

Understanding Human Thoughts, Behaviors, and Social Influence to Counter Racial Discrimination

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ABSTRACT

In light of the rising societal tension and critical importance of systemic response, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the Stop AAPI Hate movement, many have reexamined the role that discrimination plays on their perception of others. This paper recounts how racial discrimination is currently affecting society holistically and how in particular it affects African American Youth. The paper will then utilize current literature on the psychological aspect of discrimination in order to solidify a clearer understanding of human behaviors and thoughts with regard to racial discrimination. Lastly, this paper will illustrate how public institutions can extend their preexisting diversifying efforts using the key concepts of Moscovici's minority influence theory in order to combat this systematic problem.

Introduction

Racism is viewed as a set of beliefs, ideas, attitudes, stereotypes, or motives held by individuals (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Racism can manifest itself into discrimination, in which racial minorities are subject to societal disadvantages and detriments to their safety and mental health. In 2020, 5227 reports of hate crimes based on the single bias of race were recorded by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)'s Uniform Crime Reporting Program. Lee, Perez, Boykin, and Mendoza-Denton (2019) sampled over 3,700 respondents from the Pew Research data and reported that 63.1% of Black, Hispanic, and Asian respondents are facing discriminatory experiences. These numbers indicate that racial discrimination is still widely present in America despite the establishment of multiple laws against discrimination to the right to vote, a fair trial, government services, and public education. Why is progress so slow and this misfortune of indignation widespread?

One psychological theory known as the Marley Hypothesis can be an explanation. The Marley hypothesis refers to the racial group differences in perception of racism that reflect denial and ignorance about past racism, especially from the dominant group (Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013). Marley Hypothesis suggests that lack of experiencing discriminant treatments on the part of the dominant group (in this case, the White majority) can be an important factor contributing to ignoring or undervaluing needs for equity. Society must address racial discrimination by recognizing how discrimination is experienced and also perceived in the lives of ethnic groups.

Educational and Societal Impacts of Racism on African American Youth

One group that has been disproportionately impacted by structural and historical discrimination is African American youth. Racially discriminatory experiences within this marginalized group have been associated with lower academic performance, achievement expectations and motivation, and depressive and problematic behaviors, and poor psychological well-being (Varner, et al, 2020). African American youth has been subject to a significantly higher racial profiling. A study that investigated racial profiling of Black youth in Toronto found

that Black youth were subject to a disproportionate amount of stops with regards to gun, traffic, drug, and suspicious activities (Meng, 2017). Similarly, an analysis conducted by the English Ministry of Justice found that Black defendants were almost 20% more likely to be sent to jail for similar offenses than their white counterparts, and the average prison sentence for Black defendants was seven months longer (Pitts, 2015).

These findings indicate that even judges and law enforcement officers who are supposedly knowledgeable and highly trained are not free from potential bias they hold. A study done from Florida State University, the University of Georgia and Southern Illinois University-Carbondale suggests that this may occur due to racial stereotypes that link African Americans to social problems such as crime, violence, disorder, and poverty (Stewart et al., 2009). Together, these studies tell us that paying attention to how equity and fairness are experienced across demographic groups where discrimination must not exist are critical.

Understanding Behavioral Aspects of Racism through Research

Although many consider expressing bigotry and animosity as racial discriminatory behaviors, they exist in many forms, including harassment, stereotyping, and appropriation according to the U.S Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. These offenses are downright immoral. To combat the issue, it is first important to understand what factors drive racism. Caughy, O'Campo, and Muntaner (2004) examined how African American parents' responses to racism experiences impacted their children's mental health and anxiety. Their study conducted in Baltimore neighborhoods confirmed that parents who actively addressed racism by confronting perpetrating individuals or taking actions saw their preschool children suffer less from depression and anxiety measured by the Child Behavior Checklist scale. To measure response behaviors toward racism, these researchers used two measures, one for denial of experiences and the other for coping strategies. Using the RaLES-B scale (Racism and Life Experiences Scale), they captured how African American parents experienced discriminatory treatments ranging from never to every time to themselves and to neighbors, and scores were aggregated to capture their degree of denials. The coping part asked six questions for emotional coping and three items for behavioral coping. Those researchers also included additional individual and neighborhood level variables, such as participants' socio-economic-status and neighborhood crime rates. A research study like this demonstrates how the extent and resolution of racism can be assessed by studying behaviors, such as denying and coping.

Understanding Structuration of Discrimination through Research on Human Thoughts

Discriminatory behaviors are the materialization of bias, which comprises human thoughts. Although most people would want to be seen as reasonable and bias-free, research shows that there is a long list of cognitive biases prevalent among even highly educated people. Cognitive bias ranges from a blatant and explicit bias, such as ethnocentrism to more nuanced and subtle beliefs. For instance, theory of confirmation bias tells us that people favor information that confirms their beliefs. How people favor watching particular news channels only or consume recommended videos that reflect their preferences over research evidence are good examples. When it comes to racism and discrimination, research on group identification has a rich body of literature.

In one frequently cited work, social psychologist Marilynn Brewer (2007) states that intergroup relations arise from individuals' natural desire to establish ingroups and outgroups for belonging and attachment, and ingroup favoritism is the origin and driver of intergroup discrimination. The American Psychological Association defines ingroup bias as the tendency to favor one's own group, its members, its characteristics, and its products, particularly in reference to other groups. According to Brewer, prejudice and discrimination against outgroups can intensify when people see such a view helps them acquire resources, status, and support more effectively within their ingroup. Another similar and familiar concept can be homophily, that is well captured

by the phrase - birds of the same feathers flock together. Although this aspect of the phenomenon may seem rather harmless, the adversarial and detrimental effect of ingroup bias is a polarization of different groups.

Gaertner and Dovidio (2005) pointed out that racial discrimination has a long history in America. They said that earlier manifestation through bigotry and supremacy changed into a more subtle form known as aversive racism, a view that most educated and well-intended Whites support racial equality and egalitarianism, yet in reality, many hold negative feelings toward ethnic minorities, especially in economic choice situations. They also noted that the White group in the U.S. has been taught and raised to approach race with different cultural and class codes. They tested their hypothesis through victim-helping situations - how the Whites helped the other White or Black victim under having other witnesses or not. Their simulated setting reported that when witnesses were not perceived to be present, their helping behaviors were reduced substantially indicating conformity.

How the Concept of Social and Minority Influence Can Help?

When considering a long-term solution to preventing discriminatory behavior, it is vital to focus on revealing and uprooting racial prejudices rather than simply enacting policies or viewpoints. Social influence is a concept that can effectively counter racial stereotypes and prejudices. The American Psychology Association defines social influence as a change and changing process in thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors by actual or perceived presence of other people. Minority influence, a type of social influence, focuses specifically on how a minority group can change the views of the majority group. Gordijn and colleagues' (2002) experimental study with 55 students at the University of Amsterdam found that a minority is most influential when they are perceived to be growing in number and popularity. Through three related experiments, they compared how racism-related attitudes and thoughts changed in response to the size and strength of the voice from the group, and importantly, results supported the claim that elaborating issue-specific and relevant messages from the expanding minority group helped improve the minority point of view. They also cautioned how such effects could be limited to low self-relevance from the majority group. In a similar vein, a study done by Steven Wu (2021) reported that cities with more Black officers at the leadership level were positively associated with lower per capita civilian death rates caused by officer shootings. Wu (2021) stated that this effect may be due to the cultural emphasis that Black police chiefs may put on deescalating civilian and officer encounters, thus demonstrating how diversity efforts can impact the racial prejudices of a majority group if the minority group appears to be powerful or expanding.

Findings from these studies provide research evidence and support for how racial minorities can be a positive and capable source for influencing cultural norms in group interactions as well as how the enhancement of diversity representation can be helpful in dealing with societal problems. Both are practical and life affecting concerns that should further be researched as more diversity and inclusion efforts are implemented these days. The presence, expansion, and interaction of attitudes, thoughts, voice, and acts of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging - opportunities and constraints surrounding ethnic groups are rich realms of which research and practice must continue so that we can live in a more harmonious and culturally enriching world.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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