

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy can be summarized in three statements: examining auxiliary assumptions is critical, theory is only useful if applied, and context matters. Students in their early years have yet to refine a critical approach to determining truth and, thus often accept assumptions as sacred. Probing students to question the underlying assumptions of their own perspectives develops their critical thinking and allows them the opportunity to identify faulty reasoning. Many times arguments can be found inconsistent or indefensible once assumptions are questioned and one or more of the underlying assumptions are found to be invalid or untested. I promote the questioning of these assumptions. The theories we use to frame our understanding may be the best we have currently, but as underlying assumptions are determined to be invalid, new approaches rise to guide us. It is our critical discussion of conflict between theory and data that drives advances in knowledge. Part of identifying relevant replacements to our theories is identifying what is wrong with current frameworks through evaluating their assumptions.

My second point, that theory is only useful if it is applied, follows from the first. When we identify faulty assumptions, we begin to tweak our thinking about phenomena. This leads to new ways of interpreting human behavior. Historically, social psychology has been dedicated to action and programs of research often arise as a response to societal problems. The history of social psychology is filled with activism that has helped lead to the betterment of our societies, such as research that influenced the 1954 supreme court decision that illegalized segregation in the United States. Research should accomplish something more than providing entertainment to curious parties. Students must learn theory but they also must learn how to apply this theory to interpret current events, to design practical solutions to problems, and to understand the current limitations of our frameworks when applied to real world data. If a student or a researcher cannot explain the value or significance of a theory, a finding, or an area of research, it may have little real world value. Through scenario-based exam questions and short written assignments, I urge my students to use seemingly unrelated theories to understand modern problems in an effort to conceptualize solutions. For example, in my *Introduction to Social Psychology* course, students choose a social problem of interest and a theory discussed in class, and then write a brief report explaining how their chosen theory could be used to advance our understanding of their chosen problem. In one essay, a student applied the concept of prisoner's dilemma to understand the actions of individuals in Alberta following the 2013 flood that caused substantial property damage. Alberta landowners acting in their own self-interest could be seen to harm the outcomes of everyone when the best communal outcome would have been to collaborate on production of reservoirs to reduce the possibility of flooding in the future.

Third, context matters. This applies in a number of ways. The field of social psychology is undergoing rapid change due to failures to replicate "pivotal" work in the field, but sometimes even when findings do replicate within the traditional laboratory experiment, no effort is made to understand whether that applies outside the lab. Because psychologists have labeled the laboratory experiment the "gold standard", external validity is not often the focus of researchers. In one case, implicit bias research has demonstrated the *weapons effect* in numerous studies (Correll et al. 2002; Correll et al. 2007), only for later research to suggest that these findings on student samples do not extend to police officers (Correll et al. 2014) and do not extend to

research which uses realistic shooting simulators (James et al., 2014; James et al. 2016). In order to make sense of experimental laboratory research, students must learn to critically evaluate the context of research before applying research findings in the real world. There is often a disconnect between laboratory studies on students with simple paradigms and the real interest group and real situation. Understanding the limits of our work is essential.

Beyond these three critical points, I am adamant that introductory courses are to be more than exercises in knowledge transfer. The purpose of an introductory course is threefold: 1) to introduce students to the major content of a field, 2) to begin training students in how to operate within a field, and 3) to develop students' critical thinking skills that can be applied inside or outside the field. The first purpose is straightforward and the third has been discussed in detail above. The second is the area in which, I feel, students are not instructed early enough in their academic training. Students must begin learning how to operate within a field as early as possible. In practice, this means learning how to read and interpret the literature and becoming familiar with how the research is done.

I use three techniques to accomplish initially introducing students to reading and interpreting literature. First, I teach through data. When I describe research findings, I present tables, graphs, and effect sizes. This encourages students to learn how to interpret the data rather than solely what the stated outcomes of a study were. Second, I invite students to participate in class studies as learning experiences and I present the data as part of the corresponding lecture. For example, when giving lectures on personality theory, I invite students to participate in a brief survey that includes a measure of the Big-5, sex, and political orientation. During the lecture, when I discuss sex differences in personality, I present the class data as a replication of larger scale studies discussed in class (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2008). When we discuss personality traits as potential correlates of political orientation, I present the class data as a replication of Chirumbolo and Leone (2010). Simple replications like this allow students to experience basic research, interpret new data, and examine why results may or may not replicate previous findings. Third, I have recently begun teaching without a textbook. Assigning recent reviews and recent empirical papers introduces students to what social psychologists actually spend their time reading and doing. This provides an overview of the current state of the field, which includes rapidly changing scientific norms regarding peer review, data sharing, and norms of data analysis.

I believe that students must develop a critical eye toward the assumptions behind social psychological theories, a respect for the application of these theories to understanding real-world behavior, a healthy restraint when attempting to apply research findings to understand the world around them, and must learn how to operate within the field of inquiry.