11.3: Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination

The terms stereotype, prejudice, discrimination, and racism are often used interchangeably in everyday conversation. Let us explore the differences between these concepts. Stereotypes are oversimplified generalizations about groups of people. Stereotypes can be based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation—almost any characteristic. They may be positive (usually about one’s own group, such as when women suggest they are less likely to complain about physical pain) but are often negative (usually toward other groups, such as when members of a dominant racial group suggest that a subordinate racial group is stupid or lazy). In either case, the stereotype is a generalization that doesn’t take individual differences into account.

Where do stereotypes come from? In fact new stereotypes are rarely created; rather, they are recycled from subordinate groups that have assimilated into society and are reused to describe newly subordinate groups. For example, many stereotypes that are currently used to characterize black people were used earlier in American history to characterize Irish and Eastern European immigrants.

Prejudice and Racism

Prejudice refers to the beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes someone holds about a group. A prejudice is not based on experience; instead, it is a prejudgment, originating outside actual experience. A 1970 documentary called Eye of the Storm illustrates the way in which prejudice develops, by showing how defining one category of people as superior (children with blue eyes) results in prejudice against people who are not part of the favored category.

While prejudice is not necessarily specific to race, racism is a stronger type of prejudice used to justify the belief that one racial category is somehow superior or inferior to others; it is also a set of practices used by a racial majority to disadvantage a racial minority. The Ku Klux Klan is an example of a racist organization; its members’ belief in white supremacy has encouraged over a century of hate crime and hate speech.
Institutional racism refers to the way in which racism is embedded in the fabric of society. For example, the disproportionate number of black men arrested, charged, and convicted of crimes may reflect racial profiling, a form of institutional racism.

Colorism is another kind of prejudice, in which someone believes one type of skin tone is superior or inferior to another within a racial group. Studies suggest that darker skinned African Americans experience more discrimination than lighter skinned African Americans (Herring, Keith, and Horton 2004; Klonoff and Landrine 2000). For example, if a white employer believes a black employee with a darker skin tone is less capable than a black employer with lighter skin tone, that is colorism. At least one study suggested the colorism affected racial socialization, with darker-skinned black male adolescents receiving more warnings about the danger of interacting with members of other racial groups than did lighter-skinned black male adolescents (Landor et al. 2013).

**Discrimination**

While prejudice refers to biased thinking, discrimination consists of actions against a group of people. Discrimination can be based on age, religion, health, and other indicators; race-based laws against discrimination strive to address this set of social problems.

Discrimination based on race or ethnicity can take many forms, from unfair housing practices to biased hiring systems. Overt discrimination has long been part of U.S. history. In the late nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for business owners to hang signs that read, "Help Wanted: No Irish Need Apply." And southern Jim Crow laws, with their "Whites Only" signs, exemplified overt discrimination that is not tolerated today.

However, we cannot erase discrimination from our culture just by enacting laws to abolish it. Even if a magic pill managed to eradicate racism from each individual's psyche, society itself would maintain it. Sociologist Émile Durkheim calls racism a social fact, meaning that it does not require the action of individuals to continue. The reasons for this are complex and relate to the educational, criminal, economic, and political systems that exist in our society.

For example, when a newspaper identifies by race individuals accused of a crime, it may enhance stereotypes of a certain minority. Another example of racist practices is racial steering, in which real estate agents direct prospective homeowners toward or away from certain neighborhoods based on their race. Racist attitudes and beliefs are often more insidious and harder to pin down than specific racist practices.

Prejudice and discrimination can overlap and intersect in many ways. To illustrate, here are four examples of how prejudice and discrimination can occur. Unprejudiced nondiscriminators are open-minded, tolerant, and accepting individuals. Unprejudiced discriminators might be those who unthinkingly practice sexism in their workplace by not considering females for certain positions that have traditionally been held by men. Prejudiced nondiscriminators are those who hold racist beliefs but don't act on them, such as a racist store owner who serves minority customers. Prejudiced discriminators include those who actively make disparaging remarks about others or who perpetuate hate crimes.

Discrimination also manifests in different ways. The scenarios above are examples of individual discrimination, but other types exist. Institutional discrimination occurs when a societal system has developed with embedded disenfranchisement of a group, such as the U.S. military's historical nonacceptance of minority sexualities (the "don't
ask, don't tell" policy reflected this norm).

Institutional discrimination can also include the promotion of a group's status, such in the case of white privilege, which is the benefits people receive simply by being part of the dominant group.

While most white people are willing to admit that nonwhite people live with a set of disadvantages due to the color of their skin, very few are willing to acknowledge the benefits they receive.

Racial Tensions in the United States

The death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO on August 9, 2014 illustrates racial tensions in the United States as well as the overlap between prejudice, discrimination, and institutional racism. On that day, Brown, a young unarmed black man, was killed by a white police officer named Darren Wilson. During the incident, Wilson directed Brown and his friend to walk on the sidewalk instead of in the street. While eyewitness accounts vary, they agree that an altercation occurred between Wilson and Brown. Wilson’s version has him shooting Brown in self-defense after Brown assaulted him, while Dorian Johnson, a friend of Brown also present at the time, claimed that Brown first ran away, then turned with his hands in the air to surrender, after which Johnson shot him repeatedly (Nobles and Bosman 2014). Three autopsies independently confirmed that Brown was shot six times (Lowery and Fears 2014).

The shooting focused attention on a number of race-related tensions in the United States. First, members of the predominantly black community viewed Brown’s death as the result of a white police officer racially profiling a black man (Nobles and Bosman 2014). In the days after, it was revealed that only three members of the town’s fifty-three-member police force were black (Nobles and Bosman 2014). The national dialogue shifted during the next few weeks, with some commentators pointing to a nationwidesedimentation of racial inequality and identifying redlining in Ferguson as a cause of the unbalanced racial composition in the community, in local political establishments, and in the police force (Bouie 2014). Redlining is the practice of routinely refusing mortgages for households and businesses located in predominately minority communities, while sedimentation of racial inequality describes the intergenerational impact of both practical and legalized racism that limits the abilities of black people to accumulate wealth.

Ferguson’s racial imbalance may explain in part why, even though in 2010 only about 63 percent of its population was black, in 2013 blacks were detained in 86 percent of stops, 92 percent of searches, and 93 percent of arrests (Missouri Attorney General’s Office 2014). In addition, de facto segregation in Ferguson’s schools, a race-based wealth gap, urban sprawl, and a black unemployment rate three times that of the white unemployment rate worsened existing racial tensions in Ferguson while also reflecting nationwide racial inequalities (Bouie 2014).
Multiple Identities

Golfer Tiger Woods has Chinese, Thai, African American, Native American, and Dutch heritage. Individuals with multiple ethnic backgrounds are becoming more common. (Photo courtesy of familymwr/flickr)

Prior to the twentieth century, racial intermarriage (referred to as miscegenation) was extremely rare, and in many places, illegal. In the later part of the twentieth century and in the twenty-first century, as Figure shows, attitudes have changed for the better. While the sexual subordination of slaves did result in children of mixed race, these children were usually considered black, and therefore, property. There was no concept of multiple racial identities with the possible exception of the Creole. Creole society developed in the port city of New Orleans, where a mixed-race culture grew from French and African inhabitants. Unlike in other parts of the country, “Creoles of color” had greater social, economic, and educational opportunities than most African Americans.

Increasingly during the modern era, the removal of miscegenation laws and a trend toward equal rights and legal protection against racism have steadily reduced the social stigma attached to racial exogamy (exogamy refers to marriage outside a person’s core social unit). It is now common for the children of racially mixed parents to acknowledge and celebrate their various ethnic identities. Golfer Tiger Woods, for instance, has Chinese, Thai, African American, Native American, and Dutch heritage; he jokingly refers to his ethnicity as “Cablinasian,” a term he coined to combine several of his ethnic backgrounds. While this is the trend, it is not yet evident in all aspects of our society. For example, the U.S. Census only recently added additional categories for people to identify themselves, such as non-white...
Hispanic. A growing number of people chose multiple races to describe themselves on the 2010 Census, paving the way for the 2020 Census to provide yet more choices.

THE CONFEDERATE FLAG VS. THE FIRST AMENDMENT

To some, the Confederate flag is a symbol of pride in Southern history. To others, it is a grim reminder of a degrading period of the United States’ past. (Photo courtesy of Eyeliam/flickr)

In January 2006, two girls walked into Burleson High School in Texas carrying purses that displayed large images of Confederate flags. School administrators told the girls that they were in violation of the dress code, which prohibited apparel with inappropriate symbolism or clothing that discriminated based on race. To stay in school, they’d have to have someone pick up their purses or leave them in the office. The girls chose to go home for the day but then challenged the school’s decision, appealing first to the principal, then to the district superintendent, then to the U.S. District Court, and finally to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Why did the school ban the purses, and why did it stand behind that ban, even when being sued? Why did the girls, identified anonymously in court documents as A.M. and A.T., pursue such strong legal measures for their right to carry the purses? The issue, of course, is not the purses: it is the Confederate flag that adorns them. The parties in this case join a long line of people and institutions that have fought for their right to display it, saying such a display is covered by the First Amendment’s guarantee of free speech. In the end, the court sided with the district and noted that the Confederate flag carried symbolism significant enough to disrupt normal school activities.

While many young people in the United States like to believe that racism is mostly in the country’s past, this case illustrates how racism and discrimination are quite alive today. If the Confederate flag is synonymous with slavery, is there any place for its display in modern society? Those who fight for their right to display the flag say such a display should be covered by the First Amendment: the right to free speech. But others say the flag is equivalent to hate speech. Do you think that displaying the Confederate flag should considered free speech or hate speech?

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Summary

Stereotypes are oversimplified ideas about groups of people. Prejudice refers to thoughts and feelings, while discrimination refers to actions. Racism refers to the belief that one race is inherently superior or inferior to other races.

Section Quiz

Stereotypes can be based on:

1. race
2. ethnicity
3. gender
4. all of the above

Answer

D

What is discrimination?

1. Biased thoughts against an individual or group
2. Biased actions against an individual or group
3. Belief that a race different from yours is inferior
4. Another word for stereotyping

Answer

B

Which of the following is the best explanation of racism as a social fact?

1. It needs to be eradicated by laws.
2. It is like a magic pill.
3. It does not need the actions of individuals to continue.
4. None of the above

Answer

C
Short Answer

How do redlining and racial steering contribute to institutionalized racism?

Give an example of stereotyping that you see in everyday life. Explain what would need to happen for this to be eliminated.

Further Research

How far should First Amendment rights extend? Read more about the subject at the First Amendment Center:
http://openstaxcollege.org/l/first_amendment_center

Learn more about institutional racism at www.splcenter.org

Learn more about how prejudice develops by watching the short documentary “Eye of the Storm”:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjSHOaugO-0

References


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Glossary

**colorism**
the belief that one type of skin tone is superior or inferior to another within a racial group

**discrimination**
prejudiced action against a group of people

**institutional racism**
racism embedded in social institutions

**prejudice**
biased thought based on flawed assumptions about a group of people

**racial steering**
the act of real estate agents directing prospective homeowners toward or away from certain neighborhoods based on their race

**racism**
a set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that are used to justify the belief that one racial category is somehow superior or inferior to others

**redlining**
the practice of routinely refusing mortgages for households and business located in predominately minority communities

**sedimentation of racial inequality**
the intergenerational impact of de facto and de jure racism that limits the abilities of black people to accumulate wealth

**stereotypes**
oversimplified ideas about groups of people

**white privilege**
the benefits people receive simply by being part of the dominant group