INTRODUCTION

Translating Prejudice and Discrimination Psychological Research to Address Inequality

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We suspect that readers will readily agree that the psychological study of prejudice and discrimination is an immensely suitable theme for Translational Issues in Psychological Science. Daily media consumption necessitates copious exposure to new stories concerning prejudice and discrimination and underscores the widespread relevance of these topics to people’s lives. While this editorial was being prepared, the media in the United States covered news related to police shootings of Blacks, gender inequities and workplace sexism, mistreatment of a Muslim teen from Texas who invented a clock mistaken for a bomb and was met with arrest, and a county clerk’s refusal to issue marriage licenses to gays, to name a few. The reality is that prejudice and discrimination remain commonplace, despite historical progress reflected in equal rights legislation, the establishment of egalitarian normative expectations, and resulting positive shifts in public opinions and attitudes. The prevalence of contemporary prejudice and discrimination is especially apparent in often subtle and sometimes even unintentional intergroup biases, which nevertheless produce vast and systematic discrimination (Nier & Gaertner, 2012). Indeed, the fact that contemporary bias is often subtle makes it all the more important that research uncovers its nature and consequences. Furthermore, applying these findings to programs and policies that promote positive change is imperative.

Prejudice and discrimination are associated with a multitude of adverse consequences and challenges that affect the lives of many members of stigmatized groups (see Major & O’Brien, 2005), which are too numerous to name here. As examples, targets of discrimination experience psychological and physiological stress, which have implications for health and quality of life (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Penner, Albrecht, Orom, Coleman, & Underwood, 2010). Historical and present-day prejudice and discrimination result in group-based disparities in employment rates, income, incarceration (see Nier & Gaertner, 2012), and health care treatment (Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2002). Cultural stereotypes can evoke social identity threat among members of stereotyped groups and result in disidentification and underperformance (Steele, 1999).

Once again, we wish to underscore that subtle and not just overt biases play a role in these and other discriminatory outcomes. For instance, people may not say or even consciously believe that “Women are not as intelligent as men.” However, women are more likely to be characterized by communal (e.g., helpful and kind) rather than agentic (e.g., ambitious and competent) traits than men in letters of recommendation. These communal characterizations subtly lead to gender-biased hiring decisions (Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009). At the same time, women who behave in agentic ways seem to rub people the wrong way, owing to the inconsistency with feminine prescriptions of “niceness,”

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resulting in systematic prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012).

Prejudice and discrimination are relevant to majority group members’ lives as well, even if they do not consciously realize that this is the case. Prejudice-related social norms within communities are powerfully shaped by mass media (Paluck, 2009). People’s reactions are also shaped by the diversity of their environments. For instance, White Americans who are threatened by the imminent so-called “majority–minority” nation react with heightened racial animosity (Craig & Richeson, 2014). Many people feel that talking about race is a taboo topic (Pauker, Apfelbaum, & Spitzer, 2015), while at the same time they may struggle to control implicit biases rooted in knowledge of cultural stereotypes (Monteith, Mark & Ashburn-Nardo, 2010).

Kurt Lewin, who is generally credited with coining the term ‘action research,’ argued that “Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice” (Lewin, 1948, pp. 202–203). Clearly the extensive work within psychology on the multiple aspects of prejudice and discrimination can be useful only when it is accompanied by a translational focus. We can capitalize on ideas about helping people to cope with stigmatized identities discrimination only if those ideas are implemented and evaluated in applied settings. For example, we need to know whether prejudice reduction strategies that have been tested in the context of controlled laboratory studies are similarly effective when implemented in real-world contexts (e.g., workplace settings; see Paluck & Green, 2009). Furthermore, an overreliance on convenient college student samples when conducting prejudice-related research, rather than testing and evaluating theories in applied settings, can lead to misleading conclusions and determine the very topics that are studied (Henry, 2008). Finally, we can make our research translational by considering its implications for public policy, collective action, and social change.

Translational Issues in Psychological Science is aimed toward the development of young investigators, with psychologists in training (graduate students and postdoctoral fellows) represented as authors and as associate editors. Some authors had their first experience with manuscript submission, revisions, and acceptance. Associate Editors gained exposure to research foci outside their own concentrations, providing the opportunity for broadening perspectives. Associate Editors also had ample opportunity for practicing their critical thinking, professional communication, editing, and feedback skills. The authors and Associate Editors are now better equipped for moving into leadership roles in the psychological study of prejudice and discrimination.

The articles included in this special issue highlight a diverse array of topics in translational prejudice and discrimination research. Some articles concern prejudice-related phenomena of relevance to applied settings (e.g., race-based “shooter bias”) and highlight the pressing need for translational research. Other articles move basic research into action-oriented work by providing roadmaps for application, such as interventions to increase opportunities for and representation of targets of stigma (e.g., women, Blacks, first-generation college students). Still other articles highlight promise and limitations of extant research, and delineate evidence-based tactics for reducing disparity, decreasing discrimination, and fostering positive intergroup relations. Our authors come from different areas of psychology and a variety of methodological approaches are represented. The breadth of topics, disciplinary focus, and methods should help this issue to be useful to a broad array of readers: basic and applied researchers, diversity resource directors and staff, mental and physical health professionals, educational administrators, and policymakers. Readers will learn much about the nature of intergroup biases, the consequences of bias for targets and society, and strategies for intervening and fostering equality of opportunities and outcomes.

Prejudice and discrimination researchers are uniquely positioned to answer some of society’s most daunting questions. Research in this field is inherently translational. It is our hope that this special issue will inspire our readers to continue to consider the translational impact of their research to make a positive impact on our society.

References


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