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
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\textit{ 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