Student Perceptions of Psychology as a Science in Introductory and Research Methods Psychology Courses

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Abstract
College students (N = 297) completed a perceptions of psychology as a science (PAS) survey before and after completion of psychology courses. PAS scores decreased significantly from the beginning to the end of the research methods courses, but introductory psychology courses did not change and communications psychology courses decreased their PAS perceptions. Implications for program development are discussed.

Introduction
While many psychologists consider themselves to be scientists, using the scientific method to conduct experiments on human behavior, convincing others of their scientific merit and fellowship among other ‘hard’ sciences such as biology, chemistry, and physics, has been quite a challenge. Recently, there has been a trend for university departments to change their names and course titles from Psychology to Psychological Science, or other variations highlighting the term science. In 2006, the American Psychological Society voted to change its name to the Association for Psychological Science, emphasizing its scientific mission. But what do students think about the scientific nature of the field of psychology? And what factors influence these perceptions?

Perceptions of psychology as a science (PAS) differ around the world. The Psychology as a Science Scale (Friedrich, 1996) investigated a sample of undergraduates from four universities in Brazil. Fifty-four percent of students strongly agreed that psychology was a science. Students strongly agreed that psychological research is necessary and that training in methodology is important (Morales, Abramson, Nair, Nelson, & Bartoszek, 2005). In an Australian sample, students viewed psychology to be a science within a few weeks of program commencement and their academic development influenced their view of psychology as a science (Provost et al., 2011). In the U.S., non-majors, including natural science and education majors, perceive psychology to be a soft-science or helping profession. However, psychology majors perceive the major to be more of a hard-science (Bartels, Hind, Glass, Gerson, & Whewell, & Yoder, 2010). Previous research supports the idea that advancement in psychological statistical courses and research method courses is associated with an increase in scientific thinking (Amsel, Baird, & Ashley, 2011; Holmes & Beins, 2009; Friedrich & Carnac, 2003).

Current Study Hypotheses
The current investigation was designed to examine how student perceptions of psychology as a science (PAS; Friedrich, 1996) would change upon completion of introductory and research methods psychology courses. We predicted that students would report an increase in PAS scores from the beginning to the end of all psychology courses, but a larger increase would be reported in research methods based courses which emphasize and/or require research experiences.

Method
Participants
College students (N = 297) enrolled in 12 psychology courses over three semesters from two universities participated in our study. The majority of students were from a medium sized public university in the Southeastern United States (84.2%), with the remaining from a branch campus of a large public university in the Midwestern United States. The average participant age was 21.13 years (SD = 3.41). Students were enrolled in introductory psychology (INTRO; n = 47), scientific communication in psychology (COMM; n = 163), research methods (RM; n = 59), and a senior thesis course (ST; n = 75). Consistent with the makeup of the major, the majority of students were women (61.12%). While a variety of majors were represented, approximately 80% of the sample were psychology majors. There were 12.8% freshmen, 17.5% sophomores, 33.1% juniors, 36.3% seniors, and 2.1% “other.” The racial distribution of the sample included 67.7% Caucasian, 22.5% African-American, 5.7% Hispanic/Latino, 1.3% Asian, 3% Native American, and 2.5% “other.” Participants received a minimal amount of extra credit for study participation.

Materials & Procedure
Students completed the PAS scale (Friedrich, 1996) at the beginning and end of the semester. The PAS measure was composed of 20 questions, including five filler items, with a 7-point Likert agreement response scale. See PAS scale below. In addition to anticipated course grade, participants also reported their course effort and enjoyment of the course on a 10-point Likert scale.

Participant age, sex, class rank, and major were collected on a demographic questionnaire.

Results
The pre PAS scores among all courses were similar, F (3, 293) = 1.05, p = .37, while the post PAS scores among all courses were significantly different, F (3, 293) = 8.11, p < .001. The post PAS scores for ST were significantly higher than the INTRO course (p = .002) and the COMM course (p < .001). The post PAS scores for RM were higher than the INTRO course (p = .09) and significantly higher than the COMM course (p = .04). See Figure.

Difference scores were calculated to examine student PAS change from the beginning to the end of the course. There were significant change between pre and post PAS scores by course, F (3, 293) = 12.31, p < .001. The PAS change scores increased more for the ST course (M = .259) compared to the INTRO course (M = .042)(p = .03) and the COMM course (M = .155)(p < .001), but not the RM course (M = .086) (p = .46). PAS change scores were not significantly different for students expecting As (M = .055), B (M = .023), or Cs (M = .081) in the courses, F (2, 291) = .40, p = .63.

Overall, there were no significant gender differences in PAS score changes, F (1, 294) = 2.53, p = .11, although men (M = 1.42) reported more positive changes than women (M = .042). PAS scores for men (M = .062) and women (M = .043) reported similar PAS score changes, F (1, 45) = 0.09, p = .99.

Although confounded by course, psychology majors (M = .067) reported a greater increase in PAS change scores than non-majors (M = -.115), F (1, 295) = 4.77, p = .03. Overall, there were positive relationships between PAS change scores and participant age [r (295) = .12, p = .03], course effort [r (295) = -.16, p = .005], and enjoyment of course [r (295) = .21, p < .001].

No significant differences in PAS scores were found between different professors teaching the same course.

Discussion
Despite students initially having very strong opinions that psychology is a science (over 5.0 on a 7-point scale), we found increases in PAS scores at the end of ST and RM courses, minimal changes in INTRO, and decreases in COMM courses. The ST and RM outcomes were expected, but the COMM findings were not. The COMM course focused on writing and communicating, which may have made the course seem less research and science oriented.

Previous research has found psychology student perceptions of PAS increase as students complete more psychology courses (i.e., Bartels et al., 2009). However, our study did not show significant differences between pre PAS scores among the different level courses, suggesting number of courses completed is not the only factor in engendering PAS beliefs. One-on-one interaction between faculty and students (Bjomsoen, 2000), especially working on research as in ST, may be especially important in strengthening psychology’s scientific status. Students can further strengthen their perception of psychology as a science through courses which emphasize research methodology and/or require students to complete a research project.

Past research has also found perceptions of psychology as a science differ due to personality differences across genders (Harton & Lyons, 2003). Future research could consider these variables and other influences.

Psychology departments may find the PAS to be a useful tool to assess student attitudes about psychology and consider the emphasis on psychology as a science in their respective program.

Selected References

Acknowledgements
We thank Coastal Carolina University for travel assistance to attend this conference and present our findings.

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Presented at the 26th Annual Association for Psychological Science Teaching Institute, San Francisco, CA, May 21st, 2014