

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

September 28, 2017

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 the column](#) for supplementary components, including classroom activities and demonstrations.

Visit David G. Myers at his blog [“Talk Psych”](#). Similar to the APS *Observer* column, the mission of his blog is to provide weekly updates on psychological science. Myers and DeWall also coauthor a suite of introductory psychology textbooks, including *Psychology* (11th Ed.), *Exploring Psychology* (10th Ed.), and *Psychology in Everyday Life* (4th Ed.).

[Sexual Conflict: Uncovering the Mysteries of the Mating Battleground](#)

[Religious Engagement and the Good Life](#)

Sexual Conflict: Uncovering the Mysteries of the Mating Battleground

by C. Nathan DeWall

[Buss, D. M. \(2017\). Sexual conflict in human mating. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26, 307–313.](#)

Many people picture their wedding day as a public promise of commitment and cooperation. A wedding signifies the culmination of the lessons learned from years of navigating the relationship market — learning what brought you joy, what invited heartache, and how you found the person of your dreams. But according to David Buss (2017), a heterosexual wedding signifies entry into another arena in the mating battleground, one in which men and women evolved different preferences that often create sexual conflict.

Sexual conflict occurs when an individual’s sexual interests clash with a potential mate’s sexual interests. Buss argues that most human sexual conflict results from “conflicts between different genes located in individual males and individual females” (pp. 3–4). The different genes predispose men and

women to have differing reproductive interests. For example, men want to pair widely, whereas women prefer to pair wisely. Why? Men, compared with women, have a lower minimum amount of obligatory parental investment — features of human reproductive biology that have favored the evolution of a somewhat different mating psychology when it comes to short-term sex (Buss, Goetz, Duntley, Asao, & Conroy-Beam, 2017).

Successful heterosexual relationships accommodate these evolved sex differences. According to Buss, “sexual conflict is not a narrow flashpoint, but rather a frequently occurring set of forces that permeate many domains of human social interaction” (pp. 14–15). You can spot sexual conflict at three stages of the mating process:

- **Prior to consummation.** People fib, especially when doing so may help them satisfy their relationship goals. Some men may feign emotional involvement in women because they believe doing so will increase their chances of having sex. Seventy-one percent of men admit to deceiving women in this way, whereas only 39% of women report doing so (Buss, 2016). In contrast, women are five times more likely than men to send signals of sexual interest in the hopes of securing nonsexual resources (Haselton, Buss, Oubaid, & Angleitner, 2005).
- **After a relationship has formed.** Sexual conflict can give rise to jealousy out of fear that one’s partner will engage in infidelity. Both men and women experience jealousy, but they show reliable differences when forced to choose whether a partner’s sexual or emotional infidelity would cause more psychological distress (Buss & Abrams, 2016). The second teaching activity delves into this example of sexual conflict.
- **After a breakup.** Buss uses the example of stalking to show how sexual conflict can continue after the dissolution of a romantic relationship. Unable to accept a breakup, a person sometimes seeks to threaten or persuade a former partner back into a relationship (Duntley & Buss, 2012). Most stalkers are men stalking women, but some woman also stalk their prior relationship partners. In both cases, the goal is often to re-establish the romantic relationship, interfere with a former partner’s future mating attempts, or both.

To bring this cutting-edge research to the classroom, instructors may engage in a brief discussion of what constitutes evolutionary psychology. Students tend to vary in how much they understand and acknowledge the principles underlying evolution by natural selection. I have taught ardent evolutionists and devout creationists. All students receive the same message: It’s my business that you learn it.

Evolutionary psychologists apply the scientific method to test specific, falsifiable hypotheses regarding the underlying function of our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Dating back to William James, psychology has a rich history of applying evolutionary theory to better understand human nature. Evolutionary psychology attempts to *explain* our responses; it does not seek to reward or excuse them, even those that individuals and society deem inappropriate.

In the first activity, Buss shows students the following two PowerPoint slides:

Slide 1:

Class Exercise: How Do Men Upset Women?

- Think of all the ways—in your experiences and observations—in which a man has irritated, angered, annoyed, or upset a woman.

Slide 2:

Class Exercise: How Do Women Upset Men?

- Think of all the ways—in your experiences and observations—in which a woman has irritated, angered, annoyed, or upset a man.

“Basically, I have students nominate ways in which men and women have come into conflict with each other,” he says. “Students REALLY love this exercise and generate dozens of things.” Instructors can select a small number of nominations to discuss in class. What similarities exist between how men upset women and how women upset men? What differences exist? How might evolutionary psychology help explain those male–female differences? Might these differences give rise to sexual conflict?

“The exercises get the students heavily involved into the topic,” Buss says, “since they have all experienced different forms of sexual conflict in their lives.”

Buss uses the second activity to teach students about sexual jealousy. Instructors should forewarn students that the activity involves sensitive material and that participation is voluntary. Drawing on his extensive sexual jealousy research (Buss et al., 1992; 2016), Buss asks students to respond to the following scenario:

Imagine that your romantic partner became interested in someone else and became both deeply emotionally involved with and had sexual intercourse with this person.

Which aspect would upset you more:

- The partner’s emotional involvement, or
- The partner’s sexual involvement?

Instructors can have students anonymously write down their gender and answer on a half-sheet of paper, wad the paper into a ball, and throw it to the front of the classroom, after which the instructor can read

each response. In Buss's experience, the results should be clear-cut: "This exercise always produces large sex differences," he said, "with more women than men picking (a), and more men than women picking (b)."

Ask students to form pairs and discuss why such large sex differences exist. What do these differences say about the pressures that our male and female evolutionary ancestors faced? Do men and women still face different adaptive problems in the modern environment regarding paternity uncertainty (knowing the true identity of a child's biological father) and commitment of resources? When might women become more upset by a male partner's sexual involvement with another woman (vs. by his emotional involvement)? When might men become more upset by a female partner's emotional involvement with another man (vs. by her sexual involvement)?

Learning about evolutionary psychology may upend traditional notions of heterosexual romance. People can experience marital bliss, but doing so often requires resolving sexual conflict when — not if — it arises. The good news is that understanding the underlying functions of our thoughts, feelings, and actions can serve as a mainspring of greater acceptance and patience toward our romantic partners.

Religious Engagement and the Good Life

by David G. Myers

VanderWeele, T. (in press). Religious communities and human flourishing. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

Despite the secularization of many Western cultures, two in three humans across the planet agree that in their everyday lives "religion is important" (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). Given religion's prevalence, people understandably wonder: Do religious communities more often foster health, happiness, and altruism, or repression, bigotry, and ingroup selfishness? Do evolutionary psychologists rightly infer that religion fosters morality, social cohesion, and group survival (Wade, 2009; Wilson, 2002; Wright, 2009)? Or is religion "one of the world's great evils" (Dawkins, 1997)?

Before engaging students in thinking about such questions, a caveat is in order: Remind students that research on religion and well-being does not speak to the truth of any single religion's beliefs. Any given religious claim might be

1. true and health-promoting,
2. true and unhealthy,
3. false and health-promoting, or
4. false and unhealthy.

Religion's advocates and skeptics have both recognized that, at their worst, religious communities have done harm, and at their best, they have done good. To highlight this point, instructors could invite students to list examples of religion-associated harm and religion-associated good during a 2-minute writing period. Students could then volunteer some of their examples of each, which might include (on the harm side) religious wars, gay-bashing, women's subordination, slavery justification, and terrorism,

and (on the good side) the founding of hospitals, universities, and hospices, and the antislavery and civil rights movements.

Such history aside, social scientists are now asking: Is religious engagement in today's world associated more with the flourishing of life or with misery? More with generosity or greed? More with humility or self-serving pride? More with forgiveness or revenge? More with health and longevity or stress and illness? More with happiness and life satisfaction or repression and depression?

Into these waters dives epidemiologist and biostatistician Tyler VanderWeele (2017). VanderWeele is aware of the hundreds of studies that correlate religiosity with health and well-being, but he notes that these findings are nearly all correlational. If individuals who worship regularly are happier and healthier, is this because religious engagement promotes health and well-being, or because healthy, happy people more often get out of the house to join communal worship?

To explore causality, VanderWeele and others have assessed people's religiosity and health, along with other health predictors, and then followed them through time — for example, across 20 years with 74,534 women in the Nurses' Health Study. Even after controlling for other health predictors, those who attended services more than weekly were, compared with nonattenders, a third less likely to have died during the course of the study. And they were five times less likely to have committed suicide. Longitudinal studies also reveal that religiously active people are less likely to divorce, more generous in volunteering and charitable giving, and less likely to smoke and abuse drugs and alcohol than their nonreligious counterparts.

From these and other data, VanderWeele concludes that “religious community is a major contributor of human flourishing” and “a powerful social determinant of health.”

But why? Can your students brainstorm mediating factors that might explain why religious engagement predicts future health?

Unpacking the religiosity variable for the giant nurses' study, VanderWeele and his colleagues report that

- *social support* explained 23% of the religiosity effect,
- *not smoking* explained 22%,
- *few depressive symptoms* explained 11%, and
- *optimism* explained 9%.

Said differently, people active in faith communities experience more social support, smoke less, are less depressed, and are more optimistic.

Some devout students may object to psychological scientists' efforts to “explain away” the religion factor in terms of its psychological components. But understanding the physical concepts that explain a rainbow needn't destroy our sense of its beauty. Examining the brain mechanisms that enable consciousness and language needn't reduce the significance of mind. Moreover, as VanderWeele illustrates, it is possible to study links between religiosity and human flourishing without presuming either the truth or falsity of religious beliefs.

References

- Buss, D. M., Larsen, R. J., Westen, D., & Semmelroth, J. (1992). Sex differences in jealousy: Evolution, physiology, and psychology. *Psychological Science*, 3, 251–255.
- Buss, D. M. (2016). *The evolution of desire: Strategies of human mating* (revised and updated edition). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Buss, D. M., & Abrams, M. (2016). Jealousy, infidelity, and the difficulty of diagnosing pathology: A CBT approach to coping with sexual betrayal and the green-eyed monster. *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, 1–23.
- Buss, D. M., Goetz, C., Duntley, J. D., Asao, K., & Conroy-Beam, D. (2017). The mate switching hypothesis. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 104, 143–149.
- Dawkins, R. (1997, January/February). Is science a religion? *Humanist*, pp. 26–29.
- Duntley, J. D., & Buss, D. M. (2012). The evolution of stalking. *Sex Roles*, 66, 311–327.
- Diener, E., Tay, L., & Myers, D. G. (2011). The religion paradox: If religion makes people happy, why are so many dropping out? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101, 1278–1290.
- Haselton, M. G., Buss, D. M., Oubaid, V., & Angleitner, A. (2005). Sex, lies, and strategic interference: The psychology of deception between the sexes. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 3–23.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology* (Vol. 2). New York, NY: Holt.
- Li, S., Stampfer, M. J., Williams, D. R., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2016). Association of religious service attendance with mortality among women. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 176, 777–785.
- VanderWeele, T. J. (2017). Religion and health: A synthesis. In: J. R. Peteet and M. J. Balboni (Eds.). *Spirituality and religion within the culture of medicine: From evidence to practice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Wade, N. (2009). *The faith instinct: How religion evolved and why it endures*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Wilson, D. S. (2002). *Darwin's cathedral: Evolution, religion, and the nature of society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wright, R. (2009). *The evolution of God*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.