

# Prejudice

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

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A prejudice is a prejudgment, an assumption made about someone or something before having adequate knowledge to be able to do so with guaranteed accuracy. The word prejudice is most commonly used to refer to preconceived judgments toward people or a person because of race, social class, gender, ethnicity, homelessness, age, disability, obesity, religion, sexual orientation, or other personal characteristics. It also means beliefs without knowledge of the facts and may include "any unreasonable attitude that is unusually resistant to rational influence."

### **Historical approaches**

The first psychological research conducted on prejudice occurred in the 1920s. This research was done to attempt to prove white supremacy. One article from 1925 reviewing 73 studies on race concluded that the "studies taken all together seem to indicate the mental superiority of the white race". This research among others led many psychologists to view prejudice as a natural response to inferior races.

In the 1930s and 1940s, this perspective began to change due to the increasing concern about anti-Semitism. Theorists of this time viewed prejudice as pathological and looked for personality syndromes linked with racism. Theorist Theodor Adorno believed prejudice stemmed from an authoritarian personality. Adorno described authoritarians as "rigid thinkers who obeyed authority, saw the world as black and white, and enforced strict adherence to social rules and hierarchies". Adorno believed people with authoritarian personalities were the most likely to be prejudiced against groups of lower status.

In 1954, Gordon Allport linked prejudice and categorical thinking. Allport claims prejudice is in part a normal process for humans. According to him, "The human mind must think with the aid of categories...Once formed, categories are the basis for normal prejudgment. We cannot possibly avoid this process. Orderly living depends upon it".

In the 1970s, research began to show that much of prejudice is based not on negative feelings towards other groups but favoritism towards one's own groups. According to Marilyn Brewer, prejudice "may develop not because outgroups are hated, but because positive emotions such as admiration, sympathy, and trust are reserved for the ingroup".

In 1979, Thomas Pettigrew described the ultimate attribution error and its role in prejudice. The ultimate attribution error occurs when ingroup members "(1) attribute negative outgroup behavior to dispositional causes (more than they would for identical ingroup behavior), and (2) attribute positive outgroup behavior to one or more of the following causes: (a) a fluke or exceptional case, (b) luck or special advantage, (c) high motivation and effort, and (d) situational factors".

### **Contemporary theories and empirical findings**

Social psychologist Henri Tajfel found that prejudices can be witnessed in even randomly-created groups, called the minimal group paradigm. In his minimal group experiments, Tajfel found that when strangers were assigned into groups based on something trivial such as a coin toss, participants exhibited in-group and out-group biases, giving preferential treatment to in-group members and acting more hostile toward out-group members.

The out-group homogeneity bias is the perception that members of an out-group are more similar (homogenous) than members of the in-group. Social psychologists Quattrone and Jones conducted a study demonstrating this with students from the rival schools Princeton and Rutgers. Students at each school were shown videos of other students from each school choosing a type of music to listen to for an auditory perception study. Then the participants were asked to guess what percentage of the videotaped students' classmates would choose the same. Participants predicted a much greater similarity between out-group members (the rival school) than between members of their in-group.

The justification-suppression model of prejudice was created by Christian Crandall and Amy Eshleman. This model explains that people face a conflict between the desire to express prejudice and the desire to maintain a positive self-concept. This conflict causes people to search for justification for disliking an out-group, and to use that justification to avoid negative feelings (cognitive dissonance) about themselves when they act on their dislike of the out-group.

The realistic conflict theory states that competition between limited resources leads to increased negative prejudices and discrimination. This can be seen even when the resource is insignificant. In the Robber's Cave experiment, negative prejudice and hostility was created between two summer camps after sports competitions for small prizes. The hostility was lessened after the two competing camps were forced to cooperate on tasks to achieve a common goal.

### **Controversies & prominent topics**

One can be prejudiced against, or have a preconceived notion about someone due to any characteristic they find to be unusual or undesirable. A few commonplace examples of prejudice are those based on someone's race, gender, nationality, social status, sexual orientation or religious affiliation, and controversies may arise from any given topic.

### **Racism**

Racism is defined as "the belief that races exist, that physical characteristics determine cultural traits, and that racial characteristics make some groups superior. By separating people into hierarchies based upon their race, it has been argued that unequal treatment among the different groups of people is just and fair due to their genetic differences. Racism can occur amongst any

group that can be identified based upon physical features or even characteristics of their culture. Though people may be lumped together and called a specific race, everyone does not fit neatly into such categories, making it hard to define and describe a race accurately.

Scientific racism began to flourish in the eighteenth century and was greatly influenced by Charles Darwin's evolutionary studies, as well as ideas taken from the writings of philosophers like Aristotle; for example, Aristotle believed in the concept of "natural slaves". This concept focuses on the necessity of hierarchies and how some people are bound to be on the bottom of the pyramid. Though racism has been a prominent topic in history, there is still debate over whether race actually exists, making the discussion of race a controversial topic. Even though the concept of race is still being debated, the effects of racism are apparent. Racism and other forms of prejudice can affect a person's behavior, thoughts and feelings, and social psychologists strive to study exactly that.

### **Sexism**

The term sexism is generally linked to negative female sentiments that derive from the belief that women are worth less or less capable than males. The discussion of such sentiments, and actual gender differences and stereotypes continue to be controversial topics. Throughout history, women have been thought of as being subordinate to men, often being ignored in areas like the academic arena or belittled altogether. Traditionally, men were thought of as being more capable than women, mentally and physically. Even when addressing instances of discrimination and prejudice in the past, discrimination based on gender would, at times, be overlooked. In the field of Social Psychology, prejudice studies like the "Who Likes Competent Women" study led the way for gender-based research on prejudice. This resulted in two broad themes or focuses in the field: the first being a focus on attitudes toward gender equality, and the second focusing on people's beliefs about men and women. Today studies based on sexism continue in the field of psychology as researchers try to understand how people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors influence and are influenced by others.

### **Nationalism**

Nationalism is a sentiment based on common cultural characteristics that binds a population and often produces a policy of national independence or separatism. It suggests a "shared identity" amongst the people of the nation in which the boundaries dividing the "national family" from nonmembers, as well as the commonality amongst members within this group are emphasized, and the differences within the group are minimized. This leads to the assumption that members of the nation have more in common than they actually do, that they are "culturally unified," even if injustices within the nation based on differences like status and race exist. Nationalism, during

times of conflict between one nation and another, is controversial since it may function as a buffer for criticism when it comes to the nation's own problems since it makes the nation's own hierarchies and internal conflicts appear to be natural. It may also serve a way of rallying the people of the nation in support of a particular political goal. Nationalism usually involves a push for conformity, obedience, and solidarity amongst the nation's people and can result, not only in feelings of public responsibility, but also a narrow sense of community due to the exclusion of those who are considered outsiders. Since the identity of nationalists is linked to their allegiance to the state, the presence of strangers who do not share this allegiance may result in hostility.

## **Classism**

Classism is defined by the World English Dictionary as "a biased or discriminatory attitude on distinctions made between social or economic classes". The idea of separating people based upon their class is controversial in itself. It is argued by some that economic inequality is an unavoidable aspect of society, and that as a result, there will always be a ruling class in existence. It has also been argued that even within the most egalitarian societies throughout history, some form of ranking based on social status and so forth takes place; therefore, one may believe the existence of social classes is a natural feature of society. Others argue the contrary. According to anthropological evidence, for the majority of the time the human species has been in existence, we have lived in a manner in which the land and resources were not privately owned. Also, when social ranking did occur, it was not antagonistic or hostile like the current class system. This evidence has been used to support the idea that the existence of a social class system is unnecessary. Overall, society has yet to come to a consensus over the necessity of the class system, nor has society been able to deal with the hostility and prejudice that occurs because of the class system.

## **Sexual orientation**

One's sexual orientation is a "predilection for homosexuality, heterosexuality, or bisexuality". Like most minority groups, homosexuals and bisexuals are not immune to prejudice or stereotypes from the majority group. They may experience hatred from others because of their sexual preferences; a term for such intense hatred based upon one's sexual orientation is homophobia. Due to what social psychologists call the vividness effect, a tendency to notice only certain distinctive characteristics, the majority population tends to draw conclusions like gays flaunt their sexuality. Such images may be easily recalled to mind due to their vividness, making it harder appraise the entire situation. The majority population may not only think that homosexuals flaunt their sexuality or are "too gay," but may also erroneously believe that homosexuals are easy to identify and label as being gay or lesbian when compared to others who are not homosexual. The idea of heterosexual privilege seems to flourish in society. Research and questionnaires are formulated to

fit the majority--heterosexuals. This discussion of whether heterosexuals are the privileged group and whether homosexuals are a minimized group is controversial.

### **Religious affiliation**

While various religions teach its members to be tolerant of those who are different and to have compassion, throughout history there have also been instances where religion has been used in order to promote hate. On the Nature of Prejudice. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 413. Print. Researchers have done various studies in order to understand the relationship between religion and prejudice; thus far, they have received mixed results. A study done with US college students found that those who reported religion to be very influential in their lives seem to have a higher rate of prejudice than those who reported not being religious. Other studies found that religion has a positive affect on people as far as prejudice is concerned. This difference in results may be attributed to the differences in religious practices amongst the individuals. Those who practice "institutionalized religion," which is when one focuses more on the social and political aspects of religious events, are more likely to have an increase in prejudice. Those who practice "interiorized religion," which is when one devotes him or herself to his or her beliefs, are most likely to have a decrease in prejudice.