1.9: Experiencing Prejudice and Discrimination

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

Look again at your answer to Activity 3. Now think of an experience when an aspect of your identity (for example, in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability, class, sexuality or age) resulted in you:

- being discriminated against or badly treated by comparison with others
- being treated more advantageously than others in a similar position
- being placed in a position of power over others.

Answer

Here is an example from a course team member, which you may want to compare with your own answer.

I grew up with the reality of poverty and anti-Irish prejudice. Later, as a nurse, I found that I was in an inferior position to male doctors and was even bullied and harassed by senior staff. This was part of the culture of being a young nurse. As a senior nurse, I was often in charge of shifts, so that power was afforded to my position. Later in life, as a midwife, I acted as an advocate to the women in my care and challenged oppressive behaviour towards them. I was often consulted over care decisions and seen as someone who was powerful and assertive.

Individual examples of prejudice and discrimination should not be seen as isolated or free-floating. Within organisations, stereotypes and prejudice are often dismissed as the attitudes of a small minority, and instances of discrimination as ‘isolated incidents’. However, a social model of difference would view them as reflecting wider institutional patterns and structures. Stereotypical views held by individuals do not materialise out of thin air. They often reflect deeply rooted social attitudes, which are themselves grounded in processes of oppression and exclusion going back hundreds of years. For example, stereotypes about African, Caribbean and Asian people can be seen as deriving ultimately from...
Britain’s long involvement in slavery and colonial exploitation (Fryer, 1984). Similarly, feminists argue that negative images of women have their origins in patriarchal structures and practices going back millennia (Abbott, 2000).

Processes of racism and sexism play a part in producing and perpetuating supposed ‘differences’ between people based on their ethnicity and gender. Moreover, as you saw in the case study in Activity 1, these processes of prejudice and discrimination can lead directly to people’s diverse needs not being met appropriately. Adopting this approach does not mean denying the existence of difference, but acknowledging that responding to difference also means challenging and changing practices and structures that exclude and disadvantage people on the basis of supposed ‘differences’ from the norm.

This discussion is developed further in the next three sections with specific reference to issues of ethnicity, gender and disability.

**Key points**

1. Attributing fixed ‘differences’ to particular groups of people can be seen as part of a process that reflects and reproduces inequalities of power.

2. Stereotypes of people based on their social identities tend to be negative and to define them in relation to their difference from an imaginary ‘norm’.

3. Stereotypes can lead to prejudice and discrimination, which themselves reflect and perpetuate wider processes of oppression, such as sexism and racism.