Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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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.

The Hidden Key to Virtuous Behavior

The Upside of Being Down

The Hidden Key to Virtuous Behavior: We’re All on the Same Side

by C. Nathan DeWall


What separates paragons of virtue from the rest of us? From Mahatma Gandhi’s overturning English rule through nonviolence, to Paul Rusesabagina saving refugees from the Rwandan genocide, to Nelson Mandela ending apartheid in South Africa, history is filled with examples of people who dazzle us with their devotion to do the right thing. They had the right stuff at the right time. But what is that stuff — and do we also have it?

According to psychologists Sam McFarland, Derek Brown, and Matthew Webb (2013), the answer is simple: identification with all humanity; and yes, we can all do it. To identify with all humanity involves emphasizing commonality between all people, regardless of race, religion, geographic region, language, or other difference. Identification with all humanity may have helped eradicate the slave trade and create international laws barring people from committing crimes against humanity.

Everyone identifies with all humanity. Some people just do it more. McFarland and colleagues (2012) showed that the more people identify with all humanity:

The greater their concern for global human rights and humanitarian needs.
The more they value the lives of all people regardless of their group membership.

The more willingness they express to donate money to international humanitarian relief efforts.

The time is ripe to bring this cutting-edge research into the classroom. International conflict abounds. Income inequality rises each year. Faith in American politics is at an all-time low (Gallup, 2013). Instructors may position these activities within the context of adolescent moral development or social psychological perspectives on altruism.

To get the ball rolling, have students complete the Identification With All Humanity Scale (available online). Students can compute average scores for the “my community,” “Americans” (or their nation if non-American), and “People all over the world” measures. This will establish their baseline scores for identifying with community, country, and the world.

Next, ask students to complete the scale two more times. The first time, have students fill it out according to how they think their current or ideal romantic partner would complete it. The second time, have students write down the name of a morally virtuous person they most admire. With that name in mind, ask students to complete the scale according to how they think the moral exemplar would answer the questions. Ask students to score the two completed scales.

Now is the time to have students reflect on the differences they see between the three scores. How differently did they score compared to their chosen moral exemplar? Did they score differently compared to their current or ideal romantic partner? What might students do to narrow the gap between their scores and their moral exemplar’s scores? Instructors may ask students to discuss their results and what they mean in small groups, online class blogs, or in front of the entire class.

The next activity involves students designing an intervention to increase identification with all humanity. McFarland and colleagues (2012) showed that most people scored relatively low in their identification with all humanity. Hence, interventions are needed to raise this key to human virtue. Divide students into groups of three or four. Ask them to spend 15 minutes brainstorming a way to increase identification with all humanity. Have them spend the first five minutes of the brainstorming session working on their own, with the rest of the time spent with their group members developing an intervention. This method will avoid groupthink and encourage both passive and dominant students to play a role in their group’s intervention.

Each group will then “pitch” its idea to the class. When all groups have finished, the instructor will conduct an anonymous survey in which students vote for the one intervention they want the class to do. I have students put their heads down on their desks and raise their hand when they hear the intervention description they prefer. The group that receives the most votes wins and receives a prize. In my classes, I take the students out to “Donuts with DeWall.” They like it.

Have students conduct their intervention for a week or two. When it’s finished, have them complete the three versions of the Identification With All Humanity Scale again. Ask students to score their responses and compare them to their baseline scores. How did their scores change? If they observed a change, was it due to an actual shift or simply the fact that they knew they were trying to increase identification with all humanity? What sort of controls might a future study include that would strengthen confidence in the
intervention? Instructors may direct students to existing experimental manipulations that show a relationship between imagining yourself in another person’s place and increased moral behavior (Batson, Lishner, Carpenter, Dulin, Harjusola-Webb, Stocks, Gale, Hassan, & Sampat, 2003).

Virtuous behavior relies on a constellation of factors, including a tendency to identify with all humanity. By seeing others through the same lens as we see ourselves, it is easier to sacrifice our self-interest to serve others. Teaching students about the power of identifying with all of humanity may awaken them to the plight of others — and motivate them to lend a helping hand to those in need.

References


The Upside of Being Down

*by David G. Myers*


Happy moods are good moods. Happy moods don’t just feel good, they brighten our thoughts and actions. When happy (rather than unhappy), we see the world as safer. We feel more confident. We make decisions more easily. We rate job applicants more favorably. We feel energized. We appreciate our relationships. We savor our positive past and project a hopeful future, without ruminating on the negative (Briñol, Petty, & Barden, 2007; Liberman, Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Ross, 2009; Mauss, Shallcross, Troy, John, Ferrer, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2011).

In a gloomy mood, life feels depressing, even meaningless. The cynic in us comes out. But let our mood turn happy and our thinking broadens and becomes more creative (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Forgas, 2008; Fredrickson, 2009). When feeling good, we also do good. We become more likely to volunteer, to donate, or to help someone with dropped papers (Salovey, Mayer, & Rosenhan, 1991). Good moods work!
Surprisingly, bad moods can also have important benefits, notes APS Fellow Joseph Forgas (2013), a social psychologist who is currently Scientia Professor at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Studies show that mild, temporary, negative moods can improve vigilance and attention to new information and so provide important adaptive advantages in some situations.

Before explaining Forgas’s findings, instructors might ask students to take a couple minutes to write answers to two questions, and then to discuss their answers (either as a class or in small groups):

1) Given that good moods feel better and have benefits, why are bad moods so common?

2) For our distant ancestors, what functions might negative moods, such as sadness, have served?

Extreme moods — the hyper-optimism of ecstatic mania and the heavy lethargy of depression — come with a price. But normal, everyday mood variations — both good and bad — do have survival value, Forgas argues. Positive moods offer a “relax” signal. They imply a safe, familiar, nonthreatening situation in which we can rely on our preexisting, internal knowledge. Negative moods offer an “alarm” signal. Like a car’s oil pressure warning light, a negative mood primes our vigilance: it alerts us to problems and prepares us to pay closer attention to new, external information rather than relying on what we already know.

For the past 10 years Forgas and his colleagues have explored the cognitive and behavioral consequences of temporary mood states, using hypnosis, films, music, or writing to experimentally induce different mood states. Who among us would have predicted these documented benefits of induced negative moods?

**Better memory**: Those put in a negative mood are less vulnerable to forming false memories by incorporating misinformation.

**Better judgment accuracy**: Negative moods eliminate primacy effects, halo effects based on appearance, and vulnerability to the fundamental attribution error.

**Reduced gullibility**: Negative moods increase people’s ability to detect deception and reduce their acceptance of urban myths and rumors.

**Reduced stereotyping**: A negative mood has reduced reliance on stereotypes.

**Strengthened motivation**: A negative mood increases the reward value of expected future achievement and also reduces self-handicapping.

**Enhanced social sensitivity**: A negative mood leads to more cautious and polite interactions and communication.

**Increased fairness**: A negative mood increases focus on external fairness norms, which diminishes selfishness.

**Greater persuasiveness**: Those put in a negative mood produce higher-quality and more persuasive
Before describing these findings, instructors could offer students an experience of temporary mood inductions akin to those used in the experiments. For a sad mood, instructors might invite students to recall and write a short paragraph about sad, unpleasant experiences, perhaps while playing sad music, such as the songs at tinyurl.com/SadMoodMusic. To leave them in a good mood, instructors could invite students to recall and write a short paragraph about happy, joyous episodes, perhaps while playing happy music, such as the songs at tinyurl.com/HappyMoodMusic.

Informing students of the evidence for the cognitive, motivational, and social benefits of negative moods perhaps can reassure them of the adaptive value of all affective states. Knowing the up side to being down may help students accept their own everyday emotional fluctuations, and also to become more accepting of the benefits of a normal range of emotional reactions of their family members and friends. Star Trek’s Mr. Spock notwithstanding, all affective states can serve useful adaptive functions.

References


