Media Coverage of “Wise” Interventions Can Reduce Concern for the Disadvantaged

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Recent articulation of the “wise” approach to psychological intervention has drawn attention to the way small, seemingly trivial social psychological interventions can exert powerful, long-term effects. These interventions have been used to address such wide-ranging social issues as the racial achievement gap, environmental conservation, and the promotion of safer sex. Although there certainly are good reasons to seek easier as opposed to harder solutions to social problems, we examine a potentially undesirable effect that can result from common media portrayals of wise interventions. By emphasizing the ease with which interventions help address complex social problems, media reports might decrease sympathy for the individuals assisted by such efforts. Three studies provide evidence for this, showing that media coverage of wise interventions designed to address academic and health disparities increased endorsement of the view that the disadvantaged can solve their problems on their own, and the tendency to blame such individuals for their circumstances. Effects were strongest for interventions targeted at members of a historically disadvantaged group (African Americans as opposed to college students) and when the coverage was read by conservatives as opposed to liberals. Attempts to undermine this effect by introducing cautious language had mixed success.

Keywords: intervention, media psychology, science communication, wise interventions

By and large, the public learns about scientific advances through media coverage, and opinions formed as a result are increasingly consequential. With ever-growing competition for attention in the “marketplace of ideas,” favorable media coverage can be critical to the continued funding and influence of individual researchers, their institutions, sources of funding, the journals in which they publish, and even the fields within which they operate (Rödder, Franzen & Weingart, 2012). Despite the many desirable consequences that might, therefore, result from positive media attention, we consider a potential downside of a particular type of coverage. We focus our attention on what has come to be known as the “wise” approach to psychological interventions, and we consider how common media treatments of wise interventions designed to address social problems might lead the public to have more critical views of the very individuals these interventions are designed to assist.

Wise Interventions

The defining feature of wise interventions is a desire to conserve energy in the production of change. The philosophical roots to this approach can be traced to Lewin (1943), who sought a more efficient method of altering food consumption during World War II. In his Forces behind Food Habits and Methods of Change, he posited that interventions premised on altering public attitudes could encounter a wide range of obstacles, and so he went in search of ways he might instead influence the views of the smaller groups of individuals that play the role of “gatekeepers” in the movement of food from farm to table. Lewin reasoned that an intervention targeting such individuals could alter consumption habits, even if broader public opinion was largely unaffected. Such logic led him to develop an intervention targeting housewives.

Although husbands in this era were more often viewed as heads of their households, Lewin determined that housewives typically were more consequential than husbands in determining a family’s eating habits (as housewives more often moved food from the grocer to the kitchen and from the kitchen to the table). Housewives also were more consequential than farmers (as housewives were the more proximal determinants of a family’s eating habits). In subsequent research building on that analysis, Lewin determined that he could efficiently alter the choices of housewives if he utilized small-group discussions, rather than direct consumer marketing. His careful analysis resulted in a group-based intervention targeting housewives, one that could promote change more efficiently than any mass marketing approach premised on shifting public opinions.

In the decades since Lewin (1943), social psychology has given less attention to testing psychological interventions out in the “real world” and more to testing basic processes from within the experimental laboratory. There has been a recent shift, however, to reclaim Lewin’s goal of designing efficient psychological interventions, one that is premised on adapting the methods and theories developed in the experimental laboratory. This modern ap-
proach has been termed the “new science of wise psychological interventions” (Walton, 2014; see Yeager et al., 2014), and the wise approach to psychological intervention is defined by its embrace of subtle manipulations typically utilized in the experimental laboratories. However, whereas such techniques are often used to produce small but provocative effects the laboratory (see Prentice and Miller (1992), they are used in wise interventions to produce large and consequential effects in everyday settings.

Consider for illustration an experimental study that utilized a minimal manipulation to boost the performance of African American college students taking a laboratory test designed to measure intellectual ability. Taylor and Walton (2011) found that a brief, 10-min task that allowed African American college students to write about (and thereby affirm) a value that was important to them was sufficient to boost their recall of newly learned words. This effect helped reduce a performance gap observed between African American and White students—with effects lasting as long as 4 to 9 days, particularly when the learning occurred in a high-threat learning environment. The ability of such a seemingly incidental manipulation to influence performance on what appears to be an unrelated intellectual test suggests that real-world interventions that harness the same underlying mechanism might produce large and meaningful effects. More important, however, the original study itself need not produce a large effect to inspire such attempts at application. As Prentice and Miller (1992) note, the fact that a minimalist intervention can produce any effect at all argues for the power of the mechanisms being studied, and so this single laboratory study could inspire vigorous attempts at future application, even if the effect size observed in the laboratory setting were defined as “small” by traditional standards (Cohen, 1988).

However, how might one build a field intervention that draws on the affirmation mechanisms explored in Taylor and Walton’s (2011) research laboratory? We suspect that if such a task was given to a team of educators, many would focus on ways of “going big” with the approach. Many might look for ways of providing strong and consistent reinforcement of students’ self-worth through their daily interactions with teachers and school officials, through guided peer-based workshops, and perhaps through the addition of self-affirming lessons built into the course curriculum. Some might further seek to integrate any of the new affirmation-based approaches with other evidence-based strategies already known to lower the achievement gap. Multifaceted interventions are common in education, just as they are in other applied fields. Psychological interventions in applied health, for instance, often are designed to target the full range of informational, attitudinal, motivational, and skill-based constructs known to influence health-relevant decisions (e.g., Fishbein & Yzer, 2003; Fisher & Fisher, 2000; Jemmott et al., 2010).

However, such interventions would not be wise interventions. Walton (2014) contrasts the newer wise approach with more traditional approaches that are “multifaceted and expensive” (p. 73). This is because wise interventions embrace not just the strong theories that experimental social psychologists seek to study via subtle manipulations; wise interventions also embrace the subtlety. This fact is illustrated in a set of studies by Sherman et al. (2013), who pursued a straightforward field application of Taylor and Walton’s (2011) laboratory research mentioned previously. Their intervention (Study 1) focused on reducing the achievement gap facing Latino middle-school children, and it involved no more than having students complete four or five self-affirmation exercises, each of which followed roughly the same procedures utilized by Taylor and Walton. These seemingly trivial and everyday experiences—allowed to stand on their own and with no additional help from other affirmation experiences or other methods of promoting improved academic performance—were found to stimulate higher grades in Latino (but not White) students over the next 3-year period. This is an amazing finding, and it highlights the goals of the wise intervention approach: to draw on both the strong theories and the subtle methods advanced in the laboratory to identify the small, seemingly inconsequential efforts that can produce large and lasting changes in the field.

Media Interest in Wise Interventions

It is hard to argue against the goals of wise interventions. There is no obvious reason to advocate for expensive and multifaceted interventions, if easier and more targeted approaches might do as well or better. At a more personal level, the subtle nature of these interventions might lead those who benefit from them to feel personally responsible for their good outcomes, which is of course a good thing. The concern animating the current research is not about the “wisdom” of pursuing wise interventions or how targets might react to them, but with ways media coverage of this research approach might shape public perceptions of social problems. How the public will react to media coverage of wise interventions is an important question to ask, as wise interventions by their very nature are provocative. Consider that a university news release on the Sherman et al. (2013) intervention titled, “Simple Interventions Bridge the Achievement Gap between Latino and White Students” (Rigoglioso, 2013) was picked up by various media sources (e.g., Pomellis, 2013).

Media interest in this specific study is not unusual, as wise interventions tend to attract attention. This fact is driven home by inspection of the studies Walton (2014) listed as prototypic examples of wise interventions (in their Tables 1–5). Setting aside four older and highly publicized research articles (that are now citation classics and have received considerable press attention over the years; Aronson & Osherow, 1980; Langer & Rodin, 1976; Penn- baker, Kiecold-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Rokeach, 1971) and focusing only on the 19 remaining articles published in the last 15 years, we were able to find media coverage (i.e., university press releases, scientific blog reporting, or commercial news reporting) for 17 of these.¹ We located media reports that informed the public about wise interventions promoting such outcomes as water conservation (Burn, 2013; Robbins, 2008), safer sex (Vedantam, 2009), weight loss (Trego, 2012), improved academic performance (Tough, 2014), increased voter turnout (Weaver, 2011), higher marital satisfaction (Herbert, 2013), interracial harmony (Lisnow, 2013), and more.

¹ The tables in Walton (2014) highlighted a set of articles that were presented as representative of the wise intervention approach. At times, the tables also pointed readers to ancillary citations making similar points. For instance, the description of Hullmenen and Harackiewicz (2009) in Table 3 also pointed readers to Harackiewicz, Rozek, Hullmenen, and Hyde (2012). In instances such as this, we only included these ancillary citation in our estimation of media coverage when the ancillary research was conducted by an independent research group. We did this so that our analysis of did not distort our estimate upward by counting the same highly publicized research program more than once.
Most typically, such media coverage highlighted the subtle, minimalist nature of interventions and the dramatic effects obtained. It seems possible that such coverage often produces desirable results. Research showing large and consequential effects of small interventions might help to promote public appreciation of the social sciences and the need for empirically grounded solutions to social problems. Of concern to the current studies, however, is that media attention to this aspect of wise interventions might lower public sympathy for the individuals targeted by such interventions. Reduced concern can occur when an “easy fix” to a problem is further interpreted as revealing culpability.

Simple Blame

Again consider the study by Sherman et al. (2013). They showed a long-term reduction in the achievement gap for Latinos from brief affirmation exercises. If such a seemingly inconsequential intervention can so dramatically affect the lives of Latino children, then how serious a problem is the achievement gap they face? The apparent ease with which this small intervention altered their lives might, in the eyes of many in the public, imply that minority underachievement is a problem that Latinos could just as well solve on their own through personal effort. Also striking is how this particular wise intervention (like many in this tradition) promotes change by altering the behavior of the disadvantaged (cf., Yeager et al., 2014). If it appears that members of historically disadvantaged groups need only make what appear to be “minor tweaks” in their own mindsets to counter their disadvantages, then a public exposed to media coverage of wise interventions might conclude that such individuals should make these changes on their own—and if such individuals do not, that they then bear responsibility for experiencing continued disadvantage.

Support for these conditions follows from considerable research tying attributions of responsibility and assignment of blame to the ease with which misfortunes can be mentally “undone” by evaluators (Spellman & Gilbert, 2014). When attributing responsibility and blame to others, perceivers appear to “work backward” from known events to try to locate any voluntary actions that might be deemed a cause (e.g., Hilton & Slugoski, 1986; McClure, Hilton, & Sutton, 2007). In the evaluations that follows, particular weight is given to actions that could have been placed under the actors’ volitional control (Girotto, Legrenzi, & Rizzo, 1991; McEleny & Byrne, 2006) or actions that for any number of other reasons might be easily “imagined away” by the perceivers to create a different and more desirable result (Burris & Branscombe, 1993; Miller & Gunasegaram, 1990). It seems reasonable from this analysis that common media portrayals of wise interventions often do, by their very nature, introduce the very conditions that can promote blaming the disadvantaged. These media reports tend to emphasize the seeming ease with which “fixes” to the problem can be implemented, and, in the process, point to controllable actions that actors could have engaged in on their own to avoid misfortune. The unintended result of such media coverage is that, by drawing attention to powerful new approaches to promote positive changes in the lives of the disadvantaged, such media reports might promote greater blaming of the very individuals these interventions were designed to help. Three studies examine this possibility.

Overview

The above analysis suggests that media coverage emphasizing the seeming ease with which wise interventions produce large changes might promote endorsement of statements indicating that the disadvantaged could have easily avoided or overcome misfortune on their own. Such shifts could also be associated with a tendency to blame others for their disadvantage, particularly among perceivers that have pre-existing negative views of the individuals being targeted by the intervention (Alicke, 2000). We tested this hypothesis in three studies, each of which exposed White research participants to media coverage reviewing the effects of wise interventions designed to reduce the educational and health disparities facing African Americans. We chose this focus based on evidence that White populations often place some degree of responsibility on the African American community for their historic disadvantages (Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996), and so we hypothesized that media coverage of wise interventions designed to assist African Americans might reinforce or magnify such pre-existing tendencies (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2002). Study 1 investigated this hypothesis by utilizing a news story adapted from the Rigoglioso’s (2013) coverage of the Sherman et al. (2013) intervention. Study 2 expanded on this by examining a wise intervention designed to promote public health, and by directly manipulating the nature of the group targeted to determine if media coverage of wise interventions might activate pre-existing stereotypes and biases against historically disadvantaged groups. Study 3 examined how the effects of media coverage might be influenced by readers’ prior political ideology (liberal vs. conservative), and whether the introduction of strongly cautious language in media reports might counteract the hypothesized effects.

Study 1

Participants

Participants were recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, an Internet crowd-sourcing site that can be used to connect interested participants with research studies for pay. Evidence suggests that this portal replicates experimental effects obtained in laboratory settings, but it does so with samples that are more diverse than college samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Participants were paid $1.00 to complete a questionnaire designed to take 30–45 min. From an original sample of N = 130, a total of 37 were eliminated either for not completing the questionnaire (n = 8), for being under 18 (n = 2), for failing attention checks and/or completing the questionnaire too quickly (n = 11),3 for being

2 It is not our argument that media reports always focus attention on the ease with which wise interventions can affect change, nor do we suggest that media reports provide an accurate understanding of the relative ease or difficulty of implementing wise interventions. Our argument is that media coverage of wise interventions often emphasized the seeming ease with which they address complex social problems, and the press releases we adapted for our three studies all are representative of this type of framing. 3 In this and every study that followed, we placed a timer on the web page with the experimental manipulation and eliminated participants who did not spend at least 90 s reading the media reports. The majority of those who were deleted spent fewer than 15 s on the manipulation and likely were not participating in good faith.
nonwhite (n = 13), or for some combination of these factors (n = 4). The rationale for exclusion based on race/ethnicity was that the study lacked sufficiently large subsamples to examine group differences on this dimension in detail. This resulted in a sample of N = 92 participants (M_{AGE} = 38, SD = 13, range 18–69, 57% women).

**Procedure**

The recruitment to participate in the research described the study as an investigation on “reactions towards press releases.” After completing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to read one of two media reports describing an intervention that had helped reduce the racial achievement gap of African American children (see the online supplement for experimental materials for this and all studies). In the wise intervention condition, the news report was based on the Sherman et al. (2013) coverage of the Rigoglioso (2013) findings, with the primary modification being that the intervention was presented as a means of addressing the achievement gap observed in African American rather than those Latino children (“Simple Interventions Bridge the Achievement Gap between African American and White Students”). Otherwise, much of these details of this original press release were kept in the version of the article that participants read, with the primary editing performed to reduce the length of the article. As in the original, this report described a “simple intervention” that directed middle school students to engage in a series of values affirmation tasks, after which the article reported “dramatic results”—higher grades and standardized test scores that persisted over 3 years.

The remaining participants were randomly assigned to a multifaceted intervention condition. The goal of this condition was to have readers exposed to media coverage of a psychological intervention that targeted the racial achievement gap affecting African American children, but in this condition the article described a (nonwise) psychological intervention that tackled the same problem through multiple routes. To locate a real intervention that could be substituted in place of the wise intervention, we performed a literature search on “achievement gap” and “African American” and identified a multifaceted, school-based program titled “Success for All” by Slavin and Madden (2006). Like Sherman et al. (2013), these researchers implemented an intervention designed to reduce minority achievement gaps, but their intervention was designed to be a comprehensive application of many of the known factors that influence educational achievement of minority students. Specifically, their program introduced (a) changes in the school curriculum that emphasize the value of learning from mistakes, (b) the addition of professional tutors to classrooms, (c) the introduction of program facilitators that assist teachers, and (d) regular assessment that can alert educators to problems as they arise. Descriptions of this alternative approach to addressing the achievement gap were substituted into the places where the original article referenced the Sherman et al. (2013) study, in a version of the story now titled, “Multifaceted Interventions Bridge the Achievement Gap between African American and White Students.” This report otherwise mirrored the Rigoglioso (2013) article, including attribution of the intervention to the same researcher and home institution. Because of the complexity of the multifaceted intervention, the media report on this approach was slightly longer (757 words) than the report focusing on a wise intervention (604 words).

**Measures**

**Ease of the intervention.** As a manipulation check, the perceived ease of conducting the intervention was measured with four ratings indicating how easy, straightforward, feasible, and practical participants perceived the intervention to be. These ratings and all other ratings in this study were made on 7-point scales that ranged from 1 = not at all to 7 = extremely and were then averaged to create a single composite score (α = 0.97).

**Ease of overcoming misfortune.** Five questions assessed perceptions that minorities can easily overcome their own disadvantage on their own, if they so chose (e.g., “I think that minorities can overcome prejudice and discrimination if they apply themselves,” and “In general, if minorities in America simply tried harder, they would be just as well off as Whites,”) (α = 0.95).

**Results**

Across conditions, perceived ease of implementing the intervention correlated significantly with the perceived ease of overcoming misfortune on one’s own, r(90) = 0.37, p < .01, with no significant differences in association by experimental condition. An independent sample t test further indicated that the wise intervention was perceived as easier to implement (M = 4.45, SD = 0.93) than the multifaceted intervention (M = 3.24, SD = 1.00), t(91) = 6.02, p < .01, and those reading about a wise intervention more strongly endorsed the view that minorities could easily overcome their disadvantage on their own (M = 3.92, SD = 1.49), compared with those reading about the multifaceted intervention (M = 3.28, SD = 1.44), t(91) = 2.11, p = .04.

**Discussion**

Study 1 provided preliminary evidence that media coverage of wise interventions can alter perceptions of individuals targeted by the intervention. When participants read about a psychological intervention that was designed to raise the academic performance of African Americans via a simple, single-step intervention, they moved in the direction of viewing minorities as more able to overcome their group’s disadvantages on their own, when compared with another group of participants who read comparable media coverage of a more difficult and multifaceted intervention. Study 2 pursued a conceptual replication of this finding. Rather than determining if wise interventions might influence the perceived ease of overcoming an existing misfortune (academic achievement gap), this study was designed to determine if wise interventions might influence the perceived ease of avoiding a future misfortune. Participants read about either a wise or multifaceted intervention that was designed to reduce the chance of future unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

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4 Exploratory analyses indicated that the patterns reported for Study 1 were diminished with minority participants included, whereas they were enhanced in Study 2 and no different in Study 3.

5 All study materials and questionnaires for this and all studies will be made available in their entirety upon request.
(STDs). It also included a second evaluation, blame. Of interest was whether exposure to wise interventions designed to reduce riskier sex would increase the tendency to blame those who experienced unwanted consequences of engaging in riskier sex.

Study 2 was also designed to determine if the nature of the group targeted in an intervention could influence reactions. Although it seemed plausible that wise interventions would alter opinions of the members of most any group that benefits from a wise intervention, research indicates that perceivers tend to assign greater blame to individuals when doing so is consistent with pre-existing unfavorable expectations (Alicke, 2000). This suggested to us that media portrayals of wise interventions might promote blame to the greatest degree—at least among members of a White community sample—if the intervention targeted members of a minority racial group. This is because research indicates that many Whites have a propensity to blame racial minorities for their disadvantages; tendencies that might be triggered by media reports of a wise intervention (e.g., Christopher et al., 2008; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2002; Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Reyna, Henry, Korf, Sidanius, 2006; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996). Thus, it seemed reasonable to predict that media coverage of wise interventions would evoke greater blaming among White research participants if the intervention targeted African Americans rather than a general college population.

### Study 2

#### Overview

Participants read media coverage of either a wise or nonwise intervention designed to promote safer sex in the African American community or at a historically White-majority university (University of California at Santa Cruz). The full design was thus a 2 (Intervention: Wise vs. Multifaceted) × 2 (Target: African American vs. UCSC) between-subjects factorial design.

#### Participants

White participants were again recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. From an original sample of N = 388 respondents, 88 were eliminated either for being non-White (n = 37), not completing the questionnaire (n = 18), being under 18 (n = 3), for failing attention checks and/or for completing the questionnaire too quickly (n = 18), or for some combination of these factors (n = 12). This resulted in a sample of N = 300 participants (53% women; MAGE = 74, SDAGE = 12.94, range = 18–61), with n = 74 in the multifacted/African American condition, n = 80 in the multifaceted/UCSC condition, and n = 62 in the wise/African American condition.

#### Manipulations

**Intervention type.** Participants randomly assigned to the wise intervention condition read a media report adapted from actual press coverage of a study showing that a “hypocrisy manipulation” might be an effective means of reducing the rates of unplanned pregnancies and STDs. This article was adapted from a news story in the Washington Post by Shankar Vedantam (2009) titled, “Preach What You Plan to Practice.” This piece reviewed research using a hypocrisy procedure to reduce unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Stone et al., 1994). To maintain participant attention, the original article was reduced in length (from 2,191 words to either 1,274 or 1,294 words, depending on target). It also was modified to include the addition of the word “simple” to the title, and we removed two cautions made by the researchers in the article, emphasizing limiting conditions in which hypocrisy manipulations might not work. (The potential impact of such cautions was examined in more detail in Study 3.)

The finished article was next altered to create an alternative report that instead focused attention on a longer-term, multifaceted psychological intervention. In this new version, all descriptions of the intervention were adapted from an actual safer-sex intervention developed by Fisher and Fisher (2000). Their 5-week, multistorey intervention was designed to communicate the information (knowledge), motivations, and behavioral and social skills found to effectively promote safer sex practices in at-risk populations. Whereas the simple and easy nature of the wise intervention was presented as its major innovation in the media coverage of the wise intervention, the comprehensive nature of the multifaceted intervention was emphasized as the breakthrough in the new version of the article. Editing to create this report again resulted in a slight increase in the number of words (increasing the text to either 1,536 or 1,557 words), but the article was otherwise comparable with the article describing the wise intervention.

**Targeted population.** The original media report focused on the use of hypocrisy to influence the safer sex practices of undergraduates at the UCSC, and so one set of the articles retained this same focus—presenting results of a study that utilized a wise or a multifaceted intervention to promote safer sex on the UCSC campus. In contrast, the original intervention developed by Fisher and Fisher (2000) was designed to target African Americans. Therefore, the original wise and multifaceted articles were altered to create a new set of stories describing interventions that targeted African Americans. Regardless of the target group, the article presented the target population as one that was of interest to the researchers because the group in question was one that often failed to act in a way that was consistent with their own better intentions to try to practice safer sex.

#### Measures

**Ease of intervention.** As in Study 1, participants completed four 7-point ratings to indicate how easy versus hard, straightforward versus complex, and how feasible it would to carry out the intervention, and these ratings were then averaged to create a single composite score (α = 0.73).

**Ease of avoiding misfortune.** Four questions assessed the belief that it is relatively “easy” for individuals to avoid having unprotected sex. This assessment was made with four questions that assessed the perception that an individual “should not find it too hard to practice safer sex 100% of the time,” and that it should be “easy to overcome any temptation,” and that safer sex requires “just a little willpower,” and that most anyone can perform safer sex “if they just apply themselves” (α = 0.93).

**Blame.** Participants rated the extent to which individuals who experienced each of three unwanted effects of risky sex (unplanned pregnancy, contracting HIV, or contracting other sexually transmitted diseases) “deserve no sympathy” and are “deserving of sympathy.”
criticism.” This resulted in six separate ratings of blame, the wording of which was altered slightly depending on if the targets of the intervention were African Americans ($\alpha = 0.94$) or UCSD students ($\alpha = 0.92$).

**Journalistic quality.** Added to Study 2 were ratings of perceived journalistic quality. Participants rated the story assigned to them based on how “interesting” and “entertaining” they found it to be and the extent to which they found it to be a “good story” ($\alpha = 0.83$).

**Results**

A 2 (Intervention) $\times$ 2 (Target) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was first performed on the perceived ease of implementing the intervention. This revealed only a main effect of the intervention type, $F(1, 296) = 15.04, p < .001$, such that wise interventions were perceived as easier to implement ($M = 3.82, SD = 1.05$) than multifaceted interventions ($M = 3.33, SD = 1.09$). An equivalent analysis performed on the perceived journalistic quality also found a main effect of intervention type, $F(1, 296) = 13.07, p < .001$, and no other effects. The nature of this was that the two articles focusing on wise interventions were perceived as higher in journalistic quality ($M = 3.04, SD = 0.66$) than were the articles focusing on multifaceted interventions ($M = 2.76, SD = 0.68$). These two findings, along with a statistically significant correlation between the perceived ease of the intervention and perceived quality of the journalism, $r(298) = 0.31, p < .001$, highlight a reason why media coverage might focus more on wise than nonwise interventions: wise interventions make for better reading.

Across conditions, perceived ease of implementing the intervention also correlated significantly with the perceived ease of avoiding misfortune, $r(298) = 0.35, p < .01$, with no significant differences in association by experimental condition. A 2 (Intervention) $\times$ 2 (Target) ANOVA performed on the perceived ease of avoiding misfortune revealed only a significant effect of the intervention, $F(1, 296) = 16.22, p < .01$, such that those assigned to read about one of the two wise interventions stated it was easier to avoid unsafe sex ($M = 7.44, SD = 1.29$) than did those assigned to read about one of the two multifaceted interventions ($M = 6.77, SD = 1.56$). There was no main effect or interaction with the target manipulation for this rating, a result that suggests that the wise interventions increased the perceived ease of avoiding misfortune, regardless of whether the target was Black or White.

With regards to blame, perceived ease of implementing the intervention was not significantly correlated with the tendency to engage in blame, $r(298) = 0.01, ns$, although the perceived ease of avoiding misfortune did predict the tendency to blame, $r(298) = 0.20, p = .01$, with no differences in association observed across conditions. A 2 (Intervention) $\times$ 2 (Target) ANOVA performed on the blame ratings revealed only a statistically significant interaction between the target’s race and the type of intervention, $F(1, 296) = 4.22, p = .04$. The nature of this interaction was that, when the intervention targeted UCSC students, no difference in blame was observed between those reading a media report using a wise intervention ($M = 4.02, SD = 2.00$) or a multifaceted intervention ($M = 4.21, SD = 1.71$), $F(1, 296) < 1$. In contrast, when the intervention targeted African Americans, greater blame was assigned by those reading about the wise intervention ($M = 4.57, SD = 1.83$) than those reading about the multifaceted intervention ($M = 3.89, SD = 1.72$), $F(1, 296) = 4.89, p = .03$.

**Discussion**

The results replicate and extend those in Study 1. Compared with participants who read about a multifaceted intervention designed to promote safer sex, those who read about a comparable wise intervention subsequently reported stronger ratings of the ease of practicing safer sex. This effect was observed regardless of whether the intervention was presented as an attempt to influence the actions of African Americans or UCSC students. However, when it came to the harsher judgment—blame—effects of the wise media coverage were only observed when it targeted African Americans. This suggests that some negative expectations might be necessary for the shifts in perceptions promoted by wise media coverage to translate into blame (Alicke, 2000). Study 2 also revealed a reason why wise interventions might attract media attention. The articles covering wise interventions were rated as more interesting to read than were the articles covering more “traditional” and multifaceted interventions, and perceived ease of the intervention correlated with the perceived journalistic quality. Our analysis thus suggests that blame of the disadvantaged might at times arise from a journalist’s desire to engage readers in their portrayals of wise-intervention effects. By suggesting that psychologists have discovered relatively easy ways of altering behavior, media coverage suggests that it should be relatively easy for individuals to change their own behavior. In the process, the report can raise the culpability of those who fail to change their behavior and experience misfortune as a result.

**Study 3**

The final study had two goals. The first goal was to explore individual differences in how people respond to media coverage of wise interventions. As noted earlier, people tend to assign more blame when doing so is consistent with pre-existing beliefs (Alicke, 2000). Study 2 yielded results consistent with this premise by showing that media portrayals of wise interventions might promote blame of some groups more than others. Study 3 explored a related question: whether media coverage of wise interventions promotes blaming in some perceivers (conservative) more than others (liberals). Evidence that wise interventions might promote blame more among political conservatives than liberals comes from research suggesting that conservatives tend to assign greater responsibility and blame to members of disadvantaged groups for their circumstances (Christopher et al., 2008; Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Reyna, Henry, Korfmacher, & Tucker, 2006). By comparing the responses of political conservatives and liberals, Study 3 also speaks to the potential policy implications of the effects documented in Studies 1 and 2. A concern that can follow from our results is that, by promoting conditions that lead to greater blaming of the disadvantaged for their circumstances, media coverage of wise interventions might reduce public support for social programs that can assist these individuals. A very similar concern has been expressed with regards to recent emphasis on educational interventions that explore ways of instilling “grit” in children, as the more educators put the onus of responsibility on the students themselves to overcome their challenges, the less likely the public may be to pursue (liberal) social policies that can help students achieve (Kohn, 2014a, 2014b).
The second goal of this study was to test the effectiveness of introducing a caution into media reports, as a strategy of counteracting the effects documented in Studies 1 and 2. It seems unlikely that researchers who use wise interventions can consistently prevent media outlets from focusing on the seeming ease with which wise interventions alter outcomes—ease is a “selling point” that journalists will likely seize upon in many instances whether researchers wish them to or not. As noted in Study 2, such a focus can make for more compelling journalism, and researchers can only exert so much control over journalists pursuing a compelling angle for a story. However, it is an empirical question of whether strong cautions embedded in a story might attenuate the effects in Studies 1 and 2. Therefore, we wished to determine if the effects of these interventions on public perception might be overridden with sufficiently strong language placed in a story—language emphasizing how the straightforward nature of a single wise intervention belies the many challenges facing members of disadvantaged groups. Thus, we introduced a new condition in Study 3, one in which the author of a media report included many strong quotes from the researcher cautioning against overinterpretation of the results.

In addition to these two primary goals, a change was made in the control condition to address a potential criticism. Studies 1 and 2 compared the effects of media coverage on wise interventions to media coverage on multifaceted intervention. Such comparisons made it possible to determine whether media coverage of wise interventions can alter perceptions of the disadvantaged, in comparison with effects that would have been observed if attention had instead focused on alternative, multifaceted approaches. Such a comparison is meaningful but it makes it unclear if the effects of Study 1 and 2 occurred because coverage of wise interventions drove sympathy for the disadvantaged down or if multifaceted interventions drove sympathy for the disadvantaged up (or if some combination of effects was occurring). Study 3 thus utilized a “wise priming” control condition that had participants read about a wise intervention that was unrelated to the target ratings they would later make. This control should thereby activate thoughts regarding the ease with which social problems might be solved via interventions, but no mention was made about how interventions might be used to assist the group targeted in the two experimental conditions.

Participants and Design

White participants were recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. From an original sample of $N = 259$ participants, 55 were eliminated for not completing the questionnaire ($n = 12$), for failing attention checks and/or for completing the questionnaire too quickly ($n = 12$), for being nonwhite ($n = 14$), or some combination of these factors ($n = 17$). This resulted in a sample of $N = 204$ participants (53% women; $M_{\text{AGE}} = 41$, $SD_{\text{AGE}} = 13.31$, range = 18–61). After completing a measure of political conservatism and some distractor items, participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions, a (a) wise condition (that utilized a media report highlighting a wise intervention that was designed to help African American college students adjust to college), a (b) cautious condition (in which the wise media report included numerous quotes from the lead investigator cautioning against overly strong interpretation of the findings), and a (c) control condition (in which participants read about a wise intervention designed to promote water conservation).

Manipulation

The media report used in the wise condition (949 words) was adapted from a Stanford University press release titled “Got an Hour? Boost Your Grades. Stanford University Psychologists Design 60-minute Exercise that Raises GPAs of Minority Students” (Garlick, 2011). This press release began by asking readers to consider the following:

What could you do for an hour in the first year of college that would improve minority students’ grades over the next three years, reduce the racial achievement gap by half and, years later, make students happier and healthier?

It went from there to describe research reported in Science (Walton & Cohen, 2011) indicating that a 60-min workshop designed to promote perceptions of belonging had improved the grade point average (GPA), emotional well-being, and health of African American college students over a 3-year period. Text from press release was also combined with some of the text from a CNN online article that built on this original release (Enayati, 2012). The result was a single short article emphasizing the lasting impact of this wise intervention on African American college students. Critical to the intervention, however, we removed one quote from the original press release (but dropped by CNN), where the lead investigator emphasized the need for caution in interpreting his results (“This intervention alone is not the answer, but we know more about what types of things help.”). This quote was added back to the article developed for the cautious condition (1,324 words). A number of additional statements were also written and added to emphasize how the belongingness intervention is only a “small part” of a “larger solution” and how the intervention is a “first step” to tackling a “difficult problem.” In contrast to those in the two other experimental conditions, participants in the control condition read an article published in Psychology Today titled, “Changing Minds and Changing Towels” (Goldstein, 2008). This article (1,035 words) presented research by Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius (2008) describing a wise intervention that promoted reuse of towels among guests in hotel rooms. This control was meant to prime awareness of wise solutions to social problems, while at the same time making no links to interventions that can reduce minority achievement gaps.

Measures

Political ideology. Liberal versus conservative political ideology was assessed at the start of the study with four questions that had participants use the same 7-point metric ranging from 1 = extremely liberal to 7 = extremely conservative to rate their “political attitudes” and to place themselves in terms of “social policies,” “economic policies,” and “politics in general” ($\alpha = .94$).6

Ease of intervention. Participants completed three ratings to indicate how easy versus hard, straightforward versus complex, 

6 One concern is that by measuring ideology at the time of the study, we may have activated these attitudes, such that then exerted stronger influence on judgments than they normally would. However, we replicated effects on blame in a sample of $N = 259$ college students, where ideology was assessed at a mass testing at the start of the semester.
and feasible it would be to carry out the intervention they had just read, and these three ratings were averaged to create a single composite score (α = 0.85).

**Ease of adjusting to college.** Seven questions assessed the perceived ease with which African American students should be able to adapt to college (e.g., “In general, I think if black college students in America simply tried harder, they should do just as well in school as whites,” α = 0.95).

**Journalistic quality.** Participants rated the quality of the story using four items assessing how interesting and entertaining they found the article, and the extent to which the study made for a “good story” and “good journalism” (α = 0.87).

**Blame.** Five questions assessed the degree of blame assigned to African American college students for the racial achievement gap (e.g., “I think black college students deserve little to no sympathy if they choose to drop out of college,” α = 0.94).

**Results**

A set of one-way ANOVAs revealed no statistically significant effects of the experimental manipulation on either the perceived ease of the manipulation or the journalistic quality of the articles, Fs (2, 201) < 1, and planned comparisons indicated the control condition did not differ from either of the other two conditions for either outcome, Fs < 1. These findings suggest that the control condition was roughly as wise and engaging as the two experimental conditions (in contrast to the control articles used in Studies 1 and 2). However, the perceived ease of the manipulation was again correlated with the perceived journalistic quality, across conditions, r(202) = 0.26, p < .01, again suggesting that this is a critical element to a good story.

Analysis of the two outcomes revealed that the perceived ease of adjusting to college correlated strongly with blame for not adjusting, r(202) = 0.60, p < .01. Despite the high degree of collinearity between these two variables, two separate interaction regression models were performed on each of these criteria following steps outlined in Jaccard and Turrisi (2003).

In each model, the dependent variables of interest was regressed onto a dummy code for the wise-intervention condition (0 = control or wise-qualified, 1 = wise), a dummy code for wise-qualified condition (0 = control or wise, 1 = wise-qualified), and political ideology (in the first block), and the two multiplicative cross-products combining each of the two dummy codes with political ideology (in the second block).

Slightly different patterns emerged for the two dependent variables, as shown in Table 1. In the prediction of the perceived ease of adjusting to college, ideology interacted with both the wise and the cautious conditions, indicating the slope regressing ease onto ideology differed in these two conditions from what was observed in the control conditions. This is shown in the top two panels of Figure 1, where a stronger relationship (steeper slope) between ideology and ratings of ease was observed in the wise and cautious conditions, relative to the control. That pattern suggests that not only did the wise intervention exert a stronger influence on judgments among the more politically conservative participants, but the attempt to introduce caution into the story failed to attenuate this effect. In contrast, in the prediction of blame, ideology interacted with the wise condition but not the cautious condition. As shown in the bottom panel of Figure 1, there was a stronger relationship between ideology and blame in the wise condition than the control condition but no difference in this slope between the cautious and control conditions. This pattern suggests that although the wise intervention did lead to greater blame among the more politically conservative participants, the introduction of cautions reduced this effect. Given the strong correlations between ratings of ease and blame, when ease was added to the model predicting blame, all interactions between ideology and experimental condition dropped from statistical significance.

**Discussion**

Results again indicated that media coverage of wise interventions can decrease concern for the disadvantaged. When compared with the control condition, those who read about a wise condition designed to help African Americans adjust to college later rated college adjustment as more under the control of African Americans in general and assigned greater blame to African Americans who fail to adjust on their own (see main effects in Table 1). Interaction regression analysis further showed that this effect was most pronounced among political conservatives. With increasing levels of conservatism, larger differences were observed between the wise and control condition, in terms of both the perceived ease of adjusting to college and the blame assigned for not adjusting. These findings suggest that the seeming ease with which wise interventions address racial inequities reinforces or activates conservatives’ beliefs about the causes of racial disadvantages (e.g., Reyna, Henry, Korfmacher, & Tucker, 2006).

The introduction of more cautious language into the media report had mixed results. Although this did reduce the endorsement of statements that assigned outright blame to African Americans (e.g., “Most typically, black students are the ones who are most to blame when they have trouble adjusting to college”), it did not diminish the tendency to see adjustment as something under the
control of African Americans (e.g., “I think Black college students should find it fairly easy to adapt to college life if that is what they want to do”). It is unclear if the introduction of caution differentially influenced these two ratings because it altered actual beliefs, if it activated prior beliefs, or if it merely influenced impression management concerns operating at the time of the self-report. Regardless, it appears that wise interventions do activate conservative beliefs and the introduction of cautious language offers at best a partial correction.

One irony of such findings is that at a time when concern is being expressed about “liberal bias” in social psychology (e.g., Haidt, 2011; Inbar & Lammers, 2012)—particularly as it relates to accounts of racism and racial inequity (Tetlock, 2012), it appears that media coverage of interventions based on strong applications of social psychological theories might at times reinforce “principled conservative” views regarding the causes of racial inequities (i.e., views that place greater responsibility on members of historically disadvantaged groups for their own

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Figure 1. Effects of political ideology and media coverage on the perceived ease of with which African Americans should be able to adjust to college (top panel) and the blame assigned to African Americans who fail to adjust to college (bottom panel). Lines in each figure represent the best-fitting regression line, for each of the three experimental conditions.
circumstances; e.g., Christopher et al., 2008; Federico & Sida-nius, 2002; Reyna, Henry, Korfmacher, & Tucker, 2006). Al-
though the more cautious statements reduced this shift some-
what, it is worth noting that language used in this condition
advanced far greater concern than would typically be presented
in actual media coverage. Consider one fictitious researcher
quote added to the original article to introduce greater caution:

The truth is that the root causes of the racial achievement gap in
college are many and clearly there is much, much more that we can
be doing and much, much more we must be doing to more fully
address this problem. My intervention is an easy first step to
tackling this hard problem, but to close the gap further, college
administrators and educators are going to have to roll up their
sleeves and get to work.

We do not see much more that could have said to discourage
overly strong conclusions than this statement; nor do we think
researchers should expect that such statements, if made, will
even be carried in the articles covering their work. That said,
there may be other strategies that can be pursued to counteract
this effect. Our attempt was but one of any number of possi-
bilities. We pursued an approach wherein the media report
included many quotes from the researcher downplaying the
significance of his own findings. Another approach might be
to include quotes where researchers emphasize qualifications to
their findings that might limit generalizability (e.g., “although
this intervention worked on the group as whole, there likely are
individuals who will not benefit at all for a variety for reasons,
and we will need to find solutions for these individuals as well”).
Or, there may be ways of framing results that would appeal to
conservative principles (e.g., “this intervention shows the
need for school and community programs that can inspire
students to achieve”). In short, although Study 3 suggested that
at least one approach to introducing caution had limited effects,
future research might locate more powerful approaches.

It also is important to emphasize that attention given to the
eease of an intervention might promote far different effects than
those observed here, if delivered by journalists with much
different goals than those who wrote the reports adapted for our
research. In our three studies, we drew on actual media reports
to determine how common media portrayals of wise interven-
tions might influence public perception. Each of these media
reports emphasized the simple nature of the intervention (e.g.,
“Simple Interventions Bridge the Achievement Gap between
African American and White Students”), while also focusing
attention on the actions that individuals were able to take to
improve their situations (e.g., “Got an Hour? Boost Your
Grades”). However, the same interventions might be framed in
a manner that increases sympathy, rather than blame. A scien-
tific journalist might, for instance, argue that big effects from
small interventions highlight the potential utility of liberal
social programs that pursue similar goals. Such a framing might
be particularly effective when media reports focus on wise
interventions that pursue change by introducing subtle changes
to the environment, rather than pursuing subtle changes in
individual mindsets (see Yeager et al., 2014, for discussion of
this issue). However, it is not at all clear that such media frames
can change the inference drawn, as it is entirely possible that
such efforts would generate reactance or other forms of mes-
sage resistance—particularly among political conservatives.
This is an empirical question, however, and we see value in
future research that can advance our understanding of not just
the responses generated by prototypic media portrayals of wise
interventions, but also of alternative media frames that might
encourage different reactions.

General Discussion

Results of three studies suggest that media coverage of wise
interventions promotes more critical public opinions of the very
individuals these interventions are designed to assist. Putting
aside the contentious question of whether the conservative or
liberal reaction to wise media reports is more “accurate,” we
view it as safe to assume that the effects documented here are
not ones that many of the psychologists working to reduce
social inequities would wish to promote. This suggests a need to
be mindful about how the public interprets, and potentially
overinterprets, media coverage of wise interventions. We are
not alone in sharing concerns about the conclusions drawn from
wise interventions. Even two of the stronger voices promoting
their use have cautioned that these approaches are not “magi-
cal,” or “quick fixes,” appropriately emphasizing the many
challenges facing researchers who seek to apply wise interven-
tions in different real-world contexts (Yeager & Walton, 2011;
and see Cohen et al., 2006; Walton, 2014). Such reminders offer
an important corrective within the discipline but, at the same
time, the need to make them highlights the severity of the
problem facing researchers when their work generates attention
from the media. It seems unlikely that science journalists will
typically advance the responsible, nuanced, and qualified con-
clusions promoted by Yeager and Walton (2011), and there may
be little that researchers can do to wrestle a more responsible
narrative out of journalists interested in their work. The media
reports used to create our stimulus materials speak to this fear.

Of course, the challenges inherent in communicating scien-
tific results are not specific to wise interventions alone. It is the
nature of scientific reporting that some degree of simplification
often must occur for the results to be accessible to the public.
We see little that can be done to prevent the “watering down”
of research when it is translated for public consumption, and so
we can only suggest at this point that researchers should be on
guard and try to avoid oversimplifying when this can be
avoided. One way for academics to do this will be to take
charge of the press releases turned out by their home institu-
tions. In most cases when we searched for and found media
reports promoting the effectiveness of wise interventions, our
hunt resulted in a discovery of an initial press release from the
researcher’s home university. These were then adapted by tradi-
tional media outlets and science bloggers alike (as was the
case with the Rigoglioso, 2013, press release used in Study 1).
The role played by university communication seems important,
as these offices have clear goals of promoting their researchers
(and by association their home institution). In the process, the
potency and simplicity of psychological interventions might
become exaggerated. In support of this concern, a recent archi-
val analysis of print-news reporting on medical research found
that most exaggerations and misrepresentations of science “did
not occur de novo in the media but [were] already present in the
text of the press releases produced by academics and their establishments” (Sumner et al., 2014, p. 4).7

We think these findings lead to an important insight into how “over” simplification might be introduced into media reports, but we are hesitant to put too much responsibility on universities, journalists, or scientists. Certainly each of these agents will at times find ways of simplifying a story to promote an idea, but the original concern that motivated this research was not our belief that individuals or groups were being irresponsible. Our original concern was that there may be difficulties inherent to any media coverage highlighting findings generated from the wise-intervention approach—combined with a suspicion that the dramatic nature of these interventions might encourage media reports that give heavy emphasis to the seeming ease with which wise interventions appear to ameliorate complex social problems. This leads to a difficult question, and we admit to not having settled on an answer: When, if ever, might the negative consequences of media coverage outweigh the positive consequences to such a degree that it is best to avoid media attention?

Closing Thoughts

We close by turning our own logic against our conclusions. We have suggested that when media reports draw attention to seemingly simple solutions to complex social problems that sympathy for the disadvantaged might be reduced. In other research, however, we have expressed concern about what can be viewed as an opposing effect. In work on implicit bias, we have expressed concern that overly simple accounts of the causes of complex social problems (e.g., overly strong interpretation of research on implicit racial biases) might promote overly pessimistic beliefs in the inevitability of racial bias (e.g., Blanton & Jaccard, 2006; Blanton et al., 2015; see Oswald et al., in press). The common thread cutting across these two analyses is the danger of a simple story. Thus, it seems reasonable to ask if our analysis of wise media coverage is, itself, too simple. Through our own presentation, we might be promoting unrealistically strong concerns about the dangers of publicizing psychological research.

Our response is to again emphasize that we do not believe that media coverage of wise interventions inevitably results in diminished concern for the disadvantaged. Moreover, even when media coverage does lead to the type of results documented here, we have no strong predictions about the size of the effects one should expect. Perhaps some encouragement can be found by reconsidering the regression lines shown in Figure 1. Although the slopes differ by condition, the significant interaction terms that lead to different slopes produced $R^2_{change}$ values in the range of 0.02 (after the other effects were statistically controlled). By conventional standards, these effects were quite small. They were small, even though they were observed under conditions that might have been particularly hospitable to uncovering them (as our research methods promoted deliberate and guided reviews of the media materials).

Therefore, certainly, readers should be careful not to overinterpret our results. Still, we do believe that our findings reveal a concern that psychologists should begin to explore and at times confront: How might publicity surrounding our successes at ameliorating social problems alter views on the very problems we seek to address? The question we ask is very much in keeping with questions posed by Gergen (1973), who famously noted in his treatment of social psychology as history:

An analysis of theory and research in social psychology reveals that while methods of research are scientific in character, theories of social behavior are primarily reflections of contemporary history. The dissemination of psychological knowledge modifies the patterns of behavior upon which the knowledge is based. (p. 309)

We have introduced concerns that the dissemination of information about the success of wise interventions might lead to effects that past researchers have not fully anticipated. In disseminating our own concerns, we too might alter the phenomenon we are studying, in ways that we cannot fully anticipate. We do not think the answer to this dilemma (or to Gergen’s) is to halt discussions on the problem or the solution. The answer is to continue the conversation.

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