

# “We underestimate the power and force of prejudices”

A CONVERSATION WITH ANDREAS ZICK\*

## *What are prejudices?*

**Zick:** Prejudices are motivated and generalising attributions of negative characteristics to a group or a person because they belong to a particular real, or even merely imagined, group. Ultimately, a prejudice is a humiliation of other people because they are different. Fundamental to the research here is the reference to social prejudices.

Social prejudices are not individual judgements in the sense of “I don’t like those people”. The founding father of prejudice research, Gordon Allport, still based his 1954 book about prejudices on the assumption that prejudices are antipathies which express hate, a feeling of dislike against others. Today we know from research that people express prejudices because they identify with groups and are motivated to debase others and portray them as inferior because they wish to devalue outgroups, i.e. groups their own group would like to set itself apart from and elevate itself above.

## *In several children’s programmes which explain prejudices the message is conveyed that prejudices are normal so that people can locate themselves.*

**Zick:** This is difficult. What is getting confused here is what we in prejudice research refer to as “categorisation” and “stereotyping”. It is entirely normal and human for us to **categorise** other people – just as we categorise nature – i.e. we organise them into particular groups. We think in terms of lumping things together. We do this because we have to reduce information. If, for example, you and I were talking about

older people now, we would be lumping together an unbelievably diverse group of people as “old people”. On the other hand, **stereotyping** is defined in research as an attribution of characteristics to the categories: “Older people are ...”. From the point of view of research, the **prejudice** begins when we can prove that a motivated humiliation and derogation lies behind this stereotyping.

## *In our IZI studies we found, for example, antiziganistic prejudices among 8- and 9-year-old children. How do they develop such prejudices?*

**Zick:** Let me ask a question to you and me: What are we thinking of when we talk about Sinti and Roma or – as many people still say – “gypsies”? What images do we see? What characteristics? I’m sure many negative stereotypes are involved. Children learn what is available within their culture. The reservoir of images, stereotypes, negative stereotypes and prejudices is embedded in society and culture. This is often underestimated. We know that in fact all members of a society know about the prejudices circulating around a group that is massively tainted with prejudices. We both know what the worst racist images of Jews look like. And children learn this when they listen, when they engage with how other people think about groups. At 8/9 years old, children know that society organises people into groups, and they notice that the order involves superiority and inferiority. Before children begin to systematically and intentionally debase Sinti and Roma, they have the knowledge.

## *And where does this come from?*

**Zick:** For a long time there was a theory that prejudices were conveyed intergenerationally, i.e. the parents say something prejudicial and the children absorb it. Research has shown, however, that the effect is relatively small. Patterns of prejudice stick with children particularly if they realise they can achieve something with these negative images, e.g. within their peer group: if I say something anti-Semitic I will be rewarded for it or others will laugh. Children are familiar with many prejudicial images which they use, to a certain extent, unconsciously, and they realise they can engender an effect with these; they differentiate between people by placing them in groups, and this brings them advantages, identity and self-worth. This is the power of prejudice. Prejudice allows people to acquire identity by differentiating; they can keep others at a distance or portray others as inferior. And then this prejudice proliferates.

## *What would be a pedagogically appropriate way of dealing with this?*

**Zick:** It’s not all that easy. We could confront people who have prejudices; we could tell them that they have prejudices. This doesn’t work. In prejudice research we are familiar with the so-called “boomerang effect”. If you present people with a palette of prejudices (Ill. 1), for instance, “Jews are not ...”, they eventually perhaps tend to recall the prejudices and not the positive qualities of Jews. What is needed is a good pedagogical framework. This means we need a pedagogical approach for each communication.

## RESEARCH

What works much better is intercultural contact (Ill. 2). If my direct, or even merely mediated, experience with a group is such that my prejudices do not match the situation, this breaks my prejudices. Recent research has shown that this does not mean I have to have direct contact face to face. If people are brought into a merely imaginary situation, where they can imagine being with a Jewish person within a shared space, and if it is conveyed to them how prejudice can lead to wholly false conclusions, this breaks the prejudice.

The second effective route is via information or education, i.e. I explain that others are not as originally assumed. However, this only works if positive characteristics are repeatedly attributed at the same time. Research on subtle and hidden prejudices shows very clearly that the solution is to enable people to also see something positive in, and say something positive about, groups which are marked by prejudice. This means we must enable young people to also recognise something positive in those groups who are debased by society, and to say something positive about them.

### Where is the boundary between prejudice and racism?

Zick: Prejudice research in the field of psychology and, for a long time, in the fields of Human and Cultural Sciences has defined **prejudices**, in the first instance, as attributions of negative characteristics to a group, or, respectively, as motivated debasement. It is **racism** if we regard the characteristics as natural. In other words, I accuse e.g. the Jews of wanting to rule the world, and I claim that this is a natural feature which is part of their essential character. That is when prejudice researchers call it racism.

More recent research into racism has highlighted the fact that the “old racism” – biological or natural racism – no longer exists as such. Nowadays, the portrayal, for example, of the culture of Muslims is more and more towards a racist attribution of quasi-biological characteristics to Muslims, i.e. racism. Overall, people in Europe have to be careful with the concept of racism because of its proximity to the concept of “race”, which was defined by the Nazis. By talking about racism, we might give people the idea that there is such a thing as race. From a scientific perspec-

tive, however, we dispensed with this idea back in the 80s. There are barely any natural scientists left who seriously try to distinguish between races. In this respect, I would prefer to differentiate between prejudices that may be racist but do not have to be.

### Why do people have racist prejudices?

Zick: To put it simply: Racism is likely to occur when we are able to satisfy social needs through racism, i.e. needs we are only able to satisfy together with others. Firstly, we gain **acceptance into groups** via racism. In right-wing extremist groups you have to be racist, otherwise you will not be accepted, because it is a distinguishing feature of the group.

Secondly, racism explains the world to us. For people who look for simple **explanations** and are not motivated to reflect deeply, racism always provides them with a simple explanation. If we assume that all refugees who come to Germany are criminals, i.e. bring with them the characteristics of being criminal, then we can use this idea to explain why we do not have to put any effort into integrating anyone. This is how we explain phenomena such as terrorism, criminality, etc.

Thirdly, we can exert **influence** through racism. If I throw a racist comment into a conversation, I suddenly notice people around me reacting to it. I can exert influence; I can influence others. And then there’s a fourth aspect: **self-worth**. By devaluing others I increase the status of my group. We know now, however, that this effect does not last for long. In other words, debasing Jews through anti-Semitism and racist images on one occasion does not mean our self-worth remains at a high level indefinitely, rather anti-Semites have to keep doing it. The fifth aspect is that racism allows us to mark within a culture which people we should

Item	D	GB	F	NL	I	PT	PL	HU
Jews have too much influence in [country].	19.7	13.9	27.7	5.6	21.2	19.9	49.9	69.2
Jews try to take advantage of having been victims during the Nazi era.	48.9	21.8	32.3	17.2	40.2	52.2	72.2	68.1
Jews in general do not care about anything or anyone but their own kind.	29.4	22.5	25.8	20.4	26.9	54.2	56.9	50.9
Jews enrich our culture.	68.9	71.5	60.6	71.8	49.7	51.9	51.2	57.3
Considering Israel's policy I can understand why people do not like Jews.	35.6	35.9	–	41.1	25.1	48.8	55.2	45.6
Israel is conducting a war of extermination against the Palestinians.	47.7	42.4	–	38.7	37.6	48.8	63.3	41.0

Ill. 1: Agreement to anti-Semitic prejudice statements (in percent) in Germany, Great Britain, France, Netherlands, Italy, Portugal, Poland and Hungary

Source: Zick et al. (2010), p. 57

be suspicious of and which people we can [trust](#). Prejudices tell people whom to trust and are used to increase trust into the ingroups.

Prejudices very clearly satisfy these 5 motives – sense of belonging, understanding the world, exercising control, acquiring self-worth, and establishing trust. I thereby gain identity through a fundamental ideology of the inequality of others. Racism provides me with an identity on a very simple basis. This is why, particularly at the moment, as we are facing a deeply riven society, we are suddenly seeing more and more people at the centre of society making racist assertions. Behind this lies the ideology that there is such a thing as a homogeneous group to which I can belong and which is of a higher status than all the others.

#### ***What is the relationship between racism and extremism?***

**Zick:** First, we have to explain what extremism is. For us, extremism is a result of radicalisation. It is based on an ideology and the acceptance of violence. Extremism is the name given to a phenomenon, a position, an attitude or an ideology, which rejects, attacks and antagonises the majority society, i.e. normality. For an extremist position, I always need a concept of the enemy, something from which I can differentiate myself, something I can fight against. Right-wing extremism is essentially racist, as it needs racism for its own identity and in order to radicalise people. We have particular extremist phenomena in which racism is genuinely part of the ideology. You won't find any right-wing extremism without anti-Semitism or racism.

It is different with left-wing extremism, where the antagonism tends to be directed at fascistic images, and it is different again with Islamist extremism, where – as in right-wing extremism – there is racism, i.e. a concept of the enemy. I would say racism is to a certain extent part of the ideology, but essentially, for the groups, it also has



Ill. 2: [Intercultural contact as an opportunity to break prejudices](#)

the function of bringing in, recruiting, mobilising and radicalising others. Racism is motivated by debasement, and in this respect extremist groups need to use it again and again in order to motivate people to continue in their extremism.

#### ***How does the emotion of hate fit in with this?***

**Zick:** For a long time, we did not consider how important emotions are in ideologies. We thought that ideologies were far more important than emotions. Ideologies are convictions which always have a cognitive and a behavioural dimension. Now we know, however, that ideologies too have an emotional dimension, and that groups are held together by collective emotions. Rage and hate are collective emotions. Hate is an essential part of the motivation. When you have extremist groups who want to mobilise others, the emotion is fundamental here. It accelerates me in expressing my particular attitude through my behaviour. We know from research that emotions thwart norms. If you are operating from within the mode of hate, you are more prepared to behave without giving any consideration to norms, without taking a look around you.

A second important point is that, in actual fact, no prejudice or racism exists without emotions. In terms of the group, the emotion of hate that we see in prejudices and in extremism is often not only something that motivates groups but also something that binds individuals, and even – as strange as it sounds – something they enjoy. In addition to hate, though, many other emotions have a role to play. Envy plays a major role in prejudices. In prejudices towards homeless people, for example, it is not hate but disgust and abhorrence that are the dominant emotions. In many prejudices that are based on stigmatisation, other emotions come into play like envy, antipathy and other emotions.

At the moment we are living in a society in which the ideology is very strongly affected by the profusion of propaganda and populism: give vent to your emotions and your rage! Our recent studies have provided us with empirical evidence that this politicised emotion of rage and hate directed at elites has become an element within an ideology. In this sense it is not a pure emotion but an emotion that is collective and group-related, and one which binds emotion to other ideological elements, to other convictions.

### *We have no counter-concepts*

#### *What do you see as the biggest danger?*

**Zick:** I think the biggest danger is that we do not take prejudices and misanthropic images seriously in society, that we overlook how many people's identities are misrecognized or damaged by the fact that we regard misanthropic prejudices as harmless. As long as they do not result in acts of hate, we tolerate many prejudices. In Germany, e.g., recently, however, we are experiencing acts of hate based on prejudice to an even greater extent than in the 90s, when we thought society was in a very critical condition, and when there were attacks on asylum seekers and laws were changed. In other words, we are underestimating the power and force of prejudices, and we are underestimating how fundamentally they fulfil, in particular, their function within extremism and within a populism which avails itself of prejudices and needs concepts of the enemy. And we think that concepts of the enemy simply remain concepts of the enemy; we do not think that they will lead to hostile behaviour. But that is no longer the case. Secondly, there is an increasing number of people within the population who base their identity on the idea of a homogeneous nation – and we have no counter-concepts. There is a concept of the “civil society”, but this civil society is not a group with whom we can identify, because the idea is that everybody belongs to it anyway. The open society is disintegrating and is riven, and at the moment populists and extremists are successfully generating oversimplified concepts of belonging. Our conceptions of norms and normality are being challenged, but we need strong civil norms in a society in order to continually remind people to recognise others as of equal value. We, as a society, must come up with positive ideas on the issue of migration, refugees, Jews, Muslims, the homeless, etc., if we want to move forwards.

#### *What would be the role of quality-oriented media here?*

**Zick:** I believe the media can reinforce open, diverse societies and can highlight the benefit and importance of acceptance by placing people in situations in which they come into contact with others. It is not possible to break anti-Semitism through simple experiences in interaction with Jewish people because many people do not live in areas where there are Jews. What we can do, however, is create imagined, mediated contact. According to the Multidimensional Memory Monitor 2018<sup>1</sup>, many people are very interested in history.

Secondly, as media professionals you have to behave as such. This means that where there are populist, extremist environments, I can show these. But I must remember, from my point of view as a journalist, that in a democracy I must also help to put people in a position where they can give up and question their prejudices. I will give an example which has given us a lot to think about in our research: if the media frame of reference for refugees and immigration is exclusively the refugee crisis, then we shouldn't be surprised if people in society think and remain in crisis mode. In other words, I actually have to force myself to do something that is difficult for a journalist – namely, to portray and generate positive images of others and help people to mature.

#### *One problem in Germany, particularly now in children's and young people's television, is how we deal with extremism or the issue of the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD).*

**Zick:** In my opinion, it is not about the media now taking on the task of fighting a political group. Every journalist must ask him/herself whether that is part of their job. But I think there is a certain degree of timidity and fear around conveying to children what lies behind populism and why populism and simple answers are so difficult. We know from research that at the age of

8/9 children suddenly realise what a powerful influence they can have over others if they employ concepts of the enemy. At the age of 10/11 they use prejudices and racist images to debase others. In other words, they know they can do it, and that it's an instrument – and, in turn, this is precisely what we can make clear. I believe we can make it very clear to children what populism is and how false and painful prejudices can be.

Most children and adolescents know from their own experience what it feels like to be affected by prejudices or inequality themselves. In addition, we can also make clear through media what it means to live in a society where people are afraid of being treated worse than others purely because they look different or because others cannot stand them. We just have to start taking this seriously. ■

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> For this, see: [https://www.stiftung-evz.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/EVZ\\_Uploads/Stiftung/Publikationen/englisch/EVZ\\_Studie\\_MEMO\\_2019\\_en\\_07052019.pdf](https://www.stiftung-evz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/EVZ_Uploads/Stiftung/Publikationen/englisch/EVZ_Studie_MEMO_2019_en_07052019.pdf) [16.5.19]

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