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The politics of moving beyond prejudice:  
A comment on Dixon, Levine, Reicher and Durrheim

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Abstract:

Dixon *et al* have highlighted the importance of a political conceptualisation of intergroup relations that challenges individualising models of social change. As important this paper is for the development of critical debates in psychology, we can detect at least three issues that warrant further discussion: a) the cultural and historical conditions of structural inequality and its perception, b) the marginalisation of post-colonial works on collective mobilisation and c) acknowledging the complex perspectives and politics of those targeted by prejudice.

Before and beyond the existence of psychology as a science, revolutionaries of all times - Spartacus, Robespierre, Lenin, Mao Zedong, Lumumba, Malcolm X, Mandela and leaders of anti-colonial movements - knew that one needs a dedicated group of people to attempt and sometimes succeed in overthrowing an institutionalised social structure of oppression and discrimination. They also knew that dominant classes would not cede power voluntarily. Their struggle was directed against a well organised stratum of society whose power, structural dominance and exclusive privileges were legitimised by divine or secular law. In such social structures it does not make sense to attribute prejudice to the 'oppressors'. It is not prejudice to treat the 'historically disadvantaged' in hostile, denigrating or even paternalistic terms because the differences in access to rights and resources are structurally

given and their subordinated status appears 'natural'. Hence, the slave holder who is indulgent to his obedient slaves (Dixon *et al*, p. 8) is taking care of his means of production and not paternalistically prejudiced towards a potential equal.

Prejudice becomes an issue as soon as societies are more or less successful in reducing structural obstacles to social mobility to varying degrees, usually by implementing some form of democracy, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948. Differences in access to rights and resources then appear as the 'natural' consequence of individual achievement and evidence of capitalist market forces. Under these conditions it is conceptually correct to talk about the 'historically disadvantaged' as recipients of prejudice; and it is these conditions that the psychology of prejudice addresses in its humanist intention to create harmony among people where we 'like each other'.

Dixon and colleagues merge these conditions in somewhat arbitrary ways: the structurally divided societies of the US-American slave-owning society or the Apartheid system in South Africa on the one hand and seemingly benevolent, positive relations in supposedly egalitarian societies on the other. In doing so, these authors confuse the unstable character of hierarchies in democracies with structurally and legally divided societies in other historical periods. In our opinion, juxtaposing the Collective Action Model and the Prejudice Reduction Model as models of social change constitutes a confusion in conceptual levels of analysis. The first deals with collective action to abolish structural conditions of which historical revolutions are a more extreme example. The latter is a humanist attempt at smoothing daily social encounters with (constructed) otherness which does not aim for social change per se. Conflating these as dealing with the relationship between advantaged

and disadvantaged groups belittles and simplifies the complex political identities and multifaceted political ambitions of the structurally disadvantaged (cf. Bourdieu, 2000).

Nevertheless, we applaud the attempt by Dixon and his colleagues to highlight the individualisation of prejudice within psychology. Indeed, there is a long history of the individualisation and psychologisation of prejudice that has excluded more political psychological accounts that may be better equipped to tackle social inequalities and promote social change (Elchoreth, Doise and Reicher, 2011). Hence it is troubling to see this marginalisation occurring in this very paper with the omission of relevant theories on collective mobilisation and group solidarity based on the works of Biko, Fanon and other post-colonial writers (beyond one fleeting reference to Fanon, 1965). Although the authors critique the simplistic notion that positive emotions lead to a reduction in prejudice, they make the reverse and equally simplistic assumption that negative emotions lead to collective mobilisation. By contrast, postcolonial psychology promotes the development of positive emotions towards self and others to inspire a desire for collective action and social change (Biko, 1978). As a result, individuals from disadvantaged communities begin to see themselves as knowledgeable and capable agents of change (Howarth, 2006). In this way we can see collective mobilisation as a process of conflict *resolution* to achieve social justice and not merely a mechanism to “instigate intergroup conflict” (Dixon *et al.* p.19).

In our recent research (on development in Tanzania and South Africa, Kessi, 2011; community art projects for mixed-heritage families in the UK; Howarth, Wagner, Magnusson & Sammut, 2011; representations of the veil in India and Indonesia, Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli & Howarth, 2012), we have documented how individuals and groups challenge stigmatising representations (of development, of race and of Islam) and forge positive

emotions towards self and others in these communities. As a result, we see how our research participants have developed a consciousness of themselves as *agents* of change, which was reinforced through the networks of social solidarity forged through the collective activities and the positive recognition that they received from community members. These examples demonstrate that prejudice reduction and collective mobilisation can go hand-in-hand and do not *necessarily* draw on competing psychological processes as Dixon *et al* argue.

Furthermore, when these authors discuss the findings of prejudice reduction programmes and show that these can sometimes lower support for anti-discriminatory measures, they attribute a false consciousness in the sense of "They should know better that they are being discriminated against!". This is a problematic move that diminishes the perspective and politics of those categorised as 'disadvantaged' and overlooks the ideological and intersectional construction of advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Their analysis implies that there are always clearly divided and competing groups: men and women; blacks and whites; Jews and Arabs. This reifies social categories, obscures the intersectionality of all social groups and loses a perspectival approach that recognises that these are located, socially constructed and ideologically maintained (Gillespie, Howarth and Cornish, Forthcoming).

Dixon *et al* have developed an important political conceptualisation of intergroup relations that challenges individualising models of prejudice and social change. However, we suggest that there are a number of problems with this analysis: first: the comparison between the models of prejudice reduction and collective action apply to different historical and political settings; second: the marginalisation of post-colonial texts on collective mobilisation; third:

the attribution of false consciousness to disadvantaged groups. By highlighting these points, we also reveal, as do Dixon *et al*, the difficulties in moving away from dominant perspectives on prejudice reduction.

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