

## [Commentary] Prejudice is about politics: a collective action perspective

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## Behavioral and Brain Sciences

**Prejudice is about politics: A collective action perspective. Invited commentary on:  
Dixon, Levine, Reicher & Durrheim (in press): Beyond prejudice: are negative  
evaluations the problem and is getting us to like one another the solution? Behavioral  
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--Manuscript Draft--

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<b>Abstract:</b>	In line with Dixon, Levine, Reicher & Durrheim's argument, I suggest that prejudice should be understood in broadly political rather than narrowly psychological terms. First, what counts as prejudice is a political judgement. Second, studies of collective action demonstrate that it is in 'political' struggles, where subordinate groups together oppose dominant groups, that prejudice can be overcome.

## Commentary on **Dixon, Levine, Reicher & Durrheim**

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### **Prejudice is about politics: A collective action perspective**

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## **Abstract**

In line with Dixon, Levine, Reicher & Durrheim's argument, I suggest that prejudice should be understood in broadly political rather than narrowly psychological terms. First, what *counts* as prejudice is a political judgement. Second, studies of collective action demonstrate that it is in 'political' struggles, where subordinate groups together oppose dominant groups, that prejudice can be overcome.

Dixon, Levine, Reicher & Durrheim (DLR&D) contend that unequal power relations between social groups are often characterized by attitudinal complexity rather than simple hostility, and that collective action rather than reduction in negative evaluations is the solution to the problem of these unequal power relations. From a collective action perspective, there is agreement with the argument, implicit in their paper, that prejudice should be understood as a broadly political rather than a narrowly psychological notion. The corollary of this point is that responses to prejudice and inequality should also be broadly political.

DLR&D argue that negative evaluation of group members is not the essence of 'the problem'. I agree. Far from being a problem at all, negative evaluations of groups may sometimes be appropriate. According to the orthodox conception of prejudice, and hence explicit in many of the definitions cited in DLR&D, negative evaluations of members of other groups are wrong ('unjustified', 'faulty', 'irrational'). But what about the antifascist's negative evaluation of all fascists, the striking miner's dislike of all police officers, the socialist's enmity to the capitalist class: are these necessarily cases of prejudice? Whether negative evaluations of particular groups are judged to be wrong is not a matter simply of measuring perceptions against reality; rather, it is a matter of (political) perspective (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner 1994; Stott, Drury, & Reicher 2012).

Of course, the (broadly political) concern of prejudice research is specifically with disadvantaged groups. As DLR&D point out, changing relations of disadvantage is also a concern of collective action research. From this perspective, the world is socially structured by conflict between groups with different degrees of power (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Historically, the ruling class has sought to construct, promote and build upon division among subordinate groups, including by encouraging 'racial' prejudice, in order to maintain its privileged position (Miles, 1989). As DLR&D argue, collective action can improve racialized subordinate groups' material situation in relation to the powerful (cf. Piven & Cloward, 1995). Collective action can also have unintended consequences, including changes in relations within and between subordinate groups. These, in turn,

can entail changes in identity: i.e., who 'we' are, who counts as 'other', and hence how 'we' feel about 'them'.

Oral histories of the UK miners' strike of 1984-85 (Coulter, Miller, & Walker, 1984; Green, 1990; Salt & Layzell, 1985) are rich in examples of such changes. Over the course of the strike, which involved numerous picket-line confrontations, many strikers came to view the police no longer as a neutral protector of their rights but as a 'political' force, sent by the Conservative government to break their strike and destroy their livelihoods. A reference point was the 1981 urban riots in London and other cities, which the official enquiry had blamed partly on police 'racial' prejudice (Scarman, 1981). For many among the predominantly White working-class strikers, the rejection of the police as a social category was linked to a positive re-evaluation of Black people, and specifically those involved in the riots. Now they were 'the same as us'.

Our longitudinal study of a nonviolent direct action campaign investigated the process underlying this kind of psychological change (Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2005; Drury, Reicher, & Stott, 2003). The groups involved were 'locals' and 'activists' who both opposed a trunk road being built through the 'village green' of Wanstead. At first, locals saw the activists, with their 'scruffy' appearance, as 'anathema' to respectable Wanstead. Later, however, many of these same locals came to embrace the activists (literally as well as figuratively), and in some contexts to redefine 'them' as 'us'.

In their own explanation for locals' change of views, the activists offered a 'contact' hypothesis. It was the long discussions they had together, they said, that allowed locals to get to know them, realize they were decent people, and understand their 'political' (rather than parochial) critique of road-building. There were two problems with this explanation. First, contact didn't seem to be necessary, as the locals also changed their evaluations of groups who they hadn't even met, including Irish republicans, the Nigerian Ogoni tribe, and other activists around the country. Second, the activists' critique only seem to have become persuasive when relations between locals and the police had changed.

The change in relations with the police took place within a single event: the eviction by police of locals and activists from under a tree they were occupying on the green in Wanstead. While the locals understood their action in defending the tree as legitimate, peaceful protest by various different individuals and groups, the police saw it as disorderly behaviour by a single, dangerous crowd. The police acted on this perception by using force against the crowd, without differentiating between activists (who expected some rough treatment) and locals (who didn't). The social location of the locals in relation to the police was transformed. The contrast that now defined their identity was no longer that between 'locals' and 'activists', but between all those who were affected by 'injustice' on the one hand and the police on the other. Thus the locals' positive evaluations of the activists – like the miners' re-evaluation of Black people – was a function of a shared relationship of opposition to those who treated them all as a single oppositional group.

The evidence from industrial disputes and nonviolent direct actions suggests that 'contact' may indeed enhance positive evaluations between groups – at least insofar as that contact takes place within a superordinate relationship of shared struggle against their subordination. However, the problem of inequality between groups is not essentially a problem of negative evaluations, but of power. Therefore, as DLR&D argue, the solution to the problem is mobilization for social change through collective empowerment (Drury & Reicher, 2009).

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