

“Prejudice”

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Have you ever noticed that when you learn a new word, suddenly you start hearing it everywhere? It’s almost as if everyone else learned it at the same time. Of course, it’s not that other people are all using it more – it’s just that you never really heard it before, because it had no meaning – it didn’t fit in with your picture of the world. (You may have heard it physically, but it didn’t register – you didn’t hear it mentally.) You see, we don’t go around seeing and hearing everything there is to see and hear. We carry pictures of the world around in our heads, and beliefs and prejudices about the way things are – and we tune out whatever doesn’t fit them.

Not all the time, of course. Occasionally something contradicts our prejudices so blatantly that we have to notice it.

But then, of course, we can always say, “Well, that’s the exception that proves the rule” – and get to keep our prejudices intact.

But most of the time we won’t even see the contradictions. We won’t see them, because they don’t fit the pictures and beliefs we’re carrying around. For example, look in your Order of Service for a moment. Do you see anything strange about the Doxology?

DOXOLOGY (Melody: *Old 100th*)

*From all that dwell below the
the skies, Let songs of
of hope and faith arise.
Let peace, goodwill on
on earth be sung –
through every land
by every tongue.*

How many of you saw those extra words when you first read the Doxology – or sang it? Most of you [at least a third of you] didn’t, because it didn’t fit your picture. We don’t see things that don’t fit our picture. We don’t hear things that don’t fit our picture either. Ministers know this first hand. Very often someone hears something in our sermon that we never said. A colleague of mine told me he once gave a sermon on happiness in which his main point was that you cannot find happiness by looking for it. If you look for it, he said, you won’t find it. And

afterwards a parishioner came up to him and said, “Fine sermon, Reverend. It’s like I’ve always said, ‘You’ve got to look for happiness if you want to find it.’”

A professor I know said to his class one day, “I don’t believe in God, I don’t believe in God, I don’t believe in God.” He said it three times for emphasis. And after the class was over, a friend of his who wanted to see whether his students were really listening asked one of them, “Would you say your professor is a religious person?” And the student thought for a moment and said, “Oh yes, he’s very religious. Why, just this morning he was talking about God.”

People see and hear what fits in with their pictures.

And if they want to believe – as an example here – that one race is better than another, they’ll find plenty of evidence to fit their prejudice; and it’s amazing how little they’ll see or hear that contradicts it.

So that’s one very noticeable factor in prejudice – seeing things that conform to our expectations. But there is another, more subtle factor at work – and that is our ability to make other people actually conform to our expectations.

For example, did you know that good-looking people have better personalities than plain-looking people? They do! In an experiment at the University of Minnesota they had young men meet young women over the telephone. Only, they showed the men photographs of the women they would be talking to, first. And the men who had good-looking women to talk to found those women to be much more interesting and funny than the other guys did.

And you know, the experimenters thought, “Well, maybe that’s just their recollection of their conversation.” But when they gave the tapes of the conversations to an independent group to listen to, those people found that the good-looking women were much more interesting and funny too, and they had no pictures to sway them. Now, the pictures had been randomly assigned. They weren’t the actual photos of the young women the men had talked. But when a guy thought he was talking to a pretty female, his conversation tended to elicit a more interesting and amusing dialogue with her.

So the women who were believed to be good-looking did turn out to be more sociable and humorous and friendly. And the ones who were believed to be plain-looking did turn out to be dull and serious and awkward. But not because either group was good-looking or plain-looking – but because the women just responded according to the way they were treated.

You see, if you believe someone is going to be nice and friendly, you are likely to make that person nice and friendly. If you believe they're going to be cool and distant, you will tend to make them cool and distant.

An experiment was done at Princeton some years ago, where they had white college students interview black job applicants and white job applicants. They video-taped the interviews, and found that the interviewers spent less time with the black applicants than they did with the white ones, and they were less friendly and more reserved with the black applicants, too.

Now, that may not be all that surprising. You might expect that. But the really interesting part came later. After watching the video tapes, they decided to get some interviewers together and train half of them to be friendly, and the other half to be reserved and unfriendly. And then they had them interview a bunch of applicants. This time all the applicants were white. And they found that the applicants who were interviewed by the unfriendly interviewers were more nervous and didn't do as well. Now these were all white applicants, so it's not that some did worse because of their race.

They did worse because they were treated differently. Conclusion? When white applicants are treated the way black applicants are usually treated, they tend to do worse than white applicants who are treated like whites.

Now, think about the implications: You're interviewing people for a job. You don't think you're prejudiced. But, unbeknown to you, you act differently toward the black applicants than you do toward the white ones.

Consequently, the white applicants do better. And you say, "Gee, I tried not to be prejudiced, but the white applicants were just better, that's all."

Do you see? If you are a little prejudiced, then no amount of experience will necessarily change that, because you'll not only tend to notice the things that confirm your stereotypes – but you'll also get people to do the things that confirm your stereotypes, just by the way you treat them.

So we've got two factors influencing us here. One is our tendency to see only those things that support what we already believe. The second is our tendency to act towards people in such a way as to get them to become what we already believe.

But there is a third factor too. And that is our tendency to interpret things to fit what we believe they are. So even when we actually let ourselves see something that could contradict our beliefs, we can still interpret it in such a way that it won't.

For example, consider the way people sometimes talk about women in leadership positions. Women can do exactly the same things as men, but they'll often be judged very differently for them. If he bosses people around, he's called assertive. If she bosses people around, she's called a witch. (Only, it's spelled with a "b.")

If he flies off the handle, he's just in a bad mood. If she does, it's that time of the month.

If he's sexually active, he's a man of the world. If she is, she's a slut.

If he wins at other men's expense, he's called competitive. If she does, she's called castrating.

Or, as Marlo Thomas says: "To be ruthless, a man must be Attila the Hun. A woman just has to put you on hold."

I'm sure you can think of others, but one of my favorite examples of same action/different judgment ... is from a column by Sidney Harris. He mentioned a man he knew who didn't like black people – and his reason was that they are shiftless, they lack ambition, they don't even help each other, they are unintelligent, and they can't hold down a job. This same man also didn't like Jews. And what do you think his reasons were? They're too ambitious, they help each other out too much, they're too smart and clever, and they have all the best jobs.

Now, when you add these three things together – 1) your tendency to notice those things that confirm your prejudices (and to ignore the things that don't); 2) your tendency to get people to act the way you believe they are, by the way you treat them; and your tendency to interpret the same actions differently and judge one as positive and the other as negative to fit your prejudices – when you add these three very human tendencies together ... you may wonder whether it's possible to overcome prejudice at all.

The answer, I think, is that you never completely do – but you can get closer to that goal. And you do that by examining your attitudes and watching your reactions when you are with people

who are different from you. One of the things I noticed about myself several years ago was that when I met a black person for the first time, I always tried to be more

charming than usual, to be more friendly and sensitive than I would normally be – almost as if to show them (and anyone else who might be watching) how free from prejudice I was. But I was trying too hard. That in itself revealed a convoluted kind of prejudice.

A related trap that liberals sometimes fall into is this: When a minority person says something stupid, they won't challenge him or her. "Well, I mean, she's Native American, after all." Oh, so you expect Native Americans to be stupid, is that right?

This is one of the more subtle forms of racism, and it's ironic because the people in this case are so intent on not appearing prejudiced – that they let outlandish things go by if they're spoken by a member of an oppressed group.

If your normal reaction is to say, "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard" – but you don't say it because the person is part of a minority – then think about how condescending that is of you, to act as if you expect idiocy from those people.

I think of an episode I once saw of the Bob Newhart Show in which Dr. Hartley had a black client who came in for counseling to help him deal with all the prejudice he had to put up with, and the people who didn't like him. And finally Bob tells him, "People don't dislike you because you're black – they dislike you because you've got a rotten personality."

And the man says, "Really? Gee, thanks, Dr. Hartley. That's the nicest thing anyone's ever told me."

Another statement that isn't meant to be racist – but is – is this one: "Well, you know, there are good black people." Often people who say that think they're being really liberated. But if you feel you need to point out that there are good blacks or good Japanese or good anything else, what does that say about your overall assumptions about these people? Do you also say: "Well, you know, there are good white people"? If you don't, then ask yourself why you feel you need to make this distinction.

Or suppose a Hispanic person cuts you off in traffic and you're recounting the story. If you say, "And this Mexican guy cut me off" – I would ask you to ask yourself why you pointed out his race. If it had been someone else in this situation, would you have said, "And then this white guy cut me off"? Why mention race only in the case of minorities, unless you're meaning to imply that of course ethnic minorities do this sort of thing all the time?

Well, as I say, we are all works in progress – and prejudice is something we have to work on the rest of our lives. And although most of us wish we had overcome our biases, we haven't. And pretending that we have only keeps us from getting closer to the goal of overcoming them. And if it's any consolation, the groups of people we are prejudiced against are also struggling to overcome their prejudice toward themselves.

There was another Princeton experiment (just 3 years ago) that took a group of 40 black undergraduates and 40 white undergraduates – and had them play mini-golf. Now, all these students were non-golfers. But half the students were told that they were testing for natural

athletic ability; and the other half were told they were measuring “strategic savvy.” In the group that was told they were testing for natural ability, the blacks did four strokes better, on average.

In the group that was told they were testing for strategic savvy, the whites did four strokes better. (Blacks are supposed to be good at athletics; whites are supposed to be good at mind games. People tend to live up to their expectations.)

They found similar results with math testing for women. When women are told that a math test reveals no differences between men and women, they tend to do as well as a man. But when they believe that women aren't as good, or they see commercials with women in stereotypical roles, they tend to do worse than men. [Newsweek, November 6, 2000, pp 66-8]

A rather blatant example of internalized prejudice was in the news about a month ago. A white supremacist named Leo Felton was sentenced to over 20 years in prison for plotting to blow up a number of landmarks in Washington and Boston – landmarks that honored African-Americans or Jews. He and his group were trying to – quote – “ignite a racial holy war ... that would promote chaos among the races.”

The odd thing about this case, though, is that this particular white supremacist is biracial. His mother was white, his father was black, and he blames both of them for “contaminating” him with black blood. He is part African-American, yet he hates African-Americans – he hates a part of himself. [Racine Journal Times, Dec. 12, '02]

At first glance this sounds very odd; but at second glance perhaps it is not. The truth is, black people suffer from prejudice against black people almost as much as white people do (and sometimes more). Leo Felton is of course a rather extreme

example, but it's something that is actually quite common – internalized prejudice against your own minority group.

That is why you'll find many Jews who find themselves critical of their Jewish neighbors and wondering whether the stereotypes about them are really right. You'll find many gay and lesbian people who are almost as bigoted against homosexuals as homophobic straight people are.

They usually don't want to be – they wish they weren't – they're not likely to tell you about it for fear of confirming any stereotypes – but they are.

Whether we're male or female, black or white, gay or straight, Jew or gentile, we all grow up with most of the same biases, the same pictures in our head of what's normal and what's good; and we can't help absorbing a lot of the same negative stereotypes, even when they're against the group we belong to.

I don't know if that's any consolation, but I have hope for a day when the prejudices we struggle with today will, if not be eliminated, at least be lessened. Maybe not in my lifetime, but in someone's. And until that I plan to not only keep confronting my biases and help others confront theirs – but work for educational and economic policies that will begin to neutralize the impact of those prejudices even while we're waiting for hearts and minds to catch up.

I hope you will too.