

PREJUDICE

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PREJUDICE

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology, Sociology, Cognitive Psychology

1. Core Definition

Prejudice is formally defined within the social sciences as a hostile or negative attitude toward a distinguishable group of people, based solely on their membership in that group. This outlook is fundamentally a pre-judgment, meaning it is formulated prior to or independent of actual experience, sufficient evidence, or objective evaluation of the targeted individuals or collective. The central characteristic of prejudice is its affective foundation; it represents a deep-seated feeling, often negative, that makes the individual resistant to factual information that contradicts their existing bias. While the term is sometimes used broadly in common language to describe any preconceived positive or negative opinion, its technical usage invariably refers to the harmful, negative orientation that supports and rationalizes discriminatory behavior.

The attitude encapsulated by prejudice is pervasive, applying not just to visible characteristics but also to nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability status, and socioeconomic class. It operates by attributing uniform characteristics, usually negative, to all members of an out-group, ignoring the vast individual differences that exist within that population. This cognitive overgeneralization is a fundamental building block of social stratification and conflict. The emotional intensity accompanying prejudice ensures that when a prejudiced person encounters information that challenges their worldview, they are more likely to reject the information or distort its meaning rather than modify their attitude.

The psychological structure of prejudice positions it as an internal state, often contrasted with action. It is an internal predisposition--a feeling and a belief system--that provides the necessary rationale for external discriminatory behavior. This distinction is critical for researchers, allowing them to separate the internal attitude (prejudice) from the cognitive generalization (stereotyping) and the observable behavior (discrimination). The study of prejudice thus seeks to understand not merely why people dislike certain groups, but how those negative sentiments become organized into rigid cognitive structures that resist rational disconfirming evidence.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **prejudice** derives from the Latin *praejudicium*, meaning "previous judgment" or "precedent." Historically, in legal contexts, *praejudicium* referred to a preliminary inquiry or a decision based on previous rulings rather than direct evidence in the current case. This early usage highlights the core concept of judging prematurely or forming an opinion without due consideration of the facts. Prior to the mid-20th century, the term carried less of its modern social stigma and was used simply to denote any pre-conceived opinion, whether justifiable or not.

The academic and social understanding of prejudice underwent a profound transformation in the wake of World War II, driven by efforts to understand the underlying mechanisms of large-scale atrocities. The seminal work of **Gordon Allport**, particularly his 1954 classic, *The Nature of Prejudice*, solidified its modern definition as a social phenomenon. Allport emphasized the irrational nature of the hostile attitude and meticulously separated it from mere categorization. His work established prejudice as a foundational concept in social psychology, shifting the focus from individual moral failing to systematic socio-cognitive biases.

In subsequent decades, research expanded beyond mere definition to explore the psychological origins of prejudice, examining factors like authoritarian personality (Adorno et al.), cognitive needs (e.g., the need for closure), and group dynamics (e.g., **Realistic Conflict Theory** and Social Identity Theory). This historical evolution has progressively refined the concept, moving it from a general descriptor of pre-judgment to a precise, multidimensional construct encompassing affective, cognitive, and conative (behavioral tendency) components.

3. Key Characteristics and Components

Prejudice is not a monolithic construct but is understood as encompassing three distinct, yet interwoven, components, often referred to as the ABC Model of Attitudes:

Affective Element (Emotion): This is the feeling or emotional core of prejudice. It includes intense negative emotions such as hostility, fear, contempt, anger, or disgust directed toward the out-group. This affective element provides the energy and motivational force necessary to sustain the negative attitude and is the most difficult component to change.

Mental or Cognitive Element (Stereotype): This involves the set of beliefs or generalizations held about the group. Stereotypes are oversimplified and often inaccurate mental pictures that attribute specific traits--usually negative or inferior--to all members of a social category. For example, the belief that "Group X is inherently lazy" is the cognitive element that supports the affective dislike of Group X.

Behavioral Element (Conation/Discrimination): This refers to the predisposition or tendency to act in a biased manner, although the behavior itself is typically called discrimination. While prejudice is the internal attitude, the behavioral element is the readiness to treat the out-group differently, unfairly, or unequally. Discrimination is the external enactment of the internal prejudiced attitude.

These components reinforce one another in a circular pattern. The cognitive stereotype provides the justification for the negative affective response, and the affective intensity makes the individual highly motivated to seek information that confirms both the stereotype and the resulting hostile attitude. This self-perpetuating cycle is a primary reason why prejudice exhibits such remarkable resilience to external evidence.

4. Cognitive and Affective Mechanisms

The inherent resistance of prejudice to alteration stems from powerful cognitive and affective mechanisms that protect the preconceived worldview. One primary mechanism is **Confirmation Bias**, where individuals actively seek out, interpret, and remember information in a way that confirms their pre-existing beliefs or hypotheses. When a prejudiced person encounters a positive example from the targeted group, they are likely to dismiss it as an exception, minimize its relevance, or engage in **subtyping**, thus protecting the general rule of the negative stereotype.

Furthermore, prejudice relies heavily on the cognitive process of social categorization. Humans naturally group people into in-groups (us) and out-groups (them). This fundamental process is exploited by prejudice through the mechanisms of **In-Group Bias** (favoring one's own group) and **Out-Group Homogeneity Effect** (the tendency to perceive out-group members as being more similar to one another than in-group members are). This homogeneity effect strips individual out-group members of their unique characteristics, making it easier to apply a standardized negative label and maintain the emotional distance necessary for hostility.

The affective element also plays a gatekeeping role. The negative emotional investment (fear, anger) associated with the out-group can trigger physiological stress responses that bypass rational thought. In emotionally charged situations, the pre-existing negative affective schema takes precedence, causing the individual to rely on ingrained prejudiced responses rather than engaging in deliberate, objective processing of the available social data. This interplay between generalized negative beliefs (mental element) and strong negative feelings (affective element) makes the prejudiced person's comprehension of data relative to the group significantly and negatively altered, reinforcing the attitude's stability.

5. Manifestations and Related Concepts

Prejudice is an umbrella concept that manifests in specific, harmful ideologies when directed toward particular social categories. The most frequently cited manifestation, as noted in general definitions, is **racism**, defined as prejudice against others according to the color of their skin or ethnicity. However, prejudice extends to numerous other dimensions:

Sexism: Prejudice based on gender, involving negative attitudes or beliefs regarding a person's sex, typically focused against women or non-binary individuals.

Ageism: Prejudice directed against individuals based on their age, often targeting the elderly or, less frequently, the very young.

Homophobia/Transphobia: Prejudice directed against individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, respectively.

Ableism: Prejudice against individuals with physical or mental disabilities.

It is crucial to distinguish prejudice from stereotyping and discrimination. Stereotyping is the cognitive generalization (the belief); prejudice is the affective orientation (the attitude); and discrimination is the behavior (the action). While they often co-occur, one can stereotype without being prejudiced, and discrimination can occur institutionally without the specific prejudiced intent of the actor, such as systemic discrimination embedded in policies or laws. However, when highly negative prejudice is present, it dramatically increases the likelihood of overt discrimination.

6. Significance and Impact

The significance of prejudice lies in its profound impact on both individual psychological well-being and societal structure. For individuals who are targets of prejudice, the constant exposure to negative attitudes leads to heightened stress, lower self-esteem, reduced academic and professional opportunities, and increased rates of mental and physical health issues. The experience of living under the shadow of prejudice contributes to chronic social threat perception, leading to phenomena like stereotype threat, which impairs performance in domain-relevant tasks.

On a societal level, prejudice is a primary driver of inequality, social polarization, and conflict. It fuels systemic discrimination in vital areas such as housing, employment, criminal justice, and healthcare, thereby maintaining structural disadvantages for marginalized groups. By dehumanizing out-group members, prejudice reduces empathy and moral concern, making it easier for dominant groups to justify the unequal distribution of resources and power. Historical events, from small-scale violence to genocide, are invariably rooted in deep-seated, institutionalized prejudice.

Furthermore, prejudice undermines democratic ideals and social cohesion. It impedes rational discourse and collective problem-solving by creating echo chambers where biased beliefs are constantly reinforced, preventing the integration of diverse perspectives necessary for a functioning pluralistic society. Addressing prejudice is therefore not merely a matter of social justice, but a prerequisite for stable, equitable, and economically successful societies.

7. Debates and Criticisms Regarding Alteration

Given the resistance of prejudice to rational evidence, a major focus in social psychology revolves around the methods for its alteration and reduction. Early theoretical approaches suggested that education alone could dispel prejudiced views by providing counter-evidence. However, empirical findings have shown that informational interventions often fail because of the cognitive defenses employed by the prejudiced individual (confirmation bias, subtyping).

The most influential framework for reducing prejudice remains **The Contact Hypothesis**, proposed by Gordon Allport. This theory posits that direct intergroup contact can reduce prejudice, but only under specific, optimal conditions. These conditions include: 1) Equal status between the groups in

the setting; 2) Common goals that require interdependence; 3) Intergroup cooperation; and 4) Support from institutional authorities (law, customs). If these conditions are met, contact breaks down the out-group homogeneity effect, allowing prejudiced individuals to personalize and humanize the out-group members, making the maintenance of a generalized negative attitude more difficult.

A significant criticism related to the alteration of prejudice involves the debate between focusing on individual attitudes versus systemic change. Some critics argue that focusing solely on changing individual hearts and minds (attitudes) ignores the entrenched institutional structures that perpetuate discrimination, regardless of individual intent. Therefore, effective reduction strategies must address both individual cognitive biases and the societal systems that afford unequal power and resources based on group membership. Recent research has increasingly turned toward methods that leverage awareness of implicit biases--unconscious forms of prejudice that affect judgment and behavior even in individuals who consciously reject overt prejudice--as a key path toward effective societal change.

Further Reading

[Prejudice \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Gordon Allport](#)

[Contact Hypothesis](#)

[Racism](#)