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Running head: USING *THE SIMPSONS* AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Using *The Simpsons* to Teach Social Psychology

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Abstract

We examined students' perceptions of the effectiveness of clips from the popular animated television show *The Simpsons* in illustrating key concepts in social psychology. Students rated the clips favorably and reported that the clips helped them understand the material better and apply social psychological concepts to real-life situations. In addition, students' exam performance was significantly higher on clip-related questions than non-clip-related questions. These findings suggest that television clips can facilitate the learning process.

Using *The Simpsons* to Teach Social Psychology

Many instructors have found that showing all or part of popular films during class can increase student learning, interest, and enjoyment of key concepts by helping them make the connection between abstract theories and real-world examples (e.g., Badura, 2002; Boyatzis, 1994; Gee & Dyck, 1998; Kirsh, 1998; Raingruber, 2003; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2001). One disadvantage of using feature-length films is that they take up a significant amount of class time (Roskos-Ewoldsen & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2001).

An alternative to showing feature-length films is to use parts of a single television series to illustrate various key concepts throughout the course. In our undergraduate social psychology course, we showed clips from the animated television series *The Simpsons* to illustrate key social psychological concepts. We chose this particular cartoon for several reasons. First, we predicted that many students would be familiar with the show, which has been on television since 1989 and is also in syndication. Even if they did not watch the show, it was likely that students would be familiar with the characters and premise. We hoped this familiarity would decrease the set-up time for individual clips. Second, we expected that students had not thought about this particular show in an academic or critical way before. By examining social psychological concepts in novel ways, we hoped to increase students' learning (Kirsh, 1998; Mathis & Tanner, 1991). Third, the cartoon provides a humorous look at various social situations. We hoped that the clips would make students laugh and have fun while helping them see the concepts depicted in more-or-less realistic situations. Research has shown that students respond to cartoon humor in a generally positive way (Lowis, 2002). In addition, the research on mood and learning suggests that positive moods are positively associated with certain kinds of learning (e.g., Ashby, Isen, & Turken, 1999; Fiedler, Nickel, Asbeck, & Pagel, 2003).

After identifying clips from the second season of *The Simpsons* (Groening, 2002; available on DVD) that could effectively illustrate key social psychological concepts (a complete list of which is available from the authors), we selected five of the most appropriate to show in class: one general clip depicting many different possible social psychological phenomena to

present on the first day of class to generate discussion and four depicting specific concepts to present throughout the course (see Table 1). The length of each clip ranged from approximately 4 to 7 min. We were careful not to have clips from *The Simpsons* every class, partly because we did not want to overuse the technique and partly because we wanted to show other films and film clips.

Insert Table 1 about here

During the first lecture, we told students that they were to watch a short video clip and their task was to identify any possible social psychological phenomena in the clip. They then viewed the first *Simpsons* clip. The purpose of this exercise was twofold. First, research has shown that film clips shown on the first day of class can lighten the mood of the class and generate interest in the course (Badura, 2002). Second, we hoped that the clip would encourage class discussion. This exercise indeed seemed to lighten the mood of the class, and it was successful at encouraging students to participate in a class discussion.

We showed the remaining four clips throughout the course, immediately before introducing the relevant concept. Following a brief discussion about what was depicted in the clip, the lecturer described the concept in detail, referring back to the clip when possible. This technique is recommended by Roskos-Ewoldsen and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2001), who provide evidence of its effectiveness.

At the end of the course, students completed a questionnaire assessing their opinions of the various teaching aids used, including *The Simpsons* clips. Students were told that their feedback would help the instructor assess and improve the effectiveness of various pedagogical aids, including the course Web site, the textbook, and other films shown in the course.

Students ($N = 71$) rated their agreement on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with four items regarding the clips from *The Simpsons*. The items included “The use of the Simpsons clips was an effective way to illustrate key points” ($M = 4.68$, $SD = .60$),

“The Simpsons clips helped me to understand the material better” ($M = 4.41, SD = .86$), “I enjoyed the use of the Simpsons clips” ($M = 4.77, SD = .54$), and “The Simpsons clips helped me to apply key concepts to real-life situations” ($M = 4.11, SD = .85$). These ratings suggest that students found the clips from *The Simpsons* to be effective at illustrating key points and in helping them understand the material better and apply the key concepts to real-life situations. Students also regarded the clips as highly enjoyable, as evidenced both by their high ratings and by their written comments on the course evaluation. In addition, many students spontaneously mentioned how much they had enjoyed the use of the clips from *The Simpsons* in conversations with the instructor.

The fact that students enjoyed the clips and indicated that the clips helped them understand the concepts better is encouraging; however, student ratings do not allow us to determine whether the clips actually had a positive effect on student achievement. In order to address this issue, we examined students’ performance on multiple-choice exam questions related to the *Simpsons* clips. The midterm and final exams contained a total of 8 questions on the topics illustrated by the clips, and 142 questions on topics not illustrated by clips. We converted both scores to percentages for each student, and compared the mean performance. A total of 104 students wrote both exams. A paired-samples *t*-test indicated that the percentage of correct answers on the questions relating to the clips ($M = 83.17, SD = 13.58$) was significantly higher than the percentage of correct answers on the questions not relating to the clips ($M = 75.66, SD = 11.25$), $t(103) = 6.03, p < .05$.

The combination of self-report and actual performance measures in this study provides converging evidence that the clips were effective at both generating student interest and increasing comprehension of the material. These results should be interpreted with some caution, however, as we were unable to control all potentially confounding factors in this classroom study. A fully experimental design would be a more powerful test of the clips’ effectiveness. Further investigation might involve comparing the *Simpsons* clips to other non-*Simpsons* clips, controlling for the amount of time spent on clip and non-clip topics in class, and testing other

ways to use the clips (e.g., explaining the concept before showing the clip). Nonetheless, we believe that our results provide preliminary evidence that using television clips in the classroom can help the learning process. As suggested by an astute student in the class, one reason for the enduring success of *The Simpsons* may be its unique ability to tap into key social psychological concepts. We believe that this feature also makes it a potentially useful pedagogical tool for teaching social psychology.

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Note

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Table 1

Episode Clips from Season Two of The Simpsons and Social Psychological Concept Portrayed

| Episode title and number | Scene number, title, and description ^a | Social psychological concept | Length ^b |
|------------------------------|--|--|---------------------|
| Brush with Greatness (7F18) | No. 1: " <i>Main Title</i> "; No. 2: " <i>No One Gains 30 Pounds of Bone!</i> " A television commercial prompts Bart and Lisa to persuade Homer to take them to a water-themed amusement park. Homer gets stuck in a tube because he is too fat, is publicly humiliated, and vows to lose weight. | Persuasion, the self, prosocial behavior, social influence | 5 min 46 sec |
| Bart vs. Thanksgiving (7F07) | No. 5: " <i>Now We Can Blame Him For Everything!</i> " Lisa tries to figure out why Bart ruined her Thanksgiving centerpiece. | Attributions | 3 min 54 sec |
| Dead Putting Society (7F08) | No. 2: " <i>Marge, Beer Me!</i> " Homer is upset that his neighbor, Ned Flanders, seems to have a better life than he does. | Social comparison theory | 3 min 50 sec |
| Three Men and a | No. 4: " <i>It Smells Like My</i> | | 7 min 20 sec |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Comic Book (7F21) | <i>Grandpa</i> " and No. 5: " <i>If you Guys Hadn't Tied Me, I Could Be Saving the Comic</i> " | Conflict resolution |
| | Bart and two friends pool their money to buy a collectible comic, and then fight over who gets to take it home. | |
| Itchy & Scratchy & Marge (7F09) | No. 2: " <i>I Told You, My Baby Beat Me Up</i> " and No. 2: " <i>Dear Purveyors of Senseless Violence</i> " | 5 min 28 sec |
| | After baby Maggie responds violently after watching a violent television program, Marge campaigns against the makers of the program. | Television violence and aggression |

^a Scene numbers and titles correspond with those on the DVD (Groening, 2002).

^b Clips start at the beginning of the scene.