

*An Invitation to Social Psychology: Expressing and Censoring the Self*

Dale T. Miller (Stanford University)

Published by Thomson Wadsworth, 2006.

When is the last time you picked up a psychology textbook and read it from cover to cover? Dale T. Miller has written the Social Psychology text book I wish I would have had as an undergraduate student! In a style more familiar to European academia, Miller (Professor of Psychology, Stanford University) has produced a work that relies on a consistent theme, utilizing a clear narrative and potent examples to support his argument. Miller has realized that, in his own words, "...one can learn a lot *about* social psychology without learning about a lot *of* social psychology" (p. xi, Miller, 2006). With just over 120 pages of lively writing and a lack of the sometimes tedious pictures, tables, and figures that can distract, even instructors may find themselves mesmerized by the pages of this textbook. What Miller does well is manage to write about theory and research that most of us are very familiar with, but he does so in a way that builds a coherent and even at times suspenseful storyline of the social lives of humans.

*An Invitation to Social Psychology* tells the story of the human experience as it relates to our need to censor the Self in almost all social interacting. Miller proclaims early in the book that he chooses this theme because he "believe(s) that much of the most interesting research and theories in social psychology pertain in one way or another to the causes and consequences of people's acting or speaking in ways that contradict their private experience" (p. xi, Miller, 2006). The book goes in-depth on some of the most classic and contemporary issues related to humans as norms followers, meaning seekers, and how and why we work to preserve our groups standing and personal standing in it. It continues by exploring why and how we go about enhancing our attractiveness and worth, avoid the disapproval of others, and how and why our social behaviors often are related to a desire to remain true to our self-image. Seven chapters cover an introduction and the topics of Social Etiquette, Conformity, Self-Censorship and the Collective, Self-Censorship and the Individual, Censoring and Expressing Prejudice, and Censoring and Expressing Irrationality. The latter third of the book deals more precisely with if self-censorship requires conscious awareness and what the consequences of self-censorship are for the individual, the group, and society. Each chapter includes a standard type of review section and a section of questions meant to inspire the reader to think further about the content. The book also has a quite useful appendix of research summary tables and Thomson Wadsworth publishes a reader to accompany the main text.

With unusual candor about personal social experiences and an ability to generate realistic hypothetical scenarios, Miller has found a strong formula for grasping the reader's attention early and keeping it throughout the book. In my opinion, for students to fully develop academically, it is important that they experience themselves as creators of their own knowledge. The book's reliance on hypothetical scenarios stresses the relevancy of concepts and theories by continuously encouraging students to apply them to their own experiences and observations. Miller's writing provides a plethora of opportunities for self-reflection and encourages the reader to consider practical implications for their own everyday lives in a way that enhances interest and learning. In addition, in my experience as an educator, the best way to teach abstract concepts is to make useful comparisons to concrete, real-world examples that are easy to understand – and Miller does this brilliantly. That said, it is, however, the choice to explain select research studies in more depth than is usual for text books that I believe makes this book a winner. If students can experience early the excitement of taking part in the creative process of research, then they not only understand concepts better but also remain more engaged and passionate about the subject matter in general.

Miller has understood that using a lot of detail and depth when describing research in an introductory text book will enhance an appreciation for the relationship between theoretical concepts and the empirical research from which these concepts are developed. The narrative usually also binds each research study to an everyday example of social behavior, which brings liveliness and a sense of realism to the research – helping even the most novice reader to understand the external validity of most lab based experiments.

In closing, while topics such as pluralistic ignorance, attitude changes, prejudice, self-and-other endangering behaviors, and conforming to social and self pressure are well covered in this book – research related to social identity formation, mass communication, social-evolution, attachment, love, and leadership/organizational psychology are clearly underrepresented. Hence, instructors wanting to use this book as a sole textbook in an undergraduate level course may find social psychology defined in a very narrow way. Given this, while the book is warmly recommended, it may fit best if used as a supplement to other materials.

Dr Bjarne Holmes is Lecturer in Psychology at Heriot-Watt University, Scotland, where he runs the *Family and Personal Relationships Laboratory* and teaches, among other things, undergraduate courses in social psychology and social cognition.