

Activity – Why are human beings prejudiced?

There are a number of suggested causes for prejudice. Which of the following do you find most convincing? When you have made a decision, relate it back to the last exercise and see whether it helps you understand why you feel so negative about some of the people or groups you may have admitted to having prejudiced feelings about.

1. It is a human characteristic that we tend to form 'in-groups' based upon such simplistic markers as skin colour, clothing styles or other likes and dislikes. It is a way of organizing the world of people and separating out those that might be most immediately sympathetic from those we suspect won't be. In some ways this tendency is not a bad thing because it encourages co-operation. Of course, it has its negative side encouraging prejudiced attitudes towards those that appear different thanks to something like skin colour.
2. Prejudice may be a product of stress. There is plenty of evidence that when a society is under strain perhaps because of a lack of jobs or unstable governments, then people become less trusting of difference, more prejudiced about 'out-groups'. Many of the worst examples of ethnic cleansing and inhumanity based along racial lines have emerged after periods of uncertainty and fear. For example, the Nazis in Germany found fertile ground for their ideas and policies among Germans who had suffered over a decade characterized by uncertain government, desperately high unemployment and inflation.
3. Prejudice may be a product of trauma. This follows on from the last cause. It is not hard to imagine how 'in-groups' might start looking for groups of 'others' to blame and punish following a terrible war or outbreak of disease or following a natural disaster. One of the reasons for the terrible crimes of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia in the 1970s was due to the collective madness induced by the terrifying bombing of that country by the Americans as a part of their conflicts in South East Asia.
4. Prejudice can be encouraged by politicians and other high-status individuals. If so called 'role-models' seem to endorse prejudiced attitudes then does not that give others permission to hold such views? That's the danger anyway. Some politicians love to play upon our fears and one of the best fear cards they can play is the idea of 'us' being 'swamped' by a 'them' unless harsh rules are adopted and applied.
5. Prejudice may be due to displacement. If one group cannot get at those who really affect their lives – the rich and the politicians that support them, for example, then their frustrations may be directed

against weaker groups less likely to defend themselves. Another example of such frustration leading to a prejudiced response crops up when communities turn on people they regard as deviant. This crops up at times when there are concerns about child safety and people suspected of having a sexual interest in children are subjected to harassment. In one – albeit very hyped - example in South Wales a children's doctor (a paediatrician) had anti-paedophile graffiti sprayed on her front door (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4719364.stm>). Shakespeare knew about such 'scapegoating' – in his play Julius Caesar he shows a mob tear a poet called Cinna limb from limb because they can't find the man of the same name that has played a part in the assassination of the Emperor.

6. Prejudice can be the result of fear and the desire to fit in. There is no doubt that lots of white South Africans went along with apartheid without being a fan of its ideas or attitudes partly because they benefited from it and partly because they were scared of the consequences of saying and doing things that would have put them and their families at odds with their community and in potentially dangerous conflict with the authorities.
7. Prejudice can be the result of media representation. If you read nothing but negative reports about a certain group all the time in the newspapers, and films and TV programmes only show this group in a certain light – funny; idiotic, threatening, whatever – then it is harder to imagine them other than in this manner. If your only information about black people was derived from Hollywood movies up until recent times you might be forgiven thinking all they did was sing, dance, perform the duties or servants or end up as dangerous street criminals. Misrepresentations in the media rely as much on what is not shown about certain people's lives as what is shown. Consider how an abbreviated version of your life with all the positive or ordinary things stripped out might make you seem to members of a different 'in-group' finding out about you.
8. Prejudice can be the result of segregation. If the children of a group grow up without any contact with other groups then they are far more likely to be prejudiced about such 'out-groups' in adolescence and adulthood.