

Social Issues

Solving Social Problems Like a Psychologist

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ABSTRACT—*We suggest that psychologists can play a larger role in the solution of important social problems. Psychology brings two important qualities to the study of social problems: attention to psychological process and rigorous methodology. Our key task is to define social problems in part as psychological problems, and to conduct rigorous research that tests novel psychological solutions. Examples of research that has taken this path—research on race differences in academic performance, on the training of executive function and intelligence, and on the provision of socially constructive default decisions—are provided. We argue that addressing social problems can enrich our science by connecting psychologists to interdisciplinary teams and by providing contexts in which to demonstrate, in striking ways, the value of a psychological approach.*

Psychology has a long history of informing important social problems (e.g., Lewin, 1952; Sherif, 1961). To some extent in recent years, we have, however, lost our way. Our journal articles are filled with complete answers to small questions rather than incomplete, but promising, answers to big questions. Yet as psychologists we can make unique contributions to the solution of social problems. A renewed commitment to social problems can renew our science. It can connect psychologists to interdisciplinary teams, and it can provide potentially dramatic contexts in which to demonstrate the value of a psychological approach.

Psychology contributes two important qualities to the study of social problems: an attention to psychological process and a rigorous methodology. As a consequence, we can identify the processes that underlie a social problem with greater precision and causal understanding than perhaps is possible in other disciplines. Our challenge is to define social problems at least in

part as psychological problems, to pinpoint the psychological processes involved, and to design interventions that target those processes.

Let us take as an example race differences in academic achievement. Throughout most of the 20th century, race differences were thought to be largely nonpsychological in nature, and proposed solutions addressed material circumstances rather than psychological processes. But today, largely as a result of research on stereotype threat, we recognize that group differences in academic achievement also have a social-psychological dimension. Even when students from different groups take the same test and under the same circumstances, processes like stereotype threat for negatively stereotyped individuals and stereotype lift for nonstereotyped individuals produce and reproduce inequality in performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Walton & Cohen, 2003). Moreover, laboratory investigations have spawned experimental field research, which shows that even brief interventions that target key psychological processes can sharply reduce group differences in classroom performance even months later (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007; see also Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). Today we know that at least a portion of group differences on standard measures of academic performance is due to stereotype-related threat, and we can quantify this portion (Walton & Spencer, 2009). This research underscores the psychological dimension of group differences in academic achievement. It also provides educators and policy makers novel intervention strategies that hold the promise of substantially raising the achievement of stereotyped students.

A second example involves efforts to train executive function. Long believed to be largely the product of genetic influence and large-scale social factors such as parenting style, individual differences in executive function are among the best predictors of school achievement. Yet emerging evidence suggests that targeted training can significantly improve the executive function of preschoolers, even as assessed by novel tasks (i.e., ones unrelated to the tasks used in training; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007; Rueda, Rothbart, McCandliss, Saccomanno, & Posner, 2005). This finding par-

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allels evidence that intelligence itself can be taught—even in adults (e.g., fluid intelligence; Jaeggi, Buschkuhl, Jonides, & Perrig, 2008). Such results carry enormous implications for education. They also underscore the value of a sophisticated understanding of the nature and development of the abilities that underlie school success, and the way in which this understanding can promote positive outcomes.

A third example involves research on socially relevant decision making. The overwhelming majority of Americans support organ donation, but fewer than half register as donors (Johnson & Goldstein, 2003). Why might this be so? An economist might suggest that people simply do not value organ donation enough to sign up. If so, one might create a regulated organ donation market to compensate donors or their families. Johnson and Goldstein (2003) suggest a different explanation. They argue that the specific decision that people are asked to make—to opt-in or to opt-out of organ donation—affects their likelihood of consenting to be donors. The “default” decision, they argue, implies a recommended action. For instance, when people are required to opt-out if they do *not* want to donate their organs, the suggestion is that opting-in is the favored choice. Indeed, one study found that the percentage of people agreeing to be donors shot up from 42% when people had to opt-in to 82% when they had to opt-out. The results suggest that establishing an opt-out system in the United States could significantly raise the rates of organ donation. But more broadly, by examining decision making in the context of an important social problem, the results also illustrate the power of the underlying psychology processes (for another example of how a nonintuitive psychological process affects socially relevant decision-making, see Sethi-Iyengar, Huberman, & Jiang, 2004).

It is hard to think of an important social problem that does not have a psychological component. Yet sometimes in the general clamor of the public discourse, psychological issues and psychological solutions are lost. With a sustained emphasis from researchers and journal editors, psychologists can begin to illuminate the psychological dimension of other seemingly intractable social problems. By exploring these social problems, psychologists may identify novel psychological phenomena, join interdisciplinary teams of problem solvers, and display the strength and unique contributions of our field.

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