Since social psychology emerged as a discipline in the late nineteenth century, thousands of excellent studies have been conducted, but which of these are worthy of being identified as true ‘classics’? As it turns out, this is both an easy and a difficult question to answer: easy, because there is a reasonable amount of consensus among social psychologists as to what the classic studies are, but difficult, because in creating this volume we wanted to be extremely choosy. Indeed, we sought to restrict entry to just 12 studies. In the chapters that follow, quite a few more studies are discussed – either as elaborations or as extensions of the focal studies – but nevertheless those that are included constitute a highly selective sample.

Unsurprisingly, then, the studies that are examined in the chapters that follow are very well-known within social psychology. They are described in almost every introductory textbook (and in many advanced texts as well) and they serve as common points of reference for researchers, teachers and students alike. As Christian Jarrett, author of The Rough Guide to Psychology, has noted, ‘while other sciences have their cardinal theories … psychology’s foundations are built not of theory, but with the rock of classic experiments’ (2008: 756). A key reason for this is that the studies speak powerfully to the goals of social psychology as a discipline that is concerned with providing a scientific analysis of the relationship between mind and society (Asch, 1952; McDougall, 1910; Turner and Oakes, 1997). As a result, they have played an important role in setting the research agenda for the field as it has progressed over time.

However, one quality that makes these studies genuine classics is that their details are well-known not just inside but also outside social psychology – not only by researchers in other academic disciplines (e.g., sociology, politics, economics, history), but also by journalists, social commentators, policy makers and other
interested members of the general public. In this respect, a central feature of the studies is their capacity to captivate those who read about them. Indeed, this has meant that as well as arousing intellectual curiosity they have also impacted upon our culture in a diverse array of forms – including music, art, theatre and film. These studies, then, do not just belong to social psychology. Rather, they have widespread currency in society (or, at least, western society) and have played an important role in shaping everyday understandings of the behavior within it. In Serge Moscovici’s (1984) terms, they have become central to people’s social representations of social psychology in the sense that they both anchor and objectify understanding – serving as concrete reference points for ongoing dialogue and debate.

THE INGREDIENTS OF A CLASSIC STUDY

As noted by Patricia Devine and Amanda Brodish (2003), there is a difference between knowing what the classic studies are and knowing why they have become classics. Moreover, there are no fixed criteria to decide whether a study can be raised to this status. To adapt Tolstoy’s observation about the nature of unhappy families in the first line of Anna Karenina, each classic study is classic in its own way. Nevertheless, as Tolstoy noted of happy families, there are some features that most of the classic studies in social psychology share.

Big questions

The single most important feature of the classic studies is that they address fundamental questions about human nature. Why do we conform and obey? Why do we fight and oppress? Why do we help and support? In this regard, most of the classic studies were inspired by real-world events that demanded, but seemed to defy, comprehension. And the scale of these events often motivated the researchers to be equally ambitious in their quest for answers.

In this regard, nothing in the last century played a greater role in shaping the sensibilities of social psychologists than the Second World War and the Holocaust. It is therefore unsurprising to discover that although many of the classic studies were conducted before 1945, most of those classic studies that came afterwards were motivated by a desire to understand the behavior of those who participated in these events (both as perpetrators and victims), and that they were conducted by researchers who had first-hand experience of their devastating consequences. Dissatisfied with tinkering at the edges, these researchers wanted their research to engage powerfully with the stuff of pride and prejudice, fear and loathing, war and peace. And as a result of these intense motivations they sought to conduct studies that captured the spirit of the times and that were not only groundbreaking and intriguing, but also forceful and compelling. Their point was to conduct research that demanded attention and could not be brushed idly aside.
Accordingly, while a criticism of contemporary social psychological research is that it has sometimes become bogged down in statistical sophistication and methodological minutiae (what Iain Walker, 1997, refers to as ‘impeccable trivia’; see also Baumeister et al., 2007; Rozin, 2009), this was never true of the studies included in this volume. Thus, although much of the research that has come after them has been concerned with homing in forensically on the processes they uncover, the classic studies themselves were often conspicuously deficient in their concern for the niceties of methodological and statistical nuance. It is almost certainly unreasonable to judge them by today’s standards (and to do so rather misses their point), but nevertheless many were single studies that had limited experimental control, limited theoretical grounding, limited hypotheses and limited insight into the internal processes responsible for the effects they uncover. Somewhat ironically, then, this would almost certainly mean that the majority of these studies would struggle to be accepted for publication in leading journals today (Diener, 2006; Haslam and McGarty, 2001). Nevertheless, this lack of sophistication is one further feature of their enduring appeal: for this means that you don’t need to have specialized training in order to understand the points they make.

CHALLENGING FINDINGS

Yet while the classic studies are of interest to, and can be understood by, the proverbial man or woman in the street, another of their important features is that they do not simply tell them what they already know. On the contrary, their findings are often unexpected and counterintuitive, and in this way they often challenge received ideas about human nature. For example, most people would imagine that a large incentive should produce greater change in someone’s opinions than a small incentive. However, work on cognitive dissonance by Leon Festinger and Merrill Carlsmith (1959) showed that, in fact, the opposite was true (see Chapter 3). Similarly, if you asked people whether they behaved in line with their attitudes, most people would probably respond that, generally speaking, they practice what they preach. However, when Richard LaPiere (1934) looked into this question systematically he found that people’s attitudes and behavior were largely unrelated (see Chapter 2). Or, to take another example, when Stanley Milgram (1963) asked students, psychiatrists and members of the general public what percentage of people would deliver a lethal electric shock to another person when asked to do so by an experimenter, the typical response was 1%. In fact, though, this form of destructive behavior was displayed by 65% – not 1% – of the participants in Milgram’s classic study of obedience to authority (see Chapter 7).

In this way, all the studies led to significant changes in research focus and thinking. For the power of their findings was such that they made it hard – and in many cases impossible – to return to the forms of understanding that had previously been dominant (McGarty and Haslam, 1997). This is not to say, however, that the studies closed down enquiry into particular topics. As we have already noted, more
investigation was always needed in order to replicate the effects, to clarify when they occurred, and to understand why they occurred. Indeed, a further element of the studies’ influence was that they opened up exciting new lines of enquiry. Rather, then, than reducing or eliminating scientific uncertainty, their success lay in the fact that they created uncertainty that the broad scientific community then set about trying to resolve (see Haslam and McGarty, 2001). And, in this sense, rather than being part of what the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1962) refers to as normal science, they proved to be the stuff of scientific revolution.

DEMANDING METHODS

The methods that the studies employed are also an important aspect of their classic status. Like much other research in social psychology these were ingenious and innovative, sometimes even drawing on established physiological or visual effects to study social phenomena (e.g., see Chapters 4 and 6), but more than most other studies they were typically very realistic and high in drama. Often this resulted from creating well-crafted and elaborate cover stories that required input from trained confederates (i.e., accomplices of the researcher). Usually they also placed the individual in some form of intense predicament in which he or she had to resolve a moral or practical dilemma – for example, conflict between attitudes and action, between one’s moral code and the demands of the situation, between one’s perception of reality and the influence of one’s peers, or between a desire to be fair and a desire to advance one’s group (Devine and Brodish, 2003). Furthermore, the nature of these methods lent itself to dramatic images that were often captured on film and that survive (as in the pages below) to provide students with powerful and provocative materials that engage them in the specifics of the research process. In particular, they invite onlookers to reflect on the choices they would make in the same situation: Would I modify my judgments to bring them into line with those of my peers? Would I press the lever to deliver a lethal electric shock? Would I abuse a prisoner if I were a prison guard? Would you?

Here too it is important to recognize that the classic studies are generally focused on explaining and understanding actual behavior, rather than ticks on a questionnaire, reaction times on a computer, or blood flow to various regions of the brain (see Baumeister et al., 2007). The latter are all interesting and important aspects of science, but few things capture our imagination as powerfully as real people engaging in real behavior in real situations (even if those situations have been artificially created).

One further consequence of this desire to study behavior that centres on moral and practical struggles is that classic studies raise more than their fair share of ethical issues. Indeed, two of the studies that are discussed below (those conducted by Milgram and Zimbardo; see Chapters 7 and 8) are routinely taken as starting points for consideration of the ethical dimensions of psychological research (and other forms of research with human participants). Interestingly too, the difficulty of overcoming these issues has meant that it is very unlikely that many of the classic studies would still be conducted today, at least in their full original form.
One reason for this is that the cost of addressing these ethical challenges (in terms of both time and money) is immense.

Indeed, more generally, the scale of the classic studies was often such that cost is a factor that would preclude many of them being conducted today. It is expensive to study interacting individuals and groups (especially over an extended period), to employ confederates, to measure and analyse actual behavior, and to conduct the pilot work which establishes the viability of novel paradigms. Moreover, not only is the funding for such research harder to come by today, but it is also far harder for researchers to justify investing the time that projects of this form demand – especially in a world where employment and promotion are often based on the number of one’s publications in leading journals and where, as we have noted, those journals’ appetite for such research is not what it once was (Baumeister et al., 2007; Devine and Brodish, 2003; Haslam and McGarty, 2001).

Ultimately, though, while ingenious, dramatic and demanding methods certainly help, in our minds these are not sufficient to imbue a study with classic status. Instead, to develop our initial point, what marks the studies in this volume out from the vast majority of other studies is their capacity to address meaningful social psychological questions in powerful ways. As Paul Rozin observes, ‘the great experiments capture a truth about the world, but it is the problem selection, not the elegance, that primarily determines the greatness’ (2009: 439). In short, to find out about these studies is to find out something essential about the psychological dimensions of society.

REVISITING THE CLASSIC STUDIES

ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS

But big questions, challenging findings and demanding methods are not the only features that the classic studies have in common. Thus, we can observe that all the studies selected for this volume were conducted by men (mostly with male participants) and that most were conducted in leading American institutions (e.g., Yale, Stanford, Columbia). These features reflect the nature of the field at the time (at least 30 years ago) that the classic studies were being conducted – a time before the emergence of strong social psychology in Europe (see Tajfel et al., 1981) and a time in which female participation was very limited, either as researchers or as participants.

Although seemingly trivial, these shared demographic features are usually quite salient to students and other readers of the classic studies. One unfortunate consequence of this is that, when it comes to reflecting on their findings, people are often led to ask specific types of question – and not necessarily those that are most interesting. In particular, students commonly ask whether one would obtain the same effects if the classic studies were conducted today (in an age where people are assumed to be less conformist, more questioning of authority and less prejudiced than participants of yesteryear), with female (rather than male) participants...
and in other countries (e.g., Australia, Britain or China rather than the United States). As many of the chapters that follow testify, these questions typically turn out not to be especially interesting, for the simple reason that the short answer is usually ‘Yes’. Indeed, the core findings from most (but not all) of these classic studies have been replicated many times, using a diverse range of participants, from different cultural backgrounds and in many different time periods.

What, then, might be better questions to ask? From our perspective, it is more interesting to reflect on whether demographic and other broader contextual features influenced the types of problems that the researchers were interested in and the way they set about addressing them. For example, as we have already noted, many of the classic studies were conducted in the wake of the Holocaust, and it was the scale of this and other atrocities that led researchers to eschew individual-level explanations (e.g., in terms of personality) and instead seek to develop analyses that focused on the capacity for groups to promote conformity, obedience and oppression. However, because such work was (understandably) focused on the dynamics of tyranny, it is interesting to ask whether it tended to neglect countervailing forces of resistance (e.g., see Chapters 5 to 9). Similarly, researchers were drawn to social issues such as prejudice and failure to help in emergencies because these were seen to constitute widespread social problems, but it is interesting to ask whether this led to an over-emphasis on the prevalence and inevitability of these processes (see Chapters 10 to 12). And where our understanding of research has changed over time (e.g., through simplification, or change of emphasis), what has brought this change about? Why do misunderstandings and myths about the studies persist? Why do they take the particular form they do? And are these myths harmful to social psychology’s ultimate goal of understanding the relationship between mind and society, because they stop researchers from asking certain types of question and close down potentially fruitful lines of interrogation (see Jarrett, 2008)?

In addition to answering basic questions (e.g., concerning replication), the chapters in this volume home in on questions of this more challenging form that have been prompted by work in the years since the classic studies were conducted. In particular, they do this by encouraging a deeper level of engagement both with the details of the studies themselves and with the nature of their contribution to the field of social psychology. This process is also facilitated by the fact that all the chapters have a similar structure. This starts by carefully laying each study out, but then goes on surgically to penetrate beneath its surface.

STRUCTURE OF THE CHAPTERS

All the chapters start by seeking to locate and understand the studies within their social and historical context – identifying the concerns that motivated researchers and the particular perspective that informed their scientific thinking. The studies’ methods and results are then presented. Here careful attention is paid to details that are routinely overlooked in standard textbook treatments, but
which turn out to provide important insights into the phenomenon under investigation (e.g., evidence that the experimenter or specific methods encouraged particular outcomes, or that forgotten variants produced different results).

This is followed by a discussion of the studies’ impact, which looks at the way in which ideas were taken up and developed by other researchers and the way in which they influenced both the field of social psychology and general understanding of the topic in question. There are two recurring themes here. First, while the impact of all the studies has been immense, they have often led researchers in unexpected directions and certainly have not always had the impact that those who conducted them intended. Second, it is apparent that accounts of the studies that are commonly provided in secondary sources (and hence the understandings that people take away from them) are often very simplified, and typically fail to capture important dimensions of richness and nuance. Sometimes such simplifications were encouraged by the researchers themselves, but more often they were a source of considerable frustration.

All of the chapters explore these themes but also build upon them by concluding with a consideration of the way in which, from the time that they were conducted, the field has moved beyond the classic studies. The key point here – and one that provides a central motivation for this volume – is that in the decades since they were published, the field of social psychology has not stood still. As we have observed, a key feature of the studies was that they proved to be catalysts for further research. Yet while further work has always built on the methods and insights that the studies provided, this has rarely provided straightforward confirmation of the authors’ original claims. In all cases this advance has therefore involved at least some revision in thinking, and in some it has shaken the researchers’ conclusions to their very core.

PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

Our goal in this volume is two-fold. As the foregoing discussion and the book’s title suggests, we want to revisit the classic studies with a view to showing, first, how they shaped the field of social psychology, but also, second, how the field has itself moved on through engagement with the issues these studies raise. Rather than engaging superficially and merely reproducing standard accounts, we thus seek to engage critically with the studies in order to reveal new ways of thinking both about them and about the ideas they explore. In effect, then, we want to show how social psychology can be – and has been – taken forward in interesting and exciting ways through a careful re-examination of the ‘sacred texts’ that lie at its heart. In short, we want to respect and do justice to these texts, but the goal is not to fossilize or fetishize them.

In light of the sanctity of these texts and the mystique that surrounds them, this is no easy task, and it is certainly not one that we could undertake alone. Accordingly, in the process of planning this volume, our first priority was to assemble a team of contributors whose own work had shown that a project of this form
was both viable and worth pursuing. This, it turned out, was far easier than we supposed – primarily because all of the people we approached were leading researchers who had been working for a considerable time on research programmes that were closely aligned with the book’s goals. Happily for us, all agreed to participate and they did so with considerable enthusiasm.

As a result – and as their contributions and biographies attest – all of the authors are internationally renowned scholars who are working at the cutting edge of the areas mapped out by the particular classic study that their chapter addresses. In each case, their own work has been heavily influenced by a deep appreciation of the research and researchers that they write about, but this work has also moved the field on in new and exciting directions. In this respect, all give proof to Isaac Newton’s famous dictum (handed down from the writings of Bernard of Chartres), which we have used as an epigram for the volume as a whole: that is, these contributors have been able to see further than others because they have stood on the shoulders of giants.

In writing their chapters, the authors were asked to stick closely to the structure and brief outlined in the previous section, and to write in a way that would make their contribution accessible not only to students of psychology (at many different levels), but also to readers from any walk of life who might be interested in the important issues to which these studies speak. Again happily for us, all did – using their chapters to give readers profound insights into the foundations of social psychology, but also showing how the discipline has advanced in important ways in the years since those studies were conducted. And while it is customary in a book’s Introduction to provide a summary of the chapters that follow, our sense was that in the present case this would be superfluous. This is for the simple reason that the chapters all speak very clearly for themselves and certainly no gloss is required from us in order to explain how they fulfil the book’s objectives and ambitions. Critically, then, they provide the strongest possible case for seeing social psychology as a discipline that is vibrant rather than moribund, and which is building in creative and insightful ways upon impressive historical foundations.

In organizing the chapters within the volume, our objective was to have an overall structure that provided a coherent sense of this advance. Because many of the classic studies built upon others that preceded them, the most obvious strategy was to arrange chapters in chronological order with reference to the date of each study’s publication. Accordingly, as Figure 0.1 indicates, most of the chapters are arranged in this chronological sequence. Nevertheless, this principle is violated in several places in order to preserve the logical flow of ideas from one chapter to the next.

The resulting sequence is one that we have found works best when teaching a course on ‘Classic studies in social psychology’ ourselves – a course that we have enjoyed delivering for the past six years. Indeed, we would like to end by thanking our students whose persistent demands for a suitable course textbook motivated us to develop this volume, and the authors for their hard work in helping us achieve this goal. As editors, we have enjoyed our collaboration immensely and
this has been a very positive experience from which we have learned a tremendous amount. This, we believe, is an experience that readers will share.

Figure 0.1 Timeline of classic studies in social psychology

REFERENCES


