Introduction to the Psychology of Marginalization

Why people are excluded and how discrimination affects their lives



What is marginalization

Marginalization is the process through which people are pushed to the edges of society and have less access to opportunities, resources and decision making. A **marginalized community** has reduced social, economic or political power. People may be present in a society but still have little influence over decisions that affect them.

For example, a person who uses a wheelchair may be unable to enter a school without ramps or lifts. A migrant worker may struggle to access services offered only in an unfamiliar language. These barriers limit participation. Marginalization is about unequal access and power, rather than simply being different or belonging to a small group.

Why does it occur

People often divide others into **in-groups**, meaning “people like us”, and **out-groups**, meaning “people unlike us”. This can encourage unfair assumptions and favouritism. Attitudes learned from family, friends, media and past experiences can make these divisions seem normal. Fear of unfamiliar people or competition for jobs and resources can also encourage exclusion.

Marginalization also reflects **power**: the ability to influence decisions and control resources. Historical inequalities and rules created by powerful groups can continue to disadvantage others. Exclusion does not always involve deliberate cruelty; an everyday practice can create barriers when it ignores different needs. These explanations help us understand exclusion, but do not justify it.

Stereotypes prejudice and discrimination

A **stereotype** is an oversimplified belief about a group that is applied to its members without considering individual differences. For example, assuming that older people cannot use technology treats a diverse group as though everyone has the same abilities. Even apparently positive stereotypes, such as “all members of this group are good at maths”, can create pressure and hide individual needs.

Prejudice is a judgement or attitude towards someone based on their group membership rather than knowledge of that individual. For example, an employer may distrust an older applicant because they assume older people resist change. This is a prejudiced attitude because the employer has judged the person before assessing their experience or skills.

Discrimination is unfair treatment based on someone’s actual or perceived group membership or characteristics. If that employer rejects a qualified applicant because of their age, the attitude has become an action. Discrimination can involve exclusion, unequal opportunities or rules that disadvantage particular groups.

Remember: a stereotype is a belief; prejudice is an attitude or judgement; discrimination is treatment or action. They can reinforce one another, but a belief does not automatically lead to discriminatory behaviour.

Who may experience marginalization

People may face exclusion because of their ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, disability, age, income or migrant status. For example, **racism** involves prejudice or discrimination based on race or ethnicity; **classism** involves prejudice or discrimination based on social class. The groups affected and the power they hold vary between places and over time.

People also have overlapping identities. A low-income migrant with a disability may face several barriers at once. However, members of a group do not all have the same experiences. Marginalized people and communities also have knowledge, strengths and the ability to challenge exclusion.

The four levels of discrimination

Discrimination can operate within a person, between people, inside an organization and across society. These **levels of discrimination** are connected. The following examples are illustrative situations that show how each level works.

1 Internalized discrimination occurs when someone absorbs negative messages about their own group and begins to believe them. After repeatedly hearing that people from poorer backgrounds are less capable, a student may decide that university is "not for people like me". The unfair judgement has become part of how they see themselves; this does not make them responsible for the discrimination they face.

2 Interpersonal discrimination occurs in interactions between people. It includes insults, harassment, exclusion and unequal treatment. For example, classmates may refuse to include a student in group work because of the student's nationality. This directly affects the student's opportunities and sense of belonging.

3 Institutional discrimination occurs through the policies or practices of an organization, such as a school, business or public service. For example, a school that provides important information only through an app may disadvantage families who cannot afford internet access. A practice can have discriminatory effects even if it appears to apply equally to everyone.

4 Structural discrimination occurs when patterns across several institutions and areas of society combine to disadvantage a group. For example, low wages, expensive housing near good schools and limited public transport may work together to restrict a family's access to education and employment. This level concerns the wider system, rather than one person or one organization.

Psychological effects and the cycle of marginalization

Psychology is the study of behaviour and mental processes, including thoughts and emotions. Repeated exclusion can increase stress, weaken someone's sense of belonging and damage **self-esteem**, or their sense of personal worth. Some people may experience anxiety or low mood. Responses vary, and support from friends, family and community can help protect wellbeing.

Marginalization can become a **cycle** when disadvantages reinforce one another. Low income may limit educational opportunities; fewer qualifications may restrict access to secure work; low pay may then make it harder to support the next generation. Discrimination can strengthen this cycle. Poverty itself is not the same as discrimination, and people are not trapped inevitably: accessible services, fair employment and community action can help break the cycle.

Key idea: understanding marginalization means looking at both people's attitudes and the systems that shape their opportunities.

Adapted from the supplied Psychology of Marginalization slides 6–17. Examples added for explanation.