

## HOW DOES PREJUDICE AFFECT PEOPLE?

Prejudice affects the personalities of the persons who hold the prejudice as well as those on the receiving end. You can work more effectively with people who are prejudiced if you understand the ways that prejudiced thinking influences their life views and their day-to-day actions. You can relate more constructively to people from groups that have traditionally been disparaged in the mainstream culture when you understand how their life experiences may be influencing their behavior patterns.

### *Effects of Rejecting Others*

When you stereotype and reject others as not good enough, the immediate payoff is feeling “better-than,” but it’s a cheap thrill. After all, the more time you spend with stereotyped, prejudiced, and discriminatory thoughts, the more time you spend in a critical, blaming, judging state of mind. It follows that you’ll spend less time in an appreciative, enthusiastic, or joyous state of mind.

The more prejudiced you are, the more you view life through a negative lens. The more your thoughts focus on distaste, dislike, resentment, revulsion, anger, and similar feelings, the more likely you are to experience the anxiety and fear of being despised by others, because that way of thinking is prominent in your experience. Your world becomes more hierarchical, with everyone becoming categorized as better or worse, and people always judging and comparing. You have less space in your mind and less time for the beauty, the joy, the love, the wonder of other beings. As prejudice becomes a habit, you may become more and more critical, and therefore you become more and more isolated because there are fewer and fewer people you can enjoy. You block the possibility of knowing a large part of the world’s people with their fascinating variety because you choose to judge so many of them as too strange or not good enough.

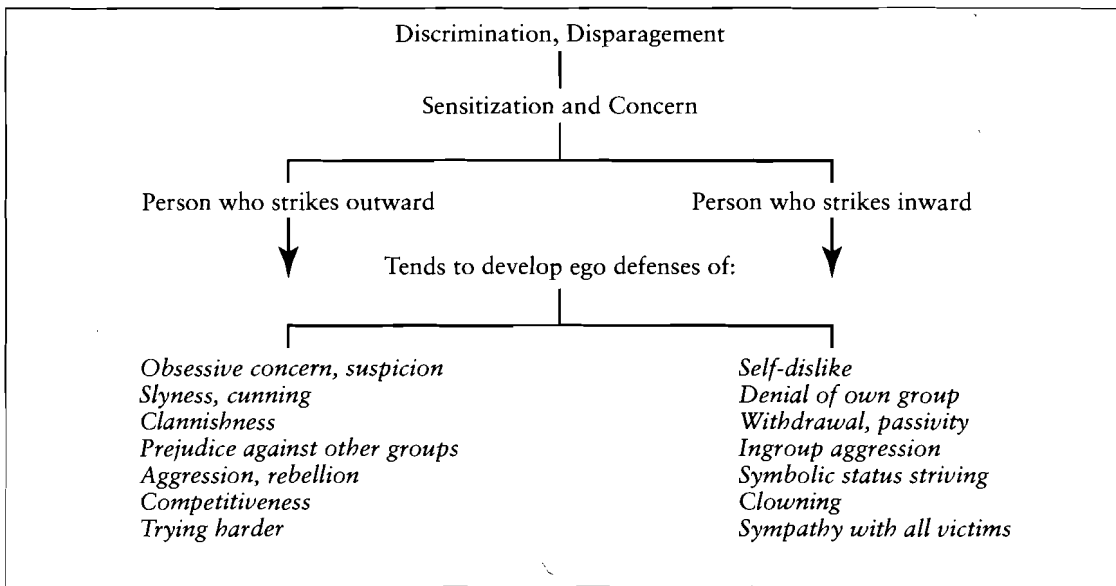
### *Effects of Being Rejected*

Feeling rejected and inferior is difficult to deal with, even if you’re a Euro-American male. It’s more difficult if you’re a woman because you’re told in thousands of subtle or blatant ways throughout your life that you’re inferior in most life areas—just because you were born a woman. If you’re a minority, you’re not only told that you’re inferior, you’re frequently rejected—just because you were born into an “inferior” subgroup. The message that you’re inferior cannot be hammered into your head day after day without doing something to your character. It may cause you to examine who you really are, to accept yourself, and to become a stronger person for it. Or it may cause you to develop defensive coping behaviors. These persecution-produced traits are not all unpleasant. Some people, even when they’re in reaction to rejection, are able to overcome the human tendency to lash out against the unfairness of a dominant majority and to choose responses that are constructive and socially agreeable (Ponteretto and Pedersen 1993; Allport 1954).

Just which ego defenses people develop is largely an individual matter, often coming out of choices made at an unconscious level but sometimes decided upon consciously. At one extreme, you’ll find minority group members who seem to handle their status easily, with little evidence that their outgroup affiliation is of any concern to them. At the other extreme, you’ll find people so rebellious that they have developed many ugly defenses, so that they continually provoke the very snubs they resent. Most people you meet fall somewhere between these extremes, showing some mixture of acceptance and resistance to their status.

Only to a slight extent can we say that certain types of ego defense will be more common in one outgroup than in another. Every form of ego defense may be found among people of every disparaged group. Allport developed the model shown in Figure 5.1, which distinguishes between ego defenses that cause us to strike out at other persons from those that we turn inward to punish ourselves.

FIGURE 5.1: Model of Responses to Discrimination



Adapted from Allport, 1954.

### Ego Defenses That Strike Outward

The basic feeling of members of disparaged groups is one of insecurity, which may lead to being on guard and hypersensitive. Minorities must make many more adjustments to their status than majority members. The latter interact mainly with their own kind and only occasionally with minority group members. The reverse is true for most minorities. In addition, they are more likely to be in a less-powerful position than each of the dominant group members they meet. Preoccupation with the strain of accommodation may become excessive, so that they come to view virtually all members of the dominant group with deep suspicion.

*Obsessive concern and suspicion* often result in a chip-on-the-shoulder attitude based on the belief, "I've been rejected so often that I've learned to protect myself in advance by not trusting any of you."

*Slyness and cunning* are responses of some people who are trying to survive or get ahead in a discriminatory environment. In really hostile environments "sneaky" traits may be a passive-aggressive way of gaining petty revenge against more powerful persecutors.

*Clannishness*, or clustering together with other minority group members, is a natural response to being excluded by the majority group. When people are excluded in work, play, and neighborhood settings, who else can they turn to but their own kind?

*Prejudice against other outgroups*, especially less-powerful groups, is one way to gain some sense of status and power. When we start with a foundation of inequality, a pecking order naturally develops, with the strong picking on the weaker, and they in turn picking on the still weaker.

*Aggression and rebellion* occur when people refuse to "take it lying down," and fight back whenever they can. Their frustration breeds aggression. This can be the source of criminal activity and riots. In contrast, some members see the futility of violence and join political or activist organizations that are dedicated to improving the existing situation.

*Competing and trying harder* are the responses of some minorities. Examples are attending evening classes, studying harder, and working harder than others, trying to make up for an uneven race. Dominant group members may respond with grudging admiration, but they also may accuse the minority of being *too* industrious and clever. Lower-class members of the dominant group may feel envious, resentful, or threatened.

### ***Ego Defenses That Focus Inward***

Some minorities turn their feelings and actions inward on themselves or their group. They tend to punish themselves for being inferior or “outcasts.”

***Self-dislike*** is related to a craving to be one of the dominant group and therefore to identify more with them than with your own group. Self-dislike is not merely pretending to agree with the dominant group; it involves actually seeing the world through their eyes. A person affected by self-dislike may be ashamed of belonging to a disparaged group. For example, self-dislike can cause women to identify more strongly with male viewpoints, with the patriarchal system, and with their limited roles as being positive and in their own best interests. Normally, they are not aware of this process and would probably deny it.

***Withdrawal and passivity*** occurs in varying degrees when a disparaged minority person decides to retreat from life’s more competitive activities and accept the status quo.

***Ingroup aggression*** refers to attacking members of your own group because they possess the traits that you and the dominant group devalue. Aggression is sometimes related to self-dislike that extends to dislike for all disparaged persons. It sometimes occurs when two or more minority groups believe they’re competing for scarce jobs and social services.

***Symbolic status striving*** refers to attempts to gain status by pomp and circumstance, a flashy display of jewelry, cars, and clothes; pretentious use of language; obsessive interest in sexual conquests; and other ways of achieving marginal or symbolic status. It’s self-punishing because it’s not based on solid achievement and may include some elements of clowning.

***Clowning*** is one way to receive good-natured, if patronizing, attention and to show that you are harmless, not threatening. Protective clowning extends into the subgroup itself. For example, some gay persons call themselves and each other *queers*, implying: “If we call ourselves ‘queer,’ it’s no longer an epithet that you can use against us.” Some African Americans call themselves “niggers,” implying: “If we call ourselves ‘niggers,’ we can harden ourselves to the sting of the insult. If we say it often enough, we’ll become so hardened we won’t ever feel its pain again.”

***Sympathy with all victims*** is considered the most positive of these inward-directed ego defenses. People who feel they’ve been victims of discrimination are usually either very high in prejudice or very low; they’re seldom “average.” Being a victim disposes you either to develop aggression toward or sympathy with other outgroups. Knowing all too well how it feels to be rejected, many minority persons reach out to other victims and offer support. Examples are Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition and Jewish Americans who joined African Americans to put their lives on the line in the South during the Civil Rights era.