

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PREJUDICE



From the persecution of Jewish people in 12th Century England to society's attitude towards people with HIV and AIDS in 2002, prejudice, stigma and the 'fear of the unknown' have always been with us, playing a central role in dividing people, cultures and races. But what makes us prejudiced and how can we challenge it?

WHAT IS PREJUDICE?

Quite literally prejudice means to pre-judge or to form an opinion about something before all the facts are gathered. One of the earliest psychological explanations of prejudice described it as: "an antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalisation towards a group as a whole or towards an individual because they are a member of that group."¹ The first thing that this explanation tells us is that prejudice is not something logical or based in fact, but rather, on a series of assumptions, half-truths and guesses. Secondly, it tells us is that prejudice is based on generalisation – on a whole host of characteristics and qualities that we assume a person has, based purely on the fact that he or she is a member of a particular group.

If *prejudice* is an attitude, then *discrimination* is the manifestation of that prejudice and a *stigma*, or as we will go on to call it, a 'label', is the result. But how does a prejudiced, negative view affect the people being stigmatised, and why does this lead to a label being placed on them? A great deal of prejudice is unconscious, reflected in the basic stereotyped assumptions that we make about others every day. These generalisations affect our behaviour and cause us to discriminate against whole sections of society. Eventually, large groups become 'ghettoised' and the people within these groups feel isolated and alone.

WHY ARE WE PREJUDICED?

Frequently we make false generalisations – not through malice or hatred, but just because, in many cases, it is easier to do so than to understand the real differences and complexities of our world. Whilst we may think that comments such as: ‘black people are good at sport’ or ‘women are more romantic than men’, or ‘Jewish people are good at making money’ are innocent enough, they all contain assumptions and half-truths that we use to categorise and ultimately stereotype the people who ‘belong’ to those groups.

The world can be a confusing place, and one way to make sense of this chaos is to put things in boxes and categorise what we see. Rather than trying to process the complex nature of things, it is far simpler for us to generalise our experiences. Psychologists who work within this school of thought suggest that prejudice is a consequence of our natural tendency to categorise the world in order to make sense of it. Such stereotypes are not based on fact but rather on what we think is right from our limited experiences and upbringing.

One of the earliest attempts to try and understand the nature of prejudice, stated that prejudice was something hidden deep within each of us and ingrained in all of our personalities. Writing in a book called *The Authoritarian Personality*, the psychologist Theodor Adorno put forward the idea that there were certain people with certain personality traits such as aggression, intolerance and conservatism that pre-disposed them to hold prejudiced views and be hostile towards ethnic minorities and other social groups. Whilst such explanations were very important in highlighting prejudice as an issue to psychologists and the medical profession, this school of thought has been criticised by psychologists more recently for suggesting that prejudice is an instinctual or biological reaction³. If this were the case, say this theory’s critics, then it would be difficult for prejudiced people to ever change their views and impossible for anyone to influence them to change their mind. Fortunately, people can be open to new ideas.

Another more widely accepted explanation comes from psychologists studying the effects of culture and upbringing on our behaviour and personality. Known as Social Learning Theory, it had a profound impact on our understanding of why we are prejudiced and what we can do to reduce prejudice in society. Social Learning Theory accepts that individual bigotry is only one part of the explanation behind prejudice, and suggests that there are many other factors influencing our behaviour towards people. This theory places a strong emphasis on our ‘socialisation’, or on how we are brought up; the values of our parents and friends which we absorb, where we live, and what culture we belong to. All of these factors have a significant impact on which people and groups we believe are ‘like us’ and which we want to hold at arm’s length. Whilst this approach attempts to explain the impact of our socialisation on which groups we consider ourselves to belong to, other psychologists were looking at determining why people feel they need to be part of a group in the first place.

Psychologists have long questioned why people behave differently when they are in groups rather than when alone. They raise questions like: what is it about being part of a pack at a football match or being part of a community or culture that makes us almost lose our sense of identity and take sides against a supposed enemy? Some psychologists have explained⁴ that a person’s social identity and how they would like to be seen by their family, friends, or colleagues is directly linked to their personal identity and how they value and view themselves. These psychologists see that the more dependent a person is on their social identity for their personal identity, or on their group to give them their feeling of self esteem, the higher the possibility of them being prejudiced. Among people who have a low opinion of themselves, prejudice is often used to separate themselves from groups they don’t want to belong to and grow closer to groups they do.

WHAT IS THE RESULT OF PREJUDICE?

To get a real understanding of prejudice, psychologists conduct 'real life' studies. For example, in a famous experiment⁶ in 1961 looking at how prejudice can result from group conformity, a group of 22 boys attended a summer camp where they were split into two groups and each assigned a team name, either 'The Rattlers' or 'The Eagles'. Each group was then given a series of competing activities where the two teams were pitted against each other. After a short time the fists began to fly, as boys started attributing negative values and stereotypes to the members of the opposite group; 'all Rattlers are cheats', 'all Eagles are bad at sport'. This experiment demonstrated how people quickly came to identify with their group and how rapidly they assigned false characteristics to them and felt antagonistic towards them.

Rather than set up specific experiments to study the effects of prejudice, other psychologists prefer to look for specific examples of discrimination in our day-to-day lives and try to explain where this prejudice may originate. In a well known study of prejudice in the health service, research psychologists Rose and Platzer⁷ found an example of where a patient's charts had been labelled 'high risk' in respect of HIV infection and made clearly visible to other patients and other members of staff. On further investigation, the psychologists found that the information had only been put on display because the man was known to be homosexual and so thought of as being at risk from HIV.

In another example, the same psychologists found that a nurse in an accident and emergency department had refused to give a gay male patient a pain-relieving suppository 'in case he liked it'. Examples such as these suggest that homosexuality is seen by some people only in terms of sexual behaviour rather than as a lifestyle – thus interfering with the usually objective opinions of nurses and their ability to separate a person's sexuality from their medical status.

Whilst we need to remember these are isolated incidents (we should be careful ourselves not to make the generalisation that 'the health service is prejudiced'), they are very useful in outlining how prejudice originates and why it is perpetuated.

HOW CAN WE CHALLENGE PREJUDICE?

The old adage that familiarity breeds contempt is not always true. Familiarity with other groups in society can often lead to tolerance and acceptance of other peoples' views and values. Our exposure, to other cultures or rather our lack of it, strongly influences our understanding of what is 'normal' behaviour and what is not. People who strongly identify with their group and have limited exposure to different cultures, people and races are more likely to consider the values of other groups as alien and therefore be prejudiced against them.

Whilst psychologists can help us explain and understand what prejudice is, only we can do something to actually reduce it. Each of us, if we so wish, has a responsibility to confront prejudice where we see it, and each of us can play a part in reducing the levels of discrimination in society. Where do we start? We can start by asking questions about ourselves, and quite literally creating a checklist to challenge our own values and views:

- 'Is this true?'
- 'Do I have all the facts?'
- 'Am I over generalising?'
- 'Am I focusing on one or two negative aspects instead of considering the whole picture?'
- 'Am I labelling this group or person unfairly?'

Just making the first step of looking at and questioning the 'common sense' views we hold about people, groups and cultures would be a major step forward in opening our eyes to our own levels of prejudice and challenging the pre-conceptions we have.

REFERENCES

- 1 Allport, 1954
- 2 Such as Tajfel and Allport
- 3 Evidence from such as Rose and Platzer's studies backs this up (see main text)
- 4 Such as Tajfel et al, 1971
- 6 Sherif, Robbers Cave experiment, 1961
- 7 1993

ARE YOU HIV PREJUDICED?