Discrimination refers to biased actions that harm and disadvantage people on the basis of their group membership. Notably, discrimination is distinct from (but related to) stereotyping (i.e., beliefs, associations, and attributions about the characteristics of groups and their members) and prejudice (i.e., emotions, evaluations, and attitudes toward groups and their members). Discrimination is an important aspect of intergroup relations and occurs not only at an interpersonal level (between individuals) but also at the institutional and organizational levels (e.g., policies that perpetuate different outcomes for different groups). This entry contrasts blatant and subtle discrimination, discusses several psychological processes involved in them, provides real-world examples of discrimination, and concludes with observations on why psychological processes are important in understanding discriminatory political behavior.

Blatant Versus Subtle Discrimination

In the United States, blatant discrimination (explicit forms) is not as common as it once was (e.g., women are no longer restricted from voting; interracial marriages are no longer illegal). Although blatant discrimination has been mostly relegated to the past, subtle discrimination (implicit forms) remains pervasive. For instance, a college professor may treat first-generation students (i.e., students who are the first in their family to attend college) differently owing to low expectations, or an employer may not hire women who apply to male-dominated settings (e.g., construction, business boardrooms). Subtle discrimination is often less obvious and arguably less intentional than blatant discrimination.

Psychological Causes of Discrimination

Social-cognitive theories, such as social identity theory or self-categorization theory, posit that people gain positive self-esteem from the social groups they identify with, and thus may favor their own groups (in-groups) over other groups (out-groups). People with strong in-group preferences are not necessarily motivated to disadvantage others, but their motivation to advantage their in-group can indeed result in discriminatory behaviors. For instance, a White man with strong in-group preferences may vote for another White man (in-group member) instead of a Black woman (out-group member), not necessarily because he feels negatively toward Black women, but rather, because he wants to advantage the group he identifies with.

Social dominance theory posits that a multitude of forces, ranging from human evolution to individual differences in the preference for group-based hierarchy and inequality (i.e., social dominance orientation [SDO]), influences the extent to which one supports hierarchy-enhancing ideologies (e.g., racism) and thus discriminates against members of other groups. Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA)—the extent to which one supports social conservatism, obedience to authority, and punitiveness toward those who violate social norms—also plays an important role in understanding discrimination. Whereas SDO is important for understanding discrimination when there are conflicts over material resources and existing group boundaries, RWA is important for understanding discrimination when there are cultural conflicts. For instance, someone high in SDO may dislike a minority group member moving into a managerial position because it threatens the existing hierarchy, whereas someone high in RWA may also dislike the minority individual moving into a managerial position, but for the reason that the person is perceived as bringing in values and beliefs that are in opposition to those of the dominant group. Taken together, situations consisting of clearly defined and highly salient groups, as well as perceptions of economic and value conflict, often provide a
context for discrimination.

Examples of Discrimination

Although scholars have outlined how discrimination has changed over time (from blatant to more subtle), and have identified a myriad of sources that underlie it, much research shows that discrimination continues to be a universal issue that can result in severe group-based inequalities. For instance, teachers who have low expectations for girls are less likely to encourage them to pursue technical careers, which can lead to girls being underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Likewise, physicians who hold subtle anti-Black biases (e.g., the belief that Black patients are not compliant) are less likely to treat the ailments of Black patients, which can lead to race-based health disparities. As additional examples, in the housing and retail markets, racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to have mortgage loans rejected, which prevents them from entering the middle class. In the labor market, older job applicants are assumed to be less competent, and job applicants with Black-sounding names are assumed to be less qualified, and they therefore receive fewer callbacks for interviews than younger applicants or applicants with White-sounding names.

Although blatant, violent discrimination is arguably less prevalent in modern society, examples of such discrimination remain common. In the United States, Black Americans are often seen as more aggressive and violent than White Americans, which makes Black Americans more likely to experience school expulsion, incarceration, and even death sentencing. In China and India, because of traditional preferences for male children, female fetuses are disproportionately aborted. Economic conflict between the Tutsi and Hutu peoples led to the 1994 Rwanda genocide, in which approximately 800,000 Tutsi people were killed by Hutu militias. Thus, blatant discrimination persists, even if discrimination often manifests in more subtle forms.

Implications for Political Behavior

Forms of discrimination have changed over time, but subtle forms of discrimination can nonetheless lead to inequality between social groups in health, education, and occupational status, to name only a few highly consequential domains. Likewise, discriminatory political behavior (e.g., discriminatory law enforcement and voting patterns) remains commonplace and is critically influenced by cognitive and social motivations, such as in-group favoritism, SDO, and RWA. Political behavior, like any other behavior, is influenced not only by the political landscape, but also by processes internal to the minds of individuals. Thus any effort to understand discriminatory political behavior must take into account sociopolitical context, personality and individual differences, and their interplay.

See also Affirmative Action; Authoritarian Personality; Citizenship; “Do No Harm” as a Code of Action; Equality of Opportunity; Ethnicity; Voter Disenfranchisement

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http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144.n90
10.4135/9781483391144.n90

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