

Difference and the psychology of conflict

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IN February 2004 David Goodhart wrote a provocative piece for *Prospect* magazine entitled 'Too diverse'. The article questioned whether Britain was becoming too diverse to sustain 'a good society and the welfare state'. Reprinted in *The Guardian* (see tinyurl.com/3bsd5), the article generated a wide and heated debate among academics and policy makers on a host of issues associated with difference, not least intergroup conflict, immigration, xenophobia, segregation and integration. But where were the psychologists?

Such episodes should ring alarm bells within the discipline. Here are topics that would seem central to our business and yet psychology is often notable only for its absence from debates or more formal inquisitions. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry is a high-profile example with its far-reaching consequences for race relations in the UK but no visible input from the psychological community (see tinyurl.com/awold).

Humankind has struggled with the psychology of human difference since at least neolithic times, and yet psychologists do not leap to present coherent and comprehensive answers as to why this should be the case. Nationally and internationally, 'difference' stories are ever-present in the news. They may range in scope from wars to more localised 'them and us' disputes, but the one constant in all these conflicts is difference.

Facing the task of explaining this canker of the human condition, we would do well to note that, as scientist, the psychologist is



It's the Society's 'Year of Reducing Conflict', but JOHN KREMER and IAN SCHERBRUCKER believe that shouldn't always be our goal.

often viewed by wider society as a possessor of truth whereas in reality all too often we remain surrounded by uncertainties and more questions than answers (Haslam & McGarty, 2001). To enter these heady debates it is necessary to make clear the partial nature of the story we are telling, that it is an early articulation of a journey that is far from complete and that only particular issues have been studied and even then only from certain perspectives, both within and without the discipline. It would be both presumptuous and preposterous to imagine that psychology has all the answers, but at the very least we should be prepared to reflect on how far contemporary psychology can move towards explaining why difference and conflicts based on difference remain the Gordian Knot of the human condition.

The theory - Painting by numbers?

Reservations and modesty aside, psychology does have interesting things to say about difference and associated conflicts; things which can make people think and which they may not have the chance to hear elsewhere. Furthermore,

while it is surprising that there is no coherent, established 'psychology of diversity' it is encouraging that psychological findings relating to difference, arising from various sources, do all seem to underline a similar message – that we simplify and by simplifying, we create the ideal conditions for conflict.

To be specific, Allport's (1954) early proposition that processes of categorisation, prejudice and group bias are banal aspects of the human condition has been confirmed by subsequent research (Tajfel, 1981). People divide their social world into useful categories of ingroups and outgroups, just as they divide the world of possessions into mine and theirs. They label these groups and then attribute to them aspects of nature, called stereotypes, just as they might label furniture of various appearances as tables and chairs. We know that chairs are for sitting on and tables are for putting on. But given a moment for conscious deliberation we might acknowledge that a particular table would be better suited for sitting on than many chairs are, or that a certain chair is very useful for putting things on. On the whole, however, people's lives are too busy to take

a highly complex social environment can be speedily simplified, and this process clarifies our thoughts as to where we fit in this world.

Alongside this tendency to categorise our world there exists a set of psychological mechanisms that confirm these categories. Information that is consistent with our conception of a particular category is remembered more easily than information that would undermine it (Rothbart *et al.*, 1979). When we ask questions, we are guided by the nature of the categories to which people belong, and tend to receive category confirming responses (Leyens *et al.*, 1994). We also seem to prefer information that supports our thoughts and feelings about established categories over information that undermines (Johnstone & Macrae, 1994), and we prefer people who behave in ways we expect given the nature of the social categories to which they belong (Brown *et al.*, 1999). There is also evidence to suggest that the way we behave is, in part, influenced by the ways in which we are seen by others (Darley & Fazio, 1980). In its most insidious form this tendency can provoke low levels of attainment among members of groups who are falsely stigmatised as possessing low levels of ability (Steele, 1997).

Throughout human history the discernment of these social groups has been exploited for every conceivable purpose: from the most sophisticated of political enterprises (including imperialism and colonialism), to the satisfaction of the most fundamental human desires (including approval, prestige, friendship and love, a sense of belonging, self-enhancement, or just living in a comprehensible world among others worthy of trust: Fiske, 2000). In return the group is given loyalty, which has been of most interest to psychologists in respect of social influence (in particular conformity). There is a rich history of research showing that we have a tendency to conform to the majority standard of our social groups (Asch, 1956) while denying this is happening, even to the extent of misremembering the details of the event (Buehler & Griffin, 1994) and decrying the non-conformist to the rest of the group (Marques *et al.*, 2001).

The tendency towards conformity and the sanctions faced by the 'other' serve, in turn, to undermine the effectiveness of the group by stifling individuality or

difference. Group members will tend to emphasise the majority opinion, whether conservative or radical. This will cause the group opinion to be more emphatic than most of the individual members' own private opinions, manifesting itself in well-known phenomena including group polarisation and groupthink.

The attempt to knit these various strands of thought together is to stretch a meagre amount of material across an enormous body of uncertainty. But the image of humanity that emerges is a dispiriting one and largely at odds with our own, introspective, sense of self. The persons presented here are greatly concerned with clarity and simplicity, with black and white, and less so with truth; they bind themselves and others into falsely apprehended social groups, and then lead their lives in accordance with the dictates of these groups; the groups themselves are emphatic but misguided. Very often the consequences of these social psychological processes are relatively benign, on other occasions the consequences are catastrophic – as the war-torn history of humankind bleakly reveals. However, implicit within psychology's disquieting version of humanity is the notion that we can, by becoming aware of these failings, seek to overcome them. It is here that the imperative turns inevitably from theory to practice.

The practice – OI' blue eyes isn't black

While conflicts based on difference are played out on stages of all sizes, some relatively benign (e.g. sport), others less so (e.g. war), to date interventions have tended to be most common at the micro rather than the macro level (in particular in relation to education and the workplace). Looking at the expansive applied literature in this area (e.g. Jones & Clements, 2002), two things are immediately apparent. First, with few notable exceptions (e.g. Stockdale & Crosby, 2003; Whittlesey, 2001), most conflict practitioners are non-psychologists. Second, from a psychological perspective many practitioners can be accused of either missing or ignoring the psychological target. To illustrate, while diversity training may be flavour of the month very often it seems to leave a bitter taste as participants struggle to understand the relevance or take on board the underlying rationale (see tinyurl.com/877c2). Yes, this training can bring to mind the experiences of others, but

account of such nuances and the label itself is sufficient to guide subsequent actions.

This process of simplification is enhanced by our taking greater account of some categories than others. Features of socially important categories, such as gender, race and age, can be detected generally within milliseconds of laying eyes on another person (Banaji & Hardin, 1996). This is particularly so if the social category differs from the 'cultural standard' or representative social category of a society. Thus in many androcentric societies, women's gender is recognised more quickly than men's, probably because the social category 'female' stands out from the societal norm 'male' (Zarate & Sandoval, 1995). We can speedily ascertain who is who, who is potentially interesting or dangerous, and, more especially, who is different.

The 'black and white' convenience of these social divisions is enhanced by a tendency to notice differences between members of different groups but similarities between members of the same group (Capozza & Nanni, 1986). This is particularly so with outgroups or groups to which the perceiver does not belong – 'they' are seen as much the same, even if 'we' have frequent associations with them (Brewer & Lui, 1984).

These processes of categorisation are dynamic in nature, with excitatory and inhibitory cognitive mechanisms promoting and demoting different social categories both in our perceptions of others and ourselves (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Thus

when the abiding memory does not extend beyond the pain and discomfort of walking in others' shoes, then meaningful learning opportunities can be lost. By now there are growing signs of disenchantment with many diversity initiatives (Hemphill & Haines, 2002), and perhaps an implicit recognition that what may have been missing all along was a sound theoretical foundation that encompasses related constructs including conflict and its management.

A perusal through manuals and workbooks on diversity and conflict management reveals an array of interesting exercises, but rarely are these interventions underscored by a coherent set of psychological tenets. As one famous example, Jane Elliott's classroom intervention with white schoolchildren in Iowa (see www.concordvideo.co.uk) has achieved iconic status in the world of diversity training. By assigning minority status, in turn, to either the blue-eyed or brown-eyed children in her class, in two days she was able to create a maelstrom of intergroup conflict. Then, just as quickly, she was able to restore 'normality' by asking the children to remove the collars associated with eye colour and thus expunging the social category from their lives. Elliott's illustration of intergroup conflict based on a novel aspect of social identity is stark and the implicit psychological messages powerful. But the lessons to be taken away about dealing with more permanent identities in a complex, multicultural society are only understandable when the psychological context is written large.

Doing difference, joining psychology

It may not be easy for psychology to make its mark around difference and conflict, but four issues must be highlighted. First, conflict is not a dirty word but is inextricably linked to an appreciation of difference. Second, our

psychological response to difference should not be characterised as pathological but as reflecting a unique combination of paradoxes associated with the human condition. Third, merely encouraging people to avoid being punished is unlikely either to help remedy conflicts based on difference, whether at a micro or macro level, or to effect attitude change. That said, in the words of Martin Luther King, 'even though legislation may not change the heart, it can restrain the heartless' – in other words, the law and associated punitive actions are necessary but only when all else has failed, including psychology. Fourth, to achieve change discussions must be framed in a context that people will be comfortable with. This is where we need to consider principles of equity or fairness.

Within psychology there is a growing

realisation that fairness or 'inequity aversion' lies at the core of not only our own affective being (Ridley, 1996) but may also be significant in other primates (Brosnan & de Waal, 2003). Indeed, virtually all negative emotional responses can be related to those three little words – 'It isn't fair'. Reflect for a moment on any negative emotion you have experienced recently, and almost invariably you will find that it will be linked to a feeling of unfairness. To promote diversity under alternative banners such as 'equality' is less effective as these will often jar when equal treatment is not seen as fair, by failing to accommodate individual differences or circumstances. The backlash to affirmative action measures in the US and elsewhere bears witness to the strong emotions that can be aroused when anti-discrimination legislation moves beyond the principle of merit (Crosby *et al.*, 2003). By contrast, the adoption of equity as a core principle sits easily with our predisposition to expect the world to be fair or just (the just world hypothesis) and to construe our relationships with others in principles associated with both social exchange and equity.

Having set the scene then, what about the psychological tale of difference? The first strand of the tale is to acknowledge

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that we are torn between two states – drawn to explore the new (neophilia) while psychologically programmed to be uncomfortable with the new (neophobia). We are cognitive misers who are naturally drawn towards prejudgement, to evaluate against existing categories and to stereotype or assign characteristics to the new on the basis of our representations of the old or existing members of that category. Stereotypes can be triggered by very little information and at the same time defy refutation from contrary information, in pursuit of our goal of cognitive consistency.

This leads conveniently to the second strand. There is now a strong consensus within the discipline that we are motivated to achieve cognitive consistency between thoughts, feelings and behaviours – to reduce cognitive dissonance. A corollary to this argument must be that difference, however defined, creates internal conflict by disturbing cognitive equilibrium and requiring us to engage in effort to restore consonance. One of the easiest ways to do this is either to avoid or negate difference. Therefore dealing with difference must require acknowledgement of the difference followed by a positive motivation to engage, something to overcome our neophobia.

The next strands derive from a distillation of the issues already addressed: minority status brings with it special feelings and requires more effort; a fundamental social category is ‘them and us’ (ingroup/outgroup); and people are amalgams of various social and personal identities that ebb and flow in salience depending on context.

Along with these strands of the psychological tale of difference there is one further inference that can be derived from work on social influence. That is, sadly, human groups, organisations, cultures and societies are inclined to favour their own and are intolerant of difference. Within organisations, an unavoidable but disturbing corollary is that diversity is unlikely to flourish wherever teamwork (Proster & Mueller, 2000) and associated characteristics such as uniformity are embraced uncritically. In many respects, the symptoms of groupthink (Janis, 1982) epitomise unfettered teamwork where minority influence is stifled under the weight of majority influence. As one recent example, the ‘like minds’ of Bush, Blair and their foreign policy advisers in the

days leading to the invasion of Iraq are now described by some commentators as an archetypal example of groupthink at work (see tinyurl.com/dlncv).

A final component of the tale must involve a re-examination of a complicated construct inextricably linked to difference – conflict. To repeat, conflict is not a dirty word. At a micro level, groups rely on functional conflict between members to develop effectively (Forsyth, 1999), and organisations that want to value difference must embrace conflict with enthusiasm. To genuinely value diversity there is a need not only to acknowledge and value conflict, but also to equip those who exercise power with the appropriate skills to manage conflict when inevitably it arises.

Despite its understandable hesitancy,

psychology does seem equipped to relate the story of difference. Hopefully it can instil a positive motivation for genuinely embracing difference and, in turn, not only understanding but also dealing with conflict. This will not be driven by institutional or state imperatives, or as part of a moral crusade. It requires the simple recognition that, psychologically, it is difference that continues to make life interesting, challenging and enjoyable – and that can make all the difference.

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