

# Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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*Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#). Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

[Visit the column](#) for supplementary components, including classroom activities and demonstrations.

Visit David G. Myers at his blog [“Talk Psych”](#). Similar to the APS *Observer* column, the mission of his blog is to provide weekly updates on psychological science. Myers and DeWall also coauthor a suite of introductory psychology textbooks, including *Psychology* (12th Ed.), *Exploring Psychology* (10th Ed.), and *Psychology in Everyday Life* (4th Ed.).

[Strength and Perceived Threat in Numbers: Teaching Students How to Celebrate Racial Diversity](#)

[Why People Believe Conspiracy Theories](#)

## Strength and Perceived Threat in Numbers: Teaching Students How to Celebrate Racial Diversity

by C. Nathan DeWall

[Craig, M. A., Rucker, J. M., & Richeson, J. A. \(2017\). The pitfalls and promise of increasing racial diversity: Threat, contact, and race relations in the 21st century. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*. Advance online publication.](#)

Do you oppose diversity? “Of course not,” most people will tell you. But after sifting through a swath of psychological research, Maureen Craig, Julian Rucker, and Jennifer Richeson (2018) tell another story.

The White American racial majority is on the cusp of going extinct. In less than 3 decades, most Americans will identify as non-White (US Census Bureau, 2015). Based on what Americans say, this should be good news. Nearly 6 in 10 Americans report that growing diversity makes the country a better place to live (Pew Research Center, 2016). Unfortunately, Americans’ prodiversity talk is cheap.

Rather than viewing increased racial diversity as a strength, Americans perceive it as a sign that their in-

group will become weak. Correlational and experimental studies show that actual and anticipated increases in racial diversity boost White Americans' anxiety, perceptions of threat, and hostility toward racial out-groups (see Craig et al., 2017, for a review). These findings are not unique to White Americans: When reminded of growth in the national Hispanic population, Black Americans and Asian Americans show greater support for conservative immigration policies (Craig & Richeson, 2017).

How can we reduce these negative reactions to increased racial diversity? Moving to a bustling metropolis is not the solution. In fact, the greater the racial diversity in a metropolitan area, the more its citizens show out-group bias (Oliver & Wong, 2003). For example, Detroit is known for its racial diversity, but its many racially segregated neighborhoods may do more to enhance in-group favoritism than out-group acceptance. What matters more is regular and positive contact with people who are racially diverse, have equal status, share common goals, cooperate, and support authorities (Allport, 1957; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Richeson & Shelton, 2007). Racially diverse neighborhoods share many of these features: People live in similarly priced houses or apartments; have common desires for living in a place that is safe, fun, and fulfilling; benefit more from cooperating than competing; and support others who function as authority figures. This may help explain why living in racially diverse neighborhoods is linked with lower levels of prejudice (Oliver & Wong, 2003; Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010; Schmid, Al Ramiah, & Hewstone, 2014).

To bring this cutting-edge research into the classroom, instructors can have students complete this 5- to 10-minute activity. That is a lot of class time, but it is a wise investment. Students will benefit from knowing about the consequences of increased racial diversity on prejudice and discrimination — and learn what they can do to make their racially diverse future world a better place.

Remind students that, by the year 2044, White Americans likely will account for less than 50% of the national population (US Census Bureau, 2015). How will that affect intergroup attitudes and actions? Ask students to respond to the following multiple-choice questions, presented on PowerPoint slides:

### Question 1

When White Americans perceive that they are becoming a racial minority, which of the following tends to happen?

1. They perceive minority populations as threatening.
2. They oppose racial integration.
3. They favor political policies that weaken minority populations.
4. They show more explicit and implicit bias in favor of Whites and against minority populations.
5. All of the above.

### Question 2

Living in a racially diverse **metropolitan area (e.g., a city)** predicts lower levels of anxiety, perceived threat, and hostility toward racial out-groups.

1. TRUE
2. FALSE

### Question 3

Living in a racially diverse **neighborhood** predicts greater levels of anxiety, perceived threat, and hostility toward racial out-groups.

1. TRUE
2. FALSE

Instructors then will give the class the answers (All of the above, FALSE, and FALSE). Ask students to form groups of three and spend 3 minutes discussing their responses (1 minute per question). Why might White Americans respond to actual or anticipated racial demographic shifts so negatively? Why does living in a racially diverse metropolitan area predict greater prejudice? Why is living in a racially diverse neighborhood linked with lower prejudice?

Time permitting, instructors can ask groups to spend 5 minutes designing an ideal city that would respond to increased racial diversity with *reduced* levels of intergroup prejudice and discrimination. Remind students to use Intergroup Contact Theory's four main ingredients — equal status, common goals, cooperation, and support of authorities (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Richeson & Shelton, 2007) — to foster intergroup relations. What would they name their fictitious city? What are the city's neighborhoods like during the workweek and on the weekends? How did they use the four pillars of intergroup contact to celebrate their city's racial diversity?

To increase the stakes, instructors can select the three most creative group responses to receive extra credit. At the beginning of the next class, instructors will announce and summarize the winning cities.

America is on a path toward increased racial diversity. We might tell ourselves and others that we welcome the day when our children will mingle with people of all races, when White American job candidates will represent a minority of applicants, and when our family and friends would be overjoyed if we decided to marry or adopt a child of a different race. But this idealistic thinking doesn't jibe with the here and now. By learning about the reality of how people respond to actual and anticipated racial demographic shifts, we can better prepare and position ourselves, our students, and our communities to celebrate the gift of racial diversity.

## Why People Believe Conspiracy Theories

*by David G. Myers*

[Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. \(2017\). The psychology of conspiracy theories. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*, 26, 538–542.](#)

Surely you and your students have heard at least some of the following statements:

- NASA faked the moon landing.
- The Holocaust is a myth.
- The US government planned the 9/11 attacks, which were controlled demolitions.

- Crashed UFO spacecraft are stored at Nevada's Area 51.
- An international plot concealed Barack Obama's birthplace and made him president.
- Global warming is a hoax.
- The Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre was done to promote gun control.
- President Kennedy's assassination was planned by more than a lone assassin.
- Millions of illegal voters cost Donald Trump the popular vote.
- Russia hacked Democratic emails to help Trump win.

Indeed, you likely believe at least one of these (mindful that conspiracies do happen). Only one-third of Americans believe the official explanation of JFK's assassination — that one man alone was responsible (Enten, 2017). After the 2016 US presidential election, most voters (though only 20% of Trump supporters) agreed that Russian email hackers did attempt to influence the results (Frankovic, 2016).

But why do so many people believe theories that are just plain fake news? Why were 27% of respondents to a recent US National Comorbidity Survey "convinced there is a conspiracy behind many things in the world" (Freeman & Bentall, 2017)? (In this survey, conspiracy beliefs were most common among less educated, lower income, unemployed, irreligious males.)

University of Kent researchers Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka (2018) offer some answers, but before sharing their conclusions, instructors might wish to assess their students' own conspiracy beliefs. Ask students to raise a hand if they agree with the following statement: "I am convinced there is a conspiracy behind many things in the world." Or, if time permits, give students a selection of items from the [Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale](#).

Instructors could then invite students to spend 3 minutes writing (and sharing in small groups or with the class) their answers to two questions:

- *Examples:* What conspiracy theories — unwarranted explanations for events that involve secret plots by powerful, evil groups — are they aware of? For each, how many people would need to have kept the conspiracy a secret?
- *Psychological explanations:* What cognitive and social factors might fuel and sustain such conspiracy theories?

The Douglas team identifies three psychological motives underlying conspiracy beliefs:

- The *epistemic* (knowledge) motive: When bewildered by chaos or random events, people seek explanations. Faced with uncertainty, people turn to conspiracy theories to make sense of the world. They "provide broad, internally consistent explanations," say Douglas and colleagues. Many people assume that big events require big causes.
- The *existential* (meaning of existence) motive: Faced with a changing world, people also seek safety and security to feel in control. To those feeling adrift, conspiracy theories may offer the hope of empowerment.
- The *social* motive: As social creatures, people welcome a group identity. The social definition of who we are supports our sense of self. When experiencing ostracism, people therefore become more accepting of superstitions and conspiracy theories. Thus, conspiracy theories are attractive to those who have, for example, been on the losing side of elections and who now embrace the

belonging and shared reality of others in their threatened group.

With such dynamics at play, should we be surprised that conspiracy theories tend to cluster among the same individuals? Much as prejudices coexist — with antigay, anti-immigrant, anti-Black, anti-Muslim, and antiwomen sentiments often living inside the same skin — so people often believe in multiple conspiracies, even contradictory ones. In two studies by the Kent team, the more that people believed that Princess Diana faked her own death, the more they also believed that she was murdered. And the more that they believed that Osama bin Laden was already dead when American forces raided his compound, the more they believed he was still alive (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012).

As a one-time researcher of group polarization, my hunch is that the suspicions that people bring to a group may further strengthen as they discuss them with like-minded others. Within the internet's echo chamber, we selectively receive and feed one another information — and misinformation. Thus, over time, views may become more extreme. Suspicion may become conviction. Disagreements may escalate to demonization. Group polarization happens.

Thankfully, science education helps. Learning the science behind vaccines, space travel, and climate change matters. Teaching the critical thinking skills that can help people distinguish the falsities from the truth makes a difference. Science education at its best inoculates students against tomorrow's fake news and prepares them to think smarter.

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