

A LINE ON LIFE

5/20/91, Revised 11/2/02

Prejudice *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Although it is easy to recognize the prejudices of others, we are only rarely aware of our own prejudices. What is prejudice? How does it affect our lives?

Prejudice is a biased, unfavorable, intolerant or unfair attitude. Prejudice can also be defined as a *prejudgment* that is not changed by contradictory evidence. All of us must make prejudgments at times. We have to come to conclusions with only a limited amount of information. However, if new information contradicts our first impression, we are likely to change it. If new, valid information is ignored, then prejudgment becomes prejudice.

As an example, let's us a preschool child with a new food. Young children often prejudge new foods – "*I don't want any spinach. It's yicky.*" However, suppose the mother disguises the new food, so the child not only eats it but also asks for seconds and thirds. What happens when the child is told that the savored dish was actually spinach? If the child responds, "*Well, that was okay, but I still hate spinach,*" the prejudgment has become a prejudice.

Prejudices have severe social effects when they are held in relation to people. Suppose some adolescents have negative attitudes toward Jews. What would happen if they made a new friend and months later found out that he was Jewish? How would they respond? In one case, they classified the new friend as "a white Jew." This was supposed to make him feel accepted, but it still indicated no change in attitude. Essentially, this response indicated that he was acceptable, but their prejudice toward Jews had not changed – Jews as a whole are still evaluated as bad. The new friend was just a rare exception. Being classified as "*a white Jew*" did not make this friend feel any better.

Prejudice is often accompanied by **discrimination**. While prejudice is an attitude, discrimination is an action. In terms of learning, discrimination is the ability to tell the difference between two or more stimuli. However, the only way psychologists can be aware that you are discriminating is if you respond differently to the various stimuli. In terms of **social discrimination**, you would treat members of one social group differently than another – as is reflected in the following statements.

"Blacks have to sit in the back of the bus."

"We don't want any Hispanics in our neighborhood."

"Women are not allowed to join this club."

"You can't work here after you are 65 years old."

Many prejudices are based on stereotypes. A **stereotype** is a rigid image of the characteristics of group members. If a person belongs to a group, s/he is expected to have *all* the characteristics of that group. Unfortunately, most stereotypes are far from accurate. For example, what proportion of Scandinavians – people from Norway, Sweden and Denmark – do you think would be tall, blonde and blue-eyed? In a study of native Scandinavians, only 11% fit this stereotype. Of course, there were more who were tall, blonde and brown-eyed ones or tall, brunette blue-eyed ones and so on. However, only 11% fit all three characteristics. This proportion seems to apply to most other common stereotypes.

Prejudice is also accompanied by another trait – **ethnocentrism**. Ethnocentrism means that your values are based on those of your ethnic group. If other groups have different values, these values are not only

perceived as different – they are viewed negatively, as "*not as good*" as your values. Your ethnocentric values are viewed as *better* than those of other groups. Because we view our customs from the values of our culture, we do not understand the value of differing customs from other cultures. This leads us to misinterpret the actions of others – "*Mexicans are lazy; they even have to rest in the middle of the afternoon.*"

In some ways, even the way we congratulate each other can be ethnocentric. Have you ever heard anyone say, "*That was mighty white of you*" or "*That was the Christian thing to do*"? Although these statements indicate approval of what was done, they also send an implied ethnocentric message. In the first, it implies that nonwhites – blacks, Indians, Orientals, Hispanics – would never do something as good as that. In the second, it infers that non-Christians – Moslems, Jews, Buddhists, and atheists – would never do something that nice. Some well-meaning people continue to use these sayings, unaware of their negative ethnocentric implications. To communicate the same approval without ethnocentrism, you could say, "*That was a very humane thing to do*" or "*That was a wonderful thing to do.*"

A more extreme example of ethnocentrism was an incident involving an older lady, who was going to Mexico for the first time. As she was about to cross the international border, her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. She gasped, "*Oh my God, look at all the Mexicans!*" I don't know what she expected to find in Mexico. Probably it was just more of the United States, except with a few sombreros added.
