Teaching: Intricacies of Intolerance / Digital Emotion Regulation

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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.

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Learning the Intricacies of Intolerance

By C. Nathan DeWall

[Verkuyten, M., Adelman, L., & Yogeeswaran, K. (2020). The psychology of intolerance: Unpacking diverse understandings of intolerance. *Current Directions in Psychological Science.* Advance online publication. https:doi.org/10.1177/0963721420924763](#)

In August 2017, the Unite the Right rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia. Neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and counterprotesters flooded the streets. Violence erupted when a white supremacist, James Alex Fields, Jr., rammed his car into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing one person and injuring 19 others. President Donald Trump declared that the Unite the Right rally had "very fine people on both sides."

Amid Charlottesville's chaos and carnage was a Muslim documentary filmmaker, Deeya Khan. Khan attended the rally with neo-Nazis to understand their intolerance. She went on to interview others who reviled her religion, beliefs, and practices. Khan's resulting film, *White Right: Meeting the Enemy*, illustrated the intricacies of intolerance. In their article, Maykel Verkuyten, Levi Adelman, and Kumar Yogeeswaran (2020) present a framework for understanding the multifaceted psychology of intolerance.

Verkuyten and colleagues argue that intolerance takes three main forms:

Prejudicial intolerance: a rigid, close-minded, and hostile approach toward others based on their group membership.

Intuitive intolerance: an automatic negative evaluation of an out-group member's beliefs or practices.

Normative intolerance: a deliberate negative judgment of how an out-group member's beliefs or practices conflict with one's worldview.

Khan documented and experienced each type of intolerance. The white supremacists and neo-Nazis she

interviewed held inflexible mental models of others that bred dogmatic thinking and actions (Allport, 1954; Rokeach, 1960). Such prejudicial intolerance contributed to Khan receiving death threats from people who viewed her with a rigid and hostile mindset.

Intuitive intolerance occurs when people automatically respond negatively to out-group members' beliefs or practices. For example, even if people profess tolerance toward Muslims as a group, they may respond negatively to the Islamic tradition of wearing a headscarf (Helbling, 2014). Khan noted her experience with intuitive intolerance during her childhood in Norway, with many Norwegians having automatic negative reactions to her based on her group membership.

Normative intolerance is a deliberate process in which people weigh the consequences of negatively evaluating out-group members' beliefs and practices. When people engage in normative intolerance, they reason that harm caused by out-group members' beliefs and practices exceeds any downside associated with rejecting those beliefs and practices (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2017). Normative intolerance can explain how people believe they are tolerant toward others yet show intolerance to others' beliefs and practices. Norway, the country Khan grew up in, for example, is often characterized as a paragon of egalitarian values. Yet the Norwegian parliament openly discriminates against Muslims, such as by prohibiting Muslim students from wearing burqas in school.

Teaching students about the psychology of intolerance can help them increase their self-awareness, improve their relationships, and enhance their compassion and regard toward other groups. Hence, the following activity aims to enhance both the understanding of intolerance and students' well-being.

Instructors can begin by reviewing the three forms of intolerance that Verkuyten and colleagues (2020) identify. Once students understand the differences among those types of intolerance, show them the following information on two PowerPoint slides. For the discussion section, have students select a discussion partner in a face-to-face class; in a virtual class, instructors can have the program automatically assign students to breakout rooms with one or two other students.

The Intolerance Task

Instructions: We live in a time of extreme intolerance toward others. To reduce our intolerance, it helps to understand intolerance's three primary forms: *prejudicial intolerance*, *intuitive intolerance*, and *normative intolerance*. Reflect on how you have experienced each form of intolerance. Next, consider how a close relationship partner (e.g., romantic partner, close friend) has experienced the various types of intolerance. Finally, identify an out-group in your society and think about how members of that group have experienced the three types of intolerance.

Discussion: With one or two partners, share your personal experience of intolerance. What happened in the situation? How often did it occur?

When discussing your close relationship partner's intolerance experience, think about why it occurred. How did each form of intolerance affect your relationship partner differently?

When considering intolerance toward out-group members, ask yourself why they experience intolerance. Consider how these out-group members may feel about intolerance toward them. How might taking their

perspective change your tendency to act toward them with various forms of intolerance?

Many psychologists, policymakers, and laypeople wish to promote tolerance. But these groups will struggle to bring about the change they desire without understanding different forms of intolerance. By diagnosing the problem as related to prejudicial, intuitive, or normative intolerance, people can identify how to address the problem of intolerance in diverse situations and societies. Such efforts are the first step in preventing future violence in the name of intolerance.

References

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Digital Emotion Regulation: Using Devices to Feel Different

By Beth Morling

Wadley, G., Smith, W., Koval, P., & Gross, J. (2020). Digital emotion regulation. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 29*(4), 412–418. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721420920592

During a family beach trip, the teenagers enthusiastically engage with the family most of the week but periodically retreat into their phones. The adults worry: Are the kids addicted to their devices? Do they have undeveloped social skills? Perhaps there's a more constructive view. Forced togetherness among individuals with different personalities can generate emotions that people feel uncomfortable experiencing or expressing. It's possible a bit of social media distraction is helping the teenagers regulate their emotions.

Some journalists and scholars have argued that smartphones endanger our mental health (and, indeed, jumps in adolescent depression and anxiety occurred around the same time the iPhone became ubiquitous in the United States; Twenge, 2020). However, smartphones might also play a healthy role in our emotional lives by enabling a digital form of emotion regulation (ER). That's the argument made by Greg Wadley, Wally Smith, Peter Koval, and James Gross (2020), an interdisciplinary team of human-computer interaction scholars and psychologists, who wrote a theory-driven overview of how smartphones might be harnessed for ER.

In this work, ER is defined as "attempts to influence which emotions one has, when one has them, and how one experiences or expresses these emotions" (Gross, 2015). We can regulate our emotions by changing our breathing, distracting ourselves, connecting with other people, even drinking alcohol. Depending on the situation, our goal may be to "downregulate" potentially harmful emotions (e.g., to feel less anxious before a presentation) or to "upregulate" potentially useful emotions (e.g., to feel angrier before a competition).

Researchers have started to study how people use digital technologies to regulate their emotions. For example, one intensive longitudinal study uncovered bidirectional relationships between app use and emotions. Using certain phone apps led to particular emotions (e.g., social app use preceded positive emotions), but certain emotions also preceded the use of particular apps (e.g., sadder emotions drove social app use; Sarsenbayeva et al., 2020). Another study found that some people's problematic phone use was associated with the desire to suppress emotions (Rozgonjuk & Elhai, 2019). Despite these studies, much of the research so far has been piecemeal, theoretical, and correlational. In response, Wadley, Sarsenbayeva, and Goncalves (2020) provide a framework for past and future work, based on James Gross's (2015) process model of ER.

To help students consider the possibility that people use devices for ER, first provide students with definitions of the terms "emotions" and "emotion regulation." Then give students time to write a brief description of three recent times they used their smartphone or other digital device. After they've done so, ask:

- What emotions were you feeling before you started using your device?
- How did you use your device?
- How did you feel afterward?
- Did using your device change your mood or feelings in any way?

Students can share their answers to the questions with partners in a face-to-face classroom or an online breakout room, or they can post their answers to a Google document or discussion board.

Some students might share examples of feeling amused by an Instagram post, angered by someone's text, or saddened by seeing friends having fun without them. Such stories are usually examples of first-order "emotion generation," which is different from ER. ER occurs later, when people evaluate their emotions, decide if they should try to modify them, and implement selected strategies (Gross, 2015).

Guide students to categorize examples of true ER by helping them slot their ideas into the table available for download in the sidebar. In a synchronous online session, you can paste this partially filled table into a Google document and invite students to provide their own examples.

Examples of Emotion Regulation (PDF)Download

Examples of Emotion Regulation (Excel)Download

After reviewing students' ideas in the third column, point out the higher-order critical thinking they engaged in. First, they used theoretically derived categories of ER to further their own thinking. Second, the examples in the table illustrate how simple arguments about technology's goodness or badness are rarely accurate. Although some critiques of smartphone culture (like those of critical adults at the family reunion) emphasize the worst, devices can be helpful, too. Similarly, students might discuss whether digital ER is a good thing. You can prompt them: "Good for whom? Are there any risks or costs?" Perhaps a digital ER strategy (e.g., watching distracting videos) is effective in the short term but counterproductive in the long term.

Finally, you could deepen the discussion to emphasize the power of psychological theory for generating practical solutions as well as research questions. For example, Wadley, Smith, et al. (2020) point out that the development of many ER apps was driven by market forces, not by scientific or theoretical principles. Your students could come up with ideas for phone apps inspired directly by the theory above.

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