

## **Lack of control and the suppression of prejudice. The role of cognitive control and withdrawal of mental effort**

As social beings, humans are constantly making judgments about themselves and others. Most people have a natural tendency to evaluate themselves more positively than others. Similarly, most people tend to view "ingroups" more positively than "outgroups." Attitudes that reject a group of people or a person because of their group affiliation are referred to as prejudices. Prejudices are believed to be judgments based on false and incomplete information about "outgroups". Most often, they arise in a situation where the person has had no contact with "outgroups" at all. For this reasons, the expression of prejudice is generally not met with approval from the environment today. In most situations, people try to hide their attitudes, refrain from expressing them publicly, or at least tone down the most negative judgments. They do this so that no one will accuse them of using hate speech or because they want to consider themselves unprejudiced. Such efforts are referred to as suppression of prejudice.

Suppressing prejudice is not an easy task. It requires considerable mental effort, as well as the involvement of the brain areas responsible for controlling the person's behavior. Numerous studies have proven that people whose cognitive resources are temporarily limited (e.g., by engaging them in an additional, simultaneous task) experience problems with suppressing prejudices. Often in such people, suppression results in a greater intensity of thoughts related to prejudice.

In this project, it will be checked whether people experiencing a lack of control will show more difficulties in suppressing prejudice. In other words, will they more often express prejudiced attitudes, for example by using hate speech, even though the situation would require them to refrain from such behavior? People experience a lack of control when they make repeated, fruitless efforts to change their lives. For example, the experience of lack of control may appear in people struggling with long-term unemployment, financial problems, a serious illness diagnosed in themselves or a loved one, educational difficulties, problems at work or school, etc. Often, getting out of such situations or solving problems turns out to be impossible or very difficult for them. A similar psychological state may appear during natural disasters or epidemics, i.e., situations that are practically impossible to control.

Psychological research indicates that people who experience a lack of control for a long time may develop a state of learned helplessness. One of the consequences of such a state is the deterioration of a person's cognitive functioning, as well as the tendency to withdraw mental effort from other tasks. As part of this project, it will be checked whether such mechanisms may be responsible for the increased difficulty in suppressing prejudice. It should be noted that this hypothesis has not yet been directly tested. It was generally argued that the lack of control simply leads to an increase in prejudice, and this is because people in this state are more likely to experience emotions such as anger or fear. It is possible, however, that those who experience lack of control are not more prejudiced at all, but rather, they have more trouble concealing their prejudices and refraining from using hate speech.

The predictions contained in this project will be tested in 6 experimental studies, 2 auxiliary studies, and 2 analyzes of representative samples. In an exemplary experimental study, participants will be asked to solve a series of tasks. In the control condition – full control – the tasks will require some mental effort, but they will be possible to solve. In the experimental condition – no control – the tasks will be constructed in such a way that their solution will be impossible. However, this fact will be hidden from the participants until the end of the experiment. After the first part, participants will be asked to complete a task where they will have to refrain from behaviors or responses that would reveal their attitudes towards a disliked social group. It is predicted that abstaining from such behaviors will be more frequent in the condition of full control than in the condition of no control. The results of experimental research will also be supplemented with research on people experiencing a lack of control in everyday life – for example, struggling with unemployment. The consequences of such an experiment are predicted to be analogous to those observed in experimental studies.

In addition to checking the validity of the presented theoretical proposal, two psychological trainings will be tested as part of this project. The aim of the first of these trainings will be to get the participants to evaluate their mental effort more positively. The second training will aim to teach the participants one of the emotion regulation strategies. It will be checked whether such treatments can also improve the ability of people with a low sense of control to suppress prejudice and refrain from using hate speech.

The knowledge gained in this project will help to understand how experiencing a lack of control in everyday life can contribute to difficulties in controlling one's behavior, i.e., controlling not only prejudices but also addictions, risky or criminal behaviors.