What We Know Now About Bias and Intergroup Conflict, the Problem of the Century

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Abstract

After nearly a century's study, what do psychologists now know about intergroup bias and conflict? Most people reveal unconscious, subtle biases, which are relatively automatic, cool, indirect, ambiguous, and ambivalent. Subtle biases underlie ordinary discrimination: comfort with one's own in-group, plus exclusion and avoidance of out-groups. Such biases result from internal conflict between cultural ideals and cultural biases. A small minority of people, extremists, do harbor blatant biases that are more conscious, hot, direct, and unambiguous. Blatant biases underlie aggression, including hate crimes. Such biases result from perceived intergroup conflict over economics and values, in a world perceived to be hierarchical and dangerous. Reduction of both subtle and blatant bias results from education, economic opportunity, and constructive intergroup contact.

Keywords

bias; stereotyping; prejudice; discrimination; intergroup conflict

People typically seek other people who are similar to themselves, being comfortable with others they perceive as members of their own in-group. From comfort follows, at best, neglect of people from out-groups and, at worst, murderous hostility toward out-groups perceived as threatening the in-group. Biases do vary by degree, and the psychologies of moderate and extreme biases differ considerably. Well-intentioned moderates reveal bias more subtle than the rants and rampages of extremists. By some counts, 80% of Western democratic populations intend benign intergroup relations but display subtle biases. In contrast, blatantly biased extremists are completely out-front. Although estimated to be a minority (perhaps 10%), they are salient, vocal, and dangerous.

After nearly a century's study, social psychology knows a lot about both forms of bias. Stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination reflect, respectively, people's cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to people from other groups (Fiske, 1998). All constitute *bias*, reacting to a person on the basis of perceived membership in a single human category, ignoring other category memberships and other personal attributes. Bias is thus a narrow, potentially erroneous reaction, compared with individuated impressions formed from personal details.

SUBTLE BIAS AMONG WELL-INTENTIONED MODERATES

Automatic, Unconscious, and Unintentional

The big news from two recent decades of research: Bias is most often

underground (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). First data showed that even among relatively unprejudiced people, racial category labels automatically prime (increase the accessibility of) stereotypes; scores of studies now support the essential automaticity of stereotypes (Fiske, 1998, 2000; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). For example, even when outgroup category labels are subliminally presented (i.e., presented too quickly to be consciously perceived), they activate stereotypic associations. In a more affective vein, out-group cues (such as faces or names) easily activate negative evaluative terms. Relatedly, brain imaging shows activation of the amygdala in response to out-group faces; because the amygdala is the center of fear and anxiety in the brain, its activation in response to out-groups is consistent with primitive emotional prejudices. Furthermore, automatic activation of outgroup categories leads to behavior stereotypically associated with that group. For example, young people primed with the category "elderly" (vs. a neutral one) walk and respond more slowly; Whites primed with Black faces (vs. White ones) respond in a more hostile way than they normally do. Such responses create self-fulfilling prophecies in intergroup biases. Brain imaging and automatic behavior form the cutting edges of work on automatic biases.

Automatic reactions to outgroup members matter in everyday behavior. Awkward social interactions, embarrassing slips of the tongue, unchecked assumptions, stereotypic judgments, and spontaneous neglect all exemplify the mundane automaticity of bias, which creates a subtly hostile environment for out-group members. The apparent automaticity of routine biases corroborates Allport's (1954) provocative early insights about the inevitability of categorization. Automaticity also shocks well-intentioned people who as-

sume that both their own and other people's prejudice must be conscious and controllable.

All is not lost for the well-intentioned. Category activation is not *unconditionally* automatic. Although people can instantly identify another person's category membership (especially gender, race, and age), they may not always activate associated stereotypes. For example, sufficient mental overload blocks activation. People's long-term attitudes also have a moderating influence: Chronically low levels of prejudice can attenuate the activation of stereotypes. Temporary goals matter, too: Category activation depends on short-term motivations, including immediate threats to self-esteem and focused efforts toward accurate understanding.

Promising as they are, findings indicating that biases are automatic, unconscious, and unintentional remain controversial. For example, the ease of category activation differs depending on the nature of the stimuli: Activation is easy when people encounter verbal labels, harder when they encounter photographs, and hardest when they encounter real people. Some researchers believe that social categories inevitably activate associated biases, whereas others believe activation depends entirely on short-term goals and long-term individual differences (Devine, 2001).

Whether bias is conditionally or unconditionally automatic, less prejudiced perceivers still can compensate for their automatic associations with subsequent conscious effort. If category activation is conditionally automatic, then people may be able to inhibit it in the first place. In either case, motivation matters.

Moreover, even if people do activate biases associated with a category, they may not apply (or use) those biases. For example, once the category is activated, other information may be consistent or inconsis-

tent with it, and perceivers have to decide what to do about the conflicting information. Inconsistency resolution and subsequent individuation of the other person require mental resources, which are allocated according to the perceiver's motivation and capacity. Overriding category use depends on metacognitive decisions (thinking about one's thinking) and higher-level executive functions (controlling one's thinking), not just brute attentional capacity. Other influences on whether activated categories are used go beyond the perceiver's motivation and capacity: For example, category use depends on the stimuli (general group-level abstractions encourage assimilation toward the stereotype, whereas individual exemplars encourage contrast away from it). Category use increases when the perceiver's personal theory holds that people's dispositions are fixed entities, rather than flexible states. Psychologists continue to debate the boundaries of automaticity.

Inhibition of both category activation and category application challenges even the most determined moderate. Direct suppression sometimes causes only a rebound of the forbidden biases. Depending on cognitive capacity, practice, age, and motivation, people can inhibit many effects of social categories on their thinking, feeling, and behaving. Indeed, when people adopt goals encouraging them to treat others as unique individuals or not at all as social objects, they no longer show even amygdala activation in response to faces from races other than their own (Wheeler & Fiske, 2001). The take-home message: Bias is more automatic than people think, but less automatic than psychologists thought.

Cool, Indirect, and Ambiguous

The biases of the moderate, well-intentioned majority not only live underground, they also wear

camouflage. Consistent with people's biases reflecting in-group comfort at least as much as out-group discomfort, bias often consists of withholding positive emotions from out-groups. Moderates rarely express open hostility toward out-groups, but they may withhold basic liking and respect; hence, their responses represent cool neglect. People more rapidly assign positive attributes to the in-group than the out-group, but often show at best weak differences in assigning negative attributes. People withhold rewards from out-groups, relative to the in-group, reflecting favoritism (Brewer & Brown, 1998). But they rarely punish or derogate the out-group. The typical damage is relative.

Moderate biases are indirect, relying on norms for appropriate responses. If norms allow biases, they flourish. That is, biases most often appear when people have unprejudiced excuses. When contact or helping is discretionary, for example, if some people neglect out-group members, then most people do. If the out-group member behaves poorly, providing an excuse for prejudice, the resulting exclusion is more swift and sure than for a comparable in-group member. Biases also appear in political policy preferences for which one might have principled reasons (excuses), but regarding which one also just happens to have a series of opinions that all disadvantage the out-group relative to the in-group. Excuses for bias fulfill the social norm requiring rational, fair judgments, but empirically controlled comparisons reveal greater bias toward out-group members than toward comparable in-group members. Researchers continue to debate the meaning of these biases.

People also engage in attributional tricks that discourage sympathy by blaming the out-group for their own unfortunate outcomes: Members of the out-group

should try harder, but at the same time they should not push themselves where they are not wanted (Catch 22). The blame goes further. Although the in-group might be excused for its failures (extenuating circumstances), the out-group brought it on themselves (unfortunate dispositions). People often attribute the out-group's perceived failings to their essence: Innate, inherent, enduring attributes, perhaps biological, especially genetic, define category distinctiveness.

In making sense of out-group members, people exaggerate cultural differences (in ability, language, religious beliefs, and sexual practices). The mere fact of categorizing into in-group "us" and out-group "them" exaggerates intercategory differences and diminishes intracategory differences: "Out-group members all are alike and different from us, besides." In short, moderates' bias is cool, indirect, and ambiguous.

Ambivalent and Mixed

Besides being underground and camouflaged, moderate biases are complex. Ambivalent racism entails, for moderate Whites, mixed "pro-Black" pity and anti-Black resentment, which tips over to a predominantly positive or negative response, depending on circumstances. Ambivalent sexism is another example, demonstrating two correlated dimensions that differentiate hostile sexism (toward nontraditional women) and subjectively benevolent sexism (toward traditional women). In both cases, ambivalence indicates mixed forms of prejudice more subtle than unmitigated hostility.

Mixed biases turn out to be the rule, rather than the exception. Although various out-groups all are classified as "them," they form clusters (see Fig. 1). Some elicit less respect than others, and some elicit less liking than others. Not only is the bias of well-intentioned moder-

ates of the cool variety (withholding the positive, rather than assigning the negative), but it is not even uniformly lacking in positive views. Specifically, some out-groups (Asians, Jews, career women, Black professionals, rich people) are envied and respected for their perceived competence and high status, but they are resented and disliked as lacking in warmth because they compete with the in-group. Other out-groups (older people, disabled people, housewives) are pitied and disrespected for their perceived incompetence and low status, but they are nurtured and liked as warm because they do not threaten the in-group. Only a few out-groups (primarily homeless and poor people of any race) receive contempt, both dislike and disrespect, because they are seen as simultaneously low status and exploiting the in-group.

Ambivalent, mixed biases justify the status quo. Subordinated, pitied groups have an incentive to co-operate because they receive care, in return for not challenging the hierarchy. Conversely, dominant groups use subordinated groups to maintain their own relative advantage. Envied, competitive groups have an incentive to support the system because they are perceived to be succeeding, even if they are socially excluded by the culturally dominant group. For dominant groups, respecting envied groups acknowledges the ground rules for competition (which favor them also), but disliking those groups justifies social exclusion.

Moderate Biases Lead to Exclusion

Subtle biases motivate personal interactions that reek of discomfort and anxiety. Nonverbal indicators (distance, posture, voice tone) and people's own reports of their feelings all reveal intergroup interactions that are anything but smooth,
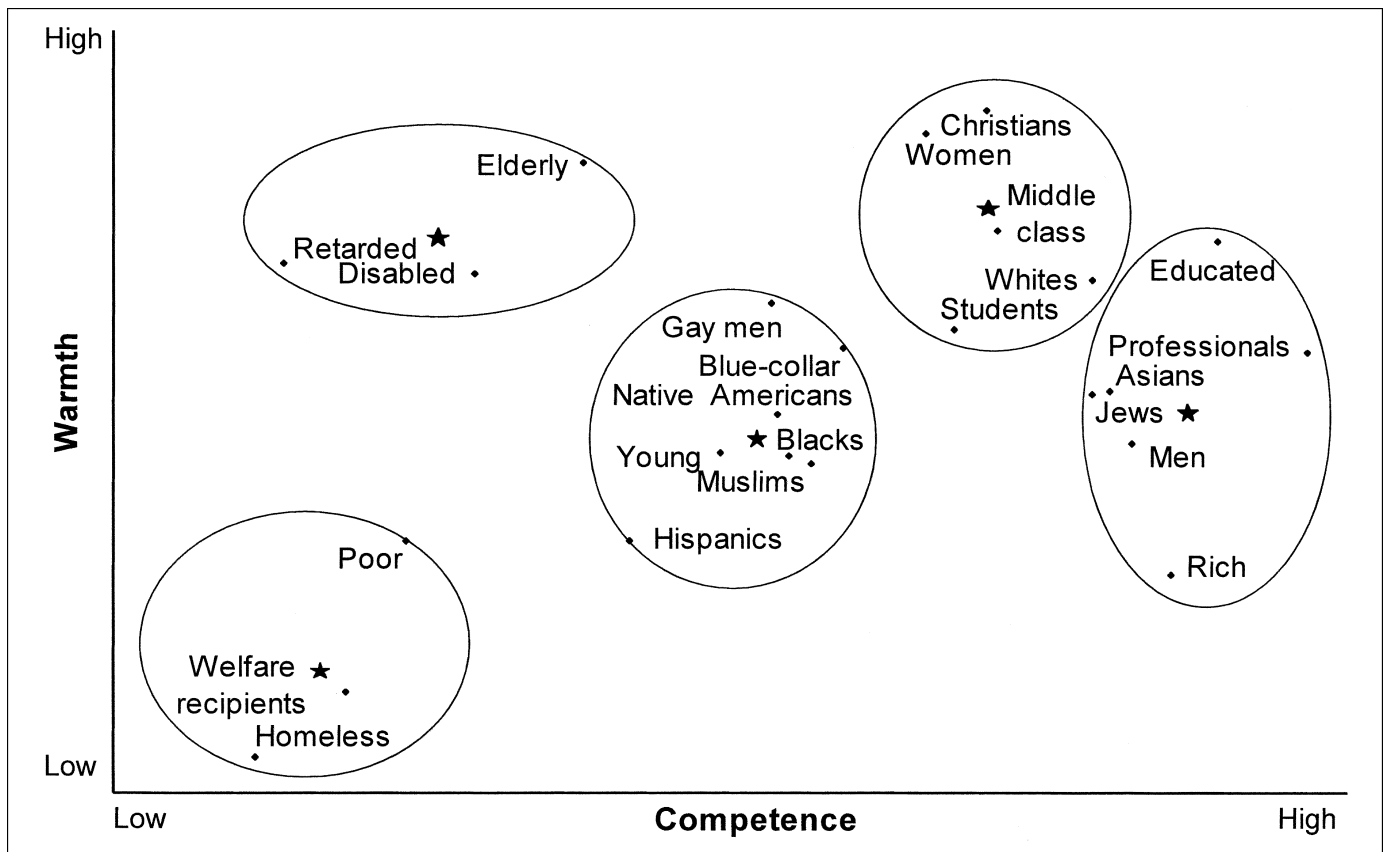
Fig. 1. Five-cluster solution showing the perceived distribution of American social groups, according to perceived competence and warmth (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002, Study 2). Copyright by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

mostly because of inexperience with the out-group.

Moreover, people mentally and behaviorally confirm their biased expectations, leading both groups to maintain their distance. *Self-fulfilling prophecy*, *expectancy effects*, and *behavioral confirmation* all name related phenomena whereby biased perceivers bring about the very behavior they anticipate, usually negative. These interpersonal processes result in subsequent avoidance, whenever people can choose the company they keep. Discretionary intergroup contact is minimized.

Furthermore, exclusion and avoidance extend to employment, housing, education, and justice that tend to favor the in-group and disadvantage the out-group. Ample evidence indicates that relatively automatic, cool, indirect, ambigu-

ous, and ambivalent biases permit allocation of resources to maintain the in-group's advantage.

How Do Moderate Biases Originate?

Subtle prejudice comes from people's internal conflict between ideals and biases, both acquired from the culture. Direct, personal experience with out-group members may be limited. Given substantial de facto residential and occupational segregation, people lack experience in constructive intergroup interactions. Cultural media, then, supply most information about out-groups, so people easily develop unconscious associations and feelings that reinforce bias.

Simultaneously, contemporary Western ideals encourage tolerance

of most out-groups. Complying with modern antiprejudice ideals requires conscious endorsement of egalitarian norms against prejudice. And moderates do endorse antiprejudice values. The upshot is a conflict between relatively implicit, unconscious biases and explicit, conscious ideals to be unprejudiced. The resulting prejudices are subtle, modern, and aversive to the people holding them.

BLATANT BIAS AMONG ILL-INTENTIONED EXTREMISTS

Hot, Direct, Unambiguous, and Conscious

In contrast to well-intentioned moderates, extremists openly resent

out-groups and reject any possibility of intimacy with them (Pettigrew, 1998b). They resent out-groups—whether racial, cultural, gender, or sexual—as holding jobs that in-group members should have and (paradoxically) living on welfare unnecessarily. They believe that out-groups and the in-group can never be comfortable together. Extremists are particularly upset by intergroup intimacy. They report that they would be bothered by having a mixed grandchild, that they are unwilling to have sexual relations with out-group members, and that they are unwilling to have an out-group boss.

Extreme biases run in packs; people biased against one out-group tend to be biased against others. People's differing levels of ethnocentrism are reliably measured by old-fashioned prejudice scales that assess self-reported attitudes toward racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual out-groups.

Extreme Biases Underlie Aggression

The result is as simple as it is horrible. Because of hot, direct, unambiguous prejudices, extremists advocate segregation, containment, and even elimination of out-groups. Strong forms of bias correlate with approval of racist movements. Hate-crime perpetrators and participants in ethnic violence, not surprisingly, endorse attitudes (prejudices and stereotypes) that fit extreme forms of discrimination.

Aggression has two main goals: preserving hierarchies and preserving values perceived to be traditional. People with blatant prejudices often approve aggression to maintain the status quo, viewing current group hierarchies as inevitable and desirable. Highly prejudiced people gravitate toward jobs that enhance group hierarchy and defend the status quo (e.g., they tend to be police officers rather than social workers and businesspeople rather than educators). Blatant prejudice may also lead to self-righteous aggression against nonconformers and other people who threaten core values. If out-groups deviate and threaten traditional values, they become legitimate targets of aggression.

How Do Extreme Biases Originate?

Whether extremists are domestic or international, they endanger those they hate. People become biased extremists because they perceive threats to their in-group. Thus, extreme bias parallels the in-group favoritism of biased moderates, who also protect the in-group. Differences lie in the perceived nature and degree of threat.

Threat to economic standing has long been implicated in intergroup bias. Although still controversial, the most convincing but counterintuitive lesson here is that personal economic deprivation is not in fact the culprit. The state of people's own wallets does not motivate their degree of prejudice. Instead, the most reliable indicator is perceived threat to one's in-group. Group threat (e.g., high local unemployment) correlates with extreme biases against out-groups perceived to be responsible. The causal sequence seems to run from subjective social class to perceived group deprivation to prejudice.

Perceived threat to in-group economic status correlates with worldviews that reinforce a zero-sum, dog-eat-dog perspective. Tough-minded competition is perceived to reflect the state of intergroup relations. Economic conservatism results. Overall, blatant prejudice correlates with high social dominance orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), that is, endorsing views that superior groups should dominate inferior groups, that force may be necessary to maintain this dominance, and that group equality is neither desirable nor realistic.

Perceived threat to traditional values is the other prong of blatant bias. Extremists view the world as dangerous, with established authority and conventions in collapse. Social conservatism correlates with perceived threats to traditional values, and also with extreme bias (Altemeyer, 1996). Extremists move in tight ethnic circles and endorse right-wing authoritarian views: old-fashioned values, censorship, mighty leaders who fight evil, and suppression of troublemakers, freethinkers, women, and homosexuals.

The background of people who become extremists features limited intergroup contact—few out-group neighbors, acquaintances, and friends. Nor do extremists value such contact. They also tend to be less educated than moderates, for reasons not fully clear, although one might speculate that a liberal education broadens people's appreciation of different values.

WHAT REDUCES BIAS?

Given subtle biases that are unconscious and indirect, change is a challenge, resisting frontal assault. Similarly, given blatant biases rooted in perceived threat to group interests and core values, direct confrontation will likely fail again. Instead, more nuanced means do work.

Education does help. Economic opportunity does help. Moreover, for decades, social psychologists have studied the positive effects of constructive intergroup contact that increases mutual appreciation (Pettigrew, 1998a): When contact features (a) equal status within the immediate setting, (b) shared

goals, (c) cooperation in pursuit of those goals, and (d) authorities' support, it provides a basis for intergroup friendship. Genuine intergroup friendships demonstrably do reduce stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination of whatever sort.

WHERE NOW?

Much is known, but much remains to be learned. Promising lines of research range from imaging brain activity beyond the amygdala, to specifying intergroup emotions beyond mere antipathy, to explaining stereotype content beyond mere lists of negative traits, to predicting discrimination in all its guises, to assessing people's control over their own seemingly automatic reactions (Fiske, 2000). Bias researchers will not be unemployed any time soon.

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