



Reports

Describing a group in positive terms reduces prejudice less effectively than describing it in positive *and* negative terms[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In a series of five experiments, we demonstrate that exposure to information related to an out-group's heterogeneity reduces prejudice more effectively than exposure to only positive characteristics of the out-group. We exposed participants to a poster that associated both positive and negative traits with an out-group (mixed condition), to a poster that associated only positive traits with the out-group (positive condition), or to no poster (control condition). Results revealed that participants in the mixed condition expressed less explicit prejudice (Experiments 1–2) and less implicit bias (Experiments 3–4) than participants in the other two conditions. The last experiment demonstrated that the mixed poster was more acceptable and created less reactance than the positive poster. The results suggest that a persuasive message highlighting both the positive and negative characteristics of the out-group reduces prejudice more effectively because it is easily acceptable and yet effectively modifies people's representation of the out-group.

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Introduction

Presenting out-group members in a positive manner (e.g., “they are hardworking”) is an important route by which reduction in prejudice and more positive intergroup relations can be achieved. When individuals are incidentally exposed to admired African Americans and disliked White Americans they express less implicit race bias than control participants who are not exposed to these specific group members (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001). Similarly, other authors found that portraying members of the out-group in positive contexts or repeatedly pairing the out-group's name with positive concepts can have a beneficial effect on stereotyping and prejudice. Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, and Russin (2000), for example, showed that after receiving training in negating stereotypes, participants demonstrated reduced stereotype activation (see also Karpinski & Hilton, 2001; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 2001).

Other researchers suggested that prejudice can be reduced by reminding individuals of the fact that the members of a given out-group are variable, that is, that some members possess positive characteristics and other members possess negative characteristics (e.g., “some are hardworking and some are not”). This idea is based on

the concept of perceived variability, which refers to the degree to which individuals perceive a group as homogeneous or heterogeneous (Quattrone & Jones, 1980). Social psychologists have argued that the perceived variability of a social group influences an individual's attitude toward that group. Ryan, Judd and Park (1996) have shown that people who perceive a group to be more variable are less likely to apply the group stereotype to judgments of individual group members. Other studies have demonstrated that the portrayal of an out-group as heterogeneous causes individuals to be less prejudiced (Brauer & Er-rafiy, 2011) and to discriminate less toward members of this group (Er-rafiy, Brauer, & Musca, 2010). Relatedly, Er-rafiy and Brauer (2010) reported that people do not tend to maintain generalized negative affect toward a group that is perceived as heterogeneous.

The main hypothesis guiding the research reported here is that describing members of an out-group in a heterogeneous manner leads to greater prejudice reduction than describing them in a positive manner. In other words, we are suggesting that the message “some are hardworking and some are not” is more effective than the message “they are hardworking.” Our hypothesis may seem contrary to common sense, but it is based on two theoretical considerations. First, the “mixed message,” according to which some out-group members possess positive traits and some do not, is more acceptable. An intervention that attempts to communicate that *all* members of an out-group possess only positive characteristics will not be well received. It is obvious that this is not true. The intervention may be perceived as a blatant influence attempt and thus cause reactance (Brehm, 1966). The mixed message, however, merely seems to restate a truism

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that no one would disagree with, and is thus received more openly (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994).

Second, there is little evidence for the idea that creating associations between an out-group and positive concepts leads to more positive explicit intergroup attitudes. All the experimental manipulations described in the first paragraph of this article affected participants' implicit race bias but not their responses to explicit prejudice scales. Modifying individuals' perceived variability of a group, however, has been shown to effectively diminish prejudice and discrimination. Brauer and Er-rafy (2011), for example, showed that participants displayed less prejudice after they had completed a task that made the heterogeneity of an out-group salient. This effect occurred regardless of whether the increased perceived variability was induced through listing sub-groups that the out-group is composed of, viewing a poster that portrayed the out-group in a heterogeneous manner, or simply thinking about differences between members of the out-group who were shown on pictures.

A number of studies provide indirect support for our hypothesis. Johnston and Hewstone (1992) exposed participants to stereotype consistent and stereotype inconsistent information about eight fictional members of an out-group. The stimulus material was constructed so that the stereotype inconsistent was either concentrated in two group members or dispersed among six of the eight group members. The results show that people are more likely to hold stereotypical beliefs after being exposed to concentrated rather than dispersed stereotype inconsistent information (see also Weber & Crocker, 1983). Although this research examined stereotypes rather than prejudice, it nevertheless suggests that people tend not to be influenced by persuasive messages in which belief-inconsistent information is concentrated in a small number of group members.

The work by Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield (1949) provides further indirect evidence for our hypothesis. These authors compared the effectiveness of one-sided versus two-sided persuasive messages. The results suggest that two-sided persuasive message – one that articulates a position and refutes opposing arguments – is more effective, especially when the audience is somewhat familiar with the domain under consideration (see also Chu, 1967). One may infer that a “positive message” will cause perceivers to generate counter-arguments and dismiss it as not credible. However, a “mixed message” presents counter-arguments but refutes them by emphasizing positive attributes. As a result, perceivers are more likely to perceive the message as credible.

To test the hypothesis that a “mixed message” reduces prejudice more effectively than a “positive message”, we conducted a series of five experiments. In Experiments 1 to 4, we first attracted participants' attention to the “heterogeneity” or to the “positivity” of the members of a given out-group by exposing them to either a mixed (positive and negative traits) or a positive message (positive traits only). We then assessed participants' attitudes toward the out-group with explicit attitude measures (Experiments 1 and 2) and implicit attitude measures (Experiments 3 and 4). In Experiment 5, we examined the extent to which participants experienced reactance when being exposed to the mixed message or the positive message.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

A total of 71 undergraduate students from Clermont University, France, participated in the experiment. Approximately half of the participants were women ($N = 36$, $mean\ age = 20.86$, $SD = 2.47$) and half were men ($N = 35$, $mean\ age = 21.74$, $SD = 2.49$). They were recruited on the campus in exchange for a chocolate bar and a gift card. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (positive vs. mixed message).

Stimulus material

Participants' perceptions were manipulated through a poster that was 40 by 60 cm large and printed on glossy paper. The poster contained the pictures of 12 Arab men and women. Next to two thirds of the pictures, the person's first name, his/her age, and one characteristic of the person were mentioned (e.g., “Fatima, 48 years, sociable”, “Mohamed, 29 years, stingy”). There were two version of the poster. In one version (“positive poster”), all associated characteristics were positive: warm, sociable, optimistic, joyful, generous, honest, serious, and intelligent. In the other version of the poster (“mixed poster”) half of the characteristics were positive and half were negative: warm, cold, optimistic, pessimistic, generous, stingy, joyful, and sad. Below the photographs, there was a slogan, printed in large letters: “What makes us the same – is that we are all different”.¹ The poster had been created in collaboration with an advertisement firm (www.conjoncture.fr) and was developed in a series of pilot experiments to maximize its impact. It is published in Er-rafy et al. (2010) or can be downloaded at the following web address: <http://lapsco.univ-bpclermont.fr/persos/brauer/>.

Dependent measures

Participants completed a variety of dependent measures all of which have been described in detail in earlier publications. We assessed *prejudice* with the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981; 15 items; Cronbach's alpha = .90), *ethnocentrism* with Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) ethnocentrism scale (6 items; Cronbach's alpha = .70). For our measure of *stereotypicality* (Damburn & Guimond, 2004), participants indicated the extent to which they thought Arabs possessed five stereotypical positive (e.g., cheerful, original) and five stereotypical negative traits (e.g., aggressive, insolent). Cronbach's alpha was .83 for the positive stereotypical traits, and .90 for the negative stereotypical traits. Finally, in order to measure *discrimination*, we asked participants whether they would agree to volunteer some of their time for an Arab interest group in town (adapted from Talaska, Fiske, & Chaiken, 2008).

Procedure

Participants were randomly exposed to one of the two posters (positive vs. mixed) while waiting in a room for the experiment to begin. After a few minutes, participants were led to the experimental room where they completed a distractor task. They were told that the study was over, and were given a chocolate bar. When they were about to leave the experimental room, the experimenter mentioned that a colleague needed to pretest a questionnaire that he had developed. Almost all participants agreed to filling out the questionnaire in exchange for a 5€ gift certificate. At the end of the experiment, participants were fully debriefed.

Results

Results revealed that participants who had been exposed to the mixed poster (containing both positive and negative characteristics of Arabs) had fewer negative stereotypes toward Arabs, were less prejudiced and less ethnocentric, and were more willing to give some of their time to an Arab interest group than participants who were exposed to the positive poster (see Table 1). There were no condition differences with regard to positive stereotypes.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 was identical to Experiment 1 with three exceptions. First, participants were not university students but were high school students and their parents who were recruited during an “Open

¹ The exact text in French was: “Notre point commun: La diversité.”

Table 1
Explicit attitudes as a function of experimental condition in Experiment 1.

DV	Positive poster	Mixed poster	Test of difference
Negative stereotypes	$M = 11.69$ $SD = 5.67$	$M = 9.01$ $SD = 4.31$	$t(69) = -2.24, p < .03$
Positive stereotypes	$M = 14.33$ $SD = 5.30$	$M = 12.18$ $SD = 4.48$	$t(69) = -1.84, ns$
Prejudice	$M = 12.25$ $SD = 4.94$	$M = 8.78$ $SD = 3.65$	$t(69) = -3.36, p = .001$
Ethnocentrism	$M = 8.28$ $SD = 3.88$	$M = 5.00$ $SD = 2.76$	$t(69) = -4.09, p < .001$
Discrimination ^a	55.6%	91.4%	$Chi2(1) = 11.65, p = .001$

^a Higher percentage values represent greater willingness to devote time to an Arab interest group and thus less discrimination.

University Day" ($N = 115$, 71% females, mean age = 33.4 years). Only one member of each family could take part in the experiment. Second, instead of being seated in a waiting room participants were simply shown one of the two versions of the poster and were asked to look at it in detail, presumably because they would have to answer questions about it later. Third, the dependent measure was presented as a filler task and consisted of the Modern Racism Scale only (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). The results replicated those of Experiment 1. Participants in the "mixed" condition expressed less prejudiced toward Arabs ($M = 9.96$, $SD = 3.66$) than participants in the "positive" condition ($M = 12.64$, $SD = 4.76$), $t(113) = -3.38, p = .001$.

Experiment 3

In this third experiment we sought to replicate and extend the main findings of the two previous experiments by using a different measure of intergroup attitudes. Whereas in Experiments 1 and 2 we investigated attitudes with explicit measures, we employed implicit measures in Experiment 3.

Method

Participants

Seventy-nine (41 male and 38 female) French undergraduate students were recruited from Clermont University, France, in exchange for two apples or a chocolate bar. Participants were between 17 and 28 years old, with a mean age of 22.2 years.

Stimulus material and procedure

The posters and the procedure were the same as in Experiment 1, except that we replaced the questionnaire with the explicit attitude measures with the *Implicit Association Test* (IAT, Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Participants completed the IAT on a PC laptop. Participants' task was to categorize Arab first names (e.g., Aïcha), French first names (e.g., Marie), negative traits (e.g., aggressive), and positive traits (e.g., warm). Order was counterbalanced across participants.

Results

As recommended by Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji (2003), an average standardized difference score between latencies for attitude-congruent trials (Arab and negative on one key, French and positive on the other key) and attitude-incongruent trials (Arab and positive on one key, French and negative on the other key) was computed to create an implicit bias score (d). Higher d scores indicate greater implicit bias against Arabs compared to French.

Results revealed a statistically significant difference between participants in the "mixed" condition ($M = .38$, $SD = .45$) and those in the "positive" condition ($M = .64$, $SD = .43$), $t(77) = 2.66, p = .009$. Participants had less implicit bias against Arabs if they were previously exposed to a poster in which Arabs were described in both positive and

negative terms than to a poster in which they were described in positive terms only.

Experiment 4

Experiment 4 was identical to Experiment 3, with four exceptions. First, the experiment took place in Toronto, and the participants were 55 undergraduate students at an anglophone Canadian university. They were recruited in exchange for course credit. Second, the target group in Experiment 4 was African Americans. A new poster was created with pictures of 12 African American men and women. The dependent measure was an African American/Caucasian American IAT in which participants had to categorize photographs of African Americans, photographs of Caucasians, positive traits, and negative traits. As in Experiment 3, we computed a d score as an indicator of bias. Third, participants were simply shown one of the two versions of the poster before they did the computer task (like in Experiment 2). Fourth, we included a control condition in which participants were exposed to no poster prior to completing the IAT.

The results confirmed our hypothesis. The effect for experimental condition was significant, $F(2, 55) = 4.18, p = .02$. As can be seen in Fig. 1, participants in the "mixed" condition were less biased than participants in the "positive" condition and participants in the "control" condition. Post-hoc analyses revealed that the differences between "mixed" and "positive" and between "mixed" and "control" conditions were statistically significant (p 's $< .07$ and $.005$) whereas the difference between "positive" and "control" conditions was not ($p = .29$).

Experiment 5

The goal of our last experiment was to examine why a poster portraying members of an out-group in both positive and negative terms reduces prejudice more effectively than a poster portraying these members in only positive terms. As we have argued in the Introduction, we believe that the difference in effectiveness is due to the acceptability of the message communicated in the poster (Chu, 1967; Hovland et al., 1949). We predicted that the mixed poster would be judged more acceptable and would create less reactance in individuals.

Method

Participants

Forty-six French undergraduate students (7 males, 39 females; mean age 20.4 years) at Clermont University, France, participated in the experiment in exchange for partial course credit in their introductory psychology course.

Stimulus material and procedure

On their arrival at the laboratory, a male experimenter explained to the participants that the study was about the thoughts of people

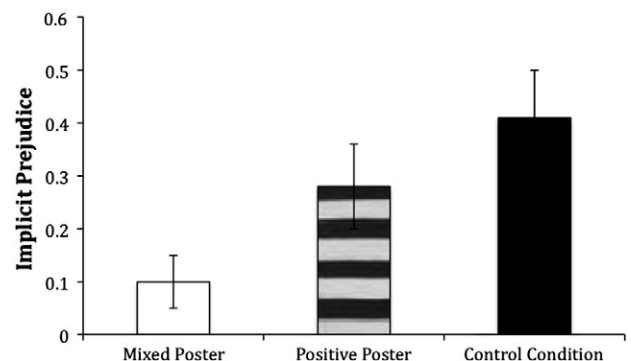


Fig. 1. Implicit attitudes as a function of experimental condition in Experiment 4.

when they are exposed to advertisement posters. Participants were asked to complete a “think-aloud task” (adapted from Ericsson & Simon, 1993), and their responses were audio-recorded. As a warm-up, participants first did two practice trials in which they thought aloud while naming the number of doors in their home and remembering the actions of their morning routine before they come to class. Participants were then shown a poster promoting the consumption of fruit and were asked to verbalize their thoughts and feelings while looking at the poster. Finally, they were exposed to one of the versions of the poster that was used in Experiments 1–3, either the mixed poster or the positive poster. Participants’ task was to verbalize their thoughts and feelings while looking at the poster.

Results

The audio-recordings were transcribed and evaluated by two independent judges who were unaware of the experimental condition. The two judges read each participant’s verbalization and evaluated it on two dimensions: Acceptability (“Does the participant find the message conveyed in the poster acceptable?”) and reactance (“Does the participant express doubt about or resistance to the message conveyed in the poster?”). The judges made their evaluations on a 7 Likert-type scales that went from “–3” (unacceptable/not in the least) to “+3” (acceptable/totally). The evaluations of the two independent judges’ were highly correlated ($r_{\text{acceptability}} = .64$, $r_{\text{reactance}} = .59$) and were thus averaged. Given the high correlation between acceptability and reactance, $r(46) = -.85$, $p < .001$, we reverse-scored the reactance ratings, and combined them with the acceptability ratings to form a single persuasiveness scores. The results revealed that participants found the mixed poster more persuasive (greater acceptability, less reactance), $M = 1.21$, $SD = 1.47$, than the positive poster, $M = -1.34$, $SD = 1.32$. An independent-samples t test showed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(44) = 6.20$, $p < .001$.

General discussion

The experiments reported in this article suggest that the best way to fight prejudice is not to communicate to individuals that the members of an out-group possess only positive traits. Prejudice can be reduced more effectively by reminding individuals of the fact that an out-group is composed of rather heterogeneous members who possess a variety of positive and negative traits. When participants were exposed to a poster that associated both positive and negative characteristics with a discriminated out-group, they expressed less explicit prejudice (Experiments 1–2) and less implicit bias (Experiments 3–4) than when they were exposed to a poster that associated only positive traits with this group. The think-aloud data from Experiment 5 showed that the message communicated in the former poster was more acceptable and created less reactance in participants than that communicated in the latter poster.

Why would a persuasive message that insists on both positive and negative traits lead to more positive (less negative) attitudes than a persuasive message that only mentions positive traits? It has been shown that an increase in perceived variability leads to a more complex representation of the target group (Ostrom, Carpenter, Sedikides, & Li, 1993), and that the complexity of a representation is inversely related to the intensity of the affect felt toward the object of the representation (Linville, 1985). Recent research suggests that it is quite difficult to maintain generalized negative affect toward an entire group of people if one is convinced that the group is composed of members that are rather dissimilar to each other (Er-rafiy & Brauer, submitted for publication). In other words, the mixed message is more effective because it affects individuals’ prejudice via a modification of their representation of the out-group, compared to the positive message which seems to create mostly reactance.

Our five experiments have a number of shortcomings. Although we are suggesting that positive messages reduce prejudice less effectively because they create more reactance, our experimental designs did not allow us to test the full mediational model. In other words, we have not yet demonstrated that the effect of type of message on prejudice is mediated by ratings of acceptability. The reason is that in our view it does not make sense to measure reactance to a persuasive message and prejudice in the same experiment. Another shortcoming is that we did not explore the full range of negative traits that make the mixed message most effective. We chose moderately negative traits (e.g., pessimistic, stingy) because we assumed that these traits would create a heterogeneous perception of the out-group without creating an overly negative image. Although we consider such a possibility unlikely, it could be that highly negative traits (e.g., dishonest, violent) would have made the mixed message even more effective. Future research will shed more light on these questions.

Our findings have important applied implications. They clearly suggest that prejudice interventions should focus on modifying people’s perception of variability of the out-group rather than on conveying a positive image of the out-group. School principals who want to reduce prejudice and discrimination in their schools are better off “admitting” that some minority children at the school are difficult and insisting on the huge variability, rather than only talking about the achievements of minority children. If one were to try to reduce prejudice by casting members of minority groups in certain roles on TV, one would be better off casting them in a variety of good and bad roles (e.g., cop, judge, criminal, manager, janitor) rather than only in high power/“good guy” roles (Paluck & Green, 2009). Relatedly, the mixed message “positive and negative images” can capitalize on media outlets like newspaper articles or Internet web pages/blogs to induce more heterogeneous perceptions of out-group members. Heterogeneous perceptions may in fact be the key to counteracting poor group relations in the modern multi-cultural world.

One may wonder why positive messages affect people’s attitudes toward consumer products but not toward out-groups. After all, we are exposed daily to advertisements that praise the numerous positive characteristics of cereals, laundry detergents, and tooth pastes. The answer is that attitudes toward consumer products are different from attitudes toward out-groups. People’s attitudes toward out-groups involve, among many things, social identity concerns (Tajfel, 1981), perceived threat (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), lack of personal contact (Brewer & Miller, 1984), and perceived intergroup competition (Levine & Campbell, 1972). Simply telling people that the members of a disliked out-group are all nice will be rather ineffective. Only a persuasive message that fundamentally alters people’s representation of the out-group has a beneficial effect. And the present experiments have shown that a message that associates both positive and negative characteristics with the out-group affects people’s representations and thus effectively reduces prejudice.

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