

Psychological Theories of Prejudice and Discrimination

I

Prejudice and Stereotypes

Social perception involves the development of an attitude towards another person or group of persons. A stereotype is an attitude towards a person or group on the basis of some physical characteristic or physical fact. A stereotype is an example of an implicit personality theory. Such theories attribute internal properties to a person, such as character traits, on the basis of external properties. In a stereotype this attribution is based on a physical external property, such as skin colour. Other implicit theories base attributions on, for example, behaviour. For example, a person could implicitly argue about a person, “he is loitering about, therefore, he is delinquent”. However, a person does not have to be conscious of making the inference. A group stereotype makes an attribution to a whole group. An anti-semitic person might argue, “all Jews love money” – it is not an attribution about a particular Jew, but about all Jews in general. An individual stereotype passes a judgement on an individual. Making an attribution means making a judgement about someone – that judgement could be about a whole group, or about an individual.

Individual stereotypes are attitudes towards individual people. Some examples of these are (1) attributions based on people’s names. Some Christian names and surnames are associated with heroes, and others with villains: compare the names of David Copperfield with Uriah Heep. An experiment by Haran & McDavid (1973) involved giving teachers essays to grade with false names. An essay with an attractive name was often given 1 grade more than the same essay with an unattractive name. The effect was more marked with boys’ names than with girls’ names. (2) Physical appearance is also a basis of individual stereotyping. An experiment by Gibbins et al (1967) showed that people were willing to infer personality traits of models based on what they were wearing. An experiment by Berscheid & Walster (1974) showed that people believed that physically attractive people are happier, nicer and more competent than physically unattractive people.

Group stereotypes are attitudes based on whether the person is a member of an in/out group. Such attitudes are not strongly distinguished from prejudices. For example, a 1978 study by Karr showed that homosexual males were generally stereotyped as tense, shallow, yielding, impulsive and passive. Katz and Braly (1933) developed a technique for studying ethnic stereotypes. Subjects are presented with a list of ethnic groups (Americans, Jews..) and 84 personality words. They are asked to attribute 5 or 6 personality words to each ethnic group. The 1933 study of Princeton students found them to be prejudiced towards certain ethnic groups. There was less prejudice when



the experiment was repeated in 1951, and more favourable stereotyping when the experiment was repeated in 1967.

Attitudes are said to have three components: (1) a *cognitive* component, which comprises a set of beliefs about the group or individual; (2) an *affective* component, which is a feeling towards the group or individual; (3) a *behavioural* component, which is a set of behaviours or actions directed towards the group or individual based on the other two components.

A prejudice is an extreme stereotype. The cognitive component is the stereotype; the affective component is a feeling of liking or disliking; the behavioural component is the various types of discriminatory action. Prejudicial behaviour can progress, according to Allport, in five stages: (1) *Anti-locution* comprising such things malicious gossip, verbal putdowns and nasty jokes; (2) *avoidance*; (3) *discrimination* – when the object of the stereotype is excluded from certain rights; (4) *physical attack*; (5) *extermination*. Allport's definition of prejudice is, "an antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalization directed towards a group as a whole or towards an individual because he is a member of that group. It may be felt or expressed." (Allport, 1954).

The **existence of prejudice** does not need much demonstration. However, a number of experiments have sought to establish its existence. (1) An experiment by Aronson and Osherow involved a teacher, Jane Elliot, telling her students that brown-eyed children were more intelligent than blue-eyed children. As a result of this, the blue-eyed children started to do less well than the brown eyed children, who started to discriminate against the blue-eyed children. (2) In an experiment by Benson and others a completed application form to a graduate school was left in an airport telephone booth. The photograph showed in 50% of the cases a white person, and in 50% of the cases a black person. A stamped envelope and a note to 'Dad' asking 'Dad' to post the letter was also included. There was a significantly less likelihood that white subjects who found the letter with the white photograph would post the letter than those white subjects who found the letter with the black photograph. (3) Another experiment was conducted by Duncan in which subjects were shown a film in which an actor gives another actor a shove in the context of a heated discussion. There were two groups – one which saw the film with black actors and one which saw the film with white actors. White subjects were more inclined to classify a black man's shove as violent than a white man's shove.

There is the question of **how prejudices are maintained**. In fact, prejudices are claimed to be fairly stable over time – which means that once you have a prejudice then you will keep it. Factors influencing the maintenance of prejudice are: (1) an experiment by Rothbart and others demonstrates that people often recall better those facts that support their stereotype. Thus a filtering process reinforces and sustains the prejudice. The experiment involved subjects recalling facts about a minority group. The subjects found it easier to recall prejudicial points than favourable points. (2) Stereotypes lead to polarized judgements – a tendency to see 'exceptions' to a



stereotype as precisely that – ‘exceptional’ – the exception that proves the rule. This means that stereotypes are very difficult to break down once formed. This point is supported by an experiment by McCauley and Stitt. This shows that although people have stereotypes they do not in general expect everyone with the required physical, ethnic character to fit it. The experiment sought to test American attitudes towards Germans. Subjects were asked answer the question, “What percentage of people in the world generally are efficient/extremely nationalistic/scientifically-minded/pleasure-loving/superstitious?” Other subjects were given the same question, but with the term “German” instead of “people”. There was a significant difference between the two groups; Germans are regarded by Americans as more efficient, more nationalistic, more scientifically minded than people in general, but less pleasure-loving and less superstitious. However, Germans are not regarded as being 100% efficient, which indicates that there is scope in a stereotype for the principle that the exception proves the rule, and thus individual exceptions to a stereotype will not be regarded by someone with a prejudice as proving anything. (3) Another important factor in maintaining a stereotype is the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy. People respond to a prejudice with actions that in turn reinforce the prejudice. An experiment by Meichenbaum illustrates this process: teachers were told that six girls in a class of fourteen were academically gifted and would develop late. These students subsequently started to improve. The teachers’ actions had created conditions that caused the students to develop.

Given this evidence in favour of the existence of prejudice and the strength of a prejudice once it has been established, one moot question is **whether there is anything that can be done to reduce prejudice**. Actually, very few people argue that this is an easy process, and the debate seems to be between those who maintain the thesis that it is possible, though extremely difficult, to reduce prejudice, and those who maintain the opposed thesis (anti-thesis) that prejudice is a virtually permanent feature of society. The thesis argues that prejudice is a social phenomenon rather than a permanent characteristic of human nature, and can be reduced by social engineering. There appear to be two forms of the anti-thesis. The first form sees prejudice as an expression of innate aggression, determined by biological (and genetic) forces, and consequently not at all amenable to environmental modification. The second sees prejudice as social in origin, but maintains that the social forces are such that prejudice is encouraged, and that no amount of social engineering will succeed in reversing the process in the context of the current state of society.

II

Psychological theories of prejudice

Nonetheless we can explain **why prejudice is at best difficult to remove**. Firstly, **prejudices serve a cognitive and emotional function**. A prejudice is an attitude. The functions of attitudes are outlined in a theory by Katz: (1) *Knowledge function*: attitudes explain experience. With an attitude we think we understand what we are



seeing. There is a great need to feel that you understand the world you live in. (2) *Adjustive function* (also called *utilitarian* or *instrumental function*). An attitude becomes associated in people's minds with rewards and punishments. If you share an attitude that others have they will reward you with approval, or perhaps more material things – like contracts, and money. This motivates people towards adopting the attitudes of their reference group. (3) *Value-expressive functions*. Through attitudes we achieve self-expression. It is part of the quest for self-actualisation that we adopt an attitude. By adhering to a system of values we achieve integrity and self-belief. (4) *Ego-defensive function*. Attitudes help to protect our fragile egos from damning self-criticisms. A prejudice gives the holder a sense of superiority over the discriminated group, which is almost certainly not justified rationally.

Thus, prejudices are linked to **ego-defence**, and this in turn leads to **scape-goating**. The theory of scape-goating is derived from Freud. He argued that (1) people seek to *displace* their aggressions and frustration on to substitute objects when it is impossible to express anger towards its real cause. (2) He also argued in favour of a *frustration-aggression* hypothesis – that is frustration causes aggression and aggression causes frustration. This means that once the subject has entered on the path of ego-defence and scape-goating he has entered a vicious circle in which one emotion (frustration) will cause the other (aggression) and vice-versa.

Another important ingredient in the debate about the causes and maintenance of prejudice is **Tajfel's Social Identity Theory**. This maintains that individuals naturally strive for positive self-image, and social identity is enhanced by the process of categorising people into in-groups and out-groups. Thus, the need for social identity supports the formation of prejudice. In his famous experiment with 15 year old boys from Bristol he gave boys the opportunity to reward other boys on the basis of artificial membership of a group. The boys were placed into cubicles on their own and they were required to allocate points to members of their own or other groups. They could give points to themselves, to members of their own group, or to members of the other group. The boys did not know who was in the other groups. The points were always awarded in favour of the in-group members first, even though in some cases giving points to both groups would have increased the rewards for everyone. Tajfel argues that this shows that discrimination arises as soon as people are categorized. He claims that there exists such a thing as a minimal group – awareness that there is a distinction between two groups is sufficient to cause a classification of one group as an in-group and the other group as an out-group. Belonging to an in-group seems to confer on members higher self-esteem. According to social identity theory people seek to maintain a positive self-image in two respects: (1) a positive personal identity and (2) a positive social identity.

Adorno argues that there is an authoritarian personality type that is prone to prejudice. The authoritarian personality is supposed to be hostile to people of inferior rank, and servile when in the presence of people with higher status. The type is said to be rigid and inflexible, and to dislike ambiguity and uncertainty. Authoritarian people resist introspection and self-examination. However, Adorno



seems to attribute the existence of the personality type to social forces – claiming that authoritarians have typically experienced a harsh, disciplinarian upbringing, and feel latent aggression towards their parents which causes them to displace their feelings onto minority groups – as in the theory of scapegoating. To measure the extent to which people are authoritarian he developed a questionnaire which leads to an “F score”. Work by Levinson and Huffman claims to show a correlation between the F scores of parents and children, thus supporting the view that parenting is related to the development of an authoritarian personality. However, it can be argued that whilst this theory might account for individual proneness to prejudice, it cannot explain the case where there is a widespread prejudicial attitude towards out-groups, which seems to affect everyone, authoritarian or not.

However, the theory that there is an authoritarian personality type is developed by both Rokeach who has created a **dogmatism scale**, and by Eysenck, who has developed a notion of **toughmindedness**. Rokeach, however, was mainly concerned to demonstrate that authoritarians can be either left or right-wing in their political views. Eysenck holds to a biological determinism of personality. He believes that genetic factors predispose subjects to be either tough or tender-minded, and he agrees with Rokeach that political persuasion is independent of authoritarianism.

III

Remedies for prejudice

Given this discussion of the difficulty of removing prejudice, there arises a final question: **supposing it is possible to remove prejudice, what steps can be taken to do this?** Strategies advocated to remove prejudice are (1) non-competitive contact between in and out groups on terms of equal status; (2) the pursuit of common, superordinate goals which are attainable by cooperation. However, the difficulty of removing prejudice is again highlighted in experimental and other studies. For instance, a study by Aronson points out that whites and blacks in America have frequent contact – when, for example, a black man washes up a white man’s dish, but this only reinforces the stereotype that the black man is inferior. Some studies, such as that by Stephan, have shown that desegregation of whites and blacks does not of itself reduce prejudice. If blacks continue to hold lower status positions after desegregation, then they will continue to be discriminated against. Studies by Brown indicate that when the contact between groups is perceived as being contact between individuals, there will not be any change of attitude towards the group as a whole – on the “exception proves the rule” principle. However, in contrast to these negative points, a study by Deutsch and Collins of two housing projects involving blacks and whites showed that when whites and blacks were integrated there was less prejudice than when whites and blacks lived in the same housing estate but in segregated sections. Similarly, a study of Jahoda showed that white Americans would change their attitude towards living in an integrated community with blacks after having them as neighbours.



If prejudice is to be removed, the pursuit of common goals seems to be very important. In **the jigsaw classroom technique developed by Aronson** and others, children are placed into inter-racial groups and each child is given a part of a jigsaw. Only by cooperating with the other members of the group can each child earn the full lesson. Aronson claims that this technique increases liking between different racial groups, and also improves academic performance. However, on the negative point, the “exception proves the rule” case was applied, and children did not generalise their new found liking for, say, one black child to all black children in general.

The **Robber’s Cave Experiment** by Sherrif and others should be mentioned. 22 white, middle-class, Protestant, well-adjusted boys were sent on a summer camp, in which they were separated into two equal sized groups. The groups were separated initially and strong in-group bonding was encouraged. Then the two groups were made aware of each other’s existence and a tournament was announced. A fight between the two groups ensued. The two groups developed prejudicial attitudes towards each other. But there was a third phase to the study in which seven equal-status contact situations were created, as a result of which the divisions between the groups disappeared. However, the whole study is arguably less important than people make out and the removal of the “prejudice” at the end of no particular significance, since all the boys were white and the original in-group/out-group classifications were contrived.

