

COMMENTARY

## Who says what (and how) to whom: A multilevel approach to improving workplace bias training

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Multiple organizational and training content aspects are influential in determining whether racial discrimination and sexual harassment trainings are efficacious in achieving desired goals (Hayes et al., 2020). The goal of this commentary is twofold. First, we comment on the utility of setting attainable evidence-based organizational and training goals, contending that the most effective and achievable goals distill into the importance of increasing motivation to control prejudice at organizational culture (macro) and workplace training (micro) levels. Second, we comment on how social psychology research on persuasive communication and a focus on message source, message content, and consumer characteristics is a useful organizing framework for understanding the potential for organizational efforts in enhancing employee motivation to control prejudicial reactions at the macro and micro levels.

Although possible in the short run (Olson & Fazio, 2006), implicit prejudice reduction is an unlikely outcome of racial discrimination or sexual harassment training (Forscher et al., 2019). Implicit attitudes emerge from hard-wired cognitive processes (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and are socially learned through multiple sources (Olson & Fazio, 2002). Furthermore, they are self-perpetuated through confirmation bias tendencies and subtyping (Kunda & Oleson, 1995), and persevere even in the face of contradictory information (Ross et al., 1975).

Instead, and consistent with the MODE Model of attitude–behavior relations (Fazio & Olson, 2014), we contend that more achievable organizational goals such as developing an inclusive organizational culture and social norms that restrict prejudicial expressions, which in turn encourage support for diversity initiatives, should be fostered. Indeed, this focus should lead employees to situationally compensate for the otherwise direct influence that implicit attitudes have in predicting discriminatory judgments and behaviors, provided that adequate time and mental resources exist to do so. Moreover, at the micro level, training workshops should focus on increasing motivation to control prejudice among attendees, not implicit prejudice reduction.

One useful organizing framework for the multiple research topics elaborated on in the focal article by Hayes et al. (2020) is informed by seminal communications and social psychology research on persuasive communication. Specifically, the Yale Attitude Change Approach (i.e., “*Who Says What to Whom*”; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953) stimulated research on how message source, message content, and consumer characteristics interact to influence the likelihood of successful persuasive communication. Interestingly, teaching embodies the core elements of the Yale Attitude Change Approach. Indeed, a teacher (i.e., *who*) must carefully consider *what* to teach his or her class and how, and those determinations stem in part from the characteristics of students in their class (i.e., *whom*). At a macro level, organizations attempt to persuade or “teach” their employees the importance of an inclusive culture in which prejudicial reactions are sanctioned. At a more micro level, presenter(s) at training workshops attempt to persuade or “teach” attendees the importance of diverse perspectives and imbue motivation to control prejudice. In this manner,

the Yale Attitude Change Approach can be applied to organize the interactive roles that source, message content, and consumer elements hold in the success of organizational culture change efforts at a macro level, as well as training workshops at a more micro level.

### **Organizational (macro) factors: Who says what (and how) to whom**

From an organizational (macro) perspective, organizations should strive to cultivate social norms and a culture that increases employee motivation to control prejudicial reactions and appreciation for diverse perspectives. However, organizations may cultivate these aspects in different manners and styles based on their own, as well as employee, characteristics.

#### ***Who (source) organizational factors***

Organizations differ in their business goals and markets, management structures, mission statements, and diversity goals. These aspects play important roles in whether and how organizations may attempt to create a more inclusive culture and develop social norms in which prejudicial reactions are sanctioned, as well as how those efforts are received by employees. For example, nonprofit (relative to for-profit) businesses may have more autonomy to focus on creating a more inclusive culture in which prejudicial reactions are sanctioned. Additionally, the degree to which organizations already have “skin in the game” regarding policies and systems in place to receive and process reports of misconduct (e.g., corporate hotline, supervisor report, whistleblower protections) will influence employee reactions to cultural change initiatives. Moreover, improvement in key metrics such as a more gender and racially diverse workforce within senior administration positions of an organization over time may demonstrate greater organizational commitment and stronger existing inclusivity social norms that influence employee reactions to related future organizational initiatives.

#### ***What (and how) organizational factors***

Organizations influence compliance with efforts to reform organizational social norms based on their implementation strategies and processes. For instance, communication quantity and quality with employees regarding organizational policies and incidents relevant to sexual harassment or discrimination play pivotal roles in the degree to which employees are responsive to cultural change efforts. Moreover, publishing diversity- or harassment-related statistics internally *and* externally create a culture of transparency that facilitates buy-in and employee perception of management’s authenticity regarding efforts to create a more inclusive culture. Relatedly, whether an organization is more externally motivated to create a more inclusive culture to “save face” with the public following negative publicity compared to more intrinsically motivated to redress past inequalities plays an important role in how it strives to create that culture and employee perception of these efforts.

Whether workshop trainings are required by organizations also plays an important role in influencing the development of social norms pertaining to sexual harassment and discrimination. Organizationally mandated trainings have the advantage of reaching a wider breadth of employees but also may lead to apathy and resentment due to reduced autonomy (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Although less efficient, voluntary trainings tend to have longer-lasting positive impacts, but this may be a function of selection effects. Thus, these trade-offs must be carefully considered prior to an organization deciding how to implement training.

An organization can also support employee resource group efforts to demonstrate the extent to which it values diversity and inclusion as social norms. Employee resource groups are voluntary, employee-led groups that promote inclusiveness based on race, gender, sexual orientation, age, or other social identities. These groups meet regularly and serve as safe spaces for members to talk openly, as well as a means of social support. Employee resource groups often lead to other indirect positive consequences such as networking and professional growth.

***Whom (employee) organizational factors***

Employees at organizations differ in a variety of organizational-level attitude variables that influence their reactions to organizational change initiatives. For instance, higher levels of job engagement, job commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational trust increase the degree to which organizations are able to gain traction and “buy in” from employees on initiatives aimed at creating more inclusive social norms that sanction prejudicial reactions. Furthermore, depending on other factors, employee tenure and organizational history knowledge could lead employees to be more apathetic or more encouraged by organizational change initiatives.

**Workplace training (micro) factors: Who says what (and how) to whom**

In addition to the organizational macro level, a focus on source, content, and consumer dynamics is important at the more micro level of workplace training workshops. From our perspective, the critical question is what are the best ways to increase employee motivation to control prejudicial reactions in workshops given the unique aspects of the training context?

***Who (source) workplace training factors***

Presenter credibility and expertise are critical factors regarding establishing trust and stimulating attention among attendees. However, the cues that convey credibility and expertise may vary as a function of the organization type and its employee characteristics. For instance, in a professional academic setting, a third-party researcher may be perceived as more credible. In contrast, an “in-house” presenter with more practical experience (e.g., a long-serving leader) may be perceived as more credible in a professional policing setting. Nevertheless, presenter cues that prime likeability, warmth, trust, and similarity (demographic characteristics, life experiences) will likely increase attendee perceptions of likeability and trust, and in turn, increase attendee attention and engagement.

***What (and how) workplace training factors***

The duration of training, the medium through which training is executed (e.g., online, in-person, virtual reality), and how scripted the training is are important considerations. Online, scripted training has the advantage of being uniform and relatively easier to implement, but also may also have weakened long-term behavioral effects compared to in-person training. Moreover, active learning that increases attendee engagement, as well as small-stakes quizzing that requires elaboration and retrieval of information should lead to increases in workshop content memory recall. Additionally, the active connection of information in workshops to attendees’ own experiences using self-referencing should increase long-term retention of information, engagement, and impact (Symons & Johnson, 1997). Notably, presenters will be more positively received when they successfully illustrate how a more inclusive culture and stronger social norms restricting prejudice expression are not only morally virtuous but also functional in improving the organization’s financial bottom line or related to an existing corporate initiative, goal, mission, or value.

There are important decisions to be made about how to best approach and frame the teaching process during workshop trainings. Research indicates that fear-arousing information can lead individuals to respond defensively and avoid attending to persuasive communication attempts, especially when they lack the perceived ability to successfully utilize the information (Witte & Allen, 2000). In contrast, presenters who establish trust early in a workshop and reduce defensiveness facilitate greater consideration of alternative viewpoints that will increase motivation to control prejudicial reactions. One way to create a trusting atmosphere and pre-emptively reduce attendee defensiveness and overwhelming anxiety may be to self-affirm attendees at the beginning of a training workshop through attendee reflection on how they embody and enact important self-values. Indeed, self-affirmations

have been found to lead cigarette smokers (Harris et al., 2007) and egalitarian-oriented White individuals (Zabel, 2015) to engage in otherwise threatening self-reflection.

Interestingly, language may be an important mechanism through which feelings of defensiveness can either be elicited or constrained in training workshops. For instance, the use of pronouns like “you” or “them,” or labeling an individual as having an implicit “bias” in training workshops may ratchet up participant defensiveness and prime maladaptive intergroup dynamics. In contrast, the use of pronouns like “we” or “us” by presenters may help create a common in-group identity between the presenter and attendees such that defensiveness and maladaptive intergroup dynamics are reduced (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Furthermore, activities in which attendees compete with others (e.g., public sharing of implicit prejudice scores) should be discouraged, as these ratchet up intergroup dynamics (e.g., in-group favoritism) and set the stage for negative workshop outcomes (Sherif et al., 1961).

Effective training workshops will likely elicit moderate levels of attendee anxiety. Thus, it is important that attendees’ internal locus of control and autonomy is reinforced by presenters by providing attendees things they can do following the workshop to make gradual improvement based on the information provided. This is another reason why focusing workshops on increasing motivation to control prejudice rather than reducing implicitly prejudicial attitudes may be more efficacious; attendees will rightfully believe that they have more control over increasing their motivation to control prejudice levels than their implicit prejudice levels, which positions them to *use* the emotions they are experiencing during the workshop more functionally.

### ***Whom (audience) workplace training factors***

An initial understanding of the previous training experience, education levels, and average motivation to control prejudice levels of workshop attendees allows presenters to calibrate their training appropriately to stimulate attention, reduce defensive reactions, and establish trust. Moreover, attendees may be motivated to control prejudicial reactions due more to avoid the *external* social costs incurred if they violate social norms by expressing prejudice or more due to being *intrinsically* motivated and personally caring deeply about redressing past inequalities. Fostering a more intrinsic motivation to control prejudiced reactions may lead to stronger workplace training impacts that persist across a variety of situations because the motivation is not as malleable based on contextual factors.

Interestingly, however, research indicates that intrinsically motivated White individuals may be especially resistant to efforts during training workshops to prompt critical self-reflection about their own negative prejudices and stereotypes (Zabel, 2015). Furthermore, the reaction of attendees to workshop trainings depends on their privilege levels, previous experiences being the target of discrimination, and social identities. Indeed, individuals that belong to marginalized or minority social identities may prefer workshops that are bluntly designed to educate workforces as to inequalities and forms of discrimination and stigma, whereas majority group members may prefer less confrontational training workshops that reduce feelings of defensiveness (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008). These preferences may result in part because majority group members’ chief goal in interracial interactions is to be liked, whereas minority group members’ chief goal is to be respected (Bergsieker et al., 2010). Relatedly, research indicates that White individuals prefer broaching topics pertaining to race in interracial interactions but only if first broached by an interaction partner (Johnson et al., 2009). In turn, this strategy appears to positively influence their partner’s impressions of them (Zabel & Olson, 2011). Workshop presenters should be mindful of audience characteristics; understand that attendees will experience anxiety and fear, albeit for different reasons; and use this information intentionally when planning workshops.

Indeed, attendee characteristics interact with presenter and workshop content aspects to predict the likelihood that workshop trainings are successful. For instance, among minority group attendees, a majority group presenter may elicit perceptions that they lack the personal experience

or gravitas to be liked or respected. In contrast, among majority group attendees, a minority group presenter may elicit perceptions that they have personal motives for coordinating the workshop, compromising professional respect. Presenters should be mindful of these and other dynamics and pre-emptively work to counteract these reactions.

### Concluding remarks

First, it is essential that *achievable* goals such as increasing motivation to control prejudiced reactions be pursued among organizations at the macro and micro levels. Second, focusing on source, content, and consumer characteristics at these levels allows for a multifaceted, systematic, all-encompassing approach to maximize the likelihood of goal achievement. Moreover, this framework allows for direct and ripe theoretical connections and applications to well-supported, dual-process theoretical frameworks such as the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and MODE Model of attitude–behavior relations (Fazio & Olson, 2014). There are interactions not just between source, message content, and consumer elements *within* the macro and micro levels, but also *between* these levels. Indeed, organizational characteristics and messaging have powerful influences on the response of employees to training workshop presenters and content. The approach outlined in this commentary flexibly encompasses these dynamic interactions while also providing a systematic organizing framework grounded in substantial theoretical support. We hope this approach serves as a framework for future organizational research on increasing motivation to control prejudiced reactions among employees and fostering more inclusive organizations.

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