

Educating Consumers of Psychological Science

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This time of year brings several things to mind. I suspect I am not the only one shocked that the holiday season seems to be upon us once again, nor the only one wondering what happened to daylight late in the afternoon? For me, this is also the time of year I come to the end of my Introduction to Psychology class. As the end approaches I start to think, what will my students take away when the lectures and exams are over? To answer that question you would have to ask them, but I know what I hope they take away. I hope that going forward they are educated consumers of the science of psychology.

Some small percentage of my students will go on to major in psychology, and maybe even become psychological scientists. But most won't. I have future doctors and economists and actors and writers in my class. What all of them have in common is that the topic of psychological science is central to their lives and will play a role in their chosen careers. In fact, it is central to everyone's life. Psychology is about *us*, after all. The topic of how people work is what we often gossip about with our friends, worry about with our kids, and argue or laugh about with our partners. And at times, having a good understanding of psychological science is critical. When someone we love is suffering because of his or her thoughts or actions, how do we know the best way to help? How can we stop unintentionally discriminating against others because of their race, gender, or ethnicity? How do we make the best possible life-changing, legal decisions knowing that we are imperfect in our judgments of others? How can we avoid unnecessary illness due to lack of treatment compliance? Chances are that for every one of my students there will come a time in their life when knowing the difference between our everyday intuitions about how people work — and what psychological data shows — will matter.

Of course, the fact that everyone has intuitions or theories about how people work is one of the reasons

why psychological science is not quite like biology, chemistry, or physics. I am sure I am not the only psychological scientist who has been told that their research finding does not “make sense” by a layperson friend. My marine biologist mother never had a non-scientist friend tell her that her data about pollutants in estuaries did not “make sense.” But my research on memory or biases in decision-making? Everyone has an opinion. Admittedly, even I find it hard to believe that my powerful, personal memories for the details of what happened on 9/11 are only about half right. But that is what the data show. And sometimes our data show what seemed obvious from the start. Then we are asked “did I need a study to tell me that?” However, sometimes the subtleties and the details of the obvious are not so obvious, and sometimes our attempts to verify the obvious with data can surprise us.

For all these reasons, it is important to educate the consumers of psychological science. And we can start with our students. At my university, about a thousand students a year will take Introduction to Psychology. Multiplied across colleges and universities over the years, this number becomes enormous. Introduction to Psychology is one of the most popular undergraduate classes almost everywhere. As such, it represents a terrific opportunity not only to tell our students about our science, but also to teach them how to think about psychological science in the future. Anyone who wonders what makes people tick is an amateur psychological scientist, but there are also professional psychological scientists and a large body of valuable research, not all of which is covered in Introduction to Psychology. If my students in the future have a question or concern that psychological science could inform, I hope they know there may be relevant research, and importantly, how to find it. I also hope they know the difference between opinions about the topic of psychology expressed in the media and elsewhere, and psychological science. Although I will quiz my students about concepts like the fundamental attribution error or classical conditioning (and they should know them, in case they are reading this), what I really want for them to take away from my class is not that. What I want them to know after the final exam is that just as Pavlov discovered basic and universal principles of learning that have stood the test of time, other scientists have discovered basic principles of persuasion, or stress, or addiction, or possibly any other topic concerning the mind and behavior they may encounter. And while an understanding of the science on a psychological topic may not always easily translate to a practical solution or be particularly informative depending on the circumstance, knowing what the science shows is a good place to start. I hope my students, past and present, have learned this much.

However, the challenge of educating the current and future consumers of psychological science should not end in the classroom. It is a challenge that we need to tackle throughout our careers if we want our science to have an impact. It used to be that if you wanted to learn about something you took a course, or read a book. Now, of course, you Google it. Because of this, I want to remind everyone about an APS initiative to educate the everyday consumers of psychology. The [Wikipedia Initiative](#) was designed to create a platform that gives all of us — teachers, students, researchers — an opportunity to translate the science of psychology to the public. So if your advanced students have a class project, how about encouraging them to update a Wikipedia page on a psychological construct? If you consider yourself an expert on a topic, perhaps you could add something. We can all get into the business of educating the consumers of psychology, outside the classroom.