

Pop and Prejudice: How Modern Prejudice is Depicted in our Pop Culture

How is modern prejudice depicted in our pop culture?

Published on September 25, 2009 by Melissa Burkley, Ph.D. in *The Social Thinker*

Humans are fascinated by prejudice, and our interest in this topic can easily be seen in our films, television shows, books and plays. Some movies and TV shows attempt to address the issue of prejudice head-on (e.g., *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *American History X*). For example, *Star Trek* broke racial barriers in 1968 when it became the first American TV show to feature an interracial kiss between fictional characters.

However, much of our modern pop culture depictions of prejudice seem to occur in more subtle ways and often these depictions of prejudice come with a bit of tongue-in-cheek. HBO's *True Blood*, for instance, imagines a world where vampires have "come out of the coffin" and depicts an "interracial" romance between Sookie Stackhouse and the Vampire Bill Compton. The writers of the show smartly use the anti-vampire prejudice as a stand in for the racism and homophobia that currently exists in our society (note that the sign "God Hates Fangs" during the opening credits of the show is just one letter off from a common homophobic slur). This allows the writers to more deeply explore the themes of prejudice without blatantly challenging the audiences' beliefs and making them feel uncomfortable.

But *True Blood* is not the first show to use a far-fetched story to explore the real underpinnings of racism. Take for example the Geico commercials that are based on the tag line "So easy, a caveman can do it." Because cavemen do not represent a true social group, we are able to watch the commercials and laugh at the ignorant stereotyping the caveman must endure. Or how about the widely successful Broadway musical *Wicked*, where we learn that Elphaba, the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*, wasn't born wicked but was made wicked after years of being treated different because of her skin color. Because there is not a green skinned race on our planet, we are able laugh at the anti-green sentiments that are flung at poor Elphaba (e.g., when she becomes upset, Galinda says "It seems the artichoke is steamed!") and at the same time, we are able to empathize with her situation.

So how well does our pop culture depict prejudice? Do its depictions bear any resemblance to the effects demonstrated in psychological studies on prejudice? To answer this question, I put together a list of some basic truths about prejudice that have been established by

researchers and provided pop culture examples that depict these truths.

I. Prejudice often results from competition for scarce resources

In the 2009 science fiction film *District 9*, insect-like creatures have become stranded on earth and are being housed in a government camp inside Johannesburg, South Africa. The aliens, who are derogatorily referred to by humans as "prawns", are then forced to relocate to a new refugee camp outside the city limits, and this forced removal results in violence and bloodshed. Thus, the film explores the topic of xenophobia (fear of people different from oneself) but instead of fear towards foreigners or racial minorities, the fear is pointed towards an alien race.

If the scenes depicted in the film seem realistic, it is because they are heavily inspired by the real life forced removal that occurred in District 6 of Cape Town, South Africa. District 6 was largely composed of Muslims and Africans and in 1966, the government declared the district was to be a whites-only area. More than 60,000 people were forcibly moved from their homes and relocated to camps outside the city limits. Although the government gave several reasons for the removal, most residents believed that the government sought the land because of its close proximity to the city center and ocean ports. Thus, the racism that occurred here sprung from a competition over land.

According to social psychologist Muzafer Sherif, competition for scarce resources is a primary cause of discrimination and stereotyping within a society. His Realistic Group Conflict Theory states that whenever groups compete for land, money, jobs, etc., intergroup hostilities occur. Sherif demonstrated this effect in his well-known "Robbers Cave Experiment," conducted at Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma. In this study, twelve year old boys who were attending a summer camp were divided into two groups (The Rattlers and the Eagles) and were forced to compete with each other for prizes. Within a few days, hostility between the groups erupted: Members of both groups referred to each other as "stinkers" or "braggers", they would hold their noses whenever in the vicinity of the other group, they created derogatory songs about the other group that they would yell at each other during dinner time, and many even refused to eat in the mess hall while the other group was present. In a matter of a few

Pop and Prejudice: How Modern Prejudice is Depicted in our Pop Culture

How is modern prejudice depicted in our pop culture?

days, Sherif had created prejudice where it had not existed before, and he did it by simply having groups compete with each other for desirable resources.

2. Prejudice is often automatic and implicit

Crash, a film that won the 2005 Oscar for Best Picture, portrays the intersecting lives of a diverse cross-section of LA residents and in doing so, offers a peek into the often unacknowledged undercurrents of racism that exist everyday in our society. But what makes *Crash* different from other films about prejudice is that it shows how subliminal and passive modern prejudice is. Many of the films' characters hold pre-conceived notions about people of different races and nationalities. These characters quickly put people into categories based on very limited information and then make snap judgments based on these assumptions. For example, when Sandra Bullock's character sees two Black men walking toward her, she grabs her purse. And when a Mexican locksmith comes to her house, she assumes he is a gang-banger because of his shaved head and tattoos and is concerned he will sell her house keys to one of his "homeys". For these characters', their stereotypes are so entrenched in their minds, they are activated automatically and then go on to impact their future decisions in negative ways. The film also displays the fact that prejudice is not black and white, but involves many shades of gray. Characters in the film that appear egalitarian and non-prejudiced also hold stereotypes about various ethnic groups and in one case, this results in a decision that has deadly consequences (e.g., Ryan Phillippe's character shoots his Black passenger when he mistakenly assumes he was reaching for a gun).

According to social psychologists, modern prejudice is characterized by automatic and unconscious expressions. Although the incidence of blatant, explicit prejudice has sharply reduced since the Civil Rights movement, implicit prejudice (prejudice that occurs outside of our awareness) continues to be widespread. We may intend to be fair and treat everyone equally, but underneath our awareness, our minds automatically make connections, activate stereotypes and ignore information that contradicts these categorizations.

For example, Keith Payne demonstrated that people automatically associate Black men with weapons. This association is so strong that when people are subliminally primed with Black male faces (meaning they see the face so quickly they do not consciously realize what they saw), they are more likely to mistake a wrench for a handgun.

Similarly, Phillip Goff and his colleagues showed that people automatically associate Blacks with apes and that this association can easily be triggered in the most egalitarian of people. In one of their studies, people were subliminally primed with ape-related words (chimp, gorilla) and then watched a videotape of police officers violently subduing a suspect. When they thought the suspect in the video was white, the previously primed ape words had no effect on their judgments of police force. However, when they thought the suspect was black, the people exposed to the ape words thought the suspect deserved the police brutality. They also showed that real newspaper descriptions of criminal cases were more likely to contain animal-relevant language when the suspected criminal was Black (e.g., "pounced on the victim", "attack occurred in an urban jungle"), and the more animal metaphors were used to describe a defendant, the more likely the defendant was sentenced to death. These and numerous other studies show that many Americans are completely unaware of the fact that they hold automatic negative associations about Blacks and other racial minorities.

So rather than going away completely, prejudice seems to have just gone "underground". This creates a dilemma for people like me who study prejudice for a living. How can you study something that participants are either unwilling to admit to or are unaware that they have in the first place? To address this issue, social psychologists have come up with some pretty crafty approaches. For example, Keith Payne used the idea of a Rorschach test to assess prejudice. The Rorschach test is a well-known psychological test that requires people to tell what they see in a photo of an ambiguous inkblot. The idea behind this test is that people project their internal states onto the inkblot, so if they are happy, they will see something pleasant in the inkblot and if they are troubled, they will see something disturbing in the inkblot.

Based on this principle, Keith Payne created the Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP) which quickly flashes photos of Black or White faces and then asks participants to indicate how much they like/dislike an ambiguous image (instead of an inkblot, he uses Chinese characters). His work shows that people who are prejudiced against Blacks are more likely to rate the ambiguous images negatively if they are preceded by a Black face. The nice feature about this test is that people's level of racism can be measured without them being aware of it; therefore, they are unable to control or hide their racism from researchers.

Pop and Prejudice: How Modern Prejudice is Depicted in our Pop Culture

How is modern prejudice depicted in our pop culture?

3. Prejudice can be reduced through shared goals

Modern pop culture references not only show how prevalent prejudice is, they also clue us in on how to reduce prejudice. During the two seasons of HBO's *True Blood*, characters that started out anti-vampire have grown to tolerate and accept this non-human race. For example, even though Jason Stackhouse's sister was dating a vampire, he nevertheless was strongly anti-vampire through most of the show's duration, so much so that at one point he trained as a vampire killer. However, when his sister's safety and the fate of his beloved town are threatened, he is forced to join sides with Bill the vampire and as a result, he develops a new respect for those of the vampire race. Similarly, in *District 9*, the human and alien main characters are only able to see past their species differences when they have the common goal of reaching the alien spaceship.

Research on prejudice reduction supports this idea that a common, shared goal can transcend intergroup conflicts. When opposing groups are suddenly in a situation that cannot be resolved without the cooperation of both parties (often referred to as a superordinate goal), they must learn to overcome their prejudices to work together for the common good. Such a situation not only reduces prejudice in the immediate situation, but it can result in long-lasting tolerance. Remember earlier when I described how Sheriff's was able to spontaneously create prejudice between two groups of boys at the Robber's Cave summer camp? Not only did Sheriff create prejudice in this study, he also was able to extinguish it through the use of superordinate goals.

First, Sheriff examined if simply increasing contact would reduce the boys' prejudice. Once the intergroup hostility had been created, he set up several communal events that had the Rattlers and Eagles interact with each other. He found that these contact situations failed to reduce prejudice, and in fact often led to acts of violence (e.g., food fights). So next, he contrived crisis scenarios that involved superordinate goals, such that to resolve the crisis, the two groups of boys would have to work in unison. For example, the camp's water supply was completely cut off because vandals had supposedly stuffed a sack into the outlet faucet. To clear the faucet, all the boys from both groups had to work side by side over the course of 45 minutes. When success was finally achieved, the boys rejoiced and respectfully allowed the thirstier members to get a drink first, even if they were members of the opposing group. Several

similar situations occurred over the course of a week and by the end, the Rattlers and Eagles were friends and ate their meals side by side in the mess hall. They even insisted on all riding back home on the same bus at the end of the experiment. Thus, the Robbers Cave study provides a very powerful demonstration of how easily intergroup hostilities can form but also how quickly they can be extinguished when super-ordinate goals transcend intergroup conflict.

Conclusion

Pop culture acts as a mirror, reflecting back our society's best and worst features. As long as prejudice continues to exist in our society, no matter what its form, it will continue to be a topic explored in our various forms of entertainment. And as researchers' understanding of prejudice continues to develop and change over time, so too will our pop culture depictions. As a prejudice researcher myself, I hope that one day, these pop culture depictions of prejudice will seem as antiquated as black and white films seem to my undergraduate students.

Reading Questions

(Answer on a separate sheet of paper please.)

1. Give **three examples** from this article of how prejudice and discrimination are depicted in popular culture (TV, movies, music, etc.).
2. Give two examples of where you've seen prejudice and discrimination in what you may have seen or heard.
3. What effect, if any do you think such examples have on prejudice? Do they increase it among those watching? Decrease? Why?
4. What are some ways prejudice could be reduced according to the article?