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METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Confronting Prejudiced Comments: Effectiveness of a Role-Playing Exercise

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We examined whether a role-playing exercise, similar to that developed by Plous (2000), increases students' ability to generate effective responses to prejudiced comments. We assessed social psychology students' (n = 23) ability to respond to prejudiced comments before and after the exercise, and compared their performance to that of 2 other groups of students (total n = 38) who did not participate in the exercise. Results showed that the exercise increased students' ability to generate effective responses to prejudiced comments. If students apply this skill in their daily lives, it could lead to a reduction in the overt expression of prejudice among others.

Given the psychological and social significance of the topics, it is not surprising that many recently published reports have focused on techniques for teaching psychology students about stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (e.g., Case, 2007; Christopher, Walter, Marek, & Koenig, 2004; Hackney, 2005; Junn, Grier, & Behrens, 2001; Pettijohn & Walzer, 2008; Plous, 2000). Based on Lewinian action research conducted in the 1950s on the effectiveness of various responses to prejudiced comments (e.g., Citron, Chein, & Harding, 1950), Plous developed a role-playing exercise designed to not only inform students about prejudice but also teach them a skill for combating prejudice outside the classroom. The exercise involved students playing the roles of speaker, responder, and coach in small groups. The speaker chose a scenario from a handout containing real-life examples of situations involving prejudiced comments and said the prejudiced comment after allowing the discussion to build for a moment. The responder's job was to respond to the comment in manner that would not make the speaker defensive or hostile. Coaches gave candid feedback to the responder on the quality of the response. Students alternated playing each role and then discussed which types of responses were most effective.

Plous (2000) found that students rated his role-playing exercise as valuable and recommended using it in future classes. The purpose of our study was to determine whether this type of exercise actually increases students' ability to generate effective responses to prejudiced comments. If students understand how to confront prejudiced comments, they might be more likely to do so in real life. As Plous explained, confronting prejudice might "ultimately lead to its reduction rather than its reinforcement" (p. 198). Citron et al. (1950) suggested that challenging a person's prejudiced comments might make the person less likely to voice such comments in public, and newer research suggests that interpersonal confrontation produces this effect and additional benefits. For example, Czopp, Monteith, and Mark (2006) induced White college students to make inferences about Black individuals that could be construed as racially biased. A confederate, whom the students thought was a fellow student involved in an Internet chat session with them, either confronted or did not confront the students. Confrontation led the speakers to feel negative self-directed affect, and it also decreased the speakers' stereotypical inferences on a postconfrontation task. In addition, after being confronted, participants reported less prejudiced attitudes on a standard measure of racial attitudes.

Given the potential of interpersonal confrontation to reduce expressions of prejudice among those who make prejudiced comments, exercises that teach students how to confront prejudice could be very valuable both inside and outside the classroom. We examined whether a role-playing technique similar to that developed by Plous (2000) actually increases students' ability to generate effective responses to prejudiced comments. We assessed social psychology students' ability to respond effectively to prejudiced comments before and after the role-playing exercise and compared their performance to that of two comparison groups of students (enrolled in either Introduction to Psychology or Police and Society) who did not participate in the exercise. The Police and Society class was selected because, similar to the Social Psychology class, it contained a mixture of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors interested in behavioral sciences. Our hypothesis was that the social psychology students' ability to respond effectively would increase more than that of the comparison groups.

Method

Participants

Overall, 78 students enrolled in one of three courses voluntarily agreed to complete at least one of our tests. We excluded 17 students (5 to 6 from each class) from the study because they did not complete both the pretest and posttest. A total of 61 students (26 men and 35 women; 53 Caucasians, 6 African Americans, and 2 "other") enrolled in Social Psychology ($n = 23$), Police and Society ($n = 12$), or Introduction to Psychology ($n = 26$) made up the final sample of participants who completed both the pretest and posttest. The average age of participants was 20.36 ($SD = 3.36$).

Procedure

Similar to Plous (2000), we asked social psychology students to keep a log of prejudiced comments they overheard in their daily lives for a week. After students handed in their logs and we covered the material on prejudice (during the 11th week of the course), the students completed a pretest measure of their ability to generate effective responses to prejudiced comments. The measure contained five different scenarios used by Plous (personal communication, June 5, 2007) that had brief background information and prejudiced comments (e.g., "Women should be barefoot and pregnant in the house"; "I can't believe he said I was in the Army, because girls in the Army are dykes"). We asked students to indicate what, if anything, they would say if they were actually in those situations. Students in the other two courses took the pretest within a day or two of the social psychology students.

During the next class period, the social psychology students participated in a role-playing exercise similar to that used by Plous (2000). We created role-playing scenarios for the exercise from the real-life prejudiced comments recorded in students' prejudice logs (see Appendix for example scenarios). Our technique differed from that described by Plous in several ways. First, rather than giving the same scenarios to all four group members, we gave a different set of five scenarios to each member so that each speaker could choose a scenario that other group members had not seen. Second, after the postexercise discussion of which types of responses were most effective (including a handout listing suggestions discussed by Plous), we asked students to apply what they had learned by actually responding to at least one or two prejudiced comments outside of class during the following week. Students recorded these incidents in a second prejudice log. Afterward, students took a posttest that was identical to the pretest. Due to differences in course schedules, the time between the pretest and posttest varied somewhat by course: 9 days in Social Psychology, 14 days in Introduction to Psychology, and 16 days in Police and Society.

Two coders, who were blind to experimental conditions, independently coded students' responses to the two tests as effective or ineffective. They coded responses as effective if they met the criteria discussed by Plous (2000) and Citron et al. (1950). For example, common effective responses included asking questions (e.g., "Why do you think that?") and objecting based on the logic of individual differences (e.g., "Some older people might not tip well, but some tip very well"). Common ineffective (or less effective) responses included saying nothing, insulting the speaker or making inflammatory statements (e.g., "That's the most ignorant thing I've ever heard"), telling the speaker how to behave and not providing an explanation (e.g., "You can't tell a woman what she should do"), challenging the accuracy of the speaker's statement by countering with information that could be dismissed as inaccurate (e.g., "That's not true, girls in the Army are bad ass"), a mere statement of disagreement without indicating

why (e.g., "It's wrong to think that"), and suggesting situational or other causes for the target's behavior (a strategy that defends the individual rather than the group; e.g., "Times are very hard"). To get a sense of whether our exercise affected students' tendency to disapprove of prejudiced comments, we also coded students' responses to indicate whether they expressed disapproval or disagreement rather than explicit agreement, implicit agreement (e.g., stating that they would laugh), or a lack of response.

To ensure interrater reliability, the coders worked to reach consensus on a sample of 20 questionnaires prior to each coder independently coding half of the remaining questionnaires. Both raters coded the last 10 questionnaires (a total of 50 responses), and interrater agreement was 92% for the coding of effectiveness and 90% for coding of disapproval.

Results

For each participant, we calculated the number of effective responses and disapproving responses to the five scenarios on the pretest and on the posttest. Because the Police and Society class contained a number of upper level students who might have had more exposure to topics related to prejudice than those in Introduction to Psychology, we kept these two classes separate for the purpose of analysis rather than combining them into one comparison group. A 2 (time: pretest vs. posttest) $\times$ 3 (group: Social Psychology vs. Introduction to Psychology vs. Police and Society) mixed-design ANOVA performed on effective responses revealed a significant interaction, $F(2, 58) = 7.79$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .21$. As expected, a simple main effects analysis showed that the social psychology students exhibited a significant increase in the number of effective responses from the pretest ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 1.27$) to the posttest ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.47$), $F(1, 22) = 6.75$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .24$. The Police and Society students showed no significant change from the pretest ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 0.75$) to the posttest ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 1.06$), $F(1, 11) = 0$, $\eta^2 = 0$. The Introduction to Psychology students exhibited a significant decrease in effective responses from the pretest ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.20$) to the posttest ($M = 1.46$, $SD = 1.10$), $F(1, 25) = 8.39$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .25$.

A 2 (time: pretest vs. posttest) $\times$ 3 (group: Social Psychology vs. Introduction to Psychology vs. Police and Society) mixed-design ANOVA performed on disapproving responses revealed a significant interaction, $F(2, 58) = 3.41$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .11$. A simple main effects analysis showed that the social psychology students exhibited a significant increase in the number of disapproving responses from the pretest ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.13$) to the posttest ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.56$), $F(1, 22) = 14.14$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .39$. The Police and Society students showed no significant change from the pretest ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.89$) to the posttest ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.67$), $F(1, 11) = 1.94$, $p = .19$, $\eta^2 = .15$. The Introduction to Psychology students also exhibited no significant change from the pretest ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.11$) to the posttest ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.05$), $F(1, 25) = 0.24$, $p = .63$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

Discussion

The results suggest that this technique (i.e., the role-playing exercise and related activities inside and outside of class) is an effective way to teach students how to respond to prejudiced comments they hear from others. The social psychology students not only expressed a greater level of disapproval of the prejudiced responses after participating in the exercise, they also generated more effective types of responses. If students apply this skill in their daily lives, it could lead to a reduction in the overt expression of prejudice and in prejudiced attitudes among those who make prejudiced comments (see Czopp et al., 2006).

A randomized control group design would have been ideal for examining the effects of this technique, but practical considerations prevented us from dividing the Social Psychology class into two groups and from equalizing the time period between the pretest and posttest across classes. Nevertheless, social psychology students improved their performance on the posttest and the comparison groups did not. Because it seems unlikely that other college coursework influenced the students' ability to respond to prejudiced comments, we believe that the activities we utilized are the most plausible explanation for the increased ability of social psychology students to generate effective responses.

Although our study indicates that social psychology students increased their ability to generate effective responses to prejudiced comments, we do not yet know whether students actually apply this skill in their daily lives. As Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, and Goodwin (2008) pointed out, the hurdles that people face in confronting discrimination might be quite similar to those

that prevent bystander intervention in emergencies. Specifically, people must interpret an event as discrimination, decide that it is an emergency (or is harmful), take responsibility for responding, identify a proper response, and take action. The exercise we utilized was effective for helping participants identify a proper response, but the other hurdles might prevent people from actually making the response in real situations. Teaching students about these hurdles and the topics of prejudice, discrimination, bystander intervention, and diffusion of responsibility might increase the likelihood that they will confront those making prejudiced comments outside the classroom. As Plous (2000) suggested, students might also benefit from a discussion of how the situational context could influence one's response. For example, students might discuss whether (a) there are situations in which one should not respond, and (b) one's response should differ depending on whether a friend or stranger made the prejudiced comment.

It is not clear why the students in Introduction to Psychology exhibited a significant decrease in effective responding from the pretest to the posttest. Their responses indicated about the same high level of disapproval during the pretest and posttest, but their posttest responses were less likely to employ effective strategies (e.g., asking questions) and more likely to employ less effective strategies (e.g., insulting the speaker). It does not seem likely that the topics (e.g., thinking, intelligence, motivation) covered in the course during this time period caused this change. Perhaps it is the result of an inability to consistently select effective responses due to relatively little training in psychology or in how to respond to prejudiced comments.

Future research might examine whether this role-playing technique is effective with other groups of people, such as those who have not received training in the psychology of prejudice or those without a college education. Previous research (e.g., Pettijohn & Walzer, 2008; Wagner & Zick, 1995) suggests that these groups might exhibit higher levels of prejudice. Thus, they might be less receptive to training in how to respond to prejudiced remarks.

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Appendix

Example Scenarios

Scenario 1

Speaker: A female server at a restaurant

Responder: A female server

Background: She is discussing how she hates waiting on old people.

Comment: "Waiting on old people is a waste of time! You sit there and talk to them for 15 minutes, and they leave you a 5% tip!"

Scenario 2

Speaker: A female friend

Responder: White female college student

Background: The college student is suggesting to her friend that they go shopping at a store that sells stylish clothes in an area of the city that has a high percentage of Black people.

Comment: "I'm not going there! I'll get shot!"

Scenario 3

Speaker: The student's grandmother

Responder: A female college student

Background: Driving to the grocery store through a part of town where some gays live.

Comment: "I can't believe how the gays have just taken over this part of town. They ruined a perfectly good area."

Scenario 4

Speaker: Male co-worker

Responder: A female college student

Background: While working at an ice cream store, the co-worker commented when a heavier customer entered the store.

Comment: "Geez! Like they need any more food, especially ice cream!"

Notes

1. We thank Lisa Benzinger for entering our data into SPSS.
2. We presented an earlier version of this article at the annual meeting of the Council of Teachers of Undergraduate Psychology (CTUP), Chicago, IL, May 2009.
3. Send correspondence, including requests for the scenarios included in our exercise, to Timothy J. Lawson, Department of Psychology, College of Mount St. Joseph, Cincinnati, OH 45233; e-mail: tim_lawson@mail.msj.edu