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Aug 02, 2019

Will Saying Something Matter? Curbing Stereotyping and Prejudice through Confrontation

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In the early stage of my career, I attended an evening social event arranged as part of an annual meeting of a flagship society in social psychology. Along with a couple of hundred social psychologists and many non-psychologists (if I recall correctly, we shared the event with insurance conference attendees), I sat down to enjoy what promised to be roaring, hilarious comedy show. However, first came the warm-up comedian.

His entire act consisted of jokes about gay and lesbian people. He played on stereotypes, tugged at emotions like disgust, and flamboyantly acted out stereotypic caricatures. My fellow social psychologists and I sat with stunned expressions. I decided to leave, and my route out took me past the stage. Without forethought and in front of everyone, I caught the attention of the comedian and asked, “Do you have a different act? This one is awful! Don’t you have something that isn’t offensive, that doesn’t play on stereotypes?” He responded, “Oh, are you a lesbian?” I stormed out of the room. Others told me that he hobbled to a finish, and the main act that followed was great.

Meanwhile, I was shook. I did not regret speaking up. In addition to being personally committed to egalitarianism and non-prejudice, I knew that research had shown repeatedly that disparaging humor about groups creates, maintains, and perpetuates bias and discrimination. However, what would people think of me? Would I be branded a troublemaker, overly sensitive, and overemotional?

No doubt, part of what spurred me to confront the comedian derived from the fact that I had recently embarked on research concerning the power of confrontation for curbing group-based biases. I have continued this line of research, along with many other researchers, across the past 15 years or so. We now know a good deal about how to navigate successful confrontations.

Confrontation of stereotypes and prejudice is important for two reasons. First, confrontation can help people become aware of their own biases. Often people may not realize they have said or done something that reflects stereotyping or prejudice, and they may be personally motivated to change when a confrontation helps them to become aware of their biases. Second, confrontation makes social norms against bias salient. Even if someone personally has no problem with their biases, a confrontation can signal that such biases are neither socially acceptable nor tolerated. For “the average person” (e.g., excluding extremist hate groups), note is taken of the norms, and the desire to fit in can encourage less biased responding.

The bottom line from confrontation research is that confrontation curbs people’s expressions of bias. For instance, studies have shown that participants who are confronted about their stereotypic inferences (for example, assuming a Black man who is described as being around drugs a lot is a “drug addict” or “criminal” rather than as a “pharmacist” or “doctor”) feel disappointed with themselves and guilty. These emotions motivate them to recognize situations in which they may respond in biased ways later and to redirect to respond in non-biased ways.

However, findings also suggest that some confrontations are more effective at curbing bias than others. When Blacks confront racism, or when women confront sexism, people may dismiss the confronters as overreacting. However, when Whites confront racism, or men confront sexism, they are taken more seriously and are ultimately more effective at curbing others’ bias. This research underscores the critical role that allies can play. People may think, “What would my saying something actually do?” Studies show that speaking up can do much good.

We also find that confrontations of racism curb bias more readily than do confrontations of sexism. Whereas social norms against race bias are very strong, many people (men and women alike) assume they cannot possibly be biased against women (“But I LOVE women!”). Consequently, studies indicate that providing people with evidence that their inferences, judgments, or behaviors actually are unfair and discriminatory is critical to the effectiveness of confrontation in the case of sexism. In my lab, we think of this as a greater burden of proof being required for effective confrontations of sexism.

Finally, studies have revealed one should be assertive in confrontations, and that confrontations with a motivational framing are more effective than simply pointing out bias. For instance, saying, “That’s prejudiced” may even backfire, because people react poorly to having their non-prejudiced self-image impugned. However, what does work is framing a confrontation as having

the choice to be fair and egalitarian. For instance, if someone says something stereotypic about Latinx people, you might say, “You may not be aware, but that’s just a stereotype of Latinx people that we see in social media. We can treat people equally by not stereotyping Latinx people in that way.” This sort of statement may lead to dialogue in which the stereotype, fairness, and treating people equally can be discussed further.

Knowing about these findings is important because people are more likely to confront bias if they believe that other people *can* and often *do* change. Getting a confrontation started can be challenging; perhaps the opportunity slips by while we consider our words. However, confrontations can occur through conversations that start with, “Wait, what did you say?” and then continue with dialogue that unfolds with the use of assertive but non-threatening language. People also can prepare themselves for confrontation by practicing or role-playing confrontation scenarios.

At this point you may ask, “All of this is fine and good, but what about the costs you mentioned earlier? I can’t afford to be thought of as a troublemaker or as oversensitive!” Studies do indicate that people confronted by a stranger evaluate their confronter more negatively and are less desirous of future interactions, relative to someone who did not confront. However, these negative interpersonal outcomes do not interfere in the least with bias reduction. So yes, there are social costs, which means a question remains: is it more important for you to be liked as much as possible or to have a chance to change their behavior?

So if you are seeking change, be a confronter. As American novelist Margaret Halsey wrote in 1946 in relation to racism, “One of the less dismaying aspects of race relations in the United States is that their improvement is not a matter of a few people having a great deal of courage. It is a matter of a great many people having just a little courage.”