

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

C. Nathan DeWall and David G. Myers

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.

Demonstrating Wishful Perceiving

by David G. Myers

[Dunning, D., & Balcetis, E. \(2013\). Wishful seeing: How preferences shape visual perception. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 33–37.](#)

“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:

People tended to see the ambiguous 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 Balcells, “emerging data converge to suggest that, at least in part, they see it the way they want it to be.”

References

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