

EXPLICIT PREJUDICE

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1. Core Definition

Explicit prejudice refers to consciously held, negative attitudes or beliefs directed toward a specific social group or its members. Unlike implicit biases, which operate outside of conscious awareness, explicit prejudice is intentional, reportable, and fully accessible to the individual. This form of bias is reflective in nature, requiring cognitive effort and conscious endorsement of the negative evaluation. When an individual expresses explicit prejudice, they are aware of their feelings and are often prepared to defend their discriminatory beliefs, even if they recognize these beliefs are socially frowned upon in modern contexts. The core distinction lies in the transparency of the attitude; the individual knows they harbor prejudice and may choose to express it openly, as illustrated by the foundational example: "Joe showed **explicit prejudice** towards people of Indian origin," implying a clear, overt expression of bias.

The manifest display of **explicit prejudice** can take numerous forms, including verbal insults, overt discrimination in hiring or housing, endorsement of discriminatory policies, or the willing subscription to negative stereotypes. Because these attitudes are conscious, researchers rely on direct self-report measures, although the validity of such measures is often complicated by social factors. Explicit prejudice represents a clear psychological state where the individual has categorized an out-group, assigned negative attributes to that group, and internalized that assignment as a valid belief. This conscious framework allows the individual to rationalize and maintain discriminatory behavior, viewing it not as unwarranted bias, but often as a justifiable reaction based on perceived group differences or threats.

2. Distinction from Implicit Prejudice

The academic utility of the term **explicit prejudice** is intrinsically tied to its contrast with implicit prejudice. While explicit attitudes are controlled and conscious, implicit attitudes are automatic, unconscious associations that influence judgment and behavior without the individual's intentional awareness. This fundamental division has dominated prejudice research since the late 20th century, particularly following the development of methods capable of measuring non-conscious bias. The divergence between what people consciously report (explicit attitude) and what their automatic cognitive responses reveal (implicit attitude) highlights the complex interplay between internal belief systems and external social pressures.

A significant finding in social psychology is that in contemporary, politically correct societies, explicit prejudice scores have generally declined over time, reflecting greater awareness of anti-

discrimination norms and the pressure of **social desirability bias**. However, this decline in explicit prejudice has not necessarily been mirrored by a corresponding drop in implicit bias scores, creating an attitude-behavior gap. For instance, an individual might genuinely report on a survey that they harbor no negative feelings toward a specific minority group (low explicit prejudice), yet their reaction times on tools like the Implicit Association Test (IAT) might reveal strong, automatic negative associations. Understanding this distinction is vital for researchers and policymakers, as explicit prejudice guides deliberate discriminatory actions, while implicit prejudice often affects spontaneous judgments and microaggressions.

Furthermore, the two forms of prejudice are believed to influence different types of behavior. **Explicit prejudice** tends to be a stronger predictor of planned, deliberate actions where the individual has time to contemplate their decision, such as voting for a discriminatory candidate or voicing objection to integration policies. Conversely, implicit prejudice is more likely to predict automatic, spontaneous behaviors, such as nonverbal cues, fleeting expressions of discomfort, or snap decisions in high-stress, low-information environments. The relationship between these two systems--conscious and unconscious--is dynamic; while distinct, implicit biases can eventually influence explicit beliefs through processes of rationalization, and conscious effort to suppress explicit prejudice can, over time, potentially weaken automatic implicit associations.

3. Measurement and Expression

The measurement of **explicit prejudice** traditionally relies on direct assessment methods where respondents self-report their attitudes. The primary tool is the questionnaire or scale, which ranges from older, blatant measures to newer, more subtle approaches. Older scales, often referred to as "Old-Fashioned Prejudice Scales," utilized items that directly inquired about support for segregation, beliefs in innate racial inferiority, or open hostility, which were acceptable measures during periods when such views were socially normative. These methods, however, became largely ineffective as social norms shifted and respondents became highly sensitized to the social inappropriateness of overt bias.

To address the pervasive issue of **social desirability bias**--the tendency for individuals to present themselves in a favorable light--researchers developed more sophisticated explicit measures. The shift moved toward assessing what is known as "modern prejudice" or "symbolic prejudice." These scales measure explicit prejudice not through blatant hostility, but through items related to resistance to change, denial of systemic discrimination, endorsement of traditional values, or resentment toward perceived special favors granted to minority groups. Examples include the Modern Racism Scale or the Subtle and Blatant Prejudice Scale, which attempt to capture conscious negative attitudes that are framed in terms acceptable to contemporary social discourse, such as opposition framed in terms of principles like individualism or fairness, rather than overt dislike.

The expression of **explicit prejudice** is fundamentally linked to the perceived social environment. In environments where prejudice is openly tolerated or even encouraged (e.g., specific online forums or homogenous social groups), the expression of explicit bias is likely to be high and blatant. However, in environments governed by strong anti-discrimination norms (e.g., workplaces, universities), explicit prejudice is often suppressed or disguised. This suppression does not eliminate the attitude; rather, it makes the attitude private, which can increase internal conflict or lead to leakage of the bias through subtle nonverbal channels or highly coded language that only in-group members readily recognize as prejudiced. Thus, the relationship between measurement and actual expression is complex, varying according to situational norms and the perceived cost of expressing the conscious attitude.

4. Historical Context and Decline

Historically, **explicit prejudice** was not only common but frequently institutionalized. During eras of colonialism, slavery, and racial segregation, overtly discriminatory attitudes were embedded within legal structures and cultural narratives, making them easily and publicly expressible without fear of social or legal reprisal. This period featured "blatant prejudice," characterized by open hostility, support for segregation, and belief in the inherent inferiority of out-groups. The attitudes were explicitly taught, learned, and passed down generationally, forming a key component of social identity and hierarchy.

A significant shift began occurring in the mid-20th century, particularly following World War II and the subsequent Civil Rights movements in various Western nations. This period saw the dismantling of officially sanctioned segregation and discrimination, prompting a corresponding change in public discourse and social norms. As a result, **explicit prejudice** became increasingly unacceptable. Studies tracking changes in racial attitudes in the United States, for instance, show a marked, consistent decline in the conscious endorsement of blatantly racist statements since the 1950s. This decline is attributed less to a complete eradication of underlying negative feelings and more to the internalization of new, egalitarian norms.

The societal cost associated with expressing explicit prejudice today--such as social ostracism, professional repercussions, or legal action--has dramatically altered how conscious biases are expressed. This transition led to the concept of symbolic or modern prejudice, where the explicit attitude is retained but is expressed indirectly, often focusing on abstract principles rather than biological inferiority. While the most egregious forms of **explicit prejudice** (e.g., advocating for Jim Crow laws) have largely vanished from mainstream discourse, researchers argue that explicit biases still persist in subtle, modernized forms that consciously challenge the pace or manner of social change and equality efforts.

5. Psychological Mechanisms

The development and maintenance of **explicit prejudice** are driven by a combination of cognitive and motivational psychological mechanisms. Cognitively, prejudice is fueled by the process of categorization, where people simplify the complex social environment by sorting individuals into in-groups and out-groups. This categorization leads to the perception of in-group homogeneity (all members of our group are diverse) and out-group homogeneity (all members of their group are alike). These conscious overgeneralizations form the basis of negative stereotypes, which are the cognitive components of explicit prejudice.

Motivationally, **explicit prejudice** is strongly supported by Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory. SIT posits that individuals strive to maintain a positive self-concept, which is partly derived from the status and reputation of their various group memberships. To enhance their self-esteem, individuals consciously favor the in-group and derogate the out-group. This intentional derogation is a manifestation of explicit prejudice, serving the functional goal of making the in-group look superior by comparison. The conscious belief that the out-group is inferior or threatening directly validates the individual's own social identity.

Furthermore, **Realistic Conflict Theory** provides another motivational framework, suggesting that explicit prejudice arises when groups compete for perceived scarce resources, such as jobs, land, or power. The conscious hostility and negative attitudes toward the out-group are direct, rational responses to a perceived threat to the in-group's well-being. This theory helps explain why explicit prejudice often spikes during periods of economic hardship or significant demographic change. The cognitive and motivational systems thus work hand-in-hand: motivational needs (to elevate self-esteem or secure resources) direct the cognitive system to consciously endorse and employ negative stereotypes, thereby maintaining the explicit bias.

6. Societal Impact and Policy

The societal impact of **explicit prejudice** is profound and far-reaching, fundamentally shaping institutional practices and interpersonal interactions. Because explicit prejudice involves conscious intent, it directly translates into deliberate discriminatory behavior. This includes intentional exclusion, harassment, and the commission of **hate crimes**, which are often defined legally by the explicit motivation of bias against a protected group. The awareness and intentionality inherent in explicit prejudice make it a primary target for legal intervention and punitive measures.

In institutional settings, **explicit prejudice**, while less common than in the past, can manifest when decision-makers consciously choose to favor members of their own group or actively block opportunities for members of out-groups. Policy solutions are therefore designed to directly counter these conscious biases. Anti-discrimination laws, affirmative action policies, and mandatory bias training are all mechanisms aimed at regulating and preventing the behavioral outcomes of

conscious prejudice. Explicit policies often require clear documentation of non-discriminatory procedures precisely because they seek to prevent conscious decision-making based on prejudiced beliefs.

The persistence of **explicit prejudice** also sustains social fragmentation and limits genuine intergroup contact. When individuals openly express negative views, it reinforces group boundaries, diminishes trust, and contributes to a hostile environment for targeted groups. Addressing explicit prejudice requires both legal enforcement against overt discriminatory acts and educational strategies focused on counter-stereotyping and promoting empathy. While unconscious (implicit) biases require long-term cognitive restructuring, explicit prejudice requires direct confrontation of the conscious beliefs and attitudes held by individuals.

7. Further Reading

[Prejudice \(General Overview\)](#)

[Implicit Bias](#)

[Social Identity Theory](#)

[Anti-discrimination Law](#)