

Prejudice and discrimination are the result of individual's and group's sense of identity. Discuss

Introduction

The UK's Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, has recently made the headlines with some openly transphobic declarations at the Conservative Party Conference, in September (Leeson, 2023). This is a decisive reversal, compared to former Prime Minister, Theresa May. Though belonging to the same party, Mrs May actively advocated for transgender topics to be taught in schools (Cary, 2017). Compared to this, Rishi Sunak shifted to a more reactionary and rigid narrative.

After those declarations, queer news media accused the Prime Minister of causing an increment in transphobic incidents (Folan, 2023; Goodier, 2023). This sparked protests against the government and in support of the trans community (Hansford, 2023). However, other surveys (YouGov, 2023; Bradley, 2020) show that transphobic hate crimes have been on the rise in the UK for several years. Starting from these events, this essay investigates transphobic prejudice and discrimination.

Using social psychology theories as a framework, this essay explores the conceptual implications and underlying assumptions of this speech. In particular, the essay will explore the Prime Minister's ideas focussing on the individual's and group's sense of identity. The aim is to understand the Prime Minister's remarks and uncover possible biases. This process will underpin the prejudice and discrimination towards trans and gender-non-conforming individuals as part of a broader cultural narrative about self and identity. In the conclusion, some opportunities for change will be explored, as well as proposing new areas for research.

Main body

It is interesting to start from the semantics of Sunak's declarations: 'A man is a man and a woman is a woman, it is just common sense' (Sunak, R. quoted in Leeson, L. 2023; Hasford, 2023; Kasulis Cho, 2023; McKeon, 2023). The rigid gender binary split is linked to 'common sense'. The issue concerns individual identities and

impacts the wider societal context. Therefore, to understand it, it is key to use self and social identity theories.

An initial approach to investigate Sunak's passionate fixation on gender-binary is through the lens of heuristics (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Though it is essential to use heuristics as 'mental shortcuts' for decision-making and problem-solving, this black-and-white cognitive process is very error-prone (Pratkanis, 1989; Kahneman, 2011). On one hand, the bias speeds up cognitive processing by simplification, on the other hand, it denies difference and complexity.

If heuristics are crucial in some aspects of human cognitive functioning, they appear to be extremely dysfunctional and even harmful in this case. Stereotypes are somehow the by-product of these cognitive processes. This type of simplification is harmful not just for the transgender community, but also for those who identify as cisgender male or female. This is because the rigidity perpetuates stereotypes and fixed gender roles. That is an inflexible view of what a man should look like and what a woman should look like. It does not consider the wide spectrum of human gender and gender expression (Richards *et al.*, 2016; Matsuno & Budge, 2017). This narrative excludes a significant portion of the population by reinforcing an 'us-and-them' narrative, which is divisive rather than inclusive.

With his appeal to common sense, Sunak actively invites his audience into this simplified and exclusive vision of human gender and gender expression. Using social identity theories, gender conformity can be understood as a schema (Tajfel, 1969). This is an example of category-biased thinking. In this framing, there is no space for people who do not conform to gender norms and try to blur the binary structure. What makes this so controversial?

Gender often plays an important part in the way people think about themselves (self-concept) and how they behave (self-expression). Self-concept and self-expression are experienced by gender-non-confirming individuals as constantly redesigning and reconfiguring themselves (Mason-Schrock, 1996). This experience is in stark contrast to the rigid black-and-white thinking proposed by the Prime

Minister.

Contrary to this more traditional Ego Theory (Freud, 1920), Dennett (1991) proposes that it is our internal narrative that creates a sense of self and not the opposite. This implies that the self is not a pre-existing entity. Therefore, it can be changed and developed according to the narrative we want to create. First introduced by Hume (1739-40), this theory is often referred to as 'bundle theory'. It can feel quite counter-intuitive, especially in a 'Western' sense (Dickerson, 2012) to think about the self as a collection of experiences.

The bundle theory does not imply that the self is inconsistent and incoherent (James, 1890). On the contrary, it is constantly forming and unravelling in a continuous creative process, which is what is experienced by gender-non-confirming individuals. Whilst Sunak proposes a static vision of the self, the trans community and allies, ascribe to a dynamic self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987). This is the idea that the self-concept is fluid and open to change.

This static self-concept, promoted by Sunak, is the polar opposite of non-conformity and does not account for individual differences. Therefore his words are not inclusive and actively promote discrimination. Why would a prime minister promote discrimination against minorities?

To answer this question it is key to consider the sense of identity as a social construct (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Crucial to the sense of self is the sense of belonging to a group (Maslow, 1943). This suggests that individuals present with thoughts and behaviours motivated by the need to be part of and included in a group (Hagerty *et al.*, 1992). It is possible then to interpret this appeal to gender conformity as a way to reduce ingroup differences and promote homogeneity.

As shown when studying relations between groups (Hinkle & Brow, 1990), the sense of belonging can often be defined by contrast to another group (Mummendey *et al.*, 2001). In this case, the Conservative Party is presented as the ingroup ('we') and the transgender community as the outer group ('them'). The Prime Minister's speech shows a clear ingroup bias ('it's just common sense'). Ingroup biases are shown to

be important in creating cohesion and a sense of belonging (Mullen *et al.*, 1992). However, the issue here is that the Prime Minister implied that the ingroup has a more sound sense of judgement compared to those who experience gender as a spectrum.

Despite specific transphobic implications and ingroup bias, it is interesting to notice the underlying themes and cultural assumptions about what 'common sense' implies. From a typically Western point of view, for general well-being and maintaining a coherent sense of self, it is generally regarded as a positive thing to experience consistency (Jourard, 1965; Lecky, 1945; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951). Amongst the Humanistic psychologists, Maslow (1954) stresses the importance of congruence, in order to achieve psychological well-being.

This individualistic approach to psychology, and well-being in general, stems from a typically Western and Eurocentric worldview (Markus *et al.*, 1997). This position is entrenched in our ways of thinking shaping our collective cultural approach. This could possibly produce unconscious biases in the way we conceptualise gender identity and gender expression.

This worldview places a lot of pressure on the self to conform to rigid gender-binary standards. The self is the centre that regulates behaviours and therefore it needs to be highly consistent and well-organised. From this perspective, it is only by experiencing that steadiness, that the individual would develop what Erikson (1968) would later describe as 'envigorating sameness' (p. 19). That sense of 'sameness' is exactly what gender-non-conforming people are trying to reform and change.

The Humanistic, and especially the Person-Centred approach (Rogers, 1951), can often be misinterpreted, especially when thinking about minoritised identities (Hope, 2019). A common misconception is that trans people experience an incongruent sense of self. Those barriers and misconceptions are the result of societal pressure to conform. They are internalised by the individual (Crowter, 2022) making it difficult to expand and enrich the sense of self.

Using this self-centred cultural scheme, when members of the group are explicit about changing their identity, the rest of the group would perceive the change as threatening (Oskap, 2000). Many trans people identify with the transition itself, which means this is not always a transition to an end, but a journey of self-discovery (Levitt et al., 2014). Therefore, using these classic social identity theories, it is possible to notice how transgender and gender-non-conforming individuals threaten the very sense of self as it is understood by Western cultural norms.

The approach to social psychology is quite different in Asian cultures for example, where a lot more importance is placed on how the environment influences the individual's attitudes and beliefs (Triandis, 2001). An alternative to Western self-centred approaches can be seen in collectivist societies, where the well-being of the individual is not a product of the consistency of the self, but the result of interactions and relations with the environment (Caldwell-Harris & Aycicegi, 2006). This changes the attitude towards power and authority (Fikeret Pasa, 2000) making it everyone's responsibility to create a more inclusive environment.

This means that it is important to put the Prime Minister's declarations in the context of an individualistic society. This can help frame the biases and implications present in this specific context (Masuda and Nisbett, 2001; 2006). Different aspects of personality are noticed and encouraged (or discouraged, in this case) because of a specific cultural context. This Western bias is translated in the way psychologists often conceptualise mental health and well-being, showing how culture penetrates, merges and influences theory.

This fundamentally different worldview, a static self versus a self in transformation, is a symbolic threat (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). The symbolic threat shakes the very foundations of values, norms, morals, standards and attitudes. The gender-non-confirming person embodies the threat itself. The Prime Ministers then voiced the defensive need to ostracise the difference to self-protect and preserve the cultural norm.

It would be interesting to see some research on the effect of this process of ostracisation on the trans community. Some research shows a clear impact on their

physical and mental health (Bradford et al., 2013; Cicero et al., 2013) but more could be investigated in this field. For example, looking at the impact of politics on the sense of self.

To conclude, it is important to underline that some of these processes can be unconscious and stem from ingroup biases (Mullen, 1992; Castano *et al.*, 2002). Some studies suggest there could be an evolutionary predisposition for racial biases (Dias, 2009). That is the individual's tendency to prefer someone who is like them. Further research could investigate if this could also be applied to gender expression.

To summarise, this essay explored different theories from social psychology with the aim of understanding the Prime Minister's transphobic remarks. The essay started by exploring heuristics and biases, moved to Ego Theory vs Bundle Theory, discussed the sense of belonging and threat, and concluded underpinning specific cultural biases.

Conclusion

The last part of this essay offers an overview of initiatives that can promote a change in attitude towards transgender people. This aims at demystifying discussions around transsexuality and creating the basis to dismantle stereotypes.

As with any type of prejudice (Allport *et al.*, 1954), those against trans people are caused by cognitive 'shortcuts'. They generate quick judgements and simplifications on the basis of incomplete or wrong information. A possible solution to misinformation is, of course, learning. This approach is called the 'Contact Hypothesis' (Schiappa *et al.*, 2005) and, in this case, would mean to listen and learn from the trans community.

Research evidenced how learning about a minority group can positively influence perception and therefore reduce stereotyping (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, this was a central point in the Prime Minister's speech who strongly opposed gender discussions in school.

This could be an interesting topic for further research: what happens to children who are taught that it is possible to change and play with their gender identity? And what happens if they are not taught that? Are they more or less likely to develop stereotypes? Are they going to feel more or less comfortable with their own gender identity? A similar study was conducted with undergraduate students (Rani & Samuel, 2019), showing how contact immediately reduced transphobia. It would be interesting to see if the same is true on a developmental level for children in primary schools.

The willingness and institutional support for this empirical examination is then a crucial prerequisite for change. Many researchers advocate for structural and institutional changes in the way the UK approaches gender conversations in schools (for example Bradley, 2020; Bettcher, 2014; Rani & Samuel, 2019). They advocate for an openness that could help people feel more accepting of different gender identities and expressions.

Macro-level change can also be initiated and implemented from a personal level. Besides institutional reforms, what is needed is a commitment to self-examination and a willingness to expose oneself to differences (Lewin, 1947; 1951). Exposure is a prerequisite to understanding and this can start on an individual level.

Word count: 2,121

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