

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.

Love Sees Loveliness

by David G. Myers

[Fletcher, G. J. O. \(2015\). Accuracy and bias of judgments in romantic relationships. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24, 292–297.](#)

What say your students: Is true love blind? Is idealizing one's partner a recipe for relationship success or, ultimately, failure?

And a follow-up discussion question: What factors might predict each result? In hindsight, what might explain findings that:

relationships flourish when we maximize perceived merits and minimize perceived weaknesses? (Students may see benefits in positive thinking or in perceiving one's partner through rose-colored glasses. They may speculate about self-fulfilling prophecies: Perhaps love creates what it sees.)

relationships flourish when they are reality based? (Students may see wisdom in recognizing virtues without being blind to faults — in seeing a glass as both half full and half empty. They may also see risk in inflated, unfulfilled expectations: Unrealistic hopes unleash unavoidable frustration.)

Relationships researcher and APS Fellow Garth Fletcher of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, offers evidence-based answers to these questions. First, he reminds us that romantic love is beneficial (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2015). It enables pair bonds that enhance reproductive fitness. There is biological wisdom to monogamous mating.

So what mix of reality-based accuracy and positive perceptual bias supports adaptive long-term love?

The mix, Fletcher finds, varies with the relationship stage. In the predecision (mate-selection) stage, accuracy matters. It will pay dividends later to correctly assess someone's warmth, ambition, and trustworthiness.

In the postdecision (commitment) stage, positive bias works. Couples thrive when they amplify one another's assets and downplay each other's flaws. Seeing the best in one's partner motivates investing in and maintaining the relationship. Thus, those who view their partners as more attractive and trustworthy than their partners see themselves tend to have happier relationships. Moreover, in longitudinal studies that follow couples through time, the couples who employ positive bias enjoy the greatest long-term marital satisfaction (Miller, Niehuis, & Huston, 2006; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray et al., 2011). Newlyweds who see little but loveliness in one another are more likely, a decade and more later, to still be together.

These relationship studies illustrate the long-ago conclusion of APS William James Fellow Shelley Taylor (1989) — that positive illusions (inflated self-esteem, exaggerated perceived control, unrealistic optimism) are (a) commonplace and (b) generally adaptive (when not unhinged from reality). However, the power of positive thinking has its limitations. When relationships face serious trouble, ignoring reality and clinging to an overly optimistic view can have some long-term downsides (McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008).

The love-sees-loveliness perceptual set also calls to mind past research on the reciprocal associations between physical attractiveness and likability. Not only do we tend to like attractive people, but we also tend to perceive those we like as attractive. Experiments have shown that people portrayed as warm, helpful, and considerate also look more attractive to study participants than those not portrayed that way (Gross & Crofton, 1977; Lewandowski, Aron, & Gee, 2007). Moreover, the more in love we are with someone, the more physically attractive we find the person (Barelds-Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008; Price, Dabbs, Clower, & Resin, 1974). "Do I love you because you are beautiful," muses Prince Charming (in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*), "or are you beautiful because I love you?" Put your money on both.

For a wrap-up class discussion, instructors might wonder aloud: Do some nonromantic relationships similarly reflect, at different stages, both accuracy motivation and a positive bias? When an athletic coach selects team members, or an employer hires a new worker, might accuracy motivation be given priority — followed, once the commitment is made, by a positivity bias? Do we carefully scrutinize candidate team members and then, once they are on our team, rave about them?

Through personal correspondence, Fletcher offers other questions for discussion:

Is it always better to know more about one's partner, or can it be better to know less?

Is love itself an illusion — or real?

In intimate relationships, can a positive bias be rational?

How do biases — both positive and negative — affect relationships?

Finally, students might offer examples from movies, books, acquaintances, or (if they are comfortable doing so) their own past and present relationships. When have they seen someone viewing a romantic partner through rose-colored glasses? And was it for better or worse?