

How Racist Are You : An Analysis



Are we all prejudiced?

Jane Elliott arrived in the UK determined to show that prejudice exists, and that racism is embedded in our society without many of us realising it. At some time or other, most of us make unwarranted assumptions about other people, and these assumptions enable us to feel it is ok to treat them less well than we would want to be treated ourselves.

Since the 1960s, Jane Elliott has been running 'demonstrations' in schools and latterly with adult groups for organisations and communities. These demonstrations pitch the participants into a situation that is very familiar for some but surprising, startling, or even shocking for others. What these exercises aim to show is that, by dint of being categorised based on some personal characteristic such as skin colour, appearance or even (in the demonstrations) eye colour, people can become the victims of serious discrimination, and that this can easily become 'institutionalised'.

Categorisation

In these demonstrations, people arrive with some uncertainty about what might happen. From the outset, those with blue eyes are treated assertively, told where to wait, given labels or collars to identify them as 'Blue Eyes', and are instructed firmly to wait quietly. Meanwhile, the people with brown eyes are treated respectfully, as individuals with their own needs. Already the two sets of people are aware that there is a difference.

This is only the beginning of the story as far as the demonstration goes, but a lot has happened psychologically. First, and fundamentally, when people are assigned to categories, particularly categories that they cannot deny belonging to, they begin to think of themselves in terms of their shared characteristics with others in the same category. They also begin to focus on the characteristics that make their own different from the other category.

Important research by Henri Tajfel and his colleagues in Bristol in the 1970s demonstrated that just this act of categorising people can be sufficient for them to want their own category to be better than the other, and to show biases against members of the other category (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The categories take hold in the way people view themselves and how they view



others, and it makes people feel good if they can view their own category as distinctive from, and better than, the other category.

Power

But Jane Elliott's demonstration adds a further important layer. In the USA, and much of Western Europe, Blue Eyed people tend to be white (though many white people have other colours of eyes), and white people have usually had power over black people.

It is no accident then that Elliott assigns the Blue Eyes to the low power category. She wants these people to begin to understand what it might be like to be in a low power position. In fact, recent psychological research also shows that believing one has power can have direct psychological effects on the way one thinks and acts (Richeson & Ambady, 2001). Power gives a sense of certainty, decisions are made more quickly, less time is spent focusing on detail, and powerful people are likely to believe that they are in the right.

People with lower power are more cautious, circumspect and less likely to assert their views. Can reversing the usual positions of power that people have, as Jane Elliott's demonstration tends to do, change their views and their behaviour?

Self-fulfilling prophecies and stereotype threat

As the demonstration continues, Elliott begins to create a social situation which mirrors that of Blacks in the USA during the 1960s. The blue eyed group is kept waiting for a long time in an uncomfortable situation. They are not permitted to question or challenge the reasons for this. Finally, they are brought in to join the Brown Eyes but the Blue Eyes must sit in a lower position, some without chairs. They are talked about rather than talked to. Inevitably they become upset, moody and even angry. But when they try to protest this is used as evidence of their bad character, their inability to listen, their desire to break rules. These (objectively quite painless) manipulations simulate how Blacks were routinely treated by Whites.

Several crucial points emerge, psychologically. First, once in a powerless position the Blue Eyes begin to behave in ways that confirm the negative stereotypes that Elliott is using to describe them. When the demonstration runs effectively, the Brown Eyes begin to 'recognise' that these stereotypes have some accuracy. They begin to attribute the Blue Eyes' sullen and uncooperative behaviour to their personality or character, to believe that these characteristics are inherent in blue eyed people. Second, once this conflict begins to develop, the Brown Eyes start to feel responsible for controlling and improving the behaviour of the Blue Eyes. They feel that they should be working with Jane Elliott to ensure the demonstration goes according to plan.

From the position of the brown eyed people, it is difficult to see why the Blue Eyes are resisting or behaving badly. They start with low expectations of the



Blue Eyes. It doesn't seem worth giving them difficult or important things to do if they cannot even manage the basics (such as completing a form or answering a simple question).

The more this develops the harder it is for the Blue Eyes to challenge the situation. Indeed, recent research on a phenomenon called 'stereotype threat' shows that members of lower status categories often perform badly on tests if they believe they might be compared with a higher status category, or if they feel that they might confirm a negative stereotype about their group (Steele, 2007).

For example, one member of the Brown Eyes described how he did not want white people at his (mixed race) daughter's school to be aware that she was not white because it would change the assumptions they made about her. Because stereotypes often form part of the shared understanding that people have about different social groups they can be hard to ignore or shake off. Indeed, research shows that we all hold strong mental 'associations' between social categories and particular feelings or images. Even if we do not agree with a stereotype, it may still come to mind and may still influence our actions and behaviour towards others (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998).

Justifying inequality

Next, Elliott ramps up the inequality a little more by giving the brown eyed people an unfair advantage – the answers to a test. How will they react to this? For the most part, people who receive an advantage are likely to take it, and often they will believe they deserve it. Besides, this deception is all in a good cause – to help the Blue Eyes understand what it is like to face unbeatable odds. In society the idea that some groups might deserve some nasty medicine stems from a basic bias that most other people are not quite as good/nice/honest/etc., as themselves, or that they are not capable of understanding the rules unless they are shown in simple terms. Jail for a petty burglar but a fine and suspended sentence for a City fraudster (if the prosecution ever gets that far). When the same kind of reasoning happens at the level of a group, this means they may seize an advantage and try to downplay its unfairness.

For example, people with privileged and wealthy backgrounds do better in school and college. Around half of the students at Oxford and Cambridge have been to private rather than state schools. People may believe that although their background helped, their success is really down to their having better abilities than others. It is comforting for them (and others) to feel that people get what they deserve. These are known as 'just world beliefs'. Privileged people may well believe that if only these others would try harder, or apply more often for the job/college, or learn the right rules of how to behave, they would surely do just as well.

Differences in power and opportunity become perpetuated because powerful groups do not like to level the playing field, and will do a lot to justify their



advantage. What is more difficult to recognise is how impenetrable the barriers appear (and often are) for members of the less powerful groups.

One of the interesting points in this demonstration was when one of the Brown Eyes decided to spill the beans and declare that the test was rigged. Other members of the Brown Eyes group were palpably shocked and annoyed that she had done this, illustrating how powerful groups are likely to close ranks and defend their position when members try to defect or challenge the status quo. This type of situation confronts many would-be whistle blowers in organisations, and many organisations, ranging from large private corporations (e.g. British Aerospace) to the public sector and the Civil Service have strict rules that make it extremely difficult for people outside the group to learn of systemic corruption or abuse. These defences make it much harder for less powerful groups to establish unfairness or injustice in the system.

A social psychological theory that explores these issues is called system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994). It highlights another important consequence of power differences. Not only do powerful groups like to keep things as they are, but members of powerless groups often go along with that too. In Jane Elliott's demonstrations, the Blue Eyes usually conform to what they are told to do. Although a few members try to object, in the end they go along with the system and the rules that are in place. There seems no way out.

It's not British...

In this demonstration in Britain, not all seemed to go according to plan. What might be the reasons for this?

Some people might offer the simple answer that, compared with the USA, people are just less prejudiced in Britain. And certainly, less racist. Many of the participants in the demonstration declared that they had no prejudices, or that there was no prejudice where they lived or worked. Yet others, and these were generally people from minority ethnic backgrounds or non-British origin, seemed quickly to recognise elements of the demonstration that highlighted their own experiences of prejudice. Interestingly, more of these people were in the Brown Eyes group than in the Blue Eyes group.

Individualism

One reason why people believe they are not prejudiced is that they treat all others purely as individuals, and that they themselves are just individuals. A couple of the people in both groups stuck resolutely to this line. Yet the USA is a more individualistic country than the UK and this seems not to have eliminated racism, racial inequality or other manifestations of prejudice. Indeed, it is easier to declare oneself to be 'just an individual' if one's day to day experience is being treated that way. Several of the participants in the demonstration argued that race is irrelevant and that people should just treat each other as individuals. White males between the ages of 25 and 50



are part of society's most powerful group. They perceive choices, they are treated with respect, they have great freedoms and few limitations. For them their individuality seems natural. Claiming that people get what they deserve through hard work, and that their race or gender are irrelevant can be viewed as a 'symbolic' or 'subtle expression' of prejudice (Kinder & Sears, 1981).

But others have a different experience and recognise that the groups and categories they belong to constrain what they can do and what others expect of them. Women, older people, gay people, people with disabilities, members of minority ethnic groups and so on, all confront these barriers in different ways. Indeed, people can find themselves excluded from opportunities, money, resources, and even social relationships by virtue of being categorised by others as 'not one of us' (see Abrams, Christian & Gordon, 2007; Abrams, Hogg & Marques, 2005).

Belief that society is equal

A second reason why people may believe they are not prejudiced is that they think we have reached an era of equality and fairness. They believe that prejudice is no longer a problem in society. The playing field is level, it is just a question of letting the best players win. One of the key points made by Jane Elliott is that it is never a level playing field. Some groups always have more power over others and we have to be vigilant that that power is not taken for granted or abused. Some recent national research conducted by the University of Kent showed that although people strongly advocate that equality is important in society, they are much more vigilant about some groups' inequality than others (Abrams & Houston, 2006)! Into this equation comes the question of what a group 'deserves'. For example even if people believe everyone should have the same basic rights, they are much less willing to grant these rights to people who have broken a law, or who are trying to compete with them for jobs (e.g., immigrant workers). In our research we found that people in general are much more likely to admit to feeling prejudiced against some groups (e.g. Muslims, gay people, asylum seekers) than others (e.g. women).

Patronising prejudice

A third reason why people may believe prejudice is not a problem is that they have a limited view of what prejudice really is. Jane Elliott points out that her demonstration is not just about racism. It is also about other types of prejudice and discrimination. A person may believe they are not prejudiced because they harbour no ill feelings toward other racial groups. But that same person might strongly endorse sex stereotypes, for example that women are essentially nicer but less competent than men. This does not feel like a prejudice because, after all, it reflects a positive feeling about women. But it is an example of so-called 'benevolent prejudice' (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Holding a belief that women are less competent is likely to mean that this man will not offer the



chance to women to show their competence. This would matter greatly, for example, in the workplace. If a person has no opportunity to demonstrate their ability, it is impossible for them to advance.

Self-control over prejudice

In Jane Elliott's UK demonstration what seems to have happened is that some of the participants were quite aware of what she was trying to show, and several of them were strongly resistant to the idea that they were prejudiced. They wanted to prove her wrong. Research shows that many people are highly motivated not to be prejudiced (Crandall & Eshelman, 2003; Plant & Devine, 1998).

However, we cannot always recognise when we are being prejudiced, or stop ourselves from expressing prejudice. For example, prejudice can be expressed in quite subtle ways through our use of language. We tend to use less complex ways of describing immigrant groups than the majority population. It is this lack of complexity, not just how positive or negative the words are that conveys the idea that 'they' are all alike (see Mullen, 2004).

Even though the groups did not exactly follow the usual pattern (the Blue Eyes were less down-trodden, the Brown Eyes were less gung ho), their reactions to the demonstration did show clearly how difficult it is for people either to recognise or to accept that they might hold and express prejudices. And if we examine what happened a little more closely we can see that, in many respects, the demonstration worked rather well.

First, the Blue Eyes and Brown Eyes did maintain separation for most of the day. Second, the Brown Eyes felt freer to debate the issues openly – they felt less under attack, and the one member who broke ranks was certainly made to feel that she had let the group down by not playing along with the exercise. The Blue Eyes were in greater disarray. Several of them wanted to show how they could be different, how they could not be treated like the rest of the group. In various ways they tried to escape the implications that they were unaware of what it is like to continually be the target of prejudice. While this tactic was feasible in the constraints of a one day demonstration, in the real world, it is much harder to pretend that one's skin colour, gender or age does not matter to others.

From the perspective of majority groups it is actually quite useful if a few individuals from the powerless groups make it across the boundary. These token individuals help to convince other members of the powerless groups that their situation is down to their own choice and effort, and is not because of their lower power (Kanter, 1977, Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

What does Jane Elliott's demonstration show?

Can we say whether the demonstration worked? In itself it did not show that people are all racist? It did not show that the UK is just like the USA. Indeed,



one of the points that seemed repeatedly to help the participants feel they were not prejudiced was their belief that Britain is different. On the other hand, there were many lessons to be learned from the demonstration. Some people who initially denied that discrimination happens or that it was not a problem for them, later came to recognise that perhaps they had concluded too hastily. Almost all of the participants felt at least uncomfortable, and some were shaken by the experience. This is not surprising because research shows that people do not want to believe that they may be prejudiced (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). All learned from the combination of being in the exercise, and the discussions and other material and information that Jane Elliott provided.

Even though this is not the era of the Civil Rights movement in the USA, there are still important divisions between social groups in Britain, and many of the features of the demonstration helped to illustrate how these might cause inequality and discrimination.

But the most important lesson, perhaps, was not that people are racist, but that when groups have power over other groups their members are likely to take advantage of that power, take it for granted, assume it is deserved, and become blinded to the humanity and rights of less powerful groups. This warning remains as pertinent today as it was in the 1960s.

Can this demonstration tackle prejudice? There have been various criticisms of this demonstration, including that it might be unethical, that it might cause people to entrench their belief that they are not prejudiced, or that it may cause resentment.

People may remember the negative feelings they experienced rather than the more complex messages that the demonstration aims to convey (see Pendry, Driscoll, & Field, 2007; Stewart, LaDuke, Bracht, Sweet & Gamarel, 2003). On the other hand, it seems just as likely to inspire some people to combat prejudice, and at the least it may help viewers recognise forms of prejudice that they may not have been aware of previously.

However, the demonstration is only one of a much larger array of techniques that psychologists and others have developed to tackle prejudice. An important issue is where the prejudice exists. Sometimes it may be that a particular person holds strong negative views about a group, harbours a grudge, or has a historical enemy. In these cases we might need to look at whether that particular person's attitude needs to be tackled.

But in other cases it is the relationship between groups that feeds and generates prejudices. Groups that are in conflict are likely to feel hostile (Esses, Dovidio, Semanya, & Jackson, 2005). Once the conflict is over, the hostility may persist. Wider social stereotypes about particular types of people may simply be wrong. For example, in Britain people widely endorse the stereotype that older people are less capable than younger people, despite the very wide variation in capability among people of all ages (Abrams, Eilola, & Swift, 2009). Efforts may be needed to challenge those stereotypes more generally, perhaps through media imagery and other



techniques. Other forms of prejudice and discrimination can be tackled through laws and rules.

Finally, much can be done by working with children. Prejudice is sometimes a result of unfamiliarity with other groups, or fear of the unknown or just viewing others in a one dimensional way. Giving children (and adults) awareness of new ways to categorise each other, recognising that often we share categories as well as being in different categories from others, and so on, seem promising ways to reduce prejudices across society (see Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Crisp & Hewstone, 2006; Rutland, Cameron, Bennett & Ferrell, 2005).

Implications

Jane Elliott's Blue Eyes/Brown-Eyes demonstration is a hard hitting and challenging experience, but some commentators believe that it can often be more practical and enduring to take different elements of the demonstration and work on them in a more gradual way. For example, work with children shows that by introducing stories that involve intergroup contact over a period of weeks can improve their attitudes toward minority groups (Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Other strategies involve role playing activities, tasks that require people to take the perspective of members of another group, activities that allow members of different groups to have contact that enables them to form friendships (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). All of these can help to break down stereotypes and inaccurate assumptions about other groups. A further line of work stresses that people's attitudes and behaviour to members of other groups depends significantly on how we categorise one another. Finding shared categories, or a 'common identity' can also reduce prejudice (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).



Questions to ask yourself

To get some insight into your own assumptions and prejudices about different social groups you could try asking yourself the following questions about your views of a person you know, or are aware of, who is a member of a different ethnic or racial group than your own.

- **Am I prejudiced toward that group?**
- **Is that person 'just like all the others'?**
- **What, or how much, do I really know about this person's group?**
- **If I was in their position, what would I do, and how would I feel?**
- **How do members of that group view me?**
- **Does their situation look fair and equal to them?**
- **Are they experiencing prejudice (even if not from me)?**
- **What other categories (e.g. gender, age) do I share with this person?**
- **How well do I know this person?**
- **Do any of my friends have friends in that person's group?**
- **Would I want or expect to be treated the way that person is treated by most others?**



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There is also a limited amount of systematic and valuable research investigating which techniques are likely to be most effective in reducing prejudices (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Paluk & Green, 2009; Vrij & Smith, 1999; Dovidio, Gaertner, Stewart, Esses, V. M., ten Vergert., & Hodson, 2004.)