

Social Psychology of Prejudice:

*Historical and
Contemporary Issues*

Edited by

Christian S. Crandall

University of Kansas

Mark Schaller

University of British Columbia



Lewinian Press

B=F(P,E)

For Charlotte and Jasper

PUBLISHED BY LEWINIAN PRESS
1415 Jayhawk Boulevard
Lawrence, Kansas 66045

Printed in the United States of America.

Cover photo © Doug Hitt, 1996.

This book is based on a conference supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 9910732. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

2004, *All rights reserved.*

These chapters may be reproduced for any non-commercial purpose; *educational reproduction and distribution without fee or waiver is encouraged.* (Distribution of materials for copying cost alone is permitted.) Commercial reproduction by entities other than educational institutions for local classroom use, whether in readers or reprinted volumes or other use, must contact the editors for permission.

How I Got Interested in Stereotypes and Prejudices

Mark Schaller

I'd like to be able to say that my interests in stereotypes and prejudice emerged as a consequence of my own experiences while growing up. So, for instance, it might seem plausible that my interests were forged during those years of my childhood in which I lived with my family in various international locations (India, Pakistan, Tanzania) where light-skinned people like me were a minority. And it seems plausible that I might've been sensitized to stereotypes and prejudices by living amidst different cultures, each marked by different ways in which people are treated differently depending on gender, social class, whatever. I'd like to say that these experiences and observations left me with some profound curiosity and passionate desire to understand stereotypes and prejudices. But I'm not so sure I was so observant.

I can't know for sure, but I think I just stumbled into studying these topics, more or less by accident, as a result of a series of semi-random circumstances.

I had never given much thought at all to prejudice-related research until I was in graduate school and I happened to take a seminar on minority/majority issues taught by Anne Maass, who happened to be visiting for a year. In that class, my interest was piqued by an article on stereotype formation (a 1976 paper by Hamilton and Gifford), which led Anne and I to collaborate on some follow-up research together. But I must admit, the thing that mostly grabbed my interest was the subtle cognitive process under inquiry (involving "paired infrequency" and the formation of "distinctiveness-based illusory correlations") and not so much the end-product of that process (stereotypes). Then I ended up pursuing another line of work on stereotype formation that was inspired by a totally trivial and accidental circumstance. I just happened to be idly flipping through old volumes of *Psychological Review* one day during my last year of graduate school, and I stumbled across an article with the words "Simpson's paradox" in the title. That sounded intriguing and fun. The article had nothing to do with stereotypes or prejudice (it focused on the analysis and interpretation of results of memory retrieval studies). Somehow one thing led to another and eventually—frankly, it took a while—I connected the underlying statistical logic of "Simpson's paradox" to stereotype formation. Again, I think, the cognitive process was just fun to think about; the fact that there was a consequence on

stereotype formation was almost secondary.

The two lines of research that Luke Conway and I talk about in our chapter in this book were similarly inspired by personal circumstances that really have nothing to do with stereotypes and prejudice. My interest in communication processes and stereotype content had its roots, remotely enough, in the fact that a new colleague was living with a guy (Don MacArthur) who became a close friend of mine, and whose father was a population biologist of some note. So I decided to read one of his dad's books on island biogeography. This got me thinking about natural ecologies and the evolution of features of biological populations, and that got me thinking about analogous social evolutionary processes and their influence on the features of cultural structures such as stereotypes. I'm pretty sure I'd never have starting working on those ideas if not for the fact that I was hanging out with Don. And, probably, if I hadn't already been thinking about the implications of social evolutionary processes, I wouldn't have started seriously thinking about the implications of biological evolutionary processes on stereotypes and prejudices. So, my interest in the processes through which ancestral environments influence contemporary prejudice processes also has its roots in those seemingly irrelevant, oddball circumstances that determine the people I meet and the things I read.

Of course, I meet lots of people and read lots of things that expose me to all sorts of other ideas and psychological processes as well. And, of course, there are lots of other implications of these broad underlying processes and meta-theoretical perspectives; they don't lead everyone to hypotheses pertaining to stereotype and prejudice. So why have I been applying them in this specific way? How come I seem to find a way of fitting them into the psychology of prejudice? Well, I guess I just don't know. Maybe it does have something to do with my childhood after all.