Social Conflict

Naive Realism, Attribution, and In-Group Favoritism

Table of Contents

Introduction

The human brain is constantly bombarded with large amounts of data from our sensory organs. Stenger (2012, pg.15) states that "the human sensory system sends the brain about eleven million bits of information each second". Our mind is unable to effectively process, analyze, and store all of the information. Stenger (2012, pg. 15) also states, "the human brain is performing such complex tasks and has to deal with so much data that it is forced to generate a simplified model of conscious decision-making". Overtime, the brain evolved to develop mental short-cuts, called cognitive heuristics, which help to save processing time and energy. Unfortunately, in gaining time and energy, the mind sometimes loses judgement accuracy. These inaccuracies manifest in the mind as cognitive tendencies. Croskerry, Singhal, and Mamede (2013, pg. ii58) state that "the consensus is that there are two major sources: innate, hard-wired biases that developed in our evolutionary past, and acquired biases established in the course of development and within our working environments". There are cognitive tendencies in both types that contribute toward the development and reinforcement of conflict in society (Gilovich, Griffin, & Kahneman, 2013, pgs. 6-7). The objective of this literature review is to examine recent findings concerning some of the cognitive tendencies that contribute the most conflict to society. The cognitive tendencies examined in this review are: naïve realism, the hostile attribution bias, the fundamental attribution error, the ultimate attribution error, and the in-favoritism tendency.

Naïve Realism

Naïve realism is one of the most common errors in judgement, setting the path towards and reinforcing many other common social cognitive tendencies. Naïve realism is the tendency to naturally assume that the way you perceive the world is the way the world really is. In other words, it is "one's conviction that he or she is privy to a knowable, objective reality that others

will also grasp if they are rational and reliable themselves" (McCracken & McGlone, 2016, pg. 38). When you think the way you perceive the world is accurate, then your mind is pressured to construct explanations for when others disagree with your perception. Unfortunately, we repeatedly make many errors in our attempts to attribute the cause of the alternate perceptions and subsequent behaviors of others. Because of naïve realism "we often inaccurately believe that other's views are biased by ideology, self-interest, and irrationality. In turn, this perspective may deepen misunderstandings, disagreements, and antagonism between individuals and groups" (Nasie, Bar-Tal, Pliskin, Nahhas, & Halperin, 2014, pg. 1544).

Liberman, Minson, Bryan, and Ross (2012) discovered that naïve realism is a very powerful and resilient tendency. Participants continued to discredit the socio-political analysis of peers who disagreed with them, even after a joint analysis between both of them was shown to be more accurate than their own initial analysis. The researchers claim that "in accord with the tenets of naïve realism, participants tended to give less weight to the input of partners who disagreed with them about the relevant issue and that this tendency persisted in final estimates made after discussion" (Liberman et al., 2012, pg. 511). However, the study did discover that participants considered their peers' analysis to be less biased if the participants were informed about the tendency of naïve realism beforehand. Nasie et al. (2014) also discovered the tendency reduction effectiveness of simply educating participants about the existence and pervasiveness of naïve realism. The researchers discovered that educating Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Israelis about naïve realism resulted in participants' greater openness to the opposition's viewpoint. The study claims that "it is possible to increase people's openness to their adversary's narrative, even in the context of intractable conflicts, by raising participants' awareness to their cognitive

limitations, and in our case by simply describing the psychological bias of naïve realism" (Nasie et al., 2014, pg. 1553).

Attribution

When naïve realism has us thinking that we hold an objective perception of reality, we subsequently attempt to attribute explanations for why the behavior of others does not fall in line with our own perception. These attributions are often inaccurate and can lead to negative opinions about other people and their intentions. Pishghadam and Abbasnejad (2017, pg. 129) state that "almost all individuals are prone to make systematic errors while evaluating the behavior of others." When coupled with the fact that these other individuals often fall victim to the same attributional judgement errors, it can then become easy to see the force-multiplying potential that cognitive tendencies can have on social conflict. This portion of the review will discuss some of the findings in recent literature concerning three frequently occurring conflict-generating attributional tendencies: the hostile attribution bias, the fundamental attribution error, and the ultimate attribution error.

Hostile Attribution Bias

The hostile attribution bias (HAB) is the tendency to lean towards assessing another individual's behavior as being oppositional to your own benefit or well-being. In other words, the HAB is "the tendency to attribute hostile intent to others' actions even if their real purpose is benign or the circumstances are ambiguous" (Kokkinos, Karagianni, & Voulgaridou, 2017, pg. 102). One possible contributor to the HAB is the evolutionary survival explanation that humans developed the need to quickly assess the motives of a potential threat. In a better-safe-than-sorry scenario, automatically attributing hostile intent toward a possible aggressor could reduce the

chances of extermination. However, in modern times, high rates of the HAB could potentially encourage unnecessary detrimental conflict in society (Schönenberg & Jusyte, 2014, pg. 61).

A 2018 study meta-analyzed the results of 27 empirical research articles concerning the association between HAB rates and aggression in children and adolescents. The study found that the HAB is "associated with aggression in both genders, with no clear gender differences in association strength" (Martinelli, Ackermann, Bernhard, Freitag, & Schwenck, 2018, pg. 25). A 2014 study also examined the relationship between the HAB and aggression; however, this study examined the relationship in adults. The study claimed to be the first to demonstrate that individuals who usually exhibit higher levels of aggression also demonstrate higher levels of the HAB while judging facial expressions. The researchers also claimed that their "findings demonstrated that aggressive individuals, as compared to controls, not only (mis)interpreted ambiguous facial cues as hostile, but also showed a strong tendency to systematically overrate the perceived intensity of anger" (Schönenberg & Jusyte, 2014, pg. 66)

Fundamental Attribution Error

The fundamental attribution error (FAE), is the tendency to be more likely to attribute internal explanations for other peoples' negative behavior, while being less likely to see potential external explanations. In other words, "when we see someone doing something, we tend to think it relates to their personality rather than the situation the person might be in" (Sherman, 2014). For example, when another individual is driving very close behind us, we have a tendency to automatically ascribe a negative personality attribute to the individual instead of considering the possible reasons for why someone might be in a hurry (e.g. emergency). This naturally skewed perception for identifying primary influences on behavior can easily lead to numerous daily inaccuracies and subsequent social conflict. Berry states that "committing the FAE may have

implications for oppression, victimization, peer stress, and the making of moral judgments," and that "underrepresented people may experience prejudice brought about by inaccurate stereotypes constructed from an occurrence of the FAE" (2015, pg. 46).

There are different plausible explanations for why we commit the FAE. Depending on the situation, one or more of these explanations could be driving our inaccurate judgement. Similar to the possible evolutionary survival explanation of the HAB, in a better-safe-than-sorry scenario, an observer can attribute dispositional attributes to a potential aggressor faster than having to determine and analyze all the possible environmental influences on the agent's behavior (Berry, 2015, pgs. 47-50). Another plausible explanation that may reinforce and prevent reduction of the FAE in some situations is the just-world hypothesis. This hypothesis presents the idea that perhaps something like karma exists in the world and people get what they deserve. When we observe another individual falling victim to a tragedy, we attribute internal factors such as personality characteristics of the individual to the cause of the tragedy instead of uncontrollable external factors (Goodman and Carr, 2017, pg. 313). Applying the just-world belief to an observed tragedy can reduce our fear and anxiety by reinforcing our feeling of control and reducing the likelihood that we could also fall victim to uncontrollable external factors (Donat, Peter, Dalbert, & Kamble, 2016, pgs. 74-75).

Recent studies tested different tendency reducing techniques to reduce the effects of the FAE. A 2015 study administered a module consisting of 30 relational questions meant to increase a person's perspective. An example of a standard-level complexity question is, "I have a red brick and you have a green brick. If I was you and you were me, what would you have?". The results of the study found a significant reduction in the FAE. The study suggested that "brief perspective taking interventions could have use in improving every day social interactions in

which the FAE is committed. Indeed, such exercises would be easily disseminable and could be accomplished in many different contexts (from schools to workplaces)" (Hooper, Erdogan, Keen, Lawton, & McHugh, 2015, pgs. 69-71). Walter and Tsfati (2018) discovered that participants playing the video game *Grand Theft Auto IV* committed less FAE against the main character as opposed to participants who merely viewed the game. The researchers concluded that "the interactive experience was able to bridge major social gaps, helping individuals from one group understand the complexities of individuals from another group" (Walter & Tsfati, 2018, pg. 13).

Ultimate Attribution Error

The fundamental attribution error (FAE) was the tendency to naturally attribute personality influences as the primary cause of other individuals' negative behavior while downplaying environmental influences. Similarly, the ultimate attribution error (UAE) is the natural tendency to attribute personality influences as the primary cause for an outgroup's behavior, while ignoring potential environmental influences. Also similar to the FAE, the UAE may be driven in part due to naïve realism and the idea that if an individual or group disagrees with my "accurate" perception of reality, then their view of reality must be biased in some way. The UAE attributes the group's biased viewpoint as primarily the result of shared negative dispositional factors of the group members (Khandelwal, Dhillon, Akalamkam, & Papneja, 2014, pg. 428).

Coleman (2013) studied the effects of fear and anger on the UAE. He found that "participants experiencing negative emotions made more dispositional attributions for bad behavior and more circumstantial attributions for good behavior than people experiencing a neutral emotion." This finding may demonstrate the potential of stressful environments, from formal political debates to all-out war, in exacerbating the social divide (Coleman, 2013, pg. 79).

However, a 2014 study may have produced somewhat conflicting findings amongst Muslim adolescents in a conflict zone (Kashmir) and a non-conflict zone (Delhi). The researchers stated, "Contrary to our expectations, no significant differences were found in attributions made by adolescents in the two zones for socially undesirable behaviours of in-group as well as out-group members." The study listed numerous suggested explanations from peace efforts in Kashmir to minority Muslim proportionality differences for why Muslim adolescents in the conflict region did not commit the UAE to a greater degree (Khandelwal et al., 2014, pgs. 431-432).

In-Group Favoritism

Naïve realism, and the three attributional tendencies mentioned above, likely contribute to what is known as in-group favoritism. In-group favoritism is the natural unconscious tendency to favor individuals you consider to be members of your group. This powerful tendency occurs with all groups from race, religion, nationality, and even sports. In-group favoritism likely helps to explain why so much love, passion, and aggression can be manifested in both the players and fans of team sports. However, Cherry (2018) states that "such attitudes often contribute to prejudice and even hostility toward outgroup members. Children often experience bullying, loneliness, and exclusion thanks to the in-group bias as kids form small groups often referred to as cliques." In-group favoritism contributes to the dangerous "us vs. them" mentality. When your brain labels someone as "them" instead of "us", then the differences become illuminated and common ground becomes harder to spot. This mentality hardens battle lines and can lead to conflict between different groups (Kavaliers & Choleris, 2017). A possible evolutionary explanation for in-group favoritism comes from the need to strengthen group cohesion and increase motivation in order to compete against other groups for scarce resources (Cherry, 2018).

Similar to the fundamental attribution error video game study (Walter & Tsfati, 2018), Hasler, Spanlang, and Slater (2017) investigated the effects of virtual reality on in-group favoritism. Humans implicitly imitate others in order to increase cohesion. This mimicking behavior increases as other individuals possess similar characteristics, such as skin color. The study found that individuals of light skin color actually demonstrate more imitational behavior toward dark skinned virtual individuals when the light skinned individuals are immersed in a virtual dark skinned body. The researchers note that "this finding demonstrates the plasticity of racial self-categorizations and the malleability of the racial in-group bias. Such virtual race transformations may be an effective strategy for combating automatic expressions of racial bias" (Hasler et al., 2017, pgs. 12-13). Luo, Han, Du, and Han (2017) found that colder temperatures can increase in-group racial bias. The researchers state that "from an evolutionary perspective, to survive in an inclement environment with scarce resources demands social support from members of a social group, which in turn may facilitate emotional understanding and sharing among in-group members" (Luo et al., 2017, pg. 8).

Conclusion

This literature review examined recent findings concerning five cognitive tendencies that significantly contribute toward social conflict. The literature highlighted the exhaustive complexity of the multitude of variables that can influence the degree to which an individual commits a cognitive tendency. Some of the studies discovered effective tendency reduction techniques. Liberman et al. (2012) and Nasie et al. (2014) demonstrated the tendency reduction effectiveness of simply educating individuals about the existence and pervasiveness of the cognitive tendency naïve realism. Technology has provided us with new and effective tendency reduction techniques. Walter & Tsfati (2018) used a video game to reduce the fundamental

attribute error, and Hasler et al. (2017) used virtual reality to reduce in-group favoritism. Because cognitive tendencies are ingrained natural tendencies, periodic tendency reduction training may also be required. Liberman et al. (2012) was able to demonstrate the unfortunate resiliency of naïve realism.

The five cognitive tendencies examined in this literature review are not the only tendencies that contribute to social conflict. Some of the cognitive tendencies that could be examined in an extended review include the **back fire effect** (inadvertently strengthening an adversary's belief when providing facts that the adversary's belief is inaccurate), the **confirmation bias** (tendency to only seek out and assimilate information that confirms your own view of reality), the **group attribution error** (tendency to believe that characteristics or behavior of one or more group members are the same for other members of the same group), the **status quo bias** (tendency to favor existing social norms, even at the expense of individual or group benefit), and the **superiority bias** (relative to others, tendency to over-estimate your own positive traits while underestimating your negative traits).

References

Berry, Z. (2015). Explanations and implications of the fundamental attribution error: a review and proposal. *Journal of Integrated Social Sciences 2015 – 5* (1), 44-57.

Cherry, K. (2018, February 07). What is the ingroup bias? Retrieved March 06, 2018, from https://www.explorepsychology.com/ingroup-bias/

Coleman, M. D. (2013). Emotion and the ultimate attribution error. *Current Psychology, 32* (1), 71-81.

Donat, M., Peter, F., Dalbert, C., & Kamble, S. V. (2016). The meaning of students' personal belief in a just world for positive and negative aspects of school-specific well-being. *Social Justice Research, 29* (1), 73-102.

Gilovich, T., Griffin, D. W., & Kahneman, D. (2013). *Heuristics and biases: the psychology of intuitive judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goodman, S., & Carr, P. (2017). The just world hypothesis as an argumentative resource in debates about unemployment benefits. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 27* (4), 312-323.

Croskerry, P., Singhal, G., & Mamede, S. (2013). Cognitive debiasing 1: origins of bias and theory of debiasing. *BMJ Quality & Safety, 22,* Suppl 2, ii58-ii64.

Hasler, B., Spanlang, B., & Slater, M. (2017). Virtual race transformation reverses racial in-group bias. *PLoS One, 12* (4), 1-20.

Hooper, N., Erdogan, A., Keen, G., Lawton, K., & McHugh, L. (2015). Perspective taking reduces the fundamental attribution error. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science, 4* (2), 69-72.

Kavaliers, M., & Choleris, E. (2017). Out-group threat responses, in-group bias, and nonapeptide involvement are conserved across vertebrates. *American Naturalist, 189* (4), 453-458.

Khandelwal, K., Dhillon, M., Akalamkam, K., & Papneja, D. (2014). The Ultimate Attribution Error: Does it Transcend Conflict? The Case of Muslim Adolescents in Kashmir and Delhi. *Psychological Studies, 59* (4), 427-435.

Kokkinos, C. M., Karagianni, K., & Voulgaridou, I. (2017). Relational aggression, big five and hostile attribution bias in adolescents. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 52*, 101-113.

Liberman, V., Minson, J. A., Bryan, C. J., & Ross, L. (2012). Naïve realism and capturing the "wisdom of dyads". *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48* (2), 507.

Luo, S., Han, X., Du, N., & Han, S. (2017). Physical coldness enhances racial in-group bias in empathy: Electrophysiological evidence. *Neuropsychologia*, 1-9

Martinelli, A., Ackermann, K., Bernhard, A., Freitag, C., & Schwenck, C. (2018). Hostile attribution bias and aggression in children and adolescents: A systematic literature review on the influence of aggression subtype and gender. *Aggression & Violent Behavior, 39,* 25-32.

McCracken, A. A., & McGlone, M. S. (2016). Naive realism in the unmarried cohabitation controversy in the United States. *Interpersona, 10* (1), 36-55.

Nasie, M., Bar-Tal, D., Pliskin, R., Nahhas, E., & Halperin, E. (2014). Overcoming the barrier of narrative adherence in conflicts through awareness of the psychological bias of naïve realism. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 40* (11), 1543.

Pishghadam, R., & Abbasnejad, H. (2017). Introducing emotioncy as an invisible force controlling causal decisions: A case of attribution theory. *Polish Psychological Bulletin, 48* (1), 129-140.

Schönenberg, M., & Jusyte, A. (2014). Investigation of the hostile attribution bias toward ambiguous facial cues in antisocial violent offenders. *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience, 264* (1), 61-9.

Sherman, M. (2014, June 20). Why we don't give each other a break. Retrieved March 03, 2018, from https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/real-men-dont-write-blogs/201406/why-we-dont-give-each-other-break

Stenger, V. J. (2012). Free will and autonomous will. *Skeptic*, *17,* 15-19.

Walter, N., & Tsfati, Y. (2018). Interactive experience and identification as predictors of attributing responsibility in video games. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications, 30* (1), 3-15.