

The Psychological Effect and Remedies of Prejudice, Racism, and Discrimination

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ABSTRACT

Racism is considered a fundamental cause of adverse health outcomes for racial/ethnic minorities and racial/ethnic inequities in health. Persistent racial inequality in employment, housing, and a wide range of other social domains has renewed interest in the possible role of discrimination. And yet, unlike in the pre-civil rights era, when racial prejudice and discrimination were overt and widespread, today discrimination is less readily identifiable, posing problems for social scientific conceptualization and measurement. Racism can exert negative effects on the self-concepts, health and well-being, and life trajectories of both non-dominant racial-ethnic (NDRE) youth and youth-serving providers. Interest in prejudice, racism and discrimination is currently shared by allied disciplines such as sociology and political science, and emerging disciplines such as neuroscience. Approaches to understanding prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination have also significantly broadened. The aim of this review is to evaluate the psychological effect and remedies of prejudice, racism and discrimination.

Keywords: Race, Ethnicity, Racism, Racial discrimination, Racial inequities.

INTRODUCTION

Prejudice is typically conceptualized as an attitude that, like other attitudes, has a cognitive component (e.g., beliefs about a target group), an affective component (e.g., dislike), and a conative component (e.g., a behavioral predisposition to behave negatively toward the target group). It may be directed toward a group as a whole, or toward an individual because they are a member of that group' (p. 9). Most researchers have continued to define prejudice as a negative attitude (i.e., an antipathy). Discrimination has a pejorative meaning. It implies more than simply distinguishing among social objects, but refers also to inappropriate and potentially unfair treatment of individuals due to group membership. Discrimination may involve actively negative behavior toward a member of a group or, more subtly, less positive responses than those toward an in-group member in comparable circumstances. Discrimination is generally understood as biased behavior, which includes not only

actions that directly harm or disadvantage another group, but those that unfairly favor one's own group (creating a relative disadvantage for other groups). Racism is an organized social system in which the dominant racial group, based on an ideology of inferiority, categorizes and ranks people into social groups called "races" and uses its power to devalue, disempower, and differentially allocate valued societal resources and opportunities to groups defined as inferior [1]. Race is primarily a social category, based on nationality, ethnicity, phenotypic, or other markers of social difference, which captures differential access to power and resources in society [2].

The term racism is often used synonymously with prejudice (biased feelings or affect), stereotyping (biased thoughts and beliefs, flawed generalizations), discrimination (differential treatment or the absence of equal treatment), and bigotry (intolerance

or hatred). This practice implicitly conceptualizes racism as a set of basic social-psychological processes underlying the psychologies of individuals (i.e., stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination) merely applied to the context of race. Though sometimes specified, the context of race is not necessarily treated as distinctive in social-psychological research; instead, the psychological consequences and antecedents for racism are typically extrapolated from minority (vs. majority), low-status (vs. high status), subordinate (vs. dominant), and out-group (vs. in-group) research paradigms. This approach can obscure the particular role that race, embedded in historical and cultural contexts, has played in organizing which persons and identities recurrently compose marginalized and dominant groups.

Conventional understandings of racism typically locate the driving force in the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of biased and prejudiced individuals. Individualist ideologies that prevail in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and Democratic [3] settings inform both laypersons' (particularly White Americans in this case) and psychological science's conception of racism as individual-level phenomena [4]; [5]. Without denying the role of individuals in the psychology of racism, there are limitations when racism is exclusively explained as rooted inside individual minds.

Discussing racism beyond the individual may be particularly challenging to conventional understandings because one cannot easily dismiss racism as due to "a few bad apples" or as a problem relegated to the past. Critics within psychology have referred to this individualizing construction of racism as the "prejudice problematic" and have identified significant problems with it [6]. Decreases in overt expressions of racial bias might suggest that racial prejudice (and therefore racism) is less extreme in modern America; however, many psychologists suggest that racial bias has gone underground, and they have mounted substantial evidence that it

instead thrives in subtle forms. However, whether it is old-fashioned and hostile [7], more subtle [8], ambivalent [8], unconscious [9], or suppressed for fear of social sanctions [10], the problem with restricted focus on individual bias is that it obscures the institutional, systemic, and cultural processes that perpetuate and maintain race-based hierarchies. Taken together, the empirical evidence suggests that measuring racism only as overt individual bias may systematically understate the ongoing significance of racism. A cultural-psychology approach adds to this discussion by considering racism as a set of ideas, practices, and materials embedded in the structure of everyday cultural worlds.

Throughout psychology's history, researchers have evinced strong interest in understanding prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination [11], as well as the phenomenon of intergroup bias more generally [12]. Intergroup bias generally refers to the systematic tendency to evaluate one's own membership group (the in-group) or its members more favorably than a non-membership group (the out-group) or its members. These topics have a long history in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology [13]. However, social psychologists, building on the solid foundations of Gordon Allport's (1954) masterly volume, *The Nature of Prejudice*, have developed a systematic and more nuanced analysis of bias and its associated phenomena. Interest in prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination is currently shared by allied disciplines such as sociology and political science, and emerging disciplines such as neuroscience.

Psychological Effects of Prejudice, Racism and Discrimination

Social psychologists have examined extensively the effects of discrimination upon its victims. Multiple studies show that when people perceive themselves to be the targets of systematic discrimination, their physical and psychological health often suffers. Moreover, perceived discrimination both increases the likelihood of engaging in dangerous and unhealthy behaviors and

decreases the likelihood of performing healthy behaviors [14]. These effects are largely mediated by increased stress, and they have been found for a variety of ethnic groups including whites. Greater drug use among those perceiving discrimination is part of this process [15]. Discrimination also heightens victims' awareness of any cultural stigmatization of their group. Such 'stereotype threat' can be stressful and hinder performance. It is triggered by situations that contain cues that make a negative stereotype salient. This situation raises the strong possibility that one's own performance will conform to the stereotype and confirm it. Such a threat creates anxiety and undermines performance. Thus, African Americans tend to score higher on intelligence tests when they take the test apart from white Americans. Stereotype threat is not unique to racial minorities; women tend to score higher on tests of mathematics when there are no men in the situation [16].

Remedies for Prejudice, Racism and Discrimination

The most elaborate array of remedial measures for racial discrimination is found in North America. Both Canada and the United States have instituted a battery of laws against many types of racial and other forms of discrimination. Court rulings in the two nations also have proven decisive [17]. The effects of these legal actions are magnified by class action suits—the ability of single litigants to sue for remedy for their entire 'class' or group. Further remedies have involved various forms of 'affirmative action' in which special efforts are made to close group disparities caused by discrimination. These approaches have led to narrowing racial disparities in social outcomes. But sharp racial inequities remain in both countries, and majority resistance has hardened against the most successful remedies [18].

Antidiscrimination remedies have been largely ineffective in Europe. Germany guarantees basic rights only to citizens. So, the disadvantages of noncitizenship include the inability to combat discrimination. There is extensive German

legislation to combat anti-Semitism and Nazi ideology, but these laws have proven ineffective in protecting noncitizens [19]. The German constitution explicitly forbids discrimination on the basis of origin, race, language, beliefs, or religion - but not citizenship. Indeed, the Federal Constitutional Court has ruled that differential treatment based on citizenship is constitutional if there is a reasonable basis for it and if it is not wholly arbitrary. In 2006, Germany, under pressure from the European Union, passed the General Equal Treatment Act (Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz - 'AGG'). It prohibits discrimination in the labor market, in the access to public services such as social welfare benefits, housing markets based on race, ethnic origin, religion, or beliefs, sex, disability, age or sexual orientation [20].

Although the AGG does not place the burden of proof on plaintiffs, they must submit the initial evidence to support their claim that discrimination has occurred; then the accused party must prove otherwise. Yet it remains difficult for the plaintiff to claim their rights. Usually the victims of discrimination do not know their full rights, and consultancy services are rarely available. Not surprisingly, few cases have been brought under the law and fewer still have been successful.

Effective means of combating discrimination are also rare in France. Commentators often view discrimination as 'natural' and universally triggered when a 'threshold of tolerance' (*seuil de tolerance*) is surpassed. Without supporting evidence, this rationalization supports quotas and dispersal policies that restrict minority access to suitable housing.

The Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Sweden have enacted antidiscrimination legislation that specifically applies to the new immigrant minorities. And the Dutch have instituted modest affirmative action programs for women and minorities. Yet this legislation has been largely ineffective for two interrelated reasons. First, European legal systems do not allow class action suits—a forceful North

American weapon to combat discrimination. Second, European efforts rely heavily on individual complaints rather than systemic remedies. The U.K.'s 1976 Act gave the Commission for Racial Equality power to cast a broader net, but individual complaints remain the chief tool [21].

Individual efforts are unlikely to alter discrimination, because they are nonstrategic. Minorities bring few charges

against the worst discriminatory firms, because they avoid applying to them. Complaints about job promotion are common, but they are made against employers who hire minorities. Effective antidiscrimination laws must provide broad powers to an enforcement agency to initiate strategic, institutionwide actions that uproot the structural foundations of discrimination.

CONCLUSION

The long-lasting character of racial discrimination means that the effects typically outlive the initiators of discriminatory practices. Discrimination is fundamentally normative; its structural web operates in large part independent of the dominant group's present attitudes or

awareness. Discrimination feeds upon itself, far more intricate and entrenched than commonly thought and is typically cumulative and self-perpetuating. To be effective, structural remedies must reverse this 'vicious circle' of discrimination.

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