Common Ground Helps Reduce Stereotyping

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In the wake of repeated bombings in the London subway system this summer by Muslim extremists, representatives from London's large Muslim community repeatedly condemned the acts, declaring that the city's Muslims shared the general sense of outrage and revulsion felt by non-Muslims. Muslim clerics and community leaders stood shoulder-toshoulder with Christians, Hindus, and representatives of the countless other religions whose followers call Great Britain home to denounce the attacks.

According to recent psychological research, such displays of solidarity can help minimize feelings of "otherness" that can lead to the sort of amorphous rage that drives young men to blow themselves up, and take as many people with them as possible.

Helping people feel a deeper connection with the broad society they live in makes such acts less likely, according to APS Fellow and Charter Member Susan T. Fiske, Princeton University. "Why would you blow up something you have a stake in? You only blow up something if you have no other recourse," said Fiske, who is a Past President of APS.

But making those connections can be difficult. People tend to place everyone around them into one of two groups, based on common attributes: an in-group to which they belong – college graduates, for example – and an out-group, to which they do not – non-college graduates, to continue with the example –. But such categories, because they are often based on superficial characteristics, such as race or gender, typically overestimate differences between groups and underestimate differences inside groups. In particular this homogeneity effect causes people to see others classified as members of outgroups as "all the same," to a much greater extent than do members of the in-group. The stereotyping arising from this "social categorization" can be extremely difficult for the stereotyper to overcome.

In part this effect occurs because of a lack of personal contact with members of the out-group, and most especially with a lack of contact among a representative sample of outgroup members. In other words, people tend to use a single encounter, such as a tense encounter with a member of a different ethnic group, and assume, consciously or not, that the unpleasant characteristics observed in that exchange are held by all members of that ethnic group.

Just throwing people together in hopes of providing personal contact is not enough to overcome this sort of behavior. For example, some advocates of school desegregation in the United States hoped that routine contact with other races would reduce the amount of racial prejudice in America. But numerous factors, such as a lack of equal status between the groups, limited personal interaction between members of groups, and a lack of shared, cooperative activities tend to limit the benefits such exposure might have on individuals.

There is hope, however. For example, the Common Ingroup Identity Model, developed by APS Fellow and Charter Member Samuel L. Gaertner, University of Delaware, and APS Fellow John F. Dovidio,

University of Connecticut, argues that instead of fighting the tendency of people to establish in-groups and out-groups, people can be induced to broaden their categories, ultimately perhaps to join super categories, such as an in-group of living things, and an outgroup of inanimate objects. They suggest that it's possible to encourage people to either recategorize or decategorize common group boundaries in ways that can reduce traditional conflicts between the in-group and out-group. This does not require that people abandon their original in-group, but rather to acknowledge a kind of super-group to which in-group and out-group members belong, creating a dual identity.

Failure to understand the complex interactions required in this endeavor will likely lead to failure. For example, recent news reports explained that the city library in Malmo, Sweden, will allow patrons to "check out" a blind person, a gypsy, a lesbian, a journalist, a Dane, or a Muslim for a 45 minute chat, a project designed to reduce the level of prejudice in Swedes by exposing them to people who commonly encounter prejudice.

"Sounds like an intriguing idea," Gaertner said. "From what we know, that person would best be regarded as typical of the group they are representing if this conversation is to lead to attitude change regarding the group as a whole. Otherwise the person may be regarded as wonderful but an exception to the rule."

Fiske argues that the Common Ingroup Identity Model can be useful in terms of crafting effective ways of uniting, rather than dividing, diverse population groups and thus minimizing the kind of isolation that can lead to suicide bombings.

"My own research area is interdependence," she said. "When people are in a powerless situation, they scrutinize the people in power in order to have an impact on their own outcome. It's a very strong effect: people who are excluded tend to think that the people in charge are all in cahoots and all similar, and all against your group."

Fiske argues that the rage against a society evidenced by suicide bombers is a special form of despair brought about by helplessness. "It's really fundamentally about control: Can I have an impact on this society?" Western societies typically express bewilderment over such sentiments, since they prize freedom of action and expression, but a large part of this problem can be traced to the difficulties of people who feel completely marginalized because their fundamental beliefs are in fundamental conflict with the larger society's beliefs.

"How do you allow people to maintain their culture when it's at odds with the larger culture? If your perspective is that women should stay home, the larger society isn't going to accept that," she said. "And in those situations, groups that feel powerless, they get frustrated, and eventually hostile."

Fiske argues that the individuals who carried out the London attacks were not well-integrated into British society. "The Muslim immigrants don't see themselves as similar to the other people around them, they're physically separated from others, they maintain their own culture, and it's not clear that the society has communicated its need for these immigrants, and there is a genuine need for immigrants in modern societies. That sort of marginalization is what leads to anger."