Freudian Defence Mechanisms: Their Link to Prejudice and Stereotypes

Introduction

This essay aims to explore the connection between the idea of prejudice and stereotypes and Freudian defence mechanisms, including projection, suppression, and rationalisation. Assuming that all forms of prejudice have a common foundation, we might employ study formulations to make theoretical progress in our search for a broader construction. Throughout the essay, we will be talking about how defense mechanisms manifest themselves in the form of hate, dislike, and myths targeted towards minorities or groups. The aim is to understand how the studies and theories have contributed to advances in establishing this link.

With the help of the group-norm theory and the theory of social dominance, we would be able to understand how individuals identify with their groups, establish dominance, and normalize prejudice. The essay aims at identifying behavioral patterns that lead individuals to project their insecurities, repress shameful prejudices behaviors, and rationalize hatred, which are the underlying defense mechanisms at work. Furthermore, we will delve deeper into the theoretical concepts and literature that provide a basis for the connection between the two concepts.

Freud’s Defense Mechanisms

The ego's fight against unpleasant or intolerable thoughts or emotions, as well as its defence against automatic demands, are referred to as defence mechanisms by Anna Freud in her 2018 book *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*. The ego's goal in creating defence mechanisms is to protect itself from the distress that comes with sexual and violent implosives and to avoid dealing with them directly. (Freud, 1926/1959a, as cited in Feist & Feist, 2008). This essay will concentrate on three primary defence mechanisms—projections, rationalisation, and repression.

Projection is the ability to perceive undesirable emotions or tendencies in others that are truly present in one's own unconscious (Freud, 1915/1957b, as cited in Feist & Feist, 2008). It is a psychological tendency when people mistakenly ascribe their own emotions, intentions, or characteristics to other people. Repression is another defence technique that requires concealing all or a portion of a personal conflict situation out of awareness and from an adaptive response. Repression may be the result of anything undesirable to consciousness, particularly those aspects of a dispute that would diminish our sense of self. In order to defend itself from unwanted id impulses, the ego suppresses them; in other words, it pushes threatening emotions into the unconscious (Freud, 1926/1959a, as cited in Feist & Feist, 2008). Freud claimed that repression is frequently maintained for the rest of one's life.

Finally, The *APA Dictionary of Psychology* defines rationalisation as a cognitive distortion when someone conjures up what appears to be reasonable justifications for their feelings or behaviours, frequently hiding the underlying unconscious causes. Through this process, people might shield their self-esteem, escape guilt, or dodge criticism. In psychotherapy, rationalisation can help clients deal with discomfort, but it can also impede self-awareness and deeper inquiry by keeping them from facing their actual feelings and reasons.

Prejudices and Stereotypes in Social Psychology

In his book *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) defines prejudice as a strong feeling of dislike or hatred directed against a member of a group based only on the fact that he is a member of that group and is therefore assumed to possess any negative characteristics associated with the group. However, according to Crandall and Eshleman (2003), prejudice is essentially an emotional state that, like other emotional states, causes physical tension that may operate as a motivator or incentive for behaviour. Because of this, it is possible to study all forms of prejudice together because they have at least one common core.

The word "stereotype" was originally used in the late seventeenth century. It was used at the time to describe a printing method that produced images and print reproductions using metal plates. The term was not widely used until the early 1920s when stereotypes were associated with "pictures in the head," or mental representations of reality. Since then, the term has developed into its modern meaning, which refers to cognitive schemas or beliefs that people employ to interpret information about or direct behaviour towards persons or social groups. (Lippmann, 1922, as cited in Marx & Ko, 2019).

Linking Freudian Defense Mechanisms to Prejudice and Stereotypes

Prejudice may be viewed from a psychodynamic standpoint as the outcome of universal psychological processes, including defence mechanisms. These psychological processes turned tensions, dangers, and frustrations that came from the environment or from within the personality into prejudice towards minorities. It was therefore believed that prejudice was a continuation of unconscious psychological defences. These defences were a projection of the psychological conflicts and hostility that often resulted from external frustrations (Duckitt, 1992). It is clear from all of this that *projection* was one of the numerous psychodynamic processes linked to prejudice.

Allport (1954) regarded group-norm theory as one of the main theories of prejudice in his seminal work on the subject. According to the theory, every group creates a way of life with distinctive norms, values, and "enemies" to meet their unique adaptive requirements. Allport defines an in-group as a group that you personally belong to as well as any other individuals who are thought to be a part of that group. In similar terms, anyone who is not a member of your group is an out-group. People identify with the

inclinations of their in-group, and those who oppose it are their enemies. According to the theory, one of the most common causes of prejudice is found in how in-group affiliations affect a person's personality development.

Interestingly, prejudices can take many different forms, some of which are more subtle, implicit, or even paternalistic, while others are overt or "hostile." Similarly, various prejudiced behaviours are often motivated by distinct stereotypes. Groups that are characterised as being warm and incompetent, for example, are likely to garner sympathy but be undervalued in terms of their potential contributions to society. Recognising and addressing the various feelings people have about a specific group is an element of overcoming prejudice. Certain emotions are probably more destructive than others. Making individuals feel bad about the discriminating activities of their group, for instance, may cause defensive responses instead of motivating them to interact constructively with the outgroup (Abrams, 2010).

Consequently, the sense of irrationality that results from imposing prejudice on out-groups can cause *repression* of such hostile attitudes. However, some people could also *rationalise* discriminatory actions by claiming that they increase in-group safety (Allport, 1954). It is easy to identify a justification by its explanatory nature: it is based on "logical" arguments of why, on some occasions, prejudices may be acceptable or even desirable and usually occur in situations that are ambiguous enough to justify a wide range of individual responses. A justification is simply any psychological or social process that can serve as an opportunity to express genuine prejudice without suffering external or internal sanction (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003).

Prejudice is a mindset that drives behaviour and looks for a way to be expressed. However, people recognise the irrationality and shamefulness of prejudice because it is seen unfavourably by society (Lima & Vala, 2004). This encourages people to repress these feelings and puts the two situations—expressing prejudice and suppressing it—in conflict. One attempts to rationalise his acts in order to prevent repression and allow for the manifestation of prejudice. (Carpigiani & De Brito, 2020).

In line with the previous explanations, Sidanius and Pratto (1999) established the *Theory of Social Dominance*, in which people tend to organise themselves in societies that maintain patterns of domination between social groupings. This results in the development of myths that legitimise societal injustices and serve as excuses for the manifestation of their prejudices. Crochik (1996) asserts that these stereotypes serve as cultural instruments that uphold the status quo and legitimise social structures. By normalising value disparities among social roles, these myths strengthen the moral foundation that underpins society.

Case Study/Examples

There are a number of examples in pop culture that reflect the influence of defence mechanisms in the formation of prejudices and stereotypes. One in particular is the movie *District 6* which depicts insect-like creatures that are stuck on Earth and are being kept in a government camp in Johannesburg, South Africa. Following their forced relocation to a new refugee camp beyond the city boundaries, the aliens—whom humans disparagingly call "prawns"—are subjected to violence and bloodshed. Thus, xenophobia (the dread of individuals who are different from oneself) is explored in the movie, but this fear is directed at an alien race rather than foreigners or racial minorities.

The film's sequences that appear realistic are mostly based on the actual forced relocation that took place in Cape Town, South Africa's District 6. District 6 was designated a whites-only enclave by the government in 1966, mostly comprising Muslims and Africans. Over 60,000 individuals were taken from their houses by force and placed in camps beyond the city limits. The majority of locals thought that the government wanted the land because it was close to the city centre and ocean ports, even though the administration provided a number of justifications for the removal. In Psychology Today, Melissa Burkley analyses this film and concludes that competition for land was the root cause of the racism that took place here.

Social scientist Muzafer Sherif claims that one of the main reasons for prejudice and stereotyping in a community is competition for limited resources. According to his Realistic Group Conflict Theory, intergroup conflict arises whenever groups vie for resources like land, money, jobs, etc. In his famous "*Robbers Cave Experiment*," carried out at Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma, Sherif illustrated this effect. Twelve-year-old boys attending a summer camp were split into two groups (the Eagles and the Rattlers) and made to compete against one another for prizes as part of this study.

A few days later, animosity between the two groups broke out and members of both groups called each other "braggers" or "stinkers," held their noses whenever they were near the other group, made up songs disparaging the other group, and yelled at each other during dinner. Many even refused to eat in the mess hall when the other group was there. By merely allowing groups to battle for coveted resources, Sherif had planted prejudice. (Sherif et al., 1961, as cited in Fine, 2004).

Limitations

According to Allport (1954), the core of irrationality in human nature is represented by psychological processes that reflect the infantile, repressed, defensive, aggressive, and projective aspects of unconscious mental existence. An individual whose nature is characterised by these mechanisms is unlikely to develop into a completely developed adult who can make mature adjustments in his social interactions.

In his book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport critiques that even though these processes play a significant role in understanding prejudice, they shouldn't be given all the importance. He also adds that numerous elements contribute, including societal conventions, cultural traditions, the way and content of a child's education, the parental model, semantic confusion, a lack of awareness of group differences, the principle of category creation, and many more. The most crucial factor is how the person integrates all of these influences—including his unconscious conflicts and psychodynamic reactions—into his overall manner of living.

Conclusion

This essay concludes by relating Freudian defence mechanisms like projection, repression, and rationalisation to the ideas of bias and stereotypes. It highlights how social groups establish dominance and normalise prejudice in response to internal and external disputes by looking at how these mechanisms show up in negative feelings towards minorities. Interestingly, repression hides negative emotions, rationalisation justifies prejudiced actions, and projection enables people to blame others for their fears.

The alien metaphor in the movie "*District 6*" and Sherif's "*Robbers Cave Experiment*," for example, are case studies that highlight how intergroup conflict and resource struggle can serve as prejudice fuels. Despite the importance of these psychological processes, Allport warns against attributing bias to them alone, highlighting the impact of social and cultural elements on personal conduct and convictions. In the end, a fuller comprehension of bias and its effects on social interactions is provided by the complex interaction between defence mechanisms and cultural standards.

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Identifying Cognitive Dissonance in our Daily Lives

Did you ever notice that people often alter what they say so that it doesn't contradict what they do? Often times people are entwined in the struggle to preserve the authenticity of their words, even when something contradictory happens. This struggle is real as inconsistencies can lead to a character judgement causing the individual to be labelled as untruthful or dishonest.

A few days back Rachel was interviewed for her dream job, but she couldn't land the role. However, when she discussed this with her friends later, she said "I barely resonated with that job. Also, I had to travel all the way down to the southside every day. They were not even offering me allowances or benefits." When she couldn't land the role, she ended up devaluing the job and her desire to bag it. She is probably trying to achieve internal harmony by avoiding contradictory thoughts. This is called Cognitive Dissonance. This concept was coined by one researcher- Leon Festiger who stated that Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that is caused when two or more cognitions are conflicting or are inconsistent with one another (Pervin, 2003). Aesop's fable "The Fox and the Grapes" is also a strong example of Cognitive dissonance.

While Cognitive dissonance is a form of defense mechanism in itself, it can lead to impaired decision-making if left unattended. On the flip side, once it is recognized, it can help in greater self-awareness and control. Festinger argued that attitudes follow behaviour. Festinger's theory is recognised to be the most important development in social psychology to that time, as in the 1970s observed by a follower of Festinger (Aronson, 1992). According to Festinger, individuals tend to reduce dissonance if they think that the elements causing it are in their control. In Rachel's case, she knew that her consistent efforts were not enough for her to land the job. This was distressing for her and her brain was working all its way out to avoid that tension.

Let's look at a research study as an example. How can cigarette smokers balance their want to live with the belief that smoking causes cancer? Naturally, rejecting the information is one way to lessen dissonance, and many smokers do just that. However, studies have shown that people can try to reduce dissonance in much more subtle ways. A range of questions were posed to groups of smokers and nonsmokers, including the following: To what extent does smoking pose a major risk of cancer? To what extent is smoking actually harmful? When will a cancer cure be discovered? How long must a person smoke for it to be genuinely harmful?

As expected, smokers gave smoking a lower risk rating for cancer than nonsmokers. Furthermore, smokers said that a bigger quantity of cigarettes were actually harmful; the more cigarettes they smoked, the more they indicated that cigarettes were truly harmful. Lastly, smokers believed that there would be a cancer cure sooner than nonsmokers and that smoking for a longer period of time was risky. The fact

that smokers believed that a cure for cancer would be discovered before smoking became seriously harmful to them, as well as the number of years that smoking was required before it became dangerous, was especially astounding in this case!

As stated earlier, nonsmokers believed that a cure for cancer was a long way off and that fewer years of smoking were risky, with the remedy occurring after the risky number of years. Cigarette smokers therefore lessened dissonance by downplaying the danger, not only by denying the link between smoking and cancer but also by thinking they were immune or that a treatment would be found (Pervin & Yatko, 1965).

That being said, this might not be the best time in Canada, and that is why there is more room for Cognitive Dissonance. Government policies, economic and political conditions, recession, and many more factors can make a jobseeker feel like he is no longer in control of his career.

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