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Prejudice as an Expression of Tribalism



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Synonyms

[Racism and prejudice](#); [Tribalism](#); [Tribalism in moral tribes](#)

Definition

People show a set of tribalistic tendencies such as ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination since they were adaptive in the past environmental conditions. In other words, groups that showed stronger ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination were more likely to survive in the past selective pressures. Therefore, prejudice can be seen as a reflection of our evolved tribalist psychology.

Introduction

The finding that people cooperate more with members of their own group and thereby show tribal tendencies has been established in many different areas of research (Balliet et al. 2018; Fowler and Kam 2007; Yamagishi and Mifune

2016). For example, Ben-Ner et al. (2009) showed that when people share an identity (religious, political, etc.), they tend to make clear distinctions between ingroups and outgroups in their intended and actual social behavior. Other research shows that newborns show preferential behavior towards their own race and discriminate against those who do not speak their own language (Bar-Haim et al. 2006). Even in the minimal group paradigm, where groups are generated randomly, people show ingroup favoritism (Tajfel and Turner 1986). This tendency is observed in other primates as well. For example, capuchin monkeys can automatically distinguish the faces of ingroup and outgroup members (Mahajan et al. 2011). In fact, De Waal et al. (2008) showed that capuchin monkeys behaved prosocially toward their ingroup members but not toward the outgroup. In short, discrimination and prejudiced attitudes toward outgroups arise as a result of ingroup favoritism among both humans and our close relatives.

Prejudice is defined as preconceived opinions or attitudes, usually based not on a rational evaluation of evidence that a person has about another party (Allport 1954). Instead, prejudice is usually based on automatic judgments (Bargh 1999) and manifests itself implicitly at the perceptual and physiological level (Payne 2006). Likewise, as the human species evolved in intense intergroup conflicts involving coalition building (Geary 2005), cooperation was often only directed toward own group members. In general, it is

thought that selective environmental pressures caused humans to acquire tribal characteristics including prejudice, since groups that showed stronger ingroup favoritism were more successful than others.

These coalitional conflicts manifest themselves in today's world as well. However, there is an ongoing debate as to whether all political groups have these tribal characteristics equally. In a meta-analysis by Jost et al. (2003), asymmetries between the liberals and the conservatives were found on many areas related to tribalism (e.g., ingroup favoritism, closed-mindedness, prejudice, etc.). For example, conservatives are more biased toward outgroups than liberals. However, these studies were later criticized on methodological grounds (i.e., Brandt et al. 2014). The most important of these criticisms is that past studies chose to study minority groups that the liberals favor (gays, atheists, etc.) as the target of prejudice. Interestingly, liberals reported more prejudiced attitudes than conservatives when minority groups favored by conservatives were selected, such as religious people (Brandt and Van Tongeren 2017; Brandt 2017). In other words, both ideological groups reported prejudice against groups that are not similar in value to themselves. This suggests that people tend to cooperate with ingroups – independent of political ideology – and support the argument that prejudice is a reflection of evolved tribalist intuitions.

In an attempt to explain the psychological differences found between liberals and conservatives, Haidt (2012) states that each political group originally has tribal characteristics, but that liberals spend cognitive effort to repress these tribal characteristics (such loyalty, authority, and sanctity). There is some evidence suggesting that liberals resemble conservatives when their cognitive resources are depleted through cognitive load or existential threat (e.g., Nail et al. 2009). Haidt's theoretical approach, therefore, supports the argument that everyone has a set of tribalistic tendencies and that favoring the ingroups and derogating the outgroups stem from our evolved psychology. Hence, prejudice reflects human nature, evolved due to function in past environmental conditions. One way to avoid

such cognitive biases in general (Kahneman 2011) and prejudiced attitudes in particular (Yilmaz et al. 2016) is to promote the processes of effortful and analytical thinking.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Evolution of Human Sociality](#)
- ▶ [For Ingroup Cooperation](#)
- ▶ [For Outgroup Conflict](#)

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