

# Favoritism, not hostility, causes most discrimination, psychology professor says

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Most discrimination in the U.S. is not caused by intention to harm people different from us, but by ordinary favoritism directed at helping people similar to us, according to a theoretical review published online in *American Psychologist*.

"We can produce [discrimination](#) without having any intent to discriminate or any dislike for those who end up being disadvantaged by our behavior," said University of Washington psychologist Tony Greenwald, who co-authored the review with Thomas Pettigrew of the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Greenwald and Pettigrew reviewed experiments and survey methods from published scientific research on discrimination from the last five decades. They were surprised to find that the discrimination observed in those studies occurred much more often as helping rather than harming someone. But they also found that most researchers defined discrimination as based on negative attitudes and hostility, only rarely treating favoritism as a component of discrimination.

That makes sense, Greenwald said, because most people think of discrimination as the result of hostility: a white person spouting anti-black rhetoric, or a homophobe yelling slurs at a gay couple. But, he argues, it's more subtle acts, ones people don't even recognize as causing disadvantage to anyone, that are likely to be much more significant.

Take this hypothetical scenario: When conducting reviews of two

employees, a manager finds they both fall between two performance categories. The manager gives a higher category to the employee whose child is friends with the manager's child, leading to a promotion and salary raise, while the other employee receives a smaller raise and no promotion.

Was the manager consciously discriminating against the second employee? Or did she simply give a boost to someone to whom she had an "ingroup" connection?

"Your 'ingroup' involves people that you feel comfortable with, people you identify with," Greenwald explained. "We usually think first of demographic characteristics like age, race, sex, religion and ethnicity as establishing an ingroup, but there are also ingroups based on occupation, neighborhood and schools attended, among other things. Outgroups are those with whom you don't identify."

Greenwald and Pettigrew propose that unequal treatment in the form of doing favors for those like you, rather than inflicting harm on those unlike you, causes the majority of discrimination in the U.S.

"This is not to say that prejudice and hostility are not related to outgroup discrimination," Pettigrew said. "But they are not as central to most discrimination as ingroup favoritism."

Yet, historically, social scientists have emphasized prejudicial hostility as the root of discrimination.

"We looked at how prejudice has been defined in the history of psychology. It has generally been understood as hostility toward outgroups. That's easy to do, because inter-group conflict is an obvious fact of life," Greenwald said. "There are international conflicts, wars, gang battles, labor-management conflicts. When such conflicts are going

on it's natural to think of them as rooted in hostility."

Greenwald hopes researchers will change how they study discrimination, because research results have substantial implications both for how discrimination is identified and how it can be ameliorated in employment, health care, education and daily life.

He said overt acts of discrimination began to decline starting in the 1960s following civil rights laws. But prejudicial attitudes didn't necessarily change. What changed is that people were no longer legally allowed to act on their prejudices by, for example, denying housing to blacks or jobs to women.

The co-authors say that racial ingroup favoritism can be very subtle. For instance, if you work in an office that is mostly white and you're asked to recommend someone for a job opening, you're more likely to recommend someone who is like you and the rest of your ingroup.

This sort of ingroup favoritism happens at all ages and in different situations. Greenwald said it can happen on the playground, where children may exhibit ingroup favoritism based on race, economic class, or the same school or sports team.

"Hostility isn't integral to the definition of discrimination; you can treat people differently without being hostile to anyone," Greenwald said. "But it is societally important to understand how discrimination can occur both without [hostility](#) and without any intent to discriminate."

**More information:** [psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2014-09886-001/](http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2014-09886-001/)

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