

Social Psychology of Prejudice:

*Historical and
Contemporary Issues*

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How I Became a Prejudice Researcher

Victoria Esses

I grew up in Toronto, Canada, and watched it evolve from a very homogeneous city to one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world. In the process of observing this transition, I became acquainted with the problems and benefits associated with multiculturalism. This planted the seed for my later interest in intergroup relations.

I first began to study intergroup attitudes as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Waterloo in the late 1980s, conducting research on the effects of mood on the expression of ethnic stereotypes, and the role of values, stereotypes, and emotions in determining intergroup attitudes. At that time, my focus was on the beliefs and feelings that might underlie prejudice, and I realized that much of the theorizing about attitudes in general could fruitfully be applied to the study of intergroup attitudes. My ideas came not only from the psychological literature, but from my everyday experiences and observations. My postdoctoral advisor, Mark Zanna, advised me that it is important to conduct research on issues that are interesting in their own right, as well as having theoretical relevance. I took this advice to heart, and in my research I have tried to combine real-world relevance with theoretical importance. In the area of prejudice, this is relatively easy to accomplish because examples of prejudice and discrimination surround us. The media, for example, is a rich source of information on prejudice and discrimination at both the national and international level.

Since the 1990s, my interest in prejudice has moved in several directions. One important direction is the investigation of attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. This was partly spurred by my experiences in Toronto, as well as media depictions of immigration. It struck me that immigrants are the target of considerable prejudice and discrimination, even among people who are only a generation or two removed from the immigrant experience. In addition, a strong source of people's negative attitudes toward immigrants seems to be the perception that immigrants are competing with members of the host community for resources, such as jobs. This led to my current interest in the role of group competition in intergroup attitudes and behavior.

I enjoy working in an area in which I can apply theory and research in social psychology to important social issues. In this way, not only do theoretical perspectives lead to research investigations, but real-world events also provoke new research directions. In the area of prejudice and discrimination, psychologists have a lot to contribute to the development of social policies and programs. Our research is an important complement to that conducted by sociologists, economists, and other

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social scientists, and I have been fortunate to be involved in informing policy through interdisciplinary projects developed by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and by Multiculturalism Canada.