STEREOTYPES, PREJUDICE, AND
PREJUDICE REDUCTION

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Abstract

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This dissertation was concerned with the interrelated fields of stereotypes, prejudice, and prejudice reduction. Four studies are presented exploring these issues in the context of social cognitive theories of stereotyping and theories of contemporary prejudice.

Part one specifically examines the relationship between gender stereotypes and causal attributions for male and female achievement. Influenced by Devine's (1989) distinction between stereotypes and prejudice, the study presented here explored the possibility of linking people's background attitudes to women to their attributions for the achievement of women and men. Traditionally, perceivers make female derogating and male favouring attributions for achievement. However, no such pattern emerged in this study. Moreover, there was no systematic difference in the attributions made by those more liberal versus more traditional in their beliefs about women. However, perceivers did make attributions derogating the stereotypically female university course of nursing. It was suggested that this may reflect a more subtle form of sexism in which roles and tasks stereotypically associated with women are derogated. Overall, it was suggested that the importance of the attitude or belief to the perceiver may be an important factor mediating whether background attitudes towards women influence achievement attributions.

Part two explored a social cognitive model of contemporary prejudice, Devine's (1989) Dissociation model. This model characterises stereotypes and personal beliefs as cognitively,
distinct structures. People differ in prejudice level depending on the extent to which their personal belief and the stereotype overlap. Low prejudice people have developed personal beliefs rejecting the stereotype, whereas high prejudice people have developed personal beliefs consistent with the stereotype. In situations when conscious control is possible, low prejudice people inhibit stereotype-based responses and replace them with responses consistent with their personal beliefs. High prejudice people have no real disjunction between their personal beliefs and the stereotype, and so respond in a more prejudiced manner. However, when conscious control is not possible, people, regardless of prejudice level, respond in a stereotype-based, prejudiced manner. Of particular interest in part two was the model of prejudice reduction developed from the Dissociation model, the self regulatory model of prejudice reduction (Monteith, 1993). This model posits that low prejudice people are able to inhibit their stereotype based responding by monitoring their own behaviour closely. Low prejudice people feel guilty when they transgress their personal beliefs and behave in a prejudiced manner, encouraging them to monitor their behaviour in such situations more closely in future. Monteith (1993) characterises this process as akin to “habit-breaking”.

Two studies in part two explored this self-regulatory model of prejudice reduction. The first, a pilot, attempted to avoid the demand characteristics imposed by Devine, Monteith, and colleagues’ Should-Would discrepancy questionnaire. Although providing some limited support for the findings of Devine et al. (1991), disappointing results indicated that this study departed too far from Devine, Monteith, and colleagues’ methodology to allow a thorough exploration of the issues of interest. The second study attempted to more closely replicate the methodology of Devine, Monteith and colleagues’. However the target group used in this study was Aboriginal Australians and not Gay men. In addition, affective consequences of responding to positive aspects of the stereotype of Aboriginal Australians were explored. This
study found that, consistent with previous research, endorsing a greater number of negative stereotypical adjectives as accurate descriptors of Aboriginal Australians was associated with higher reported compunction and lower positive affect. However, it was not significantly associated with greater discomfort. Low prejudice subjects endorsing a greater number of negative stereotypical descriptors did not report higher compunction than other subjects, contrary to Monteith's (1993) self-regulatory model of prejudice reduction. In addition, subjects higher in prejudice reported compunction following the endorsement of positive stereotype words whereas subjects low in prejudice reported discomfort. It was concluded on the basis of these results that Devine, Monteith, and colleagues' self-regulatory model of prejudice reduction did not generalise to prejudice towards Aboriginal Australians. This study highlighted some of the methodological and theoretical difficulties inherent in this model. Consideration was given to these difficulties in discussing the results of the study.

The final part of this dissertation, part three, presented a social psychological evaluation of an applied prejudice reduction intervention. Previous empirical research indicates that stereotype change and prejudice reduction will occur only under highly controlled conditions. Applied prejudice reduction interventions would appear to offer the best "Real World" approximation to these highly controlled laboratory conditions, although previous research has indicated that such programmes achieve limited success. The programme evaluated was an in-house anti-racist education programme aimed at reducing prejudice towards Aboriginal Australians. The target audience were employees of a large public service organisation. Knowledge of, prejudice towards, and stereotyping of Aboriginal Australians was assessed before commencing the programme to establish a baseline. Changes in knowledge of, prejudice towards, and stereotyping of Aboriginal Australians was assessed immediately after completing the programme, and again three months after completing the programme. The
programme had significant and pronounced effects immediately after completing the programme: there was a significant increase in knowledge and significant decrease in prejudice and negative stereotyping. However, overall, three months later, there was no significant difference to baseline levels of prejudice and stereotyping. Knowledge, though, remained significantly higher than at baseline three months after completing the programme. In addition, high prejudice participants alone experienced a significant, long term decrease in old-fashioned racism. Some suggestions were made for improving the effect of this applied prejudice reduction programme. Overall, it was concluded that further social psychological research needs to be done to develop more successful strategies of prejudice reduction and stereotype change that are also applicable to “Real World” contexts.

The conclusion considers implications of the results of the studies presented in this dissertation. It appears that as yet, social cognition and theories of contemporary prejudice have yet to develop viable applied prejudice reduction interventions. It is argued that after many years research on stereotyping and prejudice, and with little associated progress in developing prejudice reduction interventions, social psychologists of all theoretical persuasions need to pay more attention to prejudice reduction as a topic in its own right.
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