On the Relationship Between Social Class and Prejudice

February 12, 2014

Studies have indicated that prejudice is more prevalent among people from lower social classes, but researchers are still struggling to understand what might account for this association. In an article published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, a team of researchers led by Héctor Carvacho of Bielefeld University, Germany, examine the role of two ideological attitudes — right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) — in linking aspects of social class to increased levels of prejudice.

People who are high in RWA tend to be willing to submit to authority figures they deem legitimate, adhere to social conventions and norms, and be aggressive towards people who violate societal norms or values. Being high in RWA often means viewing the world as a threatening place and finding security in the maintenance of social norms and the status quo.

SDO refers to a person’s psychological orientation toward acceptance or rejection of intergroup hierarchy; that is, does a person prefer relations to be equal between groups or prefer a hierarchy between groups? Those who score high in SDO prefer hierarchical social systems and tend to view the world as competitive in nature.

Based on past research examining the relationships between RWA, SDO, social class, and prejudice, the Carvacho and his coauthors posited that deprivation experienced by people from low social classes could heighten their perception of the world as threatening and competitive — views which are linked to intergroup conflict and prejudice against others.

The authors completed a series of four studies conducted with participants from five different countries. In these studies, participants were assessed for RWA, SDO, prejudice, and racism towards a variety of different groups (e.g., the homeless, foreigners, people with disabilities, etc.), and for their income and education level. The authors used structural equation modeling to assess the relation between social class (i.e., income and education), RWA and SDO, and prejudice.

Although there were some inconsistencies in the findings between the different studies, overall, the
results suggested that income and education have an independent negative effect on prejudice, with the effect of education on prejudice being stronger than the effect of income on prejudice. The authors also found that higher levels of education and income led to lower levels of RWA and SDO, which in turn led to lower levels of prejudice.

These findings suggest that lower social class is linked to greater endorsement of social hierarchy and a desire for maintenance of the current social order, views which can lead to intergroup hostility and prejudice against others.

Reference