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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Why We Fail to Empathize — and What We Can Do About It

Is Narcissism Extreme Self-Esteem?

Why We Fail To Empathize — and What We Can Do About It

By C. Nathan DeWall

Zaki, J., & Cikara, M. (2015). Addressing empathic failures. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 24,* 471–476.

Most people cross the street to get where they're going. But sometimes we might have other, less practical motives: We see someone on the sidewalk ahead of us in need and opt to skedaddle across the street rather than awkwardly explain why we would rather not help. Although we would like to think that people are born to empathize, we also spend a lot of time getting ourselves out of empathy's way.

Why do we fail to empathize? APS Fellow Jamil Zaki and Mina Cikara (2015) offer a fresh answer to this scientific riddle. They argue that empathy interventions often fail not because of a lack of trying but rather because the people who design the interventions do not understand the intricacies of empathy. For example, mentalizing (inferring another's mental states), experience sharing (taking on another person's mental states), and compassion (feeling concern for others) are empathy's main ingredients. To increase prosocial behavior, interventionists need to consider which components of empathy to enhance.

Empathy is not a cure-all. When status differences exist, boosting empathy might not breed prosocial behavior. In those cases, it may be better to establish norms that promote equality rather than empathy. Empathy is also difficult among groups that are in active conflict. Negative emotions and low levels of trust can undermine attempts to build reconciliation through empathy (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006).

Beliefs about empathy also matter. People who believe that empathy cannot be developed — strongly endorsing statements such as "Whether a person is empathic or not is deeply ingrained in their personality. It cannot be changed very much." — experience less empathy and engage in fewer helpful behaviors than do those who do not endorse such statements (Schumann, Zaki, & Dweck, 2014). In contrast, when people believe that they can grow their empathic capacity, that belief itself increases empathic feelings and helpfulness.

To bring this cutting-edge research into the classroom, Zaki and Cikara suggest that instructors complete the following activities.

Activity #1

The first activity is designed to prime the pump about what it means to empathize. Instructors begin by sharing Zaki and Cikara's definition of empathy as "people's sharing and understanding of each other's emotions" (p. 471). Ask students to form pairs with a classmate they do not know well, then have them discuss how they think empathy works. For example, can people consciously turn it up or down? Or is empathy like a beating heart — automatically doing its job without our conscious mind needing to intervene?

Next, ask the student pairs to share examples from their lives when they consciously decided to empathize or to avoid empathizing. How did those experiences differ from when students automatically felt empathy toward another person or group? How did empathy improve their social interactions? Were there times when empathizing caused them distress, made them less helpful, or damaged their social interactions? Finally, ask students how sharing their experiences with a classmate they did not know well may have influenced their responses, compared with completing the activity with their best friends.

Activity #2

The second activity builds on the first activity by encouraging students to consider why they fail to empathize. On PowerPoint slides, have students read the following prompts:

Slide #1
Imagine you're watching TV. You notice that the next show is a fundraiser to increase awareness of leukemia. It will feature the stories of kids who are suffering from this illness.

Slide #2
Write down three reasons why you would watch the fundraiser.

Slide #3

Write down three reasons why you would not watch the fundraiser.

Slide #4
How might your decision to watch the fundraiser affect your emotions? How might your decision to avoid watching the fundraiser affect your emotions?

Zaki said that this exercise helps students realize "that we make choices all the time as to whether we 'put ourselves in empathy's way.'" Students might consider times when they regretted their decision to avoid empathizing. On the other hand, when were they glad they avoided an opportunity to empathize? How did these situations affect how they approached future social interactions?

Activity #3

In the world of emotions, empathy has a good reputation. So good, in fact, that some people think increasing empathy will solve many problems. Not so, said Cikara. "The one-size-fits-all intervention strategy is deeply flawed," she noted, "especially when groups are of unequal status." The final activity highlights the potential danger of attempting to increase empathy between unequal groups.

People live in groups. Our groups are determined by many factors, and group membership has costs and benefits. Instructors can tell students that the day they were born will determine their group membership. The following slides will walk students through the activity, adapted from Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, and Pratto (2009).

Slide #1:

Powerful Group: If the day you were born on ends in an even number (i.e., 0, 2, 4, 6, 8), you belong to this group.

Powerless Group: If the day you were born on ends in an odd number (i.e., 1, 3, 5, 7, 9), you belong to this group.

For example, if you were born on September 18, you're in the Powerful Group. If you were born on September 19, you're in the Powerless Group.

Slide #2:

Imagine that you are paired with a member of the other group. Between the two of you, you can earn 10 extra-credit points for participating in a research study. The person in the Powerful Group gets to decide how many points each person gets. The person in the Powerless Group doesn't get any control over how many points each person gets.

Slide #3:

Now imagine that you and your partner spend 5 minutes discussing your similarities. Other pairs spend 5 minutes discussing their differences.

How might discussing similarities versus differences influence how many extra credit points the Powerful Group member decides that each person gets?

Slide #4

You might think discussing similarities, which raises empathy, would make powerful people give equal amounts of extra points. Think again. This activity simulates an actual experiment, which showed that focusing on similarities made powerless people expect more equality but did not make powerful people mete out points more equally.

Empathy is a household word: Religious leaders, academics, and celebrities sing its praises. Meryl Streep said, “The great gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy.” Why then do we sometimes fail to use this power — and when might we do best to try something else? Part of the problem arises from our misunderstanding the nature of empathic failures, and that part is easy to solve by educating people. The more difficult notion to grasp is that sometimes empathy is not the answer to our problems.

“Empathy has some unfortunate features,” said APS Fellow Paul Bloom. “We’re often at our best when we’re smart enough not to rely on it.” Sometimes we fail to empathize; other times, empathy fails us.

Is Narcissism Extreme Self-Esteem?

By David G. Myers

Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., & Sedikides, C. (2016). Separating narcissism from self-esteem. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 25*, 8–13.

Narcissism is exaggerated, inflated self-esteem. It’s “self-esteem on steroids.” Yes?

Actually, no, say psychological scientists Eddie Brummelman, Sander Thomaes, and APS Fellow Constantine Sedikides (2016). Narcissism and self-esteem have differing definitions, developmental trajectories, causes, and effects.

What Narcissism Is — and Isn’t

Like the mythical Narcissus — a vain, self-aggrandizing young man who fell in love with his own reflection — narcissists do not simply feel good about themselves. They do not, like those with high self-esteem, merely view themselves as worthy. They do not solely see themselves as competent. Rather, they feel superior. They crave admiration and adulation. And they seem sure the world would benefit from their ruling it.

To help students grasp this difference, we might invite them to respond to Rosenberg’s (1965) Self-Esteem Scale and to Raskin and Terry’s (1988) Narcissistic Personality Inventory, both of which can be taken and scored at
personality-testing.info. Or, to illustrate the flavor of each, invite students first to respond to two

prototypical self-esteem scale items:

On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

__Strongly Agree

__Agree

__Disagree

__Strongly Disagree

At times I think I am no good at all.

__Strongly Agree

__Agree

__Disagree

__Strongly Disagree

And then to some narcissism items:

Which of each pair of statements best reflects your personality?

__A: I insist upon getting the respect that is due me.

__B: I usually get the respect that I deserve.

__A:
It makes me uncomfortable to be the center
of attention.

__B: I really like to be the center of attention.

And some more narcissism items:

Agree or disagree:

__1.
People love me. And you know what, I have been very successful.

__2.
I'm intelligent. Some people would say I'm very, very, very intelligent.

__3.
If I get my name in the paper, if people pay attention, that's what matters.

__4.
My fingers are long and beautiful, as … are various other parts of my body.

(Full disclosure: These last four are not narcissism items, but rather Donald Trump quotes.)

The Development of Narcissism

By about age 7, children have developed a sense of their self-worth (self-esteem) and also are making the social comparisons that underlie narcissism (e.g., "I am special"). Thereafter, the two traits typically diverge, report Brummelman and colleagues, with self-esteem dipping in adolescence, when narcissism peaks. Then, in adulthood, narcissism usually subsides while self-esteem gradually increases. That narcissism rises when self-esteem falls, and vice versa, confirms that narcissism ? strong self-esteem.

The Nurture of Narcissism

Self-esteem and narcissism are heritable but differently socialized. Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, and Bushman (2015) followed 565 children and their parents across 1.5 years, studying parental behaviors that predicted self-esteem and narcissism. They found that parental overvaluation nurtured narcissism, and parental warmth nurtured self-esteem. Would your students anticipate this finding?

Overvaluing parents regard their child as special and entitled to privileges. They overestimate their child's intelligence and overpraise his or her performance. Over time, the children of overvaluing parents get the message and regard themselves as superior.

Warm parents express fondness and foster their child's feeling that he or she matters. These children also get the message, by viewing themselves as worthy but not entitled.

To engage students in rehearsing this distinction, ask them to categorize these four statements as either from a "parental overvaluation scale" (Brummelman, Thomaes, Nelemans, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2015) or a "parental warmth scale":

1. "My child is more special than other children." [overvaluation]
2. "I let my child know I love him/her." [warmth]
3. "I treat my child gently and with kindness." [warmth]

4. “My child deserves special treatment.” [overvaluation]

Instructors might also ask why some parents are prone to overvaluation. Might it reflect their own narcissism, or perhaps their incorrect belief that overvaluation will support healthy self-esteem?

The Consequences of Narcissism

Narcissists aim not to get along but to get ahead. They seek not intimate bonds but superiority and status. When given the adulation they crave, they feel good. Often they charm others at first and perform well in public — characteristics that can lead to political success (Watts et al., 2013). But criticize them and “narcissistic rage” may erupt. “I am bad” becomes “you are bad.”

Narcissism also correlates with materialism, inflated expectations, less relationship commitment and more hookups, diminished empathy, less persistence, more gambling, and more dishonesty — all of which have become more prevalent in an era of increasing narcissism, report APS Fellows Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell (2009).

The bottom line: Narcissism matters. And narcissism is not merely super self-esteem. œ

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