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The Nature of Prejudice

In 1954 a Harvard social psychologist called Gordon Allport published a book from which this chapter takes its title (Allport, 1954). Brilliantly written and encyclopaedic in its scope, the book has rightly come to be regarded as point of departure for modern investigators into the nature of prejudice and into methods for its reduction. Allport provided not only an incisive analysis of the origins of intergroup discrimination, anticipating some discoveries in social cognition and group behaviour that have only recently been made (see Chapters 3–6), but also a series of influential policy recommendations for its elimination (see Chapter 9). Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that most practical attempts to improve intergroup relations in over the past fifty years have had their basis in Allport's theorizing.

It is thus entirely appropriate that in this first chapter we should take another look at some of the definitions and assumptions that guided Allport's scholarship. After presenting a few contemporary illustrations of prejudice in action, I examine how the term 'prejudice' has traditionally been defined. Though finding much to agree with in these conventional accounts, I propose a simpler and more inclusive definition, which eschews any reference to the putative 'falsity' of a prejudiced thought, word or deed. After this terminological discussion, I outline in broad terms the perspective to be adopted in the remainder of the book – a perspective that simultaneously seeks to treat prejudice as a *group process* and as a phenomenon that nevertheless can be analysed at the level of *individual* perception, emotion and action. Finally, I relate this social psychological approach to the analyses offered by other disciplines – history, politics, economics, sociology and so on. I conclude that each of these various perspectives can independently offer valuable insights into the nature of prejudice without being subservient or reducible to some more fundamental level of analysis. At the same time, I recognize that ultimately – in some future social scientific utopia – each level of analysis will need to be consistent with the others and may well impose conceptual and empirical constraints on theorizing in those other domains.

What Is Prejudice?

It is 5 o'clock in the afternoon somewhere in Bristol, in the West of England, in the mid-1980s. Geoff Small, a black man in his twenties, has just been shown round a flat that is being offered to let by a white landlord.

> SMALL: Am I the first one to see it?
> LANDLORD: …Yes, you are actually but there are several other people coming round, you know. Well, another one in a moment – ten past – and some more at six.
> SMALL: Ah, right. Then what's your criterion for allotting the place?
> LANDLORD: Well, I'm going to see the people who come along. Then, you know, give them a call and let them know …

Ten minutes later a second man, also in his twenties, calls round to the same flat. His name is Tim Marshall. He happens to be white. After being shown round, he asks how the landlord will decide on who will be the tenant.

> MARSHALL: Is it on a first come, first served … that is, if I wanted it …?
> LANDLORD: (hesitating) … er … yeah … well … yes … someone sort of suitable I would say yes, I would. But … otherwise I might say 'I'll let you know' (embarrassed laugh).
> MARSHALL: Ok, I do actually like it. But I have got …
> LANDLORD: … got others to see, have you?
> MARSHALL: Yes, two places. But I mean … have I got any competition? I mean, does anyone else want it?
> LANDLORD: Well, the situation is that I came back at four o'clock. There's a chap coming round at six o'clock – between six and seven – and … um … being a bit of a racist … but he was black – nice enough chap – but I thought he might create problems so I said look, I'd let him know.
> MARSHALL: Would you not have a black …?
> LANDLORD: No. He was a nice chap, you know. But on the other hand, he was a big bloke and he'd be a bit of a handful. But I thought he might create problems, you know.
> MARSHALL: Damn. I don't know what to say. I don't want to lose it but I don't want to say yes for sure.
> LANDLORD: Well, I've got another room … which I let as well.
> MARSHALL: Well, I'll take my chances because you're saying the black guy is not going to get it?
> LANDLORD: That's right.

On the way downstairs to show Marshall out, the landlord continues his justification for not wanting to let to the previous applicant, at one point describing him as 'a bit arrogant'.

These two encounters were covertly filmed by the two prospective tenants, who were in reality making a television documentary (*Black and White*, BBC Television, 1987). Armed with hidden microphones and cameras, they went looking for accommodation, jobs and leisure entertainment. The documentary was, in fact, a televised replication of a well-known piece of research initiated by a committee appointed by the British Government in 1965 (Daniels, 1968). As in the television programme, one of the

research techniques was to dispatch three interviewers, who purported to be genuine applicants, in search of housing, jobs and a variety of other services. In most respects the interviewers were similar – similar age, appearance, qualifications – but there were some crucial differences: the first applicant to any vacancy happened to have somewhat darker skin than the other two because he was West Indian or Asian; the second applicant's skin was white, but he was from Hungary; and the third applicant was always white and English.

The results were dramatic: out of 60 landlords approached, the West Indian received identical treatment to the others on just 15 occasions (Daniels, 1968). On 38 of the 45 other occasions he was told that the flat had gone when both other applicants were told later that it was still vacant. When applying for jobs, an equally stark discrimination occurred: 40 firms were approached. On no less than 37 occasions, the West Indian or Asian applicants were told that there was no vacancy. The white English received only 10 such outright refusals, and the Hungarian 23. Direct offers of jobs or encouragement to apply showed a similar bias.

It is tempting to dismiss such findings on grounds of their antiquity. Surely, one might ask, it would be difficult to witness such overt discrimination today, after four decades of successive race relations and equal opportunities legislations? I would not be so sanguine about it. There was, after all, that television documentary, which revealed repeated instances of a differential treatment of black and white reporters. That such discrimination lingers is confirmed in some more recent reports. One was a study by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) in which 5,000 applications were sent out in response to various job advertisements in American newspapers. Half of the applicants purported to have typically white-sounding names like Allison or Greg, the remainder had typical African American names like Ebony or Leroy. Independently of the names at the top of the résumé, some applicants seemed to have more skills and experience relevant to the job, others less. Of course, the vast majority of these applications did not elicit a response from the employers. However, those with white-sounding names were about 50 per cent more likely to yield a reaction than those with the African American names: the response rates were 9.6 per cent and 6.4 per cent respectively. Even worse, for the applications from the 'white' candidates, the quality of the résumé made a noticeable difference to the likelihood of a response, whilst it had virtually no effect for the 'black' candidates. Similar evidence of job discrimination, simply on the basis of applicants' names, has been found in Britain, where applicants with Asian names are less likely to be short-listed than those with white names (BBC, 2004; Department for Work and Pensions, 2009; Esmail and Everington, 1993). And in Chile, too, workers with high-status Castillean Spanish names are likely to earn around 10 per cent more than their colleagues with lower-class or indigenous names, even when holding constant (or, in technical terms, controlling for) their academic achievement level on graduating from university (Nunez and Gutierez, 2004). In the field of housing, it seems that people from ethnic minorities in Britain still face discrimination when they look for property to rent. According to the British Commission for Racial Equality, as many as 20 per cent of private accommodation agencies were still discriminating in the allocation of rented property in the late 1980s – a situation which still persists in some places, according to a recent report in a Belfast newspaper (CRE, 1990; Irish News, 30 October 2004).

Behind these statistics lies a grim reality of daily verbal abuse, harassment and threat of physical attack for many members of minority groups. Perhaps the following will serve as one last illustration that prejudice can sometimes – perhaps often – contain elements of overt hostility and violence. In 2009, the BBC sent two British Asian reporters, Tamann Rahman and Amil Khan, to live for two months on a working-class housing estate in Bristol ('Panorama', BBC 1 TV, 19 October 2009; see http://news. bbc.co.uk/panorama/hi/front_page/newsid_8303000/8303229.stm). Posing as a married couple, the two covertly filmed how they were received by their neighbours and other people in the community. Their treatment was truly shocking. They were frequently called names in the street – 'Paki', 'Oi, you Taliban', 'Who's got a bomb?', 'Iraq's that way' are some of the more printable insults that they received. They were physically assaulted, sometimes by quite young children. An 11-year-old boy tried to mug Ms Rahman, pretending to have a gun, then a knife, and finally actually producing a rock with which he threatened her until a passer-by intervened. She had rocks, bottles and cans of drink thrown at her. Mr Khan was similarly abused, and on one occasion he was punched on the side of his head, in a completely unprovoked attack. Such is life for some ethnic minorities living in parts of twenty-first-century Britain.

These are all instances of a particular kind of prejudice: prejudice towards members of ethnic minorities. There are, of course, many other common varieties of prejudice – against women, against gay people, against people with disabilities – as will become clear in the pages of this book. But what exactly do we mean by the word 'prejudice'? It is conventional at this point to refer to a dictionary in which we can find prejudice typically defined as 'a judgement or opinion formed beforehand or without due examination' (Chambers English Dictionary, 1988).

Definitions like this one have led many social psychologists to emphasize features such as 'incorrectness' or 'inaccuracy' in their attempts to define prejudice. For example Allport wrote: '[e]thnic prejudice is an antipathy *based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization*. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group as a whole or toward and individual because he is a member of that group' (Allport, 1954, p. 10; my emphasis); or, more recently, Samson: 'prejudice involves an *unjustified*, usually negative attitude towards others because of their social category or group membership' (Samson, 1999, p. 4; my emphasis).

Such social psychological definitions have much to recommend them over more formal lexical accounts. In particular, they accurately convey one essential aspect of the phenomenon of prejudice – that it is a social orientation either towards whole groups of people or towards individuals *because* of their membership of a particular group. The other common factor between these definitions is that they stress the negative flavour of group prejudice. Of course, logically, prejudice can take both positive and negative forms. I, for example, am particularly favourably disposed towards all things Italian: I love Italian food, Italian cinema, and I lose no opportunity to try out my execrable Italian on anyone who will listen (much to the embarrassment of friends and family). However, such harmless infatuations hardly constitute a major social problem, worthy of much of our attention as social scientists. Rather, the kind of prejudice that besets so many societies in the world today and which so urgently requires our understanding is usually the negative variety: the wary, fearful, suspicious, derogatory, hostile or ultimately murderous treatment of one group of people by another. Thus, practically speaking, I think it is usually most useful to concern

ourselves with what governs variations in these different forms of antipathy. Still, it will be necessary to revisit this question of 'positive' prejudice when I present my definition below.

However, I do not believe it is necessary to imply – as these definitions do – that prejudice must be regarded as a 'false' or 'irrational' set of beliefs, a 'faulty' generalization, or as an 'unwarranted' disposition to behave negatively towards another group. There are three reasons for taking issue with this point of view. First, to say that an attitude or belief is 'faulty' implies that we could have some way of establishing its 'correctness'. In some rather special circumstances it might be possible to do this, but only if the belief in question refers to some objectively measurable criterion (Judd and Park, 1993; Lee et al., 1995; Oakes and Reynolds, 1997). But how often would this be possible? Prejudiced statements are typically couched in much more vague and ambiguous terms. Take the landlord quoted earlier in the chapter: how could we hope to establish the truth or falsity of his beliefs that blacks are likely 'to create problems'? By devising some procedure to measure people's scores on this index against some normative standard of 'peaceableness'? Even to pose the question seems to me to highlight the insurmountable difficulties that would be encountered in trying to answer it. And, even if such a comparative test were possible and, let us suppose hypothetically, it did show a greater incidence of 'problem creation' among the black population, would this justify regarding that landlord's statement as unprejudiced? There is a myriad of possible explanations for the hypothetical statistic – for example reactions to provocation by whites, response to unjust social deprivation, and so on – any one of which could suffice to refute the imputation of blacks' supposed propensity 'to create problems'. The fact remains that the sentiments expressed by that landlord – and their social consequences – would be no less negative (and prejudicial) for having some (alleged) basis in reality.

A second problem with including any 'truth value' element in a definition of prejudice stems from the peculiarly relativistic nature of intergroup perception. It has long been observed – and we shall see ample confirmations in later chapters – that, for groups even more than for individuals, 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. In other words, one group may view very differently what another group finds to be 'pleasant', or 'virtuous', or even self-evidently 'true'. So, if one group regards itself as 'thrifty', is that view more, or is it less, at variance with reality than the view of another group, who regards the former as 'stingy'? Of course, it is impossible to say. The important distinction between the two views lies not in their relative 'correctness' but in their implied connotations of value.

A third point to make about some of these traditional definitions of prejudice is that they often seem to pre-empt the analysis of the origins and functions of prejudiced thinking. Thus, when Allport (1954) refers to an 'inflexible generalization', or when Ackerman and Jahoda (1950) talk of prejudice serving an 'irrational function', they are presupposing more in their definitions than it may be wise to allow. It may well be, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, that much prejudice does have an apparently immutable and dysfunctional quality to it. But equally, as these chapters will also reveal, to think of prejudice as being impervious to change, or as having no rational function for its adherents, is to fail to do justice to the variety and complexity of the forms it can take and to its surprisingly labile quality in many situations.

Let us now return to the restriction, encountered in traditional definitions, that prejudice should refer to a negative orientation. For many years this restriction was uncontroversial (Aboud, 1988; Jones, 1972; Sherif, 1966). Indeed in the first edition of this book I adopted it myself (Brown, 1995). However, some recent analyses have argued that social psychological definitions of prejudice should, after all, include some apparently positive beliefs, sentiments and actions. Thus Jones, in a revision of his earlier book, now defines prejudice as 'a *positive or negative* attitude, judgement or feeling about a person that is generalized from attitudes or beliefs held about the group to which the person belongs' (Jones, 1997, p. 10; my emphasis). And Glick and colleagues (2000) argue that 'subjectively favourable attitudes towards women can themselves be a form of prejudice in that they serve to justify and maintain women's subordination' (Glick et al., 2000, p. 764).

What is the thinking behind these more inclusive definitions? In a nutshell, the argument runs like this: many intergroup attitudes, whilst superficially positive in character, serve to perpetuate an outgroup's subordinate status position, since they accord value to the outgroup only on specific and, typically, less 'important' attributes. Moreover, these attributes may help to define members of that outgroup as being particularly suitable for more servile roles in society. Thus, however positive and genuine the feeling underlying such attitudes may be, their net effect is to reinforce rather than to undermine any pre-existing intergroup inequalities. An important stimulus in the development of this argument came from some findings reported by Eagly and Mladinic (1994) which showed that, in North America at least, men (and women) tended to hold more favourable stereotypes of women than of men. These stereotypes were most evident in various communal and expressive attributes (such as 'helpful', 'warm', 'understanding'), and they were somewhat – but not completely – counterbalanced by less favourable evaluations on such agentic and instrumental attributes as 'independent', 'decisive' and 'self-confident'. Subsequently Glick and Fiske (1996) found that, on average, men are happy to endorse such positive sounding opinions as these: 'men are incomplete without women'; 'women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility'; or 'a good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man'. However 'benevolent' such sentiments seem to be, Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001) argue that their ultimate effect is to define women as dependent on, and hence subordinate to, men (see Chapter 7 for a fuller treatment of benevolent and hostile sexism). Part of their reasoning stems from the fact that people who agree with such statements will also tend to endorse more 'obviously' sexist attitudes: 'benevolent' sexist attitudes are generally positively correlated with 'hostile' ones, weakly at an individual level (around +.3) but strongly at a national sample level (around +.9) (Glick et al., 2000).

Jackman (1994) has extended this argument to ethnic and class relationships. In her book, tellingly entitled *The Velvet Glove* (which disguises the iron fist within), she sets out 'to examine the ways that dominant groups subvert conflict by befriending or at least emotionally disarming those whom they subordinate' (p. 2). She goes on to advocate that 'the concept of prejudice be abandoned in favour if a conception of interracial attitudes that views them as politically motivated communications to defend group interests rather than as expressions of parochial negativism' (p. 41).

These arguments have more than a ring of plausibility about them. Members of minority or subordinate groups have since times immemorial complained of paternalistic

treatment by dominant groups, a treatment that often comes disguised as a benevolent yet demeaning concern for their welfare, or as attitudes which are as patronizing as they are 'favourable'. As a consequence, I believe it may be wise to amend the traditional definition of prejudice so as to capture not just the direct expressions of a negative orientation, but also these more indirectly negative intergroup attitudes. As a working definition for this book, therefore, **prejudice** will be regarded as *any attitude, emotion or behaviour towards members of a group, which directly or indirectly implies some negativity or antipathy towards that group.*

To this definition I would add the following three additional comments. First, while directly negative manifestations of prejudice are relatively simple to identify, the indirect forms may be more problematic, and even impossible to specify in advance. I have already mentioned that I happen to hold generally positive stereotypes about things Italian, including the people – for example, that Italians seem to me rather stylish, hospitable and open, especially when compared to my fellow Britons. Now, does this reveal a progressive shift from the overtly negative way my parents' generation might have viewed them seventy years ago (when Italy and Britain were at war), or does it betray a not-so-subtle northern European snobbery against southerners, represented as an emotional but feckless people – an attitude which comfortably relegates them to subordinate status in the European order? A priori it is difficult to say. Probably the best way to find out would be to assess the co-variation of such seemingly positive attitudes with more obvious indicators of a negative intergroup relationship, and also to observe the reaction of the target to the expression of the positive attitudes. If there is some positive correlation and the recipients respond adversely, then an inference of prejudice would be warranted.

The second comment is that, in this rather wide sense in which I shall be using the term, prejudice can be regarded as roughly synonymous with several others such as **sexism**, **racism**, **homophobia**, **ageism** and the like. There are some who would restrict the application of certain terms, for instance 'racism', to ideologies or practices that are justified by reference to presumed biological group differences (for example van den Berghe, 1967; Miles, 1989). However, from the social psychological perspective adopted here, I believe it is more useful to regard all the phenomena encompassed by these terms as special cases of the more general phenomenon of prejudice. In this way we do not exclude from our discussion important intergroup antipathies such as class prejudice and some forms of religious bigotry, which do not have any obvious biological component.

The third point is that prejudice is not to be regarded as just a cognitive or attitudinal phenomenon; it can also engage our emotions, as well as finding expression in behaviour. Thus I shall not be drawing any firm distinctions between biased attitudes, hostile feelings and discriminatory behaviour. Which is not to say that these different forms of prejudice are all identical, or are necessarily highly intercorrelated; we shall review evidence which suggests that, in fact, the relationship between them is often quite complex. But it is still possible to say that attitudes, feelings and actions *are* all facets of a general prejudiced orientation. This multiple-level emphasis is deliberate and stands in contrast to some trends in modern social psychology, which have tended to stress the cognitive aspects of prejudice and rather to overlook its affective and behavioural components (for example Hamilton, 1981 – but compare Mackie and Hamilton, 1993; Mackie and Smith, 2002; Smith, 1993). This cognitive analysis is

undoubtedly important; indeed I shall be devoting two whole chapters to it (Chapters 3 and 4). However, to ignore the emotionally laden – one might even say saturated – nature of prejudice as it is actually perpetrated and experienced in everyday life is, it seems to me, to overlook something rather fundamental about it. Thus a recurring theme in the pages that follow will be the interplay between the cognitive, the affective and the behavioural processes implicated in prejudice.

A Social Psychological Approach

Having defined what I mean by prejudice, I should say a few words about the general approach I shall be adopting throughout the book. At this stage, I shall outline the perspective only in rather broad terms, without very much supportive evidence and argumentation. Its more detailed documentation will be left to subsequent chapters.

The first point to make is that I see prejudice as primarily a phenomenon originating in group processes. There are three closely related reasons why this is so. *First*, it is, as I have chosen to define it, an orientation towards whole categories of people rather than towards isolated individuals. Even if its target in any concrete instance is only a single individual (as in the example with which I began the previous section), nevertheless that person's individual characteristics matter much less than the markers that allocate him or her to one group rather than another – by name, by accent, by skin colour, and so on. The *second* reason why prejudice should be regarded as a group process is that it is most frequently a socially shared orientation. That is to say, large numbers of people in a segment of society will broadly agree in their negative stereotypes about any given outgroup and will behave in a similar way towards its members. Although, as we shall see in the next chapter, there are some grounds for believing that in its most chronic and extreme forms prejudice may be associated with particular types of personality, we cannot escape the conclusion that it is too widespread and too prevalent a phenomenon to be consigned to the province of individual pathology. The *third* reason follows directly from the first two. Insofar as prejudice is usually directed *at* particular groups *by* some other groups, we should not be too surprised to discover that the relationships between these groups play an important role in determining it. Thus intergroup relations such as conflict over scarce resources, or power domination of one group by another, or gross disparities in numerical size or status can all, as I will show in later chapters, have crucial implications for the direction, level and intensity that the prejudice will display. Indeed, it is this *intergroup* nature of prejudice that really forms the leitmotif of the whole book.

The second general point about the perspective to be taken is that the focus of my analysis will predominantly be the individual. I shall be concerned, in other words, with the impact that various causal factors have on *individuals*' perceptions of, evaluations of, and behavioural reactions towards, members of other groups. These causal factors may take a variety of forms. Some may themselves be individually located (as in the case of certain personality and cognitive processes – see Chapters 2–4). On the other hand, many of the most powerful causal agents, as we shall see, stem from characteristics of the social situation in which people find themselves (for example social influence from peers, or the nature of intergroup goal relationships: see Chapters 6 and 9). Still others may have their origin in the wider society, as our discussion of

socialization influences (Chapter 5) and our analysis of new forms of prejudice (Chapter 7) will reveal. But still, in all these instances, my concern as a social psychologist is with the effects of such causal factors on individual social behaviour.

Now, since this approach seems rather to contradict my earlier claim that prejudice was essentially a group process, a little further elaboration is necessary. Actually, as I have argued elsewhere, this contradiction is apparent rather than real (Brown, 2000a). To assert the causal importance and distinctiveness of group-based processes within social psychology is merely to recognize that individuals and individual behaviour can be transformed in group settings, much as the behaviour of a metallic object can be affected by the presence of a magnetic field. The presence of the magnetic field – something external to the object itself – does not prevent us from describing and predicting what will happen to the object. In the same way it is possible to analyse individuals' behaviour as part of a coherent pattern of group processes.[1] Consider the actions of protestors during a gay rights demonstration or in an episode of ethnic conflict. To be sure, the actions of these people – their form, direction and intensity – are likely to be shaped by the norms and goals of those around them and by the relationships between the groups concerned. However, those actions are no less incidences of social behaviour by individual persons for that, and as such they fall squarely in the province of social psychology.

We can now see the resolution to the apparent contradiction between wanting to study prejudice, simultaneously, as a *group*-based phenomenon and as a phenomenon located at the level of *individual* cognition, emotion and behaviour. The key is to recognize that I am not proposing the simultaneous study of individual behaviour and group behaviour in themselves; these are indeed rather different levels of analysis. Rather, I wish to distinguish between *individuals acting as group members* – that is, in terms of their group memberships – and *individuals acting as individuals* (Sherif, 1966; Tajfel, 1978a). It is with the former class of behaviours – with people acting as 'women' or 'men', as 'gays' or 'straights', as 'blacks or 'whites' – that I shall be mainly concerned throughout this book.

In arguing for this kind of social psychological approach, I should immediately make it clear that I do not for one minute believe that social psychology has any privileged disciplinary position in providing explanations and remedies for prejudice. A complete understanding of the phenomenon is, surely, only possible if we also take account of the complex mix of historical, political, economic and social structural forces at work in any given context. History is important because it is this that bequeaths to us our language, our cultural traditions and norms, and our social institutions. All these play a significant part in the way we come to construe our world in terms of different social categories, which is the first and indispensable precursor to all forms of prejudice (see Chapter 3). Likewise, political processes cannot be ignored; for these help to determine a country's legislation on basic civil rights, or its immigration policies (to name but two issues). Apart from directly affecting the lives of minority groups (usually to their detriment), such policies contribute to the ideological frameworks in which various ethnic (and other) groups are differently valued in society. Miles (1989), for example, has described how the European settlement of Australia and the subsequent development of a 'white Australia' policy in the early years of this century were historically accompanied by the emergence of various racial terms, both in official and in everyday language. It is something of a tragic irony that

the 'success' of that 'white Australia' policy in perpetrating a systematic assault on, and oppression of, the aboriginal people has resulted in its virtual obliteration from all the official 'histories' of the continent (Pilger, 1989). Economic factors can play an important – some would say overriding – role in governing relations between groups in society. When one group has the means and the will to appropriate whole territories from another for the purposes of economic exploitation, as in the case of Britain's colonization of large parts of Africa, Asia and Australia, then racist beliefs are often developed in justification (Banton, 1983). In Simpson and Yinger's (1972) pithy summary: 'prejudice exists because someone gains by it' (p. 127).

Though not easily separable from the factors just discussed, the very structure of society, its organization into sub-groups and the social arrangements of those groups can play their part in the manufacture and maintenance of prejudice. As an example, consider the difference between societies composed of groups of ever-increasing size and inclusiveness (family, religion, region and so on), and those in which groups cut across one another (for example societies where norms prescribe that people should marry outside their immediate community, thus creating an overlap between family and village groupings). Drawing on extensive anthropological sources, LeVine and Campbell (1972) suggest that the latter type of society is less given to internal conflict because of the competing loyalty structures created by the criss-crossing of different groups (see Chapter 3). Other kinds of societal analyses reveal how institutions and social practices can exist to regulate the access to goods and services by different groups in society. Such differential access can then perpetuate, and perhaps even accentuate, existing disparities that, in turn, can generate their own self-fulfilling justification for prejudice against particular groups. Take access to education. In Britain someone's chances of going to university are strongly related to the social class of that person's parents. According to recent figures, nearly 50 per cent of entrants to university in Britain in 2000 were from social classes I and II, who comprise only 43 per cent of the population. In contrast, less than 20 per cent of the entrants were of classes IIIM to V, who make up over 40 per cent of the population (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). Such a skew in the class composition of university students results in similar imbalances in recruitment to different occupations and in the likelihood of unemployment. From there it is an easy step to the perpetuation of prejudiced images of working-class people as 'uneducated', 'stupid' and 'lazy'.

It is clear, then, that there are several different levels at which prejudice can be analysed, and the social psychological perspective is but one of these. But if, as Allport (1954) elegantly put it, 'plural causation is the primary lesson we wish to teach' (p. xii), what is the relationship between these different causal factors? Can the different levels of analysis be reduced to some more fundamental perspective? Consider two social scientists' views. They are talking about war, but it could just as well have been prejudice:

> To attempt to explain war by appeal to innate pugnacity would be like explaining Egyptian, Gothic, and Mayan architecture by citing the physical properties of stone. (White, 1949, p. 131)

> Dealings between groups ultimately become problems for the psychology of the individual. Individuals decide to go to war; battles are fought by individuals; and peace is established by individuals. (Berkowitz, 1962, p. 167)

Each of these scholars is claiming the theoretical priority of one discipline over another. For White, an anthropologist, it is the societal analysis that is fundamental; Berkowitz, a psychologist, believes that a microscopic approach is ultimately more valuable. In fact neither form of reductionism is necessary. It is possible, as LeVine and Campbell (1972) have persuasively argued, to pursue these various lines of enquiry treating them more or less as independent of one another, in the spirit of what these authors call 'optional autonomy' (p. 26). In their view, no one level of analysis can make any claim of superiority or priority over another. Disciplinary preference should simply be dictated by the nature of the problem with which one is confronted. Thus, in order to analyse the effect of discriminatory hiring practices on unemployment levels in different ethnic groups, a macroscopic level of analysis is obviously appropriate. But if one's concern were with the actual social dynamics of employment selection procedures, then a social psychological approach would probably be more fruitful. Each analysis can be conducted relatively unencumbered by the other. However, this is not to propose a form of intellectual anarchy. In the last analysis the different approaches will have to be 'congruent' with one another – to use LeVine and Campbell's term again. That is, a valid theory of employment discrimination pitched at the economic or sociological level will have to be consistent with social psychological conclusions drawn from studies of individual social behaviour in job interviews, *and vice versa*.

This is the position I have taken in this book. By accident of training I am a social psychologist, and it is this perspective that I attempt to develop in the following chapters. But I hope that, by the time the final page is reached, it will be clear that social psychology, whilst it contains the potential to contribute significantly both to the dissection and to the dissolution of prejudice, can never do more than explain a part – and perhaps only a small part – of the phenomenon as a whole.

Summary

1   Prejudice is often defined as a faulty or unjustified negative judgement held about members of a group. However, such definitions run into conceptual difficulties because of problems in ascertaining whether social judgements are at variance with reality. Instead, prejudice is here defined simply as an attitude, emotion or behaviour towards members of a group which directly or indirectly implies some negativity towards that group.

2   Because prejudice involves judgements of some groups made by others, and because it can be shown to be affected by the objective relationships between these groups, prejudice is appropriately regarded as a phenomenon originating in group processes. However, such a perspective is not incompatible with a social psychological analysis that is primarily concerned with individual perceptions, evaluations and actions. Such an analysis sees individuals acting as group members, as part of a coherent pattern of group dynamics.

3   A social psychological analysis is but one in a number of valid scientific perspectives on prejudice. Each discipline can usefully pursue its own research problems more or less independently of the others, although ultimately these diverse analyses will have to be compatible with each other.

Note

1 Actually the analogy with magnetic fields is not quite precise because, unlike inanimate objects, human beings have the ability to alter and recreate the 'magnetic' fields of the group they find themselves in. But the point is that their attempts to do so can still be analysed as individual constituents of an organized system (Asch, 1952; Steiner, 1986).

Further Reading

Allport, G. W. (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*, chs 1, 14, 15. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
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