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RUNNING HEAD: Prejudice, Terrorism, and Behavior Therapy
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Prejudice, Terrorism, and Behavior Therapy
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Abstract

Behavior therapy is relevant not just to the needs of victims of terrorism, but also to the understanding and modification of psychological processes that lead to the perpetration of terrorist acts. A key process of this kind is prejudice. In this paper, human prejudice is defined as the objectification and dehumanization of people as a result of their participation in evaluative verbal categories. Prejudice is difficult to deal with because: 1) The same verbal processes that give rise to prejudice are massively reinforced in dealing with the external environment; 2) Virtually all cultures openly amplify this process with stigmatized groups; 3) Humans are historical beings and verbal/cognitive networks once formed tend to maintain themselves; and 4) Many of the things humans do to change or eliminate undesirable verbal categorical processes are either inert or prone to making these processes more resistant to change. Mindfulness, cognitive defusion, acceptance, and valued action are suggested as alternative methods of fighting the war behavior therapy needs to help human society win: not just a war on terrorism, but a war on prejudice.

Prejudice, Terrorism, and Behavior Therapy

“September 11th” is clearly a phrase that will echo down through the 21st century. The events it has launched are still in play, and we do not yet have the sense of perspective that time alone will provide, but it is obvious that “September 11th” will have lasting meaning in many spheres and to many disciplines. It will specify a constellation of forces and events that are geopolitical, sociological, economic, religious, military, historical, and cultural. And, yes, psychological.

Other papers in this series will focus on what behavior therapists know about how to help the victims of such horrible violence. Those aspects are clearly psychological, and they are important. But the psychological dimension applies as well to the perpetrators. How is it that people can prepare for months or even years to learn to fly (but not to land) a commercial airliner, to take a plane by violence, and then kill themselves, everyone on that plane, and thousands more by flying into the side of a huge, occupied, office building? These are actions of whole human beings, with histories, motives, thoughts, and feelings. These are psychological actions.

Behavioral scientists need to understand such events – what they are, how to prevent them and how to change these destructive behavioral processes once they begin. In an era of DSM hegemony, perhaps this will seem too bold to some empirical clinicians. It might be easy to say “this is not our job.” After all there is no “terrorism disorder” in our diagnostic nosology. There are no “TD” clinics. No one is coming into our clinics asking for treatment for “TD.”

Behavior therapists cannot duck this task so easily, however. Behavior therapy is a branch of the behavioral sciences that uses the principles of human action, cognition, and emotion to understand and change psychological events for the better. Naturally, historians, political scientists, military experts, and so on will have a great deal to say about the perpetrators at their particular level of analysis, but these levels are not the psychological level. But if behavior therapy has nothing to say at that level about such important behavioral events as these, then our entire field is much less relevant to human affairs than we claim.

The barrier to considering the psychology of perpetrators is not merely professional, however – it is also deeply personal. When first faced with the events of September 11th, people had a hard time facing what had happened. Some of the most common phrases heard in casual discourse in those first few days were “I can’t believe it” or “this is insane.” The actual sight of a commercial airliner flying into a skyscraper was beyond comprehension, and the event was made even more incomprehensible when one realized that the plane was being piloted by a human being who trained to kill himself and thousands of innocents. It was as if the entire citizenry found comfort in the idea that this was an event that could not be understood and had nothing to do with normal human beings. Most especially it had nothing to do with that human being one sees every morning in the mirror.

Our politicians have since actively supported this process of rejection of personal relevance. We have gone in our political discourse from these horrible acts being evil, which they surely are, to the evildoers, which clearly applies as well, and finally to the evil ones. By the time we get there, the perpetrators have nothing to do with us. They are in a different category, more like monsters than human beings, doing incoherent, monstrous, evil things because ... well, because they are evil.

Behavior therapists cannot accept this slight of hand. It is a truism of behavioral psychology that abnormal behavior is on a continuum with normal behavior. If it is deceptive to label abnormal behavior and then reify that label into a cause, then it is just as deceptive to explain acts or terrorism by an appeal to human evil.

The Chill of Recognition

While the violent outcome revealed on September 11th is repulsive and extreme, the behavioral processes that created this outcome seem to be available to every one of us. We can see parallels of these processes every day in the clinic, but more than that, we can see them every day in our own thoughts if we are but willing to listen. Osama Bin Laden has given dozens of interviews explaining his views and actions. One has only to listen carefully and openly to his statements to feel the chill of recognition.

What we see if we listen is a human being entangled in cognitive categories and evaluations, and compelled to attack others in order to maintain consistency with these categories and evaluations. The categorical and evaluative labels flow like water from a spring. In his tapes, Bin Laden says “Under no circumstances should we forget this enmity between us and the infidels...we must be loyal to the believers ... We should renounce the atheists and infidels.” He terms the September 11th attack “a blessed attack against the global infidels” and says “We ask Allah to make him [Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar] victorious over the forces of infidels and tyranny, and to crush the new Christian-Jewish crusade.” (http://www.adl.org/terrorism_america/bin_l.asp)

What we see, in a word, is prejudice. It is cast in the language of God and religion but the fruits of Bin Laden’s thoughts are not those of faith. The fruits are not love, vitality, transcendence, peace, or harmony. The fruits are hate, and violence, and the dehumanization of others. The fruits are the fruits of prejudice.

The dictionary defines prejudice as “a feeling, favorable or unfavorable, towards any person or thing, prior to or not based on actual experience” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1984, p. 1275). Prejudice in that sense is built into all learning. A small dog who barks at men because of prior mistreatment at the hands of a harsh male master is “prejudiced” in the dictionary sense because the dog’s negative arousal does not come from actual experience with the targets of his barking. But prejudice is so greatly exacerbated by human language and cognition, that it hardly seems worth noting until those human processes are involved.

The usual view of prejudice seems to be that we are born without prejudice, and it is only a sick culture that somehow pours prejudice into us. Often the west, or America, or capitalism, or class divisions, or some other cultural force is blamed for the illness. One has only to see innocent children playing together to understand how that idea could be so widely believed, but the data suggest that it is largely false. Prejudice, we would argue, is built into human beings, because it is built into language itself.

The core of human language is the ability to derive relations among events based on arbitrary cues rather than formal properties of the related events, a position known as Relational Frame Theory (RFT; Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, and Roche, 2001). For example, a normal human adult who arbitrarily learns that x goes with y, also now knows without explicit training that y goes with x. Relations among events are bidirectional (though often not symmetrical). These bidirectional relations in turn combine into networks of relations. A normal human adult who learns that q goes with y and that p goes with y will derive that q goes with p and that p goes

with *q*. Derived relations of this kind are relatively primitive behaviors, evident even with young human infants (Lipkens, Hayes, & Hayes, 1993). They are central to how humans use words – if a round object is a “ball” then a “ball” is that round object – and a variety of studies suggest that human language is dependent on these processes (see Hayes et al., 2001, for a review).

With derived stimulus relations comes a greatly increased ability to acquire functions indirectly. A child can be told about the attributes of verbal categories, without having to experience all of these features first hand. Verbal categorization and attribution is such a powerfully useful process that it is very difficult to slow down, and virtually impossible to stop. Furthermore, because it can be controlled by arbitrary cues, it goes on with very little environmental support.

The power of this process can be shown in a short demonstration described in our book on language and cognition (Hayes et al., 2001). Start by picking three single digit numbers (you can repeat numbers). Write them down in random order. Now answer the following question, using the first number to pick the word in the first column, the second number to pick the word in the second column, and the third number to pick the word in the third column.

How is a ...

(e.g., banana)

(e.g., more than a)

(e.g., candle).

1. banana

2. race car

3. kangaroo

4. foreman

5. priest

6. football

7. hat

8. computer

9. TV

1. like

2. unlike

3. better than

4. different from

5. worse than a

6. the father of

7. the cause of

8. the partner of

9. the opposite of

1. prostitute?

2. war?

3. chair?

4. candle?

5. house plant?

6. book?

7. mud hole?

8. baby?

9. garbage disposer?

Now attempt to answer the question you have created. Generate as many answers as you can. Be prepared to justify each answer. [The present article will be more understandable if you actually do this exercise before reading on].

It is unlikely that any of these questions have ever been asked of the reader before. Yet with some thought, every question can be “answered.” As verbally competent humans begin to generate answers, they will usually be able to justify them, supposedly on the basis of the formal properties of the related events. A person answering the question “How is a TV the opposite of a garbage disposer?” may have said it is because the TV brings garbage into the house, while the disposer takes it away. The physical “truth” of that answer once it is given may make it appear that the relation was not arbitrary at all. Formal properties cannot explain the ability to answer all 729 questions, however, even though physical properties will be appealed to in virtually every answer. These nouns and relations were selected randomly. It is simply not possible that the world is so arranged that every object in the world is in fact (i.e., nonarbitrarily) related to every other object in the world in every possible way. Rather, this exercise shows that verbally competent humans can categorize, evaluate, and compare arbitrarily, but that they learn to justify these relations based on the verbally abstracted nonarbitrary features of related events.

The implications for human prejudice are profound. As we apply human categorical / attributive / evaluative processes to other human beings, we begin to justify these relations by an appeal to various features. In so doing, we begin to ignore the dynamic, historical, contextual, developmental aspects of an individual human being, in favor of evaluated attributes and collective categories more suited to objects than to humans. The evaluative verbal categories that are applied to groups of people tend to be generalizations, with features that extend far beyond the direct experience with any given individual. The more one reacts to others on the basis of evaluative verbal categories, the more one risks losing contact with their unique human qualities. In other words, human beings who are the focus of categorization and evaluation are dehumanized and objectified by that process.

This point shows the psychological limitations of blaming prejudice on a sick culture. It is true that categorical, attributive, and comparative processes are harnessed by the culture to produce common sets of attributes and stereotypes of various stigmatized groups, and it is true that some cultures engage in this process with more vigor than others. Even if the culture was not involved in the use of prejudicial terms, however, we would quickly reinvent other ones. A person is not just a person, a person is also fat, wrinkled, ugly, stupid, or any of a myriad such labels. Because these events are arbitrarily applicable, the cues that control them can become more and more subtle. A parent with a teenager will be shocked into remembrance of how subtle the cues are that differentiate, say, someone who is cool from someone who is a nerd. With adults, this same process can lead to more serious consequences. In Northern Ireland it can be a life and death matter whether a city is called, say, Londonderry or Belfast, because these serve as cues for supposedly important verbal categories, such as “Catholic” or “Protestant.” In Afghanistan, it was a life and death matter whether you grew your beard long if you were a man, or whether you covered your face if you were a woman, because these small features supposedly distinguished believers from infidels.

The core of human prejudice is *the objectification and dehumanization of human beings because of their participation in verbal evaluative categories*. Prejudice, defined this way, is a kind of cognitive entanglement. We usually use the term when the categorical terms have negative evaluative connotations, but a moment of reflection shows that this is not a defining feature. Seemingly positive categories, such a “hot” or “babe,” can be as dehumanizing as negative ones.

Prejudice, defined this way, is both shockingly common and shockingly difficult to deal with. Prejudice is difficult to deal with because:

1. The same verbal processes are massively reinforced in dealing with the external environment. In our RFT account of language and cognition (Hayes et al., 2001) human reasoning and problem solving are argued to depend upon the same relational frames as seem to be involved in human prejudice. Indeed, within the field of prejudice itself there is evidence that stereotypes have “positive” effects in reducing the burden of problem solving and understanding a complex social environment (e.g., Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994).

2. Virtually all cultures openly amplify this process with stigmatized groups. Cultural practices exist in the present day on the basis of their past ability to be passed on within groups, much in the same way that genes exist based on their impact on survival. The creation of “in groups” that will protect cultural practices is almost universal within cultures for that reason. Categorization and stereotyping helps rationalize and justify the existence of an in-group to which one belongs (e.g., Hewstone, Jaspars, & Laljee, 1982; Spears & Manstead, 1989), as well as the in-group’s treatment of those in the out-group (Tajfel, 1982). Even when groups are

formed randomly, humans will act to try to benefit the groups to which they belong (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971), in part because there are important consequences attached to group membership (Gaertner, & Insko, 2000). This same process applies whether the categorical unit involved is called a “tribe,” a “religion,” or a “class.” For example, the more religious people consider themselves to be, the more negative their attitudes are toward non-religious others (Jackson and Hunsberger, 1999), despite the many religious precepts that teach the opposite.

3. We are historical beings and verbal/cognitive networks once formed tend to maintain themselves. When new networks of verbal relations are formed it is easy to show that old ways of thinking will quickly re-emerge if the new ways of thinking are not constantly successful (e.g., Rehfeldt & Hayes, 2000; Wilson & Hayes, 1996). Furthermore, new relations are resisted if the new material conflicts with older stereotypes (Moxon, Keenan, & Hine, 1993; Watt, Keenan, Barnes, & Cairns, 1991), as compared to similar learning that appears to be neutral (e.g., Barnes & Keenan, 1993; Hayes, Kohlenberg, & Hayes, 1991). Perhaps as a result, stereotyped information tends to be better remembered (Bodenhausen, 1988) and ambiguous information tends to be construed as stereotype-confirming (Duncan, 1976). We all learn the common stereotypes, and once learned, these stereotypes never truly disappear (Devine, 1989).

4. Many of the things humans do to change or eliminate undesirable verbal categorical processes are either inert or prone to making these processes more resistant to change. The common sense methods people use to solve prejudice are largely useless or worse. One common sense tendency when confronted with prejudicial attitudes is to correct them directly through education. Unfortunately, these methods have virtually no impact (Thornton & Wahl, 1996; Wahl & Lefkowitz, 1989). Another common sense approach is to caution against negative attitudes, demand correct behaviors, or to vigorously protest misrepresentations of stigmatized populations. Unfortunately, this method is not only often inert; it can produce paradoxical effects (Corrigan, River, Lundin, Penn, Uphoff-Wasowski, & Campion, 2001). For example, creating conditions that demand correct behaviors (e.g., “do not stare at the physically disabled”) can paradoxically increase the avoidance of stigmatized persons (Langer, Fiske, Taylor, & Chanowitz, 1976). Another method is to try to suppress negative thoughts directly (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987), internally scolding oneself for prejudicial words or concepts and trying to keep them out of mind. Doing so, however, makes these thoughts more frequent and more behaviorally impactful (Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994; Smart & Wegner, 1999). For example, actively suppressing negative stereotypes results in more, not less, behavioral avoidance of stigmatized groups (Macrae et al., 1994). The failure of these methods makes all the more poignant the human condition we are facing. Prejudice will not be defeated by logic, rules, finger wagging, or simple good will. It will take more. Behavior therapists are among the few who are well positioned to learn what that might be.

A War Against Prejudice

As this article is being written, Americans are fighting a war against terrorism, but the essence of these attacks seems largely to have been missed. The World Trade Center towers fell in a terrorist act, but they also fell as an extension of religious extremism and ethnic and religious prejudice. Seen in that light, the war on terrorism should also be a war against human prejudice.

A war against prejudice is not an easy one to fight, however. It is not a simple matter of military campaigns, or of killing one’s enemy. It is a war to be fought within the human heart.

Behavior therapists may be able to bring some needed wisdom to these matters. When clients enter into a verbal world in which life is not worth living, or nothing they touch is safe

from poison, or their anxiety is too high to cope with, or they need a drink to survive, they are engaging in verbal processes not unlike those that create a world in which infidels have defiled a holy land and therefore must die. Although the content is different, the processes may be similar.

There is growing evidence that the impact of difficult thoughts and feelings can be reduced significantly by teaching those who are suffering to notice their thoughts and emotions without becoming entangled with them. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) takes this approach, and has been shown to reduce the negative behavioral impact of even such horrific content as delusions and hallucinations, without these symptoms themselves having to first disappear (Bach & Hayes, in press). Similar evidence exists for the related approaches used in Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal, Matthews, & Teasdale, 2002), or Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Linehan, 1993), and similar forms of intervention.

Mindfulness, cognitive defusion and acceptance can be powerful means of removing the fangs from cognitive entanglement. It is not too much of a stretch to imagine that these same methods could be helpful in alleviating human prejudice. Perhaps behavior therapists could teach others to step back from prejudicial thoughts, to watch them dispassionately without entanglement, and to allow more flexible and fluid modes of thinking to emerge with regard to stigmatized populations. There is evidence that this approach might be helpful. For example, teaching children to be more mindful of their thoughts about handicapped people resulted in less prejudiced behavior and lower levels of avoidance of the handicapped, even though there was no attempt to censor or suppress the subjects' knowledge of stereotypes (Langer, Bashner, & Chanowitz, 1985).

It seems possible that the "war on prejudice" might be a war that is won more by the psychological equivalent of soldiers leaving the field than by the psychological equivalent of powerful military hardware. Would there still be a cognitive war if no one showed up to fight it? Would there be prejudice if verbal categorization and evaluation of human beings is merely an automatic process to be watched, as opposed to being a method for structuring the world in which we live?

In ACT these methods of acceptance and defusion are always followed by committed action linked to chosen values, and so too defeating prejudice involves a positive agenda of human connection, friendship and alliance. Exposure to collaborative, equal status interactions with members of stigmatized groups is known to produce decreases in prejudicial attitudes toward these groups (Desforges, Lord, Ramsey, Mason, Van Leeuwen, West, and Lepper, 1991). In the current context, part of the war on prejudice might involve forming deeper and more human relationships with Muslim neighbors, or working to protect a local Mosque from harm.

It is true of course that Osama Bin Laden is unlikely to seek out help in reducing his prejudicial beliefs even if a technology for doing so was available. Fortunately there is a more readily accessible target close at hand. A war on prejudice could certainly safely start with the person one sees when brushing ones teeth. We could stop running from our own objectification and dehumanization of others, and admit the presence of these everyday cognitive processes. Acceptance and defusion, combined with positive steps to reach out to others – not as objects but as human beings – could provide a way forward without the failures and risks of more common sense methods that are useless, dangerous, or both.

If America tries only to fight a military war on terrorism, a great opportunity for human advancement will have been missed. Behavior therapists have a role in the war that should be fought: developing and testing methods for reducing human prejudice. To take up that challenge,

however, we need first to realize that this fight is not simply with the Osama who may be hiding in a cave in country far away, but also with the Osama who is surely hiding within our own skin.

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