

Phase 2 - COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Week 10 Unit 2.7. WHO is/are "WE" I: What is "human nature?" Prejudice and Discrimination: Are the causes in our genes?"

Themes: "You've Got to be Taught": Acquiring and Acting on Stereotypes

FACILITATION: Study Group #7

ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW:

READ by yourself then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.7-1 [SA] Chapter 7

VIEW by yourself or with others then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.7-2 *A class divided* (video viewing time 54 mins)

2.7-3 *Crash* (video viewing time 122 mins)

ASSIGNMENT DETAILS: THINK OVER by yourself then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.7 – 1 [SA] Chapter 7

We have already encountered "The Tragedy of the Commons". So we are not unaccustomed to thinking about limitations and inequalities in accessing scarce common resources. Here we consider the social-psychological construction of prejudice and discrimination, and attempt to evaluate the role of fear, scarcity, and socioeconomic inequality in promoting or combating prejudice.

Picture yourself living and working (going to school) in a social context in which meaningful and powerful exchanges within between and among human individuals and groups are marked by more or less pervasive and constant competition for scarce (finitely limited) human/ecological resources. What would you expect to be the situation with regard to the prevalence of inter-group mistrust, prejudice, and discrimination? (Think: MIT?)

"Lord of the Flies:" Central to the age-old misgiving about the depravity of "human nature" is the belief that people, when left to themselves, are prone to create conflict and chaos. By this way of thinking, unless there is a "ruler" or "rulers" of some kind to control and check them, people will revert into asocial behavior and violence. This (Hobbesian) view denies the possibility of individual responsibility as an inherent human trait, and is essentially congruent with doctrines of "Social Darwinism" that have roots in ancient religious arguments that deny the possibility of free will.

More than a millennium ago, a monk named Pelagius pointed out in a famous debate with his prelate (Augustine) how readily such doctrines can be used to justify and reinforce the predatory and licentious behavior of people. As we have already seen, this pessimistic view of "human nature" has been updated in sociobiological and evolutionary psychological discourse.

A hundred years ago, a "progressive" social darwinist named (Prince) Peter Kropotkin, argued from a leftist socialist/anarchist/communist view for a human nature that is benignly cooperative by nature, and naturally endowed with an inclination toward mutual aid, help and caring. In sum, Kropotkin's theory of human nature was socially optimistic; it emphasized the importance of solidarity, considerateness, and cooperation in evolution. He said that mutuality and community best epitomize the eco-systemic interrelatedness of the individual and his or her social and natural environment. Kropotkin argued that authoritarian regulation results in reproduction of irresponsibility and asocial behavior, rather than promotion of individual responsibility.

This argument has been repeatedly reinvented, asserted, and, maintained. But the sunny view is, repeatedly forgotten (or suppressed). For us, however, the main theme remains that all theories of human nature are impossible to test.

It remains for each of us to decide for ourselves whether to prefer a future predicated on "social possibility" or "biological determinism".

The formation of prejudice – like that of conformity, etc. – is a multifarious process that is best understood in the context of other issues and crises that normally arise during various phases or stages of organization/development in groups: (Cf. "Developmental Schemes" Handout and "Working Groups" description of stages of individual and group development as "Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing"). For example, the age or stage of development of a particular person in a particular situation jointly determines the ways in which its phases of development manifest themselves.

Is there a "prejudiced personality"? Some experimental social psychologists have temptingly identified a class of individuals seen as manifesting "the authoritarian personality." These allegedly are persons presumably neurobiologically, psychologically and socioculturally inclined (e.g. mentally and behaviorally) to exhibit net positive tendencies toward obedience and conformity to authority in hierarchically organized human social systems.

One implication is that some people can sometimes become socialized to unequivocally accept, without qualification or question, the legitimacy of authoritarian relations between (for example) leaderships and memberships.

We have already encountered instances of this in conformity to group norms (The Wave), and in obedience to authority (Milgram).

We have also noted that changing circumstances can result in changing attitudes: (e.g. segregated and integrated housing: the prejudice-reducing effects of meaningful equal-status contact across (e.g. racial/ethnic/religious) lines; jigsaw classroom, etc.

A great deal of evidence suggests that powerful direct and vicarious effects can result from formally legislated or mandated social rearrangements. Yet the lineaments of prejudice remain. Why?

2.7 – 2 “A class divided,” Produced and directed by William Peters, broadcast on FRONTLINE March 26, 1985, digital production.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/etc/view.html>.

This classic PBS documentary video deals with what began in 1968, in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., as an Iowa elementary school teacher’s idea for a classroom "experiment" intended to teach her all-white and relatively socio-economically non-differentiated students a lesson about prejudice.

Instead of using skin color, she distinguished between two groups on the basis of eye color.

Some highly instructive lessons were learned.

Extensions of the work into other institutional contexts are also described.

2.7 – 3 “Crash,” produced and directed by Paul Haggis, distributed by Lions Gate Entertainment Corporation, 2005, digital production. http://www.amazon.com/Crash-Sandra-Bullock/dp/B000XSAKP4/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1393959206&sr=8-2&keywords=crash+movie

Who isn't a racist? This recent (2005) "intensely fascinating" award-winning film is set in present-day Los Angeles and tells interlocking and cross-cutting stories involving a diverse group of people living and working in these times in a contemporary American big city: whites and blacks, Latinos and Anglos, Asians, Iraqis, Iranians, women and men, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, politicians, cops, criminals, shopkeepers, bureaucrats, etc. literally and figuratively colliding with each other in a series of more or less violent encounters, most of which are defined by prejudices based on and involving erroneous assumptions (stereotypes) that prevent them from actually seeing the other person standing before them, thus creating conditions conducive to the tragic unfolding of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Questions To Consider:

- What is prejudice?
- What are stereotypes?
- Is there a "prejudiced" personality?
- Can prejudice be overcome?
- Prejudice and group stereotypes: What are some common social and psychological effects of stereotypes?
- How does being the object of prejudice affect self-esteem?
- How does self-esteem relate to cognitive competency (e.g. academic or athletic performance)?
- Compare and contrast the social effects of racial profiling and gender stereotyping.
- What is "victim blaming"? What are self-fulfilling stereotypes?
- Prejudice and scientific measurement/management (how do social biases enter into tests of intelligence, achievement, aptitudes etc?)
- Can you identify some subtle and not so subtle effects of both hostile and benevolent prejudice?
- What is meant by the statement: "prejudice is a nonconscious aspect of ideology"?
- Consider the role of media vis-à-vis representations of perpetrators and victims of prejudice.
- Relate what you have learned about relations between covert mental attitudes (cognitive and affective) and overt behavioral expressions to activities aimed at promoting and combating racism, sexism, ageism, etc.

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9.70 Social Psychology
Spring 2013

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