C. Nathan DeWall, University of Kentucky, and renowned textbook author and APS Fellow David G. Myers, Hope College, have teamed up to create a new series of Observer columns aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom. Each column will offer 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 bi-monthly 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 non-experts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

**Why Do Romantic Partners Get Under Our Skin?**

Demonstrating Wishful Perceiving

Why Do Romantic Partners Get Under Our Skin? Teaching Students About the Science of Romantic Attachment

*by C. Nathan DeWall*


Bill and Rebecca have dated for two years. Bill fears rejection, craves acceptance, and acts clingy. Rebecca trusts Bill, knows he loves her, and gives him distance when he needs it. When they begin to argue, Bill becomes distressed. To him, relationship conflict signals a potential end to their relationship. His body releases the stress hormone cortisol, which colors his later interactions. Rebecca’s body doesn’t experience the same level of stress. Worn out, Rebecca eventually ends the relationship.

This scenario illustrates how, according to APS Fellow Paula Pietromonaco, Casey DeBuse, and APS Fellow Sally Powers (2013), romantic attachment gets “under the skin.” People enter romantic relationships with attachment styles that make them feel secure or insecure when getting close to their partners. In the scenario above, Rebecca is securely attached, but Bill is insecurely attached. Insecure attachment comes in two main flavors, anxious — like Bill — and avoidant. Avoidantly attached people manage their insecurity by keeping others at a distance. In an impressive demonstration of mind-body connections, Pietromonaco and colleagues review evidence that:

- Anxiously attached men experience spikes in cortisol before and during relationship threats, and
recover more slowly (Powers et al., 2006).

- When their partner travels, anxiously attached people have higher cortisol (Diamond, Hicks, & Otter-Henderson, 2008).

- One partner’s attachment style can influence the other partner’s physiological stress responses (Laurent & Powers, 2007; Powers et al., 2006).

To teach students about how romantic attachment gets under the skin, instructors can start by having them complete Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel’s (2007) brief and valid measure of romantic attachment (download at www.psychologicalscience.org/assessing-romantic-attachments). Next, they can have students visit http://wei.public.iastate.edu/manuscript/ECR-S.pdf to see how to score the items. Instructors can teach students how to reverse-score items and sum their responses to reach composite anxious attachment and avoidant attachment scores. Once students have their scores, they can compare them to average student scores (see Table 7, 12-item version from Wei et al., 2007 at www.public.iastate.edu/~wei/manuscript/short%20form%2004-07.pdf). Instructors may encourage their students to write a short journal entry or blog post about whether their scores surprised them, and how their scores may help explain their body’s stress response to relationship conflicts.

Can you know a stranger’s attachment style? Instructors can begin by referencing Nalini Ambady and colleagues’ pioneering research on how people can form accurate impressions of others based on a small amount of information (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). Building off of the previous exercise, instructors may then display images of people students do not know who show a neutral facial expression. These images can come from face databases, such as the NimStim Face Stimulus Set (Tottenham et al., 2009). Students complete the same measure of romantic attachment, but this time they complete it as if they were the person displayed. Afterward, they can score their responses and select a classroom partner to discuss why they gave the scores they did. Were there points of agreement? Disagreement? If there was some agreement, does that mean you can understand how a stranger’s body responds to relationship conflict?

In our experience, students love to relate course material to celebrities. The first step of the next exercise involves separating students into three groups: secure attachment, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment. Instructors may ask each group to identify five celebrities who conform to the group’s attachment style. Next, students locate news stories, images, or other relevant material that demonstrate how each celebrity responds to relationship threat in a manner that agrees with their perceived attachment style. This activity can help give students insight into the importance of attachment style in understanding why relationship threats cause some celebrities pronounced stress.

Many psychology textbooks etch out some space to discuss dreams and dream analysis. Students often delight from analyzing their own dreams, only to learn that historical theories regarding the importance of dreams were often misguided. A final activity relates students’ dreams to the relationship between attachment style and stress responses. Attachment style influences dream narratives (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Avihou-Kanza, 2011). The higher the level of anxious attachment, the more a person will dream of rejection. A similar pattern occurs among avoidantly attached people, who often dream of how they maintain their psychological distance from others. Given the preliminary link between attachment
insecurity and abnormal cortisol levels when people wake up (Hicks & Diamond, 2011; Quirin, Pruessner, & Kuhl, 2008), students can explore how their attachment style influences both their dream content and their stress responses.

First, have students complete and score the same measure of romantic attachment as described previously. Second, ask students to keep dream diaries every other day for a week. Upon awakening, students can write a 100-word narrative about their dreams, including who was in them and what happened. Students then rate their dreams in terms of how much they felt loved, rejected, independent, trusting, and close to others. To measure their stress levels, students can also report how stressed they feel, how fast they think their heart is beating, and how much they think they’re sweating.

Instructors may collate students’ de-identified numerical responses and present correlations between attachment style, dream content, and stress responses. In larger classes, instructors may have students use an online survey program that can deliver spreadsheets containing student responses. Possible survey programs include Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey, or SurveyGizmo. Though these activities don’t involve actual measurement of stress hormones, they can show students how and why attachment style may get under the skin.

References


Mikulincer, M., Shaver, P. R., & Avihou-Kanza, N. (2011). Individual differences in adult attachment are systematically related to dream narratives. Attachment & Human Development, 13, 105-123.


Demonstrating Wishful Perceiving

by David G. Myers


“You just hear what you want to hear.” So Dave’s wife sometimes observes when he perceives, interprets, or recalls conversations in pleasing ways. He’s prone, it seems, to wishful hearing. In their fascinating and fun essay, APS Fellow David Dunning and Emily Balcetis document a parallel phenomenon of “wishful seeing” — a human tendency to perceive the world not just as it is, but as we desire it to be. As most 21st century psychology students know, perceptions arise from bottom-up sensory input, but also from top-down effects of perceptual set, surrounding context, and social biases.

The hot hitter’s grapefruit-sized ball. A softball appears bigger when one is hitting well, noted Witt and Proffitt (2005), after asking players to choose a circle the size of the ball they had just hit well or poorly.

When we’re angry, the world looks more threatening. When angered, people more often perceive neutral objects as guns (Bauman & DeSteno, 2010).

Our moods color what we hear. While listening to sad music, we become relatively more likely to hear “mourning” than “morning,” “die” than “dye,” and “pain” than “pane” (Halberstadt et al., 1995).

To such top-down processes, the mid-20th-century “new look” theorists sought to add a “wishful seeing” example. Alas, methodological problems plagued their studies of poor children’s overestimation of coin size and of people’s greater speed in detecting positive words than in detecting taboo words. But Balcetis and Dunning’s recent studies confirm that our preferences do shape our perceptions. Happily, their clear and simple experiments lend themselves nicely to class explanation:

as the letter B when the letter was linked with a desired outcome, such as drinking fresh squeezed orange juice rather than a repulsive drink. If the number 13 rather than the letter B had the positive association, then people tended to perceive the number.

When Balcetis and Dunning flashed a letter to one eye and a number to the other, people tended to see whichever stimulus had been associated with financial gain rather than loss.

Objects (a chocolate muffin to dieters, a water bottle when thirsty, a $100 bill one can win) appear closer when desired and accessible (van Koningsbruggen, Stoebe, & Arts, 2011).
Ergo, as we wish, so we see.

Depending on when this research is introduced, instructors might first invite students to recall other research-based examples of positive bias. Illusory optimism, the overconfidence phenomenon, self-serving bias, self-justification, ego-supportive memories, and positive self-predictions may come to mind. Matlin and Stang’s (1978) *The Pollyanna Principle: Selectivity in Language, Memory, and Thought* offers more examples.

To demonstrate the phenomenon of our mental state priming perceptions, Balcetis suggests instructing one side of a class to write (or imagine) a little children’s story of farm life, with one animal as the main character. Ask the other half of the class similarly to write a story of sea life. Then show them the classic “horse-seal ambiguous figure” (easily found with a Google search). Ask, by show of hands, who saw a horse…and who saw a seal. Most will see the horse. But in repeated tests, somewhat fewer will if primed with sea life.

To introduce the idea of motivated perception, Balcetis suggests asking students to brainstorm examples of mental factors that might influence perceptions. Someone likely will volunteer that wishes and desires matter. After confirming this hunch with the Balcetis-Dunning findings, instructors may wish to invite real-world examples of wishful seeing. Possibilities include:

*Sports examples.* Is the basketball players’ collision a charging or blocking foul? Opposing fans will see the same reality differently, and judge referees’ calls accordingly (as illustrated in a classic 1951 study, when Princeton and Dartmouth student fans were shown the same film of combative play between their football fans).

*Religious examples.* Is that the face of Jesus on a pancake? Of the Virgin Mary on a cinnamon bun? Are religious people more likely to see such images?

*Who’s beautiful?* “Do I love you because you’re beautiful, or are you beautiful because I love you?” So Prince Charming wonders to Cinderella (in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical). Chances are it’s both. Come to love someone and their beauty grows as imperfections fade (Beaman & Klentz, 1983; Gross & Crofton, 1977).

“Although people assume that their visual experiences reflect the outside world as it is,” conclude Dunning and Balcetis, “emerging data converge to suggest that, at least in part, they see it the way they want it to be.”

**References**


