Personalization:

The Science of Reducing Bias and Building Inclusive Cultures



Nurcan Ensari

Personalization

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Personalization: The Science of Reducing Bias and Building Inclusive Cultures

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

About the Author *vii*

Foreword *ix*

Preface *xi*

Acknowledgments *xv*

Chapter 1 Roots of Bias Toward Social Outgroups ***1***

Chapter 2 Bias Toward Social Outgroups Fuels Social Movements ***13***

Chapter 3 Consequences of Bias ***33***

Chapter 4 Philosophical and Political Perspectives on Bias Toward Social Outgroups ***59***

Chapter 5 Exploring Bias Through Art ***67***

Chapter 6 The Personalization Model as a Mechanism to Reduce Bias ***99***

Chapter 7 Strategies and Tools for Implementing Personalization: Part I – Individual Growth First ***157***

Chapter 8 Strategies and Tools for Implementing Personalization: Part II – Social and Community Contexts ***179***

Chapter 9 Strategies and Tools for Implementing Personalization: Part III – Work and Organizational Contexts ***203***

Chapter 10 New Framework, Future Directions and My Honest Opinion ***229***

Afterword *241*

Index *247*

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About the Author

Nurcan Ensari is a social and organizational psychologist, educator, and community leader whose research sits at the intersection of prejudice reduction, leadership, and conflict management. She is a Distinguished Professor at the California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant University, where she has spent over 30 years teaching, mentoring students, conducting empirical research, and contributing to academic leadership.

Her journey began when her family moved from a small town on the Black Sea to Istanbul, where she grew up navigating the complexities of migration in a world where tradition and ambition often stood at odds. Education was always a priority, but within a conservative, male-dominant culture shaped by deep-rooted power dynamics, the path to academic success, especially for a girl, was never straightforward. She followed her passion for understanding human behavior, eventually leaving her home country to pursue a PhD at the University of Southern California. The journey was far from easy. She faced financial uncertainty, language barriers, and the loneliness of building a life in a new culture, but with perseverance and the guidance of her mentors, she found her path in academia. After postdoctoral work in leadership at Claremont McKenna College, she joined Alliant University in 2001.

Over the past 30 years, she has focused on teaching, research, mentoring, and leadership development, leading systemwide academic programs across multiple campuses, editing special issues in top journals, giving talks internationally, training professionals, and later launching the SPARKS-USA leadership program to empower immigrant women. Her work is driven by a commitment to resilience, inclusion, and helping others, especially minority communities, women, and immigrants, find their voice, overcome barriers, and create meaningful impact. At the core of her research is the development of practical, research-driven approaches that help individuals and leaders navigate cultural differences, reduce prejudice, and lead with authenticity and inclusion.

Through years of cultural immersion from Istanbul to Hong Kong, Thailand, Europe, and South Africa, she gained a deeper understanding of how culture, identity, and leadership shape human relationships and institutions. Her international collaborations led her to help establish the first master's program in Applied Industrial and Organizational Psychology in Türkiye, which has since grown into one of the country's leading programs preparing organizational psychologists. She has also contributed to the profession through service in professional communities such as the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology,

the Turkish Association of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and the Society for the Psychology of Women.

At its core, her career reflects the same conviction that underlies this book: that prejudice is not eliminated through moral certainty or abstract knowledge alone, but through awareness, humility, relational courage, and the willingness to see, and be seen, as a whole human being.

For more information about her research, publications, and service, please visit www.nurcanensari.com.

Foreword

For more than half a century, the study of intergroup relations has been guided by one of the most influential frameworks in social psychology: the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis, first articulated by Gordon Allport (1954). Since then, the field has produced an extensive body of research demonstrating that, under appropriate conditions, positive, high-quality, and continuous intergroup contact can reduce bias toward social outgroups. Hundreds of empirical articles, numerous edited volumes, and several influential books have been indispensable in shaping both this theory and its practice.

Yet, despite this richness, a critical gap has persisted.

While the field has extensively documented when and under what conditions contact reduces prejudice, far less attention has been devoted to understanding what actually happens psychologically during contact that produces these changes. In other words, the mechanisms through which contact transforms perceptions have often remained underdeveloped, or secondary, to the study of supportive structural conditions.

It was precisely this gap that motivated me and my colleague Marilynn Brewer to develop what came to be known as the Personalization Model in 1984. This model represents a conceptual shift from emphasizing the structural conditions of positive contact to focusing on the psychological processes that unfold within intergroup interactions, thereby moving from a more molar to a more molecular level of analysis. Over the years, research has identified several key processes through which personalization operates. Despite the theoretical and empirical importance of these processes, it is striking that, to date, there has been no comprehensive book devoted specifically to the Personalization Model as a standalone framework for integrating theory, research, and application. This is where this book makes a significantly unique and timely contribution. It fully explores the workings of the engine that drives the benefits that may accrue from intergroup contact.

In this book, my former doctoral student Nurcan Ensari uses her inherent multi-cultural perspective to bring personalization to the forefront as both a theoretical framework and a practical approach. The book not only synthesizes decades of research but also extends it by offering a clear, structured articulation of personalization as a continuum, a set of processes, and a tool for real-world application. Simultaneously, it sets the stage for more empirical elaboration of the processes underlying personalization.

Importantly, this work bridges a longstanding divide in the literature: the gap between theory and practice. Nurcan's scholarship has consistently focused on the psychological mechanisms underlying intergroup relations. Her empirical contributions to the Personalization Model, including experimental and applied research conducted over several decades, have helped clarify how different modes of personalization translate into broader intergroup attitude change. Importantly, her work bridges laboratory research with real-world application, examining how personalization unfolds in organizational settings, educational environments, and everyday social interactions. This dual commitment to scientific rigor and practical relevance is precisely what the field has needed. By integrating empirical findings with real-life cases, applied strategies, and lived narratives, this book successfully demonstrates how personalization can be intentionally cultivated in diverse contexts.

In an era marked by increasing polarization, intergroup conflict, and social fragmentation, understanding how to move beyond categorical thinking toward human connection is more urgent than ever. This book provides that missing piece. For scholars, this work advances theoretical clarity. For students, it offers an integrative framework. For practitioners, it provides actionable tools. And for all readers, it presents a compelling reminder of the power of personalization.

Beyond her research contributions, Nurcan brings a rare interdisciplinary perspective to the study of intergroup relations. Drawing from psychology, philosophy, and related disciplines, she situates personalization within a broader human context, allowing her to move beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries and speak to a wide audience. Her lived engagement with diversity, inclusion, and leadership offers insights that extend beyond empirical studies alone can capture.

This book is not simply contributing to an existing conversation: it is redefining its focus. By bringing the Personalization Model to the forefront as a comprehensive framework, she offers a perspective that is both deeply grounded in the literature and forward-looking in its implications. In this sense, this book represents not only a timely contribution to the field but also the natural culmination of a career dedicated to understanding and improving the ways in which people relate to one another across difference.

Norman Miller
Professor Emeritus of Psychology

Preface

> I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become.
> Carl Jung (1960)

This book began with a question that followed me long before I could name it.

When I first arrived in California as a doctoral student three decades ago, I was a young Muslim woman from Türkiye chasing a dream and juggling the daily chaos of doctoral studies and survival. In those early days, I did not think much about how others saw me. I was focused on learning, working, and making ends meet. But slowly, the questions started.

"Do you ride camels back home?"

"Did you wear a hijab?"

They were often asked with smiles and curiosity, yet beneath the surface, they reflected something deeper: unfamiliarity, simplification, and the human impulse to reduce complexity. I was not being *taken as* who I was. I was being sorted as the *one with an accent, the Muslim, the Turk, the foreigner*. A character viewed primarily through inherited stories of the Ottomans. A character that allowed others to manage uncertainty by placing me into a familiar mental box. Being trapped in a single identity, this inauthentic mode of being obscured my unique existence and flattened my lived experiences during my early years in the United States.

At first, these questions seemed harmless, even amusing. But as my doctoral training in social psychology deepened, so did my understanding of the structure behind these interactions. These were not simply attempts to know me; they were acts of social categorization. They reflected the same psychological processes that operate whenever individuals are reduced to group representatives rather than seen as whole, complex human beings.

The struggle to be truly seen continues to this day not just for me, but for countless individuals who live at the margins of belonging. Yet it is precisely within this existential struggle that I found my voice, my purpose, and the courage to challenge easy narratives about "Us vs. Them." For over three decades, I have studied intergroup relations as a social psychologist. I have examined these processes in research labs, taught them in classrooms, and observed their consequences in organizations and social interactions. This book emerged from the realization that bias toward social outgroups is not merely a moral failure or a trait of "bad people." Rather, it is a deeply human response rooted in fear, survival, identity, and the search for meaning.

Bias toward social outgroups thrives when psychological security is threatened by mortality, scarcity, uncertainty, or difference itself. As the first chapter illustrates, the very mechanisms that help us feel safe, worthy, and connected can also lead us to exclude, dehumanize, and harm others. Across history, these processes have justified conquest, caste systems, forced conversions, genocide, and everyday discrimination alike. In modern contexts, they persist in subtler forms often enacted by well-intentioned individuals who genuinely believe in fairness.

This book unfolds across 10 interconnected chapters. Chapter 1 examines the existential, evolutionary, social identity, social learning, and cognitive roots of outgroup bias, providing a foundational understanding of why bias emerges and persists. Chapter 2 turns to real-world social movements that illustrate how fear, power, and exclusion mobilize both oppression and resistance. Chapter 3 focuses on the psychological, social, and institutional consequences of outgroup bias, showing how exclusion, microaggressions, and systemic discrimination harm individuals, teams, and organizations. Chapter 4 offers philosophical and political perspectives that deepen the analysis of fairness, justice, and moral responsibility in intergroup relations. Drawing on Rawls's theory of justice and Aristotle's principle of proportionality, this chapter shows how fair societies can be designed to protect basic liberties, and distribute support in ways that are equitable rather than merely equal. Chapter 5 invites the reader into artistic reflections of outgroup bias through literature, film, poetry, music, visual, and performance art. Through artworks from Picasso to Kahlo, this chapter illustrates how art makes hidden suffering visible, challenges oppressive narratives, and invites empathy, dialog, and social change.

The central question guiding this work is not only *why bias exists* but also *how it can be reduced*. Chapters 6 through 10 move from understanding to action, with particular emphasis on the Personalization Model, an evidence-based approach that disrupts automatic categorization by fostering personalized connections. Chapter 6 introduces this model as a key framework for reducing outgroup bias, by explaining its different modes, types, levels, and the conditions necessary for achieving positive outcomes. Chapters 7 through 9 translate this model into practice by outlining concrete, evidence-based strategies, and show that when intentionally designed, repeated, high-quality personalization can turn diversity into genuine connection and belonging.

The final chapter, Chapter 10, brings the book to a reflective close by synthesizing its central argument: personalization is a powerful and evidence-based mechanism for reducing bias, but it is not a standalone cure for prejudice. This chapter introduces a multilevel framework for effective personalization, outlining the necessary conditions across individual, intergroup, and contextual levels. This final chapter also calls for future research to identify when, how, and for whom different forms and intensities of personalization are most effective, and situates personalization within the challenges and opportunities of the generative AI era.

Complex phenomena such as bias, identity, and moral judgment cannot be fully understood from the vantage point of a single discipline. In this book, I adopt an integrative approach, drawing insights from psychology, political science, leadership, philosophy, neuroscience, art, spiritual traditions, and lived narratives, to

broaden perspectives and to show how independent fields of knowledge converge on similar questions, and sometimes similar conclusions, about human behavior. While the scientific claims in this book are grounded in empirical research, this integrative approach allows us to see how different fields and traditions grapple with the same fundamental aspects of human experience, sometimes arriving at parallel insights. It is my hope that this broader, integrative approach will help illuminate the complex phenomena discussed in this book.

Throughout this book, theory is intentionally interwoven with stories drawn from my own life, as well as from my students, friends, colleagues, and people encountered in everyday moments. Reflection activities are included not as academic exercises, but as invitations to slow down, to examine assumptions, and to engage in the more effortful yet authentic work of seeing others as they truly are. Writing itself became an act of personalization: listening, reflecting, and allowing meaning to emerge through vulnerability and presence. The book ultimately closes with a central belief that meaningful change begins when we truly see one another, and ourselves, as whole human beings.

This book offers practical tools, intervention, and design ideas along with real-life stories and cases in multiple, complementary ways, all designed to translate the science of personalization into everyday action. Readers will find individual and group exercises that cultivate self-awareness about bias and identity, conversation guides that help individuals move from categorical thinking to personalization, and structured frameworks that leaders and educators can use to design more inclusive environments. Case examples and real-world applications illustrate how personalization operates in classrooms, organizations, and communities, while implementation checklists and discussion prompts support immediate use in trainings, workshops, and interpersonal settings.

I made frequent use of quotations not as decorative additions, but as moments of pause, inviting readers into an open space for deeper engagement before each chapter. These quotations also remind us that the questions explored in this book have been asked long before us, across cultures, disciplines, and centuries. By placing contemporary psychological research alongside scholarly voices, the book resists the fragmentation of knowledge and instead honors the continuity of human inquiry. These voices do not compete with empirical evidence; they deepen it by offering language for experiences that data alone cannot fully capture.

The cover of this book holds special meaning for me. The central symbol subtly resembles the Arabic word *noor*, which means light or illumination (just like the first syllable of my name). It is intended to visually represent the central idea of the book. Personalization is ultimately about illumination: the moment when we begin to see another person more clearly, beyond the categories that often shape our first impressions. Just as light allows hidden details to emerge from shadow, personalization brings forward the complexity and individuality that social labels often obscure. The symbol, therefore, suggests that reducing bias is not only a matter of correcting attitudes but also a process of illumination.

This is not a book about becoming "bias-free." Such a promise is neither realistic nor honest. Rather, it is a book about becoming more aware, more intentional, and more human, especially when doing so feels uncomfortable. Ultimately, this book

is an invitation to cross lines, not in ways that threaten psychological safety, but in ways that expand it. It invites toward unity beyond divides: a way of being in which difference does not diminish dignity, and belonging is not something to be defended but something to be shared. At its deepest level, this transformation asks us to see one another with a depth that far exceeds the narrow stories we often inherit about each other. As Rumi (as translated by Barks, 1995) beautifully reminds us:

You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop.

Personalization is the act of recognizing that ocean within each person we meet.

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This book is the result of many conversations, relationships, and moments of discovery, none of which I experienced alone.

I begin with my children. To my daughter, thank you for sharing my passion for social justice and for reminding me, again and again, why this work matters. Your sensitivity, bold voice, courage to speak for what is right, and moral clarity give me hope for the future. Thank you for helping me with the key diagram in this book. To my son, thank you for teaching me resilience, perspective, and the importance of growth through challenge. Watching you navigate the complex world with determination and curiosity has been a powerful source of inspiration.

To my husband, thank you for your steady support, patience, and belief in this work, even during the months I was away writing this book. Your presence has been my anchor.

To my late father, thank you for teaching me the importance of living by one's principles, especially when doing so is difficult, inconvenient, or lonely. It was through your library that I was first introduced to the works of prominent scholars whose ideas profoundly shaped my thinking. Your unwavering integrity became the foundation of my moral compass and continues to guide both my life and my scholarship.

To my mother, thank you for your strength, care, and quiet sacrifices that laid the foundation for everything I am able to do. To my sister, thank you for accompanying me during the writing of this book at our summer house. Your strength in the face of hardship gave me courage, and your companionship, through conversations, laughter, and shared silences made that time deeply meaningful. To my brother, thank you for always showing your pride in me so openly and generously. In moments of doubt, your encouragement reminded me that I was seen, supported, and never alone. To my older brother, thank you for exemplifying the values of hard work and patience through your life and actions. To my niece Burcu, thank you for generously sharing your work and ideas, which enriched my thinking and reminded me of the power of younger voices. You exemplify the strength of women who gracefully juggle multiple roles and aspirations with resilience and determination. And to my 3-year-old niece Ela and 10-year-old nephew Mehmet, thank you for being pure joy in my life: you are daily reminders of love, light, and possibility.

I am deeply grateful to my mentor, Norman Miller, who has been a guiding force in my academic life, much like a second father. Your wisdom, generosity, and unwavering belief in me have shaped who I am as a scholar and as a human being.

I want to acknowledge my colleagues who have supported me throughout my career, including Ron Riggio, Denise Lopez, Jonathan Troper, Bernardo Ferdman, Rodney Lowman, Idil Isik, Diane Sunar, Jay Finkelman, Louise Kelley, Julie Christian, Eduardo Vasquez, Jared Kenworthy, and many others whose support and collaboration have meant so much to me.

I also thank my friends, some of whom appear in the pages of this book as living examples of the ideas discussed here. I'm grateful to them for giving me ideas, listening to me, and encouraging me to finish this book. Your insights, challenges, humor, and continued support have sustained me intellectually and emotionally throughout this journey.

I am thankful to my university for granting me the sabbatical that made the writing of this book possible. That gift of time and trust allowed me to think deeply, write honestly, and bring this work to life.

I thank my students, who have challenged my assumptions, deepened my thinking, and reminded me that learning is always a shared journey. Your questions, courage, and lived experiences continually shape how I teach, write, and understand the world.

Finally, I offer my gratitude to many authors, thinkers, and spiritual scholars whose words and wisdom informed this book, often across centuries and cultures. Among them, the voices of Ibn Arabi and Rumi have been a constant companion, reminding me that knowledge without love is incomplete and that true understanding begins within the heart, *qalb*.

As Rumi writes:
Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world.
Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.
May this book invite us all to do both.

Chapter 1

Roots of Bias Toward Social Outgroups

> The mere existence of people with different beliefs threatens our primary basis of psychological security Greenberg et al. (2015).

Beautiful rain is a blessing as it clears the air and fills it with a fresh smell of the garden. The wealthy Park family enjoys watching the rain from their luxury estate in Seoul. Meanwhile, the poor Kim family's basement-level home completely floods with sewage water in a small town Goyang City. Ki-jung, the daughter, sits on the toilet as filthy sewage water violently erupts beneath her. Everything the family owns is destroyed: their dignity is washed away. Bong Joon-ho's (2019) film Parasite is a masterpiece that depicts the power of class separation and the progressive eruption of violence as class boundaries are compromised, threatening the psychological security and sense of superiority of the rich.

> If there is one thing I hate, it's people who cross the line says Rich Mr. Park (Bong, 2019).

Facing the harsh realities of prejudice has been a struggle throughout human existence. Bias against social outgroups has been an existential defense in the history of humanity. Across the world, early civilizations often viewed neighboring tribes as threats. Warfare, conquest, and enslavement were justified through ethnic superiority. Social fear of different religious beliefs led to persecutions while institutionalized social hierarchies created systemic oppression and exclusion. Countless historical realities remind us that systemic bias against marginalized groups has long operated as a destructive power that dehumanizes, excludes, and erases. The Chinese distinction between the "Hu" (civilized) and the "Yi" (barbarians) shaped political boundaries and justified social dominance. Similarly, the caste system in Ancient India classified individuals into rigid social categories based on birth rather than merit. In post-1492 Granada, after the fall of the last Muslim stronghold in Spain, Muslim Moriscos faced mass forced conversions under Cardinal Cisneros. The forced Christianization of Indigenous peoples in America involved the destruction of indigenous identities. The Hutu-Tutsi divide

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in Rwanda, though shaped by colonial intervention, led to one of the most horrific genocides of the 20th century.

In the modern world, bias toward social outgroups and their members continues to fuel fear and exclusion, reinforce systems of inequality, and justify social hierarchies. Today, it manifests in many forms (e.g., sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia, ageism, classism, Islamophobia, and others) and is deeply rooted in a simple social equation: "Me" is superior to/better than "You" and "Us" is superior to/better than "Them." Across many disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, and political science, scholars have developed frameworks to understand the sources of bias. Why do humans hold unfavorable beliefs about members of social outgroups, develop negative attitudes toward them, and treat them more poorly? Why do people like the rich Mr. Park despise those who *cross the line*? Let us examine several approaches that help explain the roots of outgroup bias.

> ***Bias against social outgroups (outgroup bias\|prejudice)***: The belief that members of social outgroups ("THEM") are inferior, less worthy, less competent, less capable or even less human than the members of one's own group ("US"). In everyday life, this bias is commonly experienced as us-versus-them thinking which refers to the tendency to view, judge, and treat those outside one's own group more negatively.
>
> **ME > YOU; US > THEM**

Existential Roots of Outgroup Bias

From an existential perspective, one's belief in the superiority of one's own group (the *ingroup*) over other groups (the *outgroups*) can be understood as stemming from a fundamental need to find meaning and certainty in one's finite existence. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1927) describes human existence (*Dasein*[1]) as fundamentally shaped by the awareness of its own finitude: death is inevitable.

Once we become aware of our finite existence, we are faced with two possible paths:

1. **Face mortality**: We must face our mortality despite the anxiety (*Angst*) it provokes (Heidegger, 1927). *Angst* arises from confronting the uncertainty, finitude, and groundlessness of existence itself. It emerges when familiar meanings, roles, and social structures lose their taken-for-granted quality, revealing the fragility of the frameworks through which we ordinarily make sense of life. Central to this experience is Heidegger's concept of

[1]In Heidegger's philosophy, *Dasein* refers to more than mere human existence. It denotes the uniquely human way of *being-in-the-world*, how individuals experience each moment of their lives and actively make meaning of those experiences.

being-toward-death (*Sein zum Tode*). For Heidegger, death is not merely a future biological event. Instead, it is a constant existential horizon that shapes how we exist in the present. To become aware of one's *being-toward-death* is to recognize that one's life is finite, non-repeatable, and ultimately one's own. This realization confronts individuals with responsibility for how they choose to live authentically in its shadow.

Authenticity is an effortful way toward making meaning of our finite existence. Authentic existence involves facing mortality directly instead of fleeing from it. It mirrors the "fight" response (Cannon, 1932) as a courageous, meaningful engagement with the realities of existence. By engaging System 2 thinking (Kahneman, 2011), this reflective process allows us to examine our beliefs and values, question our assumptions, and challenge social norms. Through this deliberate cognitive effort, we can move beyond reactive thinking, break our social habits (Devine, 1989), inhibit outgroup bias, and progressively develop inclusive attitudes.

> When one has an understanding Being-towards-death – towards death as one's own most possibility – one's potentiality-for-Being becomes authentic and wholly transparent. Heidegger (1927)

2. **Avoid mortality**: If our survival instinct compels us to flee from fear, then how can we live meaningfully in full awareness of death, while simultaneously feeling fear of it? The easy escape is flight from mortality anxiety.

   Instead of facing mortality authentically, humans often flee from it through distraction, conformity, or immersion in the anonymous "they" (*das Man*, Heidegger, 1927). When this confrontation is avoided, people frequently seek certainty, stability, and meaning through external structures such as rigid group identities or hierarchical distinctions that promise protection from existential anxiety. Inauthenticity aligns with the "flight tendency" (Cannon, 1932) representing an attempt to escape the fear associated with confronting death. We cope with mortality anxiety by avoiding confronting it (Terror Management Theory by Greenberg et al., 2015). Instead, we search for psychological comfort by conforming to the social collective ("the They," Heidegger, 1927): we live according to social norms, conform to the crowd, and think in cognitively less demanding and more comfortable ways.

   Flight from mortality-related anxiety often manifests as a retreat into simple heuristics and reliance on readily available information (Kahneman, 2011). These tendencies are characteristics of System 1 thinking, in contrast to System 2 thinking which is cognitively demanding, effortful, and often experienced as uncomfortable. Thus, fear of death can push individuals toward inauthenticity which then fuels reliance on simple heuristics and mental shortcuts such as social categorization and stereotyping, as ways to cope with existential anxiety and restore psychological comfort. Consequently, favoring one's own social groups (ingroup bias) and derogating the outgroups (outgroup bias) act as a defense mechanism that help manage anxiety triggered by awareness of mortality (Greenberg et al., 2015).

The implicit self-affirmation *I matter because I belong to something greater than myself* serves as a buffer against existential threat. However, this sense of meaning and security is threatened by the presence of outgroup members who symbolically challenge the coherence and superiority of the ingroup (see Fig. 1). As Fig. 1 illustrates, outgroup bias is a result of the need to escape from existential fear through conforming to social norms, reliance on simple heuristics such as stereotypes and social categorization.

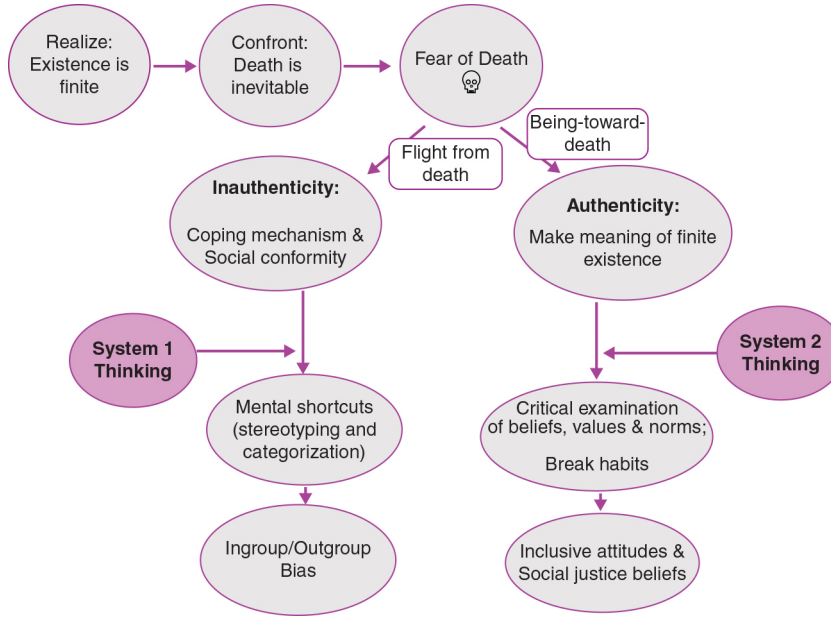


Fig. 1. Existential Process of Outgroup Bias.

Evolutionary Roots of Outgroup Bias

The base of the pyramid of human needs is the survival needs such as food, shelter, and safety (Maslow, 1943). According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, only when these basic needs are sufficiently met can individuals progress upward to the higher-order needs such as love, belonging, esteem, or self-actualization. However, this upward progression is not linear and guaranteed. During times of crisis, threat, or uncertainty, individuals may regress to lower levels of the hierarchy as survival concerns reemerge. Even in relatively stable and civilized societies, when foundational needs are perceived as threatened or when access to survival resources become scarce, people may shift into a survival mindset characterized by heightened fear and fight-to-life mode. In such contexts, higher-order reasoning and reflective judgment are often overridden by fear-driven responses. As a result, others who are perceived as competing for limited resources (particularly social outgroup members) are more readily viewed as threats. As illustrated in

Fig. 2, perceived threats to survival needs can rapidly erode social civility and cooperation and activate intergroup conflict and prejudice directed at those defined as "others."

Muzafer Sherif's (1949) Realistic Conflict Theory explains how competition over scarce resources fuels hostility and bias between groups. According to Sherif, intergroup hostility arises primarily from objective or perceived competition over scarce and valued resources such as food, territory, employment, security, power, or social status. When groups believe that their access to these resources is threatened by others, intergroup relations shift from neutrality or cooperation to competition, hostility, and bias. This competition produces a zero-sum perception: one group's gain is assumed to come at the expense of another's loss. Under such conditions, members of each group become increasingly motivated to protect their own interests, leading to heightened ingroup solidarity and favoritism, alongside the derogation and dehumanization of outgroup members. Negative stereotypes, exclusion, and justification of unequal treatment emerge as psychological tools that legitimize hostility toward those seen as competitors. As illustrated in Fig. 2, perceived threats to basic survival needs can rapidly activate this process. When fear of loss dominates, individuals and groups become more attuned to cues of competition, interpreting the presence of "others" as a direct threat to their safety or well-being. In such contexts, outgroup bias is a predictable outcome of survival-oriented cognition, where fear overrides reasoning.

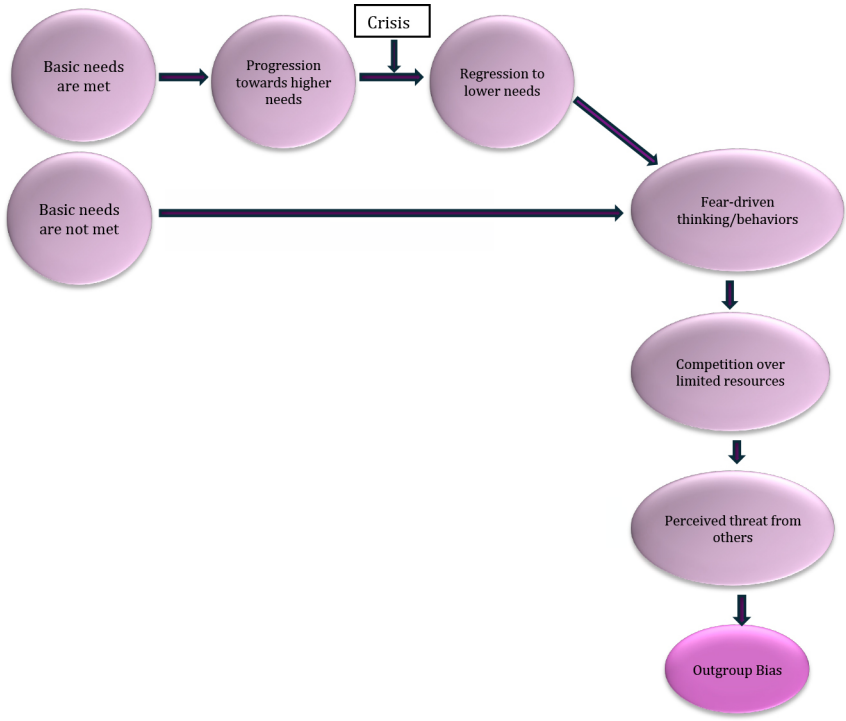


Fig. 2. Evolutionary Model of Outgroup Bias.

The Toilet Paper Wars: Scarcity, Fear, and Intergroup Conflict During COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some essential products like toilet paper became scarce. Let's remember the irrational behaviors, physical attacks, and panic-buyings in stores when people felt their physiological needs were under threat. Polite and considerate people became enemies over toilet papers because they perceived others as direct competitors for limited resources. Remember the two Australian women who physically fought in a supermarket aisle over a pack of toilet paper. Californian man was caught in camera trying to sell black-market toilet paper rolls out of his trunk. Toilet paper became symbolic of survival, replacing gold in the pandemic economy. As Realistic Conflict Theory (Sherif, 1949) would predict, scarce resources led to panic due to unmet survival needs, which intensified perceived threats from outgroups and intergroup tensions (e.g., Asian hate) and declined social trust (e.g., heightened suspicision of others). When people felt unsafe, rational reasoning replaced with heuristic, tribal thinking that enforced self-protective and other-derogative behaviors. Consequently, outgroup biases became more explicit in the form of scapegoating (e.g., Chinese were blamed for the pandemic, attacked publicly) and dehumanization (e.g., elderly were treated as expendable, excluded from ventilator assignments in some hospitals during the pandemic). Thus, when survival needs are seen as zero-sum, it can lead to social divisions, scapegoating, and intergroup conflict escalation.

Social Identity Roots of Outgroup Bias

During my second year in my current faculty position, I struck up a conversation with a new faculty member while we were waiting in line for coffee. Within minutes, we discovered meaningful similarities: we were both immigrant women, had navigated higher education through challenging paths, were mothers of two children, cared for elderly parents, and shared a deep passion for cultural diversity and inclusion, as well as a strong commitment to teaching and mentorship. The connection felt immediate and effortless. What began as a brief exchange that day grew into a friendship that extended far beyond collegiality. What made that initial interaction feel so natural was mainly the rapid recognition of common ground, shared identities, histories, and aspirations that laid the foundation for enduring connection.

"Similarity breeds liking" (Byrne, 1971) is a critical social psychological principle that is central to understanding the law of attraction in interpersonal relationships and in the formation of social identity. Why do we like those who are similar to us? When we meet with someone who is similar to us in attitudes, values, interests, personality, and cultural background, we are more likely to have

agreements. This perceived similarity and experiences of agreement affirm our own beliefs, bring emotional comfort, reduce social anxiety, and reinforce our sense of self-worth. Feeling worthy is a core psychological need that is essential for psychological well-being and healthy social functioning (see Fig. 3).

Applying the same law of attraction principle at the intergroup level, we drive part of our self-worth from our social groups that give us a sense of identity, meaning, and belonging in the social world. For instance, our profession, ethnic, racial, cultural, or religious groups; neighborhood; sports team; or online networks provide a sense of "who we are" and "where we belong" in the social world. Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains that the groups that we belong to or affiliated with provide a social identity that satisfies our core psychological needs such as self-worth and positive self-image. We adopt the identity of our successful and respected ingroup, and we act in ways that we perceive our ingroup members act. As our identification with the ingroup grows, we progressively develop emotional significance to that identification, and our self-esteem will be dependent on it.

Social categorization into ingroup versus outgroup is followed by social comparison where we compare our ingroup against the outgroup. To maintain our self-esteem, we attribute positive characteristics to our ingroup and favor them, whereas we tend to attribute negative characteristics to outgroups and derogate them. We feel strong emotional ties to the groups that are central to our self-concept. Thus, we tend to like people who share similar attributes, opinions, beliefs, and values with us (ingroups) over others.

Let's examine Fig. 4 within the following example: Let's assume that you explore that your personal values and political beliefs are more closely aligned with Democrats (attitude similarity with ingroup). This attitudinal similarity creates a sense of connection to Democrats: You identify as a Democrat and will most likely behave within the norms of that group, adopt language, and political views that are consistent with Democratic ideals (In-group identification). Conversations with other Democrats further reinforce this newly formed identity, affirm your political beliefs, and support your perspectives (Collective affirmation and validation). More you socialize and identify with Democrats, more comfortable you will become with your own self (Emotional comfort). You will feel less

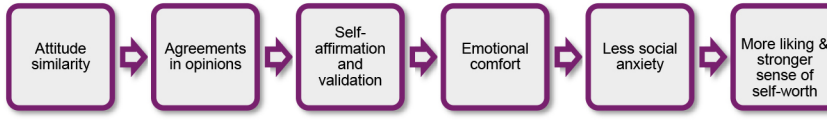


Fig. 3. Law of Attraction in Interpersonal Relations.

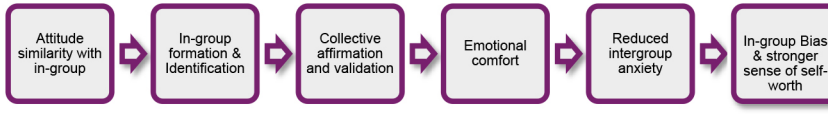


Fig. 4. Law of Attraction in Intergroup Relations.

judged, more secure in your opinions, and more confident in expressing them (less intergroup anxiety). As your Democratic identity solidifies, you will favor Democrats over Republicans: you think Democrats are more rational, compassionate, or informed than Republicans (ingroup bias). Simultaneously, your affiliation with Democrats contributes to a positive self-image, boosting your own self-esteem and reinforcing a sense of meaning and belonging (sense of self-worth).

As can be seen in this example, similarity in political beliefs leads to group identification, which then shapes our attitudes toward both ingroups and outgroups, while also enhances our sense of self-worth. In essence, similarity to another breeds interpersonal liking, and similarity to a group breeds social categorization and social comparison. Ultimately, both interpersonal and intergroup processes serve a common purpose: nurturing our self-worth, an essential component of our psychological well-being.

Social Learning Roots of Outgroup Bias

"You're a good apple – you can stay in the U.S. because you're one of the good ones." That was a comment made to me by the father of one of my son's ice-hockey friend, a talkative, Republican-leaning, Catholic, family-oriented man who loved sports. We had spent time together during championship trips, chatting casually on the sidelines. During one of those conversations, I asked about his views on Mexican immigrants in California. He replied, "They're stealing our jobs." Then, upon learning that my husband had contributed to the development of cell therapy for leukemia, he followed up with the "good apple" comment.

What struck me most was hearing his son, David, my son's teammate, later echo the exact same phrase in the locker room: "Your family is a good apple. You're welcome in the U.S." He meant it as a compliment. Beyond the obvious offense in categorizing immigrants into "good" and "bad," what was more revealing was how seamlessly the father's beliefs had been passed down to his son. David's repetition of the phrase reflected more than admiration; it revealed how outgroup bias can be learned through everyday family conversations, social media, observation, and modeling.

Humans are active information processors who form associations between behaviors and their consequences. Bias toward outgroups is shaped by direct experiences as well as indirect observations of others and the outcomes of their actions. As David grew up, he likely heard his father make negative comments about immigrants, witnessed unpleasant interactions, and listened to complaints in social settings where immigrants were blamed for social problems like job loss. He was also exposed to anti-immigrant rhetoric through Republican-leaning media. It is plausible that family friends and peers shared his father's bias, reinforcing these attitudes. Through social learning, David adopted anti-immigrant views.

Bandura (1977), the father of Social Learning Theory, outlined four stages of social learning. First, the individual must pay attention to the model's behavior and its consequences. David's active listening and attention to his dad's reactions toward immigrants reflect this first stage. Second, the individual must retain