

From the Unconscious to the Conscious

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Abstract

As a systematic evaluation of our belief systems, General Semantics (GS) serves as a methodology to view our own and others' attitudes toward prejudice and bias. With the thoughtful application and use of GS, the concept can help to address, understand, and overcome some of our prejudices and biases. Additionally, processing our thoughts-actions-feelings etc. through GS, aids us in viewing each person as an individual, no matter the race, religion, sexual orientation, age, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, culture, national origin, disability, language, socioeconomic status, intelligence, height, weight, attractiveness, etc. In raising our level of social unconscious bias to that of the level of the social consciousness by "thinking about our thinking" we can take the first step in understanding the many perspectives we operate from, in and around. Throughout this discussion, GS looks at methods in which to add to and extend the developing sense of self-awareness to better address the issues of prejudice-bias in daily interactions and interpersonal relations.

Inherent in cultures throughout the world are belief systems, developed through cultural expectations, perspectives, experiences, and doctrine. Through our belief systems, I believe, we come to our place of prejudice-bias. Erich Fromm (Allen, 2000) indicated that all societies and cultures create a social unconscious bias. That is, prejudices-biases are built-in to the core of our culture based on the history of our experience and the history of humankind. Social unconscious bias toward groups, individuals and ideas seem to be at the core of our feelings, thoughts, and actions toward others. Additionally, prejudices-biases have blatant components as the issue of human slavery exemplifies.

Corrective measures of blatant discrimination include affirmative action, cultural sensitivity and diversity training, and education. It seems understood by most members of society that these measures address the situation of blatant discrimination in the workplace, schools, social settings and so on. But, how effective is the training when the prejudice lives in the core of the being, unknown to the possessor of the traits? How then, do we handle the issue of prejudice-bias?

Perspective taking through the lens of General Semantics (GS) becomes a methodology to allow self-awareness and systematic evaluation of our belief systems to help overcome and address our own prejudices-biases. Additionally, processing our thoughts-actions-feelings etc., through GS allows us to view each person as an individual, no matter the race, religion, sexual orientation, age, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, culture, national origin, disability, language, or socioeconomic status. Mandates provide us with only an outline of where some of our biases lie. Consider other types of categories we assign to individuals as we look at someone and identify him or her by attractiveness, intelligence, height, weight, character traits, etc. These may seem trivial, but all play a part in our prejudices-biases.

GS can be an even greater asset to add to and extend the developing sense of self-awareness to better address the issues of prejudice-bias in the many “selves” (Dawes, 2001) that make up who we are including our professional-selves and personal-selves. Throughout this report GS principles attempt to offer an understanding of prejudices-biases to strengthen interpersonal relations. Keep in mind that while some of the principles of GS will be used to strengthen elements of this discussion, the principles identified are merely pieces of the larger puzzle of GS as a concept. It is my intention to use GS in a holistic sense by incorporating and using it as whole rather than separate ideas, thus unifying all elements of the selves, the environment, and body-mind connection. Some of the principles employed in this discussion include non-allness, indexing, non-identity, consciousness of abstracting, theory, and intensionality and extensionality.

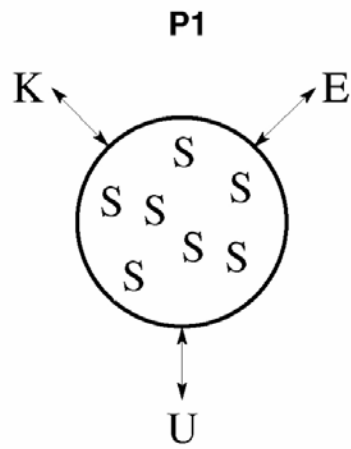
With the understanding of non-allness principles, we can never know all there is to know about anything, and one of the basic tenets of GS, the word is not the thing, Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1993), attempts to define GS as “a doctrine and educational discipline intended to improve habits of response of human beings to their environment and one another, especially by training in the more critical use of words and other symbols” (pg.1). Furthermore, Steve Stockdale states, “general semantics offer us a method to choose our attitudes in each given moment” (2003, pg. 2).

For purposes of this discussion, let us examine the definitions. The operatives in Webster’s definition, as I see it, include “improve habits of response of human beings,” and “to their environment and one another.” Stockdale makes an important distinction in his definition by using the terminology, “choose our attitudes.” Finally, the operative words that I find to be most useful are consciousness raising and self-awareness.

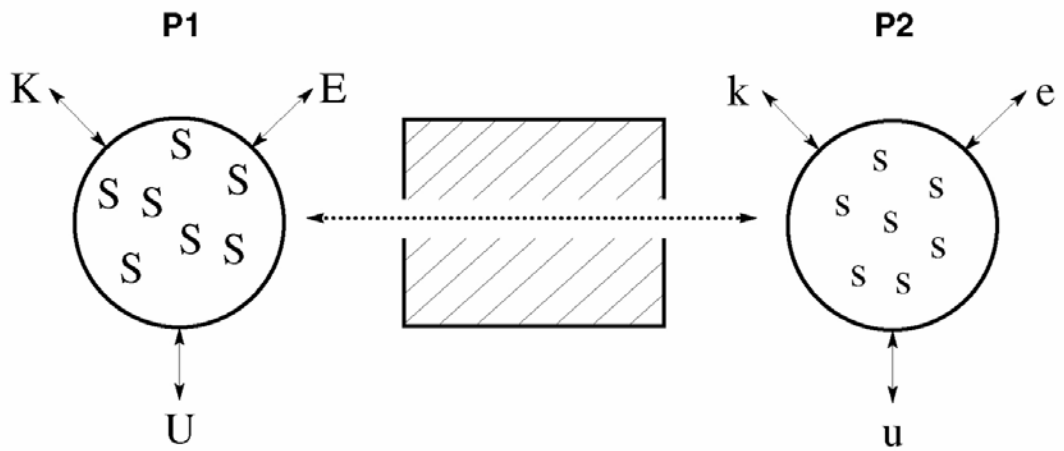
To improve our habits of response of human beings, I believe it is beneficial to understand what our responses involve, keeping in mind of course, our consciousness of abstraction. Not just external responses, but the internal mental responses we contribute to each meeting, interaction, etc. These interactions involve many levels of action-reaction based on our past experiences, culture, history, traditions, expectations, and so on. The mental response of thought-feeling can often lead us to classify and judge another individual based on a pre-existing belief, which in turn leads to identification to or within a specific group; therefore, reinforcing the attitude-prejudice-bias.

As indicated below, item 1 represents the person (P1) that we are prior to an action-reaction with another individual. In this first sequence, each person brings a pre-determined set of experiences (E) with him or her to the action-reaction. These may include culture, history, traditions, experiences, expectations, attitudes, beliefs, etc. As we come to the action-reaction, we bring too, our known set of prejudices-biases (K) based on our known perceptions, ideals, thoughts, etc. In addition, we bring with us infinitesimal amounts of unknown facts (U), action-reaction, attitudes-prejudices-biases, etc. All of the action-reactions K, E, U interact and react with, and on, one another while at the same time influencing the selves (S), such as the mother-self, daughter-self, professional-self, private-self, sister-self, etc.

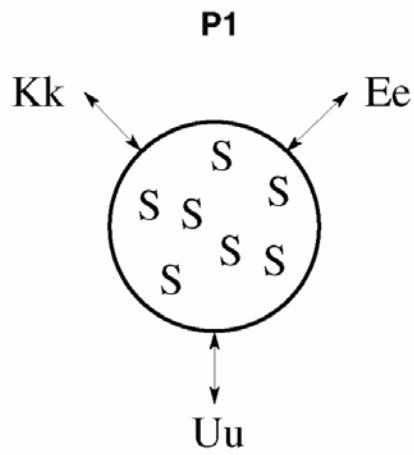
1.



2.



3.



In sequence 2, two people, P1 and P2, come to the action-reaction each with his or her own operating force of the K, U, and E action-reaction. Now do we not only have the attitudes-prejudices-biases of one individual, we have two, each bringing his or her own set of action-reactions. It is through this process of the action-reaction that exchange and delivery of K, U, E takes place and brings us to the final sequence (3). This final image represents the impressions and effects of the action-reaction with P2. I use this diagram to represent the many and involved processes that take place when two people come together, acknowledging and accepting (or not) that each person has left the exchange a different person. This is where I believe it is important to understand the principle of non-allness and GS in general.

Through an understanding of the principle of non-allness we come closer to the realization of how we respond to human beings. One of the methods I have found to be useful is to first understand what allness means. If we look at the concept of allness, an unconscious assumption that we know everything about a person, subject, object, it becomes clearer how we come to find our-selves in the quandary of unconscious prejudice-bias. The first part of understanding comes through knowledge and awareness.

The principle of non-allness (Dawes, 1993) assumes we cannot know, say, understand, experience, etc., all about anything and the principle of non-identity assumes no two things are identical and/or the same in every respect. Therefore, the theory of non-allness assumes we all carry prejudices-biases because we can never know all of what we see, experience, taste, observe, know, etc., and as such, continue to operate from our own perspective. Just as we understand this through non-allness, the theory of indexing (Dawes, 1999) teaches us that what we know and who we are today is not the same as who we were yesterday, and who we will become tomorrow. With this method of understanding our prejudices-biases we can come to an understanding that we do not and cannot hold to the same set of beliefs from one day to the next. Thus, our understanding of the ever-changing frame of reference-mind-worldview helps us to move beyond classification-labeling-identifying characteristics of “one another” to a frame of reference-mind-worldview that accepts each person on a similar perspective according “to their environment,” experiences, and so on.

By looking at individuals in a non- \hat{A} manner to understand that just as you or I come to the table with a predetermined set of experiential biases, so too, does the person across the table. Through self-review and self-acknowledgement we can strive to understand “one another” as individuals.

According to Fromm’s (Allen, 2000) theory of social unconscious bias, we will never be able to spot all of our prejudices-biases because these attitudes-thoughts-feelings lie below the surface of our awareness. An awareness of GS becomes the enlightening power to help recognize and to, on some levels, overcome prejudices-biases of both the internal and external worlds in which we live and operate. Thus, a systematic review and self-evaluation of our own attitudes-biases-prejudices helps us to move beyond the scope of our partially known, external prejudices-biases to allow exploration of our unknown, internal prejudices-biases. The deeper the exploration, the greater the awareness, accepting we will never know all of what there is to know about our own attitudes-prejudices-biases, nor will we know all of what there is to know about others’ attitudes-prejudices-biases.

Gordon Allport (Allen, 2000, p. 421) defined prejudice as a “felt or expressed antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalization toward a group or an individual, felt internally or externally.

Prejudice tends to be erroneous in the sense that no trait will apply to most, much less all members of a group.” The meanings people assign to a person of a group in the world of allness is similar to Allport’s, definition of prejudice. It is the way of thinking-feeling that encompasses an entire group based on what one would consider a common trait for all. Considering the principles of non-allness and non-identity, a person can begin to think in terms of “individual” rather than maintaining or creating a judgement based on a mis-belief of a common trait among people of a particular group.

Generalizations without noting our levels of abstraction (Berger, 2003) concerning perspectives, thoughts, ideas, feelings that we have not considered, or are unaware become dangerous territory because of the tendency to breed self-ascribed power differentials, “intolerance, closed-mindedness” (2003, pg. 8), and in turn, prejudices-biases. According to Stockdale (2000), the process of abstracting is a continual process of filtration involving the brain-body-nervous system on a sub-conscious and sometimes conscious level. Therefore, it becomes advantageous to explore through abstraction, non-allness, non-identity, and indexing techniques to become a person of patience, understanding, and open-mindedness. As this happens, we can begin to “choose our attitudes” as Stockdale suggests in his definition of GS.

In large part, I believe the principles of GS to be similar to the concept of consciousness raising-self-awareness-self-evaluation, as demonstrated by the concept of abstraction and other GS principles. I am of the opinion that the actions of self-evaluation, self-monitoring, and understanding through introspection become the processes of change which can influence the level of consciousness of an individual. An examination of our perceptions-misperceptions of our own personal history allows for an understanding of one’s own cultural attitudes-prejudices-biases and personal attitudes-prejudices-biases. In turn leading to a better understand of one’s “selves,” thus allowing for the “choice” so much needed when dealing with an individual, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, height, weight, intelligence, etc. It helps to understand where the prejudicial-biased attitudes of meanings-thoughts-feelings assigned to a particular group operate.

Prochaska & Norcross (2003) note methods of consciousness raising involve education and feedback which help to alleviate, to some degree, the “cognitive blinders” (p.14) we tend to use when dealing with issues of uncertainty. Issues such as not knowing the reality of our prejudices-biases. Cognitive blinders serve as defense mechanisms used to “selectively attend only to the positive information about” (p. 14) “our-selves” as we choose to side-step the negative aspects of our character.

Another point of interest and helpful in understanding our own prejudices-biases is the principle of “theory.” Dawes (1999) proposes that all actions, in everyday life, can be thought of as theories because we cannot know all of what is being said, heard, thought, feeling, etc., and because we cannot know all of anything, we as humans are only hypothesizing about a situation, thought, or feeling. Applied to the situation of prejudice-bias, and similar to non-allness, we come to see what we assume to be a “truth” of a belief we hold concerning a group of people, persons, etc., as a hypothesis. Based on my understanding of theory, all of what we know to be true about a situation is only based on our perceived knowledge, and since we cannot know all of anything, we cannot hold a theory-hypothesis as a “truth.”

Using GS principles of extensional and intensional meaning can also serve as an aid to understanding the world in which we assign prejudices-biases. Extensional behavior and thinking, (Dawes, 2000) occurs when a person assigns the value to the physical world of “what one can point to, show, touch and so on” (pg. 1).” Hayakawa (1990), in discussing extensional meaning, states, “the individual object or event we are naming, of course, has no name and belongs to no class until we put it in one” (p.122). The intensional meaning of a word refers to “when what is being said is interpreted as what the object, thing behavior is.” In other words, when a person thinks-feels-acts according to an ascribed trait, he or she assigns the meaning to the term rather than focusing on other aspects of what the person may be behaving-thinking-feeling, etc. The intensional meaning of a word fixes the classification, and to some extent, determines future attitudes within and toward a person, both internally and externally, thus creating and reinforcing the prejudices-biases held by an individual.

By incorporating non-allness and non-identity principles, an individual can begin to think in terms of self and other “selves.” Realizing and understanding our many selves in an action-reaction allows us to begin to see that as we interact, each of our selves will act-react differently based on which self or selves are interacting at that moment. In addition, understanding the selves from which we operate, can also serve to help us to understand the many selves that others bring to the action-reaction.

Integration of GS as a holistic concept helps us to view our belief systems, experiences, prejudices-biases, actions-reactions on multiple levels, both internal and external, and brings to our awareness actions-reactions that may not have been present before such an interaction. Perspective taking through GS becomes a process by which self-awareness and systematic evaluation of our belief systems help understand, address, and overcome our own prejudices-biases. Additionally, processing our thoughts-actions-feelings etc. through GS, aids us in viewing each person as an individual, no matter the race, religion, sexual orientation, age, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, culture, national origin, disability, language, socioeconomic status, intelligence, height, weight, attractiveness, etc. In raising our level of social unconscious bias to the level of the social conscious realm by “thinking about our thinking” we can take the first step in understanding the many perspectives we operate from, in and around. Indeed, this can take us a long way in improving our interpersonal relationships and our actions-reactions with other individuals.

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