CHAPTER 7

Ethnocentricism and Othering

Barriers to intercultural communication

'I'm not racist, but . . .'
'It's just a joke.'
'Some of my best friends are . . .'

(James 2001:1)

It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.

(Lorde 1986: 197)

Change your thoughts and you change your world.

(Peale 2007: 233)

learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

1 explain the process of social categorization
2 describe the relationship between perception and social categorization
3 discuss the implications of social categorization and Othering for intercultural relations
4 define and discuss the nature of ethnocentricism
5 distinguish between a generalization and a stereotype
6 describe the process of stereotyping and provide examples of stereotypes (e.g. racial and ethnic, language, gender, religious)
7 identify at least four reasons why people stereotype
8 provide examples of sexist and ageist language
9 explain how stereotypes can serve as barriers to intercultural communication
10 define and provide examples of bias and prejudice
11 describe the causes of prejudice
12 define and provide examples of discrimination and discriminatory language
13 define and discuss the nature of racism
14 identify three types of racism and provide an example of each
15 describe the potential impact of racism and xenophobia on intercultural relations
16 identify ways to combat ethnocentric tendencies and biases.

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, we examined the nature, characteristics and multiple types of identities that exist in today's complex world. While identity can provide us with a sense of belonging, it can also serve as the basis for negative views and reactions to people who are different from us. We are naturally drawn to people who share a similar language, culture and way of being and we may unconsciously or consciously shy away from those who do not belong to our ingroup. As Samovar *et al.* (2012: 169) explain, '[o]ur preference for things we understand and are familiar with can adversely influence our perception of and attitude toward new and different people and things. This can lead to stereotyping, prejudice, racism, and ethnocentricism'.

Social categorization and ethnocentricism lie at the heart of identity biases and discrimination. Consequently, this chapter begins by examining these processes, which all too often create barriers to successful, equitable intercultural interactions. We then examine what lies behind racist and xenophobic behaviour (e.g. racist discourse, exclusion). Finally, we discuss ways to overcome ethnocentricism and identity biases.

SOCIAL CATEGORIZATION AND OTHERING

Social categorization refers to the way we group people into conceptual categories in order to make sense of our increasingly complex social environment. This entails the act of **perception**, that is, 'becoming aware of, knowing, or identifying by means of the senses' through a three-step process involving selection, organization and interpretation (Jandt 2007: 433). Throughout each day we are continuously exposed to a variety of perceptual stimuli (e.g. sights, sounds, smells) that can be overwhelming. To cope, we try to reduce information to manageable forms. In the process, we typically place people into different groups and categories based on our current understandings, perceptions and experience (Allport 1954). In other words, we make inferences about individual behaviour based on group patterns. Unfortunately, this can easily lead to essentialism.

> Essentialism is the position that the attributes and behavior of socially defined groups can be determined and explained by reference to cultural and/or biological characteristics believed to be inherent to the group. As an ideology, essentialism rests on two assumptions: (1) that groups can be clearly delimited; and (2) that group members are more or less alike.
>
> (Bucholtz 2003: 400)

Essentialism and other negative consequences of Othering can be very harmful to intercultural relations as noted by many interculturalists, including Prue Holmes (2012: 468):

> the cognitive activities of categorization and generalization that occur normally in the human brain are an important way of making sense of the world around us. Although such categorizations are useful as sense-making strategies for human behavior, if unchecked, they can lead to more extreme understandings of cultural difference, such as ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and prejudice—the roots of racism.

Otherization or **Othering**, a form of social representation, involves 'the objectification of another person or group' (Abdallah-Pretceille 2003). In this process, culture is used to account for all

of the views and behaviours of 'the other', largely ignoring the complexity and diversity of individual characteristics (e.g. thoughts, emotions, actions) (Holliday 2006, 2012; Dervin 2012; Virkama 2010). This leads to reductionism or essentialism, that is, 'pretending that knowing the other takes place through knowing her culture as a static object' (Abdallah-Pretceille 2003: 13). Instead of seeing people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds as individuals, in the eyes of an ethnocentric person, they are merely representatives of a particular culture, and tied to a rigid set of characteristics and behaviours.

Social categorization and Othering are linked to the **social identity theory** that was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s to explain intergroup behaviour (Tajfel 1982; Tajfel & Turner 1979, 1986). A basic tenant of this theory is the notion that individuals tend to categorize people in their social environment into ingroups and outgroups (e.g. 'us' and 'them') (Wodak 2008).

Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012: 303) define **ingroup members** as 'people with whom you feel connected to or owe a sense of loyalty and allegiance, such as family members, close friends, or familiar others within the community'. For Jandt (2007: 430), an ingroup is a '[c]ohesive group that offers protection in exchange for loyalty and provides its members with a sense of identity'. Ingroups ('us') typically consist of people from the same perceived ethnic or religious group, or peers of the same age, gender, class, political affiliation or occupation, etc. This also means that we usually belong to multiple ingroups at the same time and one's ingroups may change at different stages of one's life.

In contrast, **outgroup members** are 'those with whom one feels emotionally and psychologically detached, such as strangers, unfamiliar others, or members who belong to a competitive or opposing group' (Ting-Toomey & Chung 2012: 306). Who we perceive as outsiders ('them') may also change as we gain more life experience (e.g. engage in more intercultural interactions).

One of my students wrote the following in a journal, disclosing how she defined one of her most important ingroups. Her comments reveal ways in which negative perceptions can serve as barriers to interactions with outgroup members.

> I strongly recognize myself as belonging to a religious group, and I find my particular religion a concrete and absolute thing in culture that conspicuously differentiates me from nonbelievers . . . The way I choose friends and socialize with other people is very much based on my religion, too. I see nonbelievers as human beings belonging to their flesh. Thus, I share no common points with them in their spiritual aspects, and I should not adopt their thoughts and behaviors.

The social identity theory posits that it is natural for people to seek ways to 'strengthen their self-esteem' and to 'strive to achieve or to maintain a positive social identity' (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Positive ingroup membership can help to accomplish these aspirations by providing a sense of belonging and camaraderie among those who are thought to share similar beliefs, values and traditions or ways of being (e.g. communication styles). People tend to view their ingroup more positively than other groups as they gain positive self-esteem from their group memberships.

Group characteristics are developed over time within specific social, historical, linguistic, religious, political and geographic contexts. By observing how other group members behave and act (e.g. use language and nonverbal means of communication), we discover what values and attributes are associated with and prized by our ingroup(s). The typical characteristics of the group gradually become norms for one's own behaviour, reinforcing one's group

membership. This learning is part of the socialization and identity formation processes that were discussed in Chapters 3 and 6. The emotional and cognitive significance of our ingroup membership becomes salient and is often strengthened when in the presence of outgroup members, especially when there is discord or rivalry between groups. In times of heightened tension and conflict, emotive 'us' vs. 'them' discourse may prevail.

Individuals with a strong ingroup identification tend to more fully adopt the values, behaviours and practices that are associated with their particular ingroup(s). As well as guiding thoughts and actions, the group's norms serve as a basis for Othering, that is judging outsiders (outgroup members) by one's own standards. People who have a more intense connection with their ingroup identity see themselves as more typical group members and are more apt to evaluate the performance of ingroup members more favourably than outsiders (Tajfel & Turner 1979).

Ingroup-favouritism (sometimes called **ingroup bias)** refers to situations in which people give preferential treatment to those who are perceived to be in the same ingroup. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012: 303) define the **ingroup-favouritism principle** as 'a positive attachment to and predisposition for norms that are related to one's ingroup'. If ingroup members feel under threat from outsiders, ingroup favouritism may be accompanied by outgroup derogation (e.g. 'us' vs. 'them' discourse whereby us is positioned more favourably). Insufficient knowledge about outsiders and negative expectations can heighten one's anxiety level and reduce the desire to interact with people outside one's ingroup (Gudykunst 2005). Not surprisingly, then, favouring one's ingroup can lead to the negative consequences of Othering, e.g. prejudice, discrimination, sexism, ageism and racism.

ETHNOCENTRICISM

Through the process of primary socialization, people in all cultures develop expectations and shared understandings about the most appropriate ways to behave in different situations and contexts. Basically, from our parents, teachers and religious leaders we learn the social rules and ways of being (e.g. linguistics norms of politeness) that are preferred by members of our particular ingroup (e.g. ethnic group, religious group). We are exposed to worldviews endorsed by those who are closest to us and over time we develop common ideas about what is 'right' and 'wrong', 'fair' and 'unfair', etc. If we have limited contact with other cultural groups, we may also assume that everyone does things as we do.

The ingroup-favouritism principle is closely linked to the notion of **ethnocentricism**, which derives from the Greek words *ethnos*, meaning 'nation' or 'people,' and *kentron*, meaning *centre.* The term ethnocentrism was coined by William G. Sumner, an American sociologist, who observed the tendency of people to differentiate between their ingroup (e.g. ethnic group) and outsiders in a way that privileges their own group members. He defines ethnocentricism as '[t]he sentiment of cohesion, internal comradeship, and devotion to the ingroup, which carries with it a sense of superiority to any out-group and readiness to defend the interests of the ingroup against the out-group' (Sumner 1911: 11). Individuals with an ethnocentric mindset see people from other cultural backgrounds as inferior or insignificant compared with their own ingroup members. Ethnocentric behaviour may be characterized by arrogance, vanity and even contempt for people who do not belong to one's ingroup.

Ethnocentric thinking may cause us to make false assumptions and premature judgments about people who have been socialized in a different cultural environment. When we only draw on our own cultural (and linguistic) norms to evaluate unfamiliar practices (e.g. cultural

scripts, sociopragmatic norms, customs, ethics, religious traditions), we are engaging in Othering and behaving in an ethnocentric way. We are 'assuming that the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality' (M.J. Bennett 1993: 30) and that our ways are the *only* proper ways to think and behave. As noted by Lustig and Koester (2010: 150), '[w]hen combined with the natural human tendency to prefer what is typically experienced, ethnocentricism produces emotional reactions to cultural differences that reduce people's willingness to understand disparate cultural messages'. An ethnocentric mindset can hold one back from initiating and maintaining healthy intercultural relationships.

Ethnocentric tendencies can impact on the way we communicate with people who are different from ourselves. For example, ethnocentric individuals who are using their first language when conversing with minority members who are not fluent may speak in ways that convey indifference or a lack of respect. They may use complex grammatical structures, jargon or idioms, speak very rapidly and switch topics frequently, knowing full well that their speech is incomprehensible to their audience. Through their verbal and nonverbal behaviours (e.g. patronizing tone of speech), they may also communicate with adult second language learners in ways that position their interlocutors as young children or less than intelligent adults.

Ethnocentric people may also make comments that disparage their interlocutors and other individuals who they perceive to be from a lesser group or category. For example, they may display disrespect for members of the opposite sex or denigrate people from a different region who speak with a different accent or communication style. To create social distance from outsiders who they dislike, fear, distrust or simply disrespect, ethnocentric individuals may also limit future intercultural interactions.

In stark contrast with ethnocentricism, **cultural relativism** refers to the view that beliefs, value systems and social practices are culturally relative, that is, no culture is inherently superior to another. Ethnorelativism means 'to understand a communication practice from the other person's cultural frame of reference' (Ting-Toomey & Chung 2012: 301). From an ethnorelative perspective, 'different cultures are perceived as variable and viable constructions of reality' (M.J. Bennett 1993: 66). This position acknowledges that there is no absolute standard to compare and contrast different ways of being. As noted in the first chapter, however, this does not mean that we accept practices that harm others. Later in this chapter we discuss how to minimize the ethnocentric tendencies that exist in all of us.

STEREOTYPING

Ethnocentrism often results in **stereotyping**, a strong tendency to characterize people from other cultural backgrounds unfairly, collectively and usually negatively. A **stereotype** is a preconceived idea that attributes certain characteristics (e.g. personality traits, intelligence), intentions and behaviours to all the members of a particular social class or group of people (Allport 1954; Bar-Tal 1996; Holliday 2010).

Before we go further, it is important to distinguish between stereotypes and generalizations. A **generalization** is 'a statement about common trends within a group, but with the recognition that further information is needed to ascertain whether the generalization applies to a particular person' (Galanti 2000: 335). Although stereotypes and generalizations may seem similar, they function in different ways. For example, if you meet an Egyptian man and assume that he has many children, you are stereotyping him. If, on the other hand, you say to yourself, 'A lot of Egyptians have many children, I wonder if Sami does,' then you are generalizing. Whereas a stereotype imposes one's assumptions on others based on commonly

held beliefs, a generalization is a starting point and you understand that much more information is needed to determine if your ideas or perceptions apply to a particular individual (or group) or situation.

We are not born with stereotypes, we learn them during the process of socialization by way of messages about outgroup members from parents, grandparents, teachers, the clergy, etc. As we mature, we are influenced by portrayals of different groups in the media (e.g. television dramas, sitcoms, movies, comedy shows, newspapers, the Internet) as well as our own life experiences (e.g. intercultural encounters, travel). Stereotypes may also emerge out of fear, ignorance or distrust of people who are different from ourselves (e.g. physical attributes, intelligence, colour of skin, etc.).

There are many reasons why people resort to stereotyping: to quickly process new information about a person or situation, to organize previous experiences, to stress differences between themselves and other individuals or groups (e.g. to convey that 'us' is superior to 'them'), to make predictions about other people's behaviour, to simplify their life and so on.

The process of stereotyping typically involves the following steps:

1 Often individuals are categorized, usually on the basis of easily identifiable characteristics such as sex or ethnicity.
2 A set of attributes is ascribed to all (or most) members of that category. Individuals belonging to the stereotyped group are assumed to be similar to each other, and different from other groups, on this set of attributes.
3 The set of attributes is ascribed to any individual member of that category.

(Hewstone & Brown 1986: 29)

Stereotyping about groups of people can be based on a wide range of characteristics (e.g. language/accent, ethnicity, physical appearance, nationality, religion, geographic location, class, age, sex, gender, etc.). The following list provides a few examples of people or groups that are often stereotyped (e.g. in the mass media, films):

- cities (Beijingers, Bostonians, Parisians, Singaporeans, Berliners)
- regions within countries (Newfies in Canada, Northerners, Yorkshire folk)
- dialects (Ebonics in the U.S., Yakuzas in Japan)
- race (African Americans, Caucasians, Hispanics, Native Hawaiians)
- religion (Atheists, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs)
- ethnic groups (Chinese, black Africans, Arabs, Hispanics)
- national groups (U.S. Americans, Iranians, Irish, Italians, North Koreans)
- age (youngsters, adolescents, teenagers, middle-aged, senior citizens)
- vocations (teachers, garbage collectors, clergy, newscasters, football players)
- social class (poor, white collar, blue collar, upper middle class, the corporate rich)
- physical attributes (obese, anorexic, dwarfs, tall, jocks)
- disabilities (deafness, blindness, mentally disabled)
- gender (masculinity, femininity)

When people stereotype, they typically apply a commonly held generalization of a group to every single person in the cultural group. For example, in many parts of the world, U.S. Americans are stereotyped (e.g. in the media, movies) as friendly but arrogant and ignorant about world affairs, while the British are perceived as reserved and uptight, etc. In Hong Kong, Mainland Chinese are often stereotyped as loud, aggressive and lacking in manners, whereas

in Mainland China, Hong Kongers are sometimes branded as materialistic and devoid of culture. In the following excerpt, for instance, a Hong Kong student discloses the stereotype she harbours of Mainland Chinese:

> From my own experience of the Mainland, I have a bad impression that people there are less civilized than Hong Kong people. They are untrustworthy, unfair, and unjust. Bribery and corruption are all around in court, in schools, in companies, and even in streets . . . They are less educated in the concepts of hygiene: they squat in toilets, spit around the streets, and throw rubbish all around . . . It is not surprising there are a lot of contagious diseases. The Mainland Chinese are just inferior to us Hong Kong people. Hence, it is a torture for me to visit my relatives in the Mainland.

Individuals who have only encountered a few people from a particular group may overgeneralize what they have observed and this can lead to stereotyping. For example, if you interact with a Frenchman for the first time in your life and you perceive him to be very rude and arrogant, you may erroneously conclude that all French are lacking in manners. Similarly, if you chat with an Indonesian girl who is very shy and reticent, you may draw the incorrect conclusion that all Indonesians (or even Asians) are poor conversationalists.

Stereotypes are often infused with emotion, and usually portray individuals or groups in a negative light (e.g. 'Don't employ Mexicans as they're all lazy', 'Women are not as intelligent as men', 'Males are not good at learning foreign languages'). Some overgeneralizations may stress positive characteristics or behaviours. For example, Asians are often assumed to excel in mathematics and the learning of musical instruments (e.g. the violin, piano). In reality, not all Asian students are good at maths and many have no musical talent – as in other ethnic groups. When a stereotype overgeneralizes the positive characteristics attributed to a particular group, individuals who do not fit the mould are disadvantaged.

Stereotyping related to gender is common in many parts of the world. The behaviour, conditions or attitudes that promote stereotypes of social roles based on gender is referred to as **sexism**. As men are most often in positions of power, this typically entails sexist behaviours that foster prejudice and discriminate against females. **Gender stereotyping** refers to simplistic overgeneralizations about the gender characteristics, differences and roles of males and females. For example, believing that a woman is incapable of holding public office because 'females are too emotional' is a gender stereotype. Denying men the opportunity to teach in a primary school because 'males are not good with young children' is another example. Stereotypes such as these are typically expressed through **sexist language**, that is, the use of words or phrases that unnecessarily emphasize gender, or ignore, belittle or stereotype members of either sex.

Sexist language is linked to power and oppression. As males tend to be in positions of power, not surprisingly, sexist discourse often portrays females in a negative light. For instance, when two professors are formally introduced in a conference meeting as Dr. Martin Shore and Mrs. Nakano, the male lecturer is accorded more respect. His academic title is verbally acknowledged, whereas her status is ignored, even though she also has a PhD and, actually, a much higher academic rank. In this scenario, the language used privileges the male professor and diminishes the professional status of Professor Nakano; the introduction also discloses her marital status, which is a personal detail that is not relevant to the meeting.

Ageism refers to the stereotyping or discrimination of a person or group of people due to their age. As Hopkins (2010: 8) observes, ageism 'works to create and sustain assumptions about aged individuals and their behaviours, attitudes, and values'. **Ageist stereotyping** involves

categorizing individuals into groups according to their age and then ascribing certain characteristics and behaviours to all people of that age group (e.g. teenagers, Generation X, senior citizens). In many cases, these overgeneralizations can be harmful to people. For example, not all teenagers are irresponsible, immature and selfish; in fact, many are quite the opposite! Not all people who are over 65 are too old and feeble to work! Ageist language can also be used to convey stereotypes of people based on their age. For example, older people are portrayed as mentally and physically challenged when labels such as old-timers, old folks and golden agers are used. Stereotypical language and images such as these can diminish people and lead to exclusion and other discriminatory practices.

Dervin (2012), Samovar *et al.* (2010), Sorrells (2012) and other interculturalists have identified a number of ways in which stereotypes can become engrained and serve as barriers to intercultural communication:

1 Stereotypes can lead us to believe that a commonly-held belief is actually true, when in fact it is not.
2 Stereotypes may compel us to only accept information that is in accord with our previous perceptions of a particular outgroup. Even if we meet an individual who does not fit our preconceived ideas, we may choose to ignore this new information.
3 Stereotypes are difficult to change, in part, because many were formed in childhood through messages from people we love and respect, as well as through portrayals in the media (e.g. TV, movies). Therefore, we may fail to modify the stereotype even when it no longer fits with our actual observations and experience.
4 When we stereotype we assume that all members of a group possess the same characteristics and we fail to recognize or acknowledge individual variations.
5 Stereotypes generally reduce people to a single aspect of their identities (e.g. trait, characteristic or dimension), overlooking the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identities.
6 When we stereotype, we send and interpret messages in ways that do not convey recognition of the unique, individual characteristics of others; instead, we rely on oversimplified, overgeneralized perceptions, which is not fair to the people we are communicating with as it reduces them to mere 'cultural representatives'.
7 Stereotyping can lead to the use of language that diminishes the worth of individuals, perpetuates overgeneralizations, and leads to inequality (e.g. sexist language, ageist discourse).
8 Stereotyping devalues individuals and groups, and can result in or perpetuate inequality (e.g. gender inequality, age inequality, religious inequality and so on), which is very damaging to intercultural relations.

Intergroup communication is impacted in negative ways by the common practice of stereotyping and Othering. Later in this chapter, we discuss ways to avoid stereotyping and cultivate more respectful intercultural relations.

BIAS AND PREJUDICE

To become a more respectful intercultural communicator, it is imperative to have an understanding of what is meant by bias and prejudice; like stereotyping, these are common phenomena that can negatively impact on intercultural relations worldwide. As Omaggio Hadley (1993: 368) observes, '[f]or good or for bad, we all have biases. We see things in

terms of what we know'. A **bias** is a personal preference, like or dislike, which can interfere with our ability to be objective, impartial and without prejudice. For example, some people have a bias against blondes and do not regard them as intelligent; hence, the pejorative term 'blonde bimbo'. Others are biased towards people with body art and fail to recognize the positive, unique qualities in individuals with tattoos and piercings.

Prejudice refers to 'dislike or hatred of a person or group formed without reason. It is culturally conditioned since it is rooted in a person's early socialization' (Maude 2011: 112). In other words, we learn to dislike or distrust people who are not like ourselves as we are influenced by negative messages or images that we receive from those who are closest to us (e.g. parents, religious figures) and the media. Thus, prejudicial thoughts are closely linked to rigid and faulty stereotypes that form during the primary socialization process.

Noting that prejudice is 'a universal psychological process', Lustig and Koester (2010: 156) observe that

> [p]rejudiced attitudes include irrational feelings of dislike and even hatred for certain groups, biased perceptions and beliefs about the group members that are not based on direct experiences and firsthand knowledge, and a readiness to behave in negative and unjust ways toward members of the group.

Unfortunately, prejudice is common all over the world as it serves many economic, psychological and social functions (Allport 1954; Samovar *et al.* 2010).

People may experience prejudicial thoughts and emotions for a variety of reasons:

- *to 'fit in' and feel more secure.* For example, Ali was born in Australia to immigrant parents from Yemen, who have become successful merchants in Melbourne. To fit in with the majority culture, he might display disdain for Arab immigrants (e.g. make derogatory comments about newcomers) and refuse to learn Arabic or use the language in public, fearing he would be treated as an outsider (immigrant) if he did so.
- *to provide a scapegoat for difficulties in times of trouble (e.g. economic, social, interpersonal).* In Manchester, England, for example, Sven, a 28-year-old skinhead (an unemployed white supremacist who dropped out of secondary school) blames his unemployment status on immigrant workers; at the same time, he denigrates their work ethic, skills and output.
- *to boost their self-image and self-esteem.* For example, a well-to-do homemaker without higher education may give orders to her amah (live-in nanny) and frequently criticize and disrespect the young woman (e.g. her second language accent, ethnicity, work ethic, appearance, etc.) to feel more powerful and in control. Her Filipino helper may, in fact, have a university degree but be forced to work abroad due to poor economic conditions in her home country.
- *to strengthen ingroup bonds and gain social distance from outgroups.* To feel closer to other believers, a devout Catholic may only socialize with other Catholics and harbour prejudice against other branches of Christianity (as well as other religions) and stress how Catholic doctrine is different and superior.
- *to justify a group's domination over another.* In some countries, beliefs about the lack of mental toughness and 'emotional nature' of women allows men to exclude women from certain occupations and positions, e.g. senior administrative posts, posts within the military.

Many forms of prejudice negatively impact on intercultural relations. For example, individuals may be prejudiced towards people who have a different accent, second-language speakers,

individuals with a different sexual orientation/preference, believers of another religion (or individuals who are atheists, non-believers), minority group members, foreigners and people who have a different skin or hair colour, etc.

Ignorance and fear are often at the root of prejudice. For example, people who have limited intercultural experience may fear interactions that could lead them to unchartered waters. It is also easier to blame others than acknowledge limitations in oneself or other ingroup members.

As noted by Samovar *et al.* (2010), prejudice may be expressed overtly or in indirect ways. For example, while individuals may be prejudiced towards a particular person or group (e.g. those who differ from them in terms of age, class, language, skin colour, sex, gender, ethnicity, level of education, physical abilities, etc.), they may not act on their beliefs or negative **attitudes** (a learned tendency to evaluate a person, behaviour, or activity in a particular way). Instead of actively discriminating against outgroup members, they may try to keep their prejudicial thoughts and biases hidden, recognizing that it is not politically correct to openly disparage others based on religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

Convinced of the superiority of their ingroup, ethnocentric individuals may also display overt prejudice towards people who are not outgroup members. They may express prejudice by employing ethnocentric speech to denigrate outgroup members, that is, they may talk in a way that is demeaning or disrespectful of others or their ingroup(s) (e.g. use sexist/ageist language, derogatory terms). People who are prejudiced may adhere to stereotypes even when confronted with evidence that conflicts with their negative perceptions. Therefore, prejudice is destructive and very harmful to intercultural relations.

DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination can be thought of as 'the expression of prejudice' (Samovar *et al.* 2006: 175) or 'prejudice "in action"' (Lustig & Koester 2012: 158). Basically, it is the prejudicial or unequal treatment of certain individuals based on their membership, or *perceived* membership, of a particular group or category. The United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) (1989) defines **racial discrimination** as

> any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin, which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, or any other field of public life.

Discrimination can take place in multiple forms and encompass many issues. For example, individuals or groups may be discriminated against (e.g. receive fewer benefits or be denied opportunities) based on their age, language, accent, sex, gender, pregnancy, race/colour of skin, religion, national origin, medical condition (e.g. AIDS, cerebral palsy, bipolarism), mental or physical ability and so on. Individuals or groups (e.g. ethnic minorities) who are discriminated against do not enjoy the same privileges and respect as the rest of society. The term **human rights** refers to the basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled, including the right to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression and equality before the law.

Discrimination may occur in all domains of life (e.g. in the workplace, at social functions, in public transportation, housing, education, etc.).

The following scenarios illustrate discriminatory practices:

Plate 7.1 New immigrants sometimes face discrimination and harsh living conditions as they struggle to find their way in a new environment © Jane Jackson

- A second language speaker with a high proficiency in English is denied a job as a clerk because she is not a native speaker of the language. She is more than capable of doing the required tasks and is more competent than the native speaker who was offered the post.
- A security guard refuses to allow a blind woman to enter the library with her seeing-eye dog.
- A Muslim woman applies for a job as a secretary. Even though she is the best applicant she is not offered the job due to her religion.
- An HIV-positive student is not accepted by a private school as the administrators fear that he will eventually get AIDS and this will endanger others and harm the reputation of the school.
- A junior high school teacher only encourages boys to major in physics and chemistry as he believes that hard sciences are too difficult for girls.
- After discovering that a tenant is gay, a homophobic landlord accuses him of making too much noise and evicts him even though the heterosexual tenants are much noisier.
- Young girls wish to attend school like their brothers but the village men refuse to allow females to be educated.
- An Indian couple wishes to rent an apartment that was advertised in the local newspaper but the landlord tells them that he no longer has any vacancies. This was not true and later the same day he rents the apartment to a white applicant.

- A high school graduate with an impressive academic record is invited to a selection interview for a prestigious college; when the Chinese interviewers discover she has a Filipina mother and her parents are divorced, they choose a Chinese candidate instead, even though that person's qualifications are not as impressive.
- A very energetic, physically fit 55-year-old man applies for a job that he is well qualified for; however, he is rejected as he is considered too old by the potential employer.
- A university graduate who has cerebral palsy applies for a job with a company and even though she is physically and intellectually able to perform the required tasks, the interviewer cannot see past her disability and refuses to offer her the post.
- Only males are allowed to participate in study abroad programmes even though female students are also keen to go abroad to further their education.

These examples highlight the diverse ways in which people in positions of power may discriminate against others.

Individuals may also believe that they are the victims of discrimination when this may not actually be the case. When members of a minority group are visibly different from the majority, they may understandably feel insecure and when intercultural encounters do not go well they may attribute it to discrimination. For example, a Chinese student who was having difficulty adjusting to England wrote the following in her sojourn diary:

> The British don't accept us to be in their country. Discrimination is still there, though there may be laws to protect you . . . Now, I feel more about my Chinese identity. It will never equal to western people. We are too different. We don't understand, or refuse to understand each other fully. They are too far ahead of us. (I notice the use of 'we', 'I' versus 'they' here; there is really a distinction).

Perceptions of discrimination, whether real or imagined, need to be acknowledged and processed as they will, inevitably, impact on intercultural relations and the willingness for further intercultural encounters. This aspect is discussed further at the end of this chapter.

Discriminatory language

Discrimination may also manifest itself through language use. **Discriminatory language** may take many forms (e.g. derogatory labels, offensive terms, stereotypes, trivializing language). People who are different from ourselves may be labelled in a pejorative way, largely ignored or verbally referred to in a demeaning way, which can be very hurtful to the group or individuals that are targeted. In Australia, for example, the term 'abos' is sometimes used for Indigenous Australians, 'pooftas' for gay men, 'queue jumpers' for refugees or asylum seekers, 'welfare cheats' for the unemployed, 'wogs' for European immigrants and their children, 'spazzes' for people living with cerebral palsy and 'geriatrics' for older people (Equal Opportunity Unit 2005; Pauwels 1991). Referring to a woman as 'just a housewife' or 'just a girl' is also dismissive; expressions of this nature foster unequal treatment and respect.

In many cultural settings, individuals with mental illnesses are ostracized and stigmatized. The pejorative terms used to depict people with mental illness or cognitive impairment reflect the level of ignorance and lack of tolerance that are prevalent in the community. Undeniably, language plays a powerful role in perpetuating discrimination.

Discriminatory practices

What lies behind discriminatory practices? Why do people use discriminatory language and engage in other acts that deny individuals and groups the rights and privileges that they themselves enjoy? Discrimination can be motivated by many factors. People may feel compelled to promote and protect their ingroup and also be motivated by the rather unattractive desire to denigrate or put down others.

Discriminatory beliefs and practices are often driven by fear and ignorance, and the craving of power over others. In contexts where people are very superstitious, mental illness and physical abnormalities may be considered a curse (e.g. a consequence of the sins of parents) and marginalized or hidden from mainstream society. Able-bodied individuals may not make eye contact with people who are disabled and refrain from interacting with those who have mental or physical disabilities.

Discrimination has also been linked to the potential dark side of identities (Samovar *et al.* 2010). Lustig and Koester (2012: 159), for example, warn that 'the formation of one's cultural identity . . . can sometimes lead to hostility, hate, and discrimination directed against nonmembers of that culture'. Strong ingroup affiliations can foster ethnocentric practices, including discrimination and exclusion.

Combating discrimination

Perceptions and attitudes towards differences and disabilities can and do change over time. For example, with more education, superstitions diminish and there is more awareness and recognition of the valuable contributions that disabled people can make in society (e.g. in their home environment, in the workplace). The pejorative labels used to identify people who are physically and mentally different from the majority are then considered unacceptable. To eradicate barriers to equality, people in many parts of the world are fighting discriminatory language and other practices.

In some regions, individuals and groups are still pushing for equal education benefits. In 2012, Malala Yousafzai, a 15-year-old Pakistani schoolgirl, survived a murder attempt by the Taliban (Islamic fundamentalists) as she fought for the right of girls to attend school in the Swat Valley of Pakistan. In 2013, she became the youngest nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. As she recovers, Malala continues to press for women's rights and education for all children. Inspired by her courage, young people and adults all over the globe are joining her crusade to combat gender discrimination.

People are also combating other forms of discrimination. For example, some strive to protect language rights (e.g. mother tongue teaching, bilingual policies in governments, more opportunities for lower income children to learn an international language), equal pay/compensation (e.g. equal pay for women and minorities), and protection from sexual harassment (bullying or coercion of a sexual nature), etc. Some also fight for disabled individuals to have more opportunities to actively contribute to society (e.g. in the workplace). Medical professionals (e.g. mental health experts, rehabilitation specialists, physicians) and, in some cases, caregivers may play a role in advocating for the rights of those who are affected by mental and physical disabilities. Groups may lobby against the use of degrading labels (e.g. mentally retarded) and other forms of language that undermine the dignity of individuals with mental or physical limitations.

In a growing number of nations, **anti-discrimination legislation** now exists to protect the rights of individuals and promote equality among people regardless of their differences (e.g.

sex, gender, religion, ethnicity, social class, physical ability). In the U.S., **affirmative action** (known as **positive discrimination** in the U.K.), refers to education, business or employment policies that aim to redress the negative, historical impact of discrimination by taking factors such as race, sex, religion, gender or national origin into consideration in hiring/promotion/selection situations. In some educational and employment settings, **racial quotas** have been set, that is, there are numerical requirements for the selection and promotion of people from a group that is deemed disadvantaged (e.g. African American students, females). Individuals from disadvantaged groups may be admitted to college with a lower entrance standard than the norm. This policy is controversial and opponents refer to it as **reverse discrimination**, that is, unfair treatment of the majority (or group that is generally considered to have more power and privilege).

RACISM

As discussed in the previous chapter, '**race**' is a contested term that 'has no defensible biological basis' (Smith *et al.* 2006: 278). It is a social construction that historically has privileged people in positions of power (e.g. whites in Britain, Australia, and the United States, etc.). Based on the notion that superiority is biologically determined, 'race has always been established as relationships of domination, oppression, and privilege that position people differently in society' (Parker & Mease 2009: 316). The social category of race has long been associated with colonialism and the abuse of power (e.g. the dominance of white rulers in British colonies).

While scholars and human rights advocates now rally against the use of race in social categorization, in many parts of the world, perceived racial differences continue to be used to classify groups and explain or predict people's behaviour. Census takers (e.g. those who are officially counting the population in a nation) usually ask survey respondents to declare their race from a pre-determined list of categories (e.g. black, Caucasian, Chinese, Hispanic, Japanese and so on). While this information may be used in a positive way (e.g. to determine areas of need for particular health care services), racial categories, which are largely arbitrary, and census data can also be used by ethnocentric individuals and institutions as a basis for treating people less favourably.

Sociologist Gail Lewis explains that racial categorization usually entails a three-step process (**racialization**), which she describes as follows:

1 human populations are divided into discrete categories based on variations in physical features;
2 meaning is then linked to this physical variation, with the view that it is possible to know 'the potentialities, behaviours, needs, and abilities of an individual based on her or her "racial" belonging';
3 this 'social process of categorization and classification' is regarded as 'a product of nature' – that is, 'racial division is said to be natural'.

(Lewis 1998: 99–100)

The placing of racial groups in a hierarchy in society stems from ethnocentric perspectives, ignorance and prejudice. When power, hatred and oppression accompany prejudicial attitudes and discrimination, **racism** may prevail.

> Racism is the belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race. It denies the basic equality of humankind and correlates ability with physical composition. Thus, it assumes that success or failure in any societal endeavor will depend upon genetic endowment rather than environment and access to opportunity.
>
> (Leone 1978: 1)

Liu *et al.* (2011: 291) define racism as '[t]he belief that one racial group is superior and that other racial groups are necessarily inferior'. Along similar lines, Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012: 307) explain that racism relates to 'a personal/institutional belief in the cultural superiority of one race and the perceived inferiority of other races'. Ethnocentric attitudes and feelings of superiority that lead to racist behaviours can have dire consequences for oppressed people in all areas of life (e.g. educational, social, employment, religious) and, in extreme cases, can lead to persecution and even death.

Types of racism

Racism can exist on different levels, e.g. individual, institutional, systemic. **Individual racism** refers to a person's attitudes, beliefs and actions, which can support or perpetuate racism; these racist thoughts and behaviours may be below the person's level of awareness. Individuals may demonstrate their racist beliefs through the telling of racist jokes or by using racial slurs. They may also express their belief in the inherent superiority of their racial group in less direct ways (e.g. by only interacting with members of their racial or ethnic ingroup or by not objecting when others use racial slurs). All the while, they may deny they are racists and become very upset when their behaviours are labelled as such. Accordingly, they may make routine statements of denial such as "'I have nothing against [. . .], but", "my best friends are [. . .], but", "we are tolerant, but . . .'" (Wodak 2008: 65). "'I'm not a racist, but . . .' "It's just a joke." "Some of my best friends are . . .'" (James 2001:1).

Racism may also exist on an institutional level and even be pervasive in public organizations and corporations (e.g. schools, businesses, governments bodies). Economic, social, and political structures, and institutional systemic policies and practices may privilege a particular racial or ethnic group and place others (e.g. minorities) at a disadvantage. For example, racism in schools can lead to unequal treatment for second language, minority children (e.g. lack of access to linguistic, cultural, and material resources, premature streaming into vocational certificate programmes instead of university-bound academic tracks even if the students are very bright). In hospital settings, patients from a minority racial or ethnic group may not receive the same care and attention as members of the majority group (or whatever group is most privileged). **Institutional racism** can result in differential access to the goods, services and opportunities of society.

Systemic racism can lead to the mistreatment of people on a wide scale (e.g. minorities in a particular nation may suffer injustices in all aspects of life due to racist policies). For example, in the United States, from the 1400s to 1865, African Americans (previously labelled as 'negros') were subjected to slavery and some were even murdered (e.g. the victims of mob lynchings or hangings) due to racist beliefs and practices, which are still an issue in contemporary U.S. American society and other parts of the world. In South Africa, from 1948 to 1994, apartheid, a system of **racial segregation** (the separation of people into racial groups in daily life), was enforced through legislation until multi-racial democratic elections eventually brought it to an end. The legacy (e.g. poverty, unequal job opportunities) persists.

Plate 7.2 While apartheid may be over, many South African blacks still live in poverty and have not yet realized the dream of economic independence and stability. The effects of decades of racism linger © Jane Jackson

In other extreme cases, racial hatred and bigotry can culminate in **genocide**, 'the deliberate and systematic destruction, in whole or in part, of an ethnic, racial, religious, or national group' (Funk 2010: 1). In the **holocaust**, for example, millions of people who were deemed racially (or otherwise) inferior (e.g. Jews, the Roma, the mentally or physically disabled, Slavic groups) were massacred in the 1930s and 1940s by Adolf Hitler and the German military. More recently, in 1994, in Rwanda, a sovereign state in Central and Eastern Africa, nearly 100,000 Hutus were murdered by the ruling Tutsis, who professed themselves to be racially superior.

Worldwide, strong ingroup preferences, feelings of superiority based on perceived 'racial' or biological differences and the abuse of power can lead to racist discourse and other acts (e.g. vandalism, physical attacks, ridicule, name-calling, arson, spray painting symbols of hate on buildings linked to minority group members). When there is a power imbalance, individuals or groups with racist attitudes may deny the rights of those they consider 'inferior'. Often these racist thoughts and actions are driven by fear and ignorance, feelings of superiority (or inferiority) and entitlement, and a desire to control others.

Racist discourse and behaviours

Racists, individuals who believe that people who have a different skin colour (or ethnicity) are inferior, may convey their hatred and bigotry in their speech (both oral and written) as well as

their nonverbal behaviours. Through their actions they may express, confirm, legitimize and reinforce oppressive power relations and racist ideologies (beliefs) related to the dominant group. Wetherell and Porter (1992: 70) define **racist discourse** as 'discourse which has the effect of categorizing, allocating and discriminating between certain groups . . . it is discourse which justifies, sustains and legitimates . . . (racist) practices'. Racist discourse may be directed at individuals or groups who are racially or ethnically different or it may include derogatory comments about ethnically different others by those in positions of power. It may take the form of insults, disrespectful forms of address, slurs, taunts and other expressions that convey the speaker's feelings of superiority.

Although there are now more regulations protecting human rights in many sectors of society, in many parts of the world (e.g. **anti-racist legislation** governing schools, the workplace), racism is still widespread and people may convey racist beliefs in a more subtle way. For example, those in positions of power may frequently interrupt ethnic minority speakers, give them little time to speak and/or insist on discussing topics that embarrass or belittle them. Their intonation, facial expressions and posture may also convey a lack of respect of outgroup members (e.g. people who are perceived to be members of a different 'race' or ethnic group with lower social standing).

Whether overt or covert, racism can be extremely detrimental to intercultural relations and world peace. It can threaten the fabric of social harmony and be harmful to society.

XENOPHOBIA

Xenophobia is a severe aversion to or irrational fear (phobia) of 'foreigners' or 'strangers', that is, basically anyone who is different from oneself or one's ingroup, especially in terms of culture (ways of being), language and politics. While racism is linked to prejudice based on ethnicity, ancestry or race, xenophobia is broader; it encompasses any kind of fear related to an individual or group perceived as being different. The target of this hostility may be a group that is not accepted by mainstream society (e.g. minorities, immigrants, members of other ethnic groups).

Plate 7.3 This racist sign was posted in South Africa during the apartheid era © Jane Jackson

Plate 7.4 During apartheid, taxi drivers who were not white were required to park in a special area. Inequality during this time period was pervasive © Jane Jackson

Xenophobic individuals do not recognize that their views are rooted in deep insecurities, e.g. the perceived threat of losing one's own identity, culture and positioning. Gripped with anxiety, individuals in this state may fear the loss of their imagined superiority or racial purity (e.g. interracial marriages involving their children). On a regional or national level, this may lead to discriminatory policies and anti-immigration legislation. Xenophobia is dangerous as it has the potential to spawn hostile and violent reactions, e.g. mass expulsion, brutal killings of immigrants or particular ethnic groups, such as the atrocities that have taken place in Bosnia, Nazi Germany and Darfur.

OVERCOMING ETHNOCENTRICISM AND IDENTITY BIASES

In this chapter, we have discussed the negative consequences of social categorization and Othering, especially in situations where individuals cling to a rigid sense of self, resist other ways of being and do not respect the preferred identities of others. Ethnocentricism, prejudice, discrimination, racism and xenophobia can destroy opportunities for dialogue and friendship with people who have been socialized in a different environment. In today's interconnected world, it is imperative that we develop more awareness of the multiple dimensions of our identities and the ways in which our cultural perceptions and attitudes can influence our interactions with people from outside our ingroups. After all, 'intercultural communication involves people from dissimilar cultures, and this makes difference a normative condition. Thus, our reaction to, and ability to manage, those differences is key to successful interactions' (Samovar *et al.* 2010: 169).

To be a competent intercultural communicator, it is vital to acknowledge the impact of the socialization process on our identities and actions (verbal, nonverbal), as well as how we view the behaviours of people who are different from ourselves. For example, what messages about your identities and cultural membership did you receive from your parents, grandparents, religious figures, teachers, the media, etc.? What messages did you receive about the appropriate ways to use language and various nonverbal codes in particular contexts?

It is natural for us to make generalizations to cope with the complex environment in which we live but this common practice can lead to stereotyping if we are not vigilant. What stereotypes have you been exposed to throughout your life? What messages did you receive about people from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds (outgroups) that you now recognize as stereotypes? Also, consider your language usage. Do you or any of your friends use terms or make jokes that might be offensive to people from other cultures? In what situations have you used the categories of your own culture to judge and interpret the behaviours of people who are culturally (and linguistically) different from you?

To be mindful intercultural communicators, we must recognize the harmful effects of ethnocentricism and stereotyping, and take steps to 'recognize, accept, and celebrate' cultural difference (Lorde 1986: 197). It takes time and conscious effort to nurture an ethnorelative mindset, as noted by one of my students:

> I think the most challenging aspect of communicating with someone from another cultural background is the cultural differences. People need to move away from their own culture's perspectives to see things from the partner's point of view . . . To gain new perspectives, one may have to reduce one's self-centeredness and pay more effort to build up the relationship. One needs to remove one's prejudices and stereotypes of people from other cultural backgrounds. It takes time and energy to remove the cultural barrier and build up intercultural relationships.

To enhance intercultural interactions, we need to recognize the dimensions of our identities that are meaningful to us (e.g. ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality). Are there any aspects that you are particularly sensitive about (e.g. age, sexual orientation, gender, cultural)? How do you define yourself and how would you like others to define you? How do you communicate this to others? How do you feel when others do not recognize your preferred identities? Do you think you clearly indicate how you wish to be viewed or identified?

It is also important to address the following questions and respond in an honest way: Do you respect the identities of others? Are you attentive to messages that individuals from other linguistic or cultural backgrounds send about their preferred identities? Do you avoid the use of sexist or ageist language? If an intercultural encounter does not go well, do you automatically assume that someone from another culture is discriminating against you? Do you quickly label the individual as a racist or do you take time to reflect on other possible explanations for the miscommunication? After unsatisfactory intercultural interactions do you reevaluate your own actions and responses or do you tend to always blame the negative outcome on your communication partners?

While discrimination, prejudice, racism and xenophobia exist everywhere in the world, it is unhelpful to attribute every negative encounter to these phenomena. In intercultural incidents, it is more constructive to begin by considering a range of possibilities (e.g. an emotional reaction to the omission of discourse markers of politeness, lack of recognition or respect for one's preferred identities). Differing linguistic/cultural norms and ignorance (e.g. lack of knowledge of cultural beliefs, values, practices) may lie at the heart of the miscommunication rather than malice or ill-will.

Understanding what intercultural differences annoy you is crucial so that you can work on ways to reduce your negative feelings and become more sensitive to your own actions that may annoy others. Also, identify stereotypes that have become entrenched in your mind so that you can take steps to eradicate them. Be mindful of the language you use (e.g. avoid the use of terms and jokes that belittle people from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds). Knowing how you see yourself and wish to be positioned in various contexts (e.g. at home, in a foreign land) are key elements in intercultural communication. Heightened self-awareness can help you to become a more successful communicator. It can enable you to be more sensitive to the preferred self-identities of people you interact with and more accepting of different ways of being.

All of us experience emotional, visceral reactions to the world around us. It is natural. As we respond to perceptual stimuli (sights, sounds, smells, touch), we often reveal our attitudes and prejudices towards 'outgroup members'. If we are sensitive to our own emotions and behaviours when interacting with people from a different culture we are better positioned to recognize the messages that we are sending.

In an intercultural situation, if you react negatively to something or someone, reflect on what may be the source of your displeasure or discomfort. For example, were you socialized to expect a larger personal distance between speakers than your communication partner? Did the person stand very close to you and invade your personal space? Were you expecting the person to speak more quietly? Were you expecting to hear 'excuse me' or 'I'm sorry' when he or she brushed up against you? Recognizing that someone from another cultural (and perhaps linguistic) background may have learned different social norms can diminish some of the negative feelings that arise. Realizing that the person is not deliberately trying to annoy you is a good start! You can then make an effort to be more accommodating and less hasty in making negative evaluations. One of my students offers the following helpful advice:

> Opening our eyes to see cultural differences is one thing. Opening our heart to accept and respect the differences is another thing. To be open-minded and competent in intercultural contacts, we have to set aside our cultural biases, perceptions about beliefs, values and norms and our expectations on others. This process often involves a lot of internal struggles and anxieties. A way to cope with these internal struggles is to lighten up a bit and be able to laugh about ourselves. The key to deal with cross-cultural communication is to have a sense of humor.

If you are reacting strongly to some aspect of another culture, seek out an explanation in the ethnocentric preferences that you have developed during the process of primary socialization. To avoid ethnocentrism and stereotyping, remember that people who have been socialized in other cultural contexts will not necessarily behave in the same way that you do. Their beliefs, values and practices may differ. Therefore, instead of interpreting anything new based on your own social and cultural norms and values, try to understand how a concept, product or practice fits into the other culture. When people act differently from what you expect, try to avoid making snap judgments, e.g. labelling anything different as 'strange', 'weird' or 'wrong'. Acknowledge differences and try to understand what lies behind these differences.

> When interacting with people from a different culture, we may need to adjust our behaviors. I'm still learning to put myself into others' shoes and interpret others; behaviors from their cultural perspectives instead of mine. When I come across people of other cultures violating the rules of our culture, I step back and see the causes of problems in miscommunication before I make negative comments on others. How can we judge anyway if the standard is not the same?
>
> (University student)

Making a genuine effort to develop friendships with people from a different linguistic and cultural background can be one of the best ways to enhance one's intercultural understanding. One of my students who had very strong negative views about Mainland Chinese was assigned a roommate from Beijing. While very unhappy at first, the stereotypical image she had built up in her mind gradually faded away as she got to know the young woman as a person.

> When I knew I had to stay with a Beijing girl for the whole semester, I was quite nervous and disappointed because of my prejudice towards Mainlanders. Nonetheless, after nearly a month of getting along together, I found that there were many things valuable in her mind that we don't have. For instance, she is hard-working and just sleeps very little. She is polite and sweet to everyone. She is not so uncivilized or dirty as I had imagined. She baths every day, though not usually at night like me. Still, she keeps personal hygiene and her things are clean and packed tidily . . . I realized how unfairly my prejudice made me look down upon our Mainland fellows.

After this positive experience, my student resolved to overcome her tendency to stereotype: 'I'm trying to move from a critical perspective to a sympathetic view, to understand more from the perspectives of Mainlanders and to appreciate their valuable, genuine and sincere characters rather than to criticize their place.' She also recognized that this would not be easy as prejudicial thoughts about Mainland Chinese had been built up in her mind since childhood.

Recognizing one's prejudicial thoughts (that exist in all of us) is a very important first step. A shift in attitude, a willingness to learn about other ways of being and a strong desire to

develop meaningful, equitable intercultural ties can also propel individuals to higher levels of intercultural competence. While it is difficult to avoid social categorization and stereotyping, these are steps that all of us can take to ensure more mutually beneficial and respectful intercultural relations. With more self-awareness and self-monitoring, you can avoid an 'us' vs. 'them' mentality and become a more mindful intercultural communicator.

SUMMARY

While ingroup affiliations provide us with a sense of belonging, our identities, attitudes and mindset can also serve as significant barriers to intercultural communication. Ethnocentrism, the belief that one's own culture is superior to all others, leads us to categorize and judge the world around us using our own cultural frame (e.g. beliefs; values; social, cultural and linguistic norms or rules of behaviour) as a guide or yardstick. Ethnocentricism can result in even more serious reactions to cultural difference, such as stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice, which lie at the heart of racism, whether overt or covert. It can also lead to xenophobia, an intense, irrational dislike or fear of people who are different from us (e.g. foreigners).

This chapter discussed the potentially harmful consequences of ignoring our ethnocentric tendencies. Even if we are well intentioned, our verbal and nonverbal behaviours can convey a lack of respect for people who differ from us in some way (e.g. age, gender, language, ethnicity, skin colour, sexual orientation). This can then impede the development of positive intercultural relations and we will miss out on many of the opportunities that our diverse world offers us. This chapter suggests a different path: 'Change your thoughts and you change your world' (Peale 2007: 233). All of us can take steps towards a more ethnorelative perspective and reap the benefits with more positive intercultural interactions.

discussion questions

1 How might our perceptions of our cultural identity influence our communication with people who have a different linguistic and cultural background?
2 Identify a linguistic and cultural group in your community that you do *not* belong to. What are your attitudes towards individuals who are linked to this group? How have these attitudes been formed? Do you think your views might change in the future? If yes, how and why?
3 What factors influence one's attitudes towards people who speak a different language or have a different accent?
4 Define ethnocentricism and explain how it can lead to stereotyping and prejudice.
5 In a small group, discuss your reaction to the following comment by Gordon Allport (1954) in his book *The Nature of Prejudice*: 'Most of the business of life can go on with less effort if we stick together with our own kind. Foreigners are a strain.' Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
6 In a small group, discuss the causes of prejudice. Cite examples from your personal experience and discuss ways to combat prejudiced behaviour.
7 In some parts of the world, xenophobia and violence are sometimes linked to football

(soccer) or other sports. Why do you think this is the case? Do you think sports officials have a responsibility to address this? If yes, what steps should be taken?

8 Why are immigrants and minority groups often the targets of prejudice and discrimination? What is the impact of this and how might it be combated?

9 How can one's accent serve as an identity marker? Provide examples of situations in which it may serve as a barrier.

10 Identify three types of racism and provide an example of each. What steps can be taken to combat racism and xenophobia?

11 In this chapter we examined numerous ways to combat ethnocentric tendencies and biases. What other suggestions do you have to foster a more ethnorelative perspective in intercultural interactions? Share your views in small groups.

further reading

Bakanic, V. (2008) *Prejudice: Attitudes about Race, Class, and Gender*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

The author examines the role of structural inequality and the cognitive dimension of prejudice.

Brown, R. (2010) *Prejudice: Its Social Justice,* 2nd edn, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

From a social psychological perspective, the author analyzes the prejudices and stereotypes of individuals as part of a pattern of intergroup processes. Numerous examples of prejudice in everyday life are provided.

Hill, J.H. (2008) *The Everyday Language of White Racism*, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

The author examines everyday language in the U.S. to reveal the underlying racist stereotypes that persist in American culture.

Lippi-Green, R. (2012) *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*, London: Routledge.

The author discusses the ways in which discrimination based on accent functions to both support and perpetuate social structures and unequal power relations.

Lustig, M.W. and Koester, J. (2006) *Among Us: Essays on Identity, Belonging, and Intercultural Competence*, Boston: Pearson, Allyn and Bacon.

This collection of essays addresses four main themes: identity, negotiating intercultural competence, racism and prejudice and belonging to multiple cultures.

Valentine, T. (2003) *Language and Prejudice*, New York: Longman.

This book focuses on the way language influences and prejudices perceptions of race, gender, age, disabilities and sexual preferences.