Modern discrimination:

How perpetrators and targets interactively perpetuate social disadvantage

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Abstract (word count: 120)

Stereotypes and discriminatory behavior do not necessarily imply that people are explicitly devalued or actively excluded from attractive positions in society. Instead, these often implicitly communicate that any social disadvantages are due to individual shortcomings. Recent research has uncovered a number of mechanisms that explain how individuals may come to enact stereotypical expectations of others. Modern expressions of stereotypes are not easily *recognized* or perceived as discriminatory. Attempts to distance the self from the disadvantaged group to *avoid* discrimination are likely to backfire in different ways. Countering common beliefs, people are quite reluctant to *confront* discrimination or to claim unequal treatment. For all these reasons, modern discrimination tends to induce a cycle of self-fulfilling mechanisms that perpetuate group-based social disadvantage.

Highlights: 3-5 bullet points 85 characters per bullet point

- Equal opportunity beliefs help maintain group-level outcome differences

- Perceiving discrimination is impeded when stereotypes are communicated implicitly

- Avoiding discrimination requires people to denounce part of their identity

- Confronting discrimination often results in victim blame rather than system change

Introduction

Many societies these days have legal provisions prohibiting discrimination. Different types of organizations have formal guidelines aiming to prevent unequal treatment. Hence, we tend to think stereotyping and discrimination are a thing of the past [1]. At the same time, we can all see that migrants or women are underrepresented in certain professions or job levels [,2, 3]. Statistics show their hourly wages are consistently lower than those of white males at every job level [4]. The conviction that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed, together with the observation that some are less successful than others can only convey one thing: That any differences in important societal outcomes, such as jobs, income, housing, or health status must be ascribed to individual differences in people's abilities, ambitions, or priorities [5].

As a result, the focus of attempts to avoid unequal outcomes has shifted. Instead of addressing stereotypes held by members of advantaged groups, nowadays social equality is pursued by trying to increase the competencies of those who are disadvantaged. At the same time, scientific research has been unable to establish evidence for reliable differences between different groups in relevant abilities or ambitions [6]. Hence, 'fixing' individual shortcomings does not seem to offer a satisfactory solution for the systematic inequality of outcomes achieved by members of different social groups.

Recent research helps understand what should be more effective. It has established that – instead of being a thing from the past – the nature of stereotypes and the way these lead to discrimination has *shifted* [7]. Instead of 'perpetrators' explicitly devaluing and excluding 'targets' [8,9], there is a much more subtle and implicit cycle of group-based social expectations that tends to undermine the self-confidence of those who are disadvantaged and impedes their ability to perform well [10, 11] (see Figure 1). In fact, these more subtle and

implicit group-based expectations often seem innocent and accurate, and tend to be endorsed by those who are advantaged as well as those who suffer from them [12].

Modern stereotyping

We tend to think of stereotyping and discrimination as blatantly negative views of others ('immigrants are lazy', 'women lack ambition') that make people reluctant to accept them into their neighborhood, or to respect them as colleagues at work. Nowadays, many of us no longer endorse such views. Instead, we are motivated to be unprejudiced, and hope to provide equal treatment for all [13]. Yet we unwittingly ascribe characteristics to individuals that seem to fit their group membership. In turn, these biased associations are more predictive of our actual behavior towards others than the stated intention to provide equal treatment [14].

Thus, stereotypical views have shifted towards more implicit forms of bias [15]. Instead of emphasizing the shortcomings of devalued groups in society, modern stereotypes emphasize and celebrate domains of excellence considered typical for these groups (e.g. sports or music for migrants, care activities for women) [16]. At the same time, such features are clearly less useful to obtain important educational or societal outcomes [17].

Exposure to implicit bias elicits anxiety, and increases concerns about one's abilities. This depletes people's cognitive resources and results in performance loss [18, 19]. The fact that so few individuals originating from disadvantaged groups are successful, impacts on our expectations regarding the potential of other group members [20]. Over time, such common expectations of characteristic group features easily turn into prescriptive norms. Individuals who violate stereotypical expectations (professional women; stay-at-home dads) tend to be evaluated negatively, or are seen as disloyal to their group ('oreo's' - blacks 'acting white'). Even if modern stereotypes are subtle and implicit, they are not harmless. Research has convincingly documented the negative impact subtle discrimination has on individual well-

being (self-esteem, life satisfaction [21]) and on indicators of psychological and physical

health relevant to performance in educational and work settings [22].

Perceiving discrimination

Stereotypes and prejudice can be expressed in different ways. Some are very implicit

and subtle, and may seem innocuous [23]. They can take the form of compliments

(emphasizing the appearance rather than the competence of women in a work context), or

jokes (making fun of cultural practices). Such forms of prejudice do not necessarily

communicate negative views of these groups. In fact, individuals who belong to

disadvantaged groups may also endorse stereotypes that pertain to their own group, and hence

think unequal outcomes are fair [24]. We tend not to recognize these beliefs as being biased

[25].

It is difficult to overcome stereotypical associations [26], yet most people will not

easily admit (even to themselves!) that their preferences and decisions are co-determined by

people's group memberships. Furthermore, 'perpetrators' as well as 'targets' typically only

have case-by-case experiences, while aggregate information is required to detect group-level

disadvantage [27]. Consequently, modern discrimination tends to remain unnoticed [28].

Nevertheless, experimental studies reveal that candidates with identical qualifications

are rated differently, depending on their presumed group membership (John vs. Jennifer,

[29]). Likewise, experiments with mock job applications make it possible to expose people to

biased decision making, in order to examine whether they perceive discrimination when it

occurs. This has revealed that people tend to under-estimate rather than over-estimating the

occurrence of group-level discrimination [30]. Additionally, the presence of representatives of

undervalued groups [31], or of measures aiming to secure equal treatment, for instance in

organizations, paradoxically makes us less vigilant against bias, and less likely to note discrimination when it occurs [32]

Avoiding discrimination

People often have multiple identities. They can simultaneously be a migrant and national citizen, a mother and a manager, or a homosexual and a school teacher [33]. Although these identities are not necessarily incompatible, they are often regarded as such [34]. Individuals are generally expected to adapt to demands, for instance associated with their work role, by ignoring other roles that are important for their identity [35].

As a result, individuals may come to denounce immediately visible group memberships (based on gender or race), or to conceal less visible group memberships (social background, sexual preferences) to avoid group-based discrimination [36]. This happens when female workers emphasize their competence or ambitions as being superior to those of other women [37], or when homosexuals take pains not to reveal their sexual orientation at work. Individuals adopt this strategy as they think it may help them escape discrimination. Nevertheless, there are important psychological and interpersonal costs associated with such strategies, which actually increase the likelihood of social rejection [38]. Distancing the self from others who suffer similar fates makes people forfeit important sources of social support [39]. Rumination, stress, or guilt about hiding one's 'true self' is distracting. This undermines the ability to perform well [40], and damages mental and physical health [41]. When successful individuals present themselves as being exceptional, this also reinforces stereotypical expectations about other members of their group [42] (see Figure 2).

Confronting discrimination

We tend to assume that discrimination is obvious, that people will protest against bias, and that an absence of complaints implies equal treatment [43]. For all the reasons cited

above, these are not valid assumptions [44]. Discriminatory practices rarely are as clear or explicit as is often presupposed, for instance in anti-discrimination legislation. Two job candidates never have identical qualifications, with the only difference between them their gender or ethnicity. Targets of discrimination often do not recognize bias, and are more likely to under-report than over-report unequal treatment [45]. Yet they are expected to take the initiative to expose or rectify discriminatory practices they encounter.

For those who are excluded from important opportunities in life, it is not so easy to complain. Paradoxically, people have to feel secure in their belongingness needs, before they seek respectful treatment or feel free to confront discriminatory treatment [46]. Thus, while system level changes rely on individuals who confront discrimination, those who complain about unequal treatment incur important social costs [47]. Targets who confront discrimination are disliked by observers, even if their complaints are valid [48, 49].

Conclusion

Prior efforts have aimed to understand how the endorsement of stereotypes can be reduced (from the perspective of the perpetrator), or how discrimination may be avoided (from the perspective of the target). During the past years, it has become clear that instead we need to address the *interaction* between these two perspectives. Recent research has revealed the self-defeating cycles through which implicitly biased views (held by perpetrators) may elicit stereotype confirming behavior (among targets). As a result, the lower societal outcomes of members of devalued groups in society are not easily traced back to overt discrimination. Instead, these seem to reflect individual differences in competence or ambition. Findings from different studies demonstrate that the insistence that all individuals have equal opportunities to achieve, in itself constitutes a form of discrimination that perpetuates group-based

inequality. Specifically, it has been established that stereotyping and discrimination may be expressed implicitly and are not easily recognized.

Individuals who try to avoid discrimination by denouncing or concealing their stigmatized identity deprive themselves of social support, and suffer in terms of well-being and performance. When they are successful, this does not benefit the image we have of other members of their group. Relying on targets of discrimination to expose or confront unequal treatment presupposes their awareness of implicit bias. It also places the burden of system change – including the social cost of being the bearer of bad news - on the targets instead of the perpetrators of unequal treatment. In sum, recent research reveals that it is not realistic to rely on our desire to provide equal treatment to all. Nor is it reasonable to place the responsibility for identifying and confronting discrimination on those who suffer from it. Instead, we should take advantage of scientific evidence on the implicit nature and far-reaching implications of modern discrimination, to provide more effective strategies to combat group-based inequality [50].

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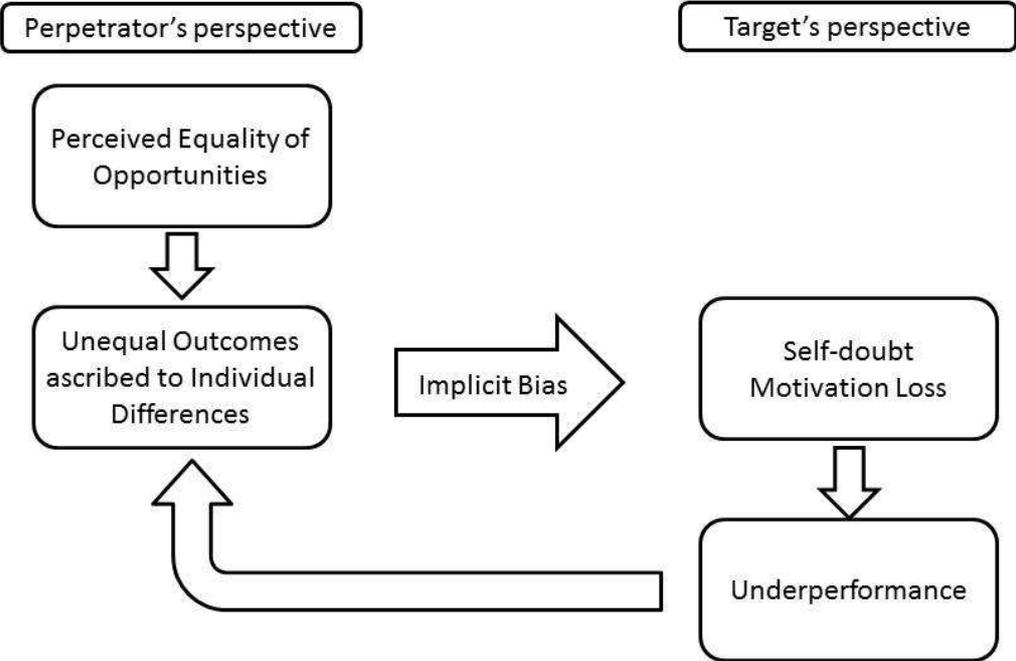Figure 1: How denial of discrimination perpetuates unequal outcomes

Figure 2: How attempts to avoid discrimination confirm stereotypical expectations