

Individual Perceptions of Prejudice

Each individual person is unique. Our individuality defines us and separates us. It may also be the source of our delight in each other and enrich our personal relationships. Over and above our individuality, we also share characteristics with other people, some characteristics with almost everyone, others with only a few people. Common features, like unique qualities, can also form the basis of connections and relationships between people and groups. Therefore, in varying degrees, we are like and unlike other people we encounter. Despite the fact that most people are able to tolerate, even celebrate and enjoy, the unique differences of others with whom they come into contact, in general we are most comfortable in the company of those with whom we share common features. Such features may be social class, educational background, taste in music, religious beliefs, professional interests, and a whole host of other possible factors. The more we have 'in common' with another person, the more likely we are to feel an affinity with them. Differences, too, may be a source of interest, but they are potentially more challenging and divisive. There is a level of comfort in being able to identify with elements of another person's being or experience.

History and observation demonstrate that our response to unfamiliar or different people and situations is not universally one of acceptance. Neither is it universally one of condemnation and rejection I would maintain, however, that it is more often a response which veers away from inclusion and tends towards withdrawal. Such withdrawal can take many forms, some relatively benign, others with a greater capacity for causing offence or damage. Prejudice and adverse discrimination exist in all social groups. The fact that there are laws against discrimination of various kinds in every western country attests to its existence. You do not need to outlaw something unless it has proven to be problematic. Such laws have helped by punishing offenders, people who have been shown to be actively practicing racism, or some other form of discrimination, and, presumably, by acting as deterrents. The deterrent effect would be to discourage people from engaging in overt expressions of prejudice, but would do nothing to remove the underlying beliefs, thoughts, and feelings that motivate such expressions. It would be convenient to assume that the phenomena of prejudice and adverse discrimination manifest themselves in a small and reprehensible group within society and that most of us are clear, unbiased, and prejudice-free.

Fortunately, it is only a minority who choose to engage in the most extreme forms of discriminatory behaviour, violence or even murder on the basis of a person's skin colour or religion. But that does not exonerate the rest of us from harbouring prejudices. We all have preferences and we discriminate, in the sense of making choices based on our values and tastes, in all areas of our lives. Many of these choices and preferences are in response to the perceived similarities and differences of others. The presence of our own prejudices or biases is something we prefer not to acknowledge or examine, precisely because it conflicts with that aspect of our chosen identity by which we would like to see ourselves as non-judgmental, fair-minded, and accepting of all humankind. Society is made of people, if the society we have created is imperfect, oppressive, or unjust, it is because we have made it so, or allowed it to be like that.

Q. Write the meanings of the following words in the spaces provided.

a. affinity

b. divisive

c. benign

d. deterrent

e. reprehensible

f. exonerate

Q. Answer the following questions based on the text, 'Individual Perceptions of Prejudice'.

a. To what extent does the writer say humans are individually 'unique'?

b. Why are we more likely to feel an affinity with those who have more 'in common' with us?

c. In what forms do humans express withdrawal? What are the extremes?

d. Why are the majority of people in society prejudice-free?

e. What does the writer say about our individual perspectives and discrimination?

f. What might be the best method of eliminating discrimination and prejudice from the society?
