

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

C. Nathan DeWall and David G. Myers

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.

The Psychology of Extremism by David G. Myers

Hogg, M. (2014). From uncertainty to extremism: Social categorization and identity formation. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23, 338–342.

Barbaric beheadings. Suicide bombers. Horrific genocides. Violent gangs. Fundamentalist zealots. Conspiracy theories. Polarized politics. Today’s world seems plagued by radical extremes from which most people recoil. A September 2014 Pew Research Center poll found 62% of Americans are “very concerned” about “Islamic extremism around the world” — up from 37% in 2011.

What circumstances and dispositions breed such radical and reactionary extremes?

In the aftermath of Nazi fascism, psychologists led by Theodor Adorno (1950) explored the roots of poisonous anti-Semitism. They concluded that the insecurities and fears of right-wing authoritarians predisposed them to an intolerance of ambiguity and an inflexible right-wrong way of thinking. Authoritarian personalities were said to be submissive to those with power and punitive toward those of lower status. Other psychologists have explored a broader dogmatism that surfaces on both the extreme left and the extreme right (Altemeyer, 2004; Rokeach, 1960) and a dog-eat-dog social dominance orientation that focuses on social hierarchies, with associated ethnocentrism, nationalism, and homophobia (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

In further search of the roots of animosities and extremism, social psychologists have identified additional forces at work, which perhaps could also be explored with students in class discussion:

1. *No matter our similarities with others, we focus on our differences.* As William McGuire and his coresearchers observed (1978), we tend to be conscious of how we differ from others around us — whether by hair color, birthplace, race, sexual orientation, or height.
2. *Group solidarity increases among those facing a common enemy.* As Muzafer Sherif (1966) demonstrated, a shared threat or rival feeds “we feeling,” patriotism, and even willingness to engage in war.

3. *Discussion among the like-minded often produces group polarization.* Analysis of terrorist organizations has shown that the terrorist mentality evolves from people who share a grievance, their views growing more extreme as they dialogue within their own face-to-face or Internet echo chamber.
4. *We naturally divide our worlds into “us” and “them,” ingroup and outgroup.* For our Stone Age ancestors, and for us, there is safety in solidarity. We are social creatures. We live in groups, with social identities that define who “we” are.

Extending this last point, the eminent social identity researcher and APS Fellow Michael Hogg, along with his coworkers, has time and again observed how people’s feelings of uncertainty about their world and their place in it — about who they are and how they should act — motivate their identifying with tightly defined groups. Much as dissonance motivates its own reduction, and much as insecurity feeds authoritarian tendencies, so uncertainty motivates people’s seeking social identity. Uncertainty subsides as people perceive that “we” are like this, and “they” are like that. For someone living in a chaotic or uncertain world, becoming part of a tightly knit group feels good; it validates who they are and what they believe. That’s the nub of Hogg’s “uncertainty–identity theory,” which is supported by experiments that alter people’s feelings of uncertainty.

Twenty-first century extremism and political polarization are fit topics for class presentation and discussion. To prime student discussion, pause the class and ask students to write for 2 or 3 minutes and then, either in small groups or as a whole class, to share their thoughts on the following topics:

1. *What sorts of situations, or what times of life, lead people to feel uncertain, anxious, or insecure?* One answer might be the transition from one’s familiar home to an unfamiliar new college life. Other possibilities include migration, job loss, divorce, poverty, and fear of death.
2. *Are the teen and emerging adult years — a time of changing ideas, shifting identities, and vocational questions — years of increased uncertainty, and therefore of potential interest in extreme groups?*
3. *What sorts of extreme groups might appeal to people in such times of personal uncertainty?* Answers might include street gangs, extreme right or left political groups, protest groups, fraternal organizations, and religious cults or fundamentalist cells. Religious organizations are especially well-suited to reducing feelings of uncertainty, Hogg has noted.

Out of respect for students’ political and religious diversity, instructors will not wish to demean students’ politics or faith. Perhaps they can acknowledge, as have psychologists from William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*) to Gordon Allport (“Religion is paradoxical. It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice,” 1958, p. 413) to Hogg and his colleagues (2010) — that religiosity comes in varied forms. Thus, religion — can we all agree? — has, in some forms, been associated with humility, compassion, and joy — but, in other varieties, especially when salving uncertainty, used as justification for terror and genocide. For all sorts of cruel deeds, noted William James, “piety is the mask” (1902, p. 264).

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