



# Are You Enlightened?

## The Impact of the Enlightenment Effect on the Fundamental Attribution Error in In-Group Evaluations of Homelessness



Matthew E. Vanaman  
Stetson University

Laura C. Crysel  
Stetson University

Robert L. Askew  
Stetson University



### INTRODUCTION

The *fundamental attribution error* (FAE) is an error in thinking whereby observed behavior in others is unduly attributed to one’s personality without considering environmental influences. Research indicates that people may exhibit bias against the homeless in this way (Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997). Furthermore, *in-group prejudice*, or prejudice against one’s own group, has been shown to occur in various disenfranchised groups, such as Blacks and African Americans (K.B. Clark, and Clark, 1947; Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Davis, 2005), however no study has yet attempted to determine whether this phenomenon exists among the homeless.

Educating people about the reality of homelessness has shown promise in decreasing prejudice toward the homeless (Mistry, Brown, Chow, & Collins, 2012; Wisehart, Whatley, & Brihl, 2013), as well as reducing the frequency of the FAE in evaluations of others more generally (Wisehart et al, 2013). Furthermore, the *enlightenment effect* (EE), or the phenomenon in which learning about a psychological mechanism reduces its power (Gergen, 1973), has also been shown to do this, in addition to increasing the awareness of the FAE in oneself (Chen, Froehle, & Morran, 1997; Stalder, 2012). However, research on the relationship between the EE and the FAE remains inconclusive.

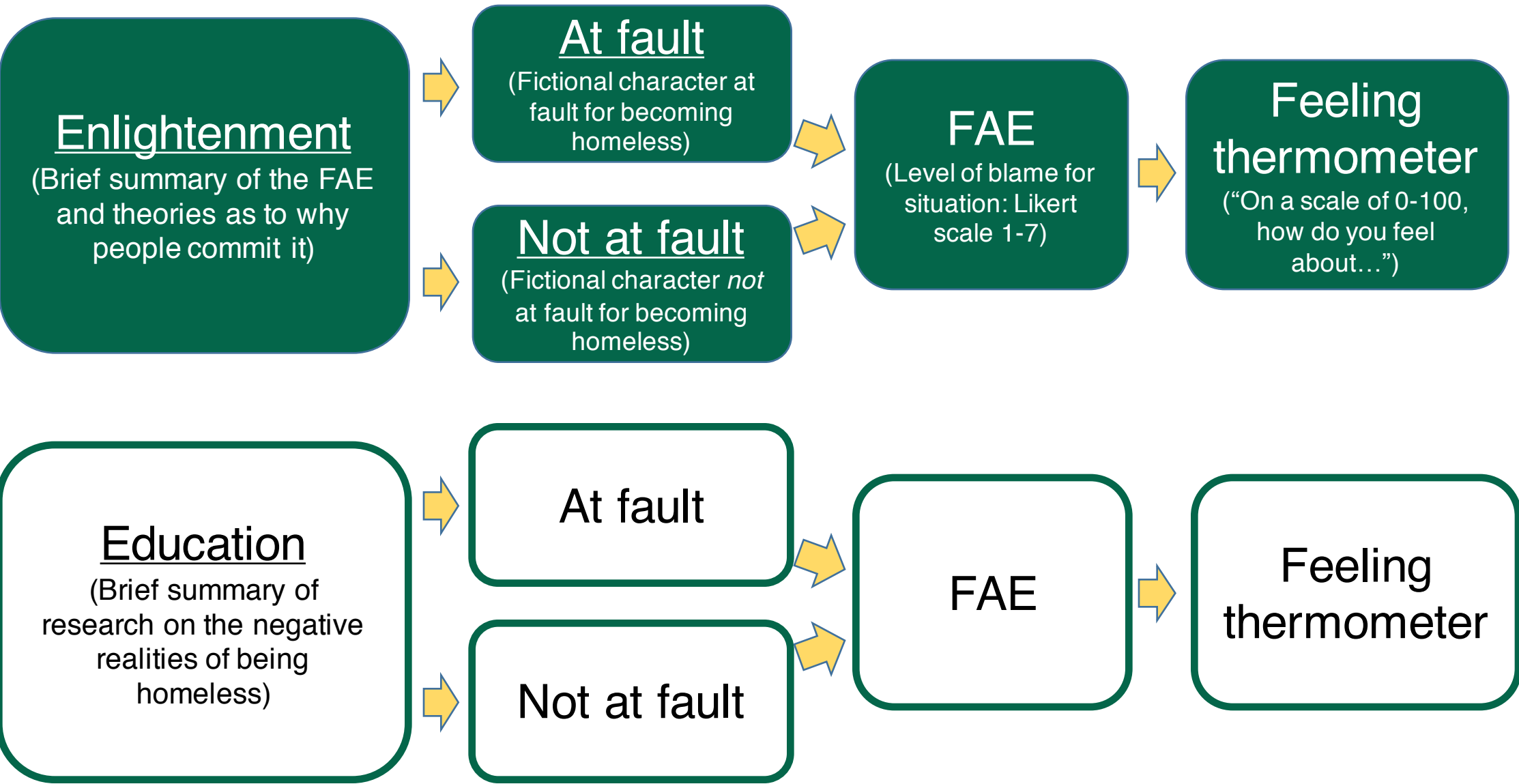
Is there prejudice against the homeless among the homeless population (in-group prejudice)? Does the EE decrease the FAE towards the homeless more than education about homelessness?

#### Hypotheses

- The homeless population will feel less warmly toward the homeless than other groups.
- Those receiving information on the FAE should blame an individual, specifically one who is not at fault, less than those who read educational information on the realities of homelessness.

### METHOD

Homeless men and women were recruited from several shelters and congregate meals sites throughout central Florida. Participants took part in the study voluntarily. The study was double-blind, and participants were randomly-assigned one of four possible conditions containing one of two informational passages and one of two vignettes about a fictional character who becomes homeless:

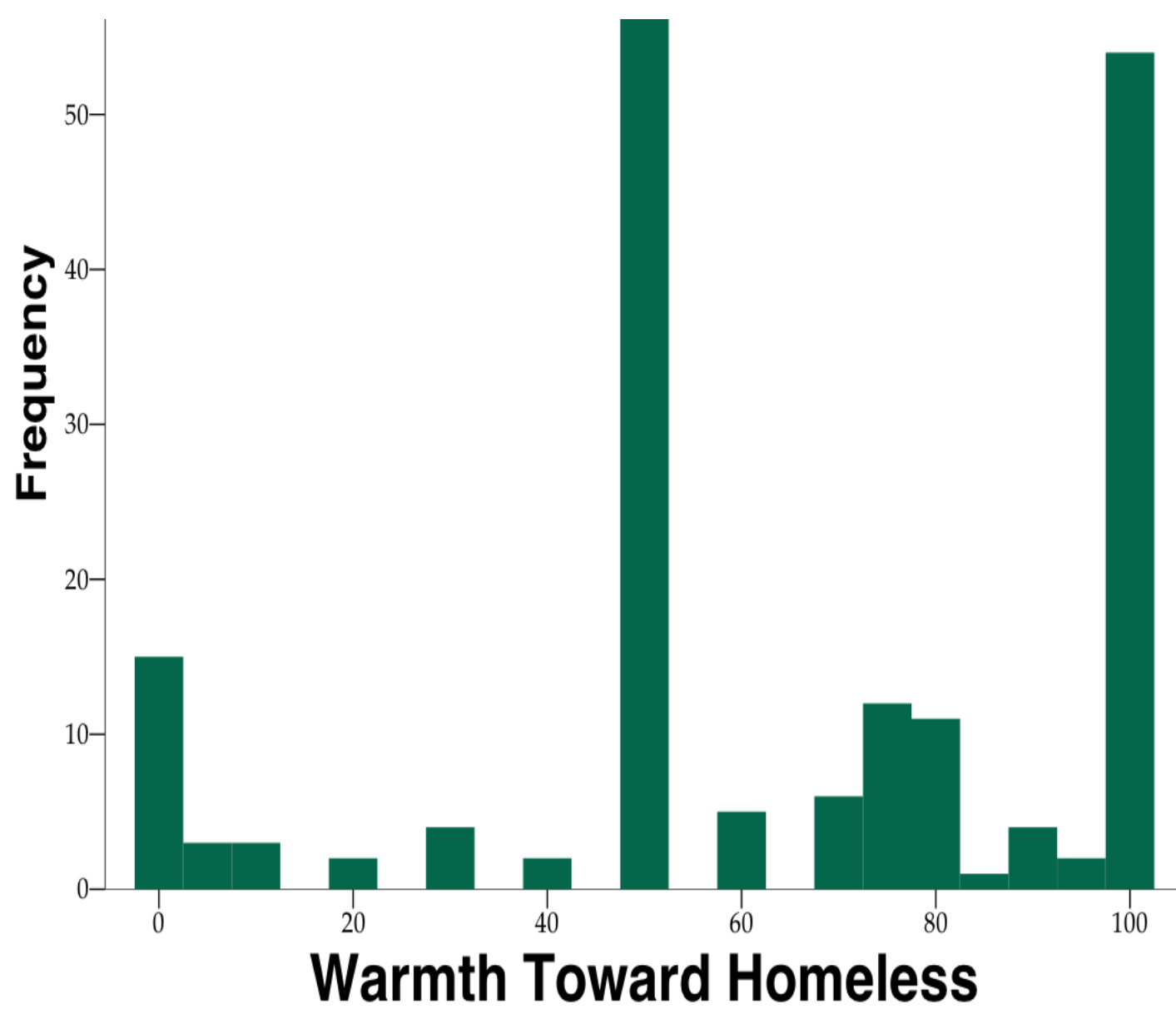


100  
(median and mode)

60  
(median)

50  
(mode)

The Middle Class, College Students, Italians, African Americans



The Homeless

Due to non-normally distributed data, scores for both the blame and warmth scales were discretized into terciles. For the blame scale, scores of 1-7 were discretized into three levels of blame: Low, Medium, and High. For warmth, scores 0-100 became Cold, Moderate, and Warm.

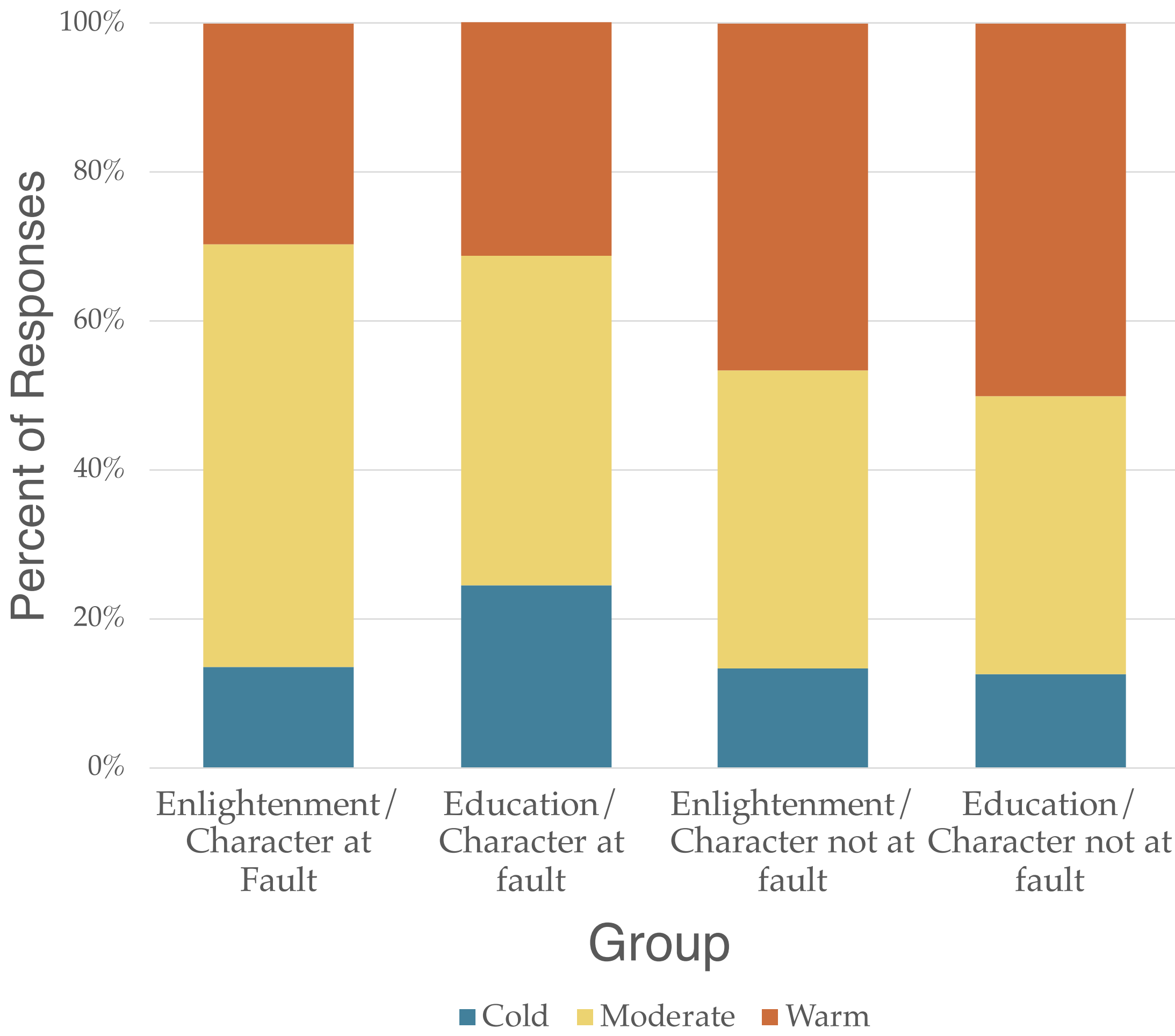
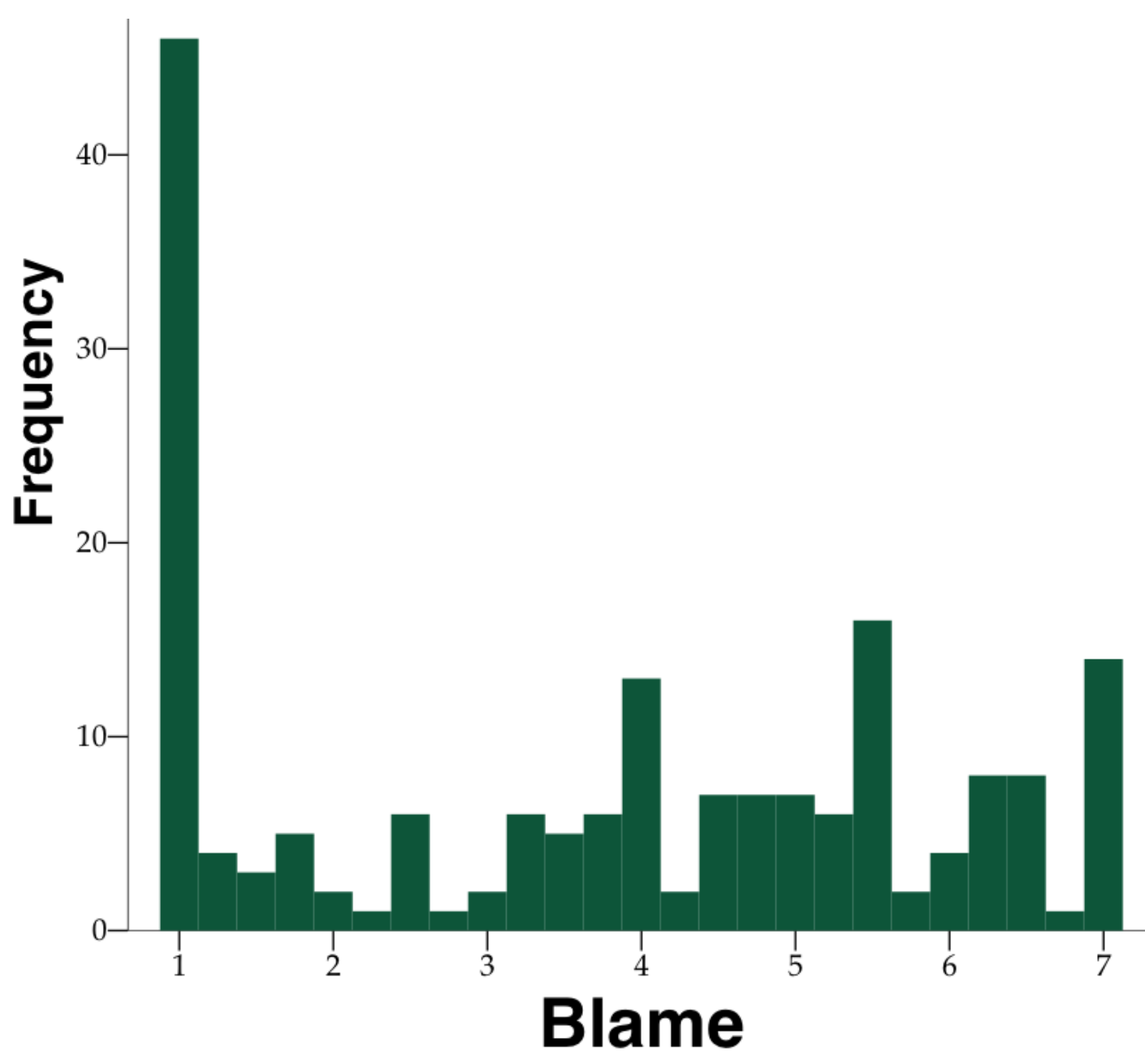
The study failed to find support for our hypothesis that the enlightenment manipulation would perform better than the education. However, we did find strong evidence for in-group prejudice in that the homeless rated themselves lower in warmth compared to all other groups. This met our other hypothesis.

Exploring the data further, an unexpected relationship between the vignettes and warmth toward the homeless was discovered. Participants who received the “at fault” vignette rated the homeless considerably colder than participants who received the “not at fault” vignette, irrespective of whether they received education or enlightenment manipulations.

	Level of Blame						$X^2$	$(df)$	$p$
	<i>n</i>	Low (%)	<i>n</i>	Medium (%)	<i>n</i>	High (%)			
Enlightenment/Character at Fault	1	(2.3)	15	(34.1)	28	(63.6)	1.10	(2)	0.58
Education/Character at fault	3	(6.7)	16	(35.6)	26	(57.8)			
Enlightenment/Character not at fault	28	(62.2)	12	(26.7)	5	(11.1)	0.25	(2)	0.88
Education/Character not at fault	29	(60.4)	12	(25)	7	(14.6)			
Character at fault	4	(4.5)	31	(34.8)	54	(60.7)	73.62	(2)	> 0.01
Character not at fault	57	(61.3)	24	(25.8)	12	(12.9)			

	Level of Warmth						$X^2$	$(df)$	$p$
	<i>n</i>	Cold (%)	<i>n</i>	Moderate (%)	<i>n</i>	Warm (%)			
Enlightenment/Character at Fault	6	(13.6)	25	(56.8)	13	(29.5)	2.05	(2)	0.36
Education/Character at fault	11	(24.4)	20	(44.4)	14	(31.4)			
Enlightenment/Character not at fault	6	(13.3)	18	(40.0)	21	(46.7)	0.10	(2)	0.95
Education/Character not at fault	6	(12.5)	18	(37.5)	24	(50.0)			
Character at fault	17	(19.1)	45	(50.6)	27	(30.3)	6.28	(2)	0.04
Character not at fault	12	(12.9)	36	(38.7)	45	(48.7)			

### RESULTS



### DISCUSSION

Although this study could not support the efficacy of the EE as a useful intervention for prejudice, it still provided evidence of two crucial phenomena that have yet to be documented in the research literature.

First, if our results are generalizable to the homeless population beyond our sample, the homeless indeed demonstrate considerable in-group prejudice.

Secondly, simply having a single undesirable member of a group made salient may strongly influence an individual’s perception of that group as a whole. What is especially interesting about this second point is that participants in this study were being influenced by this example to feel colder toward their own group. This has significant implications for the role of personal anecdote and the media in forming the public’s perceptions of society’s misunderstood and disenfranchised groups.

### References

Chen, M., Froehle, T., & Morran, K. (1997). Deconstructing dispositional bias in clinical inference: Two interventions. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 76, 74-81.

Clark, Kenneth B. and Clark, Mamie P. (1947). Racial identification and preference among negro children. In E. L. Hartley (Ed.) *Readings in Social Psychology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Correll, J., Park, B., Judd, C. M., & Wittenbrink, B. (2002). The police officer's dilemma: Using ethnicity to disambiguate potentially threatening individuals. *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology*, 83(6), 1314-1329. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.83.6.1314

Davis, K. (Producer and Director). 2005. A Girl Like Me (Motion Picture Documentary). United States.

Gergen, K.J. (1973). Social psychology as history. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26, 309-320.

Mistry, R. S., Brown, C. S., Chow, K. A., & Collins, G. S. (2012). Increasing the complexity of young adolescents’ beliefs about poverty and inequality: Results of an 8th grade social studies curriculum intervention. *Journal Of Youth And Adolescence*, 41 (6), 704-716. doi:10.1007/s10964-011-9699-6

Phelan, J. C., Link, B. G., Moore, R. E., & Stueve, A. (1997). The stigma of homelessness: The impact of the label 'homeless' on attitudes toward poor persons. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 60(4), 323-337. doi:10.2307/2787093

Stalder, D. R. (2012). A role for social psychology instruction in reducing bias and conflict. *Psychology Learning & Teaching*, 11(2), 245-255. doi:10.2304/plat.2012.11.2.245

Wisehart, C. G., Whatley, M. A., & Brihl, D. S. (2013). The effectiveness of the faces of homelessness educational program on student attitudes toward the homeless. *North American Journal Of Psychology*, 15(3), 483-494.