

Indoctrination in Introduction to Psychology

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Abstract

There have been dozens of papers published on the misrepresentation of psychological studies and theories (e.g., omitting criticisms) presented in introductory textbooks. Authors of these papers have offered numerous explanations for the errors including limited space for covering criticisms and the desire among textbook authors to “sell” psychological science to an introductory audience. In the present article, several studies and theories, most of which have been identified in previous research as misrepresented in introductory psychology textbooks, are reviewed. The possibility of ideological bias contributing to the misrepresentation is considered. The bias in introductory psychology is considered in the context of wider concerns about the consequences of political homogeneity in the field. Suggestions for reducing bias in introductory psychology textbooks and courses are offered.

Keywords

Introductory psychology, social psychology, bias, scientific thinking, critical thinking

Recent revelations have exposed the standard narrative of the Stanford prison experiment (SPE) as profoundly inconsistent with actual events (Blum, 2018; Le Texier, 2019). Even prior to these revelations, numerous concerns had been raised about the design and interpretation of the study (e.g., Banuazizi & Movahedi, 1975; Haslam & Reicher, 2012). Banuazizi and Movahedi (1975), for example, presented a sample of college-aged participants with information comparable to that which was available to SPE participants and the vast majority were able to determine the purpose of the study. In addition to concerns about demand characteristics, critics have noted the poor ecological validity of the mock prison (Fromm, 1973) and the potential for participant selection bias (Carnahan & McFarland, 2007). Despite the substance of these criticisms, several analyses of psychology textbooks indicate they have largely been ignored (Bartels, 2015; Griggs, 2014; Griggs & Whitehead, 2014). For example, of the Introduction to Psychology textbooks surveyed by Griggs (2014) and Bartels (2015), only 18% and 7% discussed the issue of demand characteristics,

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respectively. Similarly, across both textbook samples, only one addressed ecological validity and two tackled participant selection bias. Textbook authors tended to explain the deviant behavior of the SPE guards as the product of situational forces, use the SPE to account for prison abuse at Abu Ghraib, and use it to demonstrate the relevance of social psychology research (Griggs, 2014; Griggs & Whitehead, 2014). One might assume that though space constraints lead textbook authors to present abridged, criticism-free versions of the study, instructors are providing a more nuanced version of events. Unfortunately, a survey by Bartels et al. (2016) suggests otherwise. Less than 40% of instructors covered demand characteristics (37%), and barely a quarter of them covered questions about the ecological validity (28%) and participant selection bias (26%). That the presentation of the SPE is oversimplified is clear. What is less clear is why it is presented in such a manner? It is possible that both textbook authors and instructors are unaware of the criticism, are aware of the criticisms but found it lacking merit, or decided to omit criticism due to space constraints. Griggs and Whitehead (2014) suggested another possibility for brief, uncritical coverage noting that the author's goal is to demonstrate the relevance and applicability of social psychology research; the inclusion of SPE criticism complicates an otherwise tidy story about social roles and the power of the situation. Unfortunately, the inaccurate presentation of the SPE is not an anomaly. Inaccuracies have been noted in the textbook presentations of Stanley Milgram's obedience studies (Griggs, 2017), David Rosenhan's (Bartels & Peters, 2017), and antidepressant and antidepressant drug trials (Bartels, 2019) to name a few. Ferguson et al. (2018) reported biased coverage of media violence, stereotype threat (ST), spanking research, the theory of multiple intelligence (MI), and evolution psychology. While open to the possibility that the abovementioned explanations may account for their finding (e.g., the overselling of psychology), Ferguson et al. clearly pointed to the personal views and political ideology of authors as contributors to bias:

Given that the misinformation contained generally hewed toward presenting contested research as more consistent, generalizable to socially relevant phenomena and higher quality than it was, we believe that these errors are consistent with an indoctrination, however unintentional, into certain beliefs or hypotheses that may be "dear" to a socio-politically homogeneous psychological community. (p. 579)

The liberal leanings of the psychological community have been well-attested (see Ferguson, 2015; Haidt, 2011; Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Von Hippel & Buss, 2017) and validate concerns over indoctrination. Ferguson (2015) notes that the American Psychological Association (APA) has been less than impartial in issuing policy statements that "support generally left-leaning positions likely to alienate social conservatives" (p. 9). The APA, notes Ferguson, expresses "what are, indeed, opinions that often, obfuscate policy opinion for scientific fact, and consistently leans in a liberal political direction in a way that alienates many policymakers and the general public" (p. 10). Two surveys of social psychologists provide further insight as to the demographics of the field. In a study by Inbar and Lammers (2012), 3.9%, 17.9%, and 10.3% of the psychologists surveyed identified as conservative on social, economic, and social policy issues, respectively. Similarly, among the more than 300 social psychologists surveyed by Von Hippel and Buss (2017), the overwhelming majority identified themselves as liberal. Decades ago, Hogan and Schroeder (1981) identified such bias in introductory psychology textbooks, arguing that it was rooted in a liberal political philosophy, a belief in progress through environmental manipulation.

To return to the misrepresentation of the SPE, Milgram's studies, and Rosenhan's, the authors of these critiques did not consider the possibility of ideological bias. The SPE was not just a testimony

to the power of the situations generally, but to prisons specifically, a long-standing target of reform among those on the political left. Blum (2018) accounts for the early, uncritical acceptance of SPE results this way: “Reform-minded liberals were hungry for evidence that people who committed crimes were driven to do so by the environment they’d been born into, which played into their argument that reducing urban crime would require systemic reform” (para. 55). The SPE is also used to account for the prison abuse at Abu Ghraib. In fact, six of the seven textbooks reviewed by Griggs and Whitehead (2014), used the SPE to explain the tragedy. The political implications here are even less opaque. Abu Ghraib was Republican President George Bush’s disaster and Zimbardo has been an outspoken critic of the former President. If one associates anti-prison and anti-war positions with the political left, then it would seem a plausible assumption that political bias has played some role in the treatment the SPE has received from textbook authors. Milgram’s experiments, equally devoid of criticism in textbook presentations (Griggs et al., 2020), are certainly a testament to situationism.

David Rosenhan’s pseudopatient study also speaks to the power of the situation. Rosenhan (1973) posed the question, “Do the salient characteristics that lead to diagnoses reside in the patients themselves or in the environments and contexts in which observers find them?” (p. 251). His answer to this question favored the latter and his study has served as a key piece of evidence that diagnostic labels produce stigma (though this is a myth; Lilienfeld et al., 2010). Like the SPE and Milgram’s studies, Rosenhan’s, despite substantive criticism raised, has been generally treated by textbook authors as unblemished (Bartels & Peters, 2017). Aside from the situational explanation for Rosenhan’s results aligning it with the political left and the progressive spirit of the anti-psychiatry movement (Nasser, 1995) of which Rosenhan was a part, there is research indicating that mental health stigma is more prevalent among political conservatives than liberals (DeLuca & Yanos, 2015).

Though it is worth considering the extent to which political bias may have contributed to the treatment of the Stanford prison experiment, Milgram’s obedience research, and Rosenhan’s study, their utility in selling psychology is a significant confound. Given that, I will consider three widely covered topics often presented in a biased fashion, namely the Implicit Association Test (Bartels & Schoenrade, 2021), MI, and ST (Ferguson et al., 2018). In each case, I will consider the case for political bias and competing explanations including the lack of awareness of criticism, and the merits of the criticism, and the storyline or utility in selling psychology.

Implicit Association Test

A survey of introductory textbooks by Bartels and Schoenrade (2021) revealed that only three of 17 textbooks presented the Implicit Association Test (IAT) in an unbiased fashion. Specifically, though critics have expressed concerns about the predictive validity of the IAT, only two textbooks acknowledged this shortcoming. Likewise, only five textbooks noted uncertainty about what the IAT measures despite questions raised about whether the IAT measures prejudice, preferences, or simply awareness of cultural stereotypes (e.g., Brendl et al., 2001). Given the volume of critical articles addressing well-publicized concerns over the IAT (see Bartels & Schoenrade, 2021), it seems unlikely that textbook authors are unaware of such issues.

Goldhill (2017), in an article critical of the IAT, notes the politics surrounding it: “Taking the test, and buying into the concept of implicit bias, feels both open-minded and progressive” (para. 21). Likewise, Singal (2017) notes, “If it is politically palatable to embrace the IAT and the nationwide search for our inner bias, then to criticize the test is to be on the wrong side of the progressive conversation about race” (para. 79). The IAT is different than the aforementioned

classics in several key ways. There is no dramatic story surrounding the development of the IAT, nor is the IAT a testament to the applicability of psychological science (Forscher et al., 2019). Thus, the storyline explanation for the lack of attention to criticism does not seem fitting.

Surveys indicate significant differences in the political parties in terms of beliefs about race, with Democrats perceiving more discrimination among Blacks (Griffin et al., 2021) and more advantages for Whites (Atske, 2020). Beliefs about the prevalence of implicit or unconscious bias are at the heart of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts at the federal level and reflect significant differences between the Republican and Democrat parties in the United States. In a message explaining the rescinding of the Trump-era ban on divisive concepts in DEI training and expanding such training, the Biden administration notes the benefit of raising awareness of unconscious bias (The United States Government, 2021). The IAT has been used to account for racial disparities in outcomes (e.g., housing and income) and proponents have called for “greater use of affirmative action programs and other ‘fair measures’ to counter and change implicit biases against women and minorities” (Mitchell & Tetlock, 2006, pp. 1026–1027).

Multiple Intelligence

Equally void of a compelling story, yet often presented in a biased fashion, is Howard Gardner’s theory of MI. Ferguson et al. (2018) found that, though every textbook included MI, less than 10% of introductory textbooks presented it in an unbiased manner. A perusal of recent introductory textbooks reveals considerable space devoted to this theory. One textbook provides the following synopsis:

According to Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, people have different profiles of intelligence because they are stronger in some areas than others. And they use these intelligences differently to learn new material, perform tasks, and solve problems. Moreover, Gardner’s research suggests that most people possess one or more natural intelligences critical to success in various occupations. (Huffman et al., 2018, p. 277)

Another textbook presents “g” as a historical artifact that “early psychologists” “presumed” important then lays out Gardner’s theory which stands in contrast to “traditional thinking about intelligence.” Yet, as Willingham (2004) notes, contemporary thinking about intelligence includes an appreciation for the hierarchical nature of intelligence with “g” accounting for the relationship among cognitive skills. While Gardner argues that the intelligences in MI are independent, research indicates that the intelligences are correlated (Visser et al., 2006). Moreover, the notion that there are distinct brain areas associated with each intelligence is not supported by neuroscientific research (Geake, 2008).

The textbook author concludes the presentation, sans critiques of Gardner’s theory, with a note on the application of MI, “In addition, many educators, embracing the concept of multiple intelligences, have designed classroom curricula that are meant to draw on different aspects of intelligence” (Feldman, 2019, p. 271). Yet, many critics of the theory have raised concern about its pedagogical value (e.g., De Bruyckere et al., 2015; Geake, 2008). Willingham (2004), for example, argues that numerous issues with Gardner’s theory aside, there is no application of MI that is consistent with the theory (even according to Gardner himself) and no data documenting the educational value of these applications (e.g., improved test scores). Concluded Willingham, “Gardner’s theory is simply not all that helpful. For scientists, the theory of the mind is almost certainly incorrect. For educators, the daring applications forwarded by others in Gardner’s name ...

are unlikely to help students” (p. 24). Willingham further notes that despite the aforementioned issues with Gardner’s theory, teacher education textbooks “offer extensive coverage of the theory, with little or no criticism” (p. 22). Therefore, it is worth considering the extent to which this bias is better accounted for by ideological bias or competing explanations. As noted, the storyline explanation does not seem a satisfying one. It would be difficult to argue that textbook authors are simply not aware of the criticism as Gardner’s theory has been around for nearly 40 years and numerous criticisms raised and critiques penned (e.g., De Bruyckere et al., 2015; Rousseau, 2021; Traub, 1998; Visser et al., 2006; Waterhouse, 2006; Willingham, 2004). How does the presentation of Gardner’s theory in textbooks fit with the notion of liberal bias? Let’s return to the textbooks:

Consider that intelligence is often linked with financial success. If you were in a group at the top of the economic ladder, and you believed that intelligence was primarily inherited, you might believe that your position and privilege were part of your intellectual birthright, without considering that you were born with special advantages that maximized any inherited abilities. (Huffman et al., 2018, p. 277)

The political relevance of Gardner’s theory is clear in the above passage. Intelligence, as it is traditionally defined and measured, a supposed tool of the “meritocracy,” is, in fact, a tool for white hegemony and white privilege. Gardner, notes Traub (1998), “has given legitimacy to critiques of the test-driven meritocracy and of the high-IQ elite it fosters. Multiple intelligence theory clearly serves many purposes” (p. 20). The theory, according to Waterhouse (2006), “has been praised for addressing this inequity by allowing for students to have the wide range of eight distinct intelligences in which to express distinctive talent” (p. 220). Likewise, De Bruyckere et al. (2015) note:

It [MI] fits very well in the social-democratic philosophies that have flourished since the middle of the last of the previous century, namely the essential equality of all people. One can see—in this age of anti-intellectual, anti-elitist populism—the attractiveness of this idea that there is not one “unfair” concept of universal intelligence “g,” but rather that we all Einsteins but in our own right. (p. 63)

The theory of MI offers an alternative to “g” and the IQ test, anathema to a progressive mindset. It is not coincidental that the notion of IQ test bias is such a persistent myth (Lilienfeld et al., 2010).

Stereotype Threat

ST research, particularly the seminal article by Steele and Aronson (1995), has a track record of misrepresentation and overselling. In fact, the misrepresentation of ST in introductory psychology textbooks has been documented by two independent groups of researchers decades apart (Ferguson et al., 2018; Sackett et al., 2004). ST occurs when awareness of a widely held negative stereotype about a group inhibits performance among members of the group in the domain in which that negative stereotype applies. For example, the standardized test performance of African Americans is negatively affected by the salience of the stereotype that African Americans underperform on such tests. The seminal study by Steele and Aronson (1995) found that African Americans performed worse than White students in the presence of ST and that with the presence of threat removed, scores mimicked preexisting differences (i.e., means were SAT-adjusted). When one considers the political implications of such results, the tendency for overselling and misrepresentation is understandable, consistent with the thesis of this article. Wax (2009) explains the relevance:

It is not hard to see why advocates of social equality have seized on ST findings. If ST effects dominate, other causes of group performance disparities can be discounted. So, for instance, the Steele-Aronson observation that black students' verbal test scores are depressed under ST conditions suggests that long-standing test score disparities between blacks and whites might be due simply to performance anxiety rather than to real differences by race in academic ability, aptitude, or learning. (p. 133)

However, the lack of research documenting that ST accounts for a nontrivial proportion of the gap between genders (or races) brings to light another gap, that between the scientific evidence of ST and the claims made (referred to as “overclaim syndrome”; Wax, 2009). Occupying the space in this gap, most relevant to introductory psychology presentations of ST, is a misrepresentation of the original Steele and Aronson (1995) studies. The studies did not demonstrate that eliminating ST eliminates pre-existing differences on standardized tests like the SAT gap between African Americans and Caucasians. What the study did show is that when you take a sample of African American and White students with comparable SAT scores, presenting a test under threat conditions will result in poorer performance among African American relative to White students. The no-threat condition resulted in no significant differences (essentially no change as the groups were no different on SAT due to statistical adjustment; Jussim et al., 2016; Sackett et al., 2004). To be clear, the study did not show that when you take a group of African Americans with lower mean SAT scores and a group of Whites with a higher mean SAT score, both groups will score the same under testing conditions in which ST is eliminated. Thus, interpreting the Steele and Aronson (1995) study as finding that performance among the two groups in the no-threat condition was equal is misleading. As an example, in one introductory psychology textbook, the author notes: “In the problem-solving condition, they (African Americans) performed the same as European Americans” (p. 555). Jussim et al. (2016) noted a valid and efficient presentation of Steele and Aronson (1995) is as follows: “Steele and Aronson (1995) found that stereotype threat increased racial achievement differences” (p. 122).

The mischaracterization of the Steele and Aronson studies was noted in roughly one-third of the textbooks reviewed by Sackett et al. (2004). The authors noted that the mischaracterization was likely unintentional (e.g., authors “did not notice that test performance had been adjusted for prior SAT scores” p. 11). It would seem this interpretation is fair and one should not assume bias, particularly considering that the Steele and Aronson results were relatively fresh at that time. However, more than a decade after the Sackett et al. publication, Ferguson et al. (2018) conducting the aforementioned review of introductory textbooks, found biased (62.5%) or partially biased (12.5%) coverage in *all* of the presentations of ST (25% did not cover ST). Ferguson et al., however, were more open to the possibility of intentional bias:

Given that the misinformation contained generally hewed toward presenting contested research as more consistent, generalizable to socially relevant phenomena and higher quality than it was, we believe that these errors are consistent with an indoctrination, however unintentional, into certain beliefs or hypotheses that may be “dear” to a *socio-politically homogeneous psychological community* [emphasis added]. (p. 579)

Conclusion

Forty years ago, attempting to account for liberal bias in psychology textbooks, Hogan and Schroeder (1981) suggested that the bias reflected “deep-seated, unappraised (unconscious) attitudes toward human nature and science” (p. 14). Textbook authors, like all members of the

scientific community, are not immune to cognitive biases, particularly confirmation bias (Ferguson, 2015). All the more likely that the “fish don’t know they’re in water” when one considers the ubiquity of liberal bias in the psychological science community.

As noted earlier in the article, formal surveys have documented the overwhelming political partiality in psychology in favor of liberals. Given this and the biased presentation of the topics reviewed here and elsewhere, it would seem a reasonable conclusion that liberal bias influences the presentation of numerous topics covered in introductory psychology textbooks.

The consequences of indoctrination, as I see it, are threefold. One, we undermine the credibility of the field in the eyes of the introductory psychology student; even landmark studies in psychology cannot be taken for granted. The fact that students can easily access information on an introductory topic or study and find that the textbook narrative is false or at least misleading, further undermines credibility (Ferguson et al., 2018). Two, indoctrination undermines critical thinking, a major learning goal in psychological science (APA, 2013). Controversial topics like the validity of the IAT are opportunities to teach analytical skills and help students become better consumers of psychological research. Bartels and Griggs (Bartels & Griggs, 2019; Griggs & Bartels, 2019), for example, have provided a framework for addressing controversies surrounding the Stanford prison experiment in a manner that fosters scientific and critical thinking. Third, we perpetuate the political homogeneity in the field. Students who are right-of-center or conservative and interested in the field, may reconsider after an introductory course in which it is obvious that the field is inhospitable to their political worldview.

There are likely many solutions to the problem, but they must all begin with the acknowledgment that “true sciences,” as Jussim et al. (2016) note, “do not act as if data that conflicts with a preferred narrative simply do not exist” (p. 125). Introductory textbook authors should seek out collaborators with different viewpoints as this can illuminate blind spots across the ideological spectrum (Jussim et al., 2016). Organizations that promote viewpoint diversity could vet and recommend textbooks. Instructors may consider supplanting a textbook with primary readings or adding supplemental readings to the course that address the criticisms of controversial findings or theories.

For instructors wanting to mitigate the bias of the aforementioned introductory topics and others, APA (American Psychological Association, 2018) and APS (Bernstein et al., 2018) initiatives to reinvent introductory psychology provide useful guidance. As an example, consider how an instructor might present the IAT. In the majority of textbooks reviewed by Bartels and Schoenrade (2021), students were encouraged to take the IAT. While not the intent of the textbook authors, this exercise could provide the basis for a lesson on the IAT that develops students’ methodological and critical thinking skills. Specifically, rather than (or in addition to) having students reflect on their own biases, students could be asked to consider the following after completing the test: how is implicit bias operationally defined? If you took the test again and obtained a different score, would this be problematic? How important is it for implicit bias to predict explicit bias or for unconscious bias to predict discriminatory behavior? Students could then be asked to find research that is both supportive and critical of the IAT and evaluate the evidence (e.g., a case study, correlational study, experiment, and meta-analysis). Instructors might also consider the use of annotated research articles to increase introductory students’ familiarity with the structure and statistical analyses presented in such articles. Instructors can address the issue of test-retest reliability and predictive validity of the IAT and have students think about the implications of these issues in terms of implicit bias training. Students might also consider the political implications of IAT research and the relationship between advocacy and science. Lastly, students might be asked to consider what additional evidence would help one evaluate the utility of the IAT.

Structuring a lesson in this way allows students to approach content in an active rather than passive way, models a scientific approach, and fosters critical thinking skills.

Efforts to reinvent the teaching of introductory psychology should include efforts to combat political bias and indoctrination. The late Scott Lilienfeld (2010), reflecting on lessons learned from his mentor Tom Bouchard, noted:

Tom taught me that political correctness has no place in science: The desire to discover the truth must trump the desire to feel comfortable ... Tom also taught me that we must be courageous in facing up to the evidence, regardless of where it leads us, and that as scientists we must prepare to have our preconceptions challenged, even shattered. (p. 282)

Bouchard's lesson should serve as a guidepost for such change in introductory psychology instruction.

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