

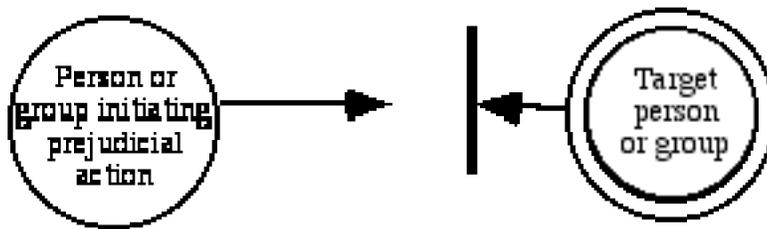
Not in My Own Defense

Many times, in order to explain relationships between people or groups of people, it seems that physical metaphors make relationships more clear and understandable. So, I want to use three of them here to describe the relationships between prejudiced people and those who are the targets of prejudicial behavior.

Principle I

Any force which is directed toward a target can be redirected much more easily than it can be confronted, resisted and stopped. This may sound more like physics than an approach to changing prejudicial behavior, but let me pursue this a bit further. The principle is, I believe, universal and valuable in developing a model for reducing prejudicial behavior.

Direct Opposition is Ineffective

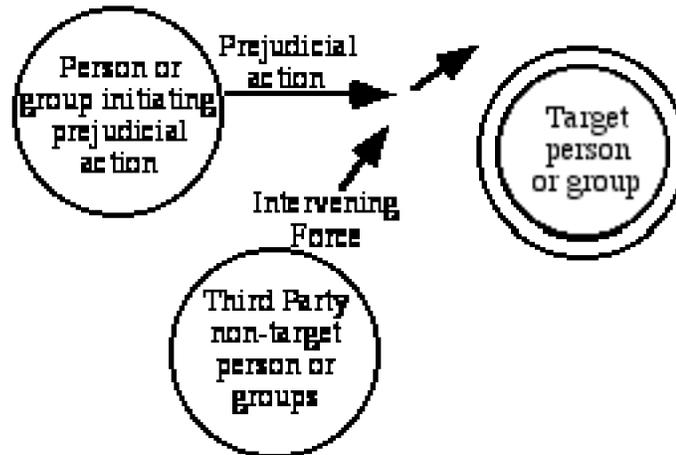


In this simple illustration it becomes clear that any person or group who is the target of a force is not located in a position to provide an efficient or effective intervention for their own defense. An oncoming force cannot be effectively redirected from a position which is the target of that same force. From the target, a second force can only resist the oncoming force and thus absorb its full impact. To economically protect people, it becomes clear that the redirection of any force needs to be executed from a completely new vector.

The victims of prejudicial thinking or prejudicial actions are already devalued in the eyes of prejudicial individuals and any action taken by these people is seen as less valid because of their devaluation. In addition to this person being devalued, his or her action also brings an

oppositional force into the situation; this often creates more heat than light. Oppositional positions, while they may be completely “correct,” often trigger resistance within observers, as well as within the individual who perceives himself or herself as the target of that force.

The Opportunity of the Non-target Person



An understanding of this process can be best illustrated with a quote from Martin Niemöller.

“In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.”

Principle II

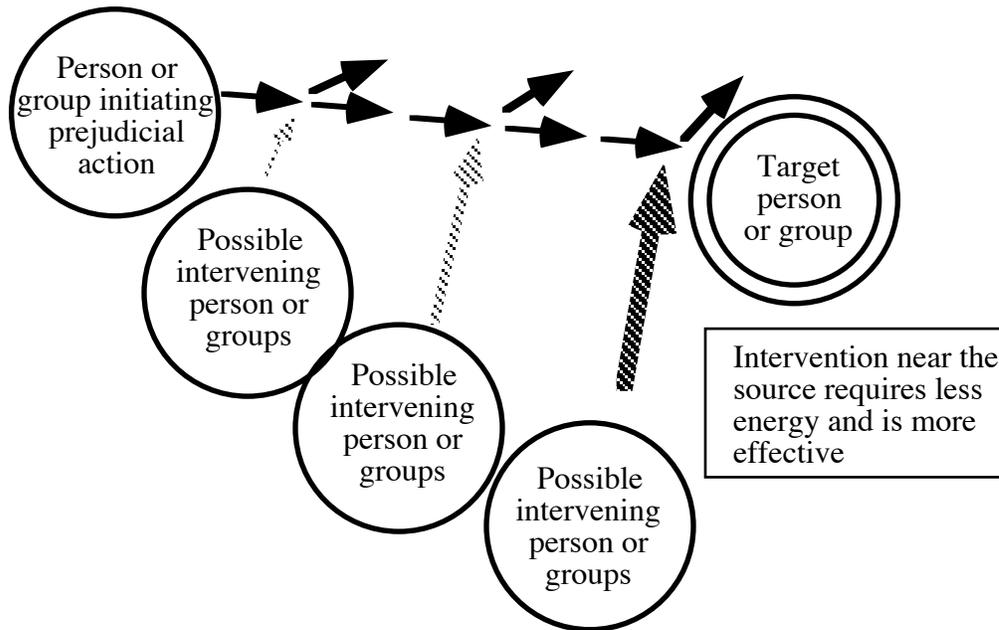
In addition to the foregoing principle, there is a second principle to consider here. This principle has to do with the location of, or point at which the force is redirected. You see, **the earlier a force is redirected, the less energy it requires for the same effect.** Just as a force meeting its target requires the greatest change of direction, a force leaving its origin requires the least change in direction to protect the target. The force of change is most powerful if it is from one who might be best identified with the initiator of the prejudicial action.

So, to effectively redirect a force, the target position is precisely in the weakest position to respond. Thus, a force from any other position can more effectively redirect the prejudicial force than a force from the target position. This principle can be illustrated if you imagine a small

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bird landing near the end of the barrel of a rifle just as a marksman is shooting at a distant target. The weight of the bird could never stop this projectile, but it could slightly redirect the projectile as the bird puts a small critical force on the rifle barrel.

Intervention Near the Origin



When we apply this principle to the process of reducing prejudice, it becomes clear where the opportunities are greatest for intervention to be effective. The position of greatest influence is the position nearest to the person acting in a prejudicial way and is from a person who is not the target of such prejudicial actions. One who is not a target has greater influence, can act with greater safety, and needs to apply less pressure to redirect the prejudicial actions.

When I imagine people intervening to protect others from prejudicial behavior, I am reminded of a traditional folk story from Vietnam about the difference between heaven and hell. In hell, people have chopsticks that are a yard long so that they cannot reach their mouths. In heaven, the chopsticks are the same length -- but the people all feed one another. It seems that the prevention of prejudicial behavior is much like the people with yard-long chopsticks; none of us can effectively respond to prejudices toward ourselves, but we can each intervene to help others.

Principle III

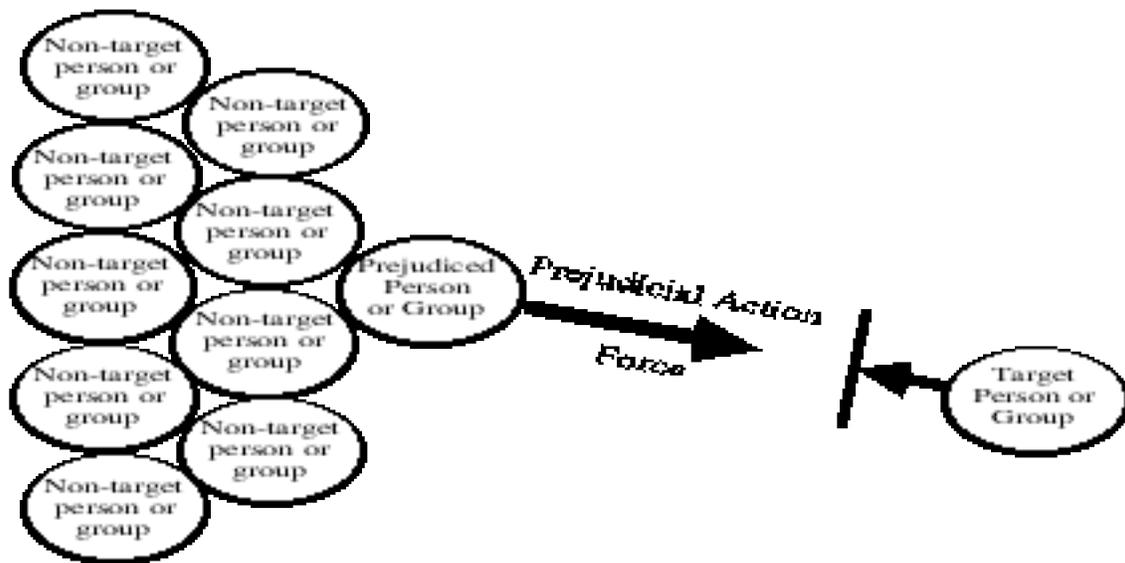
The third major principle is **that all actions have an equal and opposite reaction; anyone who exerts a force will create a force in**

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the opposite direction. This means that without support for one's position, one is unable to direct a force toward others without being moved by the equal and opposite force.

With this principle it is clear that those who are acting in prejudicial ways have support from people around them. The support may be defused and not active, but it supports the actions of the prejudicial behavior. Therefore, if this support is removed, the prejudicial actions that it supports can no longer exist. This may seem like a difficult goal, but it needs to be addressed. If we are to continue to move toward a more equitable and sustainable world, each of us needs to use the position we find ourselves in to improve this world.

The Inactive Support for Prejudicial Activities



We need to have a clear understanding that as we allow those around us to speak or act in prejudicial ways, we are providing support that is essential for the prejudicial acts to occur. Without our support, as quiet as it might be, the prejudicial acts could not continue.

One of the effects of nonviolence and passive resistance is to produce change. The individuals who usually provide silent inactive support for prejudicial activities, stop providing that support. When the institutions of law began to use fire hoses and police dogs on school children in Birmingham, the support of the silent inactive citizen melted away. This left the instigators of prejudicial violence without the support they needed.

This final theme is very much related to our society at large. We have created a society where heroes are those who lead us into battle against those whom they define as different from us. This theme is played out repeatedly every Saturday morning on children's TV and many other times throughout the week. In this action to reduce prejudicial behavior, we need to recognize that the reduction of conflict will reduce opportunities for many young men to become heroes in the traditional way.

Unless this loss is defined and these male myths revised, conflict will be difficult to replace within our society. It is my fear that we have created such an expectation for conflict that is only resolved by defeating others that we will have difficulty eliminating this expectation in order to have a more inclusive society. Even in traditional children's literature only the story of **Ferdinand The Bull** stands out as a model of one who chose not to fight.

As a society, we need to stop encouraging conflict in the face of differences and we need to encourage understanding and acceptance of differences. This single issue has far-reaching implications which we can not possibly address here, but our subtle support for prejudicial actions and prejudicial thinking should be addressed at every opportunity.

A Prejudice Reduction Strategy

In consideration of an effective strategy for prejudice reduction, the foregoing dynamics seem central to any successful approach. These dynamics also seem central to an understanding of the limitations of many groups which have been devoted to prejudice reduction and have been less than successful. A group cannot be created by one group to effectively create changes in the beliefs and actions of another group.

It is my proposal that the most effective prejudice reduction strategy will be one which takes full advantage of the above dynamics, not one which ignores these processes.

Indeed we are all interdependent, and on an issue like prejudice, each of us is in the position of being least able to act in our own defense. However, we each have the power, the leverage, and the opportunity to act in the interest of others. It might be said that by having the opportunity, we each have the responsibility to act in accordance with the needs of others.

The Dalai Lama recently wrote, “As we approach the end of the twentieth century our world has become smaller and more interdependent. . . . But, to begin with in the context of this new interdependence, even self-interest lies in considering the interests of others.”

While the simplest form of this type of intervention might simply be to respond clearly to a prejudicial joke that occurs near us, it is important to start where we are able. To move forward and take the prejudicial force upon oneself is usually effective in weakening and redirecting that force. I imagine people who hear racist jokes or sexist jokes responding, “Well I might do that myself under some circumstances.” A statement of this type does not label or counterattack the person who has made the prejudicial joke or statement. However, by making a statement like this, one simply places oneself in the line of the prejudicial action. In doing so, we change the direction of the force and identify the action as inappropriate without creating a direct conflict or oppositional force.

At times other action might be needed, but counterattacks are not the most effective intervention. I will sometimes respond to a prejudicial remark with a simple reflection on the group that is experiencing the attack. For example, “When I hear jokes about gay guys, I am reminded of the social pressures they experience and how they have a suicide rate that is three times that of their age group.” In responding to a joke about a young woman’s weight I might reflect upon how about 25% of the women in our colleges and universities have eating disorders, which are largely a response to social pressures for a woman to have a body that is the “right shape.”

I don't feel that it is helpful to interpret the intentions of the person who has made the prejudicial remark or told the prejudicial joke. But, it does seem to be important to define oneself within the context of the prejudicial actions of others.

Organizational Applications

The practical application of these principles within an organization seems to require some important strategic rules.

- 1) The response to a prejudicial action is the weakest when taken by a member of the targeted group.
- 2) The response to a prejudicial action is most effective when it is taken by a person who is identified as being within the same group as the person taking the prejudicial action.
- 3) The passive support by the group where the prejudicial actions originate is essential in order for the prejudicial actions to continue. Thus, the removal of this support, regardless of its seemingly inactive nature, is essential.

The message of these three principles is clear. None of us can act for our own defense as effectively as one who is identified as different from us by those who might be prejudiced toward us.

In order to institutionalize the above principles, it would seem most appropriate to have a committee or task force which would be as diverse as the organization or unit it functions within, such as the university, college, corporate division, department, etc.

This task force or committee would function most effectively if it were to have the following freedoms, characteristics and responsibilities.

- 1) A membership which is not dominated by any specific group and all members be personally committed to the creation of a more just world for everyone.
- 2) Some level of official recognition and support.
- 3) The access to and responsibility for making the total institutional membership aware of issues related to prejudicial actions within the greater organization.

- 4) The actions of this group should be taken in ways which are inclusive and supportive of the written policies, procedures, goals and regulations of the larger organization.
- 5) The spokespersons for this group should vary, depending upon the situation, needs and issues.
- 6) This group should make all decisions in total, with consensus being the level of agreement needed for action.
- 7) Policy recommendations from this group might be submitted to the larger policy- and decision-making body or administration.

The response of this group might be to have the male members of the group jointly submit a committee statement on the concerns about sexism within the institution, or to have the non-Hispanic members speak up about the need for action for the Hispanic population. These actions might be only recommendations or public statements, but it would seem to be an important function for a diverse group to share.

The group could recommend training for its own members or for the total organization, but it needs to have the visibility of a recognized group within the organization and the responsibility and freedom to take actions.

With this configuration, whenever any member's identity group is under attack, a response needs to come from the total group. Those members who are most easily identified with the group taking the prejudicial actions can most effectively be the spokespersons for the response. The most leverage for reducing prejudice always stays with those who are identified as members of the offending group and this leverage needs to be utilized. To take an extreme example, we might remember the whites who joined the blacks in the civil rights actions of the 1960s, and began to be killed with the blacks. The public opinion from otherwise inactive whites was mobilized.

The actions of this task force or committee and the sharing of its decisions also models a diverse group working together and is an important model for the way people can function.

This group should be allowed to do informal research and surveys within the organization with the goal of defining problem areas and making recommendations for improvement within the organization. While they need to be responsible in the actions that they take, they also need to be removed from any subtle threats that are often related to such activities.