

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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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.

Morality Matters

by David G. Myers

[Graham, J., Meindl, P., & Beall, E. \(2012\). Integrating the streams of morality research: The case of political ideology. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 21, 373–377.](#)

Psychological scientists — from William James to Hugh Hartshorne to Jean Piaget to Lawrence Kohlberg to Carol Gilligan to Walter Mischel to Jonathan Haidt — have pondered how we discern right from wrong, how we develop the moral muscles for doing the right thing, and how well moral *thinking* prompts moral *action*.

In “Integrating the Streams of Morality Research,” Jesse Graham, Peter Meindl, and Erica Beall identify distinct tributaries of morality research:

- Humans differ in moral judgments
 - *Cultures differ*: Easterners are more concerned about loyalty and respect than Westerners are”; “liberals are more concerned about care and fairness and are less concerned about loyalty, respect, and sanctity than conservatives are”; and “women are more concerned about care, fairness, and sanctity than men are.
 - Individuals differ: Some people more than others have an intense moral identity. People for whom moral concerns are central to their self-concept indeed act more morally (for example, generously).
- *Immediate situations influence moral judgments*
 - Disgust cues, such as bad odors, can prime more severe moral judgments.
 - Positive mood inductions decrease moral severity. (We are reminded of earlier research that links feeling to doing good, in which situational happiness boosts helping [Salovey, Mayer, & Rosenhan, 1991]. Receiving a gift increases willingness to relay a phone message.)
- *People and situations interact*. For example, conservative individuals are more sensitive to disgusting stimuli.

Graham, Meindl, and Beall are curious about the links between moral thought and action, and we think students will be, too. When are thought and action consistent? When is moral hypocrisy (inconsistency) likely?

Issues of morality are well-suited to the teaching of both moral development (in introductory and developmental psychology) and attitude-behavior relations (in introductory and social psychology). Students could be asked:

- What examples come to mind of people walking their talk — of moral attitudes feeding moral actions? Perhaps of someone professing honesty and resisting an easy opportunity to cheat?
- What examples come to mind of moral hypocrisy — of cheap talk not lived out? Perhaps someone espousing concern for climate change but living otherwise?
- Can you think, perhaps from your own life, of times when your character and conduct, your words and deeds, made sweet harmony — or didn't?
- Do your own moral intuitions — your gut emotions before any moral reasoning — clue you in to right and wrong? Students can be offered several of Haidt's (2012) scenarios that evoke immediate ("It's wrong!") responses. An example includes cooking and eating a family dog that has been killed by a car.
- Are there factors that differ between those examples of moral integrity and moral hypocrisy? Perhaps something that reminded you of who you are or situational pressures that overrode your better judgment?
 - In social psychological research, attitudes are especially likely to affect behavior when external influences are minimal and when the attitudes are stable, specific to the behavior, and easily recalled (Glasman & Albarracín, 2006).
 - Daniel Batson (2011) offers another reason for commonplace moral hypocrisy: many people's egoistic motivation to *appear* moral exceeds their motivation to actually *be* moral.

Batson's experiments suggest to him that principled moral integrity is rarer than we might wish and that society therefore needs "to tap nonmoral resources" (such as social norms and civil laws, we infer). Nevertheless, students may be inspired to consider striking examples of moral heroism. Scott Allison and APS Fellow George Goethals document some in their book *Heroes: What They Do and Why We Need Them* (Oxford University Press). And APS Fellow Philip Zimbardo's "Heroic Imagination Project" offers educational resources and stories. For a TED lecture by Zimbardo, and for inspiring stories of people whose moral judgments have engendered moral courage, see www.heroicimagination.org.

References

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