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Beyond Prejudice to Prejudices

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Different groups, because they are perceived to pose different threats, elicit different prejudices. Collective action by disadvantaged groups can amplify the perception of specific threats, with predictable and potentially counter-productive consequences. It is important to carefully consider the threat-based psychology of prejudice(s) before implementing any strategy intended to promote positive social change.

[Commentary on Dixon, Levine, Reicher, and Durrheim]

Dixon, Levine, Reicher, and Durrheim observe that it is problematic to equate prejudice with antipathy—that doing so limits scientific understanding of prejudice and discrimination, and retards efforts to undo inequitable treatment of disadvantaged groups. We agree. They also suggest that discrimination and group inequality may be more effectively reduced by interventions that focus not on prejudice-reduction but on collective action instead. We're less convinced of that.

Prejudice comes in many different forms. Although it's often defined simply as a negative attitude directed toward a group, this definition fails to convey the fact that different groups elicit different kinds of prejudicial attitudes. One study within the United States revealed that prejudices against Mexican-Americans and gay men were equally negative, but negative in very different ways. Prejudice against Mexican-Americans was characterized substantially by fear, whereas prejudice against gay men was characterized primarily by disgust (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). These differences matter. They are associated with different stereotypes, different inferences, and different forms of discrimination that have implications for the fortunes of different disadvantaged groups (e.g., Cottrell, Richards, & Nichols, 2010).

Different groups elicit different prejudices because they are perceived to pose different threats. For example, whereas Mexican-Americans are perceived to threaten physical safety, gay men are perceived to threaten disease transmission (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). Findings such as these follow from an evolutionary perspective on prejudices (Schaller & Neuberg, in press), in which prejudices are conceptualized as highly automatized stimulus-response linkages that, in ancestral environments, facilitated specific behavioral responses to people who appeared to pose specific forms of threat to reproductive fitness. In contemporary circumstances, these prejudices are elicited by the perception of superficial cues that heuristically (and sometimes incorrectly) imply threat. Disgust-based prejudices are elicited by features connoting a person's potential to

transmit infectious diseases (or to violate behavioral norms that serve as buffers against disease transmission). For instance, because morphological anomalies have been symptomatic of many diseases throughout history, disgust-based prejudices may be elicited not only by people who actually are infectious but also by people whose facial or bodily appearance is anomalous in any way (Park, Schaller, & Crandall, 2007). In contrast, fear-based prejudices are elicited by features connoting a person's potential to commit intentional harm. Because of high rates of intergroup violence in ancestral ecologies, these features may include any trait (e.g., different language, different clothing, different values) suggesting membership in a coalitional outgroup—even if the actual intentions of these outgroup members are benign.

Threat-based prejudices are amplified when people perceive themselves to be vulnerable to the specific form of threat, and are inhibited when people feel less vulnerable. Disgust-based prejudices against many disadvantaged groups are reduced when people feel less vulnerable to disease transmission, such as when they have been recently inoculated against seasonal influenza (Haung, Sedlovskaya, Ackerman, & Bargh, 2012). Analogously, fear-based prejudices are reduced when people feel less vulnerable to inter-group hostility. Within the context of actual ethnopolitical conflict, Sri Lankans who were induced to perceive their ethnic ingroup to be relatively numerous compared to the outgroup (a perception that connotes "safety in numbers") consequently perceived the outgroup to be less hostile and were also more favorable toward peaceful conflict resolution (Schaller & Abeysinghe, 2006).

These and other findings suggest that interventions focusing on prejudice-reduction can be successful. But to be successful, they cannot be informed merely by idealism and hope, or by crude conceptualizations that equate prejudice with undifferentiated antipathy. They must be informed by realistic consideration of the distinct nature of specific prejudices, and by an awareness of the distinct psychological antecedents that produce these prejudices. Failure to do so may produce intervention strategies that are ineffective or even counterproductive.

The same is true for collective action strategies. Collective action may indeed foster group identification among disadvantaged individuals, and facilitate their efforts to challenge the status quo; but these immediate outcomes don't translate neatly to positive social change. When people perceive the actions of others as representing the collective objectives of coalitional outgroups, they tend to appraise such actions as threatening. This distrustful "us versus them" mindset gives rise to fearful prejudices and demonizing stereotypes, which in turn promote coordinated resistance to those objectives, and to hostile rather than conciliatory responses (Insko & Schopler, 1998; McDonald, Navarrete, & Van Vugt, 2012; Schaller & Abeysinghe, 2006). Can this inflamed battle of wills hasten an end to group inequalities? Perhaps sometimes it can. Many times it won't, however, and may lead to even more desperate and blood-stained inequalities instead.

We suspect that collective action strategies will be most successful if they are perceived not as united actions of a coalitional outgroup, but as coordinated actions of individuals instead. And if disadvantaged individuals are to be perceived as a group, their fortunes are likely to improve more swiftly if they publicly (if not privately) adopt attitudes that minimize the perception of "us versus them" coalitional threat and, thus, reduce the likelihood for hostile resistance. The U.S. civil rights movement was successful not simply because it was a form of collective action. It

was successful in part because prominent civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. cleverly employed strategies that made the movement less overtly threatening (protesters were actively nonviolent; the protest rhetoric echoed with White majority Christian narratives and values; etc.). Had the movement been defined solely by the more confrontational tactics of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, the response is likely to have been more fearful and more violently repressive—and the movement’s landmark accomplishments are likely to have gone unrealized for yet another generation or more.

It is important to consider the threat-based psychology of prejudice before implementing any strategy intended to change the societal status quo (whether that strategy focuses directly on prejudice-reduction, collective action, or something else entirely). To do so, it is necessary to move beyond any simplistic definition of prejudice (singular), and to attend carefully to the many different causes, and consequences, of prejudices (plural).

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