting theories of behavior. Finally, instructors can nurture an environment of socially responsible students who seek to critically understand course content and apply it in real world.

In conclusion, these ideas are aimed at shifting the orientation of social psychology courses from a science of explaining obedience and conformity to the world as it is, to a science that studies and facilitates human agency in creating an alternative world. This approach may help students to leave social psychology courses with both the knowledge and the empowerment to create social change in the real world.

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