

Sources of bias beyond the individual



Two articles in *Nature Reviews Psychology* shift the focus of research on racial bias from individual-level biases to the systemic, structural and historic forces that shape them.

At *Nature Reviews Psychology* we – like many psychologists – believe that psychology can and should be used to learn how to address societal problems. However, social psychology has historically studied social phenomena at the individual level (that is, how individuals perceive, reason about and interact with other individuals), which limits the kind of solutions that the research suggests. For example, if racial discrimination reflects individual attitudes, then it follows that targeting individual biases should promote a more equitable society by reducing individual prejudices. This logic underlies the popularity of implicit bias training, which has been deployed on a massive scale to ostensibly improve diversity, equity and inclusion within organizations by changing people’s underlying attitudes¹.

However, there is growing recognition that individual-level social processes are shaped by the political, economic and social structures in which the individual is embedded². Consequently, an individual-level intervention to reduce racial bias is unlikely to have a large or long-lasting effect if there are systemic biases in broader societal structures: after the intervention, the individual will return to the world where they will continue to interact with the systems and structures that create and reinforce biases and inequality. Indeed, the effects of implicit bias training on attitudes are weak³ and short-lived⁴, and therefore have little bearing on actual behaviour.

In a *Review* in this issue, Skinner-Dorkenoo et al. consider how systemic factors shape individual-level racial biases, and how individual-level biases in turn shape systems and institutions. The article makes clear that systemic factors – power and privilege, cultural narratives and values, racial segregation, shared cultural stereotypes and nonverbal signals – are critical to the development of individual racial biases, and therefore systemic change is needed to reduce or eliminate individual bias that stems from these factors. However, the authors propose that psychological interventions based on teaching children about race and racism, raising awareness of racial biases, close intergroup contact and education about the history of racial injustices can limit the effects of systemic factors in the interim.

Skinner-Dorkenoo et al. note that the systemic factors that they review reflect the specific historical context of the USA, and they consider historical narratives as one factor that contributes to the development of individual-level racial biases. This historical discussion dovetails with a Perspective by Lei et al.⁵ published earlier this year, which

considers how historical context shapes representations of social categories. Specifically, Lei et al. propose that social prototypes of people reflect ideals about what members of social categories should be like, as defined by the dominant cultural perspective within society and by their historical origins. For example, the history of white men colonizing the land that became the USA serves as the foundation for contemporary US social structures and norms. Thus, according to Lei et al., social prototypes for different subordinated groups of people in the USA should be based on that group’s specific history of exploitation by white men. Lei et al. go on to demonstrate the utility of this sociohistorical model by illustrating how it can reconcile existing theories to explain intersectional gender–racial prototypes (for example, prototypes of Black men and Asian women).

Both Skinner-Dorkenoo et al. and Lei et al. focus on the USA because this is where most research on racial bias has been conducted. Indeed, Lei et al. suggest that ‘race’ in the USA might be a unique construct compared to, for example, western Europe (where ethnicity and/or nationality have largely replaced considerations of ‘race’) or more homogeneous countries with few minority ethnic groups. Moreover, a key point of both articles is that systemic factors and social prototypes will vary across countries and regions owing to their unique social structures and histories, thereby limiting generalization. However, there are certainly parallel issues throughout the world – although the centrality of race to group-based discrimination might be unique to the USA, the USA is not the only place where structural power differentials between groups that arose from sociohistorical contexts play out in contemporary inequities.

Progress on social issues throughout the world critically depends on understanding how a country or region’s unique context and history feed into present-day individual-level social processes. We look forward to seeing this approach applied to non-USA contexts, and to showcasing how such developments can promote a more just world.

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