

1.6.10: Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination

Learning Objectives

- Describe the differences between stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination



Social perception is relative, reflecting both positive and negative impressions of people based on a range of factors. Our perceptions of people help to allow us to make decisions and snap judgments, but can also lead to biased or stereotyped conclusions. Although often used interchangeably, the terms used to describe these perception errors—stereotype, prejudice and discrimination—have different meanings and connotations.

Stereotypes are oversimplified generalizations about groups of people; stereotypes can be based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation—almost any characteristic. They may be positive (usually when referencing one’s own group, such as when women suggest they have better soft skills), but are often negative (usually toward other groups, such as when members of a dominant racial group suggest that a minority racial group is dangerous or stupid).

In either case, the stereotype is a generalization that doesn’t take individual differences into account. As novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains in a TED Global talk titled “[The Danger of a Single Story](#),” the problem of stereotypes is not that they are wrong, but they are incomplete. Adichie is a storyteller par excellence; with good humor and keen observation, her talk raises our awareness of everyday errors and is a powerful antidote to stereotypes.

Prejudice refers to the beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes someone holds about a group. A prejudice is not based on one’s experiences; instead, it is a prejudgment, originating outside actual experience. In the [1970 documentary Eye of the Storm](#), Jane Elliott illustrates the way in which prejudice develops. The documentary shows how defining one category of people as superior (in this case, children with blue eyes) results in prejudice against people who are not part of the favored category.

While prejudice refers to biased thinking, **discrimination** consists of actions against a group of people. Discrimination can be based on age, race, religion, health, and other indicators. Discrimination can take many forms, from unfair housing practices to biased hiring systems. Equal Employment Opportunity legislation and enforcement by the EEOC is an attempt to prevent discrimination in the workplace. However, we can’t erase discrimination from our culture just by passing laws to abolish it. As alluded to in the discussion of race, discrimination is a complex issue that relates to educational, economic, legal, and political systems in our society.

Prejudice and discrimination can overlap and intersect. One area of particular opportunity is raising awareness of unconscious bias. In a *Fast Company* article titled “How Unconscious Bias Affects Everything You Do,” author Howard Ross relays a classic example of how major orchestras overcame systemic hiring bias to achieve relative gender equity. Although there were a number of contributing factors (for example, advertising auditions rather than relying on invitations only) the critical factor was implementing blind auditions where raters did not see the musicians. The critical aspect of this example is that the bias wasn’t overcome until auditioners were asked to remove their shoes before entering the audition area. Prior to that, raters were still influenced in their judgement by the sound of a person’s shoes (i.e., the sound of either heels or flat shoes led the raters to make a judgement about the gender of the auditioner).

Unconscious bias isn’t limited to a particular industry or gender. Ross notes that “Over 1,000 studies in the past 10 years alone have conclusively shown that if you’re human, you have bias, and that it impacts almost every variation of human identity: Race, gender, sexual orientation, body size, religion, accent, height, hand dominance, etc.” The conclusion: “The question is not ‘do we have bias?’ but rather ‘which are ours?’”

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