Social Psychology
Social Behavior and Interpersonal Processes
Psychology 256 Syllabus (Winter 2014)

Neil Lutsky

Olin 111, x4379, e-mail: nlutsky@carleton.edu
Updated syllabus and other course materials available on Moodle

Social Psychology as an Approach to Understanding Human Behavior:

This course examines social behavior and interpersonal processes from a social psychological perspective. Psychology 256 and Psychology 258 (Social Cognition) are complementary courses that together cover the field of social psychology. I highly recommend that you consider taking Psychology 258 if you are or become seriously interested in social psychology.

Social psychology itself is an attempt to understand human thought, feeling, and behavior as a function of the dynamic interactions of psychological processes, past social influences, and present situational stimuli. What this means is that social psychologists typically seek to understand human activity in terms of specific social influences as they interact with properties of the psychological entity generating behavior: the person as a biological or learned actor, information processor and organizer, individual character, or experiencing being, depending on your psychological perspective. Furthermore, this interaction between psychological and social phenomena is conceived as an ongoing and mutual one in which social processes affect psychological events just as psychological processes affect social ones. In fact, the social psychologist asserts, to separate the two is to misconstrue seriously the nature of human thought and action.

This description is only abstract in meaning at present; one goal of our efforts this term is to make sense of it in light of specific theories, findings, and applications. What this characterization of human action begins to suggest, however, is the complexity and breadth of the domain from which we shall be sampling. Ideally, social psychology informs and is informed by psychology as a whole, sociology, biology, anthropology, economics, history, and many other intellectual endeavors. Relatedly, social psychology speaks to our own experience, understanding, and behavior, and to real events and issues in our world. The task we are about to undertake, then, is a far-reaching one, but it is one that will be furthered by informed and critical thinking (regarding our own preconceptions and others' arguments), active attempts to synthesize diverse claims and considerations, an appreciation for the value and limitations of particular methodological procedures, and, of course, hard work.

Course Reading and Assignments:

This is a rigorous, demanding course. There is considerable reading to be completed and much to think about. My expectation, which is structured into the course, is that you will be responsible for mastering basic material and participating in class discussions. Monday and Wednesday classes will be based on lecture and discussion of the topics of the material that week. The Friday sessions will involve discussion of weekly issues and two short projects. Your final grade will be determined based on the following weights: midterm (30%), final (30%), short projects (20%), and discussion (10%). Three books are recommended for your purchase:


Additional readings—marked CR on the syllabus—will be available on Moodle. I will also post the slides from my presentations in class on Moodle after each class session.

Please note that if you choose to bring a computer or other electronic device to class, I expect you to restrict your use of the resource to course-related activity during class meeting times. Any violation of this rule will result in a deduction to your discussion grade in the course and would be rude to your classmates and instructor. Carleton's ASC also wants you to remember the following: "All assignments, quizzes, and exams must be done on your own. Note that academic dishonesty includes not only cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism, but also includes helping other students commit acts of academic dishonesty by allowing them to obtain copies of your work. You are allowed to use the Web for reference purposes, but you may not copy material from any website or any other source without proper citations. In short, all submitted work must be your own. Cases of academic dishonesty will be dealt with strictly. Each case will be referred to the Academic Standing Committee via the Associate Dean of Students or the Associate Dean of the College. A formal finding of responsibility can result in disciplinary sanctions ranging from a censure and a warning to permanent dismissal in the case of repeated and serious offenses. The academic penalty for a finding of responsibility can range from a grade of zero in the specific assignment to a F in this course."

There will be midterm and final exams in the course. The midterm will be given on Friday, February 7; the final exam will be self-scheduled. I hope these exams will stimulate insightful syntheses of course material rather than require its mere repetition. While these exams will be written during class or exam times, you will be informed of the questions to appear on them beforehand.

Lastly, I strongly encourage use of office visits for discussions of interesting ideas and challenges or of things confusing or incomplete (perhaps your notes), for giving feedback on the course, or for no apparent end. The course office hour is on Monday from 1:30-2:30, but I am in my office most other times as well. Don't hesitate to stop by or invite me out for coffee or lunch.
Course Topic and Reading Schedule:

I. Introduction to social psychology.

(1/6) An overview of subject matters and assumptions in social psychology. What range of phenomena do social psychologists study? What tenets guide contemporary social psychology? How has social psychology emerged as a scientific discipline from earlier interest in and speculation about social phenomena? How ought social influence to be conceptualized and evaluated?

"The Theory of Suggestion denies that there is any special hypnotic state worthy of the name trance or neurosis. All the symptoms...are results of that mental susceptibility which we all to some degree possess, of yielding assent to outward suggestion, of affirming what we strongly conceive, and of acting in accordance with what we are made to expect." (William James)

(1/8) Introduction to the Milgram obedience study: A classic symbol of social psychology. What variables affected the levels of obedience obtained in these studies? How do predictions of obedience differ from actual obedience, and why? What do social psychological studies of obedience indicate, if anything, about the extent and nature of social-situational control of behavior? Why do many social psychologists consider the obedience studies unrepresentative of the best the discipline has to offer?

"Without ties of loyalty, authority, and fraternity, no society as a whole, and none of its institutions, could long function." (Sennett)

S. Milgram, Obedience to authority, 1-26, 27-43, 55-72, 89-122.

(1/10) Introduction to the core motives approach to social psychology. What phenomena do Aronson and Fiske cite as illustrative of social psychology? What is "situationism", and why do social psychologists tend to embrace it? What is the "BUCKET" of motives Fiske emphasizes, and how might these be anchored in evolution? What is the character of a motivational approach to social psychology, and what might such an approach leave beyond the pale?

"Some difficulties and some qualities are not so much attached to this or that individual or to this or that moment of existence. Considered from the social point of view they are, as it were, exterior to the individual who passes through their beam of light as through various pre-existent, general, and inevitable solitudes." (Marcel Proust)

E. Aronson, The social animal, 1-11.

S. Fiske, Social beings, 1-29. (CR)

(1/13) A research literature view of the obedience experiments. How robust have the findings of the original experiments been across time and culture? What variables appear to influence behavioral outcomes in the Milgram situation? How might we account for consistencies and variabilities in the obedience literature? How is an important research finding evaluated and explored in psychological science, and how is a literature summarized empirically?

"Circumstances were such that he had to do it; but it seems that his disposition was such that he could do it." (R. Huch)

A. Miller, The obedience experiments, 67-87. (CR)


(1/15) Explanations of obedience. What account of obedience does Milgram espouse, and how does it differ from that most likely to be considered by an outside observer? Are particular individuals more or less likely to engage in brutal behaviors towards others? Are Milgram's participants expressing normally repressed aggression towards the learner? How strong is the hypothesized human tendency to obey authority?

"I am not the monster I am made out to be; I am the victim of a fallacy." (Adolf Eichmann as quoted by Hannah Arendt)


S. Milgram, Obedience to authority, 123-164, 165-168, 203-205.

(1/17) Method and ethics in social psychological research. To what extent can social psychological research findings, such as those on obedience, be properly attributed to intervening social psychological processes in the conduct of research? What ethical questions are raised by experimentation in social psychology, and how have these been treated in the discipline? Is the Milgram experiment ethically justifiable?

"Your virtues, gentle master, are sanctified and holy traits to you. Oh what a world is this, when what is comely envenoms him that bears it." (W. Shakespeare)


G. Perry, Behind the shock machine, 75-107. (CR)

(1/20) Interpersonal influence. How and why does the presence of others influence individual judgment and behavior? What psychological systems mediate social influence and what features of the social context constitute that influence? Under what circumstances and for what reasons do individuals maintain their independence in the face of influence pressures? To what extent is the "obedience" situation one that simply maximizes more general social-situational influences on behavior? If so, which ones?

"Our opinions are not in our own power; they are formed and governed much by circumstances that are often as inexplicable as they are irresistible." (Benjamin Franklin)


S. A. Haslam & S. Reicher, Contesting the "Nature" of conformity: What Milgram and Zimbardo's studies really show, 1-4. (CR)
(1/22) Discussion: Social influence for the good.

"It is by defying the gods that human beings have best expressed their humanity." (Salman Rushdie)

T. Rosenberg, Join the club: How peer pressure can transform the world, xi-xxi, 1-20, 97-123, 211-248.

(1/24) An application of the social psychological study of obedience and brutality.

"Evil is never done so thoroughly or so well as when it is done with a good conscience." (Pascal)

C. Browning, Ordinary men, pp. xv-189.

II. Interpersonal encounters: Passing, helpful, aggressive, friendly, close, and otherwise.

(1/27) Social interaction and self. How spontaneous, regulated, or instrumental is social interaction? What are "norms" and how do they shape social interaction? What is the norm of equity in exchange, and what are some ways in which it is expressed in social interaction?

"The mask that replaces the dramatic nobility of the human face is benevolent and courteous but empty of emotion, and its set smile is almost lugubrious: it shows the extent to which intimacy can be devastated by the arid victory of principles over instincts." (O. Paz)

E. Goffman, On face-work: An analysis of the ritual elements in social interaction, 175-189. (CR)

C. Toma & J. Hancock, Self-affirmation underlies Facebook use, 1-11. (CR)

(1/29) Strategic interaction and emergent qualities of social interaction. To what extent is behavior an emergent outcome of social interaction rather than a reflection of the characters or purposes of the persons engaging in it? How is this illustrated in conflict situations? How can game theories be applied to real-life conflicts? What features of particular bargaining or conflict situations influence or constrain conflict resolution?

"The only real solution to this problem was not to have gotten into this situation in the first place." (Canablanca)

M. Van Vugt, Averting the tragedy of the commons: Using social psychological science to protect the environment, 169-173.

(1/31) Discussion: Social norm violations. [Project 1 Papers Due]

"...he, who imagines commendation and disgrace, not to be strong motives on men, to accommodate themselves to the opinions and rules of those, with whom they converse, seems little skilled in the nature, or the history of mankind; the greatest part whereof he shall find to govern themselves chiefly, if not solely, by this law of fashion; and so they do that, which keeps them in reputation with their company, little regard the laws of God, or the magistrate." (John Locke)

(2/3) Helping others and the question of altruism. To what extent are persons generally and differentially predisposed to be helpful? How do such factors as presence of others, prior exposure to a model, characteristics of the person in need, nature of the need, and potential helper's mood, among others, affect the likelihood of helping responses? What do the results of helping behavior studies indicate about general models of human social influence?

"If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages Prince's palaces; it is a good divine that follows his own instructions." (W. Shakespeare)

E. Aronson, The social animal, 48-57.

(2/5) Interpersonal dynamics in the Stanford Prison study.


P. Gray, Why Zimbardo's prison experiment isn't in my textbook. 1-5. (CR)

(2/7) Midterm examination.

"Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere." (Spinoza)

(2/10) Midterm break.

(2/12) Interpersonal attraction and friendships. What makes us attractive to others and others attractive to us? What characteristics and behaviors contribute to liking? How can attraction be converted into friendship? To what extent are friendships forged within social psychological constraints? How important are the characters of the participants in the formation and development of relationships?

"Is that the basis of friendship?...Do we respond only to people who seem to find us interesting?...Can I think of anyone in my whole life whom I have liked without his first showing signs of liking me? (W. Stagner)

E. Aronson, The social animal, 355-388.

S. Taylor, Tend and befriend: Biobehavioral bases of affiliation under stress, 273-277. (CR)

(2/14) Discussion: Attraction. [SPSP]

"What men have called friendship is merely association." (La Rochefoucauld)

J. Egan, Love in the time of no time, 66-71, 124-128. (CR)
(2/17 & 2/19) Close interpersonal relationships. What is the importance of close relationships in our lives? How do friendship and romantic relationships differ? Are there sex differences in close interpersonal relationships? Why do some relationships last and others fail? How do social factors influence the course of close relationships? How can the development and denouement of relationships be explained via models of social interaction?

"Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance..." (J. Austen)

E. Aronson, The social animal, 389-403.


C. Perilloux, J. Easton, & D. Buss, The misperception of sexual interest, 146-151. (CR)

C. Hill, Z. Rubin, & L. Peplau, Breakups before marriage: The end of 103 affairs, 133-146. (CR)

C. Harris, The evolution of jealousy, 62-71. (CR)

(2/21) Discussion: Relationships.

Lady Astor once said to Winston Churchill, "Winston, if you were my husband I should flavor your coffee with poison." To which Churchill replied, "Madam, if I were your husband I should drink it."

R. Carver, What we talk about when we talk about love, 137-154. (CR)

A. Borowitz, Alarm bells, 74. (CR)

III. Groups and individuals.

(2/24) The meaning and impact of groups and social networks. What functions does group membership serve for an individual? How and why does group and network membership influence the opinions and behaviors of group members? How lasting are group and network effects on individual preferences? When and how might a minority within a group alter the preferences and direction of the group as a whole?

"There is no 'ground' for [our] loyalties and convictions save the fact that the beliefs and desires and emotions which buttress them overlap those of lots of other members of the group with which we identify ourselves for the purposes of moral and political deliberation." (R. Rorty)

D. Bem, The social foundations of beliefs and attitudes, 79-86. (CR)

N. Christakis & J. Fowler, Connected, ix-32. (CR)

K. Williams, Ostracism: Consequences and coping, 71-75. (CR)

(2/26) Groups and task performance. What are the basic elements of group structure and functioning? Does individual behavior and productivity differ in a group setting, and, if so, by virtue of what influences? Are groups more or less effective as decisionmakers than individuals? What can be done to enhance group performance? When is the impact of groups maintained outside the group situation?

"The individual forming part of a group acquires, solely from numerical considerations, a sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would have kept under restraints." (Le Bon)

D. Forsyth & J. Burnette, Group processes, 495-534. (CR)

(2/28) Discussion: A rational analysis of group influence and "preference falsification."

J. Surowiecki, The wisdom of crowds, xi-22. (CR)

T. Kuran, Private truths, public lies, 3-35. (CR)

(3/3) Leadership and groups. What is leadership? Are there different kinds of leaders? How do various leadership styles affect group performance? What contributes to leadership effectiveness and ineffectiveness? What factors predict leadership? Does a leader lead, or is a leader created by the group?

"Leaders help us overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness and fear and get us to do better, harder things than we can get ourselves to do on our own." (David Foster Wallace)


(3/5) Hurting others, aggression, and conflict. What are the sources of human aggressive behavior? How can aggression and other types of behavior that potentially injure others be controlled? What personal, experiential, and situational factors dispose individuals to act aggressively? What is the impact of mass media portrayals of violence on aggressive behavior?

"I don't think aggression works like thirst or sleep...aggression is more elicited by particular situations. I think it can be mitigated." (Steven Pinker)

E. Aronson, The social animal, 249-295.

C. Muehlenhard & M. Linton, Date rape and sexual aggression in dating situations, 186-196. (CR)

(3/7) Extensions and applications of social psychology. [Project 2 Papers Due]
(3/10) Intergroup relationships and conflict. What factors are responsible for intergroup conflict? How can intergroup conflict be minimized or, at least, resolved as successfully as possible? What is the relevance of social psychology to social problems?

"It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love; so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness." (S. Freud)

R. Eidelson & J. Eidelson, Dangerous ideas: Five beliefs that propel groups toward conflict, 182-192. (CR)

T. Bartlett The science of hatred, 1-26. (CR)

(3/12) Summary and reflections.


January 2, 2014