

The Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination

Exam Answers

1. Critically discuss the factors that are argued to influence stereotype threat and evaluate the impact this has on stereotyped groups and/or individuals.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word stereotype as “a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality and may cause hurt and offence.” (Oxford Dictionary, 2010).

Stereotype threat is the effect of being aware of a stereotype relating to yourself or your group and fearing that you will confirm that judgement through your behaviour. Examples of common stereotypes are; women’s abilities at driving, Asian’s abilities at maths, men’s ability to multitask, Black people are better dancers. These are clearly prejudiced ideas, yet they are commonly referred to within society and culture (in the West). The awareness of, and fear of confirmation of the stereotype, impacts upon abilities. For example, physical or academic performance can be impacted upon just through the fear of meeting the stereotypical expectations that are expected of you. This phenomenon has been found amongst many groups, such as women, racial minorities, LGBTQ+ members and the disabled, among many others.

Stereotype threat can be increased under certain circumstances. If an individual feels that a task will be a measure of their ability, this will heighten the stereotype threat they experience. This is even more prevalent if the task at hand is associated with the stereotype or if the level of difficulty is high. Being monitored whilst completing a task will also add to the anxiety caused by stereotype threat. The feeling of being insufficient due to stereotype threat, combined with an increase in demand for performance on an important (self-perceived), goal orientated task, is the basis of the biopsychosocial model of threat and challenge (Blascovich, 2008).

Regarding the impact upon women, it has been seen largely in the STEM (Science, technology, engineering and mathematics) industry. Beasley and Fischer (2012) studied the attrition of women from STEM in an attempt to distinguish whether it was due to stereotype threat or poor preparation and low economic status. They found that stereotype threat was a significant factor in undermining the aspirations of women, along with ethnic minorities of both sexes also, to complete STEM education.

Cohen et al. (2012) documented real world, long term interventions on stereotype threat to join theory with action. Real world research was required due to the nature of stereotype threat having long term effects, making lab-based studies unreliable as a measure of the lifelong impact upon those at risk of stereotype threat. Interventions included altering vigilance of environment, such as invoking positive feedback and self-belief as opposed to biased judgements. Positive results were seen after these pro-success and self-affirming interventions were implemented.

This positive result from implementing positive and affirming beliefs can be seen in later research that looks at self-fulfilling prophecy and the Pygmalion effect. A self-fulfilling

prophecy is that of; outcome meeting the expectation of a person or group. For example, a student with low self-belief in their abilities will perform poorly due to them having convinced themselves of being no good. This phenomenon has been known for a long time with a report in 1948 discussing it (Merton, 1948). This is where it is stated that the self-fulfilling prophecy is initially a false belief of a situation, which affects consequent behaviour, which makes the initial false belief come true. Self-fulfilling prophecy is a knock-on effect of negative stereotype threat. The fear of fulfilling the stereotype, affects performance and thus becomes reality.

In educational settings, it has been observed that children perform better when they are told that they are good and are achieving well, through positive feedback. The self-fulfilling prophecy then, can be manipulated to create positive outcomes when the correct interventions are used, as discussed by Cohen et al. (2012).

As seen above, not all stereotypes are negative. Golshan et al. (2020) studied the effects of positive stereotypes, negative stereotypes and nullified stereotypes on the entrepreneurship and venture creation intentions of women. Results found that those exposed to the positive stereotype information in relation to women entrepreneurs, had increased interest and positive implications for women involved in entrepreneurial activities.

Stereotype threat, unfortunately, impacts negatively on those who fall under stereotyped groups. The implications of which impact upon society. Poor performance leads to lower grade qualifications, which further supports low economic status and so the detrimental effect continues. This serves as a drain on society due to individuals not reaching their full potential, which lowers their societal input.

Although stereotype threats can be positive, they carry a negative outcome also. It has been found that positive stereotyping promotes out-dated prejudiced beliefs. For example, although Black people are considered to be better athletes (positive stereotype), this can support the notion that White athletes are less biologically able, which can lead to negative stereotypes of Black people. Kay et al. (2013) found these results and confirmed that these stereotypes can actually reinforce negative, racist stereotypes further.

3. How successful have psychological interventions been in helping to reduce prejudice and discrimination? Support your answer with evidence from the psychological literature and beyond.

Prejudice is defined by the Oxford Dictionary (2010) as a “preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.” Prejudice is commonly seen as racism, sexism, homophobia to name but a few.

Discrimination is defined by the Oxford Dictionary (2010) as “the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, or disability.”

Intergroup contact theory

Intergroup contact theory is the idea that mixing individuals from their “ingroup” with individuals from an “outgroup”, will reduce tension between the different members and facilitate interaction, trust and familiarity. Ingroup refers to those that an individual deems their own sort. Outgroup refers to those that an individual deems different from themselves. An example of this could be Black people and White people or Christians and Muslims.

There are numerous research studies that have confirmed the positive effect of intergroup integration on the reduction of prejudice. Initially presented by Gordon Allport in 1954, intergroup conditions were required for successful contact. The conditions are; equal

status amongst all within the group, common goals, cooperation of all within the group, and support from authorities such as law enforcement. This method has seen consistent positive results. However, this is a small-scale way of reducing prejudice which is a global phenomenon.

Individual level processes

Individual level processes are vital to reduction of prejudice. An individual has to accept their behaviour and opinions are at times based upon prejudice or stereotypes (Kite & Whitley, 2016). Without this acknowledgment, the individual's attitudes cannot change.

A way of reducing prejudice on an individual personal level, is to suppress any stereotypes you have of people you encounter. Instead, choose to treat each person as an individual with their own characteristics. However, there is documented research showing that suppression of thought can lead to the return of that thought at a later stage with greater strength and has been termed the rebound effect. This effect can lead to negative consequences in that when the suppressed thoughts re-emerge, they are more potent and thus their presence carries the prejudice that was hoped to be reduced.

Self-regulation model

Monteith et al. (2016) found that those who have experienced behaving in a prejudiced way but see themselves as non-prejudiced, are more susceptible to social cues that alert them to their own possible prejudiced responses to a stereotyped group. Using these cues, the individuals are able to suppress those prejudice thoughts and replace them

with appropriate behaviour. Monteith et al. (2016) termed this process the self-regulation model. The initial prejudiced response will contradict the individual's self-image of being non-prejudice, this conflict will develop the cues needed to address the prejudice action sooner in future.

Further methods of reducing prejudice include extended contact. This involves having an ingroup friend who is friends with someone from the outgroup. The effects of this can be the shared knowledge that friendships with an outgroup member are possible. Also, that disliking someone that your friend is friends with causes cognitive dissonance, which can be dampened by the acceptance of that friend and changing opinions on them. It also supports the notion that members of an outgroup are open to friendships with those of the ingroup, thus reducing any fear of rejection.

There is also imagined contact, a method involving imagining meeting an outgroup member in a positive and relaxed manner. Studies have found that this alleviates anxiety about an intergroup meeting.

Finally, there is media contact. Research found that the more positive intergroup interactions seen through TV and film etc, the more positive the attitude towards those groups. Although it is important to note that this can work in the opposite way, when media portrays outgroup members in a negative way.

Implicit bias and workplace interventions

Implicit bias is the behaviour of people based on stereotypes and prejudice, without them realising they are doing so. This unawareness of bias can contradict an individual's

beliefs. Well known examples of implicit bias are; picturing a nurse as a woman, or a mechanic as a man. Those experiencing implicit bias believe they are not prejudiced, however, there are implicit ideas that expose a subconscious level bias. Implicit bias can influence behaviour, creating discriminatory actions. Jackson et al. (2014) studied the effect of implicit bias training on attitudes towards women working in STEM (Science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Results found that men who received diversity training, had reduced negative implicit bias towards women. This improvement in attitudes towards women in STEM may contribute towards a more welcoming environment for women and reduce the stereotyping that has been found to be prevalent in the STEM industry.

Metinyurt et al. (2021) studied the effects of interventions on workplace bias and found a that there is a lack of literature regarding the mitigation of microaggressions in the workplace. However, interventions for similar issues such as implicit bias were studied, and it was found that the interventions were successful in raising awareness of the inequalities within the workplace. This did not necessarily translate into behavioural change, suggesting that further work and research is required.

National Initiatives

Along with the small group and individual level interventions, there are national (UK) initiatives to reduce prejudice and discrimination. For example, the Red Card campaign within football. This campaign aimed to highlight the issue of racism within football and had the slogan “show racism the red card”.

The government introduced an LGBT action plan in July 2018. This was in response to a survey that indicated the level of inequality experienced by the LGBT community. The plan supports the extension of anti-homophobic education in schools and pushing for an end to conversion therapy.

The telecoms company EE created the “Not Her Problem” campaign to raise awareness and tackle the sexism experienced by women, particularly in sport. The campaign highlighted that women aren’t sending hate to each other and that it is down to men to address the problem.

The impact of these campaigns is not easily researched, however, highlighting the issues on a national stage and relating it to individuals allows the general public to learn about the problem that they may not have been previously aware of. This enables action against these behaviours should they witness them. However, some research suggests that this type of campaign is not all that effective. In question is the credibility of the message provider and whether the government has the right to intervene in this manner (Scottish government, 2015).

From the information gathered above, it appears that the smaller scale group and individual based interventions are the most successful. Thus, it would be prudent for all organisations to include these types of interventions and training for their staff and members to ensure a healthy and safe environment for all.