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Bill R. Garris

East Tennessee State University, garrisb@etsu.edu

Bethany A. Novotny

East Tennessee State University, novotny@etsu.edu

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Citation Information

Garris, Bill R.; and Novotny, Bethany A.. 2018. TRANSformation; Affecting Transgender Prejudice in the Classroom. *Proceedings of the National Organization for Human Services*. <https://www.nationalhumanservices.org/assets/Conference/2017%20NOHS%20Proceedings%20Final.pdf>

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TRANSformation: Affecting Transgender Prejudice in the Classroom

Dr. William R. Garris LMFT, HS-BCP, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor Human Services East Tennessee State University

Dr. Bethany Novotny, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor Human Services East Tennessee State University

Abstract

Social discrimination is a common experience with measurable consequences for those affected. The effects include poorer mental health and poverty, issues which are commonly addressed by human service professionals. People who are transgender are particular targets of discrimination and, as such, find themselves in need of human service assistance at levels disproportionate to the larger population. Research from social psychology suggests that intergroup contact reduces prejudice. This quasi-experiment explored the effect a transgender speaker, followed by informal social interaction, had on measures of transgender prejudice in a sample of college students.

Transgender Prejudice and Its Consequences

Prejudice is a common problem and many people, regardless of identity, believe they are targets of prejudice. Intriguing research from Pew (2014) finds that each group surveyed believes their group experiences the most social discrimination. This particular finding is further corroborated in polling conducted by NPR, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (2017). Gallup (2016) reports that racism, in particular, is widespread and is viewed to have increased between 2008 and 2016. Objectively, the issue of prejudice is nuanced, somewhat difficult to define and measure, and specific to groups whose status can change across time and particular news events. However, despite progressive social change in the past fifty years in the United States, prejudice continues to be a problem.

While prejudice continues to be a widespread problem for many, one group in particular has experienced an inordinate amount of prejudice and violence in recent years: the transgender community. In 2011 the The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Center for Transgender Equality published its seminal work, The National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS) (2011). The survey aimed to depict the realities of living as a transgender person in the United States. Over 6,000 transgender and gender non-conforming study

participants completed survey which, as a whole, depicted pervasive discrimination, especially for transgender people of color.

Discrimination was not the only problem; people who were transgender have frequently been subjected to harassment and violence. An online survey of 402 transgender people found that 25% had been victims of violence (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002). School and work were particularly dangerous settings. A majority of young people who identified as gender non-conforming or transgender during their school years were harassed in school. Thirty-five percent reported physical assault. The pattern of harassment and abuse continued into adulthood. Ninety percent reported they either experienced harassment, mistreatment or discrimination at work, while others concealed their gender while at the workplace to avoid repercussions (National Transgender Discrimination Survey, 2011).

Prejudice created problems for transgender people in public spheres, contexts where fairness and civility might suggest accommodations. Frequently, people experienced denial of treatment or harassment as they used public transportation, visited stores, or sought help with social security (James et al., 2016). Public restrooms have become a political flashpoint. Although the James et al., study was conducted before bathrooms became politicized in state legislatures, nearly one in ten respondents indicated they had been denied access to a restroom in the preceding year, while 12% reported having been verbally harassed. Fifty-nine percent avoided using a public restroom during the past year for fear of confrontations or harassment. About a third of respondents limited what they drank to avoid dealing with restrooms, and 8% reported having a urinary tract infection or other kidney-related health issue because of avoiding bathrooms and the harassment that occurs (James et al., 2016).

Transphobia and prejudice affected transgender people in ways beyond the workplace and the restroom. Some of the personal effects were captured by survey research conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality, which built upon the earlier NTDS work. The study detailed some of the indirect consequences of prejudice and discrimination: effects on economic well-being and health. In their survey James et al. (2016) found that 29% of transgender individuals fell below the poverty line, compared to 14% of cisgender individuals. Fifteen percent of transgender people were unemployed, compared with only 5% of the cisgender population. Homelessness was a problem. James et al. (2016) found that 30% of transgender respondents had been homeless previously, 12% during the preceding year. Further, it appeared that prejudice and economic hardship also evoked a psychological toll. Thirty-nine percent of transgender individuals, compared with 5% of the cisgender population, reported severe psychological anguish within the past year. Forty percent of transgender individuals, compared with 4.6% of cisgender individuals, have attempted suicide.

Although the evidence was strong that transgender people are being harmed, the size of the transgender population in the United States, and thus the breadth of the problem, has been difficult to ascertain. The US census has not included information on gender identity. Population studies have only recently begun to collect transgender-inclusive data when asking

about gender. Yet for treatment purposes, research dollars, planning, and advocacy, it is important to have an idea of the population size.

To address the issue of population size, Meerwijk and Sevelius (2017) used a meta-regression model based upon 12 surveys conducted between 2007 and 2015. Generalizing from their findings to a US population, they estimated that about 390 adults of 100,000 are transgender. This represented about .39% of the population, or nearly a million people in the United States. Younger adults were more than 50% of the respondents in the surveys considered. Given increasing social acceptance of gender non-conformity, Meerwijk and Sevelius (2017) suggested that the number of people who identify with a non-binary, gender identity may increase in future surveys.

The number of people who are transgender is not large on an absolute basis. However, the effects of prejudice, harassment, and violence on their economic well-being, relationships, and mental health (James et al., 2016), has resulted in people who are transgender being overrepresented amid the populations served by human service professionals. It is, therefore, important that human service professionals are informed concerning the needs of the transgender community and active in addressing the social forces that bring them harm.

Factors Associated with Transgender Prejudice

Several studies have considered the factors that contribute to prejudice against transgender individuals. Norton and Herek (2013) drew from a representative sample of heterosexual U.S. adults ($N = 2281$) and matched various demographic and psychological characteristics with participants' prejudice toward people who were transgender. Greater prejudice was predicted by the following: subscribing to a binary conception of gender, being a heterosexual male, psychological authoritarianism, anti-egalitarianism, and political conservatism. Religiosity increased transgender prejudice among women, but did not affect prejudice among heterosexual men. Research on transgender prejudice sometimes has drawn from studies that explored prejudice against the gay and lesbian communities. This has been not careless blurring, but reflected the finding that there was a strong correlation ($r = .66$ to $.8$) between transgender prejudice and bias against other sexual minorities (Norton & Herek, 2013).

Trait aggression was a relatively stable personality characteristic that predisposed a person to respond to situations with aggression; it was also linked to transgender prejudice. Several studies have found that trait aggression was correlated with transphobia and homophobia in heterosexual men, but not women (Nagoshi et al., 2008; Warriner, Nagoshi, & Nagoshi, 2013). Recent research suggested trait aggression was also provoked by the politically stoked issue of bathroom and gender. Callahan and Zukowksi (2017) had 158 participants complete two measures and read a hypothetical scenario. One measure gauged essentialism, the view that gender is a fixed and unchanging quality of being. The second measure assessed trait aggressiveness. Participants then visualized a transgender person using the restroom that aligned

with their identity and not their birth sex. Essentialism and trait aggressiveness, separately predicted negative reactions to people not using bathrooms that align with their natal sex.

Of note, lack of contact with sexual minorities has been found to be related to homophobia and transgender prejudice in multiple studies. Telephone survey research from Herek and Glunt (1993) identified that if respondent affirmed a friend or relative had “let them know they were homosexual,” regression analysis revealed that they were also more likely to have positive attitudes toward gay men. A follow-up study noted that these positive attitudes were contingent upon three factors: amount of contact with sexual minorities, more intimate relationships with this group, and being the recipient of direct disclosure concerning sexual orientation (Herek & Capitanio, 1996). Related, 24% of the variance in homophobia in one study was attributable very simply to personal contact with homosexual individuals (Walch, Orlostky, Sinkanen, & Stevens, 2010). More contact with sexual minorities was associated with a reduction in prejudice.

More Contact, Less Prejudice

A prominent theory, spawning hundreds of studies, has suggested that prejudice can be reduced through contact with target populations. Gordon Allport (1954) has been commonly credited for developing Intergroup Contact Theory. This theory rose to prominence during an era of racial segregation, though the foundations for the model were laid in the previous decade when World War II when combat situations provided a natural experiment in integration. According to Allport, prejudice was caused by inaccurate information about a target population. Prejudice reduction, then, resulted from cognitive changes: learning more about a group of people (Allport, 1954). Allport believed that prejudice could be reduced through interpersonal contact. However, his model and research posited that five stringent conditions governing the social interactions must be met (Forsyth, 2009).

Allport was wrong about a few things, and this has turned out to be good news. Hundreds of studies have supported the proposition that intergroup contact is associated with reduced prejudice. This research finds, however, that Allport’s five conditions were, in fact, not required. Mere contact was sufficient. Further, Allport seemed to have placed unwarranted emphasis on cognitions; the change appeared to be more emotional than cerebral (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Pettigrew explains, “your stereotypes about the other group don’t necessarily change; but you grow to like them anyway” (APA, 2001, para. 4).

Prejudice has also been commonly assumed to be deeply ingrained and resistant to efforts to change it. It turned out that this, too, may not be correct. In December 2014, the Miami-Dade County Commission passed a law to protect transgender people from discrimination in housing, public accommodations and employment. When similar non-discrimination ordinances had been passed in other communities (e.g., Charlotte, NC) a fierce backlash ensued, and included the politically contrived bogeymen that alleged transgender women would have opportunity to

sexually assault young girls in bathrooms. Anticipating this reactionary backlash, a local LGBT organization teamed with volunteers and staff from a similar group in Los Angeles to go door to door and speak with residents. The conversation included attempts to have targets engage in “analogic perspective-taking” in which the residents were asked to talk about a time when they were judged for being different and then to imagine how their experience might relate to the experience of a transgender person’s experience. Subsequent measures of attitude found increased positivity toward transgender people equal to the change in attitude toward gay men and lesbian women in the United States that occurred between 1998 and 2012. In short, the change was significant and it was lasting (Brockman & Kalla, 2016).

Other research from a classroom has also underscored the effect that perspective taking may have on reducing transphobia. Tompkins, Shields, Hillman, and White (2015) explained research in which they had a class perform one of two actions: describe the features of gender dysphoria based upon diagnostic criteria (education task) or write a letter to parents and loved ones as though they were disclosing that they were transgender (humanizing task). Compared to those who were assigned to the education task, those who wrote the letter desired more contact with transgender people at the post-test and evinced a decrease in transphobia.

Across the past few decades research has shown that prejudice, discrimination, and harassment are addressable public health concerns. The harms caused by prejudice against the transgender community include economic inflictions and psychological distress. Although certain beliefs and demographic factors may incline someone toward prejudice, research also suggests interpersonal contact, empathy, and perspective-taking can result in a meaningful, positive improvement in how one views a target population. This current study sought to extend this current line of research.

Methods

Institutional Review Board approval for the study was obtained from the university. Students were administered the Transgender Prejudice Scale (TPS), but no identifying information was collected from participants.

Design and Participants

This present study was a natural field experiment. Across three semesters students enrolled in either research methods, which served as a control condition, or a course in human development. There were three classes and a total of 50 students in the control condition and three classes, totaling 58 students, in the experimental condition. The control group and experimental group were both comprised of human service students enrolled in two different required courses. While the groups were not created through random assignment, are reasonably assumed to be similar demographically. A pre-test supports the view that both groups were

similar demographically on the variable of transgender prejudice. Participants were observed to be predominantly White undergraduate students aged 19 to 22, approximately 75% were female and a majority of the participants hail from the Southern Appalachian region.

Instrument

The dependent variable was transgender prejudice, assessed by the TPS. The TPS (Davis, 2014) is a 25 item scale that measures prejudice arising from two component constructs: sex essentialism and discomfort. Sex essentialism is the view that sex is an essential, binary quality fixed from birth. Discomfort measures the unease the respondent may have when in contact with transgender individuals. This scale was selected because of the rigorous process used in its construction, compared to other instruments available at the time, and because it measured prejudice using a relatively small number of items. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .98; Discomfort and Sex Essentialism were .94 and .98, respectively.

Each semester, students in the control class and the human development class were administered the TPS as a pre-test. By show of hands, a majority of students in the class indicated that they had never met someone who was transgender. In the human development class, occurring during the section on gender identity development, students participated in a presentation and question-answer session that was led by a friend of the faculty member teaching the course, a local transwoman. The transwoman, who had served as an advocate in the region, was relaxed and comfortable sharing from her journey and was imminently relatable, drawing attention to the characteristics and interests she shared in common with the class. The ensuing conversation covered universally familiar topics, from love and relationships, issues with parents, hobbies such as cooking, and shared cultural interests like Star Wars. The discussion was more personal than political. It was humanizing and not hostile. Forty-eight hours after this guest speaker, the TPS was administered to the human development class and the control class. A second post-test was administered to both groups four weeks later.

In our coding, Group 1 was the control group. Group 2 was the experimental group. Table 1, below, identifies the results from the pre-test. The two groups are not statistically different from one another.

Figure 1. The pretest

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	1.00	50	89.8000	33.52489	4.74114
	2.00	58	88.6897	27.92296	3.66646

The TPS was administered to students in both classes after the guest speaker and discussion event, at time intervals 48 hours and 4 weeks. Figure 2 shows the results. Transgender prejudice decreased in the experimental condition and remained lower four weeks after the guest speaker. There was no statistically significant change for the group in the control condition. The results were statistically significant at the level of $p < .05$.

Figure 2. The posttest

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest1	1.00	50	89.3400	34.04535	4.81474
	2.00	58	76.9828	26.31289	3.45505
Posttest2	1.00	50	90.1200	34.00399	4.80889
	2.00	58	75.5862	26.37053	3.46262

**Representing the data in a line graph provides another view of the change.

Scores on Transgender Prejudice Scale

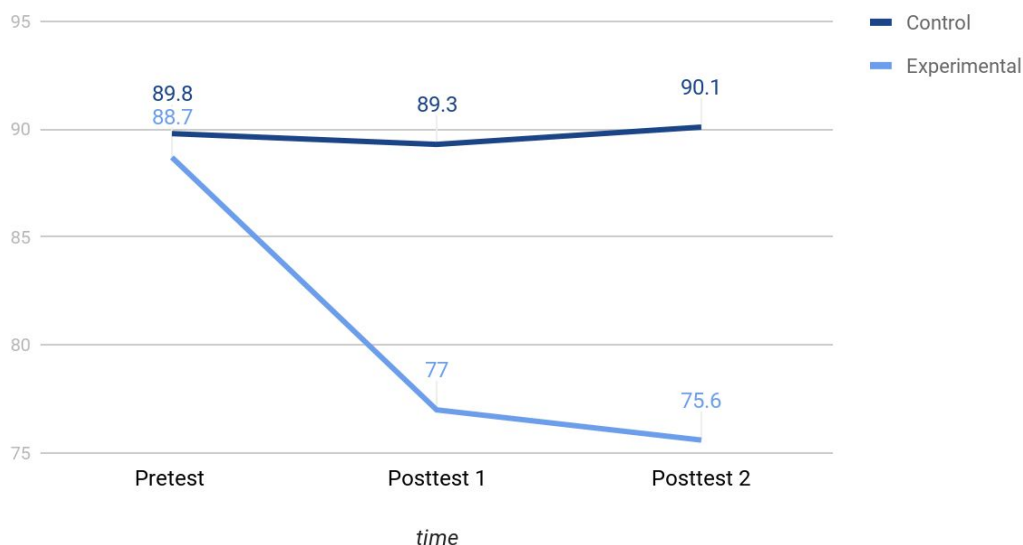


Figure 3. Scores on prejudice scale.

**Transgender prejudice decreased and remained lowered a month later.

Discussion

This study contributes to the literature on prejudice in several different ways. First, more narrowly, it supports a growing body of literature that finds relatively brief, interpersonal encounters can affect prejudice. It affirms the social value that emerges from sharing common, humanizing experiences. Drawing attention to shared humanity may have evoked perspective-taking, which other research suggests may reduce prejudice. This research also raises the prospect of the classroom as an incubator for civic discourse. The study suggests, along with other research, that discussions which emphasize the human dimension of political issues and promote interactions may reduce prejudice. These interactions may not otherwise occur in a community and are not generally modeled on cable news. Consequently, the classroom remains a tool that can be harnessed toward a social good, to promote understanding, civil discourse based on empathy and, ultimately, a kinder, less prejudiced and more inclusive democracy. Finally, human service practitioners and educators are change agents. This study invites us to consider the classroom as venue for human service educators and students to explore prejudices and affect change.

Limitations

There are several ways that this study, and its conclusions, could be improved. First, additional posttests could have been administered to assess the durability of the decrease in prejudice. Although it was useful to observe the near-term effect of a 60-90 minute encounter, it would have been further illuminating to explore what happened to this effect over a longer time through a longitudinal design. Second, it would have been helpful to have constructed the research as a mixed-method design. Adding interviews to the research process would have provided insight into what more precisely changed in participants as they interacted with someone who was transgender.

Early prejudice researchers, coming from a more social-cognitive tradition, subscribed to the view that the change was largely cognitive. More recent findings suggest that the change in prejudice is due to something more emotional or relational. Other studies suggest perspective-taking by participants is an important ingredient. This study design did not explore the mechanisms of change and the researchers are limited to speculation. Third, project was a natural experiment; the independent variable was not standardized. The speaker's script varied. The interactions with the classes were also different, depending upon spontaneous factors that emerged. As such, exact replications are not possible and conclusions should be tentative. Finally, the speaker addressed classes of approximately 22 students. It would have been interesting to assess the effect of the speaker-class interaction, at varying class sizes. Might the effect be more pronounced with a small group of eight? Would the effect still hold with a class size of 150?

Conclusion

Many of the issues addressed by human service professionals are exacerbated by prejudice. Although prejudice may be widely regarded as a difficult and largely intractable problem, recent research suggests otherwise. Instructional design in human services curricula can use our emerging understanding of the roles of emotion and perspective taking in prejudice, and include guest speakers from marginalized groups, including the transgender community. The literature suggests the format should be one that promotes a consideration of shared experiences and perspective-taking. This study, along with others, suggests the classroom may present an opportunity for human service faculty to intervene to reduce prejudice in a student population.

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