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CHAPTER 10

Acceptance and Mindfulness for Undermining Prejudice

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Prejudice toward individuals based on their group memberships is a major source of human misery. Extreme manifestations of prejudice include many of the most horrific, large-scale acts of violence such as genocide, racial wars, and terrorism. Discrimination based on group status can be observed in central domains of society including employment, housing, education, health care, judicial systems, and financial systems (e.g., Pager & Shepherd, 2008). In addition to the direct consequences of such discrimination, these experiences negatively impact the physical and mental health of those who are discriminated against (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Prejudice is an important target for reducing human suffering and improving the quality of life of people belonging to marginalized groups.

The Psychological Flexibility Model of Prejudice

The psychological flexibility model (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006) identifies prejudice as a generalized verbal process that involves normal and useful language abilities gone awry. Thus, prejudicial thoughts can be difficult to change directly. Promoting psychological flexibility via cognitive defusion, acceptance, mindfulness, and values-based processes should reduce the impact of prejudice without having to directly change automatic thought content and subsequently decrease discriminatory behavior while promoting more pro-social behavior.

Prejudice as a generalized verbal process. We define prejudice as the objectification and dehumanization of people as a result of their participation in evaluative verbal categories. This expansive definition includes bias and discrimination directed at any group that can be identified by a verbal label, such as "Black," "White," "gay," "Muslim," or "woman," as well as "poor," "psychotic," "addict," "handicapped," "obese," and so on. This definition also highlights the role of language processes that make acts of bias and discrimination possible.

There has been a number of studies demonstrating that prejudiced attitudes toward various groups tend to co-occur and comprise a single latent variable (e.g., Bäckström & Björklund, 2007). Individuals who are biased against African Americans are likely to be prejudiced toward other ethnic minority groups, women, sexual minorities, and so on. This suggests that prejudice may involve a general process of having biases and engaging in discrimination toward individuals based on their group status in verbal evaluative categories, rather than being constrained to biases toward any one specific group. If this is the case, then interventions may be more efficacious if they can target the verbal processes that underlie prejudice, as opposed to focusing on the content of beliefs and biases toward specific groups.

Prejudice is the result of normal language abilities. The same verbal processes involved in prejudice (categorization, association, evaluation) are useful and reinforced in everyday life. The ability to socially categorize and arbitrarily relate verbal categories is learned early in childhood (Berens & Hayes, 2007; Kohlenberg, Hayes, & Hayes, 1991), and there is nothing to prevent irrelevant and potentially harmful distinctions of all kinds from entering into verbally defined and evaluated groupings. The evaluation of verbal categories is a central verbal skill, key to both problem solving and prejudice (Barnes-Holmes, Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). In other words, the same process that allows you to evaluate that your "car" is "broken or undesirable," which can result in behaviors that attempt to get it running again, can also lead to evaluating a "gay" person as "broken or undesirable," which can result in discriminatory behavior. In addition, stereotyping reduces the cognitive burden of understanding a complex social environment, making it useful despite obvious costs (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994).

These normal language processes (i.e., categorizing, associating, evaluating) can occur relatively automatically and without conscious awareness. Unfortunately, this also applies to prejudice. Research on implicit cognition during the past few decades shows that many individuals, including those who deny prejudiced attitudes, maintain implicit (i.e., automatic, unconscious) racial biases (Greenwald,

Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009). These implicit biases are important, as they can subtly influence discriminatory actions in a variety of ways even if one is unaware of them (Dasgupta, 2004).

Prejudice is rigid and resistant to change particularly in form. New ideas are resisted if they conflict with old ways of thinking (Moxon, Keenan, & Hine, 1993), suppressing unwanted thoughts can increase their frequency and intensity (Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000), and implicit cognition occurs automatically and potentially outside of one's awareness (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Given this, some researchers have questioned the feasibility of directly changing prejudicial thoughts (Bargh, 1999; Lillis & Hayes, 2007).

An alternative approach is to reduce the impact of prejudice without having to directly modify prejudicial thought or emotional content. Such a focus could decrease discriminatory behavior effectively, while promoting more prosocial behavior via the use of values-based processes.

Emerging Trends in Prejudice-Reduction Efforts

There have been substantial efforts across a range of fields to combat prejudice (Paluck & Green, 2009). Within this vast literature, there are emerging trends that highlight the relevance of psychological flexibility processes for reducing prejudice. This chapter will review a selection of this research in the context of the psychological flexibility model. We will then describe a psychological flexibility intervention approach to reducing prejudice.

Discouraging social pressure and thought suppression. A common prejudice-reduction approach is to leverage social influence processes. Examples include social norms messages (e.g., Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001), expert opinions (e.g., Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998), and the variety of direct and indirect societal messages stating racism is bad and one should not be racist. Although there is a commonsense

appeal to these approaches, research indicates that when regulating prejudice is driven by such external motivators (i.e., social pressure), there can be a paradoxical *increase* in prejudice attitudes and behavior (e.g., Legault, Gutsell, & Inzlicht, 2011).

External motivation alone may lead to increases in prejudice in part because it can motivate ineffective suppression strategies (Hausmann & Ryan, 2004). When there is social pressure to not appear prejudiced and it is "wrong" to have prejudiced thoughts, it makes sense that individuals would turn to trying to push prejudiced thoughts out of their mind. Such suppression efforts produce a subsequent increase in prejudiced thoughts as well as discriminatory behaviors toward the target group (e.g., Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Thus, interventions focusing on external social pressure and suppressing prejudiced thoughts can increase prejudice, suggesting that psychological flexibility interventions emphasizing personal values relevant to prejudice reduction, as well as acceptance and defusing from prejudiced thoughts, may be a more effective alternative.

Enhancing internal motivation. A recent trend has been examining the benefits of increasing internal or self-determined motivation for regulating prejudice (i.e., motivators based on personal relevance and importance as well as a sense of autonomy and choice). Research has shown that higher internal motivation is related to more effective prejudice regulation, even when one's self-control resources are depleted (Legault, Green-Demers, & Eadie, 2009), and that interventions emphasizing internal motivation for regulating prejudice can reduce both explicit and implicit prejudice (Legault et al., 2011). Another related study found that highlighting one's most important values eliminated racial discrimination in a job candidate rating task (Fein & Spencer, 1997). These studies suggest that enhancing motivation linked to chosen, personally relevant goals and values is a promising avenue for prejudice reduction.

Increasing awareness of automatic prejudices. More common, subtle forms of contemporary prejudice (i.e., modern racism) share a

common characteristic in which individuals deny explicit prejudice beliefs but nonetheless demonstrate implicit biases (Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011). This disconnection between explicit and implicit beliefs may be due to a lack of awareness of or willingness to admit one's prejudice biases. An important step in targeting this form of prejudice is to raise awareness of one's prejudiced reactions and biases so that their influence on one's behavior can be modulated (Monteith & Mark, 2005). In line with this approach, one study found that actively encouraging awareness of moments when one was prejudiced as part of a larger prejudice-reduction intervention reduced discriminatory behavior among individuals with low explicit and high implicit prejudice (Son Hing, Li, & Zanna, 2002).

Promoting cognitive flexibility and perspective taking. A number of studies have found empirical support for prejudice-reduction interventions that seek to alter the process of favoring perceived in-groups over out-groups by targeting the salience of particular group statuses (Paluck & Green, 2009). These contextual interventions expand and elaborate on perceived group statuses, reducing the emphasis on "us" vs. "them." Studies have also found that perspective-taking manipulations such as writing about or imagining what someone belonging to a minority group might be thinking and feeling can reduce explicit and implicit prejudice as well as increase empathy and positive interactions with individuals belonging to minority groups (e.g., Shih, Wang, Bucher, & Stotzer, 2009; Todd et al., 2011; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).

Increasing contact. Increasing contact with individuals belonging to marginalized groups is one of the most well-known approaches to prejudice reduction. A meta-analysis of 515 studies found strong empirical support for the impact of increased contact on reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Effects were particularly strong when contact occurred under ideal conditions including equality, cooperation, authority support, and a shared goal (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Research suggests that increased liking, empathy, and self-disclosure as well as decreased intergroup anxiety may account for

how intergroup contact reduces prejudice (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007). In addition, personal importance of contact is a key variable in predicting whether increased contact leads to prejudice reduction (Van Dick et al., 2004).

Summary. This selective review highlights emerging trends consistent with a psychological flexibility approach to prejudice reduction, which we will present in the following section. Within the prejudice-reduction field, researchers are exploring methods focused on how to deal with prejudiced thoughts, motivation, and intergroup behaviors. Researchers have begun to develop and evaluate approaches consistent with psychological flexibility sensibilities: teaching awareness and flexibility with prejudiced thoughts, discouraging thought-suppression strategies, emphasizing internal motivation for prejudice reduction rather than external motivation, promoting perspective taking, and encouraging intergroup interactions situated within a cooperative, prosocial context. We now turn to a discussion of how the psychological flexibility model brings these features together into an integrated mindfulness-, acceptance-, and values-based approach to prejudice reduction.

A Psychological Flexibility Intervention for Reducing Prejudice

The psychological flexibility approach uses acceptance and mindfulness processes to reduce the impact of prejudicial thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes; it also uses values and behavior change processes to promote behavior more consistent with chosen ideals. The approach is experiential in nature, utilizing metaphors and exercises to create a context promoting psychological flexibility. We will walk through each component and provide rationale, exercises, and a discussion of relevant issues. These strategies come from a study that tested a brief prejudice-reduction intervention for college students (Lillis & Hayes, 2007).

Reducing the impact of prejudicial thoughts and stereotypes. The psychological flexibility model assumes that prejudice is the result of normal language processes (categorization, association, evaluation), making them hard to change directly. Thus, an important component of this approach is to undermine the literal *impact* of thoughts, without trying to change the form or frequency of thoughts. This approach is nontraditional and could be seen as controversial. However, we are not saying that *behaving* in prejudiced and discriminatory ways is acceptable. Rather we are saying that there is substantial evidence to support targeting the process of thinking as opposed to the content of thoughts in order to produce behavior change.

An important first step is illustrating the automatic and additive nature of thoughts through experiential exercises. For example, you can tell participants that it is important to remember the answer to this question (playing it up for dramatic and irreverent effect). The question: "What should I plant?" The answer: "Carrots and peas." Have them repeat that answer to your question a few times playfully. Discuss that, with just a few moments of mere exposure to these words and this association, they now might have "carrots and peas" as a recurring thought for some time. You can continue by asking them to simply forget "carrots and peas" or have the answer to the question "What should I plant?" be something else entirely. This will be hard to do, illustrating the point that verbal relations work more by addition as opposed to subtraction.

This can be followed by simply asking participants to complete common phrases, such as "There's no place like...[home]" or "Only the good die...[young]." After running through a number of these, discuss the nature of "programming," automatic thoughts our minds give us that can be prompted by context. Thoughts are a product of our history. We have been exposed to massive amounts of words from parents, family members, peers, teachers, media, the Internet, and so on. Although it often feels like our thoughts are important and true, they are also automatic and historical, like "carrots and peas."

The next step would be to have participants observe these processes in relation to prejudicial stimuli. For example, participants can be asked to "notice their programming" by completing statements

in writing, such as "Most Black people tend to..." or "People who live in this country and don't speak the language are..." or "Being gay is..." It is important to create a safe space where participants can simply be aware of and watch these verbal processes without having to suppress or censor what shows up in order to promote awareness of the automatic nature of thoughts. The ensuing discussion should validate the normality of whatever thought content showed up, while continuously pointing to the historical and automatic nature of the thoughts themselves. If thoughts are arbitrary and historical, perhaps treating them as true and important is not warranted.

Additional exercises can be used to provide multiple examples for undermining the literal nature of thoughts. For example, have participants repeat a word out loud until only the sound remains, a technique known to reduce the believability and distressing impact of thoughts (e.g., Masuda, Hayes, Sackett, & Twohig, 2004). It may also be useful to have participants imagine their thoughts coming from a "biased radio" that constantly generates prejudicial thoughts. Teaching the distinction between "noticing" and "buying into" a thought can also be helpful. Each of these exercises is designed to promote mindful awareness of the process of thinking and create psychological distance from thought content, thus undermining the literal nature and impact of biased thoughts.

Mindfulness and acceptance of unwanted emotions. Humans have a strong tendency to try to reduce, eliminate, or change unwanted emotions, often referred to as experiential avoidance (Hayes et al., 2006). Experiential avoidance can reinforce prejudice. Consider the following example: A Caucasian teenager is taught that it is wrong to discriminate against people of a different race or ethnicity, and subsequently that "nervous" feeling around African Americans is evidence of prejudicial attitudes. In this scenario, it would not be surprising if the next time the teenager was in the presence of African American peers the feelings of anxiety *and now* guilt were present. The easiest way to avoid those feelings would be to avoid contact with African Americans altogether. This avoidance would function to reduce the unwanted feelings; however, it would have the effect of

limiting contact with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This reduced contact could serve to reinforce stereotypes and bias, as the teenager becomes less connected to the individual qualities and characteristics of each person, leaving only the verbal products of history to operate.

The psychological flexibility model promotes mindful awareness and acceptance of emotional experiences as they are and without struggle. The goal is to undermine experiential avoidance in the service of behaving consistently with chosen ideals. In our previous example, teaching the teenager acceptance skills could allow him to become aware of his emotions, reduce any struggle with emotions, and engage in desired behavior in the presence of anxiety and guilt, thus allowing him to build new behavioral patterns with respect to peers from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

A first step is to promote mindful awareness of emotional experiences through guided imagery. You can present a series of scenarios and ask participants to notice any emotional reactions or changes in their body. For example:

Imagine you are applying for a desirable job. You've been out of work, money is tight. You think you're the best candidate, your résumé is great, you interviewed well. Just get present with that... Then you find out that you're not getting the job, that the job went to another candidate, and that that candidate was a different race. Notice what happens with your body, and try to sit with it, without fighting or changing it... Check in with yourself, what did you feel? What race did you picture the other person to be?

It can be hard to notice unwanted emotional reactions. However it is important to point out the cost of avoidance. Suppressing emotions makes it difficult to remain in the present moment, harming one's ability to experience and connect with another person. As described earlier, it also creates a difficult standard that could inhibit diversity-seeking and prosocial behavior. The latter problem can be illustrated using a metaphor:

Imagine you are strapped to a chair above a shark tank with the world's most sensitive arousal detector, and you are told that all you have to do is stay completely relaxed, completely calm. If the detector registers any arousal in you, the seat will go out like a dunk tank at a carnival and you will be plunged into the water with the sharks. It is pretty obvious what would happen, no? Yet we often do this to ourselves. "I can't feel anxious at work!" Or "I can't feel uncomfortable around gay people!"

In processing the metaphor it can be useful to point out that while emotions may not be controllable, at least not all of the time, behavior is. For example, if we are asked to sing or else we would fall into the shark tank, we could do it. This distinction is key for building the foundation of the psychological flexibility approach to reducing prejudice. Instead of trying to control our own cognitive and emotional reactions to people and situations, focus on our behavior.

The alternative to suppression and avoidance is acceptance. Acceptance is making room for the full range of human emotions, allowing them to come and go without struggle. Acceptance is like holding emotions gently in our hands as we move about. From an accepting stance, behavior can be more flexible, as opposed to directing effort toward suppression and avoidance, which could take the form of prejudice.

A number of experiential exercises can promote acceptance. Unwanted emotions can be imagined as objects with physical characteristics. Mindfulness-based exposure exercises can be used to track bodily sensations associated with different emotional experiences, breaking them down piece by piece. Or alternatively, emotions can be contacted and metaphorically "breathed into."

An important distinction is that acceptance is not about treating reactions as true or valid in a verbal sense. For example, if one feels anxious around White people, acceptance does *not* mean the anxiety is "true," that it is "right" to be anxious around White people. Acceptance means that in this moment anxiety is present, and one can be willing to experience anxiety in the service of behaving consistently with chosen ideals.

Promoting empathy via perspective-taking skills. Promoting empathy through perspective-taking exercises is another key component of the psychological flexibility approach. Perspective taking can help break down the dominance of categorical language functions and transform the experience of "us vs. them" to more of a "we." Often participants experience a sense of common humanity while simultaneously becoming more in contact with the varied individual characteristics of people. Virtually anything that facilitates taking the perspective of the "other" can be useful here. A sequence of exercises is described below.

Participants can be asked to identify an emotion they struggle with from time to time and try to remember the first time the emotion was experienced. Participants then write down the emotion, fold the piece of paper, and hold it in a closed-handed fist. Everyone is then asked to raise his or her hand and keep it raised as the facilitator verbally states increasing time periods (1 week, 1 month, 1 year, etc.). Participants put their hands down when the time period exceeded how old the emotion is. Typically most hands remain in the air for long time periods that extend into early childhood. The ensuing discussion highlights the ubiquity of human suffering.

In the next step, participants are asked to write their emotion on a name tag and place it on their chest. When all have completed, participants are guided through an observer exercise and asked to notice what it is like to wear their emotion "badge," with specific attention paid to the experience of noticing. The goal is contact with a stable sense of self, the noticing self. Participants are then asked to notice other participants' badges, to "climb behind the eyes" of each person, noticing what he or she might be thinking or feeling. A further iteration asks participants to notice the other person noticing them. As the exercise progresses, awareness is expanded and perspectives are shifted. For example, participants may be asked to notice what it was like to experience their badge as a young child, or conversely what it would have been like for another participant to experience their badge as a young child, and so on.

Clarifying values. Behavior change is the primary goal of psychological flexibility: both the reduction of discriminatory behavior and an

increase in prosocial and humanitarian action. Thus, clarifying values is another key component of the psychological flexibility model. As one becomes more free from the dominance of literal language (stereotypes, judgments, beliefs) and the pull to avoid unwanted cognitive and emotional experiences, values can become the guide for behavior.

A useful way to discuss values is to describe them like guides. For example, sailors used to use the stars as guides at night to let them know in which direction they were headed. Similarly, we can use our values as a "compass," letting us know that we are on track. At any point we can check in to see if we are moving "east" and orient back if we have strayed.

Values are not feelings. If one values being a loving person only when feelings of love are present, behavior will be inconsistent at best and harmful at worst. Therefore it is useful to discuss that values are a choice and that thoughts and emotions will do whatever they do as we pursue our values. Values should not be used as an attempt to make us feel or think a certain way.

Uncovering core values can be difficult. In dealing with prejudice, an appeal to relationship values can be helpful. One exercise asks participants to imagine being at their eighty-fifth birthday party and have each important person in their life speak about them and have them say what they would most want him or her to say. The goal is to imagine an ideal, if you were exactly the person you wanted to be in relation to the people you care about. Common themes include being a loving person, treating people with respect, being close and connected to others, being honest and open, and learning from others. Once these core values are present, they can be organized into values statements and broadened out to include a wider range of people: coworkers, members of one's town, state, country, and so on.

Behavioral commitments. The final piece of a psychological flexibility intervention for prejudice is making behavioral commitments: any activity designed to get participants exposed to new experiences and people can fit here, with specific attention to being mindful, defused, and accepting, while orienting to behavior

consistent with chosen values. For example, college students could be prompted to attend a social club or party in which they would be a minority member. Coworkers could be asked to work on committees together, and so on. This component is consistent with the vast literature supporting contact as an effective strategy for reducing prejudice. The psychological flexibility model, however, provides acceptance, mindfulness, and values skills that can increase the likelihood of positive contact experiences, as well as the motivation to engage in contact.

Evaluation. Research on the effect of psychological flexibility-based intervention for reducing prejudice is still in the early stages. However, a preliminary study revealed the favorable effects of this psychological flexibility-based intervention on increasing prosocial behavioral intentions at post and one-week follow-up, while improving defusion, mindfulness, and acceptance of prejudicial thoughts and biases (Lillis & Hayes, 2007).

Conclusion

Prejudice is widespread and difficult to impact due to the verbal processes involved. The psychological flexibility model presents an alternative to attempting to directly change prejudicial thoughts in form. Promoting mindful awareness, cognitive defusion, acceptance, and values-based processes can reduce the impact of prejudicial thought content and emotional reactions while orienting to prosocial values as a means for navigating behavior. Although evidence is still limited, extant conceptual and empirical works suggest this approach warrants further study.

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