

Inter-group Prejudice*

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Prejudice is a bane of humanity. Unjustified aversive beliefs and affect are the primary proximal causes of aversive behavior toward groups. Such beliefs and sentiments cause aversive speech and physical violence. They also serve as justification for denying people rights and opportunities. Prejudice also creates a deadweight loss. For instance, many people refuse to trade with groups they dislike. Prejudice is the reason why so many people lead diminished lives.

So why do so many people hold incorrect aversive beliefs about other groups (and commensurately, unjustified positive beliefs about their group)?¹

- **Immutable Intrinsic Trait.**

- **Universal.** Even when people are randomly parceled into groups, they develop aversive beliefs and feelings about people in other groups (and correspondingly, warm feelings toward their group) (see Tajfel 1970, etc.). This tendency may stem from evolutionary reasons to do with the fact that such beliefs help groups act in concert. One natural extension of the theory is that cross-cutting memberships, and the salience of the memberships, will affect the level of prejudice toward a group.

- **Kinds of People.**

- * **Authoritarian Personality.** Prejudice against specific groups is a result of the deference of authorities who are prejudiced against those groups (see Adorno 2019, etc.).

- * **Reasoning Capacity and Interest in Thinking Deeply.** These (somewhat mutable) traits modulate the effect of other factors than cause prejudice per se.

- **Unreflective Personality.** Greater credulousness means greater susceptibility to whatever is swirling around. Frequently, it is ethnocentric beliefs, but it could also claim like, “My group is (currently) bad because many members of my group discriminated against other groups in the past.”

*The note benefited from comments from Daniel Stone and Donald Green.

¹Some people also hold unjustified positive beliefs about other groups and unduly harsh beliefs about their group.

- **Intelligence.** Intelligence allows people to see through bad data and arguments more easily but also endows people with a greater capacity to conjure up self-serving arguments.

- **Motivated Biases.**

- **Jealousy.** Less successful groups come up with aversive explanations to explain the success of other groups. For instance, the group is successful because they are clannish, scam artists, good at keeping others down, etc.
- **Social Identity.** We derive part of our identity from the groups we belong to. It feels good to think that the groups we belong to are good. So we instinctively believe it (see Tajfel, Turner, Austin and Worchel 1979, etc.). It may cause people to invent congenial lies and share them with people who are motivated to believe them.
- **A Ruse For Exploitation.** Aversive beliefs, e.g., certain groups are stupider, uncultured, unholy, etc. are a cynical narrative to justify exploitation (see Sidanius and Pratto 2001, etc.). It is morally less repugnant to exploit someone if they deserve it. Colonialism, slavery, and the caste system are three commonly cited examples. One way people do this is with Jerry-rigged science. For instance, some scientists were involved in the fake science of cranial measurement to prove the intellectual inferiority of blacks (see Gould 2012).
- **Adversary.** A fight over resources can cause people to develop prejudicial feelings and attitudes that justify bad behavior (see Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood and Sherif 1961; Campbell 1965, etc.). Why do other groups deserve less? Because they are less deserving.
Group competition may not be rooted in an actual zero-sum game. For instance, some immigration may be a positive sum game in economic terms (see, e.g., Card 1990) but people may misperceive it as a zero-sum game. The zero-sum game can also apply to socio-cultural things, e.g., Christian values, etc.
- **Motivated Exposure, Skepticism, Recall, Retention, and Invention.** For instance, why has millennia of cohabitation with women led to so little reduction in prejudice against women?
- **Motivated Inference.** I hate the group because they oppose a policy that benefits my group (see Ross 1977, etc.).

- **Unmotivated Biases.**

- **Mental Models and Inference.**
 - * **Skepticism About Deviations From Equality.** The belief that success should be equally distributed because people are equal may lead people to think of surplus returns as suspect, leading them to cook up aversive explanations about why some groups are successful.

- * **Belief in Equality.** The belief that everyone is equal may make people skeptical about aversive claims about groups. For instance, it may explain some of the reluctance to acknowledge the approximately 1 SD IQ gap between Whites and Blacks in the US.
 - * **Special Favors.** If a group receives special concessions, e.g., preference in hiring, etc., people may infer that the group is not fair-minded and less able.
 - * **Prejudice Against Oppressors.** I hate the group because *they* oppress my (some) group.
- **Unmotivated Psychological Biases.**²
- * **Availability bias.** People make judgments based on data that most readily comes to mind. If the modal Muslim on the news is a terrorist, it may lead people to think that most Muslims are terrorists.
 - * **Social Learning.** One answer to how to behave is to emulate the behavior of people you look up to. It could be religious leaders, parents, friends, pop stars, people on the television, etc. Social modeling (see Bandura and Walters 1977, etc.) from characters like us that we see on television and elsewhere is another variety.
 - * **Representativeness.** We understand groups in terms of their most discriminating traits. If most terrorists are Muslim and most people are not, terrorism becomes a discriminating trait. The rub is that very few Muslims are terrorists.
 - * **False Consensus Effect.** Belief that others share our beliefs may lead us to be overconfident about our beliefs and hence less likely to introspect.

- **Information Supply.**

- **Elite Ploy.** Some examples:
 - * **Divide and Rule.** Anti-Black prejudice is an elite ploy so the working class doesn't unite (see Cox 1948³, etc.) By the same token, the British are thought to have worked to deepen the Hindu-Muslim divide.
 - * **White Washing History.** Reeling from a bruising partition, the Indian history books were written to bring the country together and hence under-emphasized some divisive topics, e.g., caste prejudice, Muslim atrocities, etc. More generally, the education curricula is decided by a few people. And their ideas and values are baked into what is taught.

²See Stone (2023) for a longer treatment in the partisan context.

³For a short essay, see, <https://jacobin.com/2020/09/oliver-cromwell-cox-race-class-caste>

Some of those values may have nothing to do with prejudice directly but may reduce it nonetheless. For instance, education may reduce prejudice by exposing people to better data, creating greater awareness about our own psychological biases, and biases in the information environment, etc. (On the other hand, religious schools may exacerbate prejudice, especially toward some groups.)

- * **Scapegoat.** Deflect attention from own failures by blaming other groups. Why are we doing badly? It is because of Blacks, Muslims, Jews, etc.
- * **New Coalitions.** Build new coalitions by deepening prejudice against a group. For example, the BJP is thought to do that by deepening prejudice against Muslims.
- * **Taste-based Production.** Much of the most widely watched content is produced by a relatively small number of people. And even though it is often profitable to cater to people's prejudices, sometimes people produce content that is designed to reduce prejudices because they prefer it. For instance, one of the creators of *Will & Grace* is a gay man, Max Mutchnick.⁴ And it is likely that him being gay had something to do with the show he helped create. By the same token, it is likely that the reverse racial bias in shows like *Law & Order* (Sood and Trielli, 2017) is partly a consequence of the ideological preferences of the writers.

– **Other Factors Affecting Information Supply.**

- * **Activists, Interest Groups, etc.** People who care about an issue find ways to persuade the public.
- * **Profit Maximizing Production.** The profit motive may lead to biases like the negativity bias and extremity bias—preference for covering the most controversial statements, etc., in the news media. Such biases may exacerbate prejudice because of some of the psychological mechanisms like the availability bias that we cover elsewhere.
- * **Immigration.** Immigration may be seen as adversaries but immigration also produces opportunities to learn about each other. Getting to know people from the other group may bridge some of the informational gaps (see Allport 1954, etc.).
- * **Parents.** Beliefs held by family members are what we are exposed to when we are young, which is a particularly important time as we are still forming our identities.

⁴See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Mutchnick

Persuasion

Besides tactical advice, e.g., perspective getting may be more effective than perspective taking (see, for e.g., Eyal, Steffel and Epley 2018; Kalla and Broockman 2023), what explains why people change their views?

- **Intra-person Heterogeneity.** Many of our beliefs are at odds with each other. Ironing out the wrinkles is an evergreen strategy to persuade. For instance, Americans' belief in equality may have sat at odds with their support for slavery, and highlighting this may have persuaded people to change their views.
- **Consuming Uncongenial Information.** If prejudiced people have to become less prejudiced, they have to consume information that isn't congenial to their worldview. Why do they? Some of the exposure may be incidental. Second, identity-affirmation is but one reason why people seek information. People also seek novelty. They also want to be right. Third, part of the answer may lie in the inability to decipher larger agendas. For instance, people may have watched *Will & Grace* without being able to grok the creator's agenda (to the extent there was one).

Complements of Prejudice

- **Principled Affect.** The group believes in violence, subjugation of women, etc. I oppose these. Hence, I hate the group. Such negative affect may not count as prejudicial as long as it is proportional, not group-specific but idea-specific, and pro-rates for the soft foundations of some of our moral principles. For instance, overwhelming majorities of Muslims in many Muslim-majority countries hold unfavorable attitudes toward Jews.⁵ Learning that may cause people to hold a dim view of Muslims in Muslim-majority countries. This would be principled if people hold an equally dim view of other groups who hold similar views and the feelings are proportionate to the moral violation. The point about soft foundations of moral principles is better explained with a different example. Many people who don't eat meat because of concerns about violence wouldn't eat a cow that died of a heart attack. Hence, affect toward meat-eaters may not be entirely based on a violation of moral principles.
- **Unjustified Positive Beliefs.** The flip side of having unjustified aversive beliefs toward other groups is having unjustified positive beliefs. Many of the theories covered here can explain it. For instance, if the media covers Spelling Bee winners who more recently have had a substantial Indian representation, people may infer that Indian-Americans (Indians) are smart.

⁵See <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2010/02/04/chapter-3-views-of-religious-groups/>

Miscellaneous Topics

- **Generational Replacement.** To the extent prejudice is indeed declining across generations, the trend may be founded in more progressive media environments for the children, more integrated schools, more schooling, progressive teen icons, and the fact that children may be particularly sensitive to social pressures and may adapt their thinking to match those of their icons. A rise in intelligence across generations may also explain some of the reductions in prejudice.
- **Irreversible.** Why does it feel that the reduction in prejudice against Italians and the Irish in the US is more irreversible than against other groups? Among other things, this may be due to a) Italians and the Irish are better assimilated and richer (so fewer differences), and b) Italy and Ireland's economies have boomed and this helps undercut some of the old stereotypes.

Measuring Prejudice

- **Beyond Belief.** Say the prejudicial belief is about the prevalence of trait Y in group X. Where possible, measure trait Y in group X. And measure how widespread people think trait Y is in group X. Belief that a much larger share of a group holds a negative trait than is true can be seen as evidence of prejudice.
- **Inference Based on Policy Attitudes.** As we note above, inferring that a group is prejudiced because they oppose a group-targeted benefits policy is lazy thinking (and can be seen as an example of the fundamental attribution error). Except this kind of lazy thinking was raised to the level of canon in Political Science (Sniderman and Carmines, 1999).
- **Double Standards.** Assume that we only judge groups on how many support a vile belief. Then, if two groups endorse the vile belief equally, people should despise the groups equally.
- **Inflammable.** If prejudice can be quickly inflamed, does it mean that prejudice was never really lower? Given its importance, one thing we may want to study is resistance to propaganda.

Open Questions

- **Dramatic Decline.** There has been a dramatic decline in prejudice against Italians, the Irish, Jews, Women, LGBT, etc. in the West. How has that come about? What does that tell us about the ability of humans to change? What does that tell us about the circumstances needed?

- **Million Dollar Question.** If you had a million dollars that you could spend on reducing prejudice, what would you do where and why? How about a billion dollars? If you had discretion over what you could spend the money on, would you spend any of the money on reducing prejudice?

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