Why social psychology matters in the real world: Reflections on Steve Reicher's talk

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PhD candidate Amena Amer reflects on the implications of Steve Reicher's Talk in honour of the Department of Social Psychology's 50th anniversary.
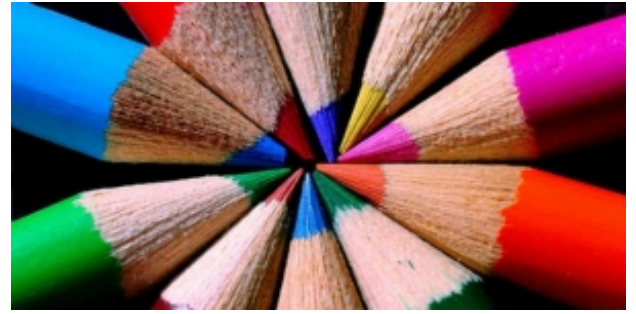
In the first lecture of 2015 celebrating fifty years of Social Psychology at the LSE Professor Steve Reicher delivered a talk entitled *"Not in Our Name": contesting the (mis) use of psychological arguments in the immigration debate* (see below, ed.). In it Reicher deconstructed political narratives around the immigration debate in Britain. He argued that these narratives rest upon a number of unfounded psychological assumptions about the "nature" of groups and the relations between groups, emphasising that the practice of immigration control exasperate the very problems it claims to attempt to solve.

Reicher noted that politicians use the same structural argument in addressing immigration: they are not anti-immigration, it is part of being British to be welcoming, but then go on to assert that there is a problem and that they are being responsive to that problem – a problem identified by others, in this case, society. The underlying factor however, and as Reicher put it "the elephant in the room", is racism. In our post-Enlightenment era not being prejudicial is the supposed sign of rationality and reason. Thus, Reicher said, as long as politicians use a superficially neutral explanation with regards to their de facto discrimination against immigrants, such as notions of demography, economics and social issues, they are immune from being accused and indeed labelled as racist.

These institutional productions of prejudice and racism are not limited to discourses around immigration, but, as seen in my research, are also used with reference to Muslims in Britain. In a speech on tackling extremism in 2011, David Cameron stated: "Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream… We have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to our values". Here these communities, although a part of the make up of Britain, are deemed as 'other', and are actively excluded from Cameron's use of the word 'we'. In 2013 in response to the murder of Lee Rigby, Tony Blair claimed "there is a problem within Islam" a statement that dismisses the numerous condemnations by British Muslim organisations and individuals and the assertion that these types of acts are completely at odds with the religion. More recently, a letter received by Muslim organisations from the Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, which stated "We know that acts of extremism are not representative of Islam; but we need to show what is" and went on to encourage Muslim clerics and leaders to contact the government and inform them of the work they are doing to "promote the positive image of British Islam."This letter was criticised by some, arguing that the government was asking Muslims to prove their loyalty to Britain. These narratives, alongside sensationalist headlines such as 'Muslim School Bans Our Culture', 'Brit Kids Forced to Eat Halal School Dinners!' creates a discourse of "us" and "them". Muslims become 'othered' and are portrayed as a threat to British values and way of life. For indeed, as Reicher stated, "if how we define who 'we' are and who 'they' are determine our values, then the social world in which we live largely depends on these categories".

The fundamental question for social psychology according to Reicher is to understand what the structures and social practices are that create essentialised categories. In attempting to answer this, one cannot ignore the institutional dynamic of power in the production of racist and prejudiced discourses. We must acknowledge who has the dominant voice and has the influence in constructing discourses and representations of categories and groups. In doing so we can deconstruct how essentialised negative representations of groups become reified. For indeed, in essentialising categories into "us" and "them", who can be included in the "us" becomes limited. According to Reicher and others however, this can be countered by increasing contact between groups and broadening definitions of the "us" resulting in positive behaviours and increased empathy. Nevertheless, there is no doubt this cannot occur in and of itself, and one must still have willing participants in order for genuine interaction to occur. Integration, for instance, although often viewed as the responsibility of the 'immigrant', is in fact a two way process. Regardless of how 'integrated' the 'immigrant' tries to be if confronted with hostility, discrimination and racism, how far can they become part of the in-group? Further, in broadening definitions of "us", who becomes "them"? To what extent can we truly dissolve the in-group and out-group phenomenon, which does not always exist but where it does has the potential to lead to dangerously discriminatory and racist thought and action?

It is part of the role of Social Psychology to understand the processes at work and it is essential to appreciate the contexts in which these processes occur. In understanding our interpretations and perceptions of group difference we must deconstruct the structures that often lead us to perceive things in a certain way. In his concluding remarks, Reicher asserted, that social science needs social psychology to "understand how the social constitutes subjects, our sense of who we are, what we are and how we are positioned by others and relative to others. And these subjects then constitute politics, creating the society we live in". Further, he stressed the importance of social psychologists being at the forefront of discussions on issues such as that of immigration. For indeed, they must play an active role in calling out the dangerous narrative that reduce categories and groups to binary forms: the "us" and "them", the non-immigrant and the immigrant, the true British Muslim and the not truly *British* Muslim.

Listen to the Steve Reicher talk below: