

# Textbook Accuracy in Social Psychology

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# What are our objectives as researchers?

1. Sustenance
2. Social approval
3. Satisfy curiosity - scholar
4. Apply our knowledge - pragmatist

- My focus is on the “pragmatic” goal that our “truth” (research findings) be
  - Communicated accurately
  - Retained
  - Useful

# Which audience to study?

(Goldilocks Principle)

Public? -- **Too cold**; insufficient exposure to social psychology



# Graduate students? – Too Hot true believers



Undergrad psych students? – **just right**  
captive audience for a semester



# Questions

- (1) are students exposed to accurate information?
- (2) do they retain it?
- (3) do they draw appropriate conclusions?
- (4) does it impact them beyond the course grade?
- (5) how can 1-4 be facilitated?

## Question 1: Identify “classic” (core) studies

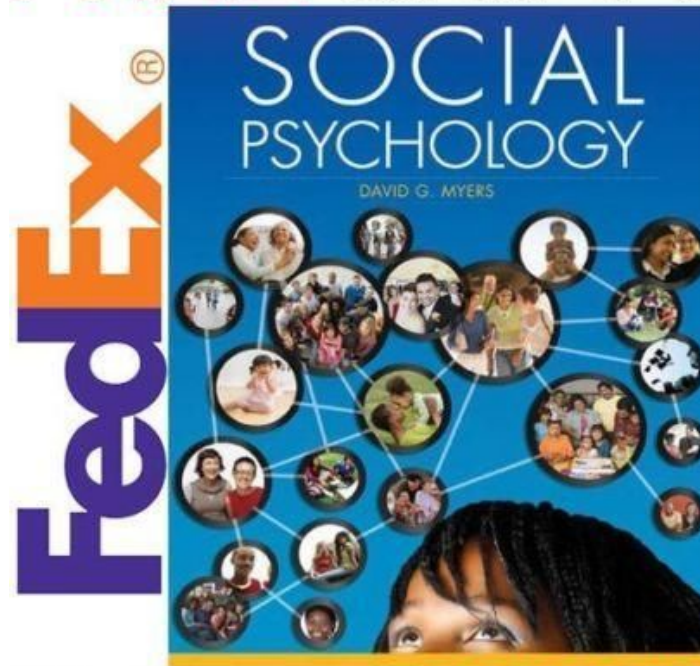
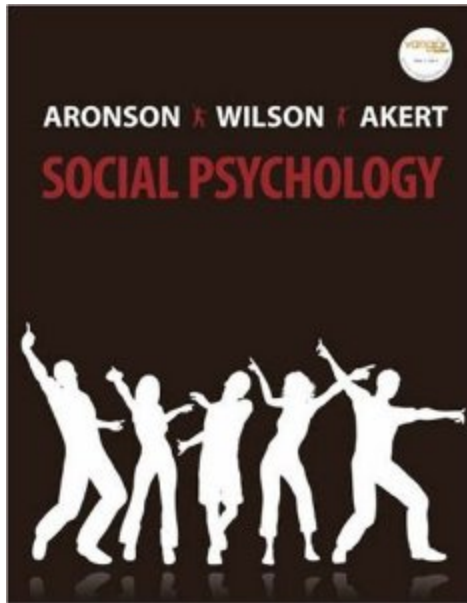
- Text selection: texts used at a sample of major universities

Aronson, Kassin, Kendrick, Myers

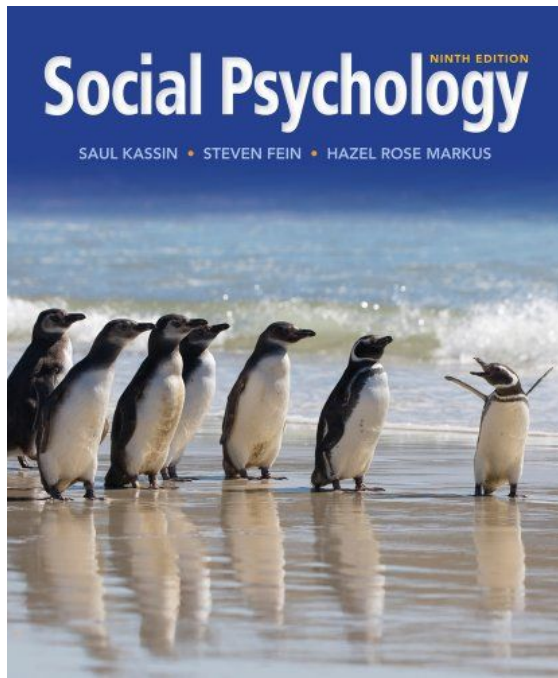
- Study selection:

- Described in a paragraph or more with a table, figure, or photo.
- Appear in at least 3 of the 4 texts (most in all 4)
- Original publication available for comparison
- Sample from major areas of social psych





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# 9 “classics”

- Milgram (Obedience)
- Asch (Conformity)
- Darley & Latane (Helping)
- Festinger & Carlsmith (Dissonance)
- Jones & Harris (Attribution)
- Sherif (Intergroup relations)
- Berkowitz & LePage (Aggression)
- Diener (Self-awareness)
- Rosenthal & Jacobson (Self-fulfilling prophecy)





For each “classic”, we looked at:

1. Accuracy
2. Thoroughness

- of
1. Text description
  2. Tables/Figures
  3. Conclusions and implications

# Examples

## 1. Incorrect Inference

- Darley & Latane (helping) – texts do not distinguish between probability of someone helping and probability of getting help
  - The probability of any one subject helping decreases when others are present (diffusion of responsibility)
  - **But the probability of the victim receiving help does not decrease**

## 2. Incomplete Reporting

- Rosenthal & Jacobson (self-fulfilling prophecy)
  - report that “bloomers” gained more IQ points than controls across grades 1-6
  - **However, differences were significant only in grades 1 and 2**

### 3. Incomplete and Inaccurate Reporting

- Berkowitz & LePage (aggression) – texts fail to report the condition that yielded the critical finding
  - Aggression increased when angry subjects when weapons were present
  - Weapons effect significant when the weapons *belonged to the confederate*



- Suggested changes for textbooks:
  - More detailed reporting of fewer studies and topics
  - Selection of those studies that have replications
    - P-curve, Meta-analyses? (e.g., heat and social behavior)
  - Exercises that present social problems that demand (a) thinking and (b) integration (e.g., obedience and social support)

- Survey instructors to see what studies they consider essential to cover (“classics”)
- Assessing student retention/inferences
  - 57% (56-61%)
- Impact beyond classroom