Psychology 11

Prejudice and Discrimination Reading

Despite the efforts by schools to teach the history of anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia (dislike or fear of foreigners), and homophobia, prejudice, discrimination and conflict between groups continue to plague society. These behaviors can be considered the result of a complex interaction of biological, cognitive, and sociocultural factors.

Stereotyping is a cognitive process whereby people categorize themselves and others based on membership in a group. A stereotype is a simplified mental representation of a person, group of people, or institution that is shared by a larger number of people. Once a set of characteristics is used to describe a group of people, those characteristics are often attributed to all members of the group.

Prejudice, that is - a favorable or unfavorable predisposition toward any member of the category in question - is an attitude. An attitude can be defined as the combination of emotion and cognition. Not only does a person judge an individual based on a set of characteristics that is attributed to her because of the group to which she belongs but contact results in an emotional response.

Discrimination is a behavior. Discrimination is when a person treats someone differently based on his or her membership of a group, rather than on individual merit. This type of behavior can range from denying the person a job (e.g. because they are overweight, old, or suffer from a physical disability), to segregation, to violent hate crimes.

Cognitive Explanations of Prejudice

Arguing that stereotypes alone cause prejudice is not sufficient. Allport (1954) argued that hostility is a key emotional component of prejudice. If this is so, how does it become connected to the stereotypes that develop in a culture?

One important factor in the development of prejudice is the way people make decisions. Shortcuts or tricks to making easy decisions, called heuristics, may influence how people interpret the behavior of others. Tversky and Kahnemann (1982) argue that people make many judgments based on the availability heuristic—that is, they base decisions on the information that is most readily available.

Seen from the cognitive approach a person's knowledge is stored in cognitive schemas. This means that information processing is mostly automatic, based on those schemas, and often not conscious. In the Czech Republic, if the discussions in the media and in social settings focus on the stereotypical poverty and crime rate among the Roma (gypsy) population, even without any personal experience, one might develop a fear that the Roma will rob them. This would be an example of prejudice. Based on this schema, a businessperson may decide that a Roma would not be right for a job at their company. This would be an example of discrimination.

To overcome prejudice, one must be able to decategorize, but this is no easy task because stereotypes are resistant to change — partly due to the phenomenon called “confirmation bias”, that is, people tend to look for information that confirms their stereotypes or prejudices — not the opposite. To challenge stereotypes and maybe change them, members of the group who do not fit the

stereotype need to be presented to those who hold the stereotype. However, just presenting one member of a minority group who does not match the prevalent stereotypes is not enough to change stereotypes. For example, if you have a stereotype that people from a certain country are all rude but then meet someone from the country that is really kind and has a good sense of humor, you may simply say that this person is “an exception to the rule.” Rothbart and John (1985) argue that whereas unfavorable traits need only a few examples to confirm and strengthen stereotypes, more examples are needed to disconfirm them.

The Theory of threatened egotism argues that intergroup discrimination occurs when our own perception of self is threatened. By acting out against an out-group, we can feel better ourselves, boosting or restoring self-esteem. Evidence for this was found in a study by Fein & Spencer (1997). In this study, 61 male undergraduates were given false feedback on an intelligence test. The participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: being told that they were in the top 10% of the university or that they had scored below average. The participants were then asked to read a description of a young man’s struggles to begin an acting career in New York City. If the description implied that the young man was gay, the participants who were told that they had done poorly on the intelligence test tended to rate the actor in highly negative and stereotypical terms. If the actor was described as heterosexual, then there was no difference in the quality of feedback from the two groups. It appears that lowering one’s self-esteem makes one more likely to discriminate.

Rogers & Frantz (1962)

Rogers & Frantz wanted to test the hypothesis that in Zimbabwe the attitudes of Europeans about Africans would be inversely correlated to the amount of time that they had lived in the country - that is, as the length of their residence increased, race attitudes would become more “conservative.” The researchers defined conservatism as wanting to maintain a system of racial segregation.

The sample consisted of 500 White Europeans aged 20 and over, living in Rhodesia for a period of fewer than five years to over forty years.

The method was a survey containing sixty-six examples of laws and customs in which White Europeans and Africans were treated differently - this included the use of racially segregated public spaces, lack of political representation, and cross-racial sexual relations. Responses were on a scale of 0 meaning that it is very important to maintain the current system and 6 arguing that it is very important to change the system.

The mean score of the sample was 2.45, indicating that most Europeans in Zimbabwe favored keeping the system of discrimination in place. However, the Europeans who supported the status quo the least strongly were those who had been living in Southern Rhodesia for fewer than five years. Compared to newcomers, residents who were there for 5 - 9 years were 27% more conservative about maintaining segregated social and recreational facilities. It appears that the stereotypes and attitudes about the African population were integrated into the identities of the newcomers as they began to identify with their new group and accept their new "social role.”

Sociocultural Explanations of Prejudice

Research like the study by Rogers and Frantz is problematic because it is a cross-sectional study. In other words, it is a "snapshot" in time – it does not follow the behavior of the participants over a period of time. It is difficult, therefore, to rule out individual differences as a factor, even though such studies often compare different ages, genders, and socioeconomic status. It also did not measure the participants' level of prejudice before arriving in Zimbabwe. It could be possible that an individual's level of prejudice decreased in the first years that he was in the country.

Social norms play a key role in a society's prejudices. It was not so long ago that Western society had a strong prejudice against gays and lesbians. This prejudice was seen as normal and justified. But social norms can change – and we have seen a major shift toward tolerance in Western society. As social norms change, the members of a group conform to the new norms over time.

Stephan et al (1998) proposed the integrated threat theory. This theory argues that prejudice is the result of three types of threats. First, there is stereotyping which creates expectations about out-groups which often leads to prejudice. Second, there are realistic threats. This refers to competition for economic resources – for example, jobs. Finally, there are symbolic threats. These are perceived threats to one's culture because of the integration of members of an out-group with morals, social norms, and values that are distinctly different from those of the in-group. A study carried out in 17 European countries by McLaren (2003) found that beliefs that immigrants challenge or undermine national values were a stronger predictor of negative attitudes towards immigrants than perceptions of realistic threat.

It is clear that no one factor completely explains the origin of prejudice. The origins of prejudice are multi-factorial. To understand prejudice, we need to consider the interaction of the three approaches rather than looking at any one factor in isolation. Society and culture may teach certain stereotypes and prejudices, which influence the way people perceive or think about minorities or "outsiders". These learned perceptions may induce physiological arousal that may lead to hostile emotions against the out-group. Reducing prejudice, then, means looking at the complexities of the origins of prejudice at all levels, and attempting to affect change on each of these levels.

Biological Explanations of Prejudice

Recently, psychologists have looked more closely at the biological factors that may be involved in prejudice. Research suggests that the amygdala plays a key role in social cognition. In a study using fMRI, Hart et al. (2000) investigated amygdala responses when participants were presented with the faces of either a member of their racial in-group or out-group. The faces had neutral expressions. The eight white and black participants of both sexes were shown pictures of male and female faces of individuals from both racial groups and asked to decide whether the face was male or female by pressing one of two buttons on a keypad provided to them in the scanner. The participants saw 10 different faces three times each, so they saw 30 out-group and 30 in-group faces during the scan. After the scanning participants were asked to describe the pictures seen and any subjective feelings they had to them. The fMRI showed more activity in the amygdala when the participants looked at out-group pictures compared to in-group pictures. The participants, however, reported having no noticeable difference in their emotional reaction to the out-group pictures during the study. The

researchers argue that the amygdala response may be a natural reaction to out-groups. But does that mean that prejudice is a natural reaction?

An fMRI study by Phelps et al. (2000) used a sample of only White American participants. The researchers studied neural correlates of unconscious evaluation of Black and White faces, both unfamiliar and familiar. The participants saw the faces of Black and White males while in a scanner and then they participated in a standardized test for ethnic prejudice (the Implicit Association Test). The results showed a correlation between those individuals whose amygdala was most strongly activated after being exposed to Black unfamiliar faces and scores on a standardized test for ethnic prejudice. The research also showed that the amygdala did not respond in the same way when the White participants looked at Black faces that were familiar and positively regarded. The researchers conclude that this study shows that looking at the faces from members of Black and White social groups can activate the amygdala differently and that this activity is related to unconscious social evaluation.

Be an Inquirer

One of the tests that claims to measure one's level of prejudice is the Implicit Association Test. The test is looking at how quickly people make associations between a group and an emotion.

You can take the test here.. Choose a test such as race, disability, sexual orientation, or gender.

After you have taken the test, answer the following questions:

- Do you think that your score is a fair representation of how you think you feel about the out-group?
- How would you explain the theory on which this test is based?
- Do a bit of research. What are the criticisms of this test?

Implicit biases are thought to be formed because of sociocultural factors - e.g. black characters on television, reports of certain minority groups as high crime, and direct tuition in schools about different political groups. These biases may not be explicit - that is, you don't talk about them in a negative way - but you are still influenced by exposure to these environmental cues.

Cognitive psychologists talk about System 1 thinking - and the application of this strategy when there is limited time to decide.

Perhaps the most intriguing study, however, was carried out by Harris and Fiske (2006). In her study, participants were placed into an fMRI scanner and then shown a series of photos. These photos included people with disabilities, rich businessmen, older people, US Olympic athletes, and homeless people. Fiske was surprised at what happened when participants viewed the photo of the homeless person: their brains set off a series of reactions associated with disgust. An area in the brain called the insula was activated, which is usually a response to non-human objects such as garbage and human waste. Perhaps even more surprising, the part of the brain that is activated when we think about other people or ourselves - the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex—was not activated. In other words, in the case of the homeless, the participants' brains did not react to them as people.

Evolution-based arguments would explain this reaction to out-groups as a means of protecting the gene pool of a community and increasing the chance that genes will be handed down within a group. Being able to detect a potential threat from strangers could have an evolutionary advantage. Such a reaction may be useful in evolutionary terms because it helps to distinguish friends from enemies, but what about today?

Evaluation of Biological Research

It is very tempting to attribute prejudice to automatic brain functions, but one must be cautious. First, since prejudice has an emotional component, it means that cognitive factors play a strong role in determining whether one acts in accordance with these immediate brain responses. Cunningham (2004) did a study using brain scans and showed that when participants have longer exposure to images, it is not simply the amygdala, but also the frontal lobe that is activated. Although out-groups may trigger an immediate response from the amygdala, cognitive control of emotional reactions is exerted by the frontal lobe.

Another concern is the use of correlational research. Remember that correlational studies do not demonstrate causality and can lead to bidirectional ambiguity. In Phelps's research, it is unknown if some participants were more prejudiced because of a more active amygdala, or if their prejudices had led to a stronger response from the amygdala. Since the research has been carried out on adults who would have been highly influenced by the values and attitudes of the cultures in which they grew up, one cannot easily determine the level to which their responses are innate or learned.

Finally, remember that we must be careful with over-interpreting data obtained through brain imaging. For example, a heightened amygdala response to a different ethnic group does not necessarily equate to racism. It could just mean, "Clearly this person does not look like me." Although there is evidently a biological component to prejudice, this approach alone is not enough to explain the origin of prejudice.