



# Prejudice and War Stories for a Better World

By Rutger Tamminga

War could never take place without prejudice.

The Germans of the early twentieth century saw the Jewish people as less than human and called them "rats". Hutus involved in the Rwanda genocide called Tutsis "cockroaches". Slave owners throughout history considered slaves "subhuman animals".

In *Less Than Human*, David Livingstone Smith argues that it is important to define and describe dehumanization, because it is what opens the door for cruelty, genocide and war. Recent events in Ukraine are a textbook example of stereotyping and vilifying "the other" and justifying a brutal and barbarian war of rape and destruction.

P.R. Sarkar made fighting against prejudice a key part of the Neohumanist philosophy. But how can we prevent people from falling again and again in this trap of dehumanizing "the other" and what can we do to prevent such events?

## It All Starts in Childhood

Our social values and identity begin to be formed from early on. Babies as young as three months old will prefer the people that look like their primary caregivers. By the sixth month they prefer the people who speak the language of their primary caregivers. The idea of people belonging to our group and "the others" evolves and becomes conscious in the child's own mind by the age of four.

Psychologist Gordon Allport believed that to make sense of the world around us, it's important to sort information into mental categories. "The human mind must think with the aid of categories," Allport explained in his book, "The Nature of Prejudice." "Once formed, categories are the basis for normal prejudgment. We cannot possibly avoid this process. Orderly living depends upon it."

Being able to quickly categorize information allows us to interact and react quickly, but it also leads to mistakes. For example, we tend to minimize the differences among people within certain groups and exaggerate the differences between groups. This is referred to as "social categorization".

## Types of Prejudice

Loving your own group does not imply a negative attitude towards others, but it is very well possible. Our natural inclination to categorization and social identity easily can turn into prejudice under the influence of parents and the social environment. These attitudes become ingrained as what P.R. Sarkar calls "socio-sentiments," "geo-sentiments" and "pseudo-humanist sentiments."

These sentiments can feed numerous types of prejudice, some of which include:

**Ageism**, such as believing that someone is "too old" or "too young" to work in a particular role or participate in a specific activity

• **Classism**, which may include having a negative belief about someone based on their income or looking down on someone because they are "poor" or a member of the working class

• **Nationalism**, which involves believing that the interests of your state's group are more important than those of other groups

• **Racism**, which involves having a negative attitude toward members of a certain racial or ethnic group rooted in systems of power and oppression

• **Religious prejudice**, which involves feeling negatively toward someone because of their religious beliefs, practices, or ideologies

• **Sexism**, which involves holding certain stereotypes or beliefs about someone based on their sex or gender, such as feeling as if they can't (or can) do something based on this factor

• **Xenophobia**, which involves disliking or fearing someone who the person considers "foreign" or "strange," often in the context of their native country

## Family, Friends, and Social Groups

A 2018 study involving children between the ages of 3 and 9 found that if the parents held even a subtle ethnic prejudice, this predicted whether their kids held an implicit prejudice, regardless of parenting style. This suggests that the beliefs of parental figures can influence if a prejudice develops.

Henri Tajfel's greatest contribution to psychology was social identity theory. Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s). Tajfel proposed that the groups (e.g. social class, family, football team etc.) which people belonged to were an important source of pride and self-esteem. Groups give us a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world.

We divide the world into "them" and "us" through a process of social categorization (i.e. we put people into social groups)

## Consequences of Prejudice

When prejudice exists, it can affect people and societies in many different ways.

- Studies have connected the presence of prejudice with poorer physical health.
- Other pieces of research have linked perceived prejudice with reduced mental health, both in terms of ethnic identity and even feelings of hope.

- Prejudiced views between cultures may result in racism; in its extreme forms, racism may result in genocide, such as occurred in Germany with the Jews, in Rwanda between the Hutus and Tutsis.

An association between status and group membership can be learned surprisingly quickly. The psychologists Kristin Shutts, Kristina R. Olson, and Suzanne R. Horwitz recently demonstrated that with just a few minutes of exposure in a laboratory setting to information about fictional groups with differing socio-economic status, children picked up on which groups were wealthier — and indicated that they liked those people better.

Gender attitudes, too, form early and can be influenced by subtle cultural cues.

## **A Rationalistic Mentality - Stopping Prejudice**

Initially negative implicit attitudes about people can be unlearned. P.R. Sarkar made transcending geo/socio-sentiments a big part of Neohumanist education. The prejudices and preferences for one group over another are the seeds of social inequality, economic disparity, and possible violence. He aimed for the development of a "rationalistic mentality" to tackle issues of racism, nationalism, bias and hate. As the formation of social bias starts at a young age, it is important to start early.

Talking to children about prejudice and its social consequences is an important part of helping them grow. It is found that even in young children, we have to make children aware about the existence of bias in the society in order for them to address it rationally and not let the early childhood influences affect their future thinking.

We have started a program recently where we share stories on differences, bias, and issues of fairness through simple narratives which we then use to start conversations with young children about race, humanity, culture, inclusion, inequality, unfairness and kindness. We use these

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storytelling techniques also with adults to raise awareness of prejudice in our own thinking.

In a recent workshop on social inequality and fairness, we asked the participants to create stories (for children) about their experiences with social inequality. One group described discrimination based on clothing. Another team created a story on the fact that they did not attend any of the prestigious universities, and thus did not qualify for certain positions in the office. Stories also touched on gender, where women earn less for doing more work than their male partners.

Prejudice is a heavy brake on society's progress and development and tremendously difficult for those who experience it. Hate crime statistics differ per country, but the latest figures show that in a country such as Afghanistan, 90 percent of the population is not safe from prejudice. In many countries this figure falls around 30% and only in some places it is much lower.

To make a difference, we need to:

1. Get educated
2. Educate our children
3. Listen and have conversations with each other
4. Take action

Being not prejudiced is not enough to make changes. Some people say we must be "anti-prejudice." This means we must be actively speaking out in words and acting up in actions against racism. This anti-prejudice attitude however is also not enough. You may be against prejudice, but what are you in favor of? What we have to develop is an attitude of what P.R. Sarkar calls "**samasamaj tattva**", social equality as a principle of life, a vision developed on the basis of universal love. Unless we aim to cultivate universal compassion, we will never find social peace, nor prevent the next war.

