

Herbert Blumer “Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position”

Main Point: Blumer contends that race prejudice is based on a person’s membership in a racial group and the relationship between the members of different racial groups and not on individuals’ feelings. In his model, through experience, one race group becomes the dominant group and the other the subordinate group. The feelings of the dominant group towards the “inferior” group become the basis for race prejudice.

Central Issues and Concepts:

The dominant racial group usually exhibits four basic types of feelings toward other racial groups that perpetuate discrimination. They feel superior and that members of the inferior race are inherently different and alien. They also feel entitled to certain areas of advantage and privilege and that those of the inferior race have an agenda that threatens the superiority of their group.

Blumer also highlights two key aspects of the process through which the dominant group comes to define itself as such. The first is the interaction between the individual members of the dominant group. He asserts that through communication, the exchange of ideas, and little or no opposition from other members of the inner group, central ideas of superiority merge and become fortified, and a certain image of the inferior group is formed. The second is that all the members of the inferior group are defined as one entity. Four implications that come from this belief are emphasized:

- The inferior group is defined by overreaching characteristics that are perceived of the group as a whole and not on personal experiences with those members of the inferior group.
- Public discussion is focused around the “big events,” events that appear to be significant, when it comes to shaping stereotypes about the inferior group.
- Those individuals and groups who have positions of power and authority and a public audience are the ones who have the most influence in public discussion.
- Groups with special interests play a large role in setting the position of the dominant group.

Two Key Quotes:

“Race prejudice becomes entrenched and tenacious to the extent that the prevailing social order is rooted in the sense of social position.” (Page 129)

“The sense of group position dissolves and race prejudice declines when the process of running definition does not keep abreast of major shifts in the social order.” (Page 129)

Two Questions:

1. Blumer outlines the process through which the dominant group comes to conclusions about the subordinate group but fails to mention the process in which the subordinate group forms its views about the dominant group. What do you think this process may be and why?
2. Is it possible that one race will ever stop being perceived as the dominant race? And if one race will always be perceived as dominant, will it ever be possible to be rid of racial prejudice?