

Confronting Bias through Teaching: Insights from Social Psychology

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Abstract

Research in social psychology has the potential to address real-world issues involving racial stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. Literature on confrontation suggests that addressing racism can be seen as a persuasive act that will allow for more effective interpersonal interactions. In this article, we explore the persuasive communication literature in the context of classroom education on the pervasiveness of racial bias. We examine some of the challenges instructors might face from students. Finally, we suggest strategies that might allow for a more effective classroom experience.

Keywords: Confrontation, teaching, social psychology, bias, persuasion

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There are continuing disparities among racial, ethnic, gender, and other groups in the United States, and these disparities can be attributed to past and ongoing bias and discrimination faced by members of stigmatized and typically underrepresented groups. In 2016 alone, society has seen a drastic increase in the media coverage surrounding instances of police brutality against Blacks—Philando Castile in Minnesota and Alton Sterling in Louisiana to name two recent incidents. Despite an abundance of statistical evidence, media coverage, and empirical studies, dominant nonstigmatized group members (i.e., Whites, males) tend to be less aware that bias is an issue in today's society and in fact often perceive themselves to be more likely recipients of bias than stigmatized group members (Norton & Sommers, 2011). These individuals are more likely to see the current social hierarchy as legitimate and feel threatened when presented with evidence of racial progress that challenges current racial disparities (Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). Accordingly, the programs and policies that address these inequalities often suffer from lack of support, either because people do not believe that the programs and policies are justified (i.e., discrimination is not a problem), or people perceive that they are unfair (i.e., this is not the way to address disparities). Thus, we need effective communication around issues of racial, ethnic, gender, and other forms of bias in order to develop viable solutions with sustained support from all stakeholders.

An important part of this communication is educating others about the existence of bias, its contribution to the disparities we observe, and evidence for potential solutions. To the extent that the challenge is to convince people that racial and other forms of bias and their effects are real, these educational efforts could be framed as persuasive bias confrontations—a topic that has received a fair amount of empirical attention in recent years. Social psychological evidence

suggests that perceived high social costs are likely to deter individuals—both those directly affected (targets) and those who witness discrimination (bystanders)—from confronting bias. Social psychology seeks to develop and test theories about human behavior that can inform practical approaches to address real-world social issues. The field is increasingly popular because it offers a scientific approach to studying factors that affect social interactions.

For our purposes, we expand the definition of persuasive bias confrontation to include classroom efforts to persuade students of the existence of systemic racial biases affecting members of a variety of minority groups. These efforts could range from a single class lesson to a semester-long course. Teaching social psychological concepts such as stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination can be seen as an act of confrontation because these perspectives might conflict with students' preconceived beliefs. Reflecting their majority in the U.S., Whites make up the largest population of students who enroll in postsecondary institutions (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Because of this, confronting bias in the college classroom is a potentially beneficial approach to engaging those in the majority to join the fight against interpersonal and systemic racial bias. Our goal in this article is to provide some guidance on classroom education efforts through the lens of the social psychological literature exploring persuasive bias confrontation.

The Challenges of Persuasive Bias Confrontation

Bias confrontation is uncomfortable, and perhaps necessarily so. It presents affective and motivational challenges to those who confront as well as those who are confronted. A great deal of research has explored the factors that determine whether someone will confront bias (Czopp & Ashburn-Nardo, 2012). A common finding in the literature exploring efforts to confront bias is that those who claim that they or others have been the victims of discrimination often are the targets of evaluative backlash. For example, women and Blacks who attribute personal outcomes

to discrimination are more likely to be viewed as complainers, hypersensitive, irritating, and trouble makers, compared to those individuals who do not confront (Gervais & Hillard, 2014; Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Kaiser & Miller, 2003). This backlash tends to be more extreme for members of stigmatized groups but can extend to everyone (e.g., Dickter, Kittel, & Gyurovski, 2012; Schultz & Maddox, 2013). For example, bystanders who confront bias (i.e., those who do not personally experience discrimination, but confront on behalf of someone else) also face backlash (Cadieux & Chasteen, 2015; Eliezer & Major, 2011; Good, Moss-Racusin, & Sanchez, 2012; Kroeper, Sanchez, & Himmelstein, 2014). Cadieux and Chasteen (2015) showed that heterosexual males who confronted homophobia were not only more likely to be viewed as complainers and disliked, but they were also more likely to be perceived as homosexual, compared to those who did not make the decision to confront.

Individuals who are confronted with the idea that their actions may have been biased also experience negative affect. For example, those who are confronted for racist behavior experience anger and irritation towards the confronter (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006) that may well translate into the evaluative backlash that confronters experience. In addition, those who are confronted experience guilt, self-criticism, and dissatisfaction (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Rokeach & Cochrane, 1972; Rokeach & McLellan, 1972). These negative reactions are not necessarily undesirable; in fact, they may be critical. If the confrontation points out a discrepancy between one's behavior (e.g., telling an insensitive joke) and one's egalitarian self-concept, it might prompt those who exhibit bias to make changes in attitudes and behavior in the long term (Czopp et al., 2006; Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Rokeach & Cochrane, 1972). Thus, the benefits of confronting racial bias through dialogues between stigmatized and

nonstigmatized groups can be important in facilitating positive intergroup relations and producing solutions for positive change.

Despite these potential benefits toward reducing the expression of bias, not every target who experiences (or bystander who witnesses) discrimination decides to confront. Those who confront bias ultimately feel more satisfaction with their actions than those who decide not to confront (Dickter, 2012). However, there are certain costs involved in confronting bias, especially for members of stigmatized groups. Even though stigmatized individuals who experience prejudice believe they will confront future acts of prejudice regardless of the social costs, research shows that they are less likely to confront when the social costs are too high or the perceived benefits too low (Good et al., 2012; Shelton & Stewart, 2004). Potential confronters might avoid claims of discrimination because of anticipated backlash, regardless of stigmatized group membership (e.g., Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Schultz & Maddox, 2013). However, avoiding confrontation has material and psychological costs (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Hill, 2006). Individuals who consider themselves egalitarian, but decide not to confront, may experience cognitive dissonance that leads them to make positive evaluations of the prejudiced individual and reduce the amount of importance they place on confronting (Rasinski, Geers, & Czopp, 2013). This dissonance produces a lower likelihood of confrontation and a missed opportunity for addressing biased behavior.

Taken together, these challenges work to discourage individuals from engaging in confrontation efforts, thus perpetuating the status quo. Instructors are no different in their sensitivity to these concerns. They find themselves in the unique position of being able to confront bias through teaching but may also be concerned about backlash from students (e.g., in the form of teaching evaluations) and that their message may not be effective. Recent reviews of the

literature point to a variety of techniques that instructors might use to confront bias effectively (e.g., Czopp & Ashburn-Nardo, 2012; Focella, Bean, & Stone, 2015). We next consider some of these approaches through the lens of research that may help instructors to overcome the challenges (outlined above) that limit the likelihood and effectiveness of confrontations.

Confrontations as Persuasive Appeals

Social psychologist Gordon Allport paved the way for the study of attitudes, defining the concept as “a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive and dynamic influence upon the individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (Allport, 1935, p. 810). Because attitudes are potentially important in determining behavior, social psychologists have long been committed to studying the causes of attitudes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Lapiere, 1934; Rokeach, 1968) and how they change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Rokeach, 1968).

Like persuasive appeals, bias confrontations could be considered communications designed to change attitudes and, ultimately, behavior (Gervais & Hillard, 2014; Schultz & Maddox, 2013; Swim, Gervais, Pearson, & Stangor, 2009). Schultz and Maddox (2013) drew this parallel in an effort to align two literatures that had largely progressed independently. The literature on attitude change suggests that there are three factors to consider when there are claims of racial bias: (a) the communicator, (b) the message, and (c) the audience (for a review, see Albarracín, Johnson, & Zanna, 2005). For instance, the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) suggests that these factors influence how people will process a persuasive appeal, with implications for argument effectiveness to induce attitude change. From this perspective, confrontations occur when a communicator delivers a message decrying an incident of bias to an audience with the hopes eliciting sympathy, remuneration, or

behavior change. These factors can vary in several ways with potential implications for bias confrontation outcomes. The communicator could be the target (i.e., direct or indirect victim of bias) or an ally (i.e., a bystander sympathetic to the target). The message could focus on a specific act or more systemic, structural inequalities. The audience could be the person directly or indirectly responsible for the biased behavior or an individual who is complicit in the structural inequalities perpetuated by a system. Below, we briefly review these factors and discuss their implications for the classroom.

Persuasive Bias Confrontation Research: Implications for Classroom Teaching

An instructor's primary goal is to teach his or her students and potentially change the way they think about and approach a topic. The research on bias confrontation suggests that when the topic is the pervasive nature of intergroup bias, this goal is even more challenging to achieve. The evaluative backlash that instructors may face has implications for their teaching effectiveness and course evaluations that are used in employment decisions. With this in mind, there are a number of strategies that instructors can use to educate students about bias while effectively while minimizing evaluative backlash.

Instructors as Messengers

As described above, the research on bias confrontation suggests that, ironically, even though members of stigmatized groups (e.g., Blacks or women) have more direct experiences with bias, allies confronting members of nonstigmatized groups (e.g., Whites or men) are seen as more legitimate by other nonstigmatized individuals when confronting bias (e.g., Gervais & Hillard, 2014; Schultz & Maddox, 2013). Thus, instructors who are members of stigmatized groups face an additional layer of complication when teaching bias because of their stigmatized identity. Minority instructors are already perceived differently than their majority colleagues—

they are seen as less professional, fair, respectful, and warm (MacNell, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2014; Smith & Anderson, 2005). Along with their stigmatized identity, discussing issues of prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping can potentially further exacerbate negative views, affecting teaching effectiveness.

Messenger characteristics such as group membership (e.g., race and gender) influence persuasion effectiveness, such that stigmatized individuals (e.g. Blacks and women) are less impactful during confrontational encounters when compared to nonstigmatized individuals (Gulker, Mark, & Monteith, 2013; C. R. Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Petty, Fleming, & White, 1999). Persuasion theories suggests that when individuals confront in favor of their own or their group's interests (e.g., Blacks supporting Africana residential housing on college campuses), others are less likely to process their message; contrarily, individuals who argue against their group's interest (e.g., Whites support Africana residential housing) often illicit greater message processing and thus greater acceptance (Petty, Fleming, Priester, & Feinstein, 2001).

Focella and colleagues (2015) suggested that when confronting students of a different race or gender, instructors can make salient a common, nonstigmatized identity. This approach, derived from the Common In-group Identity Model, recognizes the existence of ingroup bias and suggests that this tendency can help to establish harmonious intergroup relations (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Research by Nier et al. (2001) showed that White individuals were more likely to comply with an interview request from a Black individual when the Black individual shared a common sports team affiliation, compared to when the Black individual was affiliated with the opposing team. Similarly, an experiment by Schmader, Croft, Whitehead, and Stone (2013) revealed that gay men were more likely to be selected for an interview by a straight man when there was a common identity compared to when there was not. This approach suggests that

instructors connect with students on a personal level in order to reduce possible discomfort that comes along with being confronted with racial bias.

Teaching Styles of the Messages

In terms of content, the instructor of a psychology course is likely to be presenting material that seeks to address the pervasiveness of bias in a society. Research suggests that confronting participants with a message that includes strong quality arguments (based on meaningful reasons, evidence and rational considerations) versus weak quality arguments (based on superficial reasons, anecdotes, or emotions) can mitigate evaluative backlash (Schultz & Maddox, 2013). This reflects a distinction between the relative efficacy of central versus peripheral routes to processing persuasive information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In the context of a psychology course, many instructors choose to use a mix of personal experiences or examples from the media (more peripheral) and empirical evidence (more central) in their lessons. This strategy is likely a good one—a combination of these types of evidence is likely most effective in reaching the broadest audience, as individuals can vary in their short- and long-term preferences for certain types of messages (see below).

In addition to the specific content, the style in which one delivers a message can have a large impact on how others receive that message. In studies comparing reactions to hostile and non-hostile confrontations, communicators who engage in hostile confrontations appear to experience the most backlash. For example, as compared to non-hostile confrontations, hostile confrontations (i.e., those that are direct, aggressive, or angry) lead to contempt or anger directed at the confronter and can produce a heightened threat to the message recipient's self-image (Czopp et al., 2006). Hostile confrontations are probably rare in the classroom context when the instructor is the messenger. But, as noted above, beliefs about the messenger's social identity

could potentially guide the interpretation of the message. Research by Schultz and Maddox (2013) showed that White participants more negatively rated Black communicators, compared with White communicators, when making extreme claims (e.g., the need to combat ongoing discrimination on campus), but not when making relatively milder claims (e.g., the need to create safe space for minorities on campus). However, more aggressive responses are sometimes warranted and can often benefit those who confront relative to those who do not (Dickter et al., 2012). Adding another wrinkle, students may interpret the same message coming from a stigmatized instructor as more hostile than when coming from a majority instructor, leading to greater backlash. Importantly, confronting participants with strong quality arguments, such as those based on meaningful evidence and reason, versus weak quality arguments, such as those based on superficial reasons or emotions, can mitigate this backlash, even when the claims are more extreme (Schultz & Maddox, 2013).

The context of the confrontation also makes a difference. Gervais and Hillard (2014) found that female (vs. male) confronters were regarded as less positive, competent, charismatic, and worse leaders after an indirect public confrontation. This backlash was also specific to the context of the confrontation (e.g., a public confrontation of gender bias) and group membership. This finding, drawn from research on interpersonal confrontations, may be less relevant to the necessarily public setting of a classroom. That said, instructors can work to create a classroom environment that has more of a “private feel.” For instance, in courses that cover stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, one of the authors works to set up a norm of privacy in the classroom by asking students to respect “The Vegas Rule” (i.e., “What happens here stays here”) in order to provide students with the space to struggle openly and honestly with the material presented.

Students as Audiences

It is perhaps obvious that instructors should consider the characteristics of their students when considering their approach to presenting confronting material. Despite strong empirical evidence and knowledgeable instructors in the field, there will always be students who will have difficulties or an unwillingness to accept the ideas being presented. Students' affective and motivational states, demographic characteristics, and prior beliefs can each play a role in their responses to a confrontation message. In our experience, majority students often see the discussion of systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of bias as a personal accusation, causing them to feel attacked and become defensive. This defensiveness is not totally unwarranted; individuals share some responsibility in maintaining systemic bias. However, defensiveness becomes counterproductive if it prevents one from engaging in discussion or encouraging corrective action. Stone and colleagues (2011) provided evidence that students who have opportunities for self-affirmation may be less likely to react negatively to confrontation. Instructors might incorporate this finding by including activities that provide students the opportunity to affirm valued aspects of their selves prior to being exposed to challenging information.

Like research exploring messenger factors, the audience factors that influence reactions to confrontation have largely focused on the group membership of the audience. For example, Whites and men show greater negative responses to confrontations by Blacks and women, respectively. But some research suggests that racial or gender identity may be proxies for underlying audience beliefs. White students who have a stronger belief that the U.S. is a meritocracy (i.e., that all people get from the system what they put into it) are more likely to show evaluative backlash than those with weaker meritocracy beliefs (Schultz & Maddox, 2013).

Similar evidence suggests that individuals who endorse a colorblind racial ideology are more likely to show backlash toward Black confronters (Zou & Dickter, 2013). These findings suggest that instructors might seek to identify where their students stand on several individual difference measures and then select evidence that targets these beliefs.

There are several strategies that increase understanding of one's audience that might complement confrontation (for more detail, see Focella et al., 2015). *Discrepancy strategies* involve making students aware of how their potential biases are divergent from important values and standards they hold (Monteith, 1993). These strategies are based on the assumption that people are generally motivated to behave in socially desirable ways. *Perspective-taking strategies* involve giving students direct instructions to take the perspective of an outgroup target and have been shown to reduce negative outcomes stemming from confrontations (for a review, see Todd & Galinsky, 2014). Fortunately, instructors can use perspective taking in order to reduce perceivers' denial of racial discrimination (Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011). Finally, *consciousness-raising strategies* suggest that demonstrations like the implicit-association test (IAT) can be used in educational settings to make students more aware of their possible bias, which may lead them to engage in more prosocial behavior (Hillard, Ryan, & Gervais, 2013). In fact, studies show that hypocrisy induction can motivate aversive racists to reduce prejudicial behavior and change negative views of outgroup members (Son Hing, Li, & Zanna, 2002).

Conclusion

Bias confrontation is challenging to both instructors and students. It is, however, also necessary. Research suggests that confrontation and other methods can be effective in curbing biased behavior (e.g., Becker & Swim, 2012; Czopp & Ashburn-Nardo, 2012; Focella et al.,

2015). Instructors who seek to educate students about the nature of interpersonal and structural bias have accepted a challenging task. By integrating research on attitude change and bias confrontation, we have sought to provide a framework for instructors to consider the factors that may affect how students receive messages that challenge their beliefs, while effectively avoiding the kind of resistance and evaluative backlash that can undermine their teaching efforts. As a cautionary note, many of these strategies focus on making students comfortable enough to engage in dialogue and to process the messages about their potential role in the perpetuation of bias. But it is perhaps important that students are not too comfortable, as research suggests that cognitive dissonance and negative self-directed affect are important factors in bringing about individual change. Plus, once they receive the message, students need to engage further, as they must seek strategies to minimize bias in their own interpersonal behavior (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2008); they must also work to impact policies, programs, and laws through civic engagement. Hopefully, the strategies we have provided will help instructors to more effectively move students along the path from ignorance and denial to acceptance and engagement.

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