Psychology's Unique Approaches to Social Justice

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Steven A. Meyers' Teaching Tips column about integrating social justice themes into teaching psychology provides several useful suggestions and methods (Meyers, 2007). However, I think that psychologists should pay attention to the issue of social justice, not only because it permeates much of psychological research (e.g., prejudice, intergroup relations, and moral reasoning), but also because psychology can examine the issue by using principles and perspectives that differ from those of other social sciences like sociology and the political sciences.

The psychological approaches outlined below can be used to examine the issue of social justice.

First, psychology recognizes that social cognitions or perceptions that regulate psychological activities in human interactions may be inaccurate or distorted. Achieving social justice entails differentiating the perceptions from reality and correcting the cognitive distortions. This unique perspective can be used to reduce stereotypes and prejudice derived from social-categorization. According to research in the area, when people are categorized into groups (e.g., in-groups and out-groups), members of the same group seem to be more similar than they actually are, but variations between members of different groups tend to be exaggerated and over-generalized. The perceived group relation and demarcations, however, can be modified by changing social categories, such as de-categorization (creating the perception that everyone is an individual), re-categorization (structuring an inclusive, higher level of category so that all share a superordinate and cross-cutting group membership), and mutual intergroup differentiation (Gaertner, et al., 2000). Psychology helps understand that the conventional definition of *group*, which is based on social, economic, ethnic, or other categories with fixed boundaries, has overlooked individuals' cognitions. The cognitions are developmental and changeable and are the real agent that instigates various group-related psychological activities.

By the same token, discerning the distinction between the real differences and perceived differences for social categories can shed light on the confusion between stereotypes and cross-cultural understanding. Since the colonial period, biases and misperceptions about "the others" have afflicted American society. Some psychology literature and research have reproduced those biases and stereotypes and shaped Americans' social perceptions. When psychologists misconstrue the perceived differences or stereotypes as the truth, they show faulty cultural sensitivity, with the unawareness that the self's knowledge about a culture is distorted or purely false.

In addition, recognizing the operation of distorted cognitions in social situations explains some prejudice-motivated activities. For example, the legal definition of hate crime (i.e., the offender attacks the victim because of the race, color, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or national origin of that victim) tends to be viewed as a causality description for the offense. Namely, people tend to focus on the victim distinctiveness as the explanation for hate crime. However, from the psychological perspective, the "because" statement in the legal definition only refers to the offender's criminal intent and distorted cognitions (e.g., blaming the victim for some perceived wrong and using different group memberships to

justify and rationalize their hate crimes), rather than suggesting that the different group memberships for the offender and the victim cause hate crime. Clarifying the distinction between the offender's mental state and reality has implications for understanding and conducting research on hate crime and clinical interventions with the victims (Sun, 2006).

Furthermore, Western psychologists need to acknowledge and integrate the contributions of non-Western psychology in their curriculums, because humans everywhere develop both unique and universal understanding about the mind and behavior when facing common physical and social challenges. In fact, humans' ability to operate in their physical and social milieus depends on their capacity to engage in swift learning that is both cultural and universal (Smith, Spillane, & Annus, 2006). Contrary to the narrow view that individuals' thinking and actions are shaped only from within their own cultural perspectives, cross-cultural information and knowledge exchange, contacts, and influences, though moderate in the past, have transformed all cultures, including the field of psychology. For example, Taoist philosophy has influenced Western psychotherapy, social psychology, Jungian psychology, transpersonal psychology and humanistic psychology. In addition, instead of being isolated from one another, all cultures are increasingly interacting, forming a global village (Sun, 2008).

Finally, as suggested by developmental psychologists like Piaget and Kohlberg, moral reasoning is fettered by cognitive understanding. In other words, a higher stage of moral reasoning regarding social justice depends upon expanding cognitive understanding of social reality. The relation between the perception of "what is" and the perception of "what ought to be" needs to be integrated into the teaching of psychology. ?

References

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