

Donelson R. Forsyth

Talk Topics

Don, a social psychologist, studies and writes about ethics, groups, and leadership. His recent research focuses on individual, group and cultural differences in idealism and relativism, groups' reactions to success and failure, the interpersonal functions of groups, and environmental sustainability. He is currently on the faculty of the Jepson School faculty at the University of Richmond, where he holds the Leo K. and Gayle Thorsness Chair of Ethical Leadership.

Data-Focused Presentations

The Dark Triad

Personality researchers have studied hundreds of traits, but three of these traits--Machiavellianism, narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy--have emerged with great regularity in studies of moral and immoral action. These three traits, dubbed the Dark Triad (DT), pertain to more malevolent, and more closely guarded, psychological propensities and behavioral strategies. This session examines the historical roots of these three personality traits, their relationship to other traits (notably, those identified in the five factor model), and their relationship to negative and positive interpersonal behaviors.

Seeing and Being a Leader

Leadership is a process that is, in a sense, in the eye of the beholder. When people join together for the first time, one or more of these people will inevitably gravitate to a position of leadership, as the other group members silently reach consensus on who the group should let have a larger say in the group's processes and decisions. People generally believe that they know what a leader "looks like," for they have a well-developed set of expectations about the qualities they expect to find in a good leader, and the qualities that they feel disqualify on from that position. This session examines the cognitive processes that sustain people's perceptions of leaders and leadership, with special emphasis on Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) and the unique obstacles facing women leaders.

Individual Differences in Moral Philosophies

Reasonable people sometimes disagree about what is, in fact, reasonable. Ethics Position Theory suggests that variations are due, in part, to two basic differences between people. First, some individuals' personal moral codes emphasize the importance of universal ethical rules like "Thou shalt not lie," but others maintain a posture of relativism that skeptically rejects universal principles. Second, while a fundamental concern for the welfare of others lies at the heart of some individuals' moral codes, others do not emphasize such humanitarian ideals; the former assume that we should avoid harming others, while the latter assume harm will sometimes be necessary to produce good. This session will examine this theory, and review empirical findings about the relationship between ethics position, as measured by the Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ) and moral thought and action.

Responsibility in Groups

Groups, like individuals, must often track down who is responsible for their successes and failures. Did we fail because of bad luck? Did we not work hard enough? Was the task too difficult? But this search for the cause of outcomes is more complicated in groups. Group members must identify

the factors that contributed to each member's performance, assign credit and blame, and make decisions regarding rewards, power, and status. The members must also calibrate their chances of succeeding in the future, given the resources of the members, and set in motion any needed changes in the group's composition, structures, and strategies if the analysis indicates that their future outcomes are in jeopardy. This session examines those processes that influence responsibility allocation in groups, including blame, denial of responsibility, and diffusion of responsibility.

The Social Psychology of Watersheds

When will individuals act in ways that sustain and enhance the environment? A social psychological analysis of sustainability suggests that individuals will be most likely to respond to environmental challenges when they are aware of the environmental threat, believe the danger posed by the threat to be great, and feel responsible for addressing environmental problems. Several studies have applied this basic model to better understand when individuals will express positive behavioral intentions to protect and enhance the quality of the water resources—streams, rivers, lakes, and so on—in their local community. This presentation reviews that research, and ends by offering suggestions for increasing sustainability by augmenting collective-level social motivations.

General Audience Presentations

The Wonders of Groups

Human behavior is more often than not group behavior, so people can't be understood when cut apart from their groups (families, friendship cliques, work groups, etc.). Groups shape profoundly our actions, thoughts, and feelings, yet people often fail to take note of the key characteristics of groups. This session asks the question, "What if we focus on the group, rather than on the individuals in the group?" and answers: "We gain fresh insights into the nature of individuals, organizations, and society."

Leading Groups

Because so much leadership takes place in groups, skilled leaders must understand the basic principles of group dynamics; the interpersonal processes that unfold in groups over time. This session will explore key aspects of interaction within groups, including the multi-level perspective on organizational effectiveness and leadership and the basic features of groups (structure, communication and influence, performance). Special attention is given to aspects of groups that we sometimes overlook, such as roles, patterns of influence, and norms.

The Social Psychology of Morality

A social psychological analysis of ethics offers fresh insights into the processes that sustain people's moral judgments and actions. Whereas both philosophers of ethics and many early developmental psychologists implicitly adopted the notion that "I think, therefore I can be moral," emerging work in social psychology and other disciplines suggests that morality is more spontaneous, emotional, and interpersonal than controlled, rational, and personal. This session begins with the classic question of the connection between moral values and moral behavior before examining findings related to moral dumbfounding, ethical principles, and moral nudges.

Ethical Leadership

Leaders influence their followers in significant ways, but the difference leaders make is not always a positive one. They sometimes take their followers in directions they should not go. They act to promote their own personal outcomes, and overlook the good of the whole. They manipulate their

followers, persuading them to make sacrifices when they themselves enjoy the rewards of their power and influence. In some cases leaders are not just ineffective, but unethical, for their choices, actions, and motivations call into question their moral sufficiency. This session will provide an overview of emerging perspectives on the psychology of moral thought and action before applying these insights to the analysis of ethical leadership.

College Teaching Presentations

Teaching and Learning: Ten Principles

Many are the methods that could be used to unravel the processes that sustain, promote, or impede college-level learning outcomes, but in the book *College Teaching: Practical Insights from the Science of Teaching and Learning*, Forsyth draws on theory and research in psychology to offer suggestions for enhancing teaching and improving student learning. This presentation summarizes the key points in that analysis by focusing on 10 “principles” that serve as guides for the college teacher, including: Identify your Purposes and Priorities (orient), Align Your Purposes with Practices (prepare), Use Student-Centered Teaching Strategies (guide), Communicate Engagingly (profess), Align Teaching with Testing (test), Grade Them but also Help Them (grade and aid), Foster Civility and Integrity (manage). Use Technology Appropriately (upgrade), Assess your Success (evaluate), Develop a Teaching Persona (document).

Myths, Misunderstandings, and Myopias

Did you know that: Students have "learning styles:" some learn best by visual information, but others learn by doing? That the best multiple choice questions have 4 or 5 options? That students learn more from group projects than they do listening to lectures? That boosting students' sense of self-worth increases their academic performance? That too much testing destroys students' intrinsic motivation? This session will examine many everyday assumptions about teaching and learning, identifying ideas that have not survived when subjected to systematic empirical scrutiny (none of those listed above have, by the way).

Teaching and Learning with the Self in Mind

Studies of the self—from William James’s early insights to contemporary perspectives based on cognitive and neuroscience—reveal a self with many motives: to remain consistent, to expand, to find weakness, and to explore. These various motives have profound implications for teaching and for learning. When students’ selves are “in mind”—that is, they are considering the implications of their work for self and their esteem—they tend to respond in inefficacious ways during the learning process. Similarly, for instructors, the self can prompt them to fail to explore the causes of their successes and failures in the classroom, and prompt them to be too cautious in their teaching strategies. Solutions for minimizing the negative impact of the self on teaching and learning are offered.

Teaching the Hive Mind

Teaching is a supremely social activity. We could teach, and students could learn, in less socially rich environments, but they usual choose not to. Advanced scholars tend to learn alone, but novice learners—most learners—prefer to learn with other people. Traditional methods of instruction, such as lecturing, assigning readings, and competition-based testing systems, are efficient means of communicating course information and motivating group pursuit, but they do not exploit the natural tendency for students to learn collectively. This session examines a number of group-level instructional methods, such as learning communities, learning teams, and study groups, which structure learning environments so they are sources of social engagement. This analysis will

conclude by offering recommendations for implementing, successfully, group-level methods of instruction that maximize their educational benefits and minimize their complications.

Upgrading to Professor 2.0

The nature of college teaching is being reshaped by technology as more campuses are upgrading their older versions of Professor 1.0, jumping to the faster, slicker, but buggier Professor 2.0. Despite the predilection for discomfiting jargon and terminology, such as tweets, moocs, blogs, wikis, mashups, hypertext, podcasts, and the like, technology offers professors new ways to reach their long-established goals. This session reviews emerging technologies and empirical research pertaining to their effectiveness.

Groups in an Educational Context

Because so much teaching and learning takes place in groups, skilled educators must understand the basic principles of group dynamics; the interpersonal processes that unfold in groups over time. This session will explore key aspects of interaction within groups, including development and cohesion (team-building), structure, communication and influence, power, performance, and decision-making. Session participants will be asked to refocus their attention on groups, rather than individuals in groups, and take note of aspects of groups that are sometimes overlooked by educators, such as roles, patterns of influence, and norms.