

# Taboo Topics in the Teaching of Psychology

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## Abstract

This study examined teaching taboo topics in psychology. Psychology professors described topics they found taboo or sensitive topics if they did not believe taboos existed. The results suggest that teachers believe some psychology topics are taboo but there is little consensus on what separates taboos from merely sensitive topics and little desire to restrict the teaching of taboos.

## Introduction

- Controversy surrounds many psychology topics, and a variety of factors make it difficult for teachers to express themselves freely.
- Taboo topics are off-limits in the classroom, which makes them distinct from topics that are merely controversial (Evans et al., 1999).
- Only one previous study documented taboos in psychology, and it focused on research conclusions (Clark et al., 2024).
- Taboo research tended to be about race, gender, sex, and group differences.
- Although taboos exist in psychology research, it is not clear if those taboos extend to the teaching of psychology.
- The current research filled that gap by assessing psychology teachers' beliefs about topics that are taboo to teach.

## Method

- The sample ( $N = 146$ ) included full-time psychology faculty from 4-year colleges and universities in the U.S.
- The survey was adapted from previous research on taboo research conclusions in psychology (Clark et al., 2024).

- Participants identified topics they considered taboo or sensitive, then described their beliefs about the topics.

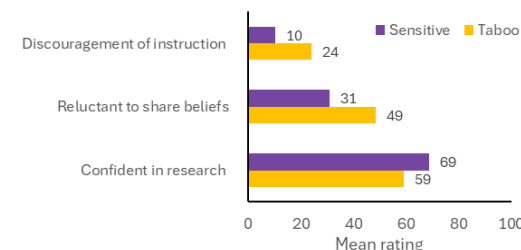
## Results

### Frequencies of Taboo and Sensitive Topics

| Topic                        | Taboo<br>( $n = 187$ ) |          | Sensitive<br>( $n = 149$ ) |          |
|------------------------------|------------------------|----------|----------------------------|----------|
|                              | %                      | <i>f</i> | %                          | <i>f</i> |
| Gender or biological sex     | 16                     | 30       | 18                         | 27       |
| Bias                         | 12                     | 22       | 9                          | 13       |
| Race differences             | 10                     | 18       | 9                          | 13       |
| Gender/sex differences       | 7                      | 13       | 5                          | 8        |
| Sexual orientation           | 6                      | 11       | 4                          | 6        |
| Evolution                    | 5                      | 10       | 1                          | 1        |
| Normal sexual behavior       | 5                      | 9        | 8                          | 12       |
| Abortion                     | 4                      | 8        | 5                          | 8        |
| Religion or spirituality     | 4                      | 8        | 3                          | 5        |
| Intelligence                 | 4                      | 7        | 2                          | 3        |
| Race or ethnicity            | 3                      | 6        | 5                          | 7        |
| Politics                     | 3                      | 6        | 6                          | 9        |
| Mental illness               | 3                      | 5        | 3                          | 5        |
| Abnormal sexual behavior     | 2                      | 4        | 4                          | 6        |
| Questionable science         | 2                      | 4        | 1                          | 2        |
| Political bias in psychology | 2                      | 3        |                            |          |
| Violence                     | 1                      | 2        | 3                          | 4        |
| Suicide                      | 1                      | 2        | 1                          | 1        |
| False memory                 | 1                      | 1        | 1                          | 1        |
| Eugenics                     |                        |          | 2                          | 3        |
| Concussion effects           |                        |          | 1                          | 2        |
| Other                        | 10                     | 18       | 9                          | 13       |

- Similar topics emerged as taboo and as sensitive to teach (see Table).
- Participants viewed taboos as stemming from conservative (37%) and liberal (28%) political ideologies more frequently than both ideologies equally (16%) or no ideology (19%),  $\chi^2(3, N = 159) = 16.93, p = .001, r = .33$ .

### Comparisons of Taboo and Sensitive Topics



- Comparisons of taboo and sensitive topics showed significant differences in ratings of discouragement of instruction, reluctance to share beliefs, and confidence in research, all  $t_s > 2.48$ , all  $p_s < .007$ , all  $d_s > 0.42$  (see Figure).
- Most participants supported teachers' complete freedom to teach taboo topics (55%) and to determine what topics risk too much harm to teach (55%), but many also believed the issue was too complicated for a definitive answer (44%).

## Discussion

- There are no universal taboos in psychology.
- Sound pedagogy may allow teachers to cover taboo topics without breaking norms.
- Future research should explore teachers' attitudes about instructional strategies for the topics that emerged as most taboo.

## References

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- Evans, R. W., Avery, P. G., & Pederson, P. V. (1999). Taboo topics: Cultural restraint on teaching social issues. *The Social Studies*, 90(5), 218–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377999909602419>