Prescription Before Careful Diagnosis?

ROBERT G. JONES
Missouri State University

KATHLYN Y. WILSON
University of Bedfordshire

It is refreshing to see industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists trying to reach beyond the compliance framing of discrimination that is so prevalent in organizations.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Robert G. Jones.
E-mail: robertjones@missouristate.edu
   Address: Department of Psychology, Missouri State University, Springfield, MO 65897

This *avoidance* stance on discrimination is prevalent in our literature and thinking: Rather than defining our constructs in psychological terms and attempting to positively intervene (*approach* the issues of prejudice and discrimination), our conversations are with compliance professionals trying to *avoid* litigation. I–O psychologists serve more stakeholders than just the lawyers who often define

constructs and set decision making agendas in organizations. It is time to use what we know as *psychologists*—not just as legal support specialists—when we do our jobs.

Approaching Prejudice

Psychology tells us that our tendencies to rely on prejudices are a very fundamental component of our cognitive and motivational endowment (Butz & Plant, 2009; Jones, 2012; Hackney, 2005; McCauley, Stitt, & Segal, 1980). We will not likely eradicate these tendencies—just manage them in ourselves and others. The important question of ''how'' to manage them first requires understanding ''why'' we resort to both overt and aversive prejudice.

Put bluntly, Lindsey, King, Dunleavy, McCausland, and Jones (2013) provide a set of solutions without carefully defining the nature of the problems. In fact, the crux of our critique is that discriminatory outcomes (the ultimate criteria here) are actually manifestations of several underlying problems (plural) associated with multiple *prejudicial processes* across times and circumstances. These deserve careful assessment before interventions are prescribed or planned. It may be that the prescriptions these authors make in the *staffing processes* will work under various circumstances—we are not arguing with the potential value of the methods described. Rather, we would like to be careful that we not fall prey to the problem of applying our favorite method regardless of its efficacy—the proverbial person with a hammer seeking screws to pound (March & Olsen, 1976). In short, we suggest a criterion-centric approach (Bartram, 2005) that includes careful needs assessment (Goldstein, 1986). We argue that such an approach involves identifying and engaging legitimate stakeholders (Phillips, 2003), defining the criteria, and placing interventions within a context, rather than presuming a one-size fits all approach.

Defining Discrimination First

Many I–O psychology students in the United States have reified the 4/5ths rule as a definition of discrimination. It has been argued elsewhere (e.g., De Corte, Sackett, & Lievens, 2010) that this single operational definition (from the law, not from psychology) does not even constitute an adequate definition of adverse impact (from the law), never mind complex, multidimensional discrimination. Lindsey et al. succumb to this by relying on legal definitions of disparate impact and treatment—again defined through law rather than psychology.

It is beyond the scope of this commentary to provide a complete definition of discrimination, but we will limit our discussion to the prejudices that combine to constitute institutional forms of discrimination (Chin, 2010). Institutional discrimination (the idea behind affirmative action) arises as result of multiple instances of biased choices, over time and circumstances, that lead to disadvantage on the basis of characteristics that are not of an individual's choosing (similar to the legal doctrine of disparate impact). The characteristics that elicit prejudices are important and include many things, such as disabilities (e.g., epilepsy, heart disease, chronic anxiety, etc.), ethnicities (e.g., Maroon, Welsh, Hmong, and Saami), and genders (e.g., bisexuality, transgendering). The list of characteristics to which people learn aversions appears to be endless. Discrimination at the institutional level is assumed to at least partly emanate from such prejudices and biases at the individual and group levels. The cumulative effects of prejudicial (and positively biased) processes give people incremental (dis)advantages in a multitude of social circumstances, even within a single organization. But it is important to note that such institutional discrimination comes from a sociological/legal perspective—not from psychology.

As applied *psychologists*, we may be more effective by concerning ourselves primarily with the bases for *prejudice* not discrimination. Lindsey et al. make excellent suggestions for managing prejudices within individual decision makers (rather than managing the access of people who are discriminated against). For example, we might select people with lower levels

of aversive prejudices to make rating-based decisions. The larger problem is that these authors, and the field generally, fail to make the important distinction between discrimination-based efforts (targeting the unfortunate recipients of discrimination) and prejudice-based interventions (targeting those whose prejudices are affecting discriminatory outcomes). We seem to have forgotten that, as psychologists, these prejudices are susceptible to our interventions—without reference to legal or sociological discrimination.

This is an important issue with Lindsey et al. in several regards. First, they rely, often implicitly, on characteristics of the targets of discrimination rather than the actual bases of prejudice in the observer. For example, their recruitment interventions (such as deliberate targeting of disadvantaged groups) are aimed at an institutional discrimination target, without reference to individual prejudices of those already in the organization. So, for example, this approach may be relatively straightforward for recruiting visible minorities, who can be ''portrayed in recruiting materials.'' However, this would be far less effective for recruitment of people with (for example) less-visible ethnic backgrounds (such as Native Americans, Maroons, and Travelers). Using a more international lens, the Saami people of far Northern Scandinavia are an indigenous people who have experienced considerable discrimination (The Stockholm International Forum, 2001). How do organizations in Scandinavia address recruitment with this (or any other) less-visible minority using Lindsey et al.'s approach?

Second, even if we accept that there may be subgroup psychological differences, finding more effective ways to help organizations integrate people—other than through legal compliance—are available. The authors provide some solid advice for career development and other access strategies. But concerns with who should be the target of these efforts remains. The authors correctly wonder whether individuation (for example) should be placed at the feet of those who already bear the burdens resulting from others' prejudices. Perhaps the deliberate and systematic engagement of people who have experienced prejudice in the crafting of solutions might help to alleviate this problem.

Third, and also illustrative of the blinders created by lack of distinction between discrimination effects and prejudice processes, is the problem of dealing with actual, underlying cultural differences. Following from our previous example, psychological differences between indigenous cultures and majority Western European cultures are in no way addressed by Lindsey et al.'s approaches. For example, we assume that timed measures are better measures, without any comparison of this versus an untimed approach to testing and in the face of clear evidence of cross-cultural differences in perceptions of time (Schwartz, 2007).

Finally, and perhaps foundational to the problem of distinguishing discrimination from prejudice, is the tendency to assume a cultural ''integration'' strategy. That is, we start with the assumption that the organization's culture is set, then try to arrive at means to integrate others into it. Why not hire people who are different in an attempt to change the existing culture of the organization (Snow & Snell, 1993) rather than trying to ''help'' people ''fit in''? Why not engage internal minority stakeholders in the definition of both the local issues and the potential approaches to managing the intractable problems of prejudice?

Understanding Discrimination in Context

If we make this distinction, it becomes clear that a one-size fits all approach to identifying solutions is not likely to be effective. The dynamics of culture-based and gender-based prejudice, for example, would arguably differ. Identities with shared *cultural* traditions such as ethnicity and nationality (Cox & Nkomo, 1990) would engender different prejudicial bases from identities such as gender and disability. Cultural differences are further

compounded by the historical relationship among groups. As examples, the basis of prejudice toward an African American by a European American might differ from the prejudice toward a Traveler in the UK by an Anglo-Saxon-Norman there.

But prejudice also needs to be examined in its *social* context. The recent riots in Stockholm that started in deprived immigrant areas have been attributed (BBC, 2013) to discrimination and relatively high unemployment among youth. London's Tottenham riots in 2011 (Prodger, 2011) occurred in a social and economic context where, as examples, unemployment of Black (African/Caribbean/Black British) and Pakistani youth is currently 46 and 47%, respectively (Office of National Statistics, 2012).

What to Do Now

As psychologists, we need to tackle uncomfortable truths. A recent review (Bezrukova, Jehn, & Spell, 2012) reported that diversity training aimed at a specific racial group can result in a backlash: Majority participants may feel they are being held responsible for past and current inequities toward the minority group. They conclude that training that focuses on multiple groups is more likely to be better accepted by all participants. This highlights the emotive nature of some forms of prejudice and argues for the need to understand the dynamics of intergroup relations between specific groups *in a social context* rather than collectively (i.e., one-size fits all). Inconsistencies in findings in this literature may reflect our tendency to combine identities, thereby focusing on general dynamics rather than unpacking group-unique, context-specific dynamics.

Again, identification and engagement of legitimate stakeholders helps to place prejudice and discrimination in the broader context. Although understanding psychological processes and group dynamics can inform our understanding in any context, understanding these processes requires engagement from both sides of the table.

Criterion Groups — Inclusiveness in Our Research

To better understand this phenomenon, we need to be more inclusive in our research, as well. We need studies that examine prejudice and discrimination in both majority and minority samples (Wilson, 2010). Much of the I–O/OB literature uses predominantly White male samples; thus theories and constructs reflect the majority group's cultural assumptions and social constructions. Among the few studies that have examined psychological and perceptual biases using minority samples, Wilson and Naemi (2011, April) found that African-American and European-American supervisors highlighted different factors in evaluating team members' performance.

In summary, we would benefit from a more critical perspective (Romani & Szkudlarek, 2013). Acknowledging that our reality is influenced by social, cultural, organizational, and historical contexts will help frame psychological prejudices and allow us to systematically engage in approaches to dealing with them. Current theories and constructs reflect the norms, habits, rules, and discourses of a dominant group. Understanding biases in all groups concerned, both majority and minority, provides a better understanding of the phenomenon under study. Adopting a criterion-centric approach as well as an approach that is inclusive, not just in terms of prescription but also diagnosis, may lead to a more positive prognosis for eradicating discrimination.

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