

Foundations in social psychology

Prejudice Theories Essay

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Let's start with two facts:

- It is commonly believed that prejudice only affects a small sector of the population. Reality though is, prejudice is broadly extended across all layers of the society.
- When people think about prejudice, it comes up the idea of something external, recognizable, avoidable, and primarily something that we all are aware of. Second fact here is, most of the times we are unaware of how small details affect to decisions we make, and behaviours we tend to develop during our lives based on them.

But, what do we mean with prejudice, and how can we be unaware of how it acts?

Conflict theory and Prejudice

We all understand this concept as a preformed judgement or opinion about something or somebody, without having all the pieces of information required to form a valid opinion.

The whole idea has been broadly backed up in numerous studies and theories, which show how different factors/ingredients combined together, directly result into implicit attitudes that can lead to common behaviours across the individuals in/and societies. This behaviours can often lead to discrimination across all sectors of the community.

Experimenting

If we were to create an atmosphere of negative prejudice and conflict over two different groups of people, a set of goals for each of these teams would quickly raise the level of this two elements.

This specific scenario was the setup for the Robber's Cave experiment done by Sheriff (1966). By creating a competitiveness atmosphere between both groups, forcing them to compete between each other, prejudice and conflict started to grow. As the experiment continued, Sherriff aimed next to reduce existent negative attitudes and behaviours. It was evidenced that by arousing the cooperation between both teams and setting common goals for them, negative attitudes and feelings would be reduced, having a positive outcome.

Sheriff concluded that it is positive intergroup relations that reduces negative behaviour and prejudice, and competition the factor that reinforces them.

System one Thinking Theory

Let's jump here to the second fact pointed at the beginning, about the unawareness of how this factors cause an influence on us.

Prejudice can be as well the result of schemas. Kahneman (Thinking fast and Slow – 2011) elaborated a concept exposing that we all have two types of thinking: System one and System Two. Most of the times we engage with System One thinking, which is fast and nearly unconscious. Many of our decisions are based on this system, that silently relies on information and schemas we are not aware of.

Schemas

But, what do we mean with schema, and how does it fit in this decisions? Well, we could say schemas are simplifications of all the information we collect, so we can make decisions quickly based on them. We tend to look for similarities or “scripts” about how we think things work, how groups of people tend to act, or how we are supposed to interact on different scenarios

If we were to mention of these scenarios, i.e. a kid's birthday, we would implicitly associate gifts, cake, candles and fun with it. Opposite would happen with a funeral. Those would be our schemas of a birthday and a funeral.

So, what happens when we apply schemas to people? And, if this **schemas** are “simplifications” we create ourselves with the information we process, are they always correct? Let's try to figure out how schemas work with people.

Obvious answer to the second question is no, **schemas are not always correct**. Malformed generalizations or inaccurate schemas applied to people are called **stereotypes**.

It's a wide range of elements that can be positively or negatively targeted by stereotypes. I.e. gender, ethnicity or occupations. While a positive stereotype could be to think all black people can sing very well, a negative one could be women talk too much on the phone, or people with tattoos are bad people.

Scenario

Let's say for some reason we have this “tattoo” stereotype, and we are in a position where we are interviewing candidates for a job opportunity. Somebody tattooed walks in.

Few points to draw a behavioural line

There is a number of things happening here. Our **system one thinking** relies on schemas and the person fits on this model. So, as the interviewee walks in, this system activates, providing a quick opinion based on this schema. At this point there is already a **prejudice** built against the person. It's more than probable that our **attitude** towards him won't be the same than to another candidate that does not fit the stereotype. Finally, our **behaviour** will be to not offer him the employment.

So, putting all the parts together, we could draw a straight line starting by schemas, following stereotypes, passing by prejudice, and ending on behaviour.

One Step further. Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The interesting remark here is, behaviour it's not the end of this straight line. As our behaviours do not always match the predicted.

As cited by Saul McLeod (2008) *"Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors."*

Festinger (1957) was the man who backed up this theory. Based on it, we all try to sync our beliefs and behaviours. But that is something that not always happens. Most common example is people who smokes. We all know smoking is a bad and unhealthy habit. As our behaviour is not aligned with our beliefs, we feel some discomfort, so the mechanical psychological response is to find an excuse that provides us some relief. This is called **Cognitive Dissonance**.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel (1979) proposed the Social Identity Theory on what turned to be his greatest contribution to psychology. He stated that our "self" personality is a compound of **several identities**.

We all tend to identify ourselves with **groups**. I.e. students, some specific music style or sport fans, etc.

This groups we feel we belong to, are called the **"in-groups"**, while the external groups we don't feel identified with, are called the **"out-groups"**. Tajfel elaborated the idea that stereotypes are based on "the tendency to group things together". With this process we implicitly tend to exaggerate "differences between groups", and "similarities of things in the same group", leading in some cases to discrimination as the seed to negative progressions.

Digging a bit deeper into this theory, Tajfel and Turner (1979) detected 3 different stages in the process:

1. The social categorization: where we spot different groups, people, etc., and link different attributes to them.
2. The social Identification: where we adopt the identity/identities of the group/s we feel we belong to by conforming to their norms, i.e. dressing, slang, life standards. Etc.
3. The social Comparison: this is the logical consequence of the precedent track. Individuals tend to favour in-groups over out-groups. Differences start building a borderline between "competitors" preceding the clash between formed identities.

Linking an old theory to the present

We could attempt to suggest that in-group and formed out-group biases, could represent the source of many actual existing conflicts. Having as an example a legit formation claiming rights for a group of citizens located in some specific region, would evolve with the time, based on this theory, into reinforcing the differences between people that does not belong to those groups. Overtime, this differences would turn into rivalry, and despite of the complexity and external factors that this specific scenario could have, we can spot sparks of this evolution in trendy topics confronting different groups of people. I.e. Brexit, U.S political and ethnical current conflicts, or this more recent great xenophobic article (<http://www.independent.ie/opinion/comment/tourists-please-pack-up-your-wheelie-cases-and-go-home-i-want-my-city-back-35222456.html>) published by the journal Independent.ie just a few days ago (17/11/2016).

The main difference that can be spotted between the Conflict Theory is, although Sheriff's found an evidence about how competition between groups could implicitly precede prejudice, Tajfel stated not always this direct conflict and competition is necessary to origin prejudice.

Own conceptions

It is such a big world that people that keeps reduced circles of connection does not get the full picture of it. The more reduced perspective and "social network" people has, the more it is prone to inherit and build a prejudice and schematic lifestyle.

We can see through TV what conformed opinions about the exterior have isolated populations as China. All the schemas they have are built based on a lack of culture and disinformation, and an attachment to the isolated and hierarchical group they are culturally attached to.

As **information** tends to be **manipulated** by political sectors, it is very easy to fall in provided schemas, priming above explained negative behaviours. Keeping a critic opinion of untruthful sources of information is key to avoid manipulation.

Own experience enhances perspective and provides knowledge to the person. Knowing new people, sharing experiences, and being in touch with other cultures is what opens our channels to connect with different "groups" or "societies", and change our composed schemas that we inherit from our given culture.

It is necessary to have an emphatic view of the world. To do so we need to expand our connections at all levels by travelling, reading, and keep ourselves informed. It is a process that happens with a mixture of this ingredients what give us the tools to make solid decisions and evade schematic influences, prejudice and discrimination.

References

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Prejudice Discrimination Stereotypes

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