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Modern Classics in Social Psychology

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The editors of *Psychological Inquiry*, Lenny Martin and Ralph Erber, have issued a provocative challenge. These editors noted that in social psychology, there is a great deal of consensus concerning the articles that are considered classics within the discipline. A moment's reflection leads to a list of familiar studies—Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) study on dissonance processes, Milgram's (1963) research on obedience to authority, Asch's (1955) study on conformity to group pressure, and Darley and Latané's (1968) study on bystander nonintervention, among a few others. The enduring interest in these studies is testimony to their status as classics. These studies are discussed in just about every social psychology and introductory psychology textbook, and some 30 to 40 years later, we still teach about these studies as students continue to find them fascinating. The challenge issued by Martin and Erber was to identify empirical studies conducted since 1980 that have achieved or are likely to achieve the status of modern classics. That is, we were charged with the task of identifying modern studies that we believe will stand the test of time as the traditional classics have done. This task proved to be both interesting and challenging.

Identification of Modern Classics: The Ground Rules

Martin and Erber established some ground rules to govern the selection of modern classics. First, they encouraged authors to focus on the time period between 1980 and 2000, as their interest was in identifying modern equivalents of the traditional classic studies. Second, authors were discouraged from nominating their own studies. Third, authors were asked to restrict consideration of modern classics, if possible, to empirical articles rather than theoretical articles, chapters, or whole lines of work. The choice of studies and the criteria by which authors considered the studies to be modern classics were left entirely open. We have tried as much as possible to operate within these ground rules, though as becomes clear later in this article, we strayed from the guidelines in a couple of respects.

Defining Features of Traditional Classic Studies

Knowing *which* studies are classic is different from knowing *why* they became classic. Thus, we first set out to explore whether the features that were responsible for the traditional classic studies' achieving classic status could serve as markers in our more contemporary discipline for identifying what might be considered modern classic studies. In our efforts to examine this possibility, we spent some time identifying the qualities that led to the emergence of the traditional classics. Not all of the criteria we identify apply equally well to all of the traditional classics, but our goal was to note the most important qualities that may have contributed to their having achieved classic status. We considered the questions motivating the research, the nature of the findings, the methods used in these studies, and the extent to which the research and findings generated interest within and beyond the boundaries of social psychology.

Perhaps the single most important feature that defined these traditional classic studies is that they addressed fundamental questions of human behavior—why do we obey authority figures, why do we conform to social pressure, why don't we help others in need of assistance, how do we respond when our behavior contradicts our attitudes? These studies were, by and large, phenomenon driven; they were motivated by a desire to understand the seemingly inexplicable significant social events of their time. For example, Milgram placed his work on obedience to authority figures in the context of understanding the behavior of ordinary people during the Holocaust. The impetus for Darley and Latané's work on bystander nonintervention was to make sense of the fact that while Kitty Genovese was brutally stabbed and murdered, 38 people watched from the safety of their apartments and failed to do anything to help her. Indeed, the results of many of these studies were counterintuitive in nature. That is, the findings often challenged what people (thought they) knew about human behavior and proved to be stunning examples of how people could be wrong in their assumptions about social behavior.

In our estimation, the methodology of these studies was an additional feature that contributed to their emergence as traditional classics. In one way or an-

other, each of the classic studies caught the individual in some type of predicament—the conflict between attitudes and behavior (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), between one’s moral code of conduct and situational demands (Darley & Latané, 1968; Milgram, 1963), or between one’s visual perceptions of reality and the situational influence of peers (Asch, 1955). Because the phenomena explored in the traditional classic studies required the creation of a dilemma that was both compelling and believable, it was necessary that the methods used in these studies be high in drama, often involving well-crafted cover stories and several trained confederates. The high drama created in these studies was essential in order to accurately capture the individual in the predicament. Further, because of the dramatic nature of these studies, readers of these studies could easily “try on” the manipulations, questioning what they would do under similar circumstances (even if their predictions were typically wrong).

Moreover, the methodology of these studies required the resolution of the dilemma on-line in actual behavior. Specifically, the way in which the predicament could be resolved was rich with implications, both intrapersonally and interpersonally. For example, the choice to help or not in the Darley and Latané (1968) paradigm had important consequences for the construal of oneself as the kind of person who helps others in need. In addition, however, this dilemma had considerable social outcomes for the (ostensible) individual in need, outcomes that could mean the difference between receiving vitally needed help or not. Indeed, part of what makes these studies so compelling, is that the way the individual resolves the dilemma has immediate and significant consequences both personally and socially.

Quite simply, the fundamental nature of the phenomena, the methods used, and the implications and significance arising from this classic work made these studies both attention grabbing and thought provoking to read for social scientists (within and outside of social psychology) and laypeople alike. Because these studies addressed such fundamental questions of human behavior and the importance of these studies was immediately grasped, the phenomena uncovered begged for further explanation. As such, the classic studies were highly generative and inspired subsequent generations of researchers to develop new lines of inquiry that have enriched our understanding of the core phenomena of interest. For example, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) paved the way for almost a half century of studying dissonance processes from the more than 1,000 empirical studies on dissonance to the other theories that dissonance inspired (e.g., self-perception theory) and the revisionist models of dissonance (e.g., self-esteem model of dissonance, new look model of dissonance, and self-affirmation theory). In addition, Darley and Latané (1968) sparked interest in

exploring the role of altruism, egoism, and empathy in helping behavior as well as inspired research programs within and outside of social psychology that span a wide range of phenomena from blood donation to volunteerism to intergroup bias. The classic studies set the agenda for subsequent generations of researchers and inspired a great deal of creative research illuminating the original phenomenon. More generally, these studies made people think—about themselves, about human nature, and about the relation of self to others.

In many ways our contemporary discipline differs substantially from the discipline during the time in which the traditional classic studies were conducted. The field was very young when Asch (1955), Festinger and Carlsmith (1959), Milgram (1963), and others published their now classic contributions. Though still a fairly young discipline, both the focus of research and the publication practices appear to be somewhat different in our contemporary discipline. For example, early work in social psychology was concerned with social problems, whereas a great deal of more contemporary research in social psychology seems to be more abstract, with an emphasis on placing one’s work in a theoretical context and uncovering the mechanisms or processes underlying phenomena. In addition, though many of the traditional classic studies appeared in the pages of the field’s flagship journal, all of the articles were single-study articles, in which an interesting question was proposed and supported by a demonstration study to illustrate the social psychological phenomenon of interest. An increasing trend in our contemporary discipline is to demand that an article not only demonstrate a phenomenon but also replicate it and provide evidence concerning the processes or mechanisms underlying the phenomenon.¹

Despite these differences, in our estimation studies that are likely to rise to the status of modern classics in the discipline will share critical features with the traditional classic studies. Specifically, modern classics will, like their traditional classic counterparts, address fundamental and important questions about human behavior and be motivated by a desire to understand significant social phenomena. The phenomena will find the individual in some type of predicament, the resolution of which is consequential for the self or others. We expect that the methods will likely make it easy for the reader to “try on” the manipulations and to imagine the nature of the unfolding experience for participants. Finally, as was true of the traditional classics, modern classic studies are also likely to elicit high levels of cu-

¹One can easily debate the appropriateness or advisability of these publication practices. That is not our goal here. Rather, we are simply noting what appear to be different expectations in the publication traditions historically compared with contemporarily. One of the authors, with many years of editorial experience with our flagship journal, can testify, at a minimum, to the contemporary publication traditions.

riosity about how to best explain the phenomenon. As such, we expect that the modern classics will be highly generative within social psychology and receive widespread attention and interest among scholars in allied subdisciplines and among the lay public as well. Although we generated an initial pool of studies that may achieve classic status within the discipline, we limited our final list to two, per the editors' request.

Modern Classic Studies

On the basis of these criteria, we nominate Wegner and colleagues' (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987) studies on thought suppression and Steele and Aronson's (1995) studies on stereotype threat as candidates for modern classic status. When we first read these studies, we found them incredibly exciting and captivating. In fact, after reading them, we could not stop thinking about the importance of the phenomena explored. It was easy to think about how these phenomena would unfold in the real world, and it was easy to understand the predicament for those who might fall prey to stereotype threat or the ironic effects of thought suppression. In addition, these studies "got the field talking" and were quickly integrated into readings and lectures for graduate and undergraduate courses. These researchers had put their finger on the pulse of phenomena whose personal and interpersonal implications were provocative and important. As we read the studies, we generated new study ideas and easily envisioned how these lines of work would be highly generative, capturing the interest and imagination of many other researchers.

These sets of researchers engaged the reader by describing an interesting and compelling phenomenon. Wegner and colleagues (1987), for example, noted the pervasive difficulty people have expunging unwanted thoughts from their minds and further noted that efforts to eliminate unwanted thoughts often backfire, such that these unwanted thoughts intrusively populate consciousness. Anecdotally, everyone can resonate to this type of experience—trying not to think about delectable sweets while dieting or trying not to think about a lost love only to have those thoughts front and center in one's mind despite trying not to think about them. Thought suppression, Wegner et al. noted, is not easy. The consequence of these failed efforts is the frustration of being haunted by the unwanted thoughts. Steele and Aronson (1995) started with the observation that Black Americans often underperform in academic settings (e.g., with respect to grade point average and retention rates) relative to their White American counterparts even when preparation and performance on standardized tests are controlled for. The implication is that a group of Americans is not realizing its academic potential. Steele and Aronson reasoned that

this underachievement on the part of Black Americans may result, in part, from *stereotype threat*, which they defined as "the threat of confirming or being judged by a negative societal stereotype—a suspicion—about their group's intellectual ability and competence" (p. 797). In a society that is concerned with fairness and creating equal opportunity for all, such observations are disturbing and represent a significant social problem. In short, the significance of thought suppression and stereotype threat is clear, compelling, and easily grasped by social scientists and laypeople alike.

The first step in each program of research was to conduct a demonstration study to show that the observations from the real world could be shown empirically. To that end, the researchers developed an empirical analogue to capture the phenomenon as it might naturally unfold. In both the thought suppression and the stereotype threat research, the methods used, although possibly lacking the high drama of traditional classic studies, simply, but elegantly, captured the individual's predicament. To explore the consequences of efforts to banish unwanted thoughts from consciousness, Wegner et al. (1987) defined thoughts of a "white bear" as unwanted and simply instructed their participants not to think of a white bear. In a control condition participants were not asked to suppress thoughts of a white bear. Wegner et al. subsequently measured the extent to which the unwanted thought intruded on the consciousness of their research participants. Consistent with anecdotal observations, efforts to suppress thoughts of a white bear resulted in those thoughts rebounding, such that they were more highly accessible—populating consciousness—than for those who were not instructed to suppress thoughts of a white bear.

To explore stereotype threat effects, Steele and Aronson (1995) first compared the performance of White participants on an academic test under conditions in which stereotype threat would presumably be high or low for Black students. In the high-stereotype-threat condition, participants were told that the test was diagnostic of intellectual abilities; in the low-stereotype-threat condition, participants were told that the test was not diagnostic of intellectual abilities. Steele and Aronson then measured participants' test performance (i.e., Verbal items from the Graduate Record Examination). Performance on the test was equal for Black and White participants when they were told the test was nondiagnostic of intellectual ability. However, when they were told the test was diagnostic of intellectual ability, Black participants performed worse than their White counterparts and worse than Black participants told the test was nondiagnostic of intellectual ability. Apparently, knowledge that the test was diagnostic of intellectual ability was sufficient to create stereotype threat—a concern that poor performance would con-

firm the stereotype that Blacks are intellectually inferior to Whites in the eyes of the others (and perhaps in their own eyes). And this concern brought about poor performance.

Like their traditional classic counterparts, the thought suppression and stereotype threat phenomena have a counterintuitive component. Why should our efforts to banish unwanted thoughts from consciousness fail? Why would well-prepared, able Black students perform comparatively poorly in academic settings? Like the traditional classics, these studies are at once compelling and puzzling. They similarly beg for explanation. Indeed, it is difficult to think about these phenomena and the demonstration studies without curiosity and interest in understanding the nature of the effects and why they occur. It is worth noting that in both articles selected for modern classic status, the studies went beyond demonstrating the effect of interest, perhaps reflecting the change in publication traditions over the years. That is, these articles report at least one additional study that replicates the effect and begins to explore the process mechanisms underlying the phenomenon.

In the relatively brief time since their publication, these articles have been highly generative within social psychology, inspiring new programs of research to advance our understanding of the processes underlying thought suppression and stereotype threat. Indeed, both phenomena have become hotbeds for research activity, and like their traditional counterparts, laid out an agenda for the next generation of researchers.

For example, researchers have examined suppression-rebound effects with regard to a wide range of thoughts. Wegner et al. (1987) began their research focusing on the suppression of a personally unimportant, nonthreatening thought—white bears. Subsequent work has examined the consequences of suppressing personally intrusive, emotionally laden thoughts (e.g., thoughts about romantic partners and bad habits and anxiety-related thoughts). In one exciting line of inquiry, researchers have examined the counterintentional effects of trying not to stereotype others. As with white bears, although successful in the short run, suppression efforts ultimately end in failure with the unwanted thought ironically becoming highly accessible. Although thought suppression is largely an intrapersonal process, this line of inquiry demonstrates that suppressing one's thoughts is ultimately a social phenomenon affecting interpersonal processes (e.g., as when stereotype rebound effects influence judgments of and behaviors toward members of stereotyped groups). Other work has examined the processes underlying suppression efforts and why, for example, the search for distractor thoughts can easily go awry and how emotion can further complicate suppression efforts.

Recent work on stereotype threat has shown that the predicament of stereotype threat can undermine the

performance of any group for which negative stereotypes exist (e.g., women in mathematics, older individuals in memory tasks, those of lower social class in academics, White males in athletics). In addition, a great deal of work has addressed the processes underlying stereotype threat that lead to underperformance in the relevant domain. Steele and Aronson (1995), for example, noted a series of possible process mechanisms, including, for example, anxiety, evaluation apprehension, stereotype accessibility, motivation, and disidentification with academics, which may independently, or in concert, adversely affect performance. To date, the evidence concerning the process issues is mixed but provides fertile ground for subsequent research to uncover the specific processes responsible for the underperformance of stigmatized individuals in high-stereotype-threat settings.

While thought suppression and stereotype threat research have certainly been influential in generating new lines of inquiry within social psychology, their influence has also been felt beyond the bounds of social psychology. Like their traditional classic counterparts, stereotype threat and thought suppression studies captured the attention and interest of scholars in allied disciplines. For example, Steele and Aronson's (1995) work is widely cited in the educational literature, sociology, counseling, law, clinical settings, and applied areas addressing how to effectively school Black Americans. Wegner and colleagues' (1987) work is cited in a broad range of clinical settings including, for example, smoking cessation, weight loss, the process of coping with traumatic events, and addiction. Indeed, these studies have been widely read by others outside social psychology and have influenced the research and theorizing of a great many researchers across various disciplines, serving as a catalyst for new lines of inquiry.

In support of their status as modern classics, thought suppression and stereotype threat studies are extensively reviewed in social psychology texts and are discussed in many introductory psychology textbooks as well. Already the scientific community has found these studies to be compelling enough to warrant future research—a testimony to the classic status of these studies. As with their traditional classic counterparts, we suspect that some 30 to 40 years from now we will still be teaching our students about these studies and students will continue to find them fascinating.

The Lost Decade and a Few Other Observations

Although we complied with the editors' ground rules in identifying modern classics, we could not help but notice that in following these rules, a decade, one during which many important studies were published,

was functionally lost. That is, the articles typically identified as classic studies in social psychology were published in the 1950s and 1960s, and the modern classics were to be selected in the 20-year period from 1980 to 2000. We think it is worth mentioning a few of the important studies published in the lost decade. More studies come to mind than we have space to list, but here is a sampling of studies. Snyder, Tanke, and Berschied's (1977) study on the self-fulfilling nature of the attractiveness stereotype along with Word, Zanna, and Cooper's (1974) study on the self-fulfilling nature of race stereotypes illustrated in a compelling fashion the significant interplay between intrapersonal and interpersonal processes in social psychology. Hazel Markus's (1977) study on self "me-not me" judgments inspired a generation of researchers to examine carefully the cognitive underpinnings of the self-concept. Higgins, Rholes, and Jones's (1977) study on how contextual priming can affect the interpretation of ambiguous social information reintroduced the next generation of researchers to the classic insights of Bruner and colleagues' new look in perception. In addition, the Higgins et al. study set up a paradigm, now very familiar and oft used, to study the effects of priming on social thought and behavior. Indeed, Higgins and colleagues' now famous, two-experiment ploy, whereby the priming of a construct was done in an initial study and the effect of priming was examined in a second, allegedly unrelated study, has become a staple of many modern researchers.

We also believe that it is worth noting that if the challenge had been issued a bit differently, we might have nominated a different set of articles as classics within the field. For example, although we were explicitly asked to shy away from theoretical or review articles, there are some such articles that have been tremendously influential in shaping the direction of theory and research within our discipline—so much so that they may be considered classic articles within the field. Indeed, in our view, each of these articles issued a challenge to the field to rethink core assumptions and to chart new directions for theory and research. And, it appears that in each instance social psychologists accepted the challenge and, in so doing, have explored new avenues of research that have enriched the discipline and fostered connections with allied disciplines.

For example, from the lost decade, Nisbett and Wilson (1977) persuasively demonstrated that although people can supply verbal explanations for their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, these verbalizations may show little agreement with the actual mental processes producing the outcomes. In short, they noted that the workings of one's own mind are often hidden from oneself and our verbal reports often "tell more than we can know." This article cautioned against complacency in the exclusive use of verbal reports for studying important psychological phenomena and

highlighted the fact that if important components of mental processes are not available to introspective awareness, then new methods would be needed to explore these processes. By synthesizing work in social psychology with theory and methods from cognitive psychology, this article encouraged the development of new research tools to provide an understanding of the impact of implicit cognition in a variety of domains in which people are either unable or unwilling to report its effects (e.g., self, stereotyping and prejudice, impression formation). This enterprise has been tremendously successful as the ever-burgeoning interest in different forms of implicit social cognition provides testimony (see Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, for a more contemporary perspective on these issues).

Markus and Kitayama's (1991) article on the role of culture in the construal of the self brought into focus the fact that basic aspects of cognition, emotion, and motivation are, in fact, strongly affected by the values emphasized within one's culture. Their review highlighted the fact that both the inner life and the social life of individuals may be substantially different depending on the cultural emphasis of the self as either independent or interdependent. For example, this article suggested that the "fundamental attribution error" may emerge only in cultures emphasizing independence of the self. More generally, Markus and Kitayama challenged social psychologists not to be satisfied with the imperialistic Western view that processes and biases discovered in American social psychology are culture free or universal. Their article functioned as a clarion call against insularity and encouraged the systematic investigation of the role of culture as an important component of the social situation and, ultimately, people's self-conceptions. Their challenge enriched the social psychological conception of the self, as it encouraged research that will lead to a more complete analysis of the self in social context.

A third theoretical article that strikes us as highly influential is Crocker and Major's (1989) analysis of the potentially self-protective qualities of social stigmas. In this article, Crocker and Major noted that the self-esteem of stigmatized groups does not appear to suffer, as many would expect to be the case, under the burden of stigmatization. In reviewing this evidence and in offering speculations concerning various processes that may protect the self-esteem of the stigmatized, Crocker and Major encouraged those interested in intergroup processes to think carefully about the experience of stigma and how assumptions underlying this research were likely in need of revision. In the publication of this article, Crocker and Major brought into focus the one-sided nature of the field's then-dominant analysis of the problem of intergroup prejudice—prejudice as a majority group problem to be solved by changing majority group members' attitudes. Crocker and Major's review made it clear that those who are stigmatized are not merely the

passive recipients of bias at the hands of majority group members but are active agents in coping with the existence of bias. Although there were always some who studied the intergroup processes from the vantage point of people who are stigmatized, we believe that the publication of this article legitimized the emphasis on the study of those who are stigmatized. Thus, this article was highly generative, encouraging a great many young scholars to explore the previously understudied predicament of people who are stigmatized.

Before closing, we feel it is important to make one additional observation. Few issues have captured social psychologists' interest and imagination in recent years as has the issue of the nature and consequence of automatic social cognition, broadly conceived. That is, there has been tremendous interest in exploring the role of automatic or unconscious processes (often as opposed to controlled and conscious processes) in a great many social psychological phenomena (e.g., aggression, attitudes and persuasion, attribution, conformity, culture, emotion, decision making, goal setting and pursuit, mood, person perception, prisoner's dilemma, self, social comparison, stereotypes, and prejudice). It seems to us that in doing this exercise it would be an oversight not to comment on the sheer amount of interest and research activity devoted to the study of automatic social cognition.² Although such issues may have had a long history in the field (e.g., early seeds can be found in the writings of William James (1890), among others), empirically they had proved to be largely intractable. In our contemporary discipline, no scholars have been more influential in paving the way to study these issues empirically than John Bargh and Russell Fazio, except perhaps Bob Zajonc. In tailoring the empirical methods of cognitive psychology to the study of important social psychological phenomena, they inspired entire research programs that might not have developed but for their pioneering efforts.³ Although coming initially from different research traditions, each recognized the importance of automatically

² In making this observation the first author of this article acknowledges a couple of sources of bias that may make the study of automatic social cognition more salient to her than perhaps it is to others. These include her own research into the automatic components of stereotyping and prejudice and her role as associate editor and then editor of the *Attitudes and Social Cognition* section of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* over the last 7 years, during which a large proportion of submissions have addressed these issues. Nevertheless, we believe that the interest in automatic social cognition is rather pervasive within the discipline and likely to be well recognized by those without this particular unique combination of experiences.

³ For those relatively new to the discipline who see numerous examples of the study of automatic social cognition both in our journals and in our professional meetings, it is worth noting that this is a relatively new development. That is, in the early to mid-1980s empirical investigations into the automatic or unconscious component of social cognition pretty much did not exist and, in large measure, were not possible.

activated information and their programs of research literally paved the way for others to address related issues. Their impact may not be traced to a single "classic" study, but their influence and impact on the contemporary discipline is marked and unmistakable.

Caveats

In some ways preparation of this article, although thought provoking and stimulating, was a source of some anxiety. There are a great many wonderful studies and articles that we did not nominate for inclusion as modern classics. By virtue of our following the ground rules, we were limited in the number of nominations we could offer. As such, our list of nominations is incomplete. Further, we recognize that our nominations (and oversights) are necessarily influenced by our own training and interests. We can only hope, in offering our observations, that both our nominations and, in particular, our oversights will stimulate some lively discussion and a great appreciation for the valuable research conducted within our discipline that we found to be so readily evident as we worked through this exercise.

Note

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