

A LINE ON LIFE

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Changes in Prejudice *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.



Only months before his assassination, **Martin Luther King Jr.** spoke at the 1967 convention of the American Psychological Association (APA). In his speech, he asked social scientists to find the reasons why many white Americans resisted equal opportunities for others. In honor of his birthday, researchers have analyzed changes that have occurred in prejudice.

As researchers investigated prejudice, its complexity became more evident. In contrast to three decades ago, today prejudice is more subtle and may even be unintentional. Americans exhibit less open forms of prejudice against racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, homosexuals and even members of the other sex. Even today, people are still suspicious of **outgroup members** – those who seem different from themselves. Psychologist John Dovidio – a race-relations researcher at Colgate University – summarizes this

trend.

"People today are more likely to publicly express feelings of open-mindedness, but may have negative feelings and beliefs that they aren't necessarily aware of."

"One of the nice things about this modern racism, if you can say anything nice about it, is that people truly want not to be prejudiced. If they can become aware of their biases, they can become motivated to change their behaviors."

Psychologist Janet Helms (University of Maryland) adds that most white people don't realize that they belong to a distinct, but dominant, racial-ethnic group. White norms are dominant in the American society. Most whites don't understand that we are just as much a racial-ethnic group as minorities. Until we realize that, we can't overcome the prejudice that exists.

Prejudice is fostered by an **ethnocentric** view of the world. This means the values of our ingroup are not merely different – but better – than outgroups. Any group can be ethnocentric, not just white Americans. However, most whites in America are not aware of their ethnic values, because their values are viewed as the "*American way*." This leads most whites to reject other value systems as "*un-American*."

In a country that advocates the freedom to express different views, ethnocentrism leads us to reject all views that lead us to question our values. Not only do we reject outgroup values, but we reject the people who hold them. In fact, if an ingroup member advocates different values, that member is more likely to be seen as an outgroup member. This reduces that person's desirability and self-worth.

As immigrants came to this country – as most of our ancestors did – they faced rejection as outgroup members. Historically, it has included the Chinese, Japanese, Irish, Polish, Vietnamese, and most recently, Hispanics. Immigrants are perceived as carriers of crime and disease. Psychologist Martha Bernal (Arizona State University) sees this prejudice among whites who criticize illegal bilingual programs in the schools and immigration. However, their prejudice is expressed as concern about education and crime. There has been – and still is – a prevailing belief that immigrants are bad. If people believe that, they want to do everything possible to exclude immigrants.

Any difference can lead to being classified as an outgroup member. We have become more kindhearted in treating people with disabilities. However, we still stigmatize them as abnormal or deficient. Because their disability is very visible, we emphasize their shortcomings rather than their capabilities.

This attitude is a part of our cultural bias. We live in a society that emphasizes independence and autonomy. That creates an environment where people with disabilities can't live well. In contrast, people with disabilities view needing help and being in cooperative relationships with others as positive traits. This viewpoint promotes our need to develop connections with each other.

Psychologist Florence Denmark (Pace University) sees sex biases working in a similar way. She indicates that covert sexism still exists in schools, where educators infer that girls lack certain academic skills. This means that girls get neither the same training nor experience as boys. For example, in a computer classroom, boys may be busy on computers, while girls hang back. The girls' hesitancy may be due to lack of innate ability. However, Denmark suggests that the girls' inhibition is caused by socialization or lack of teacher attention.

Similar trends are seen with homosexuality. Many Americans condemn homophobic hate crimes. An example is the recent fatal beating of a gay college student in Wyoming. However, these same people are still uncomfortable with legitimizing same-sex relationships. This is similar to racial, ethnic, gender, or disability prejudices. We emphasize the qualities that differ, but we overlook a multitude of similarities shared by us and outgroup members.

**With prejudice, we tend to project
our negative qualities to outgroup members.
This keeps us from the difficult task
of considering our own personal biases.**

This week we celebrate the birthday of a man who sacrificed his life to reduce prejudices. In his honor, I have tried to make you aware of biases we have which cause subtle prejudices. Will that lead to a behavior change on your part?

* Adapted from Scott Sleek's "Three Decades after King, a report card," [*APA Monitor*](#), January, 1999, pages 24-25.