

Taking Another Look at the Roots of Social Psychology

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Psychology textbooks have made the same historical mistake over and over. Now the inaccuracy is pointed out in a new article published in [*Perspectives on Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

For generations, social psychology students have read that Norman Triplett did the first social psychology experiment in 1889, when he found that children reeled in a fishing line faster when they were in the presence of another child than when they were alone.

But almost everything about that sentence is wrong. The new paper's author, Wolfgang Stroebe of Utrecht University in the Netherlands, had recently published a handbook on the history of social psychology (with Aria W. Kruglanski) when he came across a 2005 reanalysis of Triplett's data and dug farther.

It turned out that the children in the study were turning a reel, but not reeling in a fishing line, and that Triplett was studying whether children performed better with competition. For his study, he eyeballed the data—an acceptable scientific practice in the 19th century—and decided that some children performed better when competing, some performed worse, and others were not affected. The 2005 analysis found that these results were not statistically significant by modern standards.

So the modern textbooks have the details of the study wrong. But they're also wrong that Triplett was the first psychologist to look at how people are affected by each other.

In the 1880s, Max Ringelmann studied whether workers pulled harder when they were together than when they worked alone. In 1894, Binet and Henri published a study of social influence among children and in 1887, Charles Féré authored a book that described experiments on how the presence of others could increase individual performance. But the field didn't find its modern identity until 1924, says Stroebe, when Floyd Allport published a textbook defining social psychology as the experimental study of social behavior.

"I think the more interesting fact is that in the 1890s so many authors tried to answer questions relevant to social psychology with experimental methods," Stroebe says. "This is much more important than to figure out who was really the first author."

It's time to fix the textbooks, Stroebe says. "I especially tried to get the article into a major journal in the hope that authors will take more notice of it than of articles published in historical journals." He thinks his paper is important even though it isn't at the cutting edge of research. "I was trained many decades ago in a period where one would have considered correcting the history of the origin of an important subfield of psychology to be important," Stroebe writes in the conclusion of his article. "We even had a word for it. We called it scholarship."