

Deep Prejudice

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Prejudice, the "pre-judging" of people on the basis of ascribed characteristics, is ubiquitous. Modern societies differ from one another only in the degree to which certain groups are set apart from the social mainstream and consequently suffer inequality of opportunity and inequity of condition.

The Growth of Tolerance

The bad news is that sexism, racism, ageism, ethnic intolerance, religious bigotry, and all manner of other injustices persist in Western industrial societies despite calls for human rights all the way from the United Nations down to national, sub-national and even municipal governments, to say nothing of the efforts of well-meaning private individuals, associations and businesses. Fundamental conflicts remain and disputes continue to lead to ugly confrontations and physical violence.

The good news is that, thanks to political agitation and public consciousness, raising, attitudinal prejudice and behavioral discrimination are now regularly subjected to enforceable constraints. Although civil rights codes vary greatly with regard to the inventory of particular protections afforded and the specific minorities afforded protection, it is plain that the last several decades have witnessed measurable improvements in the way that we treat one another. Moreover, negotiation and compromise appear to have won support as the proper way to make right enduring patterns of injustice.

Strategies for Change

A number of methods have been adopted to promote inter-group fairness. Initiatives have been taken by governments to impose penalties on those who would, for example, deny housing, employment or access to education to members of various groups. Educational institutions now regularly include curricula dedicated to promoting mutual respect and understanding among people of different backgrounds. Many public and private corporations currently take responsibility for producing and enforcing procedures under which instances of discrimination and harassment can be identified and resolved. Less formally, there are numerous examples of communities which celebrate the diversity of their multicultural populations and affirm the worth of people whose identity and value has long been suppressed. These and other initiatives aimed at reducing prejudice and encouraging an appreciation of the richness of a pluralistic society are to be applauded. While much remains to be done, let no one dismiss the achievements of the recent past.

Successful human rights programs have normally take one of three forms.

- (1) First, there are "legalistic" approaches that require the identification of some demonstrable pattern or overt act of discrimination against which an aggrieved party can seek redress.
- (2) Second, there are "cultural" exercises which attempt to promote both social awareness and acceptance of the positive contributions made by others to the well-being of the community as a whole.
- (3) Third, there are "psychological" attempts to modify individual behaviour by promoting personal sensitivity toward others.

Probing Unconscious Prejudice

This article falls primarily into the third category and is intended for those who choose to dig a little more deeply than usual into inner feelings of personal prejudice. Our concern is that efforts to foster liberal values can sometimes be superficial and short-lived. Inducing people to partake of a meal from the culinary traditions of another culture or to rehearse the history of racism apparent in, for instance, the treatment of Japanese-American or Japanese-Canadian citizens during World War II may merely result in an ideology of recreational ethnicity lightly colored with perfunctory expressions of regret for wrongs now thankfully past.

What is offered here is a modest proposal intended to assist in the disclosure of unconscious prejudice - even among people who deny having personal social biases and among people of apparently open and tolerant expressed beliefs. The technique we propose is the semantic differential. It has several practical advantages: it is easy to use; it yields both immediate and longitudinal data on the existence and possible reduction of prejudicial opinions; it is non-threatening; it can, when properly explained, provide insights into the participants' own feelings toward others; and, not least, its apparently exotic character means that it can even appear to be fun.

The Semantic Differential

Semantic differential technique is well-known to professional social scientists. As innovations go, it has quite a long pedigree, for it builds upon psychological work in psychology and quantitative semantics that is over a half-century old. Developed by Charles Osgood and his colleagues, it has been applied cross-culturally with remarkably consistent results and, while claims for its universality must be treated with some skepticism, it appears to provide reliable data no matter where and when it is used (Osgood, 1952; Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum 1957; and Snider and Osgood, 1969).

Although it been around for some 50 years, many people were, perhaps without knowing it, first exposed to the diagnostic possibilities of the semantic differential through the Hollywood film, *The Three Faces of Eve*. Unfortunately, just as *Inherit the Wind* - in either the Lawrence and Lee play or the Spencer Tracy motion picture - had remarkably little to do with the Scopes trial, so the actual clinical effort to deal with multiple personality disorder had remarkably little to do with the doings of Joanne Woodward's character(s) in the movie. Still, there really was an "Eve" upon whom the film was based and it was the work of Osgood et al., which made her diagnosis and treatment possible (Thigpen and Cleckley, 1954).

Closer to the topic addressed here, James Snider's early work with Canadian school children remains a model for inquiries into prejudice using the semantic differential technique (Snider, 1962). In both cases, the semantic differential was used to gain access to ideas that were unconsciously held by real people.

The Theory

The idea behind semantic differential analysis is deceptively simple. It is based on the assumption that clues to the structure of prejudice can be obtained by inquiring into the psychological meaning of concepts and perceptions. Social stereotypes can be explored by inviting subjects to respond to specific items by checking that position on a seven-point bipolar adjective scale which best represents the direction and intensity (from "slightly through "quite" to "extremely") of the subject's judgment. So, to the word PACIFIST, a person might reply:

WEAK : X : : : : STRONG

This would indicate that the concept PACIFIST evokes a quite strong connotative association with WEAKNESS in the mind of this hypothetical subject.

The Method

A comprehensive interpretation depends upon subjects responding to a concept in terms of a series of scales. Subjects are given a number of sheets of paper with the specific concept to be studied (e.g. PACIFIST) at the top and a series of scales below. Subjects are then instructed to mark on the paper the degree to which a PACIFIST strikes the subject as HARD or SOFT, GOOD or BAD, SIMPLE or COMPLICATED, etc. It is critical that the subject quickly note down first impressions rather than engage in careful reflection. The questionnaire may appear bizarre or even meaningless but, if the subjects are encouraged to treat the matter seriously, important data can be gleaned.

Scales that can be used are contained in figure 1; they have all been tested for their validity and form a satisfactory data base for the sophisticated tools of factor analysis. For most heuristic purposes, however, simple averaging of the results will be adequate.

Interpretation

Once the questionnaires are completed, their results can produce an aggregate profile of attitudes toward the concept under study, the basis of comparisons of attitudes toward several concepts or an in-depth analysis of any individual subject.

The fundamental method is quite unpretentious. The scales suggested here break down into four groups:

- (1) Evaluation (bright / dark, good / bad, beautiful / ugly, pleasant / unpleasant);
- (2) Activity (angular / rounded, fast / slow, sharp / dull, active / passive);
- (3) Understandability (understandable / mysterious, simple / complicated, predictable/unpredictable, familiar / strange);
- (4) Potency (deep / shallow, heavy / light, rugged / delicate, strong / weak).

By assigning values from one to seven to each of the scaled items and then averaging the values in each group of scales, a general measure of the fundamental perceptions of a concept will emerge. Thus, if a subject reacted to the concept of pacifist thus:

DARK : : : : X : BRIGHT

GOOD : : X : : : : BAD

UGLY : : : X : : : BEAUTIFUL

PLEASANT : X : : : : UNPLEASANT

The overall evaluation of PACIFIST by the subject would be positive (Bright = 6; Good= 5; Beautiful = 4; Pleasant = 6: Total = 21 and Average = 5.2). It should be noted that the adjectives and the scales identified here are merely representative of available and well-tested semantic dimensions and readers are referred to the classic texts by Osgood and others identified herein both for additional scientifically validated scales and for some methodological cautions against using just any polar adjectives that seem relevant.

Applications

What emerges semantic differentiation is a mathematical description of the connotative or emotive meanings of concepts. If, for example, responses to the such concepts MEN and WOMEN or ENGLISH and FRENCH were calculated and compared, the result would allow for an accurate assessment both of the subjects' core attitudes toward these groups and a measure for comparing those attitudes with one another.

One obvious practical application would be to average the responses of all participants toward a number of ethnic groups at the start of a program in, for instance, "multicultural awareness." If the first results were not disclosed at the beginning and the process was repeated at the end, a comparison of the two sets of responses would provide an immediate and accurate reflection of the degree and direction of attitudinal changes, irrespective of the subjects' expressed opinions.

Even if taken only once and discussed in terms of possible explanations for why attitudes toward different groups vary, a diagnosis of stereotypes can be pursued. While subjects may be unwilling to admit to bluntly prejudicial opinions or may even loudly disclaim biases, they will usually respond well to this type of questionnaire and then be compelled to encounter their own deep attitudes when asked why their answers favored one group over another. By thus bringing prejudices into the open, rather than by encouraging their repression under a thin veneer of public politeness, opportunities for valuable social therapy arise.

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FIGURE 1: CONCEPT TO BE INVESTIGATED

(Ethnic group, religious denomination, age cohort gender identification, political movement, etc.)

Instructions:

Think for a moment about the group mentioned above and then quickly place an "X" on each of the scales below indicating the degree to which the group strikes you as closer to one or the other adjective. If no answer comes to you quickly, simply mark the middle space.

DARK ::::: BRIGHT

ANGULAR ::::: ROUNDED

MYSTERIOUS ::::: UNDERSTANDABLE

FAST ::::: SLOW

DEEP ::::: SHALLOW

GOOD ::::: BAD

DULL ::::: SHARP

LIGHT ::::: HEAVY

RUGGED ::::: DELICATE

ACTIVE ::::: PASSIVE

WEAK ::::: STRONG

PREDICTABLE ::::: UNPREDICTABLE

DARK ::::: BRIGHT

GOOD ::::: BAD

UGLY ::::: BEAUTIFUL

PLEASANT ::::: UNPLEASANT

FAMILIAR ::::: UNFAMILIAR