

Note

Bringing the World to the Classroom

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On July 13, 2019, the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo published a chat that an anonymous source had leaked; it revealed how then governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló, dealt with political opponents and the press and the degrading ways in which he privately talked about members of the LGBTQ+ community, women, and the people who had died in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and María (Valentín Ortiz & Minet, 2019). In the weeks after the chat was leaked, hundreds of thousands of organically organized people took to the streets in many protests, demanding the resignation of the governor. These mass movements were a product of the historical and cultural manifestations of Puerto Rican subjectivity.

Social scientists, including psychologists, need to study these manifestations and modify their syllabi, teaching strategies, and writing assignments accordingly. While the events were unprecedented in the history of Puerto Rico, they are not unique to our island and should not be viewed as mere exceptions to the state of affairs of a country but as phenomena that reveal the intricate web of relations between individual psychology and the world. We need to pay more attention to the scholars who first analyzed crowds, for instance, Gustav Le Bon and Sigmund Freud (Moscovici, 1985), and the authors who have been studying the nature of recent movements that organize partly through social media. While some of their ideas and explanations are compelling, the language used by these authors frequently depict multitudes negatively by comparing them to criminal mobs. In our teaching and feedback on student work, we highlight the role and the historical baggage of psychological concepts and how they construct, reproduce, and reinforce the discipline through word choice.

The underlying ideas in discourse analysis and positioning theory¹ invite us as psychologists and teachers to problematize the concepts and theories we use to address the status quo and specific ways of being (Parker, 1996; Wetherell, 2003). Psychologists need to resist the temptation to become allies to those who wish to impose one model of the self. This is possible only if we pay attention to the language they use. As Kenneth Gergen (1991) noted, historical changes in the generic terms used to talk about human beings are embedded in ontological and epistemological assumptions about the self. Critical thinking, then, involves not taking for granted or at face value the realities, concepts, and explanations we come across in our theory, research, and pedagogy.

In order to truly interpret, understand, and write the psychology of those who break the mold of the white middle-class male who volunteers as a research subject, we need to abandon old commitments of the field. Furthermore, we need to understand culture and other modalities of social organization in psychology as more than discrete variables. These collective forms of organization and being promote different ways of making sense of the

world, which cannot be captured by merely using traditional methodologies against the backdrop of the subjectivity of the groups studied in traditional psychological research.

Our problematization of the work of traditional psychology has two consequences: students need to critically read what the psychologists before them wrote, and they need to find ways of writing that do not reproduce the biases and prejudices of these older generations of psychologists. One way of approaching this is by allowing students to write texts that go beyond the conventions of the traditional paper and to explore connections between other forms of storytelling and their work. Qualitative researchers have recently experimented with ways of writing about their subjects by using creative genres, such as personal narratives, fiction, and stories (Denzin, 2010).

One of the exercises we have used in our courses is partly inspired by how biographers approach their subjects. It entails asking students to write a paper about themselves by quoting a newspaper article from the day they were born and analyzing it according to a theory of personality of their choosing to determine if or how the events reported in the article have relevance to who they are. By inviting students to consider their connections to history and society at large, we are asking them to see themselves as both individuals and members of a culture who might be interpellated by larger social forces but who actively engage with them in diverse ways. Furthermore, when we ask them to draw connections between the context they grew up in, their own life, and theory, it is easier for them to apply the concepts we are studying, to critically assess what they describe, and to explain where they fall short.

Additional writing assignments could be used to make students aware of how some concepts have been used to depict populations and to ask them to use language that sheds light on a collective phenomenon without pathologizing it. We propose one such assignment in which students explore contemporary events while engaging critically with psychological theory. After discussing with students the most prevalent theories in a field such as personality or social psychology, we invite them to write a short three- to five-page short paper analyzing a relevant contemporary event from a psychological perspective. This paper could include an introduction describing their perspective and the goals of their paper, a brief description of the event that acknowledges their position in relation to it, a summary of a relevant psychological theory, an analysis of how media messages represent different groups or how individuals use art to deliver a message, and some final comments where the students analyze to what degree the theory they chose allowed them to understand the complexity of the event.

Psychology professors and their students need to be able to use the classroom as a platform to rethink psychological theory and its uses. While we must teach and learn how to use the most prevalent psychological theories, we should also discuss and problematize their underlying assumptions about human life. The short paper we are proposing asks students to recognize their own position in relation to the topic of their paper. Most psychology students are taught to think of psychological research as accurate and unbiased representations of the world. However, when we discuss, for example, the theory of personality of Hans J. Eysenck, with excerpts from his autobiography (Eysenck, 1997), they can see the connections between the biases of the researcher and his so-called scientific descriptions of different human personality. By bringing a current event to the classroom and asking students to address it through alternative forms of writing, we can problematize implicit biases in psychological theory and promote critical thinking.

Note

¹A goal of positioning theory is to understand how language produces relationships amongst different kinds of individuals. Psychological discourses have the potential to reproduce traditional forms of authority among mental health professionals by victimizing and stigmatizing those constructed as patients or objects of research.

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