SPSSI on the Hill: The Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination

Event Summary

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) held the second in its Congressional Seminar Series on May 14, 2014. The event featured psychologist Linda R. Tropp (UMass Amherst), who discussed the subtler ways race-based discrimination continues to affect everyday interactions and policy choices. The series is sponsored by Congressman Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) and aims to inform today’s most salient policy debates with the best of recent psychological research.

Barack Obama’s election to the presidency in 2008 brought with it the hope that the nation had entered a “post-racial” era. That hope has since faded, as racist comments from Cliven Bundy and Donald Sterling have recently reminded us. But in truth it was always a little naïve to believe that the election of one African American could bring transformational change to the entire nation, said Dr. Linda Tropp in her presentation on Capitol Hill.

Tropp is a professor of psychology and director of the Psychology of Peace and Violence Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research focuses on how members of different groups approach and experience contact with each other, and how group differences in power or status affect views of and expectations for cross-group relations.

“The truth is, we do not live in a post-racial society” said Tropp. “People see race, and are treated differently on the basis of race, such that racial bias and discrimination still have major impacts in our lives and in our communities. But, even though we live in a shared society, we don’t all necessarily see bias and discrimination in the same way.”

Blacks and whites disagree about how much discrimination exists against African Americans. According to a 2013 Pew Research poll, some 46 percent of blacks believe that there is a “lot” of discrimination; only 16 percent of whites agree. (Slightly over 40 percent of both whites and blacks believe that there is at least “some” ongoing discrimination.)
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Because these attitudes can be so subtle that they function largely outside of our conscious awareness, they can be difficult to recognize. Tropp explained how psychologists have developed ingenious tools for getting at them.

The Implicit Association Test measures people’s automatic associations with different groups or objects. After describing how the test works and referring to extensive research on the test by the Project Implicit team at Harvard University, Tropp led the audience in one such exercise. She presented a list of words that were either positive, such as “gentle,” “enjoy” or “happy,” or negative, such as “poison,” “evil” or “vomit.” Interspersed were the names of various flowers and insects.

She asked the audience to tap their right knee if they read a positive word or the name of a flower, and their left knee if they read a negative word or the name of an insect. The audience went through the list quickly and confidently.

She then reversed the terms: Now the audience was to tap their right knee if they read a positive word or the name of an insect, and their left knee if they read a negative word or the name of a flower. The audience response was so noticeably slower and less confident that the audience quickly broke up laughing.

“This suggest how much less common it is for us to think about how ‘insects’ and ‘pleasant’ go together, compared to how we think about ‘flowers’ and ‘pleasant’ going together. And this is really what implicit bias is all about, the relative ease or difficulty with which we think about different categories as positive or negative” Tropp explained. “And if we can see this kind of bias emerging with flowers and insects, then we can easily imagine how similar kinds of biases would emerge with socially relevant categories like race and gender.”

These implicit biases often operate below consciousness. For example, white interviewers tend to make less eye contact, give less time, and keep a greater physical distance from black job candidates than they do from whites; these factors have the potential to influence interview experiences and performance, and ultimately, applicants’ success in the job market.

Large-scale “audit” surveys consistently find that resumes presumed to be submitted by Black applicants are far less likely to receive interview requests or job offers than identical resumes of ostensible White applicants. Similarly, a recent study showed that professors are more likely to respond to queries from prospective white male students than from prospective white female or non-white students.

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an association of approximately 3,000 psychologists and allied scientists interested in the application of psychological research to important public policy issues. SPSSI a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that believes that “Sound Science Makes Sound Policy.”
If the bad news is that many people harbor prejudices they might not even be aware of, the good news is that there are well-established strategies for overcoming them. Among these strategies: enhancing people’s awareness of the prevalence of bias, for example by teaching them about implicit biases, and encouraging them to reflect on and replace negative stereotypes. Other strategies include fostering opportunities to engage in genuine cross-racial or cross-cultural contact, such as in workplaces, neighborhoods, and in public schools.

Tropp’s own research focuses on the effects of contact between groups. In a meta-analysis she and her colleague Thomas Pettigrew conducted of 515 studies dating from the 1940s to 2000 – with more than 250,000 study participants – they found that greater contact reduces prejudice by diminishing anxiety, enhancing empathy, and increasing knowledge between members of different groups. Optimal conditions for contact to reduce prejudice include establishing equal status between the groups, having them work together cooperatively toward common goals and providing institutional support for this equal status, cooperative contact, in the forms of policies, laws, norms, and customs.

It is difficult to specify the extent to which discriminatory or prejudicial beliefs influence public policy preferences on such key social issues as affirmative action and immigration, or such law and order issues as stop-and-frisk or stand your ground laws. But, as Tropp emphasized, it is important for policymakers to understand the roles that bias and discrimination can play and to recognize potential biases in how constituents and politicians frame, interpret, and evaluate policies and programs. Policies that may race-neutral in the abstract can have serious, racial consequences once they are implemented.