



e-quilibrium

- *“electronic briefs on behavior and health”*

Volume 6, Number 9
September 2010

Discrimination

There are two common ways in which the term “discrimination” is used. The first refers to unfair treatment of one or more people as a result of generalized assumptions about race, ethnicity, nationality, age, religion, or gender. The other common use of the term “discrimination” involves the ability to make fine distinctions. An example of this second type of discrimination would be to observe that one 85 year old person enjoys doing crossword puzzles alone at home while another 85 year old person continues to manage a financial consulting agency. Ironically, this second type of discrimination is one of the most effective ways to reduce the first type.

Categorizing people based upon broad and noticeable characteristics is convenient and easy to do. It is a way to simplify life. The problem is that such overgeneralizations are largely inaccurate. What is true is that within-group differences tend to be greater than between-group differences. That is, the variety of characteristics and differences among the people within a given group are typically greater than are the average differences between the groups. At first glance it may seem that a group of 60 year old Caucasian men is substantially different than a group of 45 year old Hispanic women. However, when the individuals in these groups are observed in a more detailed fashion (i.e., with close discrimination), one will discover a wider array of differences within the groups than exist between the groups, on average. The closer we discriminate the individual characteristics of people, the less prone we are to practice unfair discrimination. Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer writes in her book, Counter Clockwise, that “A mindful approach to the world may reduce prejudice and stereotyping

by increasing discrimination not against people but between them.”

For people who are “middle-aged,” the “elderly” may appear to share a number of similar characteristics, and so it becomes easy to make assumptions about older people. However, think of a few people whom you know well (or have known) who were 80 years old or older. Were these few people identical to each other? Did they have the same interests and abilities? Have the same health problems? Have the same religious and/or political views? Have similar personality characteristics? Have the same habits? Likely not. Describing the specific characteristics (i.e., fine discrimination) of one of these individuals would not allow you to make broad conclusions or generalizations about the others.

This useful process of making fine discriminations can be beneficial in interpersonal relationships as well. Perhaps a friend of mine is “shy.” Does that mean that he is hesitant to initiate conversations 100% of the time? Or might it be only 70% of the time? A friend that might be described as “high-strung” can relax at least some of the time, or another person considered to be “irritable” may well be in a good mood more of the time than not. People typically don’t like to be pigeon-holed based upon singular characteristics.

This can also be applied to how we see ourselves. We tend to make generalizations about ourselves just as we do others. Indeed, many of these generalizations are based on our habits and tendencies. However, we need not always think or behave according to such generalizations or expectations. A person may limit him/herself by saying that “I’m too old” or “I’m too clumsy” or “I’m not smart enough.” Finer discrimination may reveal that age or coordination or intellect not need be limiting factors in certain (perhaps many) situations.

To finely discriminate in this adaptive fashion does take more cognitive work. It requires that one pay attention to specific details and characteristics, rather than stopping at broad or readily apparent features. But in doing so, one is likely to find others more interesting and oneself more adaptable. In this sense, discrimination is something to be practiced boldly!

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is Professor of Family Medicine and Director of Behavioral Science for the Family Medicine Residency Program, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

To subscribe or unsubscribe to this e-newsletter, send an e-mail message with your request to paul.hershberger@wright.edu

If you wish to read previous newsletters, you may find them at:
www.med.wright.edu/fm/equilibrium/

To contact Dr. Hershberger:

e-mail: paul.hershberger@wright.edu

phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021