

Connecting social psychology to the experience of others through a nonfiction book analysis: New wine in an old bottle

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Abstract: This article evaluates a writing assignment in which students read a non-fiction book that they chose from a list provided by their instructor, identified examples of social psychological phenomena, and fully explained how those examples fit social psychology concepts. This novel twist on a traditional assignment yielded surprisingly robust benefits. Across four samples from two universities and two instructors, students indicated that the assignment furthered their learning beyond other aspects of the course by helping them apply social psychology to “real life” situations that were beyond their own particular experiences. The results suggested that allowing students to choose the book that they would read promoted enjoyment of the assignment. Informal discussion with students, including those who rarely read books for pleasure, indicated that many students took pride in reading a book of their own choosing that they actually enjoyed. Almost all students recommended the continued use of the assignment for future courses. Variations on the assignment that could be utilized by instructors in other psychology courses and other academic disciplines are discussed.

Keywords: active learning, application, book review, choice, psychology

The goal of most educational innovations and active learning approaches is to get students focused, involved, and actively engaged in the learning process (Leamson, 2000; Prince, 2004). When students are actively engaged and personally invested in the learning process, deep and meaningful learning occurs (Laird, Shoup, Kuh, & Schwarz, 2008). Examples of active learning approaches include small group discussions, experiential activities, and writing assignments. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that active learning promotes a variety of positive outcomes including improved student attitudes (Bleske-Rechek, 2002), increased motivation (Watson, Kessler, Kalla, Kam, & Ueki, 1996), greater engagement with the course material (Smith & Cardaciotto, 2011), enhancements in writing and thinking (Bonwell & Eison, 1991), improvements in retention of the course material (Cherney, 2008; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011), and higher scores on exams (Yoder & Hechevar, 2005). By providing students with opportunities to discover the relevance and applicability of the course material to everyday life (Bloom, 1956), active learning approaches help students learn the course material at a deeper, personal level (King, 1993; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). In addition, involving students in learning concepts through multiple types of exposure (lecture, reflection and application, discussion) can increase

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the ability to remember these concepts due to the complexity and variety of retrieval cues available (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Roediger, 2000; Roediger & Guynn, 1996).

I. The Importance of Course Application and Relevance.

Teachers in numerous academic disciplines want their students to demonstrate a firm understanding of the course material by applying it to new situations that were not faced in the textbook or lecture (Bloom, 1956). Consequently, in order to promote deep comprehension, active learning, and critical thinking, teachers create assignments that encourage students to recognize the many ways in which the course material is relevant to their lives and the world around them (Bloom, 1956; Graham, 2006; Kowalski & Lakey, 2004; Lakin & Wichman, 2005; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011; Weimer, 2002; Young & Fulwiler, 1986). In this article, we describe a written assignment in which students read a non-fiction book that they chose from a list provided by their instructor, identified examples of social psychological phenomena, and fully explained how those examples fit social psychology concepts. Before discussing our assignment in detail, a brief overview of the common writing assignments that help students apply principles from psychology is in order.

A. Application-oriented writing assignments in psychology.

One of the most common application-oriented writing assignments in psychology courses requires students to keep journals in which they reflect on the relevance and applicability of the course material to their personal experiences, the experiences of others, and/or their observations of real-world events (e.g., Connor-Greene, 2000; Graham, 2006; Hettich, 1990; Miller, 1997; Weber, 1984). For example, in her course on personality theory, Connor-Greene (2000) required students to keep a journal in which they applied the course material to characters from television shows, books, videos, songs, news events, politics, themselves, friends, or family. When writing about each example, students were instructed to identify the relevant theorist, to identify a specific concept from that theory, and to clearly and fully explain how the example illustrated the concept. To assess whether the journal assignments had a beneficial impact on student learning, test grades in two classes that were assigned to write weekly journals were compared to test grades in a class that was not assigned to write weekly journals. As predicted, test scores in the two classes that wrote journals were higher than the test scores of students in the control group.

Writing assignments that require students to apply the course material to events outside the classroom can also be utilized for final papers. For example, in a final paper assigned in their social psychology course, Lakin and Wichman (2005) instructed students to gather examples relevant to the course material from sources such as articles, comic strips, advertisements, advice columns, commercials, television shows, movie clips, or audio recordings. Compared to students in a control group, students who completed the target assignment reported that they found it easier to apply the course material to real-world events. The results of a follow-up survey indicated that this effect persisted nine months after the completion of the assignment.

Previous studies have explored how works of literature can be used to help students find examples of psychological principles in action (e.g., Boyatzis, 1992; Carlson, 1992; Cavanaugh, 1999; Lips, 1990; Osborn, 1990; Williams, 1986). For instance, Boyatzis (1992) had his students reflect on developmental psychology concepts through reading Angelou's (1969) book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Students reported that they found the book to be of high educational

value, and found that they were able to relate specific concepts from the course lecture to Angelou's narrative.

B. Description of the assignment.

In this article, we describe an assignment that takes good advantage of a traditional way of learning and show its benefit for a psychology class. Students read a non-fiction book that was not written by a social psychologist. In each of these books, social psychological principles and theories implicitly permeated the authors' explanations and descriptions of their own, as well as other people's life experiences. This approach is especially relevant because social psychology research draws on the human experience (such as helping behavior, stereotyping and prejudice, aggression, attraction), and frequently, social psychologists utilize real-world events as inspiration for theories of behavior. For example, the story of Kitty Genovese's murder prompted exploration of the situational factors that decrease the likelihood of helping behaviors in emergency situations (Darley & Latané, 1968).

The primary objective for this assignment was to facilitate students' self-discovery of knowledge (Mathie et al., 1993) by providing them with opportunities to apply some of the social psychological concepts and theories to actual real-world events beyond their own personal experience. In addition, the assignment gave students the opportunity to recognize the satisfactions that can come from selecting and reading a good nonfiction book. A final objective of this assignment was to give students practice at expressing themselves in writing. We asked our students a variety of questions about their impressions regarding this assignment. We hypothesized that students would find the assignment beneficial when it came to learning social psychology concepts, that they would find the assignment enjoyable, and that they would appreciate the flexibility they had to choose a book that interested them personally.

Initially, some students were less than enthusiastic about the idea of a book review assignment. We suspect that lukewarm experiences with previous book review assignments made some students resistant to the idea of a teacher "making" them read a book in addition to their textbook. In hopes of overcoming this potential initial resistance, we introduced a novel twist to traditional notions of a book review assignment. In contrast to previous research on book reviews in which the same book was assigned to the entire class (e.g., Carlson, 1992; Cavanaugh, 1999; Lips, 1990; Osborn, 1990; Williams, 1986), we adopted a learner-centered approach (Weimer, 2002) that gave students a substantial amount of freedom in choosing the book that they would review. Students chose from a list of ten books that covered a wide variety of topics of potential interest to students (see Table 1). We believed that providing students with this freedom and personal control over the direction of their learning experience would promote intrinsic motivation (Lepper & Hodell, 1989; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011) and enjoyment of the assignment (Cialdini, 2009) while still setting the limits necessary to grade the assignment effectively.⁶

Our assignment differed from most teaching-related scholarship in psychology on book reviews in another important way. Most previous research on this topic has focused primarily on the application of psychology to works of fiction (e.g., Carlson, 1992; Cavanaugh, 1999; Lips, 1990; Osborn, 1990; Williams, 1986; for an exception, see Boyatzis, 1992). Although reviews of works of fiction promote the application of course material, they do not always facilitate the

⁶ Three students in Sample 1 and two students in Sample 2 asked if they could read books not on the list. In each case, these books fit the criteria and were allowed.

application of course material to contemporary events in the real world. In contrast, by focusing exclusively on works of nonfiction, our assignment provided students with a unique opportunity to apply the course material to actual real-world events beyond their own experiences.

In addition to providing a general summary of the book, students were required to isolate at least three examples of how course-related social psychological concepts were illustrated in the book. Students were instructed to identify the concepts and to describe fully those aspects that were relevant to the examples. Grading of the assignment was based on: 1) the degree to which the examples fit the social psychological concepts, 2) the degree to which the student clearly and fully explained how these examples fit the social psychological concepts, 3) the general structure and organization of the student's points, 4) the general clarity of writing, and 5) the degree to which there was evidence that the student thought deeply about the book. The recommended length was three typed and double-spaced pages. The assignment was worth 20% of the overall course grade in Samples 1 and 2 and 15% in Samples 3 and 4.

Table 1. Relevant concepts and theories identified by students for each book on the list.

<i>Book Title</i>	Concepts and Theories Mentioned by Students
<i>Brother Ray: Ray Charles Own Story</i>	Stereotypes, Discrimination, Reciprocity Norm
<i>Among the Thugs</i>	Deindividuation, Prejudice, Discrimination, Normative Social Influence, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Social Learning Theory
<i>True Believers: The Tragic Inner Life of Sports Fans</i>	Basking in Reflected Glory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Justification of Effort, Stereotypes, Self-Serving Bias, Proximity and Liking, Deindividuation, Normative Social Influence
<i>Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer: A Journey into the Heart of Fan Mania</i>	Basking in Reflected Glory, Normative Social Influence, Schadenfreude, Investment and Comparison Level of Alternatives, Deindividuation, Stereotypes
<i>How to Close Every Sale</i>	Reciprocity, Overcoming Resistance to Persuasion, Nonverbal Behavior, Scarcity Principle, Commitment and Consistency Principle
<i>The Tipping Point</i>	Descriptive Norms, Peripheral Route to Persuasion, Social Loafing
<i>Under the Banner of Heaven</i>	Social identity, Informational Social Influence, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Obedience to Authority, Ingroup/Outgroup, Social Exchange Theory, Minority Influence
<i>Halfway Heaven: Diary of a Harvard Murder</i>	Self-presentation, Self-monitoring, Self-esteem, Normative Social Influence, Loneliness, Individualism and Collectivism, Social Comparison, Authority and Social Influence, Attachment, Helping, Close Relationships, Rejection
<i>Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America</i>	Stereotypes, Prejudice, Discrimination, Cognitive Dissonance Theory
<i>Ghost Soldiers: The Epic Account of World War II's Greatest Rescue Mission</i>	Obedience to Authority, Social Identity, Prejudice, Social Comparison

II. Method.

A. Participants.

Participating students were in one of four sections ($n = 46$, $n = 26$, $n = 33$, and $n = 26$, respectively) of introduction to social psychology courses taught at two medium-sized state universities. One author taught two sections, and a second author taught the other two sections. The majority of students who take this level of coursework are either psychology majors or minors, and have already taken introductory psychology as a prerequisite. Therefore, they tend to be at the sophomore level of college or higher.

B. Procedure.

During the final week of the academic term and on the day the assignment was turned in, the course instructor left the classroom and a graduate student unconnected to the course asked students if they would be willing to participate in a study involving one of their assignments for the course. If so, they were given a consent form which described the nature of the study and which emphasized both the anonymity of participating and the separation of the study from any aspect of their course grade. Then, students completed an anonymous questionnaire consisting of both Likert items (also using a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* = 1 to *very much* = 5) and open-ended questions assessing their views on the value of the assignment (see Likert items in Table 2).⁷ To further assess the value of the assignment, four questions that provided a standard of comparison were added in Sample 4. Specifically, participants in Sample 4 completed Likert scale items about the educational usefulness of the assignment relative to other final papers that they had completed (using a 10-point scale in which the endpoints and neutral point were labeled; 1 = *much less useful*, 5 = *about the same*, 10 = *much more useful*).

III. Results.

A. Students' Assessment of Assignment.

To examine the extent to which the assignment was linked to students' learning experience, for each sample separately, we conducted single sample *t*-tests in which the mean for each item was compared to the point at or near the middle of the scale on each of the items assessing students' views on the value of the assignment. For the 5-point scale, the mean for each item was compared to the score of 3, which was the midpoint on the scale. Likewise, for the 10-point scale, items were compared to the score of 5, which was labeled as the neutral value. We reasoned that a significant difference by this standard would indicate that the assignment was a positive learning experience for the student (Simmons & Prentice, 2006). As shown in Table 2, only one item in Sample 2 and Sample 4 failed to meet the standard. In further evidence that the assignment was linked to students' learning experience, students in Sample 4 evaluated the assignment more favorably than most final papers that they had previously completed (See Table 3). Furthermore, 88% of the students in Sample 1, 85% of the students in Sample 2, 94% of the

⁷ Prior to completing the dependent measures, students in Sample 3 made ungraded informal presentations in which they described the examples of social psychological principles and theories that they found in the book that they chose.

students in Sample 3, and 84% of the students in Sample 4 recommended that the teacher continue to use the book review assignment in future social psychology courses.

In response to an open-ended question about how the assignment furthered their learning experience beyond other aspects of the course, numerous students commented that the assignment helped them apply social psychological principles to events in the real world. Two examples of such comments were: “While I was reading the book, I constantly was applying things I learned in class to the book,” and “The assignment helped me see other examples of social psychology besides ones from my own life.” Taken together, the results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses suggest that, across samples, students found the assignment to be a valuable learning experience. Specifically, students indicated that this assignment was effective in helping them apply the course material to “real life” events beyond their own particular experiences.

Table 2. Students' Assessment of Assignment.

Question	Sample 1 (<i>n</i> = 46)	Sample 2 (<i>n</i> = 26)	Sample 3 (<i>n</i> = 33)	Sample 4 (<i>n</i> = 25)
To what extent did the book review help you find ways to apply some of the social psychological concepts and/or theories that you learned about in this course?	3.79** (1.04)	3.96** (1.08)	4.33** (.65)	3.64** (.82)
How much did the book review assignment help you to closely examine the relevance of the course material to events beyond your own particular experience?	3.36* (1.13)	3.77** (.99)	4.15** (.76)	3.44* (.88)
How much did your having a choice in what book to read add value to the assignment for you?	4.33** (1.12)	3.96** (1.0)	4.64** (.55)	4.23** (.91)
How much did this assignment encourage you to think critically about the course material?	3.49** (1.11)	3.88** (.91)	4.03** (.77)	3.69** (.62)
To what extent did your book review assignment make a significant contribution to your learning in this course?	3.19** (1.09)	3.19 (.98)	3.79** (.60)	3.21 (.96)

Note. In Samples 1-3, judgments were made on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Labels were not provided for values 2, 3, and 4 on the scales. In Sample 4, all values on the 5-point scales were labeled (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *slight extent*, 3 = *moderate extent*, 4 = *great extent*, 5 = *very great extent*). Standard deviations are in parentheses. **p* < .05 ***p* < .01 .

Table 3. Students' Relative Assessment of Assignment in Sample 4.

Question	Mean
In comparison to other writing assignments of similar length that required you to read an assigned journal article, did you find the book review assignment to be enjoyable?	6.73** (1.73)
In comparison to most final papers that you have completed, how useful did you find the book review assignment to be in helping you to closely examine the relevance of the course material to events beyond your own particular experience?	6.39** (1.83)
In comparison to most final papers that you have completed, how useful did you find the book review assignment in helping you to find ways to apply the concepts that you learned about in the course?	6.85** (1.89)
In comparison to other writing assignments of similar length that required you to read an assigned journal article, how useful did you find the assignment to be in helping you to think critically about the course material?	6.73** (1.76)

Note. Judgments were made on 10-point scales (1 = *much less*, 5 = *about the same*, 10 = *much more*). Standard deviations are in parentheses. $n = 25$. ** $p < .01$.

B. The Importance of Choice.

As noted earlier, we expected that students would find the assignment to be more enjoyable if they were allowed to choose the book they read. For each sample separately, single sample t -tests using the item asking about the value of choice were consistent with this expectation (See Table 2). Sample 4 yielded additional supportive evidence when a strong positive correlation was found between the value of choice and the degree to which students enjoyed the book review assignment relative to other final papers they had completed, $r = .70$, $p < .001$. Multiple possible interpretations of this correlation merit additional discussion. On the one hand, students' greater sense of autonomy associated with choosing the book that they would read might have led to greater enjoyment of the assignment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). On the other hand, the combination of making the commitment to read their book choice and the subsequent time-consuming reading behaviors that were consistent with their commitment may have led to increased perceptions of the value of the assignment (Cialdini, 2009). Stated another way, perhaps it was difficult for students to report disliking an assignment involving a book that they personally chose and spent time reading. Regardless of which interpretation the reader favors, the implication for teachers is still the same. When teachers provide students with multiple options for fulfilling a course requirement, students are more likely to enjoy (or convince themselves that they enjoyed) the assignment.

When students were asked to share their opinions regarding the specific aspects of the exercise that they liked, 25% of the students in Sample 2 and 50% in Sample 3 spontaneously mentioned that they liked being able to choose the book.⁸ Based on our discussions with students and the tenor of the responses to this open-ended question, it appears that giving students a voice in charting the direction of their learning experience added value to the assignment not only for students who already enjoy reading (e.g., "I liked that we got to choose what book we read and the choices given were a wide variety."), but also for students who typically do not enjoy reading (e.g., "I enjoyed it only because I found a book on the list that highly related to me. Had I not, I

⁸ Open-ended questions were not included in the survey for Sample 1 and Sample 4.

would have hated this assignment. Mainly because book reviews take so long (you have to read the book) and my time is very valuable.")

IV. Discussion.

We designed an assignment that highlighted the relevance of social psychology to events beyond students' own experiences by exploiting a traditional learning tool of reading a book. Students chose a book from a list provided by the instructor that focused on phenomena of a social psychological nature. Their task was to identify three examples of social psychological concepts in the book and to clearly and fully explain how these examples fit the concepts.

Overall, students' attitudes toward the assignment were clearly favorable. Across the four samples from two universities and two instructors, students indicated that this assignment was effective in helping them apply the course material to "real life" situations and to see the relevance of the course material to events beyond their own particular experiences. Almost all students recommended the continued use of the assignment, a noteworthy finding given that many students, in all the authors' experiences, tend to grumble about additional reading assignments. Moreover, the results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses suggested that allowing students to choose the book that they would read promoted enjoyment of the assignment.

One limitation of our research was that we did not have a control condition in which we could compare students' experiences with other students who did not have the assignment. However, given the consistency of responses across the four samples and the preponderance of students who endorsed the assignment, there appears to be solid evidence for its value.

Variations of this assignment may be useful not only for social psychology instructors, but also for instructors of other psychology courses. For example, instructors teaching other seminars such as personality, developmental psychology, or abnormal psychology could easily create a list of biographies or autobiographies and ask the students to identify different personality traits, developmental themes, or clinical symptoms (e.g., Mueller, 1985). Using non-fiction books to provide students with a real-world application of concepts can expand beyond the realm of psychology as well; a powerful personal narrative provides a primary source that could serve to enhance a moment in history, add perspective on sociological and political issues, promote awareness of the struggles faced by people from other cultures and backgrounds, address tough ethical issues, or enhance context for a scientific or medical breakthrough.

In another variation on this assignment, some instructors might choose to incorporate collaborative learning into this exercise by encouraging small groups to meet during the academic term to discuss their reactions to the book with one another. Additionally, we encourage instructors to have students give informal individual or group presentations so that they can tell their classmates about the ways in which social psychological concepts and theories were relevant to the book that they chose. In Sample 3 and Sample 4, the lively discussions that ensued enabled the class to review the material covered throughout the course. Given that some students become quite anxious about public speaking, in future semesters, the first author plans to conduct a "speed dating" activity in which students quickly discuss the book that they read with one classmate at a time.

After using the same list of book choices for several years in our classes, we wish to offer a suggestion that we hope will maximize the excitement that this assignment generates not only for students, but also for instructors. The first author is revitalizing the assignment by adding a

book that he is currently reading, *Ghost in the Wires: My Adventures as the World's Most Wanted Hacker* (Mitnick, 2011) to the list of book choices. Given that one of the goals for this assignment is to help students discover the joys of reading a book of their own choosing during their leisure time, it only makes sense for the instructor to practice what he or she preaches. Hopefully, when the teacher enthusiastically does the same academic work that the students are doing, a cooperative atmosphere will arise in which students and their instructor become partners in the learning process.

In closing, we would like to highlight some of the most important benefits of this assignment. First, as facilitators of student learning and thinking, we were delighted to witness students taking pride in reading a book of their own choosing that they actually enjoyed. Indeed, some of our fondest memories involved glowing endorsements of this assignment from students who readily admitted that they rarely read books for pleasure. For example, in response to an open-ended question about the assignment, one student wrote, "I'm glad I read the book. I can honestly say I haven't read a book since high school." In an informal individual presentation, another student who readily acknowledged that she rarely spends her leisure time reading books confessed that she enjoyed the book *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America* so much that she later convinced her mother to read it. Second, by applying the course material to the experiences of the characters in the book that they chose, students were able to see the value of what they had been studying. For example, in response to an open-ended question about how the assignment furthered student learning beyond other aspects of the course, one student wrote, "The assignment showed me that there are people in everyday life that use the principles of social psychology." Third, based on informal discussions with many of our former students, we suspect that this assignment allows more of the course material to "stick" (e.g. Roediger, 2000). In the months following the course, some students might actually remember the social psychological aspects of the book that they chose more than certain parts of the textbook.

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* Indicates a book that students had the option of choosing to read and analyze for the assignment.