Race and Ethnicity

We like to think as a nation that we have come a long way since the days of slavery, lynching, and the severe discrimination of the Jim Crow pre-Civil Rights Movement era. But have we? Just a few years ago there was a national news story about a racially motivated incident. Two white teens and a white middle aged man attacked and severely beat an elderly black man. The victim was simply minding his own business fishing when the attack occurred. The older of the attackers was known by the nickname “Hitler” and was quoted as having said afterward that if the man had been white they would have left him alone. You may argue that this kind of incident rarely happens, and statistics might show that you have a point. However, most racially motivated crimes are committed by teens. What does that say about our country?

The attackers in the news story apparently were convinced that race was reason enough for committing an assault. Chances are they had been convinced that race is a biological category, with one race (in their case the white race) superior to all others. That is the definition of racism. Racism is a point of view — a belief. Whether or not one acts on that belief is a different matter. The actions of the attackers were motivated by racism. Does attitude always lead to action?

Prejudice is also an attitude or point of view. We often believe that prejudice always goes hand in hand with discrimination. Discrimination however is another matter. That is where action speaks louder than attitude. In fact, many people who are guilty of discrimination would tell us they are not prejudice. Sociological theorist, Robert Merton proposed that there were non-prejudice discriminators. An example would be a Caucasian, who has no personal feelings of prejudice toward people of color, votes to exclude an African American from a club. Perhaps the Caucasian member thought other members would object or would treat the new member rudely and voted based on those ideas. Merton also stated there were prejudice non-discriminators. An example would be a young person who had negative feelings about the elderly and yet managed to serve them without incident at the restaurant where the teen was employed.

Contact Hypothesis holds that the more time spent together in non-competitive situations the more people of different ethnic or racial groups reduce their prejudice and distrust of one another. In areas that have historically had little ethnic or racial diversity it may have been difficult to see this in action. College campuses often are the first environment where students encounter people from groups other than their own. Think about how your college experience may be an example of Contact Hypothesis in action.

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