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The Social Psychology Tribe of Relationship Researchers

By David A. Kenny

As I see it, there are three major tribes in our association. They are communication, human development and family studies, and social psychology. Certainly there are smaller groups such as sociologists and clinical psychologists. However, the largest, and some might argue the most dominant tribe of our discipline is social psychology. Chris Agnew has told me that he believes that about fifty percent of the members of our association are members of that tribe. As an elder member of the tribe social psychologists, I would like to help members of other tribes better understand the beliefs, rituals and practices of our tribe.

We worship at the altar of the experiment. The truth can only be known by manipulation and control. We are taught to discount the pagan sirens of participant observation and surveys. Not all experiments are equal and the supreme experiment is one with two independent variables, analyzed by a 2 x 2 analysis of variance, and showing a cross-over interaction. The X shape of a cross-over, given to us by Festinger and Carlsmith, is our most sacred icon and brings tears to our eyes and pitter-patter to

our hearts. We splatter images of the X throughout our textbooks and articles.

On a related note, for social psychologists, the only results worth looking at from a research study are means. We love means and we graph them, table them, and report them in the text. If we display the means in a table we use all sorts of lower case letter superscripts to tell us what means are different from each other. Maybe you might report adjusted means, but that would create some nervousness. Correlations are curiosities and besides they are “merely correlational.” Means and *p* values, that is where it is at!

When we do experiments, we must design them in such a way that there is deception. The participant can never be told what the purpose of the study really is, that the other participant is a collaborator of the experimenter, that the phone is not really ringing by accident, and that the shocks that the learner is receiving are fake. The most important part of a social psychology study is the procedure: It must be an elaborately staged interaction with several plot twists (i.e., “ops”) worthy of a Broadway or Hollywood production. A clever procedure counts even more than a good idea or good results. After all, we refer to a study that is realistic as having mundane (i.e., pedestrian) realism and studies with an involving, gut-wrenching procedure as having *experimental realism*. The reality of the study is more important than actual reality!

When we cite people we must have a few obligatory citations to the founding fathers of Lewin and Heider. All other citations must be recent citations from the past five years. We are allowed to cite an older paper only if it is a self-citation. We should cite only other members of our own tribe and ideally only the elders of the tribe. So for instance, we can cite Duck but only for his papers written before 1986 or so, but then again we would never cite an 80s paper.

The bible for social psychology is the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* or as it is usually just called *JPSP*. Any self-respecting social psychologist will tell you that it is only the first two sections of the journal that matter. Publishing in the third section, *Personality and Individual Differences*, is considered a black mark.

The organizational structure of our tribe is hierarchical. For years, it was ruled by the person memory boys (some of whom were not boys), but today we are lorded over by the social cognition group. They have caused quite a stir by encouraging us to abandon deception research and have people sit in front of computers and have them respond to images that they do not even see. These senior elders have even convinced us that this is *social* psychology. It is said that elders receive a crossover X tattoo on some private part of their bodies. Given the hierarchical nature of discipline, it is totally permissible at meetings to stop talking with someone of

lower status, even mid-sentence, to be able to speak to a higher-status elder.

Finally, in social psychology it is entirely acceptable to take an old idea and repackage it as a new idea. It helps that no one ever reads anything that is not more than five years old. So we can change self-fulfilling prophecy to behavioral confirmation and assumed similarity to false consensus bias. Alternatively, we have two names for the same thing: correspondence bias and fundamental error of attribution.

The major organization of social psychology is Society of Experimental Psychology (note the word “experimental” psychology). You cannot join this group but rather you have to voted in. Most people are especially proud to be members, despite the fact that most of them were not voted in during their first year of eligibility. Non-members can only attend the meeting as a guest and you are told to leave the room when the organization is having its business meeting.

Despite all of this I am proud to call myself a social psychologist. I am reminded of a character in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* who was asked given the corruption and hypocrisy that he observed in the medieval Roman Catholic Church, how could he remain a Catholic? The person replied that if such a corrupt organization could survive this long, it must be divine.