

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

December 27, 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.).

[Social Sleep: Why It Hurts Ourselves and Others to Skimp on Sleep](#)

[Why People Believe in God — or Don't](#)

Social Sleep: Why It Hurts Ourselves and Others to Skimp on Sleep

by C. Nathan DeWall

[Gordon, A., Mendes, W. B., & Prather, A. \(2017\). The social side of sleep: Elucidating the links between sleep and social processes. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26, 470–475.](#)

I'll never forget the first time a student fell asleep in my class. It was toward the end of the semester, when many students were sleep-deprived. While she snored, her cell phone rang. The rest of the class paused, looked at me, and grew quiet. The call went to voicemail; I resumed my teaching. Then the cell phone rang again. This time I tiptoed to the back of the classroom and hushed the students, who were on the verge of whooping and hollering. I spied an open seat next to the sleeping student and quietly sat down. I turned to her and asked a simple question: “Isn't this DeWall guy boring?”

“Uh huh,” she said. The class erupted in laughter, the sleeping student woke up, and everyone laughed about it the rest of the semester.

This example illustrates a key point that Amie Gordon, Wendy Berry Mendes, and Aric Prather (2017) make on the social nature of sleep: “how well we sleep affects how we interact in the social world” (p. 470). Sleep deprivation increases the risk of romantic disagreement, marital dissatisfaction, and stereotyping and biased thinking (Gordon & Chen, 2014; Maranges & McNulty, 2017; Ghumman & Barnes, 2013). People who don’t get adequate sleep are also more likely to experience anger and act aggressively (Hiser & Krizan, 2017; Krizan & Herlache, 2016). Stressful situations hit sleepy people especially hard, which may help explain their social struggles (Prather, Puterman, Epel, & Dhabhar, 2014).

Our social interactions also affect our sleep. Stormy romantic relationships rarely result in a good night’s sleep (Hicks & Diamond, 2011). Perceived discrimination also disrupts healthy sleep (Beatty et al., 2011). When people experience social rejection, they tend to go to bed later and sleep worse (Gordon, Flores, Mendes, & Prather, 2017). The bottom line: Stressful social interaction often results in low-quality sleep, and vice versa.

Students enjoy talking about sleep. To them, sleep is universally practiced yet universally neglected. One national survey showed that 69% of college students reported “feeling tired” or “having little energy” several days during the previous 2 weeks (Associated Press, 2009). In the age of the smartphone, student sleep deprivation has swelled, causing some researchers to label current times as the “Great Sleep Recession” (Keyes, Maslowsky, Hamilton, & Schulenberg, 2015).

To bring this cutting-edge science into the classroom, instructors can have students complete the following activity. Be sure not to tell them the study is about sleep! Ask students to form groups of three and to spend approximately 3 minutes discussing each of the following slides:

**What Factor Is Linked to These Outcomes?
(Hint: It Affects 7 in 10 college students.)**

- Romantic disagreement
- Anger and Aggression
- Stereotyping and prejudice
- Difficulty coping with stress

What Outcome Tends to *Follow* These Experiences?

- Romantic arguments
- Perceived discrimination
- Social rejection

Once discussion has finished, instructors can let students know the correct answer to both questions: sleep deprivation! To wrap up the activity, instructors can conduct an informal poll. Ask students to estimate how many hours they tend to sleep each night. Count to 10 and ask students to raise their hand

when they hear the number that represents the average number of hours they tend to sleep each night. Although the National Sleep Foundation recommends 7 to 9 hours of sleep, how many hours do your students typically sleep? More than 2 in 3 probably get less sleep than they need (Sleep in America Poll, 2014).

It is easy to preach to students about how they don't get enough sleep and how adding an hour of daily rest will help them earn higher exam scores, improve their physical health, and make them safer drivers. But such sermonizing falls flat because it focuses only on how sleep affects the individual student. Sleep is a dynamic process that affects — and is affected by — our social interactions. By focusing on the interplay between sleep and our fundamental need to belong, students can begin to see the value of prioritizing their sleep health.

Why People Believe in God — or Don't

by David G. Myers

[Laurin, K. \(2017\). Belief in God: A cultural adaptation with important side effects. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26, 458–463.](#)

Some aspects of human experience, such as hunger and sleep, are universal. Other aspects are prevalent — love, conflict, sex ... and religion. Worldwide, 84% of humanity identifies with a religion (Pew, 2015). Asked, “Is religion important in your daily life?”, 68% of people worldwide answered “Yes” (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). With varying content, conviction, and engagement, most people claim belief in God.

In her research and in her new review, Kristin Laurin asks (from a psychological perspective):

1. What do people believe about God?
2. Why do people believe in God?
3. Why does believing in God *matter*?

Instructors can pose these questions for class discussion (with both junior and senior level students, Laurin recommends).

What do people believe about God? In “large-scale societies,” she reports, people view God as a “Big God” that is:

- watchful;
- morally concerned; and
- powerful.

Why do people believe in God?

- People believe for *psychological* reasons — because of their tendency to perceive an active mind behind events, to presume that everything has a purpose, or to cope with the terror of their

mortality.

- Laurin draws from Ara Norenzayan (2013) to argue that people believe for *cultural evolutionary* reasons. In human history, beliefs that enhance societal flourishing become widespread. Group members who share a belief in a watchful, morally concerned, powerful Big God were more likely to cooperate with than cheat their neighbors, making their groups more likely to survive.

Why does believing in God *matter*?

- When people feel watched (whether by others or by God) they are more likely to self-regulate.
- When people believe that a morally concerned God frowns upon cruelty, they are more likely to practice compassion — and also more likely to believe that their own virtue will induce God's protection, and they are therefore more likely to take risks.
- When people believe that God is powerful, they may be more likely to perceive a just world in which God will punish norm violators — so they don't have to administer punishment themselves.

Laurin speculates that if this cultural–evolutionary theory is valid, then we might expect that when other social institutions fulfill these functions — say, when a powerful Big Brother government watches over people and enforces moral norms — that people will be less attuned to a watchful Big God.

Support for an evolutionary psychology of religion comes from other theorists as well. David Sloan Wilson (2003, 2007), E. O. Wilson (1998), and their interpreters have contended that religion is widespread because it is socially adaptive. It fosters social cohesion, morality, and group survival.

Many students — especially students of faith — may appreciate E. O. Wilson's (1998, p. 244) conclusion that religion "is largely beneficent. [It] nourishes, love, devotion, and above all, hope." Yet, if familiar with rational arguments for theism, they may take offense and protest: Doesn't explaining why people believe explain the belief away? Don't psychological explanations of religion, from Freud's wish-fulfillment to today's evolutionary psychology, diminish religion's credibility? Was E. O. Wilson (1978, p. 192) right to propose that "We have come to the crucial stage in the history of biology when religion itself is subject to the explanations of the natural sciences ... Theology is not likely to survive as an independent intellectual discipline"?

The point to emphasize: *Explaining a belief does not explain it away*. Learning about the psychology of a belief does not make or break its truth.

To illustrate, ask students to imagine the following scenario: Evolutionary psychologists, neuroscientists, and social psychologists have completed their work on the psychology of belief. Religious belief, for example, is fully explained. Imagine, also, that other researchers were simultaneously studying "the psychology of unbelief" (an actual book title from some years ago, which was echoed by later studies on the psychology of atheism in both the United Kingdom and United States) — and that these evolutionary psychologists, neuroscientists, and social psychologists similarly have completed their work. With a full and finished psychology of unbelief, could someone argue, paraphrasing E. O. Wilson, that atheism itself has become subject to the explanations of the natural sciences and is therefore not likely to survive as a credible idea?

Here, critical thinkers would rise to the defense of atheism. If both theism and atheism come to be fully explained, that cannot mean they both are false. Either God or some transcendent power exists or it does not, so mustn't one of these beliefs be true?

The point can be extended and is worth teaching. Knowing why someone believes something doesn't tell us about the truth or falsity of that belief. Explaining why one person believes vegetarianism is healthier and another believes that eating meat is healthier does not decide which is right. Explaining the determinants of people's beliefs that Clinton or Trump would be the better president does not indicate which was correct.

Thus we can advise students: Let no one say to you, and do not say to others: "Your beliefs are irrational, because you only believe them for such and such reasons." Archbishop William Temple (Jeeves, 1976) recognized this distinction between explaining and explaining away when challenged after an Oxford address: "Well, of course, Archbishop, the point is that you believe what you believe because of the way you were brought up." To which the Archbishop reportedly replied, "That is as it may be. But the fact remains that you believe that I believe what I believe because of the way I was brought up, because of the way you were brought up."

Ergo, much progress is being made in the psychology of religious belief, of unbelief, and of demonstrably false beliefs. No matter our beliefs, we can welcome the progress. Religion, like other universal or prevalent aspects of human experience, deserves scientific exploration.

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