

Discrimination: Interdisciplinary perspectives

Given by Valentina Di Stasio

Mondays, 17:00 – 19:00

Discrimination is a major barrier to accessing resources and opportunities, recognizing group differences, and securing both descriptive and substantive political representation. It not only imposes a psychological burden on its victims but also harms societies and strains social relationships. Throughout the course, we will review key theoretical frameworks for studying discrimination, focusing on its various forms and impacts on individuals, organizations, and societies. We will combine insights from sociology, social psychology, economics, organizational and legal studies. In addition to comparing theories and summarizing empirical evidence, we will closely examine the research designs of the selected readings.

While our primary focus will be on discrimination based on gender and ethnoracial background, we will also consider studies related to religion, age, and sexual orientation, including those that apply intersectionality theories to examine the unique challenges faced by individuals belonging to multiple disadvantaged groups. After introducing how discrimination is conceptualized and studied in the social sciences, we will distinguish between individual and structural explanations for its occurrence. We will compare blatant forms of exclusion with more subtle manifestations, reviewing literature on micro-aggressions, benevolent sexism, implicit bias and ingroup favoritism.

Key areas of interest include the workplace, the neighbourhood, access to justice and services, health and political representation. We will examine the behavior of key actors –gatekeepers, victims, bystanders – within a multilevel framework to understand the conditions (institutions, laws, policies, and practices) under which discrimination can be prevented, mitigated, or exacerbated. In particular, we will discuss policies that have unintended or paradoxical effects, focusing on the colorblindness literature, the discrimination paradox, and system-justifying beliefs.

We will then delve into the experiences of victims, exploring attribution theories, coping mechanisms, stigma management, and theories of stereotype threat. Toward the end of the course, we will introduce emerging research on vicarious discrimination and peer effects, bystander and allyship behavior, and non-zero-sum policy support. The course readings reflect a variety of methodological approaches to studying discriminatory behavior, ranging from quantitative analysis of survey data, qualitative studies, legal case analysis, and experiments.

Learning objectives

- Gaining knowledge of key interdisciplinary theories, debates and methodological approaches to studying discrimination
- Being able to contextualize discrimination in relation to national institutions, laws, organizational policies, and dominant ideologies
- Understanding the research designs that can be employed to study the occurrence and impact of discrimination, and being able to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses