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DEMOCRAT OR REPUBLICAN? USING POLITICAL STEREOTYPES AS A BIAS DISCUSSION EXERCISE

Abstract

This innovative practice paper explains a classroom leadership exercise that asks students to identify anonymous people as either Democrats or Republicans based only on brief descriptions. Students are challenged to explore the reasons behind the identifications they make, specifically confronting the trigger words that lead them to assign a political affiliation. In doing so, the exercise leads students to recognize preconceived notions that are largely based on general stereotypes. Although the exercise is based in political party identity, it is designed as a springboard into powerful classroom discussions about broader issues of bias and prejudice.

Introduction

The seeds of the exercise explained in this paper were planted by a Washington Post article whose headline read, "Democrats are gay, Republicans are rich: Our stereotypes of political parties are amazingly wrong" (Sides, 2016). The article appeared as the 2016 presidential election was escalating and presented an intriguing premise: Democrats and Republicans do not like each other very much, but how they characterize each other has little to do with reality and more to do with long-entrenched stereotypes. According to the article, "When we hear 'Democrat' or 'Republican,' we often think of who that party is. That is, we associate certain racial, religious, and social groups with each party — often the same ones that we have for decades" (Sides, 2016, para. 13). These stereotypes endure across generations, are resistant to change, and often have very little connection with the people that they claim to represent (Sides, 2016).

The Washington Post article reported on a survey study by Ahler and Sood (2016) that demonstrated how wrong the perceptions of party attributes can be. For example, the authors found that people surveyed thought that 38 percent of Republicans have annual incomes of more than $250,000 when in reality only about 2 percent of those identifying with the party make that much money. As for Democrats, the research showed that people surveyed thought about a third of the party (32 percent) are either lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transsexual, whereas the actual number is about 6 percent (Ahler and Sood, 2016).

While such data points on their own would enliven a leadership education lecture about stereotypes and political bias, an exercise that demonstrates to students the pervasiveness of misconceptions has the potential to stimulate more discussion and serve as a more effective teaching device. Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) noted that "discussion-based pedagogy

is the most widely used instructional strategy in leadership education" (p. 176). For such teaching to be effective, however, students should be engaged and empowered through meaningful discussion that emanates from an experiential learning approach (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). In the exercise described in this paper, students are specifically challenged to explore how they identified party affiliations and to consider the trigger words that led to their choices. In doing so, the exercise helps students recognize that their own preconceived notions often are based on stereotypes and generalized assumptions. This realization breaks down barriers and prepares the class for a lively discussion. The following section provides a review of scholarship that informs the pedagogical approach to stereotypes, bias, and prejudice that underpins the exercise and the discussions the exercise is intended to foster.

Review of Related Scholarship

The exercise is designed to spark discussion about bias and to help students recognize when they are labeling someone based on overgeneralized or limited information. It is important for a leader to self-reflect and understand how implicit judgments can influence one's ability to be a successful leader. Prior literature relevant to the goals of the classroom exercise fall within three primary areas: defining bias and prejudice, political context, and relevance to leadership education.

Defining Bias and Prejudice. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University defines implicit bias as "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner" (2015, p. 1). These attitudes are learned and can be based on characteristics such as race, age, gender, ethnicity, and appearance (Daft, 2013; Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). Scientific recognition of implicit bias is fairly recent, for researchers in social behavior

previously believed all human actors to be guided by conscious intentions to act (Greenwald & Krieger, p. 946). However, researchers now find bias to often be implicit, forming through unconscious mental processes such as social perceptions, impressions, and judgments (Daft, 2013; Greenwald & Krieger, 2006).

Allport (1954) defined prejudice as a hostile attitude or feeling toward a person solely because he or she belongs to a group to which one has assigned objectionable qualities. Prejudice can lead to the construct of in-groups (the groups to which we belong) versus out-groups (the groups to which we do not belong). In-groups and out-groups contribute to a competitive and combative mentality, which results in hostile feelings toward groups that are not our own (Allport, 1954). These hostile feelings can result in acting on one's prejudice, leading to discrimination (Daft, 2013). Fiske (2008) noted that prejudice in the 21st century has evolved significantly from the forms of prejudice seen during the Civil Rights Movement and earlier. Prejudice now is less blatant and subtler: "In this blink of an eye, a complex network of stereotypes, emotional prejudices, and behavioral impulses activates. These knee-jerk reactions do not require conscious bigotry, though they are worsened by it" (p. 2).

Thus, it is important, especially when discussing prejudice in leadership education using a political lens, to incorporate a contemporary understanding of prejudice that examines the subtle nuances seen in today's landscape. Northouse (2018), for example, defines prejudice as "a largely fixed attitude, belief, or emotion held by an individual about another individual or group that is based on faulty or unsubstantiated data" (p. 435). He noted that it "can be positive (e.g., thinking highly of another culture without sufficient evidence)" but, he asserted that it is usually negative (p. 435).

Political Context. According to a 2017 Pew Research study, the political division that year between Democrats and Republicans reached its highest point since 1994, coinciding with the first year of Donald Trump's presidency. The partisan divide between the two major political parties is larger than any other type of group division Pew studied, including religious attendance, education, and race. Along with this polarization comes increased feelings of bias and hostility across party lines, a bias "to a degree that exceeds discrimination based on race" (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015, p. 690). As a result, individuals assign stereotypes to party membership as a cognitive heuristic, or mental shortcut, to personify what they think it means to be a Democrat or Republican, which contributes to the in-group versus out-group mentality that comes with party identification (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

Ahler and Sood (2016) expanded on the nature of stereotypes in a political context. They found that people tend to think about political parties in terms of prototypes, meaning a model member of a given party based on certain characteristics. For example, a wealthy businessman might be identified as part of the Republican Party or an African American woman as a member of the Democratic Party. Individuals typically associate social and occupational groups with party membership to distinguish groups from each other (Rosch & Mervis, 1975). Stereotypes often form from this mental sorting and can be greatly exaggerated, even for one's own political party. Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) found that both liberals and conservatives overestimated the ideological extremity of moral concerns for the in-group (one's own party) and the out-group (the opposite party), such as liberals endorsing compassion and conservatives endorsing tradition.

Ahler and Sood (2016) also explored the consequences of holding misperceptions about the other party. They found that large systematic errors in which people overestimate "the extent to which partisans belong to party-stereotypical groups" lead to greater rates of hostility toward the opposite party (p. 2). This hostility is tethered back to Allport's (1954) theories of prejudice and group membership. Members of in-groups experience stronger negative feelings toward members of out-groups and greater loyalty to their own groups.

Relevance to Leadership Education. Peterson (2014) used the Implicit Association Test to teach students how embedded stereotypes and prejudices affect professional communication, actions, decisions, and emotions. The test measures the test-takers' reaction time when associating race with an affective tag (good versus bad). This approach asked students to take the test as a method for discussing implicit prejudices toward different races. She addressed the notion that American society continues to grapple with complex racial dynamics, despite supposed visual representations of progress, such as Barack Obama's 2008 presidential election: "Even though America has often touted itself as a nation of immigrants and a nation of acceptance, its citizens still wrestle with issues about difference and bias" (p. 2). Peterson concluded that discussions of prejudice and bias in the classroom provide a unique setting for students to speak candidly about how their biases were formed. Peterson also found that discussing students' test results teaches them to self-reflect: "The instructor can encourage students to examine some of their snap judgments and reflect on the processes through which they drew certain racially-oriented conclusions" (p. 6).

Connecting an understanding of implicit bias and prejudice to the discovery of self is an important first step in the leadership development process (Coleman & Katz, 2018; McCormick, 2016). Fletcher (2012) described the importance of leaders understanding their self-bias and the lens through which they see the world: "Leaders are encouraged to engage more in these self-relating activities as they seek to develop their self-awareness, self-acceptance, and their personal growth" (p. 24). It is only through such self-reflection that future and present leaders can become familiar with their biases and further explore why they might exist. Through this exploration, leaders can better manage conflict and implement systems that account for bias in the work they produce and

manage (Davi, 2017).

To reach these results, leaders must be diligent to avoid activating negative biases or stereotypes (Jhangiani and Tarry, 2014). Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, and Russin (2000) found through a leadership bias classroom exercise that students who practiced responding in nonstereotypical ways to members of out-groups became better able to manage their biases and decrease their prejudices. Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, and Tropp (2008) found similar results in their classroom study, adding that students showed a greater propensity to reach out across group boundaries once befriending members of out-groups. If leaders can find ways to identify with out-groups, the stark divide between one's in-group and another's out-group can dissolve (Jhangiani and Tarry, 2014). Promoting contact between members of diverse groups can move a group of people from "numerical diversity, in which people merely coexist, to relational diversity, in which people from different groups relate to one another as human beings" (Marsh & Mendoza-Denton, 2016, p. 2).

Description of the Practice

Teaching tools do not have to be complicated to be effective, as is the case with this exercise. The class is presented with five simple statements describing real people, and the students are asked to write down whether the people described are Democrats or Republicans. The descriptions are written to purposefully emphasize attributes that research shows are likely to evoke responses based on preconceived stereotypes, such as gender, race, age, religion, financial status, and sexual orientation (Ahler & Sood, 2016). The descriptions include multiple attributes such as age and sexual orientation or race and wealth when such combinations are even more likely to lead to a stereotypical response, such as young gays are Democrats or wealthy white men are Republicans. The key to this exercise is its use of descriptions that evoke the stereotype of a particular party but that are actual descriptions of someone in the other party.

This exercise has been used in multiple undergraduate (mostly junior and seniors) ethics and management classes taught by the lead author of this paper. The descriptions used are updated often to include people recently in the news and newly elected officials. For illustrative purposes, the specific exercise presented in this paper was used in three such classes during the spring 2018 semester with a combined total of 74 students. Table 1 shows the five descriptions presented to those students.

Table 1
Exercise Questions

No.	Description	Party Affiliation
1.	Thirty-something white woman; works in Washington D.C. as a policy analyst. Vocal advocate for LGBT issues.	D or R?
2.	A 60-something black man; born in Detroit; retired from his primary job, but now works in government.	D or R?
3.	Born and raised in rural Georgia, this 40-something white woman is now married to a lawyer and lives in Cobb County.	D or R?
4.	This 20-something male graduated from the University of Georgia; vocally identifies as Christian; worked for a couple of years in NYC but has returned to UGA for law school.	D or R?
5.	This 60-something white male is an Ivy League-trained lawyer turned businessman; built enormous wealth from early investments in cell phone and tech companies.	D or R?

Discussion of Outcomes and Results

As is typically the case with this exercise, the students in these three example classes overwhelmingly identified the person as belonging to the party evoked by stereotypes rather than the actual party the person represented. Results from the three classes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Results of Class Examples

No.	Description	Person	Party Affiliation	Student Responses
1.	30-something white woman; works in Washington, D.C. as a policy analyst; vocal advocate for LGBT issues.	Rachel Hoff, 2016 Republican Convention Platform Committee	Republican	97.3% Democrat
2.	A 60-something black man; born in Detroit; retired from his primary job, but now works in government.	Dr. Ben Carson, U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development	Republican	55.4% Democrat
3.	Born and raised in rural Georgia, this 40-something white woman is now married to a lawyer and lives in Cobb County.	Stacey Evans, Primary Candidate for Governor of Georgia	Democrat	91.2% Republican
4.	This 20-something male graduated from University of Georgia; vocally identifies as Christian; worked for a couple of years in NYC but has returned to UGA for law school.	Former student of author, worked for Hilary Clinton presidential campaign	Democrat	68.9% Republican
5.	This 60-something white male is an Ivy League-trained lawyer turned businessman; built enormous wealth from early investments in cell phone and tech companies.	Mark Warner, Senator from Virginia	Democrat	74.3% Republican

These results are presented as exercise illustrations drawn from anonymous classroom feedback and are not intended as formal research findings. The Internal Review Board at the University of Georgia allowed the reporting of this material for illustrative purposes, acknowledging that the anonymous student responses to the exercise were part of classroom instructional activities and should not be considered as human subjects research. To further ensure student anonymity, the responses are shown in aggregate. However, the breakdown of responses by classes was statistically similar to the aggregate percentages. During the classroom discussions following the exercises, students indicated that their

responses were based on strong associations with certain words or phrases. In regard to Description 1, for which 97.3 percent of the students incorrectly identified the party affiliation, students in the class discussions overwhelming said that they focused on the phrase "vocal advocate for LGBT issues" as the reason for their responses. In reacting to the results for Description 3, for which 91.2 percent of the responses were incorrect, students said that they were reacting to the person's rural upbringing as well as the affluent location where she currently resides. Description 2 had the most divided responses, with many saying during the discussions that they had assigned Democratic status based on race, while those selecting Republican said the person's age swayed their assignment. In Description 4, highlighting the man's Christian faith swayed many of the students to identify him as a Republican. With Description 5, students who identified him as a Republican said they were reacting to his wealth, while many of those who identified him as a Democrat said they drew their conclusion from his association with an Ivy League education.

Reflections of the Practitioner

The power of this relatively simple exercise is that it illustrates for the students that how they categorize someone is often based on very little information about the person. They see how they have allowed common stereotypes to guide their thinking, and it opens their minds to a robust discussion on the concepts of bias, stereotypes, and prejudice. Bissell and Parrott (2013) wrote,

> Bias and prejudice may inform discrimination, which occurs when an individual is treated differently based on group membership. It is also a component of stigmatization, an overall process in which a person is labeled (or socially categorized), stereotyped, and discriminated against within a power environment. Bias and prejudice may lead to discrimination, but sometimes that belief is not something an individual is even aware of as attitudes may be implicit or explicit in nature. (p. 222)

Therefore, any exercise that helps leadership educators teach their students to understand and recognize stereotyping and its potential ramifications can be an important tool.

Recommendations

The simplicity of the exercise makes it easily replicable and effective in different types of leadership courses. In our experience, college juniors and seniors have understood the purpose of the exercise and have responded well to it, but instructors should consider the age appropriateness of the material before proceeding. Instructors also should make it their own by creating and including descriptions of local people familiar to their students. To make the descriptions as effective as possible and to prepare for the ensuing discussion, educators should understand the research that provides the pedagogical foundation for the exercise and be prepared to include relevant literature as part of the discussion. Instructors should lead the discussion by asking students to specifically identify the trigger words that led them to the party affiliation they assigned, but this should be done in a nonjudgmental manner. Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) wrote that "creating spaces for students to experiment, reflect, and converse about turbulent issues, social justice, and identities is essential for leadership educators" (p. 186). The material gleaned from the classroom discussions could certainly be used to extend the activity into a variety of other assignments such as reflection essays, case studies or team projects. However, Guthrie and Jenkins noted that "leadership educators must thoroughly consider and prepare before implementing discussion activities" (p. 187). The recommendations for using this exercise as a discussion starter as well as the foundation for other learning activities are based on these guiding principles.

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