

Basic Issues Related to Discrimination and the Psychology of Injustice

Alin Savelie

Titu Maiorescu University, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

Discrimination, stereotyping and prejudice represent important topics that have been intensively discussed and studied within various areas of science, such as sociology, psychology and political science, as they have multiple and serious implications on both micro and macro levels of human functioning, one of the most important practice areas being the social justice.

This article has the purpose of reviewing the basic issues regarding discrimination and its connection to other concepts relevant within the field of psychology of justice, promoting a multidisciplinary perspective upon the subject. The paper starts by explaining the concept of discrimination as it has been defined in the specialized literature, and the way it is reflected at the level of society, along with the effects that follow, the accent being put on its echoes on justice. Thus, the most important themes, principles and theories within the psychology of justice are also approached.

Keywords: *discrimination, stereotype, prejudice, psychology of justice*

Corresponding author: Alin Savelie

Phone number: -

E-mail address: alin_sav_13@yahoo.com

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The term of discrimination describes a series of phenomena which, according to specific contexts, carries the name of deprivation, illegitimacy, injustice, or stigma. Generally speaking, discrimination refers to an unjustified handling towards a person or group – in the case when the respective person belongs to a certain group (Doise, 1978).

The concept of discrimination includes prejudice, insults and aggression but also the daily encounter of a general ideational support of non-respect (Stroebe & Insko, 1989). A step forward starting from the mentioned aspects is materialized by the obvious impact of the social-economic status of the person which is affected by injustice, whether it is related to the workplace, health status, educational level or social hierarchy (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001).

Today, discrimination is offered a large area of research, as the main questions which arise – whether in its own domain or regarding its origins as a phenomenon, its triggers and possible measures of reducing the occurrence of stereotypes and prejudice among individuals (Whitley, & Kite, 2009).

Part of the researchers of psychology, sociology and politology (science areas which share the area of discrimination investigation) bring to discussion the notion of involuntary discrimination which belongs to the rules built by a social group in order to function as good as possible. Thus, considering that on one hand prejudice leads to discrimination, such in-volunteer reactions may also lead to the same result (Klandermans, 2004).

An example of this issue offered by researchers (Feagin & Eckberg, 1980) refers to the minimal height imposed to the candidates of several professions (police officers, firemen), criteria which, for a long period of time, has disqualified women. The perception of discrimination occurs based on an asymmetry effects which attends to the involved social group.

If the terms are different depending of the author's and victim's group affiliation, then the perception will be different too. Rodin et al. (1990) have supported this theory discussing the fact that a social group has the duty of protecting its own members, the disadvantaged ones, in this case, favoring being considered solidarity – thus it cannot be considered discrimination.

Discrimination finds its foundations on the judgment of injustice found in an intergroup relation. Psychology brings objective conclusions in this matter: people are used to very easily apply judgment regarding the justice of events and situations offering them real importance (Miller, 2001).

In its basic form, the psychology of justice (Lerner, 1974) reveals three major rules which can be applied to situations in which individuals apply judgment regarding the inherent justice of a situation. The rule of equity leads us to the idea that the reward must be given according to the effort which has been invested; further, the rule of equity according to which one has the right to

receive (a salary, for example) no matter their contribution; third, the rule of need, which postulated that the ones who mostly need a reward should have priority to receive it.

There is a series of factors which may influence the rules social actors refer to in a given situation, as they regard political opinions (personal dimension), interdependence and the specific objective of the social structure (structural dimensions) or the level towards which the interaction takes place. People prefer equity on a micro-social level and equality on macro-social level (Smith et al., 1998).

The expression of justice may pass through such criteria, combining them, and find a completion to procedural justice which defines the manner in which individuals are treated by the instances which operate the distribution. The two types of justice are accompanied by responsibility, translated by the following question: why is there a differential treatment? Individuals attribute situations according to the specific locus of control which characterize them, thus leading to the perception that they would have deserved approach or treatment than the one they have received.

Justice is built through individualized situations, at the beginning, revealing the automatic character of reasoning: people own a set of distributive and procedural rules which they want to see applied. In the contrary situation, the perception of injustice occurs which is introjected, leading to emotional and behavioral comedown.

A highly discussed principle of the psychology of injustice is the one of meritocracy (Foster, Sloto & Ruby, 2006). From its perspective, individuals are consequent towards the idea that in a society each person must be rewarded based on their merit (equity). We will present, as follows, several theories included by this principle.

The just-world theory (Hafer & Begue, 2005) presents itself as part of the meritocracy, starting from the principle that people need to think that the environment they live in is also just and legitimate. If the situation would be different, individuals might become victims of injustice, which is a terrifying perspective (Olson & Hafer, 2001). In the given situation, individuals prefer to imagine that their environment is secure, predictable and in order, providing what each member deserves (Haynes & Olson, 2006).

The theory of ambivalent stereotypes (Glick & Fiske, 2001) is based on the observation that groups bring to the society, depending on the position they are placed in, a series of stereotypes which play the role of positive enforcement. Thus the groups with high social status are perceived as competent, with good potential of organizing and efficiency, while the groups which have a low social status are perceived as having sociability, warmth and sympathy as the main characteristics (Fiske et al., 2002). The particularity of the theory consists in the fact that it offers stereotypes a positive positioning and a view integrating elements of prejudice.

On the other hand authors emphasize that the content of stereotypes depends on two variables which affect the within-group relationship: the relative status (high/low) and the type of interaction (competition/cooperation). These two variables lead on one hand to the stereotypes ambivalence and on the other hand to the dimensions of competency and sociability which are negatively correlated (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005).

The theory of system justification represents another step towards the discussed direction which mostly refers to the project of organizing an ideology (a legitimate one). Jost (2001) supports the idea that people have the need to legitimate the social system they belong to, the need to legitimate the group they belong to and themselves. In other words, the individual has to know that the environment he lives in has the characteristics of justice and wellbeing (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Blasi & Jost, 2006), needs to feel that the social group he belongs to is respected and appreciated (Tajfel, 1981) and that he is a competent person himself (Wilson & Brekke, 1994).

From a psychological perspective, on an individual level, discrimination generates most of the times the state of frustration (Abrams, & Hogg, 1988) as the respective person experiences feelings of guilt and shame (Smith, & O'Connell, 1997; Smith, & Ellsworth, 1985; Bierbrauer, 1992). Perpetuating such states has the potential of installing suffering and psychopathologic disorders (Andrews, 1998) which eventually will demand professional health intervention.

References

- Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. A. (1988). Comments on the motivational status of self-esteem in social identity and intergroup discrimination. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 18*(4), 317-334.
- Andrews, B. (1998). Methodological and definitional issues in shame research. *Shame: Interpersonal behavior, psychopathology, and culture, 39-54*.
- Bierbrauer, G. (1992). Reactions to violation of normative standards: A cross-cultural analysis of shame and guilt. *International Journal of Psychology, 27*(2), 181-193.
- Blasi, G., & Jost, J. T. (2006). System justification theory and research: Implications for law, legal advocacy, and social justice. *California Law Review, 1119-1168*.
- Cuddy, A. J., Norton, M. I., & Fiske, S. T. (2005). This old stereotype: The pervasiveness and persistence of the elderly stereotype. *Journal of Social Issues, 61*(2), 267-285.
- Doise, W. (1978). *Groups and individuals: Explanations in social psychology*. CUP Archive.
- Feagin, J. R., & Eckberg, D. L. (1980). Discrimination: Motivation, action, effects, and context. *Annual Review of Sociology, 1-20*.

- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J., Glick, P., & Xu, J. (2002). A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 82(6), 878.
- Foster, M. D., Sloto, L., & Ruby, R. (2006). Responding to discrimination as a function of meritocracy beliefs and personal experiences: Testing the model of shattered assumptions. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 9(3), 401-411.
- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (2001). *Ambivalent stereotypes as legitimizing ideologies: Differentiating paternalistic and envious prejudice*.
- Hafer, C. L., & Begue, L. (2005). Experimental research on just-world theory: problems, developments, and future challenges. *Psychological bulletin*, 131(1), 128.
- Haynes, G. A., & Olson, J. M. (2006). Coping With Threats to Just-World Beliefs: Derogate, Blame, or Help? 1. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36(3), 664-682.
- Jost, J. T. (2001). Outgroup favoritism and the theory of system justification: A paradigm for investigating the effects of socioeconomic success on stereotype content. In *Cognitive social psychology: The Princeton symposium on the legacy and future of social cognition* (pp. 89-102).
- Klandermans, B. (2004). The demand and supply of participation: Social-psychological correlates of participation in social movements. *The Blackwell companion to social movements*, 360-379.
- Lerner, J. S., & Tetlock, P. E. (1999). Accounting for the effects of accountability. *Psychological bulletin*, 125(2), 255.
- Lerner, M. J. (1974). Social psychology of justice and interpersonal attraction. *Foundations of interpersonal attraction*, 331, 351.
- Miller, D. T. (2001). Disrespect and the experience of injustice. *Annual review of psychology*, 52(1), 527-553.
- Rodin, M. J., Price, J. M., Bryson, J. B., & Sanchez, F. J. (1990). Asymmetry in prejudice attribution. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 26(6), 481-504.
- Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (2001). *Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, H. J., Tyler, T. R., Huo, Y. J., Ortiz, D. J., & Lind, E. A. (1998). The self-relevant implications of the group-value model: Group membership, self-worth, and treatment quality. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 34(5), 470-493.
- Smith, T. A., & O'Connell, L. (1997). *Black anxiety, white guilt, and the politics of status frustration*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Smith, C. A., & Ellsworth, P. C. (1985). Patterns of cognitive appraisal in emotion. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 48(4), 813.
- Stroebe, W., & Insko, C. A. (1989). Stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination: Changing conceptions in theory and research. In *Stereotyping and prejudice* (pp. 3-34). Springer New York.

Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology*. CUP Archive.

Wilson, T. D., & Brekke, N. (1994). Mental contamination and mental correction: unwanted influences on judgments and evaluations. *Psychological bulletin*, 116(1), 117.

Whitley, B., & Kite, M. (2009). *The psychology of prejudice and discrimination*. Cengage Learning.