The “Common Enemy” and the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice”

The Nature of Prejudice was written by Gordon Allport, the Head of Harvard University’s Department of Psychology (p. 170). Chapter 3 of Allport’s book focuses on the formation of in-groups, his opposition to the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice”, and the importance of reciprocity in understanding and accepting groups different from our own. Allport’s argument against the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice,” and particularly his disagreement with the idea every out-group has a “common enemy,” are valid and reveal the limitations of the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice”.

Social groups, according to The “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice,” have a standard system of beliefs, codes, and enemies; the theory states that pressures from within the group holds everyone in line with group ideals and limit any individual deviation (Allport, 1954). Felix le Dantec, a French biologist and a proponent of the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice”, believed that social groups needed a common enemy to exist (Allport, 1954). The application of this theory would mean that your family has a common enemy, your church’s youth basketball team has a common enemy, and everyone in your neighborhood literally has a common enemy.

Allport clearly disagreed with the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice” and countered this theory with his belief that although a common enemy could strengthen an in-group, it was the individual’s psychological needs that formed the in-group and held it together. Allport (1954) uses war to illustrate his point:

Now there is no denying that the presence of a threatening common enemy will cement the in-group sense of any organized aggregate of people. A family
(if it is not already badly disrupted) will grow cohesive in the face of adversity, and a nation is never so unified as in time of war. But the psychological emphasis must be place primarily on the desire for security, not on hostility itself. (p. 182)

Allport believes it is an individual’s need for security that unifies a country in a time of war, not necessarily a common enemy. Apply Allport’s theory to a church’s youth basketball team in-group: playing against a rival church may strengthen the team more than just daily practice sessions, but fundamentally the team is together because they are a group of people who enjoy playing basketball together. It is the fulfillment of individual needs for companionship and the enjoyment of basketball that lead to the formation of the youth basketball team in-group, not an aggressive need to defeat a rival church.

To completely understand Allport’s disagreement with the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice”, one must first start with Allport’s characteristics of an in-group. Allport (1954) wrote, “members of an in-group all use the term ‘we’ with the same essential significance. Members of a family do so, likewise schoolmates, members of a lodge, labor union, club, city, state, nation” (p. 173). According to Allport, people who are born into groups, such as family, are involuntarily part of some groups, such as everyone who attends a particular university, and can choose some groups to meet a psychological need, as in a group of friends. In a group of friends, it is similarity of individual needs that pull the group together.

Allport’s views are different from those of the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice”. The “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice” says, “all groups (whether in-groups or reference groups) develop a way of living with characteristic codes and beliefs, standards and “enemies” to suit their own adaptive needs” (Allport, 1954, p. 180). Allport (1954) disagrees with the main point of the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice” and believes once the in-group is together, the needs
and prejudices of the group may influence the individuals, but “prejudice is primarily a problem of personality formation and development…No individual would mirror his group’s attitude unless he had a personal need…prejudice lies in the needs and habits that reflect the influence of in-group memberships upon the development of the individual personality” (p. 181). Allport does acknowledge the link between the influences of the group and those of the individual, but he argues that it is the individual’s values and beliefs that brought him to the in-group and thus helped mold the in-group.

If you examine the formation of friends as an in-group, it is easy to see how Allport’s argument is more logical. My best friend and I formed an in-group from similar interests in music. One day at work, we realized we enjoy the same types of music, and after discussing music for several minutes, we traded a few songs from our collections, and begun forming a new friendship in-group. Our similar interests, combined with an equal need for basic social companionship resulted in the formation of an in-group, not a common enemy. This in-group formed from similar interests; for example, we enjoyed a certain brand of music, but we did not start out by saying, “I dislike country music, so anyone who wants to be friends with us cannot like country either.” Instead, we both brought a prejudice against country music to the group and that became part of the group’s values. In this in-group, there was also some disagreement. I enjoy rock and roll music, but my friend does not. According to the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice”, group pressure should have smoothed these differences and maintained similarity (Allport, 1954). However, that is not real life. People do and will disagree with members of their in-group no matter how exclusive the group may be.

Allport also uses historical examples to illustrate the inaccuracies of the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice”. Nazi Germany and Hitler’s rise to power seems to be a classic example of
the “common enemy”. Hitler placed blame for much of Germany’s suffering after World War I on the Jews, and he rode this anti-Semitic sentiment until the Nazis controlled Germany. Dantec may believe the Jewish “common enemy” created the Nazi in-group and solidified the country; however, Allport offers a more realistic explanation. The German people’s belief in the Nazis was probably due to an individual need for not only security but also hope. Hitler’s speeches were about returning Germany to a world power and surely appealed to the German people. The supposedly Jewish “common enemy” undoubtedly strengthened the Nazi in-group, but not everyone shared the anti-Semitic view (Allport, 1954). Allport does note the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice” has an acceptable range of tolerable behavior that allows members of an in-group some deviation from group conformity, but Allport believes this adds validity to his position since it points to individuality.

The final point that illustrates Allport’s theory is more logical is the allowance of shifting in-groups and the formation of in-groups within out-groups. The “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice” is rigid in its discussion of in-groups and offers no explanation for in-groups within out-groups. I am a student at North Carolina State University, but I live in a neighborhood where all of my neighbors are graduates of the University of North Carolina. NC State and UNC are two different in-groups and are out-groups of one another, but even though I am a student at NC State, I am part of an in-group with the UNC graduates by living in the same neighborhood. On the surface, it would appear NC State and UNC are “common enemies”, but when a NC State student moves to a UNC neighborhood, a common enemy of the neighborhood in-group is very difficult to define. A deep hatred of UNC did not cause me to pick one university over another; it was personal preferences and a need for a major not offered at UNC that caused me to choose a university. During sporting events, it may appear there is a common
enemy between NC State and UNC, but those sporting events simply solidify the university in-groups. After a sporting event, I shift to the neighborhood in-group, and there is no real hostility towards my UNC neighbors. All three in-groups function and exist without a “common enemy” and are the end result of personal preference and needs.

In the end, Allport’s theory seems to be more valid than the theory of the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice”, and through example, his theory holds. Advocates for the “Group-Norm Theory of Prejudice” use examples of human aggression and circumstantial evidence as proof of their theory. On the surface, some very powerful historic in-groups do have a common enemy that led to the creation of the in-group. After September 11th, the United States’ in-group clearly had a common enemy, and the nation seemed to heal as we transitioned from victims to avengers of justice. Allport would probably make the argument that the unification of the American in-group was a result of the nation, vulnerable and scared, gaining empowerment by unifying.

Sometimes difference between the two theories resembles the ancient debate of whether the egg or the chicken came first, and in the case of September 11th, it appears a common enemy did create an in-group. Perhaps each in-group has to be examined as an individual and unique group to determine exactly which theory proves correct, but overall, Allport’s theory seems to be more accurate.