

Local vs. Foreign Tragedy: Applying Social Psychological Principles of Prejudice and Dehumanization

by
Jamie S. Hughes
Department of Psychology
University of Texas of the Permian Basin, Odessa, TX



Part I – Consensus

Read the following article by Glenn Greenwald entitled “Newtown kids vs. Yemenis and Pakistanis.” The article was published by *The Guardian* on December 12, 2012 and is accessible on their website at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/dec/19/newtown-drones-children-deaths>

The article also can be retrieved by entering the above address into the *Wayback Machine* of the Internet Archive at:

<https://archive.org/>

As you read this article, think about how the list of concepts in the box below might apply. For example, does the author suggest that one group dehumanizes another? What evidence does the author provide for his claims? (*Warning: the article is inflammatory.*)

List of Concepts

The following definitions are from pp. 360–391 of *Social Psychology (8th ed.)* by E. Aronson, T.D. Wilson, & R.M. Akert, 2012, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Contact Hypothesis: the idea that increasing contact between different groups (particularly minority and majority groups) will decrease prejudice.

Dehumanization: the belief that people in a distinguishable group, based solely on their membership in that group, are less capable of agency and intelligent thought, and/or less capable of experiencing a wide range of emotions.

Illusory Correlation: the tendency to see a relationship between events that are actually unrelated.

Institutional Racism: racist attitudes held by the vast majority of people living in a society where stereotypes and discrimination are the norm.

Justification-Suppression Model: The tendency to suppress prejudicial attitudes, while also searching for valid justification for one’s negative attitudes for the purpose of maintaining positive self regard.

Modern Racism: outwardly acting unprejudiced while inwardly maintaining prejudicial attitudes.

Normative Conformity: the tendency to go along with the group in order to fulfill the group’s expectations and gain acceptance.

Outgroup Homogeneity: the perception that individuals in the out-group are more similar to each other than they really are.

Realistic Conflict Theory: the idea that limited resources lead to conflict between groups and result in increased prejudice and discrimination.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: the case wherein people have an expectation about what another person is like, which influences how they act toward that person, which causes that person to behave consistently with people's expectations.

Stereotype Threat: apprehension experienced by a member of a stereotyped group that their behavior may conform to a cultural stereotype.

Ultimate Attribution Error: the tendency to make internal attributions about an entire group of people.

Victim Blame: the tendency to blame individuals for their victimization, typically motivated by the desire to see the world as a fair place.

Questions

In your groups, come to a *consensus* answer for each of the following.

1. Which concept is best illustrated in the following passage? "The children of north-west Pakistan, it seems, are not like our children."
A. Victim blame
B. Out-group homogeneity
C. Modern racism
D. Ultimate attribution error
E. Contact hypothesis
2. Which concept is best illustrated in the following passage? "We have to kill the terrorists and these dead kids are just collateral damage"
A. Dehumanization
B. Victim blame
C. Justification-suppression
D. Ultimate attribution error
3. The author claims that U.S. media hide and deny the humanity of the victims of the war on terror. If this were true (i.e., that several media outlets intentionally hid information about the victims of war) what would this best represent?
A. Self-fulfilling prophecy
B. Normative conformity
C. Victim blame
D. Dehumanization
E. Illusory correlation
4. In 2001, when the Bush administration went to war in Iraq, people worldwide speculated that the U.S. motive was oil. If this were true, which theory of prejudice would this represent?
A. Realistic conflict theory
B. Justification-suppression model of prejudice
C. Institutional discrimination
D. Modern racism
5. What is the author suggesting that Americans are doing in the following passage? "It is based on the implicit and sometimes overtly stated premise that Muslims generally, even those guilty of nothing, deserve what the U.S. does to them or at least are presumed to carry blame."
A. Portraying modern racism
B. Justifying and suppressing racism
C. Dehumanizing Muslims
D. Victim blaming

Part II – Discussion

Questions

1. Are there alternative perspectives with which to analyze this article? For example, how might a cognitive dissonance theorist, a researcher of conformity and social influence, or a learning theorist explain why people often turn a blind eye to atrocities that occur in other parts of the world?
2. The author claims “huge numbers of people, particularly in the countries responsible, remain completely untouched by the grief that is caused in those places.” He further suggests that one of the reasons we remain “untouched” is because, unlike the Newtown tragedy, there is no media coverage of the events taking place there. What are the effects of media coverage of tragedy? That is, what would be some of the ramifications of publicizing war?
3. Does the author have a convincing argument for U.S. institutionalized racism? Why or why not?



Licensed image in title block © Rex Wholster | Fotolia, ID#86613881. Case copyright held by the **National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science**, University at Buffalo, State University of New York. Originally published November 25, 2015. Please see our [usage guidelines](#), which outline our policy concerning permissible reproduction of this work.