

Social Psychology: A Practical Manual

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Edited by Glynis M. Breakwell, Hugh Foot
and Robin Gilmour

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Preface

This is a collection of research exercises in social psychology. The purpose of these exercises is to give students practice in using a range of research methods and techniques to investigate a number of problems central to modern social psychology. They are, therefore, the stuff of which 'practical' classes are made. In fact, the text is addressed to the organizers of such classes and explains carefully how a class might be organized in order to do each exercise. Nevertheless, the book can usefully be read by students themselves because the description of each exercise also includes its theoretical background, the processes of data collection, and the ways in which results might be discussed.

This is a 'practical' manual in the broad sense: a reasonable sample of field studies are also included, so not all of the exercises are to be done in the laboratory. Nor are all of the exercises experimental or even quasi-experimental; several involve basic techniques of ethnographic research. Such an eclectic choice of exercises is necessary if the object is to reflect something of what is happening in social psychology now. Increasingly, social psychologists are seeking to integrate different methods of research and to use them in concert to examine social phenomena. Each method has its weaknesses and where one is weak another is strong: experimentation offers control but is confounded by artificiality; ethogenic

methods offer realism but no control. Used together sensibly, methods which are each individually flawed can generate a more satisfactory picture than any could alone; hence the need to teach a broad range of methods and hence the eclecticism in the selection of exercises.

The exercises can be ranged along a continuum from those primarily concerned with a method or technique to those essentially concerned with a problem or phenomenon that needs to be researched. In a way, the continuum reflects the needs of a research methods course: the course has to teach specific methods and techniques in all their abstract purity but it must also show how they relate to particular research problems. Of course, some research problems become almost totally identified with a particular method or technique; just as some techniques only ever seem to be used to explore one sort of problem. This book is divided into three parts which represent distinct points along the continuum between technique- and problem-orientation. The first part contains exercises which are designed to introduce the student to a series of specific techniques of research; the second contains exercises which might be said to exemplify how some techniques have a special affinity for certain problems; and the third and final part contains exercises whose emphasis lies upon exploring a particular problem area in social psychology.

Part I consists of five chapters, each of which describes a technique which is standard in social psychology. In chapter 1, Robert Slater describes an exercise which will introduce students to questionnaire design. This is followed by an exercise on how to conduct a selection interview by Mike Smith who describes: how to open the interview and how to end it; how to cover systematically the important issues; how to make the interviewee talk; and what must be considered when drawing conclusions from an interview. The exercise in chapter 3 by Bram Oppenheim is a classical description of attitude measurement, an activity so central to the research goals of innumerable social psychologists. Chapter 4 by Hugh Foot is based upon the use of a modified version of the Bales Interaction Process Analysis which gives students a

route to interactional analysis in the context of group discussion. Rom Harré, in chapter 5, portrays something of the epistemology and applications of ethogenic approaches.

The five chapters in Part II contain exercises which each illustrate how a particular method or technique can be especially suited to the study of a particular social psychological problem. In chapter 6, Peter Ball and Howard Giles demonstrate the matched guise technique, a method which has come to be associated with the study of the social psychology of language. In the following chapter, Tony Chapman and Frances Wade employ non-participant observation to examine the recreational use of the street by children; it is difficult to imagine what other technique would be effective in studying this phenomenon. Paul Robinson and Peter Trower, in chapter 8, take us into the realms of applied social psychology, using role-play exercises to show the importance of social skill in interpersonal relations. Mark Cook presents in chapter 9 an exercise specifically designed to show how results can be influenced by the techniques employed in a study of person perception. Chapter 10 concludes Part II with a study on negotiation processes by Geoffrey Stephenson and Maryon Tysoe; this exercise illustrates the commonly used technique of role-play in studies of bargaining.

Part III represents the 'problem' end of the continuum. These five chapters present exercises designed to introduce the student to specific problem areas in social psychology. Chapter 11 by Ray Bull is concerned with the problem of gathering eyewitness testimony and examines some of the factors which influence the accuracy of an eyewitness's recollections in a field setting. Mansur Lalljee describes a study whose object is to test certain central tenets of attribution theory. In chapter 13, Glynis Breakwell delineates an exercise which tests how group membership influences the expression of intergroup prejudices. The theme of 'group psychology' is continued in chapter 14 by Robin Gilmour who outlines a study of co-operation and competition in groups. The concern with groups continues in the final chapter by Peter Smith in which the emergence of group roles and

norms is explored.

The structure of each chapter is obviously dependent upon the peculiarities of the subject matter covered. As far as possible, authors have used the tried and tested format of:

- * theoretical introduction;
- * procedure of the exercise;
- * forms of analysis and dimensions of discussion.

With such a large range of topics there has clearly been some divergence from this straight and narrow path. However, each chapter begins with a section headed 'Specification notes' and this is designed to outline briefly the object of the exercise and the sorts of resources needed to do it. The specification notes are provided so that readers can pick the exercise most suited to their own ends and resources. Some of the exercises need to be done at particular times during the academic session if they are to work (e.g. Peter Smith's and part of Rom Harré's) and the specification notes give these sorts of details too. In fact, it is probably valuable to read through the specification notes on each of the exercises before choosing any one. This should preclude inappropriate timetabling of exercises.

It should be borne in mind when choosing exercises that they can be regarded as prescriptive and comprehensive patterns for a 'practical' class or they can be treated as suggestive. The exercises have a certain amount of built-in flexibility. In most cases, they start with a simple design for a study which can be used as a foundation for more complex designs. The basic studies can be used for students in the first years of their social psychology training either at A level or at undergraduate level. Where extra variables are woven into the design and more complex forms of analysis are applied to data, these same studies can be used for students with considerable experience of the discipline. This flexibility also means that exercises can be modified to suit the specific needs and experience of each student group. A tutor could equally decide to cannibalize exercises and play the vivisectionist: several of the exercises fit together neatly. For instance,

that on selection interviewing (chapter 2) goes with that on the effects of language on interpersonal evaluation (chapter 6) and with that on social skills (chapter 8). Similarly, chapter 13 on intergroup prejudice complements chapter 15 on group norms. Extensions and modifications of exercises are facilitated because each chapter contains suggestions on various types of analysis which might be used on the data generated, and includes a body of self-criticism on epistemological or methodological grounds.

The exercises can be seen as building blocks. Each stands alone and yet they can be cemented together. Together they become a representative part of the edifice of social psychology, reflecting its methods and its problems.

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