

# US AND THEM: WHY WE ARE INTOLERANT?

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BRIGID EVANS BREAKS DOWN THE BARRICADES AND CALLS FOR INTEGRATION

Scrolling through your newsfeed it might feel like Australia is becoming a more intolerant and hostile place. More and more we see stories about people being racially vilified or threatened with racist violence. Flyers condemning homosexuality have been left in letterboxes. Far-right wing extremist groups have taken to the streets protesting against Islam and the building of mosques. Individuals have been 'no-platformed', banned from publically speaking about their beliefs at events or even entering our country. How do we make sense of these actions? Is our country becoming less tolerant? If it is, is there anything that can or should be done?

Before the 1970s psychologists offered two main explanations for the causes of intolerance and prejudice; competition or personality. Prejudice, many thought, was linked to authoritarian personality traits. That is, those who were more prone to servile or dominant relationships with others were more likely to see some groups as being lower or higher in status than themselves. This led to negative perceptions and behaviours towards those they deemed to be of a different social status. Alternatively, psychologists thought that empathy diminished where groups were forced to compete for scarce resources, such as land, food, employment, even first place in a football match. This led to an 'us versus them' attitude and prejudice ensued.

Social psychologist Henri Tajfel proved something scary in the 1970s; you don't need competition or a certain personality to be prejudiced. All you need it to be part of a group. Any group. In fact, he showed two abstract paintings to a group of boys and then pretended to split the boys into those who preferred the art of Paul Klee and those who preferred Wassily Kandinsky. Now the boys were actually just divided into the two groups randomly but regardless, when they were then asked to redistribute money they displayed significant bias towards those who had been sorted into their own group. There was no competition between

the groups, no winners, no rules or regulations. All they had to do was distribute money and still they were biased to those they were in their own group. The experiment has been replicated numerous times with an invariable result; all that is needed for bias to flourish is for groups to exist.

So there we have it! Problem solved; we'll just get rid of groups. Ok, philosophers can often come up with some solutions that sound ridiculous in practice but we're not that bad. Even if it were possible to get rid of groups, we know there are benefits from being in a group and from the differences that led to these groupings. Just think of how boring the world would be if everyone was exactly the same. We wouldn't just be bored; we would no longer function. We need diversity as a species and as a society. So is there a way of becoming more tolerant of difference, and is tolerance the best we can or should hope for if we want to maintain group difference?

Contemporary philosopher Elizabeth Anderson argues that it is specifically the segregation of groups that should be of concern. Segregation leads to stigmatisation and stereotypes between groups. This creates discrimination, bias and prejudice. Our intolerance and bias can be seen in the inequalities that then arise between groups. When goods and resources are being shared, just like in Tajfel's experiment, we're going to favour our own group members. Additionally, we will be more responsive to and accountable for the needs of those in our group because of the increased interaction and understanding that we share.

Anderson goes on to argue that when our leaders and decision-makers are drawn only from a privileged subset of society's segregated groups, justice and democracy are undermined. Our leaders end up less responsive to the needs of those they don't understand or interact with. As a result, our leaders become less accountable for the decisions. In reverse then, integration promotes equality, justice, democracy and even trust and tolerance. To have a just, equal and democratic society: we must integrate.

Anderson's arguments are again supported by findings in psychology. Gordon W. Allport also believed that prejudice flowed from ignorance. People make generalisations about others when they lacked information and understanding. So again, segregation will lead to stereotyping which can in turn lead to fear and hostility. Allport's "contact hypothesis", like

Anderson's arguments for integration, predicted that through contact with diverse others we will correct our mistaken perceptions, improve empathy and diminish prejudice. Both our philosopher's arguments and our psychologists' studies led to a similar conclusion; integration is the key to reducing intolerance.

For integration to really be successful, it needs to be sustained. Negative consequences can result where there is diversity but not trust. Studies have found such diversity can decrease community attachment, reduce civic participation and increase withdrawal from the collective life of a community. Further, it can lead to increased negative attitudes towards out-group members and a decreased willingness to offer forms of assistance to minority groups. This is because simple contact is not enough to overcome prejudice. Integration involves interaction with diverse others in ongoing and meaningful ways. We need to actually do things together, to work toward common goals in order to change our attitudes. This means we can't just aim to tolerate difference; we might need to learn to trust each other if we want to overcome prejudice and avoid the negative consequences of diversity.

Meaningful and ongoing integration seems to be the answer. But we need to be careful. If we have complete integration, we might start to lose something. Think of your closest relationship for a moment. How much do you have in common with this person? For most people the answer is going to be 'a lot.' This is because most people find similarity and familiarity more comfortable. Through this similarity we develop our social bonds. Findings by Pamela Popielarz and JM McPherson found that the more different you are from the other members of your group, the more likely you are to leave that group. So similarity doesn't just initiate connection, it maintains connections.

We can see the balance that needs to be struck to reduce prejudice when looking at another psychology experiment. The experiment involved the integration of racial groups in college dorms. White and black students were assigned roommates of a different race when they entered the residential college. And just as Anderson and Allport would predict; students reported more positive racial attitudes at the end of the year. However, just as Popielarz and McPherson argued, the students also reported that they were less likely to be good friends with their roommate, or continue living together the following year.

So while integration may not lead to the strongest or most lasting of connections, it can promote trust and decrease prejudice and intolerance. We may then return to our more segregated familiar groups but, as Thomas Paine stated ‘the mind once enlightened cannot again become dark.’ It may then be fine that not all bonds formed between diverse groups last. There remain difficult philosophical questions about precisely what is meant by integration, and how to justly distribute the costs of transitioning to a more integrated society. What matters in overcoming prejudice and becoming more trusting of others, is to step outside our comfort zone and get to know people we may never otherwise interact with. While doing so might be difficult, evading the challenge is no solution.