

Psychologically Speaking

In Pursuit of Big Ideas: An Interview with David Myers

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David Myers is a social psychologist and professor at Hope College in Holland, Mich. He is an award-winning researcher and an effective communicator of psychological science to college students and the general public. Myers has authored 15 books including two popular psychology textbooks, "Psychology" and "Exploring Psychology," and several general-audience books. He has also summarized psychological research for the public through articles in more than three-dozen magazines, from Scientific American to Christian Century.

His scientific writings, supported by National Science Foundation grants and fellowships and recognized by the Gordon Allport Prize, have appeared in two dozen academic periodicals, including Science, the American Scientist, the American Psychologist, and Psychological Science. In addition to his scientific writings, David is the author of five trade books, The Pursuit of Happiness, The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty, A Quiet World: Hearing Loss and How to Live with It, Intuition: Its Powers and Perils, and What God has Joined Together: A Christian Case for Gay Marriage.

David was born in Seattle, and when not writing, enjoys being an all-weather bicyclist, and an avid noontime basketball player and fan of his college's basketball team. David and Carol Myers married while undergraduates at Whitworth College and are parents of three adult children, sons Peter and Andrew, and daughter, Laura.

In addition to his activities in psychology, Professor Myers has chaired his city's Human Relations Commission, helped found a Community Action Center that assists poverty-level families, and become an advocate for people with hearing loss (www.hearingloop.org).

Recently, he established the David and Carol Myers Foundation, which receives all author royalties from David's introductory psychology textbooks and from his general audience trade books. The Foundation supports a variety charitable and professional organizations including the Association for Psychological Science Fund for Teaching and Public Understanding of Psychological Science, Bread for

the World Institute, Project Ethiopia, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, Center for Women in Transition, Fresh Youth Initiatives of New York City, and many others.

Miller: The *Journal of Psychological Inquiry* publishes undergraduate student research. In addition, there is a Special Features section that serves a variety of purposes. It is a forum for student essays on topical issues and also features, from time to time, articles that provide information of interest to both faculty and students related to the research process. We have asked you for this interview in order to explore your thoughts on the role of undergraduate research in teaching. This interview is designed primarily for the audience of students and, secondarily, for faculty, with particular emphasis on the scholarly component of teaching and learning and how that relates to students conducting research and subsequently presenting and publishing the results of that research. The three students who will be talking with you are all undergraduates, one from the University of Nebraska at Kearney and two from Bellevue University, located near Omaha, Nebraska.

Stephenson: I understand that your undergraduate degree was in chemistry. Can you describe the pivotal moment when you decided to enter the field of psychology?

Myers: It was just before I got married, at the beginning of the summer of my senior year. My wife's parents were being asked, "what is the young man going to do?" They would say, "he doesn't have a clue." I decided that I wanted to be a professor rather than a physician. Although I had completed my applications to the University of Washington and Oregon medical schools, and had taken the MCATs, I never mailed in those applications. I decided I wanted to become a professor, which meant that I needed something to profess. Psychology was the most interesting subject I had studied in my college experience, even though I had only one course in my first three years. I just thought, what more interesting subject could there be than human beings. Everything else just worked out well after that.

I would say my best moments as a teacher, that is my most rewarding times as a teacher have been when years later students will recall what the experience meant to them and how it influenced the course of their lives.

Bannon: What were some of your best and worst moments as a teacher?

Myers: I would say my best moments as a teacher, that is my most rewarding times as a teacher, have been when years later students will recall what the experience meant to them and how it influenced the course of their lives. That doesn't happen often to us but it is very gratifying when it does. In class, I would say my best moments occurred when I was doing effective demonstrations that were powerful in their impact. It was a joy to watch the faces as they realized what was happening, what they had just experienced.

My worst moments are probably peculiar to me because of my experiences of hearing loss. When a student is saying something and I can't understand what it is, then I have to sometimes guess. I think I got it but sometimes I'm not sure. Often I guess right but sometimes I guess wrong. Then there are some crackles of laughter and then you realize that you just blew it. Sometimes you ask to repeat it but it's that soft voice in a frequency that is too low for me and I still don't get it. Then I start sweating bullets! Sometimes I may ask another student to voice the question for me. Overall, those are my worst moments, when I can't hear you.

Babutzke: In your experience with writing introductory psychology textbooks, what topic in psychology is consistently misunderstood? What advice can you give teachers to correct those misunderstandings?

Myers: The single most misunderstood topic in introductory psychology is negative reinforcement. And if I knew the secret to correcting the common misconception that it means punishment, then I would be a better teacher and writer than I am. In fact for a time, I wanted to take that concept out of the text, because I didn't think that it was particularly important in understanding the mechanisms of reinforcement in shaping behavior. But when I did that, down-played it in the text, I got so many protests from teaching faculty that it was vital, it had to be put back in. I try to teach it with examples. I try to hit people over the head with this concept, but it is still difficult because it is a term that is commonly misused in the popular culture.

Babutzke: What were some of your first areas of research and what do you feel like the true value of research is?

Myers: My first area of research was studying the effects of group discussions on people's attitudes. We experimented with a very interesting phenomenon, which came to be called group polarization, which is the tendency of group interaction to amplify the preexisting tendencies with group members. That proved to be very satisfying for me in two ways that I never expected. The first was that it turned out to be a widely applicable phenomenon. Even now it is applied to the understanding of the emergence of terrorist mentality amongst a group of people who share a common grievance. Additionally, in doing research, I got to know somebody who recommended me for a writing assignment for a social psychology textbook. That led to a shift in my vocational identity from being a research psychologist and teacher to being a teacher through writing. Everything followed from that. The writing really grew out of the research, and my getting to know other people, through my work.

Bannon: Your most controversial work to date is, "What God has joined together: A Christian case for Gay Marriage." Many religious communities do not accept gay marriage. Do you believe this lack of acceptance directly affects homosexuals in their marriage?

Myers: Yes. Part of what that book does is make the case for marriage. I think that there is a lot of evidence that marriage contributes to the happiness and well being of children. Social psychologists are talking these days about our deep need to belong and marriage is one significant way in which that need to connect in close, supportive, intimate relationships is satisfied. There are also a host of legal rights that come with the institution of marriage. Currently in the USA, outside of Massachusetts, gay and lesbian people are denied the right to full equality in marriage and all the rights that come with marriage. Evidence continues to accumulate that sexual orientation is a natural and enduring disposition which is probably better accepted than denied by those with a well-defined sexual orientation. Given that the Bible has very little to say about this topic compared to lots of other topics that are really important, and given that biblical scholars disagree about what those few texts are actually saying in the context of their time, it seems reasonable to me that the faith community needs to rethink its position on the marriage and ordination to church office of the people who have same sex orientation. I think that change is gradually happening. It is happening partly because of the change in generations. There is a huge generation gap in attitudes towards same sex marriages and the ordination of gay people to church office. Eventually, today's younger adults will be tomorrow's older adults and church leaders.

Bannon: To follow up on that, religion in any area seems to be a controversial issue that many avoid. Could you ex-

plain why you have embraced it as an important component in your life and work?

Myers: I am a person of faith whose life has gained meaning through religious faith. It is an important part of my identity. Therefore it becomes natural for me to ask how religious insights in human nature correlate with psychological science's ideas about human nature. Part of what I have done is try to build a bridge between those two understandings of human nature. I have written books trying to relate psychological science to biblical understandings.

Babutzke: In talking about bridging the divide between psychology and religion, in many of your research articles you talk about the healing powers of both medicine and religion. Where do you believe that these paths of healing traditions separated and in fact do you see a re-convergence in the immediate future?

Myers: Historically, healing was very much a part of the church. In fact, modern medicine to a large extent grows out of the church. Hospitals and the spread of medicine worldwide were spread by missionaries. In more recent times, it has become more separated. We now understand the germ theory of disease and so we tend to see disease and health less in spiritual terms and more in physiology terms, and appropriately so. However, recently there has been some re-convergence because there is this huge area of research on religion, spirituality, and health. It turns out that people who are connected with others in faith communities experience social support and helping them cope with the terror of their inevitable death. They are also at somewhat lesser risk for harmful lifestyle practices since they are less likely to smoke. Even when controlling for smoking rates between religious and nonreligious people there is still something there that contributes to health. It may have to do with the communal nature of religion. People are debating what that is. But there are studies that show that there is a religious factor. It actually took me a long time to be convinced of that and to decide that religion-health research, and criticisms of it, deserve some attention in my introductory text.

Stephenson: The David and Carol Meyers Foundation helps support psychological science. What was your inspiration for starting the foundation?

Myers: My wife and I faced a question that we had to think long and hard about and that is, "how much money is enough"? We considered how much was enough for any eventuality, contemplating catastrophes toward our children, my becoming incapacitated, or whatever worst case scenario we could imagine, and we reached a point where we agreed that we had enough. From that point forward we assigned all the royalties from my introductory psychology texts to a family foundation. It goes to support psychological science but also to other things.

Most of the money has yet to be given and I don't know where it is going to go. The foundation will not survive us however. From a financial point of view, it means that my introductory psychology texts are a volunteer activity.

The real answer to your question is that our conviction, as people of faith, is that when we are given resources, we are stewards of those resources. They aren't in some ultimate sense ours, we are just holding them, and we are morally responsible for the disposition of those resources. We do not believe in inherited wealth. We love our three children dearly but they will not become wealthy as a result of our having these resources, and they understand that.

Stephenson: You are recognized as a leader in a variety of academic fields. In your opinion, what was your most influential work?

Myers: I would say that my most influential work would be my introductory and social psychology textbooks. The audiences they reach are so much larger than the group of people who are impacted by the things that I do in any other way. It is a great privilege to assist in the teaching of psychology. With so many teachers in psychology and with so many students, it is a keenly felt responsibility to do it well and get it right.

Babutzke: As a liberal arts scholar, you have mentioned that you enjoy relating psychological perspectives of human nature to wisdom found in other fields. Have you been met with some resistance in these other fields? What do you see on the horizon?

Myers: First you are right, I love to relate psychological science to everything else that students are studying and are involved in: politics, history, literature, religion, sports, sociology, and so forth. By and large I think that people have appreciated this. However, some people have occasionally complained that making allusions to sports or religion, or even politics, grates on their sensitivity. They wish it wasn't there. While I understand their concerns, I am trying to present psychology from a liberal arts perspective. To do this, I try to show how psychological science is connected to other things the students are learning and experiencing.

Bannon: Since both religion and science are major themes in your work, have you had to deal with criticism from other colleagues that these two topics should remain apart?

Myers: Yes, and on many occasions I have been told by representatives of my textbook publishers that people are skeptical of books that are written by a person who is an "out-of-the-closet" person of faith. My answer to that would be three-fold. One, I am relating psychological science to all sorts of other fields and I am not going to

censor any topic of interest. Number two; my obligation is to report psychological science as it is. If I am ever being parochial or biased, call me on it. I certainly try not to be. I try to be a faithful, honest reporter of psychological science. Third, I am part of an ever-reforming religion that has a deep respect for science, and in fact helped to give birth to modern science. We believe that this is God's whole world and we are charged with exploring it and discerning its laws. It is worshiping God with our minds. So for me, doing serious, rigorous, free-spirited science is mandated by, rather than in conflict with my religion.

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Babutzke: A very interesting point. On that note, do you have any future works coming out that we can look forward to?

Myers: I have an article on the powers and perils of intuition coming out in *Scientific American Mind* [this appeared June/July, 2007]. I have a passion for advocating hearing aid compatible assisted living for people with hearing loss. In the United States, if you go to a movie theater, they are required by the Americans with Disabilities Act to provide you with assistive listening equipment if you ask for it. It comes in the form of a portable receiver and headset. You go to the closest theater to where we are sitting right now, and those units will all be on the shelf and nobody will be using them. There is an alternative technology that is widely applied in the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Australia and is almost unknown in the United States. It broadcasts sound to hearing aids like Wi-Fi to a laptop computer. We have introduced this technology in my area of Michigan in most of the churches and auditoriums. All I have to do is activate a small "telecoil" receiver in my hearing aid and suddenly the loudspeakers are in my ears. If you listen to television and sit beside me, the television broadcasts to you from its speakers and to me into my hearing aid. It is so cool and so inexpensive; it is designing technology to suit people.

The way we have done assisted listening in the United States is not designed to suit people. It is conspicuous, it is hard to locate, and it takes effort as opposed to pushing a button. I have a website that is hearingloop.org if anyone wants to visit it. I have written eighteen articles about this technology, I have CBS news interested in doing a segment. The US House of Representatives has it in their main chamber, and the Grand Rapids Michigan Airport is about to install it throughout its concourses. My ultimate aim is to help double the functionality of hearing aids, by working toward the day when they can serve not only as microphone amplifiers but also as wireless in-the-ear loudspeakers for sound broadcast from TVs, PA systems, telephones, and more.

Babutzke: Any final thoughts you would like to share with us?

Myers: I have read with real interest the recent aggressive atheist critiques of religion by Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and others. I have also read the corresponding books on the other side like human genome director Francis Collins' book: *The Language of God*. I am interested in writing something that responds to the secular critique of religion, much of which I agree. I also would try to explain how some of us can be hard-nosed skeptics about lots of things, while also embracing a faith that seems rational, positive, and meaningful. Right now, the writing I am doing is to clarify my own thinking. [Editor's note: The result will appear as a short book due to be published by Jossey-Bass in August, 2008.]