

Activity Descriptions for Psychology & Social Justice: Activities to Teach Social Justice
Presented by Amy C. Fineburg, PhD
Oak Mountain High School, Shelby County, AL
Presented at NCSS 2012, Seattle, WA

Research Methods

Critical Thinking Activity: Demonstrating Experimental Design Logic

Concept: The strategy of investigation that psychologists use is the experimental method. Certain variables are manipulated to discover what effect that manipulation has (if any) on other variables. This exercise is intended to stimulate thinking about the number and nature of variables that must be considered in doing behavioral research. It also focuses on the control of relevant variables as a necessary condition for interpreting such research.

Materials: A printed list of 15 unrelated, single-syllable nouns, and a clock or watch.

Description: Propose a hypothesis in which a food affects memory (e.g., “Chocolate/glazed donuts enhance memory.”) Construct a formal hypothesis using operational definitions for concepts that are unobservable, like memory (“Chocolate-glazed donuts improve recall scores from a list of unrelated nouns.”) Randomly divide the class into two groups: experimental and control. Have each group sit on opposite sides of the room or in two separate rooms, depending on the availability of space. Manipulate the independent variable in that the experimental group eats a chocolate-glazed donut and the control group does not. Expose each group to the list of unrelated nouns on an overhead projector or on a slide show presentation. Each word should be displayed for about 10 seconds. Immediately after showing the last word, have the students write down as many words as they remember. Compare the number of words the two groups remembered.

Discussion: The logic of the experimental design should be apparent with this step-by-step procedure. While the hypothesis in this case will not be proven, the likelihood of finding a cause and effect relationship with this procedure should be evident. The discussion here should focus on the importance of each step and the confounding variables that might affect the results, especially if you have both the experimental and control groups in the same room observing each other during the experiment.

Interconnections: Discuss with students the ways in which this experimental setup can be confounded. Discuss with students about research bias, both from the experimenter’s and the participant’s points-of-view. Connect with students how issues of equity and fairness are important to well designed research.

Source: Demonstrating experimental design logic. (1981). In L. T. Benjamin & K. D. Lowman (Eds.), Activities handbook for the teaching of psychology (Vol. 1). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Psychological Disorders

Analysis Activity: The Effects of Labeling

Concept: Once a diagnostic label is attached to someone, we come to see that person differently. Labels create preconceptions that can bias our interpretations and memories. One result is that erroneous diagnoses can sometimes be self-confirming, because clinicians will search for evidence in a client’s life history and hospital behavior that is consistent with the diagnosis.

Materials: Handout 29–6

Description: To show how readily we can explain people’s personalities in terms of an earlier sketch of their motives and behavior, present the top half of Handout 29–6 to some small groups of students and the bottom half to the remaining groups of students in your class. The sketch of Tom W. is adapted from a description prepared by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Ask each group to read aloud its

answers to the questions. Regardless of the outcome they have been given, the groups will have no difficulty identifying psychological indicators that pointed to Tom's present status.

Discussion: David Rosenhan, whose controversial demonstration of the biasing power of diagnostic labels is reported in the text, gives the example of one pseudo-patient who told the interviewer that during his early childhood he had a close relationship with his mother but a remote relationship with his father. During adolescence and beyond, however, the father became the pseudo-patient's close friend, while his relationship with his mother cooled. His present relationship with his wife was characteristically close and warm. Apart from occasional angry exchanges, friction was minimal. The children had rarely been spanked. Knowing the person was diagnosed as having schizophrenia, the clinician "explained" the problem in the following manner. This white 39-year-old male . . . manifests a long history of considerable ambivalence in close relationships, which begins in early childhood. A warm relationship with his mother cools during his adolescence. A distant relationship to his father is described as becoming very intense. Affective stability is absent. His attempts to control emotionality with his wife and children are punctuated by angry outbursts and, in the case of the children, spankings. And while he says that he has several good friends, one senses considerable ambivalence embedded in those relationships, also.

Interconnections: Discuss with students the cognitive concept of framing. Engage students in a discussion of the importance of context in establishing a frame for a situation. Also discuss with students how one's own cultural and situational filters can influence how a situation is framed. Point out to students how issues of equity and fairness need to be considered when evaluating one's own cultural and situational biases.

Source: Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1973). On the psychology of predictions. Psychological Review, 80, 237–251.

HANDOUT 29–6

Predicting Tom’s Success

Directions: Pretend the following description of Tom W. was written by a clinical psychologist 5 years ago, when Tom was a senior in high school. Please read it carefully before responding to the question below.

Tom W. is of high intelligence, although lacking in true creativity. He has a need for order and clarity, and for neat and tidy systems in which every detail finds its appropriate place. His writing is rather dull and mechanical, occasionally enlivened by somewhat corny puns and flashes of imagination of the sci-fi type. He has a strong drive for competence. He seems to have little feeling and little sympathy for other people and does not enjoy interacting with others. Self-centered, he nonetheless has a deep moral sense. Today, Tom is a mental patient in a state hospital. Might that outcome have been predicted when Tom was a senior in high school? On what basis?

Source: Bolt, M. (1999). Instructor’s manual to accompany Social Psychology (6th ed., p. 478). Copyright © 1996 by McGraw-Hill. Reproduced by permission of The McGraw-Hill Companies. Adapted from Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1973). On the psychology of predictions. Psychological Review, 80, 237–251. Copyright © 1973 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

HANDOUT 29–6

Predicting Tom’s Success

Directions: Pretend the following description of Tom W. was written by a clinical psychologist 5 years ago, when Tom was a senior in high school. Please read it carefully before responding to the question below.

Tom W. is of high intelligence, although lacking in true creativity. He has a need for order and clarity, and for neat and tidy systems in which every detail finds its appropriate place. His writing is rather dull and mechanical, occasionally enlivened by somewhat corny puns and flashes of imagination of the sci-fi type. He has a strong drive for competence. He seems to have little feeling and little sympathy for other people and does not enjoy interacting with others. Self-centered, he nonetheless has a deep moral sense. Today, Tom is a graduate student in the School of Education in a state university and hopes to eventually work with handicapped children. Might that outcome have been predicted when Tom was a senior in high school? On what basis?

Source: Bolt, M. (1999). Instructor’s manual to accompany Social Psychology (6th ed., p. 478). Copyright © 1996 by McGraw-Hill. Reproduced by permission of The McGraw-Hill Companies. Adapted from Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1973). On the psychology of predictions. Psychological Review, 80, 237–251. Copyright © 1973 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.