

USING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY INSTRUCTION TO DECREASE BIAS, DEFENSIVENESS, AND CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

Compared to general education students who received fewer lectures on attributional and self-serving biases, social psychology students reported being more open to their own biases and less upset, defensive, and judgmental in response to mistreatment (participant age and year in school were uninformed). Knowledge of and ability to apply the fundamental attribution error predicted all outcome measures, including willingness to consider situational attributions to explain terrorism. Experimentally manipulated lecture reminders led to some similar effects.

INTRODUCTION

Some have argued that educating people about social psychological misperceptions and biases can decrease their occurrence (e.g., Smith, 2005). However, the evidence (e.g., Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975; Beaman, Barnes, Klentz, & McQuirk, 1978) is scarce, and some have shown that some biases persist even immediately following such education (e.g., Friedrich, 1996). Educating people about one bias in particular, the fundamental attribution error (FAE), holds high promise to make people more understanding of each other and even more ethical (e.g., Gilovich & Eibach, 2001; Samuels & Casebeer, 2005), although no one has yet directly documented such effects. The FAE is a tendency to focus on personality explanations for another's behavior and to underestimate situational factors. Thus, one who behaves aggressively might be labeled as "mean," "evil," or "deranged" rather than someone who might be reacting against a perceived threat or otherwise situationally influenced. More generally, perpetrators of violent acts against "us," including terrorist attacks, might be similarly condemned as evil or deranged with little consideration for situation or context. The risks from committing the FAE in the early stages of a conflict include increased anger and desire to retaliate (e.g., Anthony, Rosselli, & Caparyan, 2003; Sadler, Lineberger, Correll, & Park, 2005). Thus, if people can be trained to avoid the FAE or to consider situational causes for aggressive behavior, then less aggressive or more peaceful perceptions and reactions could result in some conflicts. (This paper is not a summary criticism of retaliation but rather a preliminary investigation of ways to increase peaceful resolutions to conflicts.)

At the end of a semester containing a number of lectures on the FAE and self-serving biases, I assessed students' perceptions of self and others, to begin to investigate whether such education might have positive or constructive effects. I surveyed students from a social psychology and general social science course and expected stronger scores among social psychology students (who received more and more in-depth information on those topics). I also reminded half the students of previous FAE discussions and expected stronger scores after such reminders, which might allow for a cause-effect interpretation of students' perceptions. In particular, I expected social psychology or FAE-reminded participants to be more open to their own biases, less defensive and judgmental in response to aggressive behavior, and more willing to explain terrorists' behaviors with situational factors. In assessing views regarding self-serving biases, I investigated students' openness to their own biases and feelings about the value of accurate self-perceptions.

METHOD

American undergraduates (57 men, 76 women) from multiple sections of social psychology ($n = 61$, mean age = 22.0) and general social science courses ($n = 72$, mean age = 19.1) (Course) completed semester-end surveys which contained or did not contain reminders of previous FAE discussions (Reminder). Thus, the design was a 2 x 2 (Course x Reminder) factorial. The reminders comprised everyday and classic examples of the FAE highlighting situational factors (e.g., immediate context, cultural norms). To try to verify social psychology students' greater experience with the FAE, I asked participants how well they thought they "knew" the definition (1 item) and could apply it (average of 3 items; $\alpha = .66$). The main dependent measures included: (a) openness to one's own FAE (average of 2 items; interitem $r = .48$, $p < .001$); (b) the degree to which participants thought their FAE knowledge contributed to their more peaceful (i.e., less upset/defensive and judgmental) responses to someone's aggressive behavior (average of 3 items; $\alpha = .64$); and (c) willingness to consider situational factors in explaining terrorists' behavior against Americans (e.g., terrorists' childhood, past U.S. behaviors) (average of 3 items; $\alpha = .87$). All items used 7-point response formats (higher scores indicate higher degrees). I measured participant age and year in school to account for these possible confounds in course comparisons.

I reminded all participants of several self-serving biases and of the fact that slight bias relates to good mental health. Then I asked participants to what degree: (a) they were open to their own biases (1 item); (b) they would be "willing to sacrifice a little mental health to be more accurate" (1 item); and (c) they would feel good or smart if they "could say that [they] were aware of [their] own self-serving biases" (average of 2 items; interitem $r = .74$, $p < .001$).

RESULTS

I conducted 2 x 2 (Course x Reminder) analyses of variance on FAE-related measures. As expected, social psychology students reported more knowledge of ($M = 6.4$) and ability to apply ($M = 5.9$) the FAE compared to general social science students ($M_s = 5.5$ and 5.4 , respectively), $F(1, 129) = 30.24$ and 19.07 , respectively, $p_s < .001$ (Reminder showed no main or interaction effect). Age and year in school could not account for these effects. Social psychology students also reported more openness to the idea of their own bias ($M = 6.0$), more peaceful reactions to aggressive behavior ($M = 5.5$), and more

situational attributions for terrorism ($M = 5.1$) compared to general social science students ($M_s = 5.4, 4.9, 4.3$, respectively), $p_s < .01$. Age and year in school could not account for these effects, except for situational attributions (p rose to .11 after covarying age and year). Note that within each course, knowledge and ability to apply still predicted situational attributions ($.23 < r_s < .35$, $p_s < .05$; partialling out age and year did not significantly reduce these correlations, $.22 < r_s < .40$, $p_s < .06$). Overall, knowledge and ability to apply significantly predicted all three outcome variables ($r_s > .30$, $p_s < .001$) (see Table 1). For each dependent measure, there was also a significant Course x Reminder interaction ($p_s < .05$) (but no Reminder main effect). Simple effects tests showed that the Reminder manipulation: (a) increased openness scores of general social science students ($p < .02$) to reach the level of social psychology students, (b) increased social psychology (but not general) students' peaceful reactions ($p < .07$), but (c) lowered general social science students' situational attributions for terrorism ($p < .01$) (see Figure 1).

Social psychology students were more open to their own self-serving biases ($M = 5.7$ vs. 5.3 ; $p < .06$) but were no more willing to sacrifice mental health for accuracy ($M = 4.3$ vs. 4.6 ; $t = 1.05$) and saw no greater value in accurate self-awareness ($M = 5.2$ vs. 5.3 ; $t < 1$). Within each course, openness to bias and valuing accuracy both predicted willingness to sacrifice a little mental health for greater accuracy ($r_s > .28$, $p_s < .02$). All reported means exceeded the midpoint of the scale (4.0), $p_s < .02$, except for social psychology students' willingness to sacrifice mental health for greater accuracy ($M = 4.3$, $p > .15$).

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

Bias education appeared to have some of the claimed (but previously unverified) positive effects on students. To the degree that high levels on these outcome measures predict reductions in actual conflicts, these findings illustrate the potential of social psychology education to reduce conflict and improve interpersonal understanding. Surprisingly, general social science students responded to FAE reminders with *less* willingness to consider situational factors to explain terrorist attacks against Americans, possibly illustrating some of the challenges (e.g., reactance) in reducing intergroup, ethnic conflicts.

Although most students valued accuracy in self-perception, willingness to sacrifice even "a little mental health" for greater accuracy was less strong. In fact, social psychology students' scores did not statistically differ from the midpoint. This study's findings can inform attempts to improve people's accuracy in self-perception.

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Table 1 – Knowledge of FAE and Ability to Apply FAE as Predictors of Outcome Measures (Pearson r Correlations)

Predictor	Openness to own FAEs	Peaceful reaction	Sit'al expl. for terror
FAE knowledge	.31	.31	.35
Ability to apply	.36	.31	.35

Note. $p_s < .001$.

Figure 1 – Willingness to Consider Situational Factors to Explain Anti-American Terrorism as a Function of FAE Reminder and Course

