

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers 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 bimonthly 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 nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

Does Viewing Mental Disorders as Biological Phenomena Reduce or Increase Stigma?

by David G. Myers

[Haslam, N., & Kvaale, E. P. \(2015\). Biogenetic explanations of mental disorder: The mixed-blessings model. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24, 399–404.](#)

There is no bigger idea in today's psychology, I tell students: "Everything psychological is simultaneously biological." We are embodied creatures. No matter, no mind.

As APS Fellow Nick Haslam and Erlend Kvaale state in their lucid *Current Directions* essay, "biological explanations are on the rise in the mental health professions." Neuroscience and behavior genetics, supported by brain initiatives, explore disorders as biological realities. The US National Institute of Mental Health's new Research Domain Criteria initiative places increased emphasis on the neural and genetic bases of disorders. Drug treatments are increasing, and psychotherapy is declining.

Thanks to the news media and to the efforts of psychological scientists, the general public also increasingly views psychopathology as biologically rooted. The National Alliance on Mental Illness encourages this way of thinking with reports such as "Discovering the Biological Basis of Anorexia." It argues that "scientific research around how the brain works is crucial ... including how nutrition, genetics, physical health, and medications impact outcomes."

So, you might ask your students, how does this biological perspective affect how people with mental disorders view themselves? And how does it affect how we view them?

Does it have positive effects, by inducing less self-blame by the afflicted and greater understanding from family and friends? Do biological explanations help us all to be less judgmental and less likely to assume that people suffer the consequences of their own choices?

Or does it have negative effects, by encouraging “prognostic pessimism” — a belief that disorders are hopelessly biologically fixed — and by feeding perceptions that people with mental disorders are “other” and dangerous?

The answers, report Haslam and Kvaale, are yes and yes. Correlational studies (on the natural associations between explanations and attitudes) and experimental studies (that manipulated explanations) agree: “Biogenetic explanations were associated with a reduced tendency to blame people with mental disorders for their problems but an increased tendency to perceive them as dangerous and unpredictable.”

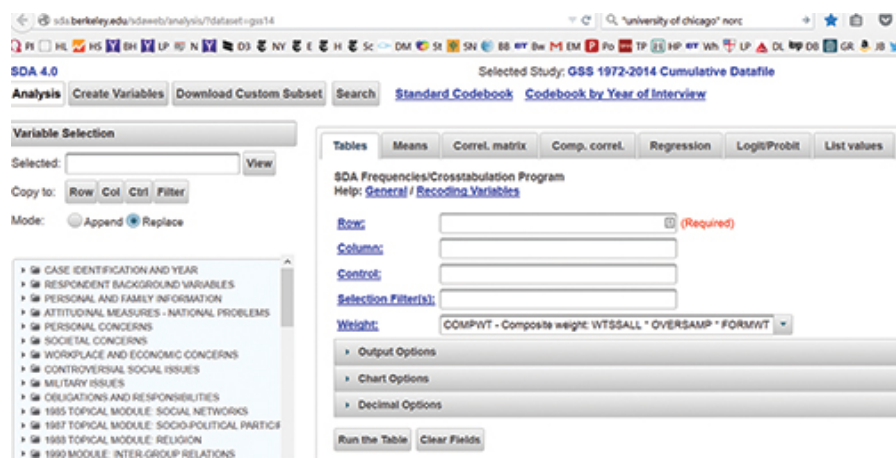
During the class discussion, instructors might seize the opportunity to remind students that what is biological is not necessarily fixed (think of how lithium moderates bipolar mood fluctuations and exercise calms anxiety) and that what is environmental may resist change (think imprinting or learned helplessness).

Instructors also might note parallels with the effects of biological thinking regarding race, gender, and sexuality. As Haslam and Kvaale document, the idea that the races are naturally, biologically different has been a predictor of prejudice, segregationism, and apartheid. Likewise, the idea that men and women are essentially different has been a foundation of sexism and of the perceived suitability of men and women for different life roles. In the mental health sphere, biogenetic explanations have led clinicians toward lower empathy, greater prescription of medication, and less use of evidence-based psychological interventions.

But seeing some traits as biologically fixed also may lead to greater acceptance of those traits. Sexual orientation provides an example. “In your view, is homosexuality something a person is born with, or is homosexuality due to other factors such as upbringing or environment?” When Gallup put that question to Americans in 1978, 13% answered “born with.” When asked again in 2015, 51% answered “born with.” Over this same era, we have seen empathy for people with same-sex attractions increase and support for same-sex marriage soar to 60% in a 2015 Gallup survey.

But these are merely parallel social trends. If only we could ask, are *individuals* who see sexual orientation as a natural, biological disposition more inclined to support same-sex relationships?

Actually, you can ask that question right in class, and in the process demonstrate the easy-to-use data archives of the General Social Survey (GSS), now conducted every 2 years by the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center. Simply [click here](#), which will bring up the screen shown in Figure 1.



In the “column” window, enter *homochng* (the variable name for the question “Do you think being homosexual is something people choose to be, or do you think it is something they cannot change?”). In the “row” window, enter *homosex* (the variable name for the question “What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?”).

Then click “run the table,” and within a second you and your students will see that individuals who believe sexual orientation is a *choice* also are more likely to see same-sex contact as “always wrong.”

The sample responding to these two questions is limited and dates back to 1994. But the data gathering illustrates a method for thinking analytically about the influence of biological explanations on attitudes, and it also illustrates Haslam and Kvaale’s point: Biogenetic explanations have social consequences.

Moreover, this online activity offers a simple introduction to the many more questions that you and your students could study with the rich GSS archives. Enter “happy” in the row window, for example, and any other variable in the column window (such as “attend,” for religious attendance), and you will see what predicts self-reported happiness among the 54,417 respondents surveyed since 1972. The website offers dozens more demographic and attitudinal variables, enabling a lab activity in which students can invent and explore their own big-data questions.