

The Genetic/Evolutionary Basis of Prejudice and Hatred¹

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I believe that prejudice underlies the development of hatred toward various outgroups. Hence, in order to understand the origins of hatred, it is essential to understand the origins of prejudice. Our genetic/evolutionary heritage provides the initial push toward prejudice. My essential argument is that three sets of genetic/evolutionary processes that lead to prejudice and discrimination evolved in hunter-gatherer tribes. They were appropriate and necessary for that subsistence mode, which characterizes 99% of human existence. These three sets of processes—inclusive fitness, authority-bearing systems, intergroup hostility—are put into motion in nonhunter-gatherer contexts because they have been incorporated into our epigenetic systems. A fourth set of processes, outgroup attractiveness, which is based on the necessity of gene flow, to some extent counteracts the above processes and may lead to the reduction of prejudice and discrimination.

The theory of inclusive fitness leads to the prediction that members of a breeding community will show preferences toward their relatives (Wilson, 1980). In primate evolution, “close relatives” is nearly synonymous with “members of the subsistence group.” That is, in general, a primate, including the human hunter-gatherer, has more close relatives in his or her subsistence group than in other groups. Thus, primates are evolutionarily predisposed to show ingroup favoritism. A scarcity of resources may, in addition, lead to outgroup antagonism.

Owing to the great complexity of tribal cultures, humans developed authority-bearing systems for readily transmitting information to the young (Waddington 1960). These systems are probably based on the primate group characteristic of dominance hierarchies, but extend into the realm of concepts and values. In authority-bearing systems, we not only accept as valid what authorities tell us, but also internalize this information. There may be a developmental trend in decreasing authority acceptance that is related to the increasing autonomy associated with adolescence. Obviously, authority acceptance is one major basis for the cultural transmission of prejudice and discrimination (Braine, Pomerantz, Lorber, and Krantz 1991; Damon and Hart 1988; Turiel 1983). In all likelihood, it is probably the main genetic/evolutionary source for hatred of many outgroups.

Primate intergroup relations, including those of human hunter-gatherers, are usually tense and frequently hostile (Wrangham 1987). The evolutionary bases of this hostility are closely linked with protecting the young and females from harm by outgroup members, and secondarily with controlling food resources and maintaining group cohesion. Close examination of intergroup relations among the African apes and human hunter-gatherers suggests that males may be predisposed to develop stronger outgroup prejudices than females. There is also a suggestion that pre-adolescents will develop weaker prejudices than adolescents.

Owing to the often deleterious effects of genetic drift and inbreeding, there is a necessity for gene flow into the tribe to occur in order for the tribe to maintain its viability, especially in times of marked environmental changes (Lamb 2000). The most likely source of gene flow is migration from other tribes. In order to psychologically support this migration, processes must have developed that made aspects of the outsider seem attractive to the host tribe. This led either to acceptance of the outsider into the tribe, or occasionally, to incorporation of specific attributes of the outsider into the tribe. The net effect of outgroup attractiveness is to mitigate outgroup hostility and likely outgroup hatred.

Thus, prejudice and discrimination have an evolutionary basis, rooted in the nature of primate and human subsistence groups. Although the existence of cultures is also evolutionarily based, the particular culture in which individuals grow and mature plays a significant role in determining the values assigned to various groups. Members of some of these groups become the targets for prejudice and discrimination. As with other cultural values, norms, and beliefs, prejudice and discrimination have to be learned. This is often a long process and depends on the developmental status of the learner, the nature of the prejudice and discrimination to be learned, and the cultural importance of the learning. It is possible that hatred may be learned in a similar fashion, especially if encouraged by the authorities in the culture.

As noted above, certain outgroups are more likely than others to be the recipients of prejudice. Prejudice toward them becomes expected and normative. However, culture is not static or stagnant, but rather evolves and undergoes historical change. For example, the television portrayal of African Americans, women, or mentally retarded, for example in 2004, may not be reflective of long-standing, relatively permanent attitudes and values. The latter do change over time; and it is important to document that change in order to accurately assess where we are today.

A consensus has emerged among social psychologists concerning the bases of prejudice and discrimination. All believe that there are multiple causes that can be construed as falling somewhere on a continuum, with individualistic or psychological causes at one pole, and cultural/historical causes at the other pole. The initial motivating force for the development of prejudice

and discrimination is the attempts of dominant groups within a culture to continue holding the power and privileges they have (Fishbein 2002).

Nearly all definitions of prejudice have in common the idea that it is a negative attitude toward others because of their membership in a particular group. Following the lead of Allport (1954) and Milner (1983), an additional component seems necessary to distinguish prejudice from another type of negative attitude—unreasonableness. Allport refers to this component as “faulty and inflexible” attitudes, and Milner as “irrational” attitudes. This inflexibility leads prejudiced individuals to resist modifying their prejudices in the face of contradictory information.

Discrimination is defined as harmful actions toward others because of their membership in a particular group. Discrimination may or may not be based on prejudice, although when children are freely interacting without adult control, it is likely that the two go hand in hand. Recent theorizing suggests that prejudice and discrimination feed on and enhance each other (Frederickson and Knobel 1980).

The relationship between prejudice and behavior is complex. Research shows that when there is no direct contact between people, as in voting situations, there is a fairly strong relationship between prejudice and behavior. However, when people interact with each other, the relationship is weak. Prejudice is just one factor among many that mediates behavior; for example, other personal attitudes and motives and situational conditions are also influential (Fishbein 2002).

One potential consequence of prejudice is stigmatizing others. Stigmas are characteristics of people—for example, being a member of a particular ethnic group, having a particular disability, being an ex-mental patient—that spoil or discredit them. Some likely reasons for stigmatizing others are: scapegoating, justifying our failures to help particular groups, enhancing our own status. But as Katz’s (1981) research shows, we are frequently ambivalent about the groups we stigmatize. The ambivalence often leads us to exaggerate either our negative or positive responses to them. One exaggerated negative response may be hatred.

The development of prejudice and discrimination is tied to the development of a group identity. The psychological literature suggests that a group identity emerges between the ages of 3 and 4 years and increases for at least several years. The social psychological study of intergroup relations in preadolescents and adolescents indicates that identification with a group, as measured by ingroup preferences, can occur merely through random assignment of individuals to groups that have no function. Intergroup hostility, however, is based on the existence of unfair competition. An equity model seems to capture the essential features of this phenomenon and leads to valuable insights into the nature of prejudice and discrimination (Fishbein 2002). Per-

ceived inequities, in addition to hostility, may lead to hatred toward outgroup members.

Based on the fact that prejudice and discrimination are determined by multiple factors (genetics and evolution, culture and history, and social development), and moreover, that these factors may have different effects on different targets, interventions based on any one of them should have a limited impact. Additionally, the broader social context in which any interventions occur can have a strong moderating effect on the success of these interventions (Taylor 2000). For example, Taylor pointed out that historically, and currently, racial housing segregation and employment discrimination have had powerful effects on racial prejudice and discrimination. These and other important contextual influences, such as educational opportunities, can most readily be changed through political processes and not psychological ones. Yet, as psychologists, we strive to induce change, but usually are unable to influence the broader social context, and may be seriously hampered by this inability. I believe that if prejudice and discrimination can be reduced, then reduction of hatred will follow.

Fishbein (2002) has summarized and evaluated much of the available psychological research on the issue of remediation for children and adolescents. Data from 23 studies concerning the effects of desegregation on prejudice and discrimination yielded some interesting conclusions. Desegregation is largely ineffective in decreasing either prejudice or discrimination. The results, however, tend to be more positive for Black children than for Whites. In general, there were no systematic differences in outcomes between boys and girls, and there were no age effects noted in the experiments. The absence of equal status between students and lack of community support (e.g., the authorities did not support the integration efforts) appear to be important factors in determining the outcomes of these studies.

Fourteen studies dealt with the effects of mainstreaming on prejudice and discrimination of nondisabled children toward the disabled. Mainstreaming does create more positive attitudes toward all types of handicaps, but is less effective on prejudice toward the moderately to severely mentally retarded. There are differences based on the age of the nondisabled children, with older children (ages 10 and up) developing more positive attitudes when compared with younger ones (ages 8 and below). Mainstreamed girls tend to be less prejudiced than their male peers. The effectiveness of mainstreaming is due, in part, to the positive sanction of school authorities.

Cooperative interaction implies positive goal interdependence for children working or talking together. Twenty studies dealt with the effects of cooperative interaction (predominantly cooperative learning) on prejudice and discrimination toward different racial and ethnic groups, the opposite sex, and the disabled. There were lasting effects on discrimination (9 months) but not on attitudes. Cooperative interaction does affect both opposite-sex and racial/ethnic prejudice and discrimination, with the effects for the former groups being

stronger than for the latter groups. The discriminatory behavior of nondisabled children toward their disabled classmates decreases as a result of cooperative interaction. The positive effects of cooperative interaction occurred through a decrease in intergroup hostility and the positive sanction of school authorities. It is also possible that outgroup attractiveness played a positive role.

Five studies were found that measured the effects of media, particularly television and movies, on attitude change. Television and film do influence prejudice in children and adolescents. The films were effective in reducing prejudice regardless of the age of the subjects; however, conclusions are restricted to prejudice toward the disabled and other racial/ethnic groups. No studies were found that examined the effectiveness of films for changing opposite-sex prejudice or for changing discrimination toward any group. Authority acceptance and outgroup attractiveness probably played a role in the success of these interventions.

There is evidence that role playing is an effective way to change attitudes; but no research was found on discrimination. Examination of the literature revealed five studies that investigated race prejudice and prejudice toward the handicapped. No studies were found that examined the effectiveness of simulations for changing opposite-sex prejudice or for reducing discrimination toward any group. In order to be effective, simulations must be as real as possible. Discussions before and after the role play are important both for engendering attitude change and for alleviating any stress felt by the participants during the experience. The diminution of outgroup hostility probably underlies some of these positive changes.

Individuation is the process of differentiating people from one another and can apply to the self (self-acceptance) and to others. Nine studies dealt with the relationship between self-acceptance and prejudice, but no experiments on discrimination were found. Non-prejudiced people are high in self-acceptance, whereas prejudiced individuals have low self-acceptance. Manipulations designed to increase self-acceptance result in decreased racial and ethnic prejudice, as well as decreased prejudice toward the disabled. Four experiments dealing with the connection between individuation of others and prejudice were found, but no data were available on discrimination. Teaching children to differentiate among disabled people and among individuals from other racial/ethnic groups causes a decrease in prejudice toward the differentiated group. The role of the four evolutionary factors is not clear in understanding these positive changes.

Based on these findings, I suggest that multiple approaches be used to combat prejudice and discrimination in children and adolescents. Importantly, some of them can be used in nonintegrated setting. These approaches attempt to utilize in positive ways, some of the genetic/evolutionary factors that often lead to prejudice, discrimination, and hatred. Due to the consistent access to large numbers of children, the school system is the ideal situation for interventions

designed to reduce prejudice and discrimination. We saw that desegregation by itself had limited effects in changing attitudes and behaviors. However, cooperative learning has been shown to have strong, widespread effects on reducing discrimination. I believe that this form of teaching should become an integral part of the educational system, especially in racially integrated and mainstreamed settings. An added benefit of this approach is that it gives students the impression that the community, especially authority figures, supports the importance of changing attitudes and behaviors toward members of other groups.

Mainstreaming has been shown to be a moderately effective approach for reducing prejudice and discrimination toward the disabled. Recall that the effects are limited when the disabled student is moderately to severely mentally retarded. Therefore, cooperative learning in these cases should be done cautiously.

In that individuation of self and others is effective in reducing prejudice, I believe that teaching methods that promote self-acceptance and valuing differences among people should become an integral part of the normal education process. This fits well with local and national efforts to promote the valuing of diversity, and is consistent with the evolutionary factor of outgroup attractiveness. Aboud (1988) suggested the use of psychological tests that reveal personal profiles to help individuals discover unique aspects of self. These profiles can then be compared with those of others to look for similarities and differences. Finally, films and role-playing simulations are effective tools in reducing prejudice, and therefore should be used intermittently throughout the academic year. Stephan and Finlay (1999) showed that empathy training, independent of role-playing simulations, can have a positive effect on reducing prejudice. It would also serve to enhance other interpersonal relations. Other than cooperative interaction, there are no known methods for reducing opposite-sex prejudice.

These proposed changes are quite dramatic. Many might question whether they are feasible. However, there are school systems in the United States that have successfully instituted cooperative learning programs. Additionally, many schools throughout the country are including individuation and valuing diversity programs in their curricula. It is clear that the social, educational, and emotional problems created by prejudice and discrimination will not be resolved if we continue with the status quo. We need strong, viable interventions to resolve the issues. The proposed changes may go a long way toward alleviating these problems, as well as toward reducing prejudice-based hatred.

NOTES

1. Portions of this paper were adapted from Fishbein, H.D., *Peer Prejudice and Discrimination*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).

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