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.*

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Teaching Students Why a Good Marriage Is Hard to Find

Love Sees Loveliness

Strategy Changes in Older Adults

Teaching Students Why a Good Marriage Is Hard to Find

By C. Nathan DeWall

Finkel, E. J., Cheung, E. O., Emery, L. F., Carswell, K. L., & Larson, G. M. (2015). The suffocation model: Why marriage in America is becoming an all-or-nothing institution. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 24, 238–244.*

All Americans now have the right to marry, regardless of their sexual orientations. But why do people prefer marriage over singlehood? The answer is that the best marriages have never been better: Our spouses have become our best friends, workout partners, spiritual brethren, likeminded sexual partners, culinary compatriots, intellectual guides, coparents, parental supporters, financial planners, philanthropic kindred spirits, and travel companions. These finest of marriages, however, also have become the hardest to find. It is both the best and worst time to get married, depending on whom you ask.

The modern American marriage is alien to its predecessors, according to APS Fellow Eli Finkel, Elaine

Cheung, Lydia Emery, Kathleen Carswell, and Grace Larson, all at Northwestern University (2015). Early Americans viewed marriage primarily as a functional institution: They sought partners who could help them meet their basic needs for safety, shelter, and sustenance. Later, Americans came to consider marriage as something that would help them feel loved and accepted. Finally, in the late 1960s, marriage became more than a feeling: People began seeking partners who helped them express their unique characteristics.

The best American marriages thrive because they bring the best out of each partner. When we find someone who pushes us to grow and express ourselves, values our independence, and tells us the truth about ourselves, we become more satisfied with our lives. Finding someone who helps us avoid hunger pangs doesn't pack the same emotional punch as does settling down with someone who shares our enjoyment of reading Albert Camus. The evidence bears this out. Having a happy marriage has never meant more in predicting whether people report having a happy life (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007).

But it can be a struggle to find someone who truly completes us. The amount of work it takes to help our spouses become the most actualized versions of themselves is not something most of us are willing or able to put in. Many people have other priorities; for example, some people would delight in helping their spouses express themselves, but their financial situations won't permit it. These factors, coupled with higher expectations than ever, help explain why marital satisfaction is at an all-time low (Marquardt, Blankenhorn, Lerman, Malone-Colón, & Wilcox, 2012).

To take this cutting-edge research into the classroom, instructors can use the following activities.

Online Dating Activity #1

Ask students to take out three sheets of paper. On each sheet of paper, have students construct an imaginary online dating profile for someone seeking a marriage partner in each of the three American marriage eras — characterized by the functional-institution role, the love-and-acceptance role, and the self-expression role. When they make their profiles, students may consider:

What information will be most important in attracting a desirable mate?

What type of profile picture would you want to use in each marriage era? Why?

What type of information would you want to share or avoid sharing in each marriage era?

Online Dating Activity #2

Instructors can review each marriage era by discussing how Finkel and colleagues repurpose Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Rather than a pyramid, Finkel and colleagues suggest that marriages occupy different stages of a mountain — what they term Mount Maslow. Just as physical activities require more exertion at high altitudes than at sea level, it takes more effort to help spouses express their unique characteristics than it does to meet their basic needs.

Next, ask students to work with a classmate to list as many online dating sites as they can find.

Encourage students to use their laptops or smartphones. Finally, ask students to rate how much each dating site seeks to connect users with people who fulfill their basic needs, their need for love and acceptance, and their need for self-expression (1, *not at all*, to 7, *extremely*).

Which sites do the best job at leading us to potential partners who could fulfill our basic needs, give us love and acceptance, or help us maximize our self-expression? Given what we know about living in the era of marriage as self-expression, why might people use sites that do not emphasize self-expression?

When June's Supreme Court decision granted all Americans the right to marry, many celebrated and some mourned. Yet few people realize how much the American marriage changed before it became a right available to all citizens. Regardless of our race, age, income, or sexual orientation, we seek spouses who will help us become the best versions of ourselves. The odds are scarce that we will find someone willing to join us on the hike to the summit of Mount Maslow — but if we do, we will experience a form of marital bliss most of our ancestors never knew.

Love Sees Loveliness

By David G. Myers

Fletcher, G. J. O. (2015). Accuracy and bias of judgments in romantic relationships. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 24, 292–297.*

What say your students: Is true love blind? Is idealizing one's partner a recipe for relationship success or, ultimately, failure?

And a follow-up discussion question: What factors might predict each result? In hindsight, what might explain findings that:

relationships flourish when we maximize perceived merits and minimize perceived weaknesses? (Students may see benefits in positive thinking or in perceiving one's partner through rose-colored glasses. They may speculate about self-fulfilling prophecies: Perhaps love creates what it sees.)

relationships flourish when they are reality based? (Students may see wisdom in recognizing virtues without being blind to faults — in seeing a glass as both half full and half empty. They may also see risk in inflated, unfulfilled expectations: Unrealistic hopes unleash unavoidable frustration.)

Relationships researcher and APS Fellow Garth Fletcher of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, offers evidence-based answers to these questions. First, he reminds us that romantic love is beneficial (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2015). It enables pair bonds that enhance reproductive fitness. There is biological wisdom to monogamous mating.

So what mix of reality-based accuracy and positive perceptual bias supports adaptive long-term love?

The mix, Fletcher finds, varies with the relationship stage. In the predecision (mate-selection) stage, accuracy matters. It will pay dividends later to correctly assess someone's warmth, ambition, and trustworthiness.

In the postdecision (commitment) stage, positive bias works. Couples thrive when they amplify one another's assets and downplay each other's flaws. Seeing the best in one's partner motivates investing in and maintaining the relationship. Thus, those who view their partners as more attractive and trustworthy than their partners see themselves tend to have happier relationships. Moreover, in longitudinal studies that follow couples through time, the couples who employ positive bias enjoy the greatest long-term marital satisfaction (Miller, Niehuis, & Huston, 2006; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray et al., 2011). Newlyweds who see little but loveliness in one another are more likely, a decade and more later, to still be together.

These relationship studies illustrate the long-ago conclusion of APS William James Fellow Shelley Taylor (1989) — that positive illusions (inflated self-esteem, exaggerated perceived control, unrealistic optimism) are (a) commonplace and (b) generally adaptive (when not unhinged from reality). However, the power of positive thinking has its limitations. When relationships face serious trouble, ignoring reality and clinging to an overly optimistic view can have some long-term downsides (McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008).

The love-sees-loveliness perceptual set also calls to mind past research on the reciprocal associations between physical attractiveness and likability. Not only do we tend to like attractive people, but we also tend to perceive those we like as attractive. Experiments have shown that people portrayed as warm, helpful, and considerate also look more attractive to study participants than those not portrayed that way (Gross & Crofton, 1977; Lewandowski, Aron, & Gee, 2007). Moreover, the more in love we are with someone, the more physically attractive we find the person (Barelds-Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008; Price, Dabbs, Clower, & Resin, 1974). "Do I love you because you are beautiful," muses Prince Charming (in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*), "or are you beautiful because I love you?" Put your money on both.

For a wrap-up class discussion, instructors might wonder aloud: Do some nonromantic relationships similarly reflect, at different stages, both accuracy motivation and a positive bias? When an athletic coach selects team members, or an employer hires a new worker, might accuracy motivation be given priority — followed, once the commitment is made, by a positivity bias? Do we carefully scrutinize candidate team members and then, once they are on our team, rave about them?

Through personal correspondence, Fletcher offers other questions for discussion:

Is it always better to know more about one's partner, or can it be better to know less?

Is love itself an illusion — or real?

In intimate relationships, can a positive bias be rational?

How do biases — both positive and negative — affect relationships?

Finally, students might offer examples from movies, books, acquaintances, or (if they are comfortable doing so) their own past and present relationships. When have they seen someone viewing a romantic partner through rose-colored glasses? And was it for better or worse?

Strategy Changes in Older Adults: Why 'Old Dogs' Don't Always Perform 'New Tricks'

By Gil Einstein and Cindi May

Touron, D. (2015). Memory avoidance by older adults: When "old dogs" won't perform their "new tricks." *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 24,* 170–176.

In grade school, as we first learned our multiplication tables, we deliberately added numbers together in order to arrive at the answers. So, in solving the problem of 3×8, we carefully added 8 to 8 to get 16 and then added another 8 to get 24. When we develop skill or expertise, practice enables us to switch from a slow and effortful computation strategy to a relatively facile and efficient memory-retrieval strategy (Logan, 1988). Thus, after extensive practice with our multiplication tables, we learned the answers to the problems and could quickly retrieve them from memory instead of relying on cumbersome calculations.

In reviewing research over the past dozen or so years, Dayna Touron (University of North Carolina at Greensboro) shows that older adults are reluctant to make the switch to memory-based strategies. To get students thinking about this issue, teachers may describe a laboratory paradigm that psychological scientists frequently use to study this type of strategy shift — the noun-pair lookup task (Touron & Hertzog, 2004). For this task, researchers present participants with a lookup table containing a set of noun pairs in the top portion of the computer screen (see Figure 1 on the following page). Then, they show the participants one noun pair at a time in the lower portion of the screen that either matches (TABLE—APPLE) or does not match (TABLE—THIEF) a pair in the table. Participants must quickly indicate whether or not a match occurs. With practice, participants memorize the pairs in the table and learn to respond on the basis of memory (rather than looking up the answer). Critically, however, the research shows that older adults abandon the strategy of scanning the table for the correct answer more slowly than do younger adults.

Strategy shifts represent changes in mental processes, and instructors might challenge students, perhaps in small groups, to think about how psychological scientists can study changes in cognitive strategies. One approach is to ask participants to self-report which strategy — scanning the lookup table or retrieving from memory — they used on each trial. Some students rightfully will express concern about the introspective quality of this measure (i.e., whether participants can accurately reflect on their mental experiences). Importantly, more objective measures such as response times (slower when scanning the table for answers) and eye movements (eye movements directed toward the table when scanning) show the same effects as the self-report measures and thus converge on the same conclusions (Touron, Hertzog, & Frank, 2011).

Touron argues that, in general, people will switch to the more efficient memory-retrieval strategy when the benefits of doing so (e.g., speed) outweigh the costs (e.g., making an error). Students could benefit from trying to explain why older adults are slow to switch to a more efficient memory-based strategy. Class discussion likely will generate the explanation that older adults have poorer memory and simply don't learn the pairs as well. But that turns out not to be the whole story: Research consistently yields the provocative finding that older adults continue to avoid using memory retrieval even after learning the material to the same degree as young adults. Thus, if young and older adults prelearn the noun pairs to the same degree (this requires more trials for older adults) and then face a situation in which they have the opportunity to look up the answers, older adults still are less likely than their younger counterparts to use a memory-retrieval strategy (Touron & Hertzog, 2004).

Why is it that older adults hesitate to use a memory-based strategy? Evidence shows that in comparison with younger adults, older adults are more concerned with accuracy and are less confident that their memory will yield an accurate response. Thus, despite having learned the material to the same degree as young adults, older adults have less faith in their ability to retrieve the information. A finding consistent with this explanation is that older adults who are generally confident about their memories and those prompted to feel confident about their memories (with feedback that they have highly accurate memories) switch to the memory-retrieval strategy more often than their less self-assured counterparts (Touron & Hertzog, 2004). Another potential explanation is that older adults tend to see memorization, and perhaps especially retrieval, as a more effortful (and perhaps a more onerous) process than do young adults.

As you might guess, older adults vary substantially in their willingness to use a memory-retrieval strategy. Some older adults switch to memory retrieval quickly, whereas others avoid it completely.

Finally, instructors might encourage students to think about how a general lack of confidence in one's memory ability might play out for older adults in real-world settings. Some possibilities include the following:

Older adults may be reluctant to try new technology such as cell phones and tablets.

Those who avoid relying on memory might be less likely to participate in social events, where failures to remember (e.g., names, previous conversations) could embarrass them.

Given the clear evidence that retrieval enhances memory (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006), older adults who avoid relying on memory lose out on the memory-strengthening benefits of retrieval.

By avoiding using their memories, older adults miss the opportunity to demonstrate to themselves that they can use memory effectively and are thus unlikely to change their self-concept regarding memory.

In conclusion, instructors should remind students that the behaviors of older adults may reflect factors other than objective changes in ability. Specifically, the stereotype (at least in some cultures) of age-related memory deficits may affect older adults' confidence and willingness to use memory strategies — even when they are more than capable of doing so. œ

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