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

Walton, G. M., & Yeager, D. S. (2020). Seed and soil: Psychological affordances in contexts help to explain where wise interventions succeed or fail. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. In Press.

Moststudents study psychology because they want to improve their lives, theirrelationships, or their community. They can learn how to live a meaningfullife, why a romantic partner's criticism echoes louder than praise, and how tomotivate companies to do well while also doing good. But students may notrecognize psychology's limitations: Psychology's interventions do not succeedfor 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 agriculturalmetaphor to make their point: For humans to flourish, they need a high-qualityseed 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 re encouraged to believe that intelligence can grow through hard work, their academic performance improves if their school's norms afford behaviors in linewith 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 minds offers few academic dividends. Rather than a failure to replicate, such findings identify a successful theoretical expansion. They illustrate 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 researchinto the classroom, have students complete the following activity.

Class Activity

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

- OptionA: 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.
- OptionB: 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 thismentality to attempt to improve the academic performance only of students who were initially struggling academically (i.e., the bottom half of performance).
- OptionC: 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 all students' academic performance.
- OptionD: 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?

Change requires good seeds and fertile soil.

	Some contexts do not afford a more adaptive perspective (poor soil)	Some contexts afford but do not yet give people an adaptive perspective (fertile soil)
Examples	 Dining hall with bad tasting healthy dishes A peer school environment in which academic challenge-seeking is uncool A college environment with limited opportunities for people like you to belong 	 Dining hall with tasty healthy dishes A peer school environment in which students seek out academic challenges A college environment with opportunities for people like you to belong
Is a change in the context (soil) needed? What kind?	Yes • Tastier healthy dishes • Peer norms for challenge seeking • Greater opportunities for belonging for one's group	Not necessarily
Is a change in individuals' psychology needed (a good seed)? What kind?	Yes • Indulgent labels on healthy foods • Growth mindset intervention • Social-belonging intervention	

Psychological scientists have much to offer the world. We can teach people how to improve their wellbeing, 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.

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Sex Objects Are Processed Like...Objects

By Beth Morling

Bernard, P., Cogoni, C., & Carnaghi, A. (2020). The sexualization-objectification link: Sexualization

affects the way people see and feel toward others, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721419898187

TheMarch 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 posesuggestively in lace bras and leather bustiers.

Sexualized images like these mayencourage 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 aresometimes objectified (i.e., reduced to their body and body parts) can betraced to philosopher Immanuel Kant. But only recently have researchersdocumented the cognitive and neuroscientific mechanisms of this process.

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

Psychologists already know thatpeople view nonsexualized human faces and bodies as wholes rather than separateparts. In contrast, objects such as shoes, houses, or cars are processedanalytically—as a set of features. One way to test for holistic processing isto 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 moreerrors 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 lessaccurate 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 andbodies (compared with upright ones), suggesting holistic processing. Incontrast, the EEG signatures for inverted and upright objects look similar, suggesting piecemeal processing.

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

Teaching About Objectification

You can introduce students to thistopic by showing half of them an image of a sexualized woman and the other halfan image of a nonsexualized woman. Then all students should rate their targeton her competence, warmth, and morality. As you analyze the results, explain how most research has found that sexualized women are rated lower onhumanness-related traits compared with nonsexualized women.

Students candiscuss the real-world consequences of such dehumanized perceptions. Oneexample concerns people's evaluation of victims of sexual violence. Whenattorneys 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 throughseveral demonstrations of how Bernard and colleagues have used cognitiveneuroscience methods to study the objectifying effects of sexualization. (Thisonline resource provides stimuli for all activities: <u>https://tinyurl.com/wnnoznv</u>.)

For example, students can consider afunctional 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 sexyblack dress and other times dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. When the woman wassexualized (in the black dress), the study detected lower activation in areasof the brain associated with (a) the emotional aspect of pain and (b) thenetwork people use to mentalize about others. This activation pattern suggests that people experienced less empathy for the sexualized target.

Next, introduce students to theinverted-image paradigm that Bernard and colleagues have used to test theobjectification process. The Thatcher illusion, included in many textbooks, introduces the phenomenon of holistic processing. Then students can participate a recognition task that illustrates holistic versus object processing. Foreach trial, present an image, followed by the original image and a distractorand have students indicate whether the image they saw illustrates holistic orobject processing. The demonstration proceeds in three stages: first withshoes, then nonsexualized bodies, and finally sexualized bodies. Your studentsmay notice that the task was easier for shoes and sexualized bodies—the "objects"—andmore difficult for nonsexualized bodies. Such a pattern matches that found inBernard 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.

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