

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

April 29, 2014

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 David G. Myers and C. Nathan DeWall's new blog "[Talk Psych](#)." Similar to the APS *Observer* column, the mission of their blog is to provide daily updates on psychological science.

[Teaching Students About the Psychology of Eating Animals](#)

[Teaching Sexual Orientation](#)

Teaching Students About the Psychology of Eating Animals

By C. Nathan DeWall

[Loughnan, S., Bastian, B., & Haslam, N. \(2014\). The psychology of eating animals. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23\(2\), 104–108. doi:10.1177/0963721414525781](#)

Ronald was one of those friends I'll never forget. He had bushy eyebrows, tons of confidence, and got along with everyone. He was equally happy chilling out by the pool, running laps around a lake, or watching television. I hated to see him experience discomfort, just as he felt bad seeing me wince in pain. You see, Ronald was a dog I used to babysit. And I never thought of eating him.

Why not? According to Steve Loughnan, Brock Bastian, and APS Fellow Nick Haslam (2014), my experience illustrates half of the *meat paradox*: People care about animals, but they also eat animals. To understand the psychology of eating animals, Loughnan and colleagues argue that we must examine features of the eaters, the eaten, and the act of eating:

- *The eaters*: Compared with people who don't eat meat, many meat eaters value masculinity and score highly on traits associated with dominating others (for example, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation).

- *The eaten*: The less an animal resembles a human, the easier it is to eat. This includes the animal's ability to experience pain.
- *The act of eating*: Simply eating meat can help people cope with negative feelings they may have about eating animals. In one study, people who ate beef (vs. nuts) rated cows as less able to experience pain (Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010). The implication is that eating meat causes people to search for reasons why doing so did not harm the eaten animal.

Food is a touchy topic. When taking this innovative research into the classroom, we urge instructors to tread lightly. Many people have strong opinions and experiences related to food, especially meat consumption. At no point should students chastise meat eaters or non-meat eaters. Instructors can take a different approach by framing the meat paradox as a mystery that the scientific method can help solve.

Loughnan uses the following activity to teach the meat paradox. First, he asks students, "Think about pigs. Jot down three characteristics of pigs." After a few moments, he says, "Now, think about dogs. Jot down three characteristics of dogs." Wait a few moments and then ask students to volunteer a characteristic of pigs or dogs. "Normally you quickly get to either pigs being dirty, stupid, or lazy, or dogs being smart, loyal, and friendly," says Loughnan.

Here is where Loughnan says things get interesting. "At this point, I say 'Okay, so pigs are dirty or gross. What about dogs? Are dogs dirty and gross?' People often say, 'Yep, my dog is.'" Then he says, "So pigs are stupid? Actually, research shows that pigs are highly intelligent, similar to dogs." The instructor pauses and says, "So dogs are friendly? Pigs form lifetime bonds to other pigs and even humans. They live in complex social environments in the wild." Finally, Loughnan asks how many of his students eat pork. "A very large number say yes, including me, which I think emboldens them!" he says. He then asks how many of his students eat dog, which he says can make his students "look horrified."

Loughnan says the exercise shows students that what drives our decisions to eat certain animals relates to *perceptions* rather than to *objective reality*. "Pigs and dogs are actually quite similar," he says. "But to us one is a pet and one is food."

The second activity encourages students to construct a *plant paradox*. Many students can identify one type of fruit or vegetable they like. First, ask students to buy one piece of their favorite fruit or vegetable. Next, have students do the following:

- Give it a name, hometown, and hobby. Be creative!
- Rate it on the Big Five personality traits (conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, extroversion).
- If it could talk, what would it say? Why would it be better or more interesting than the other fruits and vegetables?
- Give it a special place in your home. It might be a special nook in the refrigerator, the top of the desk, or on a nightstand.
- Don't eat it or a similar fruit or vegetable (its "cousins") for a week.

At the end of the week, have students jot down a few characteristics about the fruit or vegetable for which they've cared. Have students share that information with a discussion partner. Finally, have the

small groups discuss whether, compared with the previous week, it would be easier or more difficult to eat their piece of fruit or vegetable that day. Why might their perceptions have changed? If their perceptions did not change, why is it harder to experience a plant paradox compared with a meat paradox? What does this say about how we perceive plants versus animals?

Food does more than fill our bellies. It can give us a sense of meaning, adventure, and serenity. Taste drives what we choose to eat. But more than that, our perceptions of what we eat help us make sense of why it's okay to eat some foods rather than others. We may never solve the meat paradox — or experience feelings for fruits and vegetables. We can only hope to gain a better understanding of the food that we eat and how our minds feed our food choices.

Teaching Sexual Orientation

By David G. Myers

[Hatzenbuehler, M. L. \(2014\). Structural stigma and the health of lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23, 127–132. doi: 10.1177/0963721414523775](#)

When teaching controversial topics, such as those we engage with in this *Observer* column, we find it helpful to remember our priorities. Our calling as teachers is to, as best we can, 1) discern and give witness to truth, 2) equip our students to be critical truth seekers for themselves, and 3) be sensitive to our students' diverse political, religious, and social views. There is a place for argumentative op-ed essays and books (indeed, one of us authored an argumentative 2005 book subtitled *The Christian Case for Gay Marriage*). But our classrooms and textbooks instead appropriately focus on offering evidence, thinking tools, and credible perspectives that can help our students draw their own conclusions.

Among the psychological science insights pertinent to our public dialogue about sexual orientation and marriage are these, each of which is evidence based:

- 1) We humans have a *need to belong* — to connect with others in close, intimate, enduring relationships. We are social animals.
- 2) Sexual orientation is a *natural disposition* (most clearly so for males, who exhibit less “erotic plasticity”). In view of evidence regarding gay-straight differences in genes, prenatal experience, and brain centers, even the conservative Focus on the Family concurs that “we do not believe an individual typically ‘chooses’ his or her same sex-attractions.”
- 3) Sexual orientation is also an *enduring disposition*, which is seldom reversed by willpower, ex-gay ministries, or reparative therapy.
- 4) *Public attitudes* regarding sexual orientation and gay rights have *changed rapidly* and are marked by moderate gender and substantial generational differences.

Some students, from the conservative ends of various religious traditions, may object to these facts. In

response, it can be noted — without disrespect — that people of faith are having their own internal debates. Some biblical scholars, for example, note that the Protestant Bible's 31,103 verses contain but seven verses that speak of same-sex behaviors, none of which involve a long-term, same-sex partnership.

To these evidence-based conclusions, Mark L. Hatzenbuehler (2014) adds another: “structural stigma”: policies, practices, and cultural norms that label, stereotype, separate, denigrate, and discriminate, are toxic to gay, lesbian and bisexual (LGB) people, and place them at increased risk for psychological disorders and premature death.

Before presenting Hatzenbuehler's impressive data, we could ask our students, *how could we know* whether social policies, such as statewide bans on same-sex marriage or the lack of nondiscrimination protections for gay people, affect their health and well-being? What sort of research could give us answers?

In response, students may volunteer examples of cross-sectional, longitudinal, and quasiexperimental studies. Hatzenbuehler provides examples of each:

Cross-sectional evidence:

Stigma variation by state. Compared with LGB people in states with hate crime and employment nondiscrimination protections, LGB people in states without such protections have significantly higher rates of psychiatric disorders. For example, in states with such protections, there is no gay-straight difference in the mood disorder *dysthymia* (chronic, mild depression). But in states without such protections, LGB people have 2.5 times the dysthymia rate of heterosexual people. The discerning student may, however, wonder: Might these states vary in other pertinent ways, such as income and education? Yes, but the difference persists even after controlling for demographic factors.

Stigma variation by neighborhood. In Boston, LGB youth residing in neighborhoods with higher rates of “LGBT assault hate crimes” report more suicidal ideation and suicide attempts than do youth in lower hate crime neighborhoods. (Heterosexual youth's suicidality does not similarly vary across these neighborhoods.)

Longitudinal evidence: When following lives through time, local community antigay attitudes (as discerned in the General Social Survey) predict life expectancy. The 12-year life expectancy difference between LGB respondents living in low- versus high-stigma communities corresponds to the life expectancy gap between those with and without a high school education. Suicide, homicide, and cardiovascular deaths are all “substantially elevated among LGB individuals in high-structural stigma communities.”

Quasiexperimental evidence: Students may wish for a natural experiment, in which a state- or community-level stigma is introduced or removed. Would that affect LGB people's health and well-being for better or for worse? It would be unethical and unfeasible to randomly assign individuals to high- versus low-structural stigma environments. But in quasiexperiments, researchers can take advantage of naturally occurring changes in structural stigma. All they need is health data from both before and after the social policy change.

Introducing structural stigma. The United States offers just such a quasiexperiment. In 2004, notes Hatzenbuehler, 16 states passed constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage. Fortuitously (for us behavioral scientists), national mental health assessments were done before (in 2001) and after (in 2005) the introduction of these structural stigmas. The results are stunning: In states that passed same-sex marriage bans, LGB people (but not heterosexuals) experienced a 37% increase in mood disorders, a 42% increase in alcohol use disorders, and a 248% increase in general anxiety disorders. In the other states that did not pass these amendments, no significant increases in psychiatric disorders occurred among LGB respondents.

Removing structural stigma. In the 12 months after Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage, its LGB residents experienced a 14% reduction in depression, an 18% reduction in hypertension, and a 15% reduction in health-care use and costs (while the general state population evidenced an increase in health-care costs during this period).

After brainstorming ways to explore the effects of stigma and then learning the results of actual studies, instructors could also ask:

What might explain these seeming effects on LGB health and well-being? (Students may conjecture stress and other biopsychosocial mechanisms.)

What other forms of stigma exist — and how might we explore these? Hatzenbuehler notes that instructors could show “big data” possibilities, such as the frequency of racist or homophobic tweets from different areas of the United States (see users.humboldt.edu/mstephens/hate/hate_map.html#). ∞

Reference

Loughnan, S., Haslam, N., & Bastian, B. (2010). The role of meat consumption in the denial of moral status and mind to meat animals. *Appetite*, 55, 156–159.