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 David G. Myers and C. Nathan DeWall's new blog "Talk Psych" at www.talkpsych.com. Similar to that of the APS *Observer* column, the mission of their blog is to provide daily updates on psychological science.

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Why Self-Control and Grit Matter — and Why It Pays to Know the Difference

By C. Nathan DeWall

Duckworth, A., & Gross, J. J. (2014). Self-control and grit: Related by separable determinants of success. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 23,* **319–325.**

David Blaine dazzles onlookers with his endurance feats. He once held his breath underwater for over 17 minutes. To accomplish this feat, Blaine spent decades preparing his mind and body. He ignored critics, doctors, and friendly advice. He bounced back from failure, embraced discomfort, and adjusted his goals until success was the only option. He had true grit.

But David Blaine is not immune to common human struggles. Like many of us, he has struggled to maintain a healthy body weight and sometimes fails to pay his bills on time (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011). How can such a gritty person struggle with self-control?

Grit and self-control are not two sides of the same coin, according to Angela Duckworth* and APS Fellow James Gross (2014). Grit refers to remaining laser-focused on goal achievement over extensive periods of time. Self-control, in contrast, is the capacity to shift our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors away from momentary temptations and toward desirable responses. Grit and self-control both relate to

health, wealth, and success (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Duckworth et al., 2007; Moffitt et al., 2011). Gritty people also tend to be self-controlled, but grit and self-control have slightly different flavors.

To take this cutting-edge research into the classroom, begin with the following 5-minute activity, "What job will this person enjoy the most?" In our experience, students enjoy discussing connections between psychological science and career options. On PowerPoint slides, present students with the following information:

Slide #1

We're going to talk about two related yet distinct psychological traits: grit and self-control.

Slide #2

Grit is when people work hard, often over years or even decades, toward a challenging and superordinate goal. Marathon runners show grit by sticking to a training schedule even when it is uncomfortable.

Self-control is when people overcome temptation to bring their responses in agreement with what's appropriate or desired. Students demonstrate self-control when they choose to study instead of play video games.

Bill Clinton displayed grit by campaigning to win the presidency twice, but demonstrated low self-control when he engaged in inappropriate behavior with an intern.

Slide #3

Grit and self-control relate, but they aren't the same thing. With a partner, brainstorm one or two jobs that a person with different levels of grit and self-control might enjoy most. There aren't any incorrect answers. You can't repeat the same answer for any person.

High grit and high self-control: _____
High grit and low self-control: _____
Low grit and high self-control: _____
Low grit and low self-control: _____

Encourage students to discuss why they chose the professions they did. What skills might people with high grit and low self-control have that would make them a good job candidate? What about people with low grit and high self-control? How might knowing a job candidate's grit and self-control scores help or harm an employer's ability to make good hiring decisions?

The second activity is called "Building True Grit." Either before or during class (time permitting), have students watch David Blaine's TED MED talk. It discusses his historic breath-holding achievement. Next, show students the following quote from the talk:

"I wanted to see how long I could go without breathing …
I didn't realize that it would become the most amazing journey of my life."

Have students spend 5 minutes brainstorming a personal goal that might fill their lives with the same level of meaning. Ask students to propose two or three goals using the same structure Blaine used in his TED MED talk:

I wanted to _____ … I didn't realize that it would become the most amazing journey of my life.

Encourage students to discuss their goals, what possible obstacles they will need to overcome, and how many months, years, or even decades it will take to achieve their goals. Finally, ask all students, "How can you get started today?"

The final activity is called "Modify Your Surroundings, Modify Your Mind." In her teaching, Duckworth encourages students to identify personal goals and how they might achieve them. Next, she asks students to consider making a physical change to their environment that would aid their self-control. For example, if a student wanted to lose weight, the environmental change might take the form of removing tasty donuts from the kitchen or bringing fitness equipment into the living room. By modifying one's environment, Duckworth suggests, it may be possible to avoid the allure of temptations that can thwart our goals.

The human mind is stronger than any muscle we can develop. Our grit allows us to overcome obstacles that seem insurmountable and can keep us working toward a goal that may take the majority of our lives to complete. Our self-control helps steer us away from persnickety peccadillos and toward well-being and achievement. By understanding how grit and self-control relate and differ, we can make lasting changes to our lives that will improve our well-being, our relationships, and the contributions we make to society.

* Angela Duckworth will be speaking as part of the Presidential Symposium at the 2015 APS Convention, May 21–24 in New York City.

The Psychology of Extremism

By David G. Myers

Hogg, M. (2014). From uncertainty to extremism: Social categorization and identity formation. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 23*, 338–342.

Barbaric beheadings. Suicide bombers. Horrific genocides. Violent gangs. Fundamentalist zealots. Conspiracy theories. Polarized politics. Today's world seems plagued by radical extremes from which most people recoil. A September 2014 Pew Research Center poll found 62% of Americans are "very concerned" about "Islamic extremism around the world" — up from 37% in 2011.

What circumstances and dispositions breed such radical and reactionary extremes?

In the aftermath of Nazi fascism, psychologists led by Theodor Adorno (1950) explored the roots of poisonous anti-Semitism. They concluded that the insecurities and fears of right-wing authoritarians predisposed them to an intolerance of ambiguity and an inflexible right–wrong way of thinking. Authoritarian personalities were said to be submissive to those with power and punitive toward those of lower status. Other psychologists have explored a broader dogmatism that surfaces on both the extreme left and the extreme right (Altemeyer, 2004; Rokeach, 1960) and a dog-eat-dog social dominance orientation that focuses on social hierarchies, with associated ethnocentrism, nationalism, and homophobia (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

In further search of the roots of animosities and extremism, social psychologists have identified additional forces at work, which perhaps could also be explored with students in class discussion:

1. *No matter our similarities with others, we focus on our differences.* As William McGuire and his coresearchers observed (1978), we tend to be conscious of how we differ from others around us — whether by hair color, birthplace, race, sexual orientation, or height.
2. *Group solidarity increases among those facing a common enemy.* As Muzafer Sherif (1966) demonstrated, a shared threat or rival feeds "we feeling," patriotism, and even willingness to engage in war.
3. *Discussion among the like-minded often produces group polarization.* Analysis of terrorist organizations has shown that the terrorist mentality evolves from people who share a grievance, their views growing more extreme as they dialogue within their own face-to-face or Internet echo chamber.
4. *We naturally divide our worlds into "us" and "them," ingroup and outgroup.* For our Stone Age ancestors, and for us, there is safety in solidarity. We are social creatures. We live in groups, with social identities that define who "we" are.

Extending this last point, the eminent social identity researcher and APS Fellow Michael Hogg, along with his coworkers, has time and again observed how people's feelings of uncertainty about their world and their place in it — about who they are and how they should act — motivate their identifying with tightly defined groups. Much as dissonance motivates its own reduction, and much as insecurity feeds authoritarian tendencies, so uncertainty motivates people's seeking social identity. Uncertainty subsides as people perceive that "we" are like this, and "they" are like that. For someone living in a chaotic or uncertain world, becoming part of a tightly knit group feels good; it validates who they are and what they believe. That's the nub of Hogg's "uncertainty–identity theory," which is supported by experiments that alter people's feelings of uncertainty.

Twenty-first century extremism and political polarization are fit topics for class presentation and discussion. To prime student discussion, pause the class and ask students to write for 2 or 3 minutes and then, either in small groups or as a whole class, to share their thoughts on the following topics:

1. *What sorts of situations, or what times of life, lead people to feel uncertain, anxious, or insecure?* One answer might be the transition from one's familiar home to an unfamiliar new college life. Other possibilities include migration, job loss, divorce, poverty, and fear of death.
2. *Are the teen and emerging adult years — a time of changing ideas, shifting identities, and vocational questions — years of increased uncertainty, and therefore of potential interest in extreme groups?*
3. *What sorts of extreme groups might appeal to people in such times of personal uncertainty?* Answers might include street gangs, extreme right or left political groups, protest groups, fraternal organizations, and religious cults or fundamentalist cells. Religious organizations are especially well-suited to reducing feelings of uncertainty, Hogg has noted.

Out of respect for students' political and religious diversity, instructors will not wish to demean students' politics or faith. Perhaps they can acknowledge, as have psychologists from William James *(The Varieties of Religious Experience)* to Gordon Allport ("Religion is paradoxical. It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice," 1958, p. 413) to Hogg and his colleagues (2010) — that religiosity comes in varied forms. Thus, religion — can we all agree? — has, in some forms, been associated with humility, compassion, and joy — but, in other varieties, especially when salving uncertainty, used as justification for terror and genocide. For all sorts of cruel deeds, noted William James, "piety is the mask" (1902, p. 264).

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