Faculty of Social and Political Sciences

Part 2B

Paper Psy 4 for the academic year 2009-10

Current Topics in Social Psychology

Paper Contacts

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Outline of the Course  The distinguishing feature of this paper is that it consists of 4 topics that are closely related to the research interests of the teaching staff. The idea is that students taking this paper will gain an insight into current theoretical issues in each of these 4 topics, and will also familiarise themselves with key empirical findings that relate to these issues. Being a research-led paper, much of the reading material consists of primary research papers rather than textbooks. As well as reflecting the research interests of the teaching staff, these 4 topics (The psychology of religion; Morality; Social interaction; Social representations theory, social constructionism and sociocultural psychology).

Aims and Objectives  To give students an opportunity to study in depth a range of specialist topics that are close to the research interests of the staff teaching this paper, and thereby to acquaint themselves with the debates and issues that are current in each topic, and how these debates and issues are being addressed by means of research.

Course content  The paper consists of 4 modules, each involving 6 sessions. Two modules will be taught in the Michaelmas Term, two in the Lent Term, and there will be two revision lectures in the Easter Term. The Michaelmas term modules are “Conversation” and “The Psychology of Religion”. The two Lent Term modules are “Social
representations theory, social constructionism and sociocultural psychology” and “Morality”.

**Mode of teaching**
The paper is taught by means of lectures and supervisions.

**Mode of assessment**
The paper is examined by one three hour unseen examination. **Students should pay particular attention to the fact that the paper is divided into four sections, one for each of the modules referred to above. Students are required to answer 3 questions, no more than 2 from any one section of the paper.** Students should also note that the paper varies significantly from year to year. Previous years’ examination papers may have reflected different teaching, by different lecturers, and thus students should not rely solely on previous exam papers to plan their revision – but on the issues and topics covered during this year’s teaching.

**Outline of Lectures**
The timetable for the lectures is as follows:

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**Michaelmas Term**

Conversation  
Dr David Good (6 lectures, weeks 2-7, Tuesdays at 10.00 am, beginning 20 Oct, Committee Room)

Psychology of Religion  
Dr Nick Gibson (6 lectures, weeks 3-8, Wednesdays at 12.00 noon, beginning 28 Oct, Old African Library, 2nd Floor)

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**Lent Term**

Social representations theory, social constructionism and sociocultural psychology  
Dr Juliet Foster (6 lectures, weeks 2-7, Mondays at 10.00 am, beginning 25 January, Committee Room)

Morality  
Dr Simone Schnall (6 lectures, weeks 3-8, Tuesdays at 10.00 am, beginning 2 Feb, Seminar Room)

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**Easter Term**

Revision Class, Monday 17 May at 2.00 pm, Committee Room.
Supervision Arrangements

Supervision is essential for this paper and students should expect to cover 6-7 topics taken from at least 2 of the modules, though students are encouraged to have at least one supervision on each module. Students will be asked to make preliminary indications of the modules in which they wish to have supervisions at the introductory lecture. The list of students wishing to have supervisions on a given topic will be passed to the lecturer responsible for that topic, who will then make arrangements for the supervisions. In the event of problems, students should in the first instance contact the relevant Course Organiser (Dr S Schnall). In order to make this process possible it is very important for all students taking this paper to attend the introductory lecture.

Reading

Each lecturer on this paper provides readings relevant to the particular module that he or she teaches. Additional, more specialised references may be provided by individual lecturers and supervisors as appropriate.
1. Conversation (Dr David Good)

Conversation is at the heart of our social life. It is the *sine qua non* of human society. Through communication we establish our identity, make relationships, form our ideas, and build the larger social order of which we are part. In turn those identities, relationships, ideas and larger social structures guide our understanding of what is being communicated and what it means at any single point in time. This complex relationship between language, thought and culture gives rise to a variety of challenges for both the psychologist who wishes to understand the processes underlying conversation and indeed the participants themselves. These challenges have been addressed from a variety of perspectives within the humanities and social sciences, and this topic will necessarily draw on a broad range of research. The lectures will describe key features of human conversation, and illustrate how they operate through examples relating to a key element of social identity, gender, and communication breakdowns in a variety of contexts.

**Essay titles**

1. To what extent do men and women have different styles of speaking? What consequences if any follow from this variation?
2. Why do speakers often not state their intended meaning clearly? What factors determine how they choose a form of indirection?
3. In George Orwell’s *1984*, the authorities designed a language, *Newspeak*, to control radical thoughts by restricting the vocabulary to non-radical terms. How might such a language achieve this effect, if at all?
4. What insights do we gain from analysing speech as action?
5. How do listeners resolve the inherent ambiguity in what is said to them?

**Lecture 1 Introduction**

This is a broad range of books which you may find it useful to dip into from time to time, particularly if specific concepts from the more focussed lectures are obscure or unduly technical. There is much technical vocabulary in this field and you should be willing to get delve into a dictionary of linguistics. Crystal’s encyclopedia makes for an easy light read by way of general introduction to the study of language. The chapters in Holtgrave provide an introduction to much of the material in this lecture series, and is probably the best single volume from this point of view.


Lecture 2 Language & Thought

This field has been dominated by the study of particular sensory and conceptual domains, primarily colour but also other topics such as space. As you will see from this list, there has been a substantial to and fro between different authors, and the research demonstrates that even in a narrow domain such as colour, the interplay of universal and cultural factors is far from simple.


Lecture 3 Variation

Human language is remarkable for the range and diversity of ways in which ostensibly similar ideas can be communicated. This variation provides a tremendous resource for speakers to exploit in creating their identity. The link between variation and persons has been studied in considerable depth since at least the nineteenth century, and in recent times has been a matter of considerable interest with respect to gender identity.


Lecture 4 Indeterminacy
The great variety seen in language, and the narrowness of the communication channel between conversationalists results in utterances that do not fully determine how they are to be interpreted. This has been a subject of interest in a number of fields and much of the research in the last fifty years has been inspired in one way or another by the philosophical analyses of Paul Grice. His work has been built on by a variety of writers, but the complexity of the challenge can leave one wondering how we ever interpret anything that is said to us.


**Lecture 5 Reflection & Action**

A significant aspect of human language use is our ability to reflect on what we are saying and have said, and this in turn affects the way we speak. This has attracted attention from
two very different approaches to the study of conversation. One deriving from the analytic philosophy tradition represented by John Austin, and the other from etnomethodology. In quite different ways, both traditions characterise speaking as doing, and provide a framework for understanding the meanings and purposes of speakers above and beyond the literal content of what they are saying.


Lecture 6 Politeness

In the mid 1970’s an analysis was offered (Brown & Levinson, 1987) of indirection in speech which drew together a variety of perspectives on language use, and has been very productive in drawing together the threads of this area of work. The works listed below represent a small part of a very large literature. Allowing yourself to be guided by the titles, and after reading the basics, you should choose a line of interest, e.g. the study of face or gender, which attracts you.


2. Psychology of Religion (Dr Nicholas Gibson)

Why do some people believe in God (or gods) but others do not? Where do such beliefs come from? When and how do the religious beliefs that people hold influence the rest of their cognition, behaviour, and emotions? This course will explore such questions in the light of six approaches to the psychology of religious belief.

Lectures 1-3 consider universal aspects of human psychology that put constraints on the development, content, and processing of religious beliefs, and address such questions as the following: (1) What does it mean for a 4-year old to believe in God? (2) Why are some supernatural agents easier to believe in than others? (3) Why is talk of a “God spot” in the brain bad science?

Lectures 4-6 focus on how religious beliefs vary from individual to individual, and address such questions as the following: (4) Does believing in a loving God increase your self-esteem? (5) Can God function as an attachment figure? (6) Why do people get angry at God?

**General reading**


**NB** When reading for the lectures below, note that there is often a relevant chapter in the Paloutzian & Park or the Hood et al. volumes.

**Lecture 1. Religious development**


Lecture 2. Cognitive science of religion


Lecture 3. Religion and the brain


Lecture 4. Religion as psychometric variable


Lecture 5. Religion and attachment


Lecture 6. Religious attributions


Supervision questions

(1) Is religiosity a personality trait?

(2) “Belief in God is cognitively unnatural.” Discuss.

(3) Why do some religious beliefs have behavioural, motivational, and emotional implications, while others do not?

(4) How can religious belief be measured?

(5) Compare and contrast research on how people represent the supernatural properties of gods with how people represent the personality of gods.

(6) Who gets angry at God, and why?
3. Social representations theory, social constructionism and sociocultural psychology (Dr Juliet Foster)

This series of six lectures will introduce one of the foremost theories within the tradition of European social social psychology, social representations theory, which was first proposed by Serge Moscovici in the 1960s. These lectures will aim to provide a detailed account of the theory itself, and its applications within social and developmental psychology, while also considering the criticisms that have been levelled at it. Moreover, the lectures will aim to situate the theory of social representations within broader traditions of sociocultural psychology and social constructionism.

Lecture 1
• Situating the theory and describing the theory

This lecture will introduce the central issues within the theory, situating it both historically and in relation to other current social psychological theories.

Lecture 2
• Criticising the theory (and responding to that)

In this lecture we will consider some of the ways in which the theory of social representations has been criticised, both by theorists working within and outside the area, and some of the responses to those criticisms.


**Lecture 3**
- Applying the theory

We will then move on to think about how researchers can use social representations theory, and think about some of the methodological issues associated with it.


**Lecture 4**
- Some examples

This lecture will focus on some of the classic studies that have been conducted using the theory of social representations, and will aim to draw out some of the important theoretical and methodological issues that have been elaborated on within these studies.


**Lecture 5**
- Social representations and identity

The issue of how our social representations relate to the construction and maintenance of our identities is an important, and complicated one. The theory’s relationship with
another important theory within the same European tradition, social identity theory, will also be considered.


**Lecture 6**

- Situating the theory (again) – sociocultural approaches, dialogical psychology, social constructionism

In the final lecture, we will come back once again to focus on how the theory of social representations relates to other theories within social psychology, considering other contemporary theories within sociocultural psychology, including theories of dialogicality and other social constructionist theories.


4. Morality (Dr Simone Schnall)

McDougall (1908, p. 18) noted in one of the earliest social psychology textbooks that “The fundamental problem of social psychology is the moralization of the individual by the society into which he is born as a creature in which the non-moral and purely egoistic tendencies are so much stronger than any altruistic tendencies.” This module will review how theories of morality have involved both models based on rationalist assumptions, and models based on moral emotions and intuitions. Recent empirical papers from developmental, social and evolutionary psychology and neuroscience will be evaluated critically in the context of theories of morality.

Lecture 1: Developing Morality


Lecture 2: Moral Intuitions and Judgments


**Lecture 3: Moral Emotions and Social Behaviour**


**Lecture 4: Evolution, Religion and Morality**


**Lecture 5: Foundations of Morality**


**Lecture 6: Neural Substrates of Morality**


**Supervision Questions:**

1. What was Kohlberg’s contribution to the study of morality?
2. What role does emotion play in moral judgment?
3. How do evolutionary theories explain altruistic behaviour?
4. Is there evidence for a “morality area” in the brain?