

SOCIAL IDENTITY, STEREOTYPES, PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

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Group Identity: Us Versus Them

Think about the groups in which you are a member—possibly social organizations, your ethnicity, your nationality. When someone asks you to identify yourself, how often do you respond by mentioning these group memberships? And how much does it matter to you whether the people you associate with are members of the same group?

Social identity

Social identity refers to the way we define ourselves in terms of our group membership (Deaux, 2002). In contrast to personal identity, which can be highly individualized, social identity assumes some commonalities with others. A person's social identity might include identifying with a religious group, a country, a social organization, and many others. To identify with a group does not mean that we know or interact with every other member of the group. However, it does mean that we believe that we share numerous features with other members of the group.

For many people, ethnic identity and religious identity are central aspects of their social identity (Erikson, 2001). Social psychologist Henry Tajfel (1978), one of a small number of Jews who survived the Holocaust, wanted to explain the extreme violence and prejudice his religious group experienced. Tajfel's social identity theory states that when individuals are assigned to a group, they invariably think of their group as the in-group. This occurs because they want to have a positive self-image.

Self-image consists of both a personal identity and many different social identities. Tajfel argues that individuals can improve their self-images by enhancing either their personal or social identities. But he believes that social identity is especially important. Think about how you behave when you introduce yourself to a stranger. Are you more likely to say, "Hi, I'm an ambitious, hard-working idealist."? Or are you more likely to say, "Hi, I'm a counselor at such and such agency and teach at so and so college."? Chances are you are more likely to tell people about the groups with which you identify.

We are continually comparing our groups (in-groups) with other groups (out-groups). In the process, we often focus more on the differences between the two groups than on their similarities. Imagine a Lakers fan and a Sonics

fan talking. As these two fans talk, they are less likely to discuss how much they both like basketball than to argue about the virtues of their teams. As they strive to promote their social identities, they soon lapse into self-congratulatory remarks about their own team and nasty comments about the opposing team. In short, the theme of the conversation has become, "My team is good, and I am good. Your team is bad, and you are bad." And so it goes with the sexes, ethnics groups, nations, socioeconomic groups, religions, and countless other groups. These social comparisons often lead to social competition and even discrimination against groups. Thus, social identity theory helps explain prejudice and conflict between groups.

Stereotyping

At the very root of prejudice is a stereotype, a generalization about a group's characteristics that does not consider any variations from one individual to the next (Kite, 2001). These are fixed, conventional ideas about groups of people or schemas about personalities based on too little information or one fixed trait that can lead to prejudice. We are trying to make sense of the world around us by categorizing and evaluating groups. This is an essential attribution process in the development of self-identity ingrained in our consciousness from childhood.

Think about your image of a dedicated accountant. Most of us would probably describe such a person as quiet, boring, unsociable, and so on. Rarely would we come up with a mental image of this person as extroverted, the life of the party, or artistic. But characterizing all accountants as introverts is a clear example of a stereotype. Some accountants may be reserved, but at least some are likely to be very outgoing and sociable.

Researchers have found that we are less likely to detect variations among individuals who belong to "other" groups than among individuals who belong to "our" group. For example, studies of eyewitness identification have found that Whites tend to stereotype African Americans more than other Whites during eyewitness identification (Brigham, 1986). What might be occurring is the tendency to view members of one's own group as having heterogeneous and desirable qualities and to view the members of other groups as having homogeneous and undesirable qualities (Slattery, 2004).

Although stereotyping can be harmful, we should keep in mind that all people use stereotypes. People use categories or schemas when thinking about groups, group affiliation and individuals from those groups (Fiske, 1998; Steele 1996). Thus, we might engage in stereotyping without being aware of it. The main problem is not that we use these categories but that we limit our perception of others to the rough outlines of the schema; we do not add

specific information about an individual's characteristics. In addition, we may develop biases against whole groups of people (Klein & Snyder 2003).

Emotional arousal can be implicated in increased stereotyping. Anger can especially intensify stereotyping by producing irrational and biased judgments of people (Ellis, 1962).

Damage of stereotypes on the beholder:

1. The depth and accuracy of our perception of others is limited.
2. The depth and breadth of our curiosity and understanding becomes limited.
3. The possibility and range of our potential pool of friendships becomes limited.
4. We may internalize a stereotype leading to lowered self-esteem.
5. There can become an internalized sense of separation and isolation from others based in the inherent defensiveness of "us" and "them" thinking.
6. The cognitive structures of stereotyping can lead directly to the emotional content of Prejudice.

Prejudice

Understanding the antagonism that develops between groups requires knowledge about prejudice and the stereotyping and discrimination that often accompany it (Brammer 2004). Like most people, you probably do not consider yourself prejudiced. But, in fact, each of us has prejudices. Prejudice is an unjustified negative attitude toward an individual based on the individual's membership in a group. It is a preconceived opinion, feeling, or attitude either positive or negative that is formed without adequate information. Strongest negative emotions are held for groups rather than individuals. Gordon Allport in his book *The Nature of Prejudice* writes: "irritation or anger is customarily felt toward individuals only, whereas true hatred may be felt toward a whole class of people."

Prejudice, as a worldwide phenomenon (Baker, 2001), has seen many eruptions of hatred in human history. The Taliban were so prejudiced against women that they tried to make them invisible. Serbs were so prejudiced against Bosnians that they pursued a policy of "ethnic cleansing". Hutus in Rwanda were so prejudiced against Tutsis that they went on a murderous rampage, hacking off their arms and legs with machetes. European Americans were so prejudiced against the Native Americans that they systematically robbed them of their property and self-respect, killed them, and herded the survivors like animals onto reservations. When Africans were brought to America as slaves, they were considered property and treated

inhumanely. In fact, virtually every social group, including gays, lesbians, old, young, disabled, addicted, have been the victim of prejudice at one time or another.

Why do people develop prejudice? Among the reasons given by social psychologists are the following (Monteith, 2000):

Individual personality: Some years ago, social psychologist Theodor Adorno and his colleagues (1950) described the Authoritarian Personality typified by strict adherence to conventional ways of behaving, aggression against people who violate conventional norms, rigid thinking, and exaggerated submission to authority. He believed that individuals with authoritarian personalities are likely to be prejudiced. However, not all individuals who harbor prejudice have this authoritarian personality.

Competition between groups: Feelings of hostility and prejudice can develop when a society does not have enough jobs, land, power, status or any number of other material or social resources to go around. Given the historical distribution of resources in a particular society, certain groups may regularly be involved in competing with each other and this is more likely to develop prejudice toward each other. For instance, immigrants often compete with established low-income members of a society for jobs, leading to persistent conflict between the two groups.

Motivation to enhance self-esteem: As Henry Tajfel (1978) stated, individuals derive a sense of self-esteem through their identification as members of a particular group and, to the extent that their group is viewed more favorably than other groups, their self-esteem will be further enhanced. In this view, prejudice against another group leads to a positive social identity and higher self-esteem.

Cognitive processes and categorization: Human beings are somewhat limited in their capacity for careful and thorough thoughtful analysis (Allport, 1954). The social environment is extremely complex and makes many demands on our limited information processing capacity, which can produce an unfortunate consequence: simplification of the social environment through categorization and stereotyping. The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1954) would tell us that it is easier to process social information that is consistent with our prejudices than to go through the process of challenging beliefs and changing attitudes. Once the stereotype is in place, prejudice is often not far behind.

Cultural learning: Families, friends, traditional norms, and institutional patterns of discrimination provide plenty of opportunities for individuals to be

exposed to prejudice of others. There may be an assumption of dissimilarity in which we are more apt to be encouraged at a young age like people who share our values and attitudes. There may even be an assumption that people of different races and ethnic origins probably have different core values. In this manner, others' prejudiced belief systems can be easily incorporated into our own world view. Children often show prejudice before they even have the cognitive abilities or social opportunities to develop their own attitudes.

Discrimination

Having a stereotype does not mean that you have to act on it. But if you do act on your prejudices, you may be guilty of discrimination, an unjustified negative or harmful action toward a member of a group simply because the person belongs to that group. Discrimination results when negative emotional reactions resulting from prejudice are translated into behavior.

Early research on discrimination focused on overt forms of discrimination in which the target person or group, the action and the intention of the actor were clear and identifiable. Overt discrimination is the outcome of old-fashioned racism or sexism. The actor tries to maintain self-esteem by using the power and control of being a member of a particular group to abuse others and treat them unfairly.

Overt discrimination is no longer acceptable in mainstream American society. Civil rights legislation and changing attitudes expressed widely in the popular media have made it "politically incorrect" to publicly discriminate. But more subtle forms of racism and sexism have appeared, described by such terms as symbolic racism, aversive racism, ambivalent sexism, and modern sexism (Blair, 2001). They involve negative feelings about minority groups, but not traditional stereotypes. Symbolic racism, for example, assumes that, because discrimination is no longer acceptable, it must not exist; any difficulties that individuals in minority groups face are their own fault. It encompasses the ideas that the target minority groups are pushing too hard and too fast for equality, are making unfair demands, and are getting undeserved special attention, such as favoritism on job hiring and college admissions (Taylor & others, 2003). This subtler form of discrimination is covert rather than overt. It is unconscious rather than conscious and, as such, is easily denied (Monteith, 2001).

Coping with Prejudice

1. The development of Empathy is an essential adult developmental stage. The use of role reversals may help us to experience the pain of discrimination

and develop sensitivity and mindfulness. Remembering that, if it hurts us, it might be painful to others as well can build empathetic responses.

2. Intergroup contact can be effective if it is between groups with similar socioeconomic backgrounds is informal and prolonged. The more intimate the contact the more effective it is.

3. Comply with the law. Blow the whistle if you've been discriminated against.

4. Self-examination. Look into our hearts. Attribute behaviors to individuals and not groups. Separate the person from the behavior.

5. Improve your own self-esteem. Develop your own emotional awareness, manage your emotions and learn to read other's emotions more accurately. Become a better manager of your anger and be willing to explore the cause of your feelings. "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent" (Eleanor Roosevelt).

6. Participate in cooperative tasks. Working together to achieve a mutually beneficial goal can bring groups together.

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