

**NORMALIZATION OF THE BIGOT: THE CASE OF ARCHIE BUNKER**

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**EXPLAINING PREJUDICE**

In our society, prejudiced attitudes are widespread. In certain regions and subcultures in the United States, it has become institutional, informally through verbal cliches, and formally in organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Some people, however, regard prejudice as bad, wrong, and deviant, and as unjust to its victims. Psychologists have offered explanations for prejudice such as: 1) Scapegoat theory, which takes the frustration or inability to achieve as due to another, as the "cause" of the problem; 2) Projection theory, which refers to the assigning to others the characteristics of oneself that cannot be acknowledged, with condemnation of the others for having such unacceptable characteristics; 3) Authoritarian-personality theory, which held that a high score on an authoritarian-personality scale could measure prejudice (DeFleur et al 1971 339). Such theories may be valid for individuals, but they do not appear adequate to explain bigotry on a broad scale. Because bigotry is so pervasive, it seems to be a *normal* attitude. Here we will examine the normalization of the bigot (Wilson & Collins 1979).

**SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS**

Most sociological theories about prejudice include some mention of socialization processes. An individual learns either the norms to be prejudiced or the norms to avoid prejudice through the process of differential association. This concept assumes that the individual has internalized those prejudices which thus become part of the personality structure (Frazier 1976 12). This has been used mainly to describe criminal deviance, but can well be applied to bigotry. In the case of Archie Bunker, in the television series, *All in the Family*, one might speculate that during Archie's childhood, those who were significant-others to him held highly prejudicial attitudes. At least during the first few years of the television series, Archie seemed to maintain these beliefs in spite of overwhelming evidence against them. He did this because it worked

for him, and through his own selective perception, his beliefs were validated. He saw only what he wanted to see, based on his internalized conceptions. This theory is at least partly supported.

Another theory on a societal level involves the use of prejudice to maintain dominance and power of one group over another. Because we live in a fairly competitive society, with competition for jobs and social and economic resources, prejudice toward a group may permit the dominant group to maintain control. The use of stereotypes and cliches helps to promote a derogatory image of those groups, thereby making the dominators seem "better than" their victims. For Archie, this means that since he must compete with black people on the job, by ridiculing them he maintains a relatively higher social rank where he works on the loading dock. In a historical sense, this theory holds true with racial slurs about black people in the South, but it fails to explain why all white males do not hold these attitudes toward all black males.

**PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEORY**

According to phenomenological theory, individuals create their prejudices through their individual perceptions of the world (Wrightsmann 1977 336). In order for Archie to cope with the complex world, he creates prejudicial attitudes that enable him to reject whole groups of people, and thereby make life simpler for himself. His responses become simplified, and do not require reinterpretation for individuals. This theory is consistent for Archie, who is poorly educated, and who appears to have trouble coping with social change. He constructs his own reality, which is less difficult to deal with because he has reduced the number of stimuli to which he must respond. This theory is more broadly applicable than those cited above. It is also a deterministic explanation because it relies on the life-history model. Archie's beliefs and attitudes develop from the social categories to which he belongs. This enables him either to have or to avoid certain experiences which give

him the framework for his beliefs. Archie's framework is simple: good-bad; black-white. It eases tension for him and allows him to be confident of where he stands in relation to others.

The use of stereotypes in language serves to objectify and reify Archie's world. It aids in keeping the number of categories small, and in typing people to fit those categories (Berger & Luckman 1967 30). This reification of the bigot's outlook in the use of language is the focus of the television show, *All in the Family*. Within his family, Archie acts, and is reacted to by members of the family in such a way that he always "wins" the argument, or believes that he has won by virtue of his authority. He is an example of the bigot-in-action.

### THE NORMALIZATION PROCESS

How is the bigot normalized through Archie? Extensive studies have assessed viewers' reactions to Archie through measures of their level of prejudice (Brigham & Giesbrecht 1976; Chapko & Lewis 1975; Meyer 1976; Surlin & Tate 1976; Tate & Surlin 1976; Vidman & Rokeach 1974; Wilhoit & deBrock 1976). Norman Lear, the producer of the program, takes the approach that viewers will see the stupidity of the character of Archie, and thus reduce their prejudice from exposure to the program. Lear's argument is that by adding humor to bigotry, tension is reduced and prejudice is reduced; and that by poking fun at bigotry, it is brought out into the open, which gives the viewer insight which will enable him to reduce his own prejudices. But the research points in the opposite direction. The program may actually have reinforced bigotry.

Vidman & Rokeach (1974 44) found that "prejudiced persons identify more with Archie, perceive Archie as making better sense than Mike, his opposing son-in-law, and perceive Archie as winning; ...persons who liked Archie reported he is down-to-earth, honest, hard-working, predictable, and kind enough to allow his daughter and son-in-law to live with him". They found that regular viewers are more likely to be highly prejudiced, identify with Archie, and condone his racial and ethnic slurs. This supported a selective-perception hypothesis

that prior attitudes will predict attitudes about the program, and a selective-exposure hypothesis that viewers select programs that reinforce their attitudes.

Archie may be seen as similar to the prejudiced viewer, and may be liked by him. "There is a considerable body of evidence that a person is influenced by a persuasive message to the extent that he perceives it as coming from a source similar to himself. Presumably the receiver, to the extent that he perceives the source to be like himself in diverse characteristics, assumes that they also share common needs and goals. The receiver might therefore conclude that what the source is urging is good for 'our kind of people,' and thus change his attitude accordingly." (McGuire 1969 187) By the perception of Archie as a credible source, his attitudes are further normalized to the viewing audience (Miller 1966; Powell 1962). The fact that Archie is portrayed as a *lovable bigot* condones his behavior. It has also been hypothesized that the lovable quality enables viewers to model their behaviors after those of Archie (Hano 1972). Those who condemn him believe that by making bigotry "respectable, cute, a joke, and an in-thing," we are incarnating every evil (Stein 1974 300). Others claim that by portraying him as lovable, the show is not only condoning but encouraging bigotry (Hobson 1971).

### SOCIALIZATION-RESEARCH FINDINGS

To judge the effects of Archie on the socialization process, Meyer studied children aged 6 to 10. He found that at least on a limited exposure, such as viewing a single episode, the show did not affect modeling behavior. The children brought with them prior categories of race and socio-economic status, which are the most powerful discriminators. Role stereotypes emerged as a dominant factor in what the children remembered from the program (Meyer 1976). However, only a longitudinal study could determine the modeling of bigotry over time.

Surlin found that the type of individual who agreed with Archie was highly dogmatic, of low educational level, low-status occupation, low income, and middle-aged or older. Those who are closed-minded also found it

harder to see humor in the character than open-minded individuals (Surlin & Tate 1976). The closed-minded did not see the fallacies in Archie's logic. Archie is better liked by high authoritarians than by low authoritarians (Chapko & Lewis 1975).

Bigotry is made real through Archie. "In a sense, *All in the Family* is a projective test: one sees and doesn't see in Archie, in other members of the cast, and in the dynamics, what one chooses to attend and not to attend. Those who identify with Archie see themselves, their hopes, their fears, their plight, and their ambivalence mirrored in him. For them, the dramatizations *express*, not affront, their feelings." (Stein 1974 301)

In that sense, Archie exists only as we interpret him to exist. We choose to label him a bigot or not, just as he labels a *Polack* or a *Commie Pinko*. Such reliance on typology on both sides further normalizes bigotry. We cannot even label someone a bigot without relying on the same techniques used by them to label others. This pervasive use of category labels to type people places the bigot well within the range of normal behavior. The only difference is in the quality of the labels. And the fact that the bigot was presented weekly over a period of years on the national media makes it seem more normal. If we do not experience bigotry often in our own lives, we are exposed to it week after week in our homes via television. This tends to make it commonplace and normal.

### THE PUT-DOWN PROCESS

When we look at the interactions between Archie and other members of his family, we can see why he does not view himself as deviant. An excellent example is when he gives his wife Edith directions and tells her how unimportant her opinions are. By doing this he objectifies her into the status of a non-person, which neutralizes his attacks toward her. She usually agrees with him to his face, though usually she appears to disagree with him when confronted by another member of the family. By doing this she reaffirms his belief in being right. Archie's power is Edith's lack of power.

Edith: He's your cousin, Archie! How

could I say "No"?

Archie: This way, Edith, "No!" But maybe that's too much for you. It's got a whole syllable!

Further, Archie affirms his belief that he is a "decent" person, but usually for the wrong reasons. He moralizes on topics other than those directly related to himself. For instance, he does not attack men who spend their time at the local bar—as he, himself, frequently does—as being immoral in any way. But behavior in which he does not engage is immoral. This neutralizes the verbal attack. In this example he appeals to a *higher loyalty*, the almighty dollar:

Archie: Look, I know you'se kids go by what you call this new morality—skirts up to here, hot pants up to even further, see-through blouses, movies with people in bed, sometimes three, four o' them.

Mike: But Archie, peoples' bodies—the fact that they go to bed—they make love—it's part of life!

Archie: So is throwing up! But I ain't paying three bucks to see it.

Archie's attacks are all the more acceptable to us because the humor softens the attack. It excuses the behavior. Archie's convoluted logic is what makes it funny, and the fact that it is funny makes it less *bad*.

Archie: I never said that a man that wears glasses is a queer. A man that wears glasses is a four-eyes. A man that is a fag is queer!

The "reason" behind Archie's verbal attacks is mainly resources of power. Archie is a relatively powerless person. He had a poor education. He worked at a low-prestige job. He made low wages, and his social class was low. He has very little control over the direction of his life. His only source of power is through bigotry. By placing people on levels he considers lower than himself, he maintains a certain amount of self-respect. He has to remind himself constantly that he is in fact better than everyone else. It is his own constructed reality, and he must maintain and reinforce that reality. Bigots are both justified and normalized in this manner. They are normalized to themselves through maintaining their reality, and to others through the pervasiveness of the techniques they use to maintain their reality.

## PARTIAL ACCOMMODATION

In the more recent episodes, Archie gains some control over his own life. He has social position as co-owner of a bar, and this position allows him some freedom of choice. It is not surprising then, to find that Archie is softening on some issues. With a little power, he is able to accept a Jew as a business partner. He has now broadened his categories to *good Jews* and *bad Jews* from his previous single category of *bad* for all Jews. And he has a personal identity to put with the category, Jew. Through this he also gains a sense of security, because he now knows how to interact with a Jew. Archie still perceives himself as having the most power, and as being *better* in some ways than the Jew. This view shows how the interactions are dominated by a control of power. In our society, prejudice in the form of bigotry is a normal reaction to a deficit in power. It is a means of expressing superiority and is quite pervasive.

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