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## **Using "12 Angry Men" as an Integrative Review of Social Psychology**

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### **Abstract**

The use of the feature film "12 Angry Men" (Fonda, 1957) as an integrative review of social psychology is described. Students view the film, and then discuss the many aspects of social psychology represented in the interactions among the jurors. Discussion involves tying the movie examples back to social psychological research and theory as well as analyzing whether the film portrayal is "accurate" given those theories. Examples of the topics brought up for discussion are given, as are student reactions to the exercise.

## **Using "12 Angry Men" as an Integrative Review of Social Psychology**

One of the challenges of teaching social psychology is getting students to recognize how all the various theories might come together and "look" in a real world situation. Many have used feature films as a tool to analyze theory and enhance student learning (e.g., Anderson, 1992; Boyatzis, 1994). The use of film can engage students and promote active learning. Films offer concrete examples for students (Kinney, 1975), and they often present human behavior in greater complexity than is portrayed in standard textbooks (Anderson, 1992). For several years, I have been using the movie "12 Angry Men" (Fonda, 1957) as an integrative review of social psychology. Others (e.g., Anderson, 1992; Bolt, 1976) have suggested using this movie as an example of jury decision making or conformity pressures. Careful viewing of the movie reveals that it contains much more. The movie has examples of many different social

psychological phenomena, portrayed in a complex and realistic setting. It is an engaging exercise that promotes active learning and processing of information. Because the movie was not made specifically to demonstrate social psychological principles, the examples are not always obvious, are often "messy", and require students to think deeply about the issues. Finally, the movie allows students to examine how situational forces can affect the behavior of individuals even though the individuals have strong and diverse personalities. This is often a point difficult for students to grasp, as they tend to think of personality and situation as counter-acting forces.

### **Setting Up the Class Exercise**

I use this exercise in my introductory social psychology class, typically just before the final. Students are given a list of topics in social psychology and are asked to look for examples of social psychological phenomenon while viewing the film. The list may include: Conformity, Minority Influence, Attribution, Aggression, Leadership, Persuasion, Groups Dynamics, Psychology & Law, Social Cognition, Prejudice, and Gender and Culture. As they watch the film, students list examples and tie them to research or theories from their text. After the movie, the class as a whole (or in smaller groups) discusses the examples. The class should also discuss whether the example matched what would be expected given social psychological theory, and if not, why not? Examples of responses are given below, though the typical class comes up with many more. Although this exercise is best conducted in one 3 hour session, I usually run it over consecutive 1 1/2 hour class periods. Students seem to have little trouble remembering the first half of the movie over a two day period.

It is also helpful to give students a list of the names of the key actors in the movie, as the characters in the movie are not known by names. The important actors include: 1) Henry Fonda: The architect who initially votes "not guilty". 2) Lee Cobb: Leader of the "guilty" group. 3) Jack Klugman: The man who grew up in a slum 4) E. G. Marshal: One of the last

voting "guilty". 5) George Voskovec: The recent immigrant. The list given to students should probably contain all 12 actors.

### **Examples of Student Responses**

Conformity: This is probably the most obvious example in the movie. The initial vote is a classic example of a public vote and normative influences (e.g., Asch, 1955). Jurors vote by show of hand. Several jurors exhibit definite signs of being undecided but give in to group pressures and vote guilty. Only one (Fonda) withstands this initial pressure. The second vote, a secret ballot, results in several not-guilty votes. There are other examples of votes throughout the movie. Have students identify the factors that affect levels of conformity. It is especially interesting to observe the dynamics when the vote nears 6 to 6.

Minority Influence: Henry Fonda proves to be an effective minority influence, whereas Lee Cobb fails miserably as a force of influence once he loses his majority status. Have students discuss the different styles of Henry Fonda and Lee Cobb in terms of effective minority influence (e.g., Moscovici, 1985). These include Fonda's lack of ulterior motives, his consistency and self-confidence, and the way he withstands personal attacks from others.

Attribution: There are many vivid examples of attribution errors and biases. For example (an actor observer bias, e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1971), the defendant is known to have yelled "I'm going to kill you" on the night of the murder. Cobb is adamant that no one would say this unless he meant it (internal attribution). A short time later, Fonda harasses Cobb until Cobb yells "I'll kill you". Cobb explains that he didn't mean it but he was forced into this outburst by the situation (external attribution).

Aggression: There are many aggressive outbursts and conflicts during the deliberations. Have students look for the causes of the aggressive outbursts -- it is usually frustration (e.g., Berkowitz, 1989). Also, students can discuss how the presence of the switchblade acts as an aggressive cue, and how the heat and crowding of the room may exaggerate aggressive responses.

Attraction: Although no real "attraction" occur in the jury room, there are some cases of at least temporary friendships forming. Have students examine who becomes friends with whom, and why. Friendships often involved perceived similarities (e.g., Byrne, 1969), or favors given and received (e.g., Jecker & Lany, 1969).

Leadership: The three leaders (Martin Balsam, Cobb, & Fonda) are great examples of the classic Laissez Faire, Authoritarian, and Democratic leadership styles (Lippitt & White, 1947). Students can discuss the effectiveness of each of these styles. Have students examine the differences between how Fonda and Cobb treat the other jurors, both inside and outside their groups. This discussion will often relate back to the issue of minority influence.

Persuasion: Note the persuasive tactics the jurors use on each other. For example, Fonda uses vivid appeals and self-sells (Cialdini, 1993). He buys a switchblade identical to that used by the killer, and he acts out a particularly important piece of eyewitness testimony. He also gets E.G. Marshall to prove to himself that it is difficult to remember the titles of movies (a key sticking point for the prosecution). Have students keep track of when jurors seem to be processing the persuasive appeals centrally or peripherally.

Group Dynamics and Decision Making: Ask students if being locked in a closed room serves to deindividuate the jurors (e.g., Deiner, 1979). Did that affect their behaviors? Also, discuss whether the deliberation has the factors associated with Groupthink (Janis, 1971). These factors include: feelings of invulnerability and higher moral purpose, time pressures, and unanimous decision making rules. Also, some jurors seem to be "social-loafing" or being "free-riders" while the rest of the jury does the difficult work.

Psychology & Law: Discuss the impact and accuracy of the eyewitness testimony (e.g., Wells, 1993). Observant students will also notice the judge's instructions and death qualification questions at the very beginning. Have students discuss how the tone of these instructions may have imparted a subtle (or not so subtle) message to the jury.

Social Cognition: Several key concepts in social cognition, including belief perseverance, reconstructed memories, overconfidence, and the use of heuristics, are represented in the juror's

thinking. Lee Cobb is particularly prone to these cognitive shortcomings. Have students identify as many as possible. Students may notice that the argument between jurors about whether the father "slapped" or "punched" his son bears an amazing resemblance to the classic study on whether the car involved in an accident was "hit" or "smashed" (Loftus, Miller, & Burns, 1978).

Prejudice: There are several powerful examples of prejudice and stereotypes. Some jurors vote guilty primarily because the defendant is "one of them" (though no actual ethnic identity is given) and that "everyone knows they are all killers". George Voskovec, a recent immigrant, is also subjected to negative reactions because of his ethnicity.

Culture & Gender: Ask students if the jury process would have been different if the jurors had not been 12 White males. Why? Even though the jurors were all White males, there was still diversity in terms of class, age, and country of birth. Have students discuss how this diversity affected the jury's decision-making process. For example, because Jack Klugman had grown up in a "slum", he knew how to use a switchblade. The information he alone possessed was important in analyzing that particular piece of evidence.

Finally, challenge students to decide if the jury really makes the right decision in the end, and whether they made the decision for the right reasons. Viewers have a tendency to romanticize the ending of the movie as right prevailing over wrong, but challenge students to entertain the idea that it was one set of situational forces winning out over the other. Ask them to envision the deliberation had the roles of Lee Cobb and Henry Fonda been reversed.

### **Student Evaluations**

Although no data is available on how this exercise affects student grades, students subjective reports indicate it is an enjoyable as well as useful exercise. A recent class rated the exercise on a 5 point scale with 1 = very positive and 5 = very negative. The results were as follows: Usefulness as a review = 1.56, Increased your understanding of social psychology = 1.89, Increased your interest in social psychology = 2.02, Enjoyable = 1.35. Open ended

responses indicate many students found this exercise helped them understand and integrate the different social-psychological theories. One student claimed "I finally see how this all fits together". The number of examples students are able to come up with after one viewing of the film is another good example of the effectiveness of the exercise. Students are usually able to recall theories and research findings from the beginning of the course, and associate them with the film (although they often had to return to their textbooks to look up names).

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