Teaching: Psychologists and Intervention / Sexual Objectification

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Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic covered in this peer-reviewed APS bimonthly journal, which features reviews covering all of scientific psychology and its applications.

When Psychologists Should Intervene and When They Shouldn’t

Sex Objects Are Processed Like… Objects

When Psychologists Should Intervene and When They Shouldn’t

By C. Nathan DeWall


Most students study psychology because they want to improve their lives, their relationships, or their community. They can learn how to live a meaningful life, why a romantic partner’s criticism echoes louder than praise, and how to motivate companies to do well while also doing good. But students may not recognize psychology’s limitations: Psychology’s interventions do not succeed for all people, in all places, or at all times. To do the greatest good, according to Greg Walton and David Yeager (2020), psychologists need to recognize when they should intervene and when they should not.

Walton and Yeager use an agricultural metaphor to make their point: For humans to flourish, they need a high-quality seed and nurturing soil. The seed refers to an adaptive belief system, such as the belief that intelligence can grow with hard work or that all people deserve the right to feel socially accepted (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Certain soils (situations) enable adaptive belief systems to blossom, whereas others do not (Gibson, 1977).

Seeds and soils vary. When students are encouraged to believe that intelligence can grow through hard work, their academic performance improves if their school’s norms afford behaviors in line with that belief (e.g., seeking out academic challenges to grow one’s intelligence; Yeager et al., 2019). In the absence of such fertile soil, adopting a growth mindset offers few academic dividends. Rather than a failure to replicate, such findings identify a successful theoretical expansion. They illustrate the power of the situation in tipping the scales for or against the impact of adaptive belief systems on behavior (Noah, Schul, & Mayo, 2018).

To bring this cutting-edge research into the classroom, have students complete the following activity.
Class Activity

Ask students to imagine that their college or university received a charitable gift to be used to improve academic performance. Students learn that their institution will use psychological science to design an effective intervention. Which one of the following four options should their institution select?

- **Option A**: Teach all students and faculty to adopt a growth mindset of intelligence: “Intelligence can grow with hard work and effective strategies; this remedies the thought ‘I’m dumb’ in response to academic setbacks” (Walton & Yeager, 2020, p. 23). Use this new mentality to attempt to improve all students’ academic performance.
- **Option B**: Teach all students and faculty to adopt a fixed mindset of intelligence: Intelligence does not change with experience; when you experience an academic setback, it is a statement of your innate intelligence. Use this mentality to attempt to improve the academic performance only of students who were initially struggling academically (i.e., the bottom half of performance).
- **Option C**: Teach all students and faculty to adopt a fixed mindset of intelligence: Intelligence does not change with experience; when you experience an academic setback, it is a statement of your innate intelligence. Use this new mentality to attempt to improve all students’ academic performance.
- **Option D**: Teach all students and faculty to adopt a growth mindset of intelligence: “Intelligence can grow with hard work and effective strategies; this remedies the thought ‘I’m dumb’ in response to academic setbacks” (Walton & Yeager, 2020, p. 23). Use this mentality to attempt to improve the academic performance only of students who were initially struggling academically (i.e., the bottom half of performance).

Have students share with a partner which option they would choose and why. After a few minutes of discussion, instructors can share with students how Walton and Yeager would recommend starting with option D because it offers an adaptive belief system (growth mindset of intelligence) to address a psychological vulnerability (students that struggle academically who may doubt their ability to succeed in school). Instructors can then lead discussions about why someone might question implementing option D. Should there be a similar intervention that targets high-achieving students? How are the benefits of boosting struggling students outweighed by not intervening to help flourishing students?
Psychological scientists have much to offer the world. We can teach people how to improve their well-being, their relationships, and their role as global citizens. But psychological scientists do the most good when they recognize the limitations of psychological interventions. We should not expect interventions to work for all people, at all places, and at all times. Rather, we should harness the most powerful and practical aspect of psychological science—our ability to theorize—to help solve the riddle of when psychologists should intervene.

References


Sex Objects Are Processed Like…Objects

By Beth Morling

Bernard, P., Cogoni, C., & Carnaghi, A. (2020). The sexualization-objectification link: Sexualization...
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The March 2020 cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine depicted three female artists—SZA, Megan Thee Stallion, and Normani. The article on “women shaping the future” claimed to emphasize their artistic, cultural, and political accomplishments. Yet the women on the cover pose suggestively in lace bras and leather bustiers.

Sexualized images like these may encourage us to see women as objects that can be used, owned, or silenced, instead of human beings with autonomy, identity, and agency (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Hatton & Trautner, 2011). The notion that people are sometimes objectified (i.e., reduced to their body and body parts) can be traced to philosopher Immanuel Kant. But only recently have researchers documented the cognitive and neuroscientific mechanisms of this process.

In their *Current Directions* article, researchers Philippe Bernard, Carlotta Cogoni, and Andrea Carnaghi (2020) summarize research showing that when people view images of sexualized humans, their cognitive processes resemble object processing more than the processing of (nonsexualized) humans.

Psychologists already know that people view nonsexualized human faces and bodies as wholes rather than separate parts. In contrast, objects such as shoes, houses, or cars are processed analytically—as a set of features. One way to test for holistic processing is to turn photos upside down (e.g., Reed et al., 2006). When we have to recognize whether two pictures of the same human are the same or different, we make more errors and react more slowly when the photo is upside down compared to upright. In contrast, when we do the same task with a shoe, it’s not as difficult because even when it’s upside down, we process the features in a piecemeal way (laces, sole, shape) not as a whole. In sum, when people are slower or less accurate at identifying an inverted image of a human body, there’s evidence they are processing that image holistically. Electroencephalography (EEG) studies also indicate that our brains work harder to process inverted faces and bodies (compared with upright ones), suggesting holistic processing.

In contrast, the EEG signatures for inverted and upright objects look similar, suggesting piecemeal processing.

Bernard and his team have presented participants with both sexualized and nonsexualized people in both upright and inverted orientations. As expected, they observed the holistic processing signature for the nonsexualized images of people. But the EEG signatures for sexualized images resembled the processing of objects. In this work, researchers have manipulated sexualization either by presenting models dressed in skin-baring lingerie, posing in a sexualized posture, or both. Both posture and nudity are often used for women on *Rolling Stone* covers (Hatton & Trautner, 2011). But in this research, the EEG signatures (N170s) suggest that sexualized posture, rather than partial nudity, activates object processing and does so for both men and women (Bernard et al., 2019).

**Teaching About Objectification**

You can introduce students to this topic by showing half of them an image of a sexualized woman and the other half an image of a nonsexualized woman. Then all students should rate their target on her competence, warmth, and morality. As you analyze the results, explain how most research has found that sexualized women are rated lower on humanness-related traits compared with nonsexualized women.
Students can discuss the real-world consequences of such dehumanized perceptions. One example concerns people’s evaluation of victims of sexual violence. When attorneys ask juries to consider the clothing a victim was wearing (Safronova, 2018), they can induce less sympathy for the victim.

Next you can walk students through several demonstrations of how Bernard and colleagues have used cognitiveneuroscience methods to study the objectifying effects of sexualization. (This online resource provides stimuli for all activities: https://tinyurl.com/wnnoznv.)

For example, students can consider a functional MRI (fMRI) study on the effect of sexualization on empathy (Cogoniet al., 2018). While being scanned, participants watched a woman being excluded from a ball-tossing game (Cyberball). Sometimes the woman was dressed in a sexy black dress and other times dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. When the woman was sexualized (in the black dress), the study detected lower activation in areas of the brain associated with (a) the emotional aspect of pain and (b) the network people use to mentalize about others. This activation pattern suggests that people experienced less empathy for the sexualized target.

Next, introduce students to the inverted-image paradigm that Bernard and colleagues have used to test the objectification process. The Thatcher illusion, included in many textbooks, introduces the phenomenon of holistic processing. Then students can participate in a recognition task that illustrates holistic versus object processing. For each trial, present an image, followed by the original image and a distractor and have students indicate whether the image they saw illustrates holistic or object processing. The demonstration proceeds in three stages: first with shoes, then nonsexualized bodies, and finally sexualized bodies. Your students may notice that the task was easier for shoes and sexualized bodies—the “objects”—and more difficult for nonsexualized bodies. Such a pattern matches that found in Bernard and colleagues’ studies.

This fascinating line of work suggests that if Rolling Stone wants to celebrate the achievements of female artists, it should start photographing them in ways that signal their humanity, not in ways that promote their objectification.

References


