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Responding to Overt Displays of Prejudice: A Role-Playing Exercise

S. Plous

Wesleyan University

Nearly 50 years ago, a program of Lewinian "action research" explored the most effective way to respond to prejudiced comments (Citron, Chein, & Harding, 1950). In this article, I describe a classroom adaptation of that research in which students receive 10 scenarios involving a prejudiced comment and rotate playing 1 of 3 roles (prejudiced speaker, responder, or social observer) in a mock interaction. The result is a dramatic example of "action teaching" in which students learn not only about social psychology but also about ways to address an important social problem.

What is the most effective way to respond when you hear someone make a prejudiced remark? The first published research on this question was conducted by the Commission on Community Interrelations (CCI) of the American Jewish Congress, a research group set up by Kurt Lewin in the aftermath of World War II (Citron, Chein, & Harding, 1950). In this program of Lewinian "action research" (i.e., research aimed at solving a social problem), participants watched professional actors enact vignettes in which a prejudiced comment was made by one person and countered by another. Participants then evaluated the effectiveness of various responses. The CCI found that the type of response seen as most effective was a calm, quiet objection based on American values (e.g., fairness, pluralism, teamwork) or the logic of individual differences (e.g., that there are large individual differences within most groups). It also found that roughly 80% of participants preferred any type of objection over silence.

Although the CCI focused mainly on responses to anti-Semitism and anti-Black prejudice (Harding, Citron, & King, 1953; Selltitz, Citron, Harding, Rosahn, & Wormser, 1950), the experimental paradigm it used is potentially applicable to a wide variety of prejudices. Moreover, with relatively minor modifications, teachers can adapt the paradigm for use as an interactive student exercise. On a rotating basis, students can assume the role of a prejudiced speaker, responder, or social observer, and they can explore the psychological dynamics of prejudice from each vantage point. Previous reports have documented the value of interactive exercises in teaching about the effects of institutional racism (Lawrence, 1998) and stereotypes (Goldstein, 1997), and I have found that an interactive exercise based on the CCI paradigm is similarly useful in a seminar I teach on the psychology of prejudice. In addition, the exercise is suitable for classes that cover attitude change, person perception, group behavior, and other social psychology topics.

Description of the Exercise

Prior to the role-playing session, the instructor should create a handout with several different scenarios involving a prejudiced comment. These comments may be taken from actual events or may be created by the instructor (a copy of scenarios I have used are available on request). In my case, I usually couple this exercise with an earlier assignment in which students keep a "prejudice log" for one week, so I cull the prejudiced comments from actual events reported by students. Each scenario in the handout should briefly describe a "speaker," a "responder," the event's background, and the comment itself. For example, one scenario might be the following:

- Speaker: A middle-age uncle
- Responder: A family member
- Background: Comment was made during a family dinner in which the conversation turned to the topic of gay rights.
- Comment: "All that lesbians need is a good-looking man to convert them."

On the top sheet of the handout, students receive the following instructions:

The purpose of the present exercise is to practice responding to prejudice in a way that will ultimately lead to its reduction rather than its reinforcement. This is extremely challenging, because it is hard to respond honestly without leading other people to become defensive or hostile.

The exercise involves three roles—speaker, responder, and coach—and all group members should have at least one opportunity to play each role. The speaker is responsible for choosing a scenario (or making one up) and saying the prejudiced remark. The responder is given the challenge of responding to the remark in a way that reduces the likelihood of future prejudice, and the coach is a social observer who provides candid feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the response.

To get the most out of this exercise, it is important to spend as much time as possible actually *practicing*, rather than simply discussing prejudice reduction, and the coaches should be as open as possible in their feedback. To begin the exercise, one person should play the role of speaker, one should play the role of responder,

and the remaining group members should play the roles of coaches. Let the conversation build for a minute or so before the prejudiced remark is made, and let it continue for a little while after the response is given. Once the speaker and responder have concluded their interaction, the coaches should critique the response, and the roles should be rotated for another practice round with a new speaker and responder. Do not worry about getting through all the scenarios or adhering precisely to the scripted comments—the scenarios are simply designed as icebreakers to facilitate the exercise.

After students have had an opportunity to read the instructions and look through the scenarios, I explain that we will divide the class into four-person groups (a four-person group allows for two coaches in each rotation), that all group members should play each of the three roles at least once, and that the speaker should usually choose a new scenario with each rotation. In my experience, an adequate amount of role playing requires at least an hour of class time. I also stress the unique opportunity afforded by the exercise, pointing out that in daily life few people ever get the chance to practice methods of prejudice reduction and receive critical feedback from supportive coaches. To simulate normal daily experience and allow students to interact naturally, I do not provide any further preparation or training in advance of the exercise. Finally, I mention that I will float from group to group during the hour and that afterward we will convene for 20-30 min to discuss how the exercise went.

Post-Exercise Class Discussion

Because students tend to become absorbed in the role-playing scenarios, the ensuing class discussion is often lively and emotional. The most common reaction students have is that it is surprisingly difficult to counter prejudiced comments without leading the other person to become defensive, entrenched, or dismissive. As one student put it, "The exercise allowed me to realize that confrontational discussions are not effective when trying to change someone's mind."

These difficulties provide a natural opportunity for instructors to discuss psychological phenomena such as reactance, impression management, cognitive dissonance, and conformity. For example, instructors might challenge students to think of approaches that will minimize reactance on the part of the prejudiced speaker. Here are some strategies that students in my seminar have recommended in the past:

1. Use questions such as "Why do you say that?" and "Do you feel that way about every person in that group?" As Fisher and Ury (1983) wrote with respect to negotiation, "Statements generate resistance, whereas questions generate answers Questions offer no target to strike at, no position to attack" (p. 117).
2. Arouse cognitive dissonance in the prejudiced speaker by priming the speaker's egalitarian self-image. An example of this strategy would be a response such as "I'm surprised to hear you say that,

because I've always thought of you as someone who is very open-minded."

3. Tell the other person how you feel (e.g., "It makes me uncomfortable to hear that") rather than how to behave (e.g., "You shouldn't say that"). The latter statement can be disputed, but the former cannot.
4. Approach the other person with respect rather than self-righteous indignation. Many prejudiced comments are misguided attempts at humor by speakers who do not view themselves as prejudiced; consequently, an effort to convince them not to be prejudiced is likely to fail.

In addition to the question of what to say, students may also be interested in talking about how and when to respond. Good questions for discussion include the following: (a) Is the most effective response an immediate one, or is it better to wait? (b) Are public responses more effective than private responses? and (c) Are there situations in which it is best not to respond? These are questions for which there are no easy answers, and instructors can invite students to apply the results of psychological research in an effort to offer tentative answers. During this discussion, instructors may wish to underscore the difficulty of assessing prejudice reduction techniques and may wish to mention that this is an area of research being actively investigated by psychologists (Devine, 1994).

One other topic worth exploring is the role of dissonance reduction among potential responders. Students often report that in everyday life they are silent in the face of prejudiced comments and that they reduce their dissonance from this silence with thoughts such as "Nothing I say would make a difference" or "It's not my place to say anything." By comparing these statements to those made by unresponsive bystanders in emergency situations (Latané & Darley, 1970), instructors can discuss the role of dissonance reduction and diffusion of responsibility in the perpetuation of prejudice.

Evaluation of the Exercise

In the spring of 1998, 34 students who were taking a seminar on the psychology of prejudice and discrimination evaluated the role-playing exercise (roughly 60% of students were women; nearly all were juniors or seniors). Students completed an anonymous survey with three items: (a) "How would you rate the overall value of this demonstration?" based on a scale ranging from 1 (*not valuable at all*) to 9 (*very valuable*), (b) "Would you recommend using this demonstration in future classes?" based on a scale ranging from 1 (*definitely yes*) to 5 (*definitely not*), and (c) a free-response item soliciting other reactions to the exercise. The mean rating of overall value was 8.0, the median rating was 8.0, and the modal rating was 9.0 (with a range of 6.0–9.0). All 34 students recommended using the exercise in future classes (26 said *definitely yes* and 8 said *probably yes*; the mean rating was 1.2).

The free responses also indicated a high level of enthusiasm for the exercise. For example, one student wrote "I feel like I learned a huge amount in a short period of time about being on both ends of a prejudice[d] statement."

Another remarked that "It was very helpful to have others give me suggestions on what to say." If there was any common criticism or suggestion for change, it was to allot more time for the exercise. Several students said that they would have liked more time for role playing (e.g., to allow for a second attempt at responding to a comment), and some said that they would have liked to do further role playing once the full class reconvened. In sum, then, all students believed the exercise should be used with future classes, and most saw the exercise as very valuable.

Conclusion

Just as Lewin (1948) developed action research to address critical social issues, the role-playing exercise described in this article might be considered "action teaching." Not only does the exercise provide an engaging opportunity for students to apply psychological research findings to an important social problem, but the end result is that many students report feeling better prepared to deal constructively with everyday instances of prejudice. This action-oriented approach supplements other efforts to develop psychology curricula on the topic of prejudice and diversity (Khan, 1999; White, 1994; Whitten, 1993; Wurst & Wolford, 1994), and its use of role playing offers a new hands-on technique for exploring issues related to race, gender, and culture (Crawford, 1994; Goldstein, 1995; Richard, 1996).

Ideally, this exercise should be scheduled late in an academic term, once students have built rapport with each other and established a safe social environment. It is also critically important that students have the option not to make prejudiced statements if they feel uncomfortable doing so and that they be asked to give feedback respectfully when playing the role of coach (although the exercise merely involves role playing, it can evoke powerful emotions). One last tip is that instructors should visit each group every 10 min or so, just to make sure that students are spending their time role playing rather than holding discussions. If students are able to spend the full hour role playing and giving each other candid feedback, the result is likely to be a memorable learning experience.

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