

The Psychology of Prejudice

How Bias Forms & How We Can Interrupt It

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The Episcopal Church in Huntington Beach

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GLEAM-OC

Gathering
LGBTQIA+ *Episcopalians*
in
Active Ministry
[Orange County](#)

 **episcopal**

 **pride**

 **alliance**

A ministry of
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Today

- How meaning is created
- How groups shape judgment
- How threat intensifies bias
- How contact can reduce prejudice

This talk is not about bad people.
It is about being human.

Linda

is 31 years old, single, outspoken, and very bright.
She majored in philosophy.

Deeply concerned with issues of discrimination and
social justice, and she also participated in
anti-nuclear demonstrations.

Which of the following is more probable?

A Linda is a bank teller.

B Linda is a bank teller *and* is active in the feminist movement.

Correct Answer:

A. Linda is a bank teller.

Wrong Answer:

B. Linda is a bank teller and is active in the feminist movement.

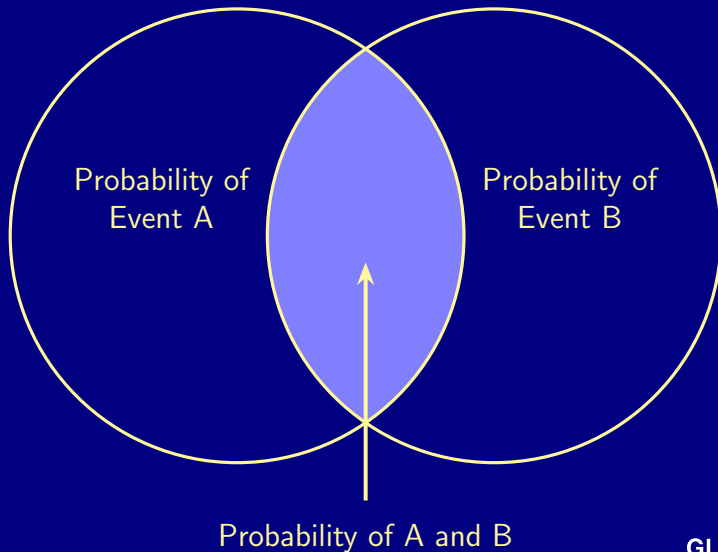
Why!?

Probability of Event A $>$ Probability of event A and B.

Probability of
Event A
Linda is a bank teller

Probability of
Event B

Linda active in feminist movement



Perception is not passive.

We do not experience reality directly.
We experience meaning.

Mental Shortcuts

- Fast, automatic interpretations
- Low effort
- Usually helpful



Figure: With increased distance, objects appear smaller and "foggier"



Figure: Perception of distance and depth



Figure: In foggy conditions, objects appear farther away

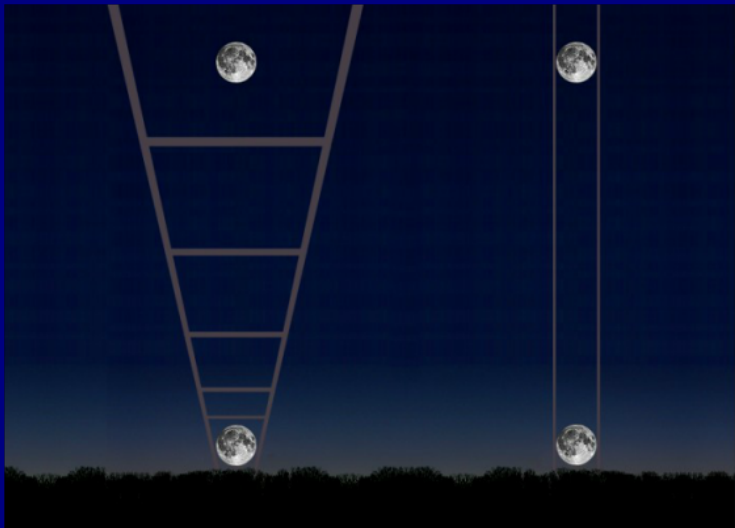
- Fog makes distant objects look farther away
- Our minds fill in missing information

Another Example



Figure: Why does the moon look so much bigger at the horizon?

Mental Heuristics
Implicit Bias
Social Identity
Intergroup Threat
Intergroup Contact



Nothing changed about the moon.
Only our interpretation did.

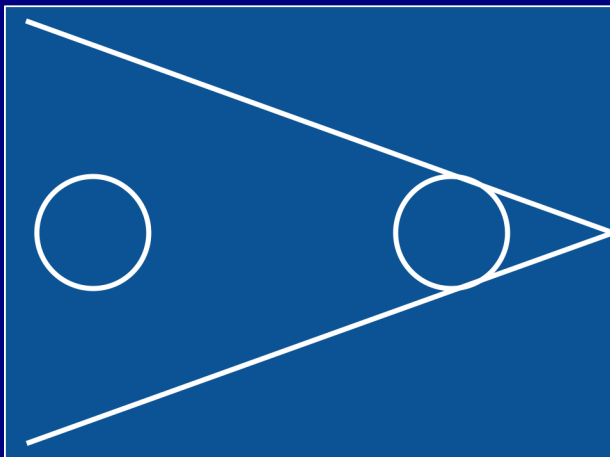


Figure: Simplified perceptual illusion

An Important Clarification

- These shortcuts are adaptive
- They help us function in a complex world
- Bias is not a moral failure

Implicit Bias

Some judgments happen
before we are aware of them.

First, a Reassurance

- This is not about bad people
- This is about how minds work

What We Mean by Implicit Bias

- Automatic evaluations
- Outside conscious awareness
- Shaped by experience and culture

A Key Distinction

- Explicit beliefs: what we endorse
- Implicit associations: what activates automatically

Automatic $\neq$ Inevitable

- Stereotypes can activate automatically
- Prejudice is not inevitable

Why Bias Is Hard to Control

- Requires motivation
- Requires attention
- Requires effort

Difficult when uncertainty is high

Examples

- First impressions
- Snap reactions
- Feelings before reasons

Well-studied example

	Strong	Weak	Ambiguous
Race (implicit)	no effect	no effect	no effect
Race (explicit)	no effect	no effect	preference for whites

Table: Discrimination emerges primarily when the appropriate decision is unclear (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000).

Well-studied example

- Clear strong → decisions follow qualifications
- Clear weak → decisions follow qualifications
- Ambiguous → "benefit of the doubt" becomes unequal

Key idea: uncertainty creates room for bias

About “Gut Feelings”

- Intuition is not the same as danger
- Familiarity often feels safe

So What Can We Do?

- Slow down
- Create space
- Design better conditions

From / to we

Exercise

Many of these judgments depend on
who we see as “us” ...
and who we see as “them.”

The moment we divide people into
“us” and “them,”
something changes.

How Little It Takes

- Random group assignment
- No interaction
- No competition

A Surprising Finding

- Bias does not require conflict
- Bias does not require history
- Bias does not require hostility

What People Do

- Favor their own group
- Accept less for themselves
- As long as their group “wins”

Why Groups Matter

Group membership and sense of belonging shape:

- Sense of identity
- Self-esteem

Everyday Examples

- Sports teams
- School affiliations
- Neighborhoods

A Subtle Moment

- Seeing a sign
- Feeling a reaction
- Thinking *after*

How Perception Shifts

- “People like us” feel familiar
- “People like them” feel uniform

An Important Clarification

- In-group bias is not just low self-esteem
- It can come from strong identification

Why This Matters

- Bias can feel meaningful
- Belonging can override fairness

And when group identity feels
threatened...
bias doesn't just appear.
It intensifies.

Bias intensifies
when difference feels dangerous.

Putting the Pieces Together

- We all interpret automatically
- Groups amplify meaning
- Threat intensifies judgment

A Central Insight

- Prejudice escalates under perceived threat
- Threat does not require real danger

What Produces Threat Perceptions

- Prior conflict or tension
- Differences in values or beliefs
- Group size or power changes
- Strong group identification
- Limited or negative *contact*

Two Forms of Perceived Threat

- Realistic threat
- Symbolic threat

Realistic Threat

- Perceived threats to resources
- Safety, jobs, institutions

Symbolic Threat

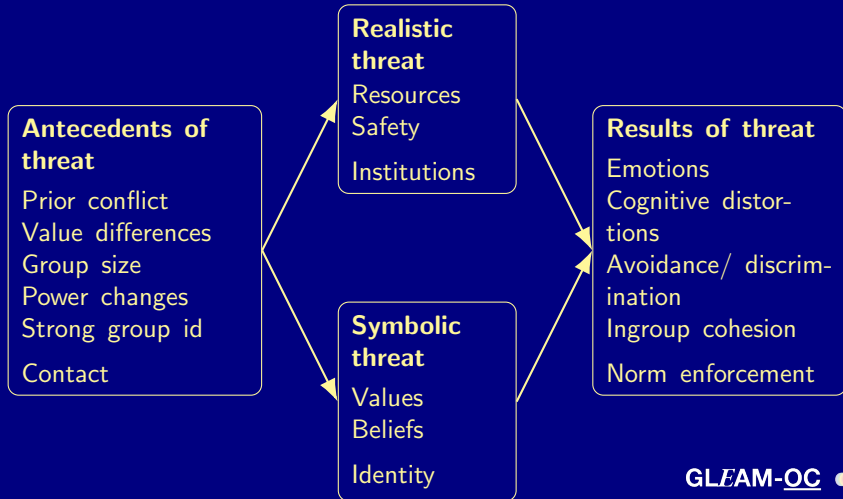
- Perceived threats to values
- Beliefs, norms, identity

What Threat Produces

- Strong *emotions* (fear, anger)
- Distorted *thinking*
- Defensive *behavior*

Bias and prejudice = cognitive processes; Discrimination = behavioral process.

Integrated Threat Theory



A Familiar Scenario

- An institution begins to change
- Language, leadership, or norms shift

Why Understanding Threat Matters

- It explains escalation
- It opens paths for response

So the question becomes...

What actually helps?

Prejudice is not fixed.

A Different Question

- Not: “How do we argue better?”
- But: “What actually changes attitudes?”

A Robust Finding

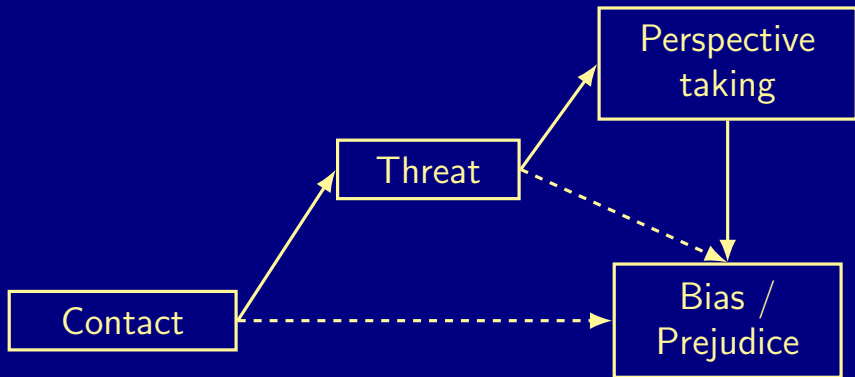
Meaningful contact reduces
prejudice

Why Contact Works

- Lowers anxiety
- Increases empathy

Why Contact Works





What Contact Is Not

- Forced proximity
- Debate or correction
- Token exposure

When Contact Works Best

- Shared goals
- Cooperation
- Supportive norms

An Ordinary Example

- A roommate or coworker
- Shared routines
- No intention to “learn”

A Community Example

- Visible leadership
- Ordinary participation
- Shared responsibility

Contact Interrupts the Cycle

- Reduces uncertainty
- Weakens symbolic threat
- Humanizes difference

Important Limits

- Contact must feel safe
- Negative contact can backfire

A Faith Lens

- Encounter over abstraction
- Relationship over judgment

What This Means Practically

- Design spaces for connection
- Support shared work
- Reduce fear before persuasion

Our minds create meaning quickly.
Groups amplify it.
Threat intensifies it.

But connection can change it.

Thank you!

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Q & A

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