12.6: Prejudice and Discrimination

Skills to Develop

- Define and distinguish among prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination
- Provide examples of prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination
- Explain why prejudice and discrimination exist

Human conflict can result in crime, war, and mass murder, such as genocide. Prejudice and discrimination often are root causes of human conflict, which explains how strangers come to hate one another to the extreme of causing others harm. Prejudice and discrimination affect everyone. In this section we will examine the definitions of prejudice and discrimination, examples of these concepts, and causes of these biases.

*Figure 12.1*: Prejudice and discrimination occur across the globe. (a) A 1939 sign in German-occupied Poland warns “No Entrance for Poles!” (b) An African-American male drinks from a designated “colored” water fountain in Oklahoma in 1939 during the era of racial segregation as a practice of discrimination. (c) A member of the Westboro Baptist Church, widely identified as a hate group, engages in discrimination based on religion and sexual orientation.

(credit b: modification of work by United States Farm Security Administration; credit c: modification of work by “JCWilmore”/Wikimedia Commons)
Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination

As we discussed in the opening story of Trayvon Martin, humans are very diverse and although we share many similarities, we also have many differences. The social groups we belong to help form our identities (Tajfel, 1974). These differences may be difficult for some people to reconcile, which may lead to prejudice toward people who are different. Prejudice is a negative attitude and feeling toward an individual based solely on one’s membership in a particular social group (Allport, 1954; Brown, 2010). Prejudice is common against people who are members of an unfamiliar cultural group. Thus, certain types of education, contact, interactions, and building relationships with members of different cultural groups can reduce the tendency toward prejudice. In fact, simply imagining interacting with members of different cultural groups might affect prejudice. Indeed, when experimental participants were asked to imagine themselves positively interacting with someone from a different group, this led to an increased positive attitude toward the other group and an increase in positive traits associated with the other group. Furthermore, imagined social interaction can reduce anxiety associated with inter-group interactions (Crisp & Turner, 2009). What are some examples of social groups that you belong to that contribute to your identity? Social groups can include gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, religion, sexual orientation, profession, and many more. And, as is true for social roles, you can simultaneously be a member of more than one social group. An example of prejudice is having a negative attitude toward people who are not born in the United States. Although people holding this prejudiced attitude do not know all people who were not born in the United States, they dislike them due to their status as foreigners.

Can you think of a prejudiced attitude you have held toward a group of people? How did your prejudice develop? Prejudice often begins in the form of a stereotype—that is, a specific belief or assumption about individuals based solely on their membership in a group, regardless of their individual characteristics. Stereotypes become overgeneralized and applied to all members of a group. For example, someone holding prejudiced attitudes toward older adults, may believe that older adults are slow and incompetent (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005; Nelson, 2004). We cannot possibly know each individual person of advanced age to know that all older adults are slow and incompetent. Therefore, this negative belief is overgeneralized to all members of the group, even though many of the individual group members may in fact be spry and intelligent.

Another example of a well-known stereotype involves beliefs about racial differences among athletes. As Hodge, Burden, Robinson, and Bennett (2008) point out, Black male athletes are often believed to be more athletic, yet less intelligent, than their White male counterparts. These beliefs persist despite a number of high profile examples to the contrary. Sadly, such beliefs often influence how these athletes are treated by others and how they view themselves and their own capabilities. Whether or not you agree with a stereotype, stereotypes are generally well-known within a given culture (Devine, 1989).

Sometimes people will act on their prejudiced attitudes toward a group of people, and this behavior is known as discrimination. Discrimination is negative action toward an individual as a result of one’s membership in a particular group (Allport, 1954; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). As a result of holding negative beliefs (stereotypes) and negative attitudes (prejudice) about a particular group, people often treat the target of prejudice poorly, such as excluding older adults from their circle of friends. The Table below summarizes the characteristics of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Have you ever been the target of discrimination? If so, how did this negative treatment make you feel?
### Table 1: Connecting Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Connection</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stereotype</td>
<td>Cognitive; thoughts about people</td>
<td>Overgeneralized beliefs about people may lead to prejudice.</td>
<td>“Yankees fans are arrogant and obnoxious.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prejudice</td>
<td>Affective; feelings about people, both positive and negative</td>
<td>Feelings may influence treatment of others, leading to discrimination.</td>
<td>“I hate Yankees fans; they make me angry.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>Behavior; positive or negative treatment of others</td>
<td>Holding stereotypes and harboring prejudice may lead to excluding, avoiding, and biased treatment of group members.</td>
<td>“I would never hire nor become friends with a person if I knew he or she were a Yankees fan.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So far, we’ve discussed stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination as negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors because these are typically the most problematic. However, it is important to also point out that people can hold positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward individuals based on group membership; for example, they would show preferential treatment for people who are like themselves—that is, who share the same gender, race, or favorite sports team.

### Types of Prejudice and Discrimination

When we meet strangers we automatically process three pieces of information about them: their race, gender, and age (Ito & Urland, 2003). Why are these aspects of an unfamiliar person so important? Why don’t we instead notice whether their eyes are friendly, whether they are smiling, their height, the type of clothes they are wearing? Although these secondary characteristics are important in forming a first impression of a stranger, the social categories of race, gender, and age provide a wealth of information about an individual. This information, however, often is based on stereotypes. We may have different expectations of strangers depending on their race, gender, and age. What stereotypes and prejudices do you hold about people who are from a race, gender, and age group different from your own?

### Racism

Racism is prejudice and discrimination against an individual based solely on one’s membership in a specific racial group (such as toward African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, European Americans). What are some stereotypes of various racial or ethnic groups? Research suggests cultural stereotypes for Asian Americans include cold, sly, and intelligent; for Latinos, cold and unintelligent; for European Americans, cold and intelligent; and for African Americans, aggressive, athletic, and more likely to be law breakers (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000; Dixon & Linz, 2000).

Racism exists for many racial and ethnic groups. For example, Blacks are significantly more likely to have their vehicles searched during traffic stops than Whites, particularly when Blacks are driving in predominately White neighborhoods, (a phenomenon often termed “DWB,” or “driving while Black.”) (Rojek, Rosenfeld, & Decker, 2012)
Mexican Americans and other Latino groups also are targets of racism from the police and other members of the community. For example, when purchasing items with a personal check, Latino shoppers are more likely than White shoppers to be asked to show formal identification (Dovidio et al., 2010).

In one case of alleged harassment by the police, several East Haven, Connecticut, police officers were arrested on federal charges due to reportedly continued harassment and brutalization of Latinos. When the accusations came out, the mayor of East Haven was asked, “What are you doing for the Latino community today?” The Mayor responded, “I might have tacos when I go home, I’m not quite sure yet” (“East Haven Mayor,” 2012) This statement undermines the important issue of racial profiling and police harassment of Latinos, while belittling Latino culture by emphasizing an interest in a food product stereotypically associated with Latinos.

Racism is prevalent toward many other groups in the United States including Native Americans, Arab Americans, Jewish Americans, and Asian Americans. Have you witnessed racism toward any of these racial or ethnic groups? Are you aware of racism in your community?

One reason modern forms of racism, and prejudice in general, are hard to detect is related to the dual attitudes model (Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000). Humans have two forms of attitudes: explicit attitudes, which are conscious and controllable, and implicit attitudes, which are unconscious and uncontrollable (Devine, 1989; Olson & Fazio, 2003). Because holding egalitarian views is socially desirable (Plant & Devine, 1998), most people do not show extreme racial bias or other prejudices on measures of their explicit attitudes. However, measures of implicit attitudes often show evidence of mild to strong racial bias or other prejudices (Greenwald, McGee, & Schwartz, 1998; Olson & Fazio, 2003).

**Sexism**

Sexism is prejudice and discrimination toward individuals based on their sex. Typically, sexism takes the form of men holding biases against women, but either sex can show sexism toward their own or their opposite sex. Like racism, sexism may be subtle and difficult to detect. Common forms of sexism in modern society include gender role expectations, such as expecting women to be the caretakers of the household. Sexism also includes people’s expectations for how members of a gender group should behave. For example, women are expected to be friendly, passive, and nurturing, and when women behave in an unfriendly, assertive, or neglectful manner they often are disliked for violating their gender role (Rudman, 1998). Research by Laurie Rudman (1998) finds that when female job applicants self-promote, they are likely to be viewed as competent, but they may be disliked and are less likely to be hired because they violated gender expectations for modesty. Sexism can exist on a societal level such as in hiring, employment opportunities, and education. Women are less likely to be hired or promoted in male-dominated professions such as engineering, aviation, and construction (See figure \(\PageIndex{2}\)) (Blau, Ferber, & Winkler, 2010; Ceci & Williams, 2011). Have you ever experienced or witnessed sexism? Think about your family members’ jobs or careers. Why do you think there are differences in the jobs women and men have, such as more women nurses but more male surgeons (Betz, 2008)?
Ageism

People often form judgments and hold expectations about people based on their age. These judgments and expectations can lead to ageism, or prejudice and discrimination toward individuals based solely on their age. Typically, ageism occurs against older adults, but ageism also can occur toward younger adults. Think of expectations you hold for older adults. How could someone’s expectations influence the feelings they hold toward individuals from older age groups? Ageism is widespread in U.S. culture (Nosek, 2005), and a common ageist attitude toward older adults is that they are incompetent, physically weak, and slow (Greenberg, Schimel, & Martens, 2002) and some people consider older adults less attractive. Some cultures, however, including some Asian, Latino, and African American cultures, both outside and within the United States afford older adults respect and honor.

Ageism can also occur toward younger adults. What expectations do you hold toward younger people? Does society expect younger adults to be immature and irresponsible? How might these two forms of ageism affect a younger and older adult who are applying for a sales clerk position?

Homophobia

Another form of prejudice is homophobia: prejudice and discrimination of individuals based solely on their sexual orientation. Like ageism, homophobia is a widespread prejudice in U.S. society that is tolerated by many people (Herek & McLemore, 2013; Nosek, 2005). Negative feelings often result in discrimination, such as the exclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people from social groups and the avoidance of LGBT neighbors and co-workers. This discrimination also extends to employers deliberately declining to hire qualified LGBT job applicants. Have you experienced or witnessed homophobia? If so, what stereotypes, prejudiced attitudes, and discrimination were evident?

DIG DEEPER: Research into Homophobia

Some people are quite passionate in their hatred for nonheterosexuals in our society. In some cases, people have been tortured and/or murdered simply because they were not heterosexual. This passionate response has led some researchers to question what motives might exist for homophobic people. Adams, Wright, & Lohr (1996) conducted a
study investigating this issue and their results were quite an eye-opener.

In this experiment, male college students were given a scale that assessed how homophobic they were; those with extreme scores were recruited to participate in the experiment. In the end, 64 men agreed to participate and were split into 2 groups: homophobic men and nonhomophobic men. Both groups of men were fitted with a penile plethysmograph, an instrument that measures changes in blood flow to the penis and serves as an objective measurement of sexual arousal.

All men were shown segments of sexually explicit videos. One of these videos involved a sexual interaction between a man and a woman (heterosexual clip). One video displayed two females engaged in a sexual interaction (homosexual female clip), and the final video displayed two men engaged in a sexual interaction (homosexual male clip). Changes in penile tumescence were recorded during all three clips, and a subjective measurement of sexual arousal was also obtained. While both groups of men became sexually aroused to the heterosexual and female homosexual video clips, only those men who were identified as homophobic showed sexual arousal to the homosexual male video clip. While all men reported that their erections indicated arousal for the heterosexual and female homosexual video clips, the homophobic men indicated that they were not sexually aroused (despite their erections) to the male homosexual clips. Adams et al. (1996) suggest that these findings may indicate that homophobia is related to homosexual arousal that the homophobic individuals either deny or are unaware.

Why do Prejudice and Discrimination Exist?

Prejudice and discrimination persist in society due to social learning and conformity to social norms. Children learn prejudiced attitudes and beliefs from society: their parents, teachers, friends, the media, and other sources of socialization, such as Facebook (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). If certain types of prejudice and discrimination are acceptable in a society, there may be normative pressures to conform and share those prejudiced beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, public and private schools are still somewhat segregated by social class. Historically, only children from wealthy families could afford to attend private schools, whereas children from middle- and low-income families typically attended public schools. If a child from a low-income family received a merit scholarship to attend a private school, how might the child be treated by classmates? Can you recall a time when you held prejudiced attitudes or beliefs or acted in a discriminatory manner because your group of friends expected you to?

Stereotypes and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

When we hold a stereotype about a person, we have expectations that he or she will fulfill that stereotype. A self-fulfilling prophecy is an expectation held by a person that alters his or her behavior in a way that tends to make it true. When we hold stereotypes about a person, we tend to treat the person according to our expectations. This treatment can influence the person to act according to our stereotypic expectations, thus confirming our stereotypic beliefs. Research by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) found that disadvantaged students whose teachers expected them to perform well had higher grades than disadvantaged students whose teachers expected them to do poorly.

Consider this example of cause and effect in a self-fulfilling prophecy: If an employer expects an openly gay male job applicant to be incompetent, the potential employer might treat the applicant negatively during the interview by engaging in less conversation, making little eye contact, and generally behaving coldly toward the applicant (Hebl, Foster, Mannix,
& Dovidio, 2002). In turn, the job applicant will perceive that the potential employer dislikes him, and he will respond by giving shorter responses to interview questions, making less eye contact, and generally disengaging from the interview. After the interview, the employer will reflect on the applicant’s behavior, which seemed cold and distant, and the employer will conclude, based on the applicant’s poor performance during the interview, that the applicant was in fact incompetent. Thus, the employer’s stereotype—gay men are incompetent and do not make good employees—is reinforced. Do you think this job applicant is likely to be hired? Treating individuals according to stereotypic beliefs can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

Another dynamic that can reinforce stereotypes is confirmation bias. When interacting with the target of our prejudice, we tend to pay attention to information that is consistent with our stereotypic expectations and ignore information that is inconsistent with our expectations. In this process, known as confirmation bias, we seek out information that supports our stereotypes and ignore information that is inconsistent with our stereotypes (Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972). In the job interview example, the employer may not have noticed that the job applicant was friendly and engaging, and that he provided competent responses to the interview questions in the beginning of the interview. Instead, the employer focused on the job applicant’s performance in the later part of the interview, after the applicant changed his demeanor and behavior to match the interviewer’s negative treatment.

Have you ever fallen prey to the self-fulfilling prophecy or confirmation bias, either as the source or target of such bias? How might we stop the cycle of the self-fulfilling prophecy? Social class stereotypes of individuals tend to arise when information about the individual is ambiguous. If information is unambiguous, stereotypes do not tend to arise (Baron et al., 1995).

IN-Groups and OUT-Groups

As discussed previously in this section, we all belong to a gender, race, age, and social economic group. These groups provide a powerful source of our identity and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These groups serve as our in-groups. An in-group is a group that we identify with or see ourselves as belonging to. A group that we don’t belong to, or an out-group, is a group that we view as fundamentally different from us. For example, if you are female, your gender in-group includes all females, and your gender out-group includes all males (See figure 1). People often view gender groups as being fundamentally different from each other in personality traits, characteristics, social roles, and interests. Because we often feel a strong sense of belonging and emotional connection to our in-groups, we develop in-group bias: a preference for our own group over other groups. This in-group bias can result in prejudice and discrimination because the out-group is perceived as different and is less preferred than our in-group.
Despite the group dynamics that seem only to push groups toward conflict, there are forces that promote reconciliation between groups: the expression of empathy, of acknowledgment of past suffering on both sides, and the halt of destructive behaviors.

One function of prejudice is to help us feel good about ourselves and maintain a positive self-concept. This need to feel good about ourselves extends to our in-groups: We want to feel good and protect our in-groups. We seek to resolve threats individually and at the in-group level. This often happens by blaming an out-group for the problem. **Scapegoating** is the act of blaming an out-group when the in-group experiences frustration or is blocked from obtaining a goal (Allport, 1954).

**Summary**

As diverse individuals, humans can experience conflict when interacting with people who are different from each other. Prejudice, or negative feelings and evaluations, is common when people are from a different social group (i.e., out-group). Negative attitudes toward out-groups can lead to discrimination. Prejudice and discrimination against others can be based on gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, or a variety of other social identities. In-group’s who feel threatened may blame the out-groups for their plight, thus using the out-group as a scapegoat for their frustration.

**Glossary**

*ageism*
prejudice and discrimination toward individuals based solely on their age

*confirmation bias*
seeking out information that supports our stereotypes while ignoring information that is inconsistent with our stereotypes
discrimination
negative actions toward individuals as a result of their membership in a particular group

homophobia
prejudice and discrimination against individuals based solely on their sexual orientation

in-group
group that we identify with or see ourselves as belonging to

in-group bias
preference for our own group over other groups

out-group
group that we don’t belong to—one that we view as fundamentally different from us

prejudice
negative attitudes and feelings toward individuals based solely on their membership in a particular group

racism
prejudice and discrimination toward individuals based solely on their race

scapegoating
act of blaming an out-group when the in-group experiences frustration or is blocked from obtaining a goal

self-fulfilling prophecy
treating stereotyped group members according to our biased expectations only to have this treatment influence the individual to act according to our stereotypic expectations, thus confirming our stereotypic beliefs

sexism
prejudice and discrimination toward individuals based on their sex

stereotype
specific beliefs or assumptions about individuals based solely on their membership in a group, regardless of their individual characteristics

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