

Them And Us

Prejudice And Self-Understanding



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Suite 301
641 W. Lake Street
Chicago, IL 60661

800.634.4941
800.998.0854

www.learningseed.com



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Please contact us with any questions or concerns at:

Learning Seed
Suite 301
641 W. Lake Street
Chicago, IL 60661

800.634.4941
800.998.0854
info@learningseed.com
www.learningseed.com

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Summary

We're all prejudiced about prejudice. We stereotype our stereotypes. We're biased about our biases. We create people types called "us" and "them." But every "us" is somebody else's "them."

Them and Us explores mental habits we all use and shows how they can easily lead to hidden bias and prejudice. Stereotype and prejudice is not limited to the ignorant or closed-minded. Its beginnings lie in the almost automatic need to group people into categories and to identify clear "us" and "them" groups. The program assumes it is better to identify and challenge your own bias rather than declare yourself bias-free.

Prejudice can develop even if it is not "carefully taught." Much discrimination has its roots in prejudiced parents who pass their beliefs to their children like an infectious disease, but we each have the capacity to develop our own prejudices. What all these pre-conceptions share is that we consider each a recognition of reality, not a prejudice. What is prejudice for "them" is fact for "us."

Them and Us is not about specific minority groups. Rather it explores the mental processes we use to deal with other cultures, with people who do not fit our category of "us."

***Them and Us* explores:**

- How all cultures assume their ways are best and natural. Watch a meal in which four people eat in differing culturally determined ways.
- The hidden beliefs each holds about the way "foreigners" eat.
- That many "people types" based on real differences are ignored while others are singled out to become the basis of stereotypes.
- Prejudice against lefties and learn some surprising inherited traits you have that make you a member of a minority group.
- Simple habits of perception that serve as the foundation for "people typing."

Categories And The Brain

What you notice first about people is WHAT they are. You notice their “people type” almost automatically. You also notice other differences, perhaps ethnic, cultural, or even racial. Your brain insists on creating categories and groups. To ask you NOT to create groups is like asking you NOT to think of a pink elephant for twenty seconds. You rebel against the idea that “people are all the same.”

What is a “people type”?

A “people type” is the category or group your brain assigns people to based on how a person is the same or different from you. The people categories you use most are simple – “us” and “them.” People who look somewhat like you, who talk, eat and dress like you are “us” while everyone else is “them.”

Once we identify a people type, we see its members as similar to each other. In contrast, we continue to see differences among individuals in our own group. For example, an Asian might have a category of “European,” but people who live in Europe see more specific groups such as Mediterranean, Anglo, Slav, Scandinavian, etc.

If earth were invaded by polka-dotted aliens with two heads and scaly green skin, humans worldwide would certainly see the creatures as “thems” while any human would be an “us.”

Lacking greenish space invaders, we settle for more subtle differences – like food. We tend to group people who eat foods we don’t as “them.” For example, “Us” might eat cows and chickens. People who eat bugs or cats are “them.”

We also learn how to eat from our culture. You won’t walk into a lunchroom in Iowa and find a hundred kids using chopsticks.

Your eyes are drawn to differences. Some people eat with chopsticks, while others use their hands or silverware.

This sorting into “them” and “us” is not a failing – it’s our brains at work. It’s similar to learning a language, but which language depends on our culture.

How do we determine who is “us” and who is “them”?

We all have a built-in “thermometer.” We categorize and group people into “thems” that are in some way apart from “us.” This grouping into “them” and “us” is the way our brains deal with reality. This mental habit is not a defect in our upbringing, not a sign of racism or prejudice, nor a practice to which we can simply “say no.”

How we group people into “them” and “us” depends on our culture and how we were raised. Some children grow up learning race is the most important “us” and “them” in life, others are taught it's religion, while many learn that ethnic group or nationality is critical.

Making categories is not prejudice. Prejudice is a preconceived judgment or opinion without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge. Prejudice is one step further than simply making a category – it is judging the “thems” or their behavior as somehow inferior to “us.”

How we eat is a way we group people into categories and a great example of the division between “them” and “us”. While some use silverware, others may use chopsticks, or even their hands.

What is “culture”?

Culture is the acquired learning of a group that gives its members a sense of who they are, of belonging, of how they should behave, and of what they should be doing; culture makes that group recognizably different from other groups. A culture teaches the way “us” behaves.

In all societies, parents shape children to become “one of us.” The behavior of children is engineered by parents and other adults to fit the surrounding culture. It becomes part of their identity – part of the answer to the question, “who am I” and “how should I behave?” Parents make it clear that “our way is best” even if they never use those words. Many take care to teach a respect for other cultures, but OUR way is still THE way.

You won't find a culture anywhere that teaches like this:

“I know this isn't a very good way to (eat, dress), but it's what we do.”

Consider language. If each person had a unique personal language we would have little communication. When it comes to language, being unique or “different” is a liability. You communicate with others only because of what you share in common with them. Being able to talk to another person in the same language is a convenience. That's why a common language is part of every shared culture.

In the same way that a child learns a language by hearing it and not others, he/she also learns rules for how to be a person by seeing what others do.

A respect for “us” does not automatically produce hatred for “them.” It could lead to sympathy for “people trapped in a primitive culture,” or a desire to spread “our culture” to “help the less fortunate.” Or it could merely create an appreciation for those that are different.

Some Thems Are More Important Than Other Thems

Do you notice when people eat with their left hand? If not, it's likely you never learned to create the people type "left-handed eaters." People who grew up in cultures where handedness in eating is important will notice the difference.

In some cultures (especially in India and the Middle East), eating with the left hand is either forbidden or at least rude. To members of these cultures, this eating style alone would land a person in the "them" category. So eaters fall into "people types," that vary with the viewer. Some see important differences, others do not.

To millions in the world, the left hand is "unclean." It is the hand associated with the devil or toilet functions. But even in cultures lacking that belief, who wants a "left-handed compliment?" *Sinister* comes from the Latin word for "left". Many languages have a word for awkward that refers to the left side.

It's the left hand that doesn't know what the right hand is doing, not the other way around. The right hand that is raised, or placed on the Bible, to take an oath. Salutes and pledges use the right hand. The guest of honor sits on the right hand of the host, and the second in charge is the "right hand man." Am I RIGHT or are you LEFT behind?

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, schools and parents often punished children for using their left hand to write. Parents routinely said "no" when a child showed left-handed tendencies. Why? The world is designed for righties. Scissors are painful over time for lefties, so are spiral notebooks and loose leaf binders. Studies even show that timed test scores of lefties are lower when using right-handed desk and they suffered increased back, neck, and shoulder pain. Most desks today are more accepting of the left-handed minority.

Left-handed people ARE different, yet they don't choose to be left-hand dominant. If we were taught from a very young age that "lefties" were dishonest or mentally twisted we would see lots of dishonest or "weird" lefties. Most lefties see themselves as inconvenienced, but not discriminated against.

How do physical traits relate to “people types”?

We make some physical differences the basis for people types; others we ignore. Gender differences we notice. Size we notice as in fat and thin, perhaps short and tall. We notice skin color but pay less attention to hair or eye color.

These traits are clearly visible (once you are taught to see them), yet we do not use them to define people types. But we could. Between 70-90% of humans have free-hanging earlobes, can roll their tongue, and are right-handed. You might say we don't use these differences because they don't influence behavior. Are you sure? Perhaps you never noticed.

Consider physical traits inherited from our parent: dimples, attached earlobes, flat arches, etc... We cannot change these qualities by schooling or training, by how we eat, or by moving to a different country. None of these differences serve as markers for groups subject to discrimination. In fact, these differences are so unimportant we often don't even know if we have them. We judge them as unimportant.

Each of us has traits that could make us a member of one or more minority groups. Some qualities (for example, blonde women, short men, the overweight, or those with a high-pitched voice) do place us in groups subject to stereotypes and discrimination.

Imagine you move to a culture in which people with long second toes or flat feet are judged to be of low intelligence. Or perhaps there is a society in which dimples are seen as disfigurement. Your life would change overnight. It is not the physical trait that would shape your life, but the judgment of your new culture about that trait.

You see, first we create the category, and then we notice the differences. For example, you probably didn't learn about Arabs by studying or living in the Middle East. You heard the label as a kid and built a vague picture based on movies, newspaper stories, and what you heard “on the street.”

You learn which categories to notice as a child. Remember, first we learn the category, and then we find information to confirm it. If you grew up learning that people with dimples were not trustworthy, you might today have doubts about trusting a dimpled person.

It's not that we notice people types because they're important. Rather, they're important because we notice them.

I'm Unique. They're People.

We think of ourSELF in a different way than we think of others. Let's say I was late for class twice last week. I explain I stopped to help a lady change a flat tire and the second time the battery in my alarm clock failed. I explain my own behavior in terms of what I did; my particular situation. But the foreign exchange student in the same class who was late twice last week I explain by thinking, "I guess those people aren't very concerned about being on time." We often explain other people's behavior by the people type we think they fit.

"Well he IS French," for example. Or by gender ("that's a guy"), by ethnic background, by race, by age (as in... "Kids today just don't value..."), or political beliefs ("of course, she IS liberal"). We often use "people kinds" to explain events. We rarely apply such generalizations to ourselves.

Grouping people based on incomplete information is human thinking. But that doesn't require us to act unjustly toward "them", nor judge their behavior as inferior.

Intelligence As Selective Ignorance

What is prejudice?

Prejudice is a belief (based on wrong or incomplete information) that members of a group generally share some common feature. Often prejudice includes hostility toward individuals simply because they belong to the group. Not all prejudices are negative. Some believe that Asians are good at math, that thin people are healthy, that women are typically nurturing, or that Norwegians are tall and blonde.

We all hold assumptions about some people types – women or men, rich or poor, foreigners, jocks or geeks, or any of thousands of categories. These beliefs, sometimes called stereotypes, live below our awareness. We all hold some, no matter how open-minded or accepting-of-others we may be. It takes courage to challenge your own convictions, to identify the stereotypes you hold as truth.

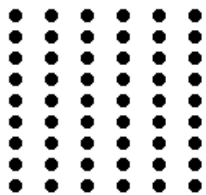
Why do we create people types?

We create people types to help make sense of the world. Seeing individuals in a group as if they were all the same is a mental shortcut. Observing that “there are birds on the beach” saves mental effort in seeking out the differences. You might be more specific and say “look at all the seagulls.”

Something like this happens with skin color. For centuries, we’ve grouped people into races based mainly on skin color – white, black, red, yellow. Most scientists today dismiss these categories as meaningless. But that does not stop people from using them. You focus on similarities in order to simplify. Those birds look pretty much all alike to you. Part of being intelligent is ignoring information in a smart way; call it selective ignorance.

You ignore a lot that happens around you, so it’s not surprising you don’t treat all people as unique individuals. It’s a mental habit that serves you well in making sense of the world, but it can also cause a “those-people-are-all-like-that” judgment. Some of our perception habits lead us to group people into types.

We do not see the world as things or pieces in disorder. We notice defined shapes and patterns. We seem to have a “built-in” group-maker. Two ways we create groups are based on closeness or similarity. We do this for things, people, everything.



Most people will see this grouping as a series of columns, NOT a series of rows. The dots are closer to each other vertically than horizontally, so we see columns instead of rows. If you were one of those dots, the people in your column would be “us” while the dots to your right and left would be “thems.”



Here we see a row of dots – one group.



But let's add movement. Now, when we add movement, we classify the dots moving in the same direction as a group. We perceive them as sharing common movement.

We tend to group objects based on proximity, similarity, and closure (as if they complete a pattern). The moving dots illustrate the Gestalt psychology called “the law of common fate” that states when objects move in the same direction, we tend to see them as a single group.

Your grouping of the dots that move together is much like your grouping of the people who “eat like me” earlier.

Another mental habit we all have is to view the world as a “fill in the blanks” project. We fill in a lot of detail that we don't really see – call it mental coding. Look through a picket fence and you see an object all chopped up – but you fill in what's missing to see the whole creature.

You do something like that with language as well. You don't really read whole words. You don't even need the letters to be in the right order:

“It deosn't mttar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a tatol mse and yuo can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. We dno't raed ervey lteter, olny the wrod as a wlohe.

Our minds constantly process incomplete information. We don't see all the separate parts that make up a word, a thing, a person, or an event. We seek well-organized and familiar patterns. We often turn what lacks a clear pattern into a pattern we have seen before – wrod becomes word and we don't even notice the mental gymnastics. The implication of this mental process is that we often see what's not there.

So grouping people (especially strangers) in a “people type” based on incomplete information comes natural – it's the way our brain works.

Only when we “get to know them” (gather more data) do people change from “people types” to individuals. If we associate only with our own “kind of people,” we never meet “them” as people. “They” remain alien, a category, a mental convenience.

But merely traveling to or living in a different culture does not guarantee we will refine our “people typing.” We filter information to fit existing beliefs – selective ignorance. If we believe a people type is “hard working” or “lazy” then we will see those qualities and filter out the opposite. Psychologists call this the “confirmation bias.”

Belief shapes perception. It's not that “I'll believe it when I see it,” as much as “I'll see it when I believe it.”

“Us” And “Them” Can Change With Time

Nationality is a powerful category. Millions have died fighting “for my nation.” Yet for most of history nations didn't exist. Kings ruled over people who recognized a certain royal family, no matter where they lived. Even today, many people we identify by nation tend to think of themselves more as members of a specific tribe or religion.

Humans believe killing “us” is wrong, yet war is a part of history. To make killing “easier” we move the “them” – the enemy – outside the larger category of humans. We de-humanize the enemy to justify killing.

Soldiers in World Wars I and II found it easier to kill “Huns” and “Japs” than fellow humans. Years later categories change and the former enemy (although still “them”) gains re-admission to the human group. Our people types are changeable. Categories change with time.

Jerome D. Frank, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine has written eloquently of how we view enemies. The following is from “The Image of the Enemy and the Process of Change.”

In each case, “we” are trustworthy, peace-loving, honorable, and humanitarian; “they” are treacherous, warlike, and cruel. In 1942, when Germany and Japan were enemies of the United States, the first five adjectives used by Americans in public opinion surveys to describe the enemies included warlike, treacherous, and cruel. None of these words appeared among the first five describing the Soviets, who at that time were allies of the United States. In 1966, when the Soviet Union was no longer an ally, among the first five adjectives describing the Soviets were warlike and treacherous. These adjectives also were applied to the Chinese, but had disappeared from the lists of adjectives applied to the Germans and Japanese, who by then were allies of the United States.

One should also note that enemy images are not monolithic – there are variations. For example, it is often said that “the people are good; it is only the leaders who are evil.” It is much easier to hate a few evil leaders than all those people. This view may create a false hope that if somehow people could only get rid of a few evil leaders, then the problem would be solved. In fact, the problem is much more complex than that. In addition, whether it is the leaders or the people who are subject to the enemy images, the effects in either case on perception, feelings, and behavior are similar and the distinction is largely irrelevant.

Many nineteenth-century Americans considered people from Ireland as suited only for work and fighting and were subject to discrimination and injustice.

The ancient Greeks called slaves *andrapoda*, the “human-footed stock.” Nineteenth-century white settlers sometimes spoke of an Indian man as a “buck” and the woman as a “squaw.” Throughout history some “thems” (including women and children) were classified more as property than people.

We find it difficult to believe much of the civilized world once accepted slavery as natural. But once some “thems” are grouped as “not human” the path to slavery becomes frighteningly short. Those outside the “human” label can be enslaved, terrorized, or killed and their prosecutors will be praised as heroes.

Our “us” and “them” boundaries change both with time and place.

An American visiting an Asian country is much more aware of being an American than when visiting another city in the U.S. Likewise, a visitor from China is much more aware of being Chinese walking in an American city than back home.

We form temporary (but often important) “us” groups. For example, with people on the same tour or cruise, people in the same school class, members of the same military squadron, neighbors, parents of kids the same age, or summer camp kids sleeping in the same bunk house.

Any sports contest demonstrates both in teams and fans how we form “us” and “them” groups. Fans are an “us” group, a tribe. In a sense, sport is a non-violent simulation of war; a chance to engage in the tribal emotions of us versus them without paying a deadly price.

Review

- Stereotypes are part of how we make sense of the world, but grouping does not require treating people unjustly.
- Accept that you hold prejudices and stereotypes. Learn to recognize them so they don't become an excuse for mistreating others.
- Realize you think of "them" in a different way than you think of "us".
- The people types you hold important are based on selective ignorance.
- Your perception is shaped by your belief.
- Be aware of beliefs about people types imposed on you by others. These beliefs will not be presented as stereotypes but as truth.

Questions For Discussion

1. The program opens with a scene of four people eating. What does this scene illustrate?
2. "America is a melting pot." What does this mean? How does this relate to the concept of "them" and "us"?
3. Where do we gather information about people who differ from us?
4. What influence, if any, do you think media has on stereotypes?
5. What do you think individuals can do to help reduce bias and stereotypes?

We And They by Rudyard Kipling

Father, Mother, and Me,
Sister and Auntie say
All the people like us are We,
And every one else is They.
And They live over the sea,
While We live over the way,
But—would you believe it?—They look upon We
As only a sort of They!

We eat pork and beef
With cow-horn-handled knives.
They who gobble Their rice off a leaf
Are horrified out of Their lives;
And They who live up a tree,
And feast on grubs and clay,
(Isn't it scandalous?) look upon We
As a simply disgusting They!

We shoot birds with a gun.
They stick lions with spears.
Their full-dress is un—
We dress up to Our ears.
They like Their friends for tea.
We like Our friends to stay;
And, after all that, They look upon We
As an utterly ignorant They

We eat kitcheny food.
We have doors that latch.
They drink milk or blood,
Under an open thatch.
We have Doctors to fee.
They have Wizards to pay.
And (impudent heathen!) They look upon We
As a quite impossible They!

All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And every one else is They
But if you cross over the sea,
Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!) looking on We
As only a sort of They!

The Implicit Assumptions Test

Understanding yourself includes becoming aware of the assumptions you make about people types. One way to study your own bias is to take an Implicit Assumptions Test. In this matching exercise you're asked to make snap decisions about where to place words or pictures. The test offers a variety of categories including race, gender, skin tone, age, weight, religion, and disability. Test takers are often surprised to learn their own hidden biases. In fact, the people most surprised are those who believe themselves most free of stereotypical thinking.

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

The unconscious attitudes have the potential to structure stereotypes that influence how we treat others. Facing underlying assumptions can be a first step to challenging and changing them. Harvard's Mahzarin Banaji, one of the test's creators, explains, "if we regard our unconscious bias as errors in the sense that they make us go in ways that are inconsistent with where we want to go, we can also learn to readjust and correct those errors, just as we would if we started driving too fast or took a wrong turn."

For background on the test see the website or "The Bias Finders" by Bruce Bower at **Science News Online** at <http://www.sciencenews.org/>.

Note To Teacher: This test requires more than a few minutes and is best suited for high school students and older. Teachers should examine the site themselves to determine if it is appropriate for their students. Some users will find the test too difficult to take; others will find the results difficult to accept. Since the test deals with unconscious attitudes, parents may find it objectionable.

Classroom Activity

Media-Shaped Minds: Children's Television Programs

Television aimed at children, especially cartoons, plays a large role in shaping children's realities about discrimination and stereotypes. How are race, gender, religion, and culture portrayed in children's programs? How have shows helped promote or prevent acceptance of these differences?

Ideas for Discussion:

Culture In Television:

Pokemon/ Other Anime
Dora The Explorer
Go, Diego, Go!
Arthur
Lilo & Stitch

Religion In Television:

Veggie Tales
Rugrats

Gender In Television:

Sesame Street
Power Puff Girls

What other programs (even those geared for adults) play a part in shaping ideas about "Us" and "Them"?

Do advertisements help shape our perceptions?

Them And Us Quiz

1. _____ If earth was invaded by war-like aliens with polka dots, two heads, and scaly green skin, how would our habit of forming groups change?

- (A) It would not change since our groups are formed for internal reasons.
- (B) A lot of people who are now "them" would suddenly become "us".
- (C) The invaders would eventually be seen as like us but different.
- (D) People with two heads would welcome them as "brothers."

2. _____ The video contends that we divide people into groups of "them" and "us"

- (A) because we want to protect ourselves from what is different.
- (B) because we are taught to be prejudiced.
- (C) because this sorting is how our brains deal with reality.
- (D) because we see all the physical differences among peoples.

3. _____ In every culture parents teach their children how to behave. Parents teach children:

- (A) our way is best.
- (B) our way is one of many that are acceptable.
- (C) our way is how to avoid punishment.
- (D) our way might not be very good, but it's they we do.

4. _____ Most people are right-handed, but 10-15% are left-handed. Which statement about lefties is made in the video?:

- (A) Most lefties see themselves as inconvenienced, but not discriminated against.
- (B) Lefties are an oppressed minority.
- (C) Left-handed people only imagine they are inconvenienced by a right-handed majority.
- (D) Society does not make life more difficult for left-handers.

5. _____ Complete this statement from the video: "It's not that we notice people types because they're important,

- (A) it's that people types are not important."
- (B) it's that we seldom notice differences that make people unique."
- (C) rather, they're important because we notice them."
- (D) rather, we notice people types no matter if they are important or not."

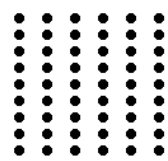
6. _____ When it comes to stereotypes,

- (A) they are held by people who were taught them by parents.
- (B) they are held by people who don't know better.
- (C) we all hold some.
- (D) they are the result of closed-minded thinking.

7. _____ According to the video, "seeing individuals in a group as if they are all the same is..."

- (A) the definition of prejudice.
- (B) the definition of discrimination.
- (C) a mental shortcut we all use.
- (D) the definition of being closed-minded.

8. _____ The figure below is used in the video to illustrate:



- (A) one way we place things in groups is by closeness.
- (B) prejudiced people see columns while others see rows.
- (C) open-minded people see columns while others see rows.

(D) if you were a dot, the people in your row would be "us" and the other dots "them."

9. _____ The phrase "It doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are.." illustrates

- (A) Some people just can't spell.
- (B) We fill in a lot of detail we don't really see in a form of "mental coding".
- (C) We can't judge people OR words unless we get to know them.
- (D) Prejudice is often based on snap decisions.

10. _____ The most common groups we use to make people categories are

- (A) black and white.
- (B) native and foreign.
- (C) English speakers and non-English speakers.
- (D) us and them.

Them And Us Quiz: Answer Key

1._____If earth was invaded by war-like aliens with polka dots, two heads, and scaly green skin, how would our habit of forming groups change?

(B) A lot of people who are now “them” would suddenly become “us”.

2._____The video contends that we divide people into groups of “them” and “us”

(C) because this sorting is how our brains deal with reality.

3._____In every culture parents teach their children how to behave. Parents teach children

(A) our way is best.

4._____Most people are right-handed, but 10-15% are left-handed. Which statement about lefties is made in the video?

(A) Most lefties see themselves as inconvenienced, but not discriminated against.

5._____Complete this statement from the video: “It’s not that we notice people types because they’re important,

(C) rather, they’re important because we notice them.”

6._____When it comes to stereotypes,

(C) we all hold some.

7._____According to the video, “seeing individuals in a group as if they are all the same is...”

(C) a mental shortcut we all use.

8._____The figure below is used in the video to illustrate:

(A) one way we place things in groups is by closeness.

9._____The phrase “It deosn’t mtttaer in what order the lttteers in a word are..” illustrates

(B) We fill in a lot of detail we don’t really see in a form of “mental coding”.

10._____The most common groups we use to make people categories are

(D) us and them.

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