Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

March 31, 2015

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 the APS Observer column, the mission of their blog is to provide weekly updates on psychological science.

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The Truth About Trust

By C. Nathan DeWall

Van Lange, P. A. M. (2015). Generalized trust: Four lessons from genetics and culture. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 24,* **71–76.**

Imagine that you have children, and they care what you think. In this fantasy world, your kids ask you to pick one trait that all of their future romantic partners must have. Which trait would you pick? Your new son- or daughter-in-law's intelligence and attractiveness are fine things to brag about around your weekly card game. But they won't do any good if your child marries a flake. You want to select the equivalent of a golden ticket trait — something that will bode well for a person's individual health, relationship quality, and the society in which he or she lives.

Our kids might never ask us for relationship advice, but psychological scientists have identified the trait we want their partners to have. According to APS Fellow Paul Van Lange (2015), it's trust. Trusting people feel comfortable putting themselves in vulnerable positions because they assume that others will help them. They also handle uncertainty and conflict well and live long, satisfying, and healthy lives.

What else do we know about trust? Van Lange offers four main principles:

   1. Trust is learned more than it is inherited. Cultures differ in how much people trust others. In

cultures with high income inequality and corruption, trust tends to plummet. Trust has only a small genetic component.
2. Trust is socially received and transmitted. Our experiences inform our trusting tendencies. We also learn to trust and distrust based on the experiences of those close to us and on culturally transmitted information.
3. Trustworthy people are common white swans, but many people think those who deserve our trust are rare black swans. Translation: There are lots of people out there who deserve our trust, but we incorrectly assume they are in short supply.
4. Without going overboard, learning to be vulnerable and to trust others is a good thing.

To bring this cutting-edge research into the classroom, instructors can sample from four short activities designed to illustrate these principles.

The first activity, "Does Trust Run in Our Genes?," requires instructors to address that pesky concept that befuddles so many students: heritability. Heritability is how much variation among individuals can be attributed to their differing genes. Instructors can then show students the following psychological traits and have them estimate their level of heritability (1 = *not at all heritable*, 5 = *highly heritable*):

_____   Conscientiousness

_____   Agreeableness

_____   Neuroticism (emotional stability)

_____   Openness to experience

_____   Extraversion

_____   Trust

Have students form pairs and encourage them to discuss their ratings. Do all of the traits seem highly heritable? How might the heritability of trust differ from that of the other personality traits? Instructors can finish by sharing with students the results of psychological research, which suggest that basic personality traits have a strong heritable component but that trust does not (Bouchard, 2004; Van Lange, Vinkhuyzen, & Posthuma, 2014).

The second activity, "Who Teaches Us to Trust?," encourages students to think about how they learn to trust others. Ask students to think of people they trust and why they trust them. Next, ask students who gave them the knowledge and experience that led them to trust that person. Was their trust born out of their own personal experiences? The experiences of relationship partners or family members? Social media, cultural traditions and norms, or other external sources? Encourage students to consider which of these three sources fuels their trust the most and how the answer depends on the situation and person involved.

The third activity is short and sweet. On a PowerPoint slide, show students the following scenario:

Imagine the following situation: You walk to class and a smiling stranger approaches you. He reaches into his back pocket, opens his wallet, and hands you a crisp $5 bill. "I want to give you this money," he says. "Every day I try to help a stranger. Today that person is you."

What do you think of this person? Do you take his money?

Based on Van Lange's research, most people will be wary of such behavior. Why? Would it make a difference if the stranger were female, a family member, or a celebrity? What are the benefits of assuming that we cannot trust seemingly kind strangers? What are the costs?

The final activity encourages students to think of ways to become more trusting. What are three ways that they can learn to trust others more? At what point does it become too dangerous to be too trusting? When is trust worth being duped?

The truth about trust is that it is one of the most powerful yet least understood human strengths. You might know a pair of trusting twins, but their shared tendency to trust has little to do with their identical genes. Our lives reverberate with information that steers us to trust or doubt. Whether it is through a childhood experience, a roommate, or a titillating tweet, trust is gained and lost by our own and shared experiences. By learning about the power of trust, we can also learn to accept some vulnerability and view others as genuine do-gooders instead of genuine goblins.

Paul Van Lange will participate in the symposium "Trust: The Root of Human Cooperation" at the 2015 APS Annual Convention in New York City, May 21–24.

How Close Relationships Foster Health and Heartache

By David G. Myers

Rook, K. (2015). Social networks in later life: Weighing positive and negative effects on health and well-being. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 24*, **45–51.**

As social animals — as people who need people — our connections feed our highs and lows, our times of greatest happiness and deepest hopelessness. APS Fellow Karen Rook, a long-time explorer of social influences on adult psychological and physical health, highlights these social helps and harms.

To prime students' thinking about relational joys and woes — and their health aftereffects — instructors might first ask them to consider the following:

1. Over the past week, what prompted your time of greatest joy or contentment?
2. What prompted your greatest moment of stress or despair?

Without invading students' privacy, one could then ask for a show of hands: How many of those happy moments involved a social situation — some experience or event that included another person (rather than being a solo happening)? And ditto for the upsetting moment.

Some years ago, Peter Warr and Roy Payne (1982) asked similar questions of British adults. The most frequently reported strain? "Family." And the most frequently reported source of pleasure? "Family." Hell may be "other people," as Sartre (1944) wrote, but so is heaven.

Rook catalogs the sorts of experiences that students may recall. Our social networks offer us

- *Support*: aid and care in times of need or stress.
- *Companionship*: shared enjoyments and respite and diversion from daily hassles.
- *Self-regulation*: influences that deter us from health-damaging behaviors and support healthy behaviors.

But they also burden us with

- *Support failures*: social network disruptions and unmet needs for assistance.
- *Rejection/neglect*: thwarting our need to belong, and exclusion from enjoyments.
- *Harmful influences*: social pressures that undermine sound health practices.

As teachers of psychology know well, close relationships predict both health and well-being. Epidemiological studies have tracked thousands of lives across decades. Their conclusion: People with ample social connections enjoy survival rates about 50% greater than those with fewer connections (across an average 7.5-year study period in one analysis of 148 studies; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Losing close relationships to death or divorce predicts increased health risk (Kaprio, Koskenvuo, & Rita, 1987; Sbarra, Law, & Portley, 2011). Friends have benefits. As Susan Pinker (2014, p. 43) says, longevity is a "team sport."

The state of our social networks also can entail negative health effects. Peer influences predict smoking (Rose, Chassin, Presson, & Sherman, 1999). Marital conflict slows physical-wound healing (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005). Loneliness can be depressing (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009). Like other forms of real pain, ostracism and social rejection can foster aggression (Riva, Wirth, & Williams, 2011).

But Rook goes further. She connects the social network components to health and well-being. In some studies, for example, health in later life is better predicted by close companionship than by supportive care. And she notes that positive interactions occur far more often than negative interactions — but the latter are experienced more acutely and have more physiological effects. Thus, marriage predicts health and longevity, but what matters most is marital *quality* (Robles, 2014). In successful marriages, positive interactions (e.g., smiling, touching, complimenting, laughing) generally outnumber negative interactions (e.g., sarcasm, disapproval, insults) by at least a 5:1 ratio, reports John Gottman (1998).

To demonstrate the greater potency of negative interactions, Rook suggests distributing written statements asking students to imagine a wedding reception at which a groom overhears a whispered comment made by one guest to another. Half of the students learn that the overheard comment was "The groom is a nice person." The other half learn that the comment was "The groom is not a nice person."

Then ask all students to rate, on a "feeling ruler," how they imagine the comment might have made the groom feel, from -10 (*extremely upset*) to 0 (*neutral*) to +10 (*extremely happy*). Students' ratings should reveal the negativity effect — more extreme ratings for the negative than the positive comment. In one

analysis, everyday negative emotional experiences exceeded the intensity of positive emotional experiences by a factor of 3:1 (Larsen, 2009).

Alternatively, the negativity effect could be explored by asking students to imagine being invited, or not invited, to a friend's party.

"In everyday social life," note APS William James Fellow Roy Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and APS Fellow Kathleen Vohs (2001), "bad events have stronger and more lasting consequences than comparable good events" (p. 355). Bad reviews of our research or teaching make us feel worse than good reviews make us feel good. Cruel words linger after kind words have been forgotten. Bad health diminishes happiness more than good health increases it. Pain produces more misery than comfort produces joy.

Negative information carries more weight because, being less usual, it grabs more of our attention (Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1991). And our sensitivity to negative interactions disposes us to respond to threats. For survival, temporarily feeling bad can be good. But so, in the long run, can supportive friendships, enjoyable companions, and connections that foster health and well-being.

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