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## DISCRIMINATION AND PREJUDICE

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While often used interchangeably in everyday dialogue, *prejudice* and *discrimination* actually refer to two different yet interrelated concepts. *Prejudice* refers to a value judgment either in favor of or against a person or a thing and stems from the Latin root for “prejudgment.” It is an attitude. *Discrimination*, on the other hand, refers to the active exclusion of a group of people from a desired benefit or advantage. It is an action. Prejudicial attitudes, even when negative, do not always result in discrimination. Therefore, for example, two employers who are prejudiced against Irish people may manifest their prejudices differently. One person, even though he or she in private may tell jokes about Irish people, may still hire an Irish employee. Nevertheless, the person is prejudiced because of his or her attitude toward the Irish. The other employer, however, may not only tell jokes about the Irish, but also adopt a policy of not allowing the employment of any Irish people in his or her firm, thus participating in the action of discrimination. Prejudice and discrimination lead to what is commonly referred to as the “isms,” including sexism, racism, and ageism. This entry provides a basis for understanding the origins, consequences, and policy implications of prejudice and discrimination.

### Theoretical Perspectives

Among social scientists, there are three main theoretical frameworks used to analyze prejudice and discrimination. Symbolic interactionists argue that the way people label the world determines their perception of it. According to these theorists, prejudice and discrimination result from selective perception through which a person ignores certain facts and focuses on others. Thus, distinctions between in-groups and out-groups become exaggerated. Detrimental labels further serve to perpetuate prejudice and discrimination.

Functionalists analyze prejudice and discrimination based on costs and benefits. From this perspective, ethnic stratification, for example, is functional for society because it provides categories of workers who will do menial jobs and thus keeps wages for this category

of jobs low within the division of labor. Conflict theorists analyze prejudice and discrimination from a Marxist perspective. From this perspective, prejudice and discrimination stem from the capitalist system itself, which requires conflict among groups in order to extract greater profit from production.

### Causes

All societies have experienced or perpetrated both prejudice and discrimination, because in every society on earth a dichotomy exists between the “us,” meaning the in-groups, and the “them,” referring to the out-groups. In-groups include those within a given social and economic system who can access important resources such as education, employment, and food supplies. In-groups have power and are often referred to as part of the “dominant group.” Out-groups include those within a given social and economic system who cannot or cannot easily access these same resources. Out-groups have less power and are often referred to as “minorities.”

In-groups and out-groups can be based on many factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, geographical origin, language, and physical or mental abilities. Therefore, in Northern Ireland, Protestants discriminate against Catholics; in the United States after September 11, 2001, non-Muslims discriminated against Muslims; in Mexico, heterosexuals discriminate against homosexuals; in Japan, native Japanese discriminate against immigrant Koreans; many companies discriminate against older workers; and throughout the world, some men discriminate against women.

Prejudice and discrimination are intricately linked to ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism refers to the use of one’s cultural, personal, and societal values to judge other cultures, people, and societies. Social scientists have found that nearly every racial and ethnic group considers itself superior to other groups in at least some ways. When taken to extremes, however, such ethnocentrism creates prejudice and discrimination, which often lead to fanaticism and tragedy.

Throughout the world, for example, ethnocentrism led to the racial prejudice and discrimination that contributed at least in part to the perpetuation of slavery

and all its horrific ills. In Nazi Germany, ethnocentrism led to the racial and religious discrimination that helped Hitler rise to power. In South Africa, it led to apartheid. In short, the ills caused by extreme ethnocentrism and the resultant prejudice and discrimination include genocide, murder, starvation, and others.

### Types

Social scientists distinguish various types of prejudice and discrimination: individual, institutional, *de jure*, and *de facto*. Individual prejudice and discrimination occur between individuals and are manifested through the tone of their interpersonal relationships. Usually, this type of prejudice and discrimination does not go beyond the individual level. Institutional prejudice and discrimination, on the other hand, refers to the very fabric of society, including educational institutions, lending institutions, housing opportunities, and employment opportunities. Institutional prejudice and discrimination is widespread and is not confined to individuals but rather encompasses entire groups. *De jure* discrimination refers to formalized prejudice and discrimination through law. Such legislation may include restrictions on physical movement, access to schooling, and expression of cultural mores. *De facto* prejudice and discrimination is not legislated, but rather, is supported by social custom and business practice.

There are many factors that lead ordinary people to develop prejudices and to participate in overtly discriminatory actions. Sometimes, the out-groups are portrayed as less than human and referred to in animalistic terms, thus facilitating and justifying horrors such as genocide. In the 1800s, the U.S. government referred to Native Americans as “savages,” thus facilitating and justifying their decimation in the pursuit of resources for White settlers. Similar patterns of dehumanization are found in many countries, including South Africa, Tasmania, and Mexico. Other times, economic depression, anger, and the simplification of complex social issues lead to prejudice and discrimination. Studies of organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi leaders in the United States have found that the membership of such groups consists mainly of disenfranchised Whites who consider their well-being as having been negatively influenced by

the presence of non-Whites. The members justify the groups' violent philosophies and acts by dividing the world into segregated in-groups and out-groups. In this worldview, survival depends of the triumph of one group over the other in the struggle for scarce resources, such as employment, housing, and education.

## Responses

Not all societies recognize, acknowledge, and condemn prejudice and discrimination. Yet, in those that do, the desired patterns of intergroup relations fall into two main nonexclusive categories: assimilation and multiculturalism. Assimilation refers to the absorption of minority groups by the dominant group and can be voluntary or forced. It is multidimensional, and can include aspects of culture, outward appearance, and behavior. Assimilation is often referred to as an "ization," such as "Americanization," "Arabization," and "Italianization," based on the group into which the minority group is being absorbed. Multiculturalism refers to the encouragement of racial and ethnic diversity by the dominant group. Switzerland is the country most often considered a model of multiculturalism. After a history of divisions among bureaucratic regimes, religions, and languages, Switzerland now emphasizes linguistic equality, proportional representation in politics, and consensual decision making.

The issues of prejudice and discrimination are intricately related to issues of civil and human rights. Civil rights refer to the rights of individuals by virtue of citizenship. In the United States, such rights include freedom of speech and association. Human rights refer to the basic rights to which all human beings are entitled and which any government may not violate. Such rights include the right to life and equality before the law. Yet, prejudice and discrimination often interfere with the respect of civil and human rights for out-groups.

## Education

Worldwide, education occupies a central position in the dialogue about issues of prejudice and discrimination and in its policy implications. Education is considered especially important because of its role in reinforcing cultural norms and in distributing scarce

resources. Prejudice and discrimination in education take many forms, including segregation, linguistic isolation, and tracking. Likewise, the remedies to prejudice and discrimination in education can take many forms, including desegregation, bilingual education, multiculturalism, and affirmative action programs. While there are many landmark cases in different countries, an analysis of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in the United States illustrates both the detrimental effects of segregation on educational opportunities and the role of legislation in addressing prejudice and discrimination.

The case started in 1951 when Oliver Brown, the father of the African American third-grader Linda Brown, requested that his daughter be allowed to attend a White elementary school in Topeka, Kansas, because of the proximity of the school to the child's home. After the school principal rejected his request, Brown went to the Topeka branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for help. The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case allowed separate but equal schools for Blacks and Whites; generally, however, Black schools did not enjoy the same resources as White ones. Yet, finally in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs—now from various states—in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, thus opening the door to the desegregation of the U.S. school system.

Yet, the importance of the case is not only in its legislative impact on school desegregation, but also in the expectations of society that it changed. Prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*, children studied in schools which replicated the norms and values of a divided society. Yet, with this landmark case, though limited initially only to the educational sphere, the groundwork was set to change the very socialization process of U.S. society. The separate but equal credo, so accepted in the country at the time, began to crumble, and the issues of prejudice and discrimination got pushed to the forefront of the U.S. political, social, and legal agenda.

More recent U.S. legislative remedies to prejudice and discrimination in education have included policies aimed at improving access to education and retention rates among minority populations. The policies, lumped under the term "affirmative action," tend to spark

great controversy with claims of reverse discrimination by dominant groups, mainly White males.

### Conclusion

Prejudice and discrimination exist in every society in the world. Prejudicial attitudes often, although not always, result in discriminatory acts. In its extreme forms, discrimination can result in genocide, population transfers, and other acts of violence.

Prejudice and discrimination can occur on the individual or the institutional level. On both levels the result is negative consequences, but institutional prejudice and discrimination affect many more people and negatively affect their life chances, rather than simply their interpersonal relationships. Racism, sexism, and ageism are just some of the forms of prejudice and discrimination prevalent in the modern world.

Prejudice and discrimination are not recognized, acknowledged, and condemned in all societies. Once they are acknowledged, however, policy responses vary. Prejudice in the realm of education is usually considered especially detrimental because of education's impact on life opportunities and distribution of resources.

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**See also** Activism and the Social Foundations of Education;  
African American Education; Culture-Fair Testing;  
Dropouts; Economic Inequality; Educational Indicators

### Further Readings

- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Ezekial, R. (1995). *The racist mind: Portraits of American neo-Nazis and Klansmen*. New York: Penguin Books.