Social Psychology

Social Behavior and Interpersonal Processes

Psychology 256 Syllabus (Winter 2016)

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 social-situational stimuli. What this means is that a social psychologist typically seeks to understand human activity in terms of specifiable 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. 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, neuroscience and 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. Our work will be furthered by informed and critical thinking (regarding our own preconceptions and others' arguments), active attempts to synthesize diverse claims and perspectives, an appreciation for the value and limitations of particular methodological procedures, and dedicated attention and effort.

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 interactive lectures and discussions of the topics of our concern that week. The Friday sessions will
involve discussions of weekly issues and two short projects. Your final grade will be determined based on the following weights: midterm (30%), final (30%), short projects (2@15%), and discussion (10%). Two books are recommended for your purchase:


Additional readings--marked CR on the syllabus--will be available on Moodle. I will post the slides from my presentations in class on Moodle after each class session. I will also schedule a Psychology 256 Film Night where we will screen "Experimenter" and "The Stanford Prison Experiment".

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 such 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.”

Carleton College is also committed to providing reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodations should contact the Coordinator of Disability Services, Andy Christensen, at 222-4464 or anchrist@carleton.edu, to begin the process.

There will be midterm and final exams in the course. The midterm will be given on Friday, February 5; 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 Thursday from 10:00-11:00am, 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:

(1/4) An overview of subject matters and assumptions in social psychology. What range of phenomena do social psychologists study? 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)

(1/6) **Introduction to social psychology.** What examples do the text authors use to represent social psychology? What questions about human social behavior are those examples intended to raise and address? What major perspectives on understanding social behavior do the authors emphasize? How does contemporary social psychology relate to other disciplines and other approaches within psychology?

"For in a question like this truth is only to be had by laying together many varieties of error." (Virginia Woolf)


(1/8) **Introduction to social influence.** What are the major ways in which and reasons for which people are influenced by others? 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?

"...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)


(1/11) **Introduction to the Milgram "obedience" study: A classic symbol of social psychology.** What inspired the Milgram study? What variables affected the levels of "obedience" obtained in Milgram's studies? How do predictions of obedience differ from actual behavior, and why? What do social psychological studies of "obedience" indicate, if anything, about the extent and nature of social-situational control of behavior?

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


(1/13) **Replications and complications of "obedience" research.** How robust have the findings of the original experiments been across time and culture? How is an important research finding evaluated and explored in psychological science? What is new research, both laboratory and historical, suggesting about the original experiments? 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 traitors to you. Oh what a world is this, when what is comely envenoms him that bears it." (W. Shakespeare)

J. M. Burger, Z. M. Girgis, & C. C. Manning, *In their own words: Explaining obedience to authority through an examination of participants' comments*, 1-7. (CR)
G. Perry, *Behind the shock machine*, 75-107. (CR)

(1/15) **Explanations for "obedience".** What account of "obedience" does Milgram espouse, and how does it differ from that most likely to be considered by an outside observer? How strong is the hypothesized human tendency to obey authority? What alternative explanations can account for behavior in the Milgram situation, and what are the broader implications of these analyses?

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

S. Milgram, *Obedience to authority*, 123-152. (CR)

(1/18) **Social norms and interpersonal influence.** What are "norms", and how do they shape social interaction? What is the norm of reciprocity in exchange, and what are some ways in which it is expressed in social interaction? How spontaneous, regulated, or instrumental is social interaction?

"The mask that replaces the dramatic mobility 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)

(1/20) **Affirmation and rejection in social interactions.** How have electronic media changed social interaction? What norms, if any, guide electronic exchanges? Why are resources like Facebook so widely used? What social psychological functions do they serve? What are the consequences of rejection in social interactions and relationships? Why is the threat of social rejection powerful?

"I speak and speak, but the listener retains only the words he is expecting. It is not the voice that commands the story; it is the ear." (Italo Calvino)

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

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

(1/22) **Discussion: Social norm violations. [Project 1 Papers Due]**

"What do you care what other people think?" (Richard Feynman)

(1/25) **Strategic interaction and the 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."
(Casablanca)


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

(1/27) **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)


(1/29) No class: Society for Personality and Social Psychology annual meeting.

(2/1) **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)


(2/3) **Moral disengagement.** What factors contribute to our ability to harm others? Why does such behavior not offend our personal standards and images? Under what circumstances do we tolerate the evil others perpetuate? When do we look away, and when do we respond?

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

A. Bandura, *Moral disengagement*, 48-91. (CR)

(2/5) **Midterm examination.**

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

(2/8) **Midterm break.**

(2/10) **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. Stegner)


(2/12) **Discussion: Gender differences in attraction and friendships.** Do men and women differ in what they find attractive in potential romantic partners? Are there gender differences in friendships? What are the roles of biology and culture in shaping attraction and associations?

"My affections are then most humble: I have no ambition to see a goodlier man. (Shakespeare)


(2/15) **Close interpersonal relationships.** What is the importance of close relationships in our lives? How do friendship and romantic relationships differ? What factors contribute to the development of commitment to a relationship? What can we do to strengthen and sustain important relationships? Are moods, preferences, and behavioral tendencies propagated over close interpersonal networks?

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


(2/17) **Close interpersonal relationships.** Why do some relationships last and others fail within a given set of apparently equivalent circumstances? What influences whether a relationship flourishes or not and continues or not? Why is it often difficult to leave an unsatisfactory or even abusive relationship?

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."

M. J. Strube, The decision to leave an abusive relationship, 236-250. (CR)

(2/19) **Discussion: Close relationships.**

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

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

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

(2/22) **Group impact on task performance.** Does individual behavior and productivity differ in a group setting, and, if so, by virtue of what influences? What can be done to enhance group
performance? Are moods, preferences, and behavioral tendencies propagated over interpersonal networks?

"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 perceive have kept under restraint." (Le Bon)


(2/24) **Groups and decision making.** Are groups more or less effective as decision makers than individuals? How and why do group and network membership influence the opinions, behaviors, and states of group members? How lasting are group and network effects on individuals? 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)


(2/26) **No class: Instructor out of town.** [Replaced by Psychology 256 "Film Night"]

(2/29) **Leadership, power, and groups.** What are the basic elements of group structure and functioning? 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)


(3/2) **Groups, roles, aggression, and conflict.** How do interpersonal influences, including those associated with being part of a group, affect aggressive behavior towards others? 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)


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

(3/4) **Discussion: The Stanford Prison Study.** [Project 2 Papers Due]

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

(3/7) Intergroup relationships, aggression, and conflict. What factors are responsible for intergroup conflict? How can intergroup conflict be minimized or, at least, resolved as successfully as possible? What are the sources of human aggressive behavior? 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)


(3/9) Summary and reflections.

(3/12-3/14) Final examination, Self-scheduled.

December 30, 2015