

Threat, Conflict & Competition

Dr Katie Sullivan

Content

By the end of this session, you should be able to

- 
- 1 Explain major threat-based theories of prejudice
 - 2 Evaluate Realistic Group Conflict Theory
 - 3 Distinguish between different forms of threat
 - 4 Apply Relative Deprivation Theory to real-world examples
 - 5 Critically evaluate the role of threat in prejudice and discrimination

From Categorisation to Conflict

Last Week

Categorisation

Social Identity Theory

Stereotype Formation

Stereotype Maintenance

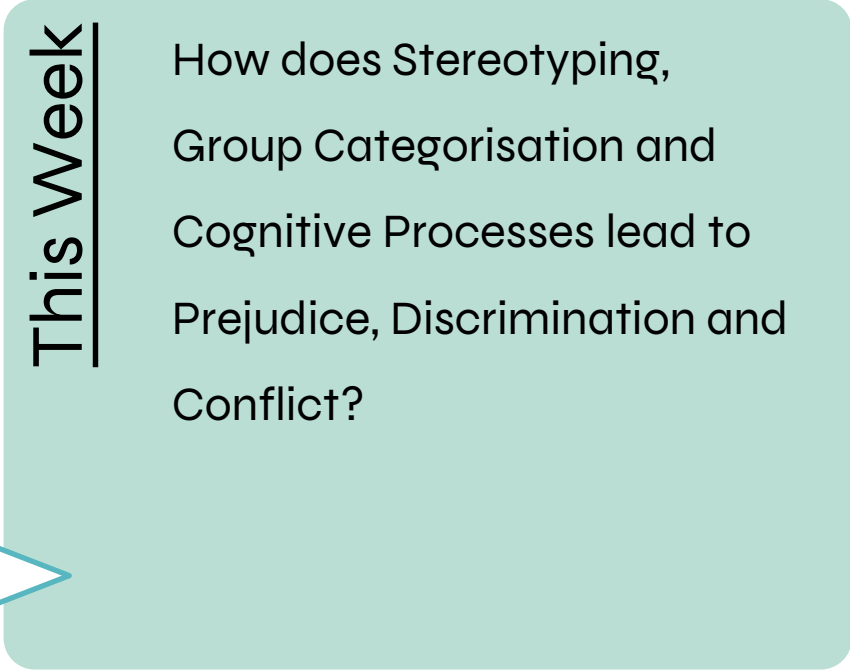
Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Stereotype Threat



This Week

How does Stereotyping,
Group Categorisation and
Cognitive Processes lead to
Prejudice, Discrimination and
Conflict?



Introduction to Group Conflict

- Tension, hostility, or competition between groups
- Often based on perceived differences or competition over resources.
- Underpins many forms of prejudice, discrimination, and societal division.

Intergroup Tension

- Emotional or psychological discomfort between groups.

Perceived Incompatibility

- Belief that the goals, values, or interests of one group conflict with another.

Competition Over Resources

- Real or perceived struggle for limited resources (jobs, land, power, recognition).

Social Categorisation

- The tendency to classify people into “us” vs. “them,” which can amplify conflict.

Consequences of Group Conflict

Prejudice and Discrimination

- Negative attitudes and behaviours toward out-group members.

Polarisation

- Increased ideological distance and reduced empathy.

Violence and Aggression

- In extreme cases, group conflict can escalate to hate crimes or war.

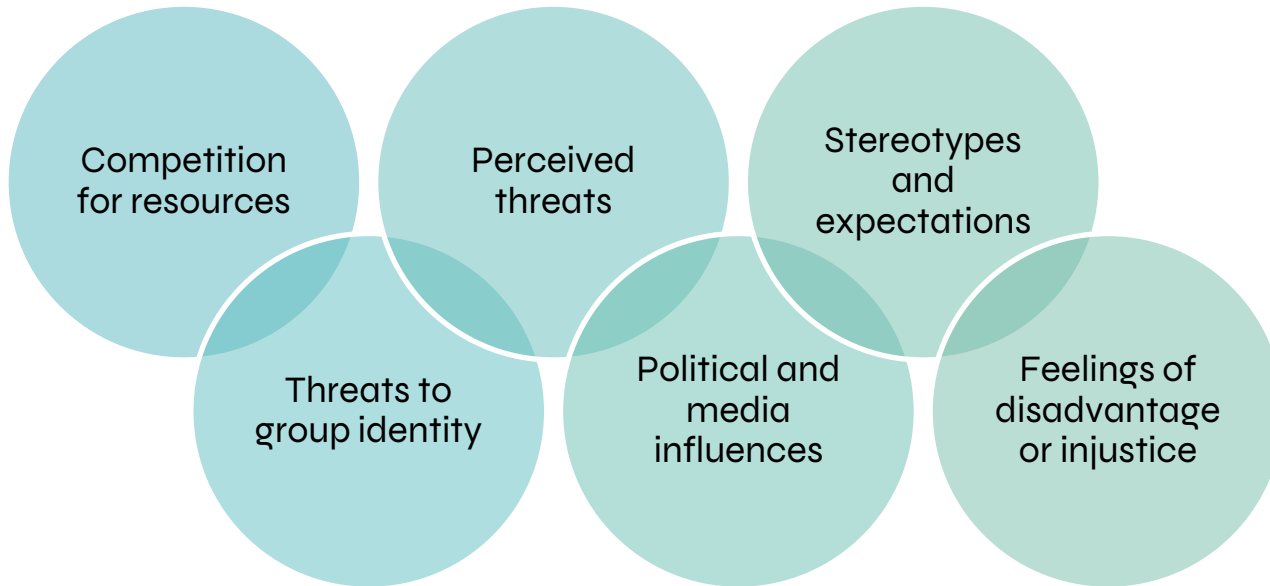
Social Fragmentation

- Breakdown of trust and cooperation in diverse societies.

For example:

- Immigration debates (e.g., "they're taking our jobs").
- Political polarization (e.g., left vs. right ideologies).
- Ethnic and religious tensions (e.g., sectarian conflict).

Why does Conflict Emerge?



What transforms group differences into prejudice and conflict?

What Do We Mean by Threat?

A threat exists when a group believes something important may be lost.

Groups may fear losing:

- Resources
- Power
- Status
- Cultural values
- Social identity

It does not need to be objective to influence attitudes and behaviour... people respond to their perception of reality

- Integrated Threat Theory proposes that perceived threats are among the strongest predictors of prejudice (Stephan & Stephan, 2000).
- multiple forms of threat consistently predicted negative intergroup attitudes across a range of social groups (Riek, Mania and Gaertner, 2006).

Do threats need to be real to influence behaviour?

Actual vs Perceived Threat

Actual Threat

Objective threats that genuinely affect resources, safety, or opportunities

- Examples:
 - Economic downturns
 - Housing shortages
 - Competition for jobs
 - Reduced access to services

Perceived Threat

Threats based on beliefs, interpretations, and expectations

- Perceived threats consistently predict prejudice towards outgroups" (Riek et al., 2006)
- Examples:
 - Media narratives
 - Political rhetoric
 - Moral panic
 - Exaggerated perceptions of competition

Which type of threat is more important for understanding prejudice?

Are prejudiced attitudes caused by threat, or do threats simply justify existing prejudice?

Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT; Sherif, 1966)

Scarcity and Competition

When two or more groups vie for limited resources (such as land, jobs, power, or money), their goals become incompatible. One group's gain is perceived as another's loss (a zero-sum fate).

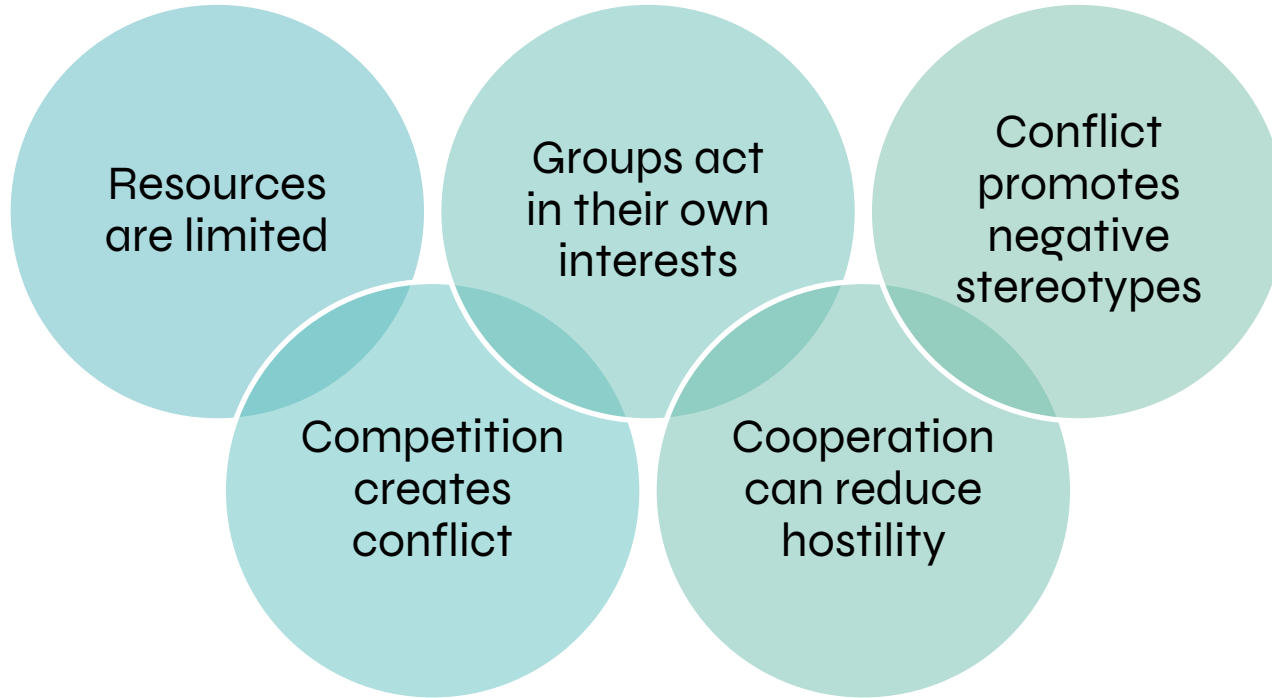
In-Group Solidarity

Competition increases unity, loyalty, and strict norms within each group while intensifying negative stereotypes and rejection of the out-group

Situational Focus

Unlike personality-based theories that blame individual traits or prejudice on personal bias, RGCT focuses entirely on environmental conditions and structural relationships between groups.

Core Assumptions of RGCT



- **Conflict is not inevitable...** the social context matters.
- RGCT is particularly effective at explaining prejudice in contexts involving competition over tangible resources.

Competition & Conflict in Everyday Life

Competition Occurs Across Many Contexts



Does competition always lead to prejudice?

Robbers Cave Experiment

(Sherif et al., 1954)

In-group Formation



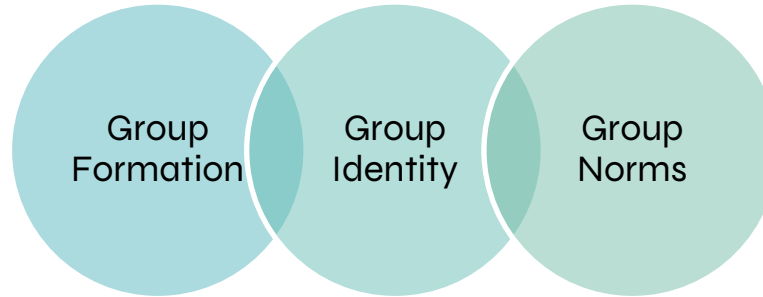
Intergroup
Competition



Conflict Resolution
(Superordinate Goals)



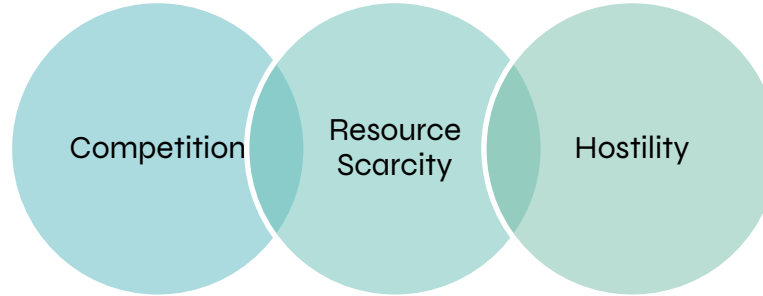
Phase 1: Building Groups



- The boys were randomly divided into two groups (later named the *Rattlers* and the *Eagles*).
- Each group was kept separate for a few days to build group identity.
- Activities included hiking, swimming, and camping.
- Group cohesion was encouraged through shared goals and tasks.

Result: Strong in-group identification developed quickly, with group names, flags, and norms forming.

Phase 2: Creating Conflict



The groups were introduced to each other and placed in competitive situations (e.g., tug-of-war, baseball).

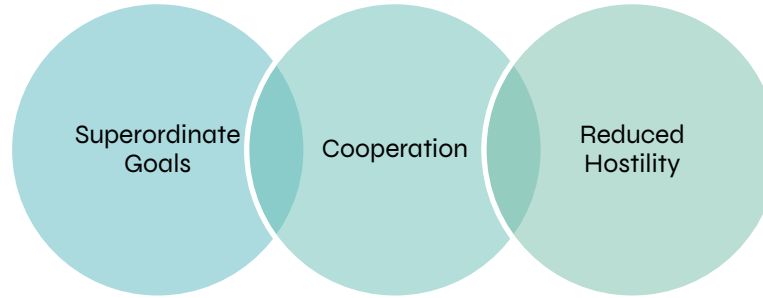
Rewards were given to the winning group (e.g., medals, prizes).

Conflict escalated:

- Name-calling and insults.
- Physical aggression (e.g., raiding each other's cabins).
- Increased in-group favouritism and out-group hostility.

Key finding: Competition over resources (even symbolic ones like prizes) led to prejudice and conflict.

Phase 3: Reducing Conflict



Researchers introduced superordinate goals (tasks that required cooperation between groups to succeed):

- Fixing a broken water supply.
- Pooling money to rent a movie.
- Pulling a truck out of a ditch.

These goals were non-zero-sum: both groups benefited from success.

Outcome:

- Hostility decreased.
- Friendships formed across group lines.
- Intergroup cooperation increased.

Robbers Cave

Psychological Insights

- Competition breeds conflict
- Group identity forms rapidly
- Superordinate goals reduce conflict

Theoretical Implications

- Supports Realistic Group Conflict Theory
- Challenges purely cognitive models of prejudice
- Influenced later theories

Critiques and Limitations

- Homogeneity of participants
- Ethical concerns
- Artificial setting

Applications

- Education
- Workplace
- Conflict resolution

Task: Design a Superordinate Goal

Imagine the Eagles and Rattlers are in conflict.

In groups, design a challenge that:

- Requires cooperation
- Benefits both groups
- Cannot be completed independently

Be prepared to explain:

- Why your activity should reduce conflict
- Which psychological processes it targets



Evaluating Realistic Group Conflict Theory

Strengths

Explains multiple forms of prejudice

Strong empirical support

Applicable across contexts

Integrates cognitive and emotional processes

Threat constructs overlap

Causality is difficult to establish

Western bias

Underplays structural inequality

Limitations

RGCT vs Social Identity Theory

RGCT

- Competition creates bias
- Competition required
- Structural explanation
- Focus on resources

SIT

- Categorisation creates bias
- Minimal groups sufficient
- Psychological explanation
- Focus on identity

Which theory better explains modern prejudice?

Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)

Stephan & Stephan (2000)

- Built upon earlier theories (RGCT, Symbolic Threat, SIT)
- Created a comprehensive model that explains different types of perceived threats
- Explains how different types of threat contribute to prejudice and negative attitudes.
- Integrates Cognitive, Emotional

Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)

Stephan & Stephan (2000)

Realistic Threat

(Threats to resources,
power, safety)

Symbolic Threat

(Threats to values,
beliefs, identity)

Intergroup Anxiety

(Discomfort during
interactions)

Negative
Stereotypes

(Expectations of
negative behaviour)

Realistic Threat

Psychological Mechanism

- Perceived competition for limited resources
- Concerns about economic, political, or physical wellbeing
- Outgroups viewed as competitors

Supporting Research

- Stephan & Stephan (2000)
- Quillian (1995)
- Riek, Mania & Gaertner (2006)

Applications

- Immigration attitudes
- Employment competition
- Housing and welfare debates

Critique

- Competition does not always produce prejudice
- Perceived threat often matters more than objective threat

Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)

Stephan & Stephan (2000)

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(Expectations of
negative behaviour)

Symbolic Threat

Psychological Mechanism

- Perceived challenges to values and identity
- Concerns about cultural change
- Outgroups viewed as threatening the group's way of life

Supporting Research

- Stephan & Stephan (2000)
- Verkuyten (2009)
- Craig & Richeson (2014)

Applications

- Immigration debates
- Religious diversity
- National identity
- Social change

Critique

- Difficult to distinguish from prejudice itself
- Often influenced by political and media narratives

Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)

Stephan & Stephan (2000)

Realistic Threat

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Stereotypes

(Expectations of
negative behaviour)

Intergroup Anxiety

Psychological Mechanism

- Discomfort during interactions with outgroup members
- Fear of negative evaluation
- Uncertainty about appropriate behaviour

Supporting Research

- Stephan & Stephan (1985)
- Plant & Devine (2003)
- Tropp & Pettigrew (2005)

Applications

- Workplace interactions
- Educational settings
- Cross-cultural communication

Critique

- Not all anxiety leads to prejudice
- Positive contact can reduce anxiety

Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)

Stephan & Stephan (2000)

Realistic Threat

(Threats to resources,
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Symbolic Threat

(Threats to values,
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Intergroup Anxiety

(Discomfort during
interactions)

Negative
Stereotypes

(Expectations of
negative behaviour)

Negative Stereotypes

Psychological Mechanism

- Stereotypes shape expectations
- Outgroups anticipated to be threatening
- Perceptions are interpreted through existing beliefs

Supporting Research

- Stephan & Stephan (2000)
- Jussim (2017)
- Allport (1954)

Applications

- Criminal justice
- Education
- Healthcare
- Employment decisions

Critique

- Threat and stereotypes may reinforce one another
- Difficult to determine cause and effect

Bringing the Four Threats Together

Realistic Threat

(Threats to resources,
power, safety)

Symbolic Threat

(Threats to values,
beliefs, identity)

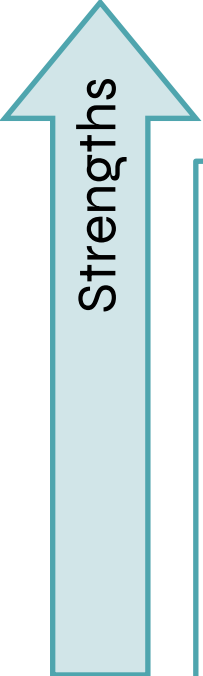
Intergroup Anxiety

(Discomfort during
interactions)

Negative
Stereotypes

(Expectations of
negative behaviour)

Evaluating ITT



Strengths

Explains multiple forms of prejudice

Strong empirical support

Applicable to contemporary issues

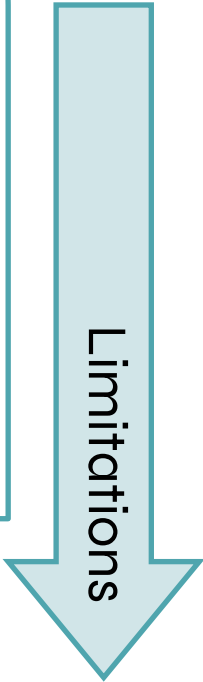
Integrates cognitive, emotional, and social processes

Threats often overlap

Direction of causality is unclear

May overlook wider social structures

Not all prejudice is threat-based



Limitations

Task: Threat Detective

Look at the below scenarios. For each scenario:

1. Is this realistic threat?
2. Symbolic threat?
3. Both?
4. Neither?

Refugee
Arrival

Religious
Clothing

Housing
Shortage

Bilingual
Education

Overseas
Workers

Pride
Events

Where Do Threat Perceptions Come From?



Do people discover threats, or are threats socially constructed?

Media and Threat Amplification

Media can portray groups as:

- Competitors
- Criminals
- Cultural threats
- Security threats

How can identical events be framed differently?

Same Event, Different Framing

How information is presented influences how it is interpreted.

Who Perceives Threat?

Not Everyone Responds the Same Way

Threat perceptions are influenced by:

- Personality
- Political ideology
- Worldviews
- Values
- Prior experiences

Individual Difference Variables

- Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)
- Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)
- Need for Closure

Relative Deprivation Theory

Samuel Stouffer (1949)

- Coined the concept while studying World War II soldiers. He found that satisfaction depends on comparisons to those around you rather than objective conditions.

**Robert K. Merton
(1957)**

- Advanced the idea by linking it to reference groups and social expectations.

**Walter Runciman
(1966)**

- Formalized the theory. He split it into *egoistic deprivation* (comparing yourself to one other person) and *fraternal deprivation* (comparing your group to another group).

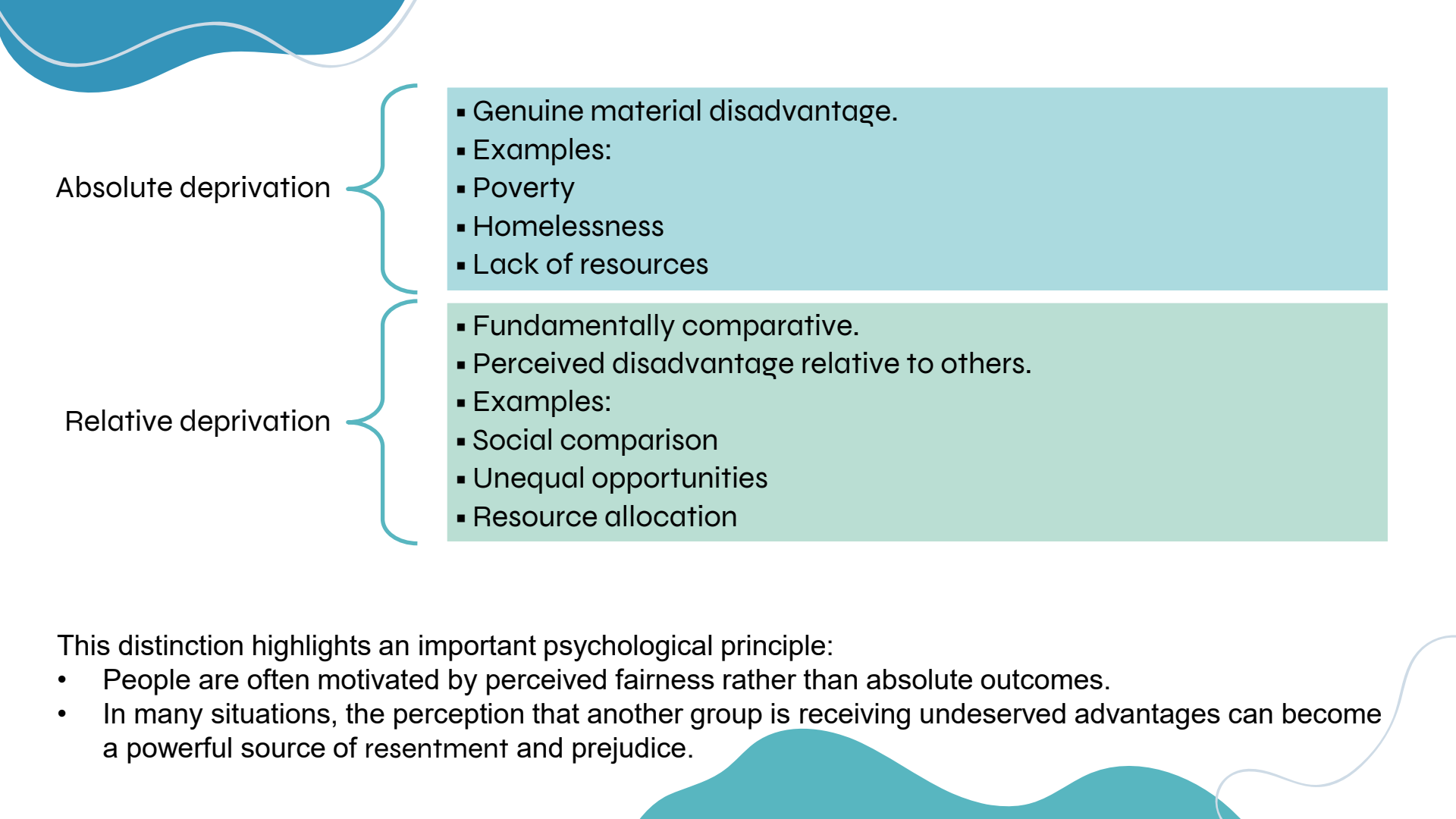
Ted Gurr (1970)

- Applied the concept to political violence and rebellion in his book *Why Men Rebel*, arguing that revolts happen when people feel a gap between what they expect and what they actually get.

People become dissatisfied when they perceive that:

- They have less than others
- Their group receives less than another group
- Outcomes are unfair
- Expectations exceed reality

Perceived disadvantage drives resentment.



Absolute deprivation

- Genuine material disadvantage.
- Examples:
 - Poverty
 - Homelessness
 - Lack of resources

Relative deprivation

- Fundamentally comparative.
- Perceived disadvantage relative to others.
- Examples:
 - Social comparison
 - Unequal opportunities
 - Resource allocation

This distinction highlights an important psychological principle:

- People are often motivated by perceived fairness rather than absolute outcomes.
- In many situations, the perception that another group is receiving undeserved advantages can become a powerful source of resentment and prejudice.



Egotistic
Deprivation

- Comparison between:
- **Me ↔ Other Individuals**
- "I am worse off than others."

Fraternal
Deprivation

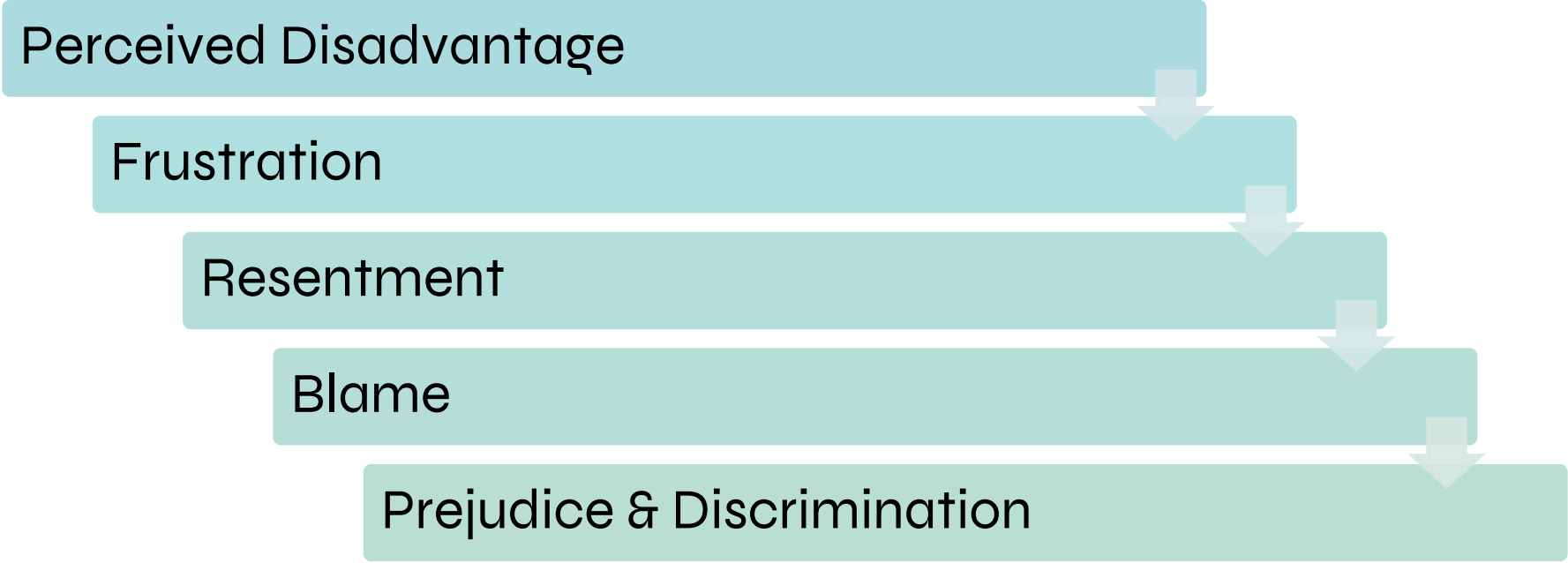
- Comparison between:
- **My Group ↔ Another Group**
- "My group is worse off than theirs."

Which is more likely to produce prejudice?



How Does Relative Deprivation Lead to Prejudice?

Perceived Disadvantage



```
graph TD; A[Perceived Disadvantage] --> B[Frustration]; B --> C[Resentment]; C --> D[Blame]; D --> E[Prejudice & Discrimination]
```

The diagram consists of five horizontal bars of increasing length, each containing a stage of the process. The bars are light blue and are connected by downward-pointing arrows, indicating a sequential flow from top to bottom. The stages are: Perceived Disadvantage, Frustration, Resentment, Blame, and Prejudice & Discrimination.

Frustration

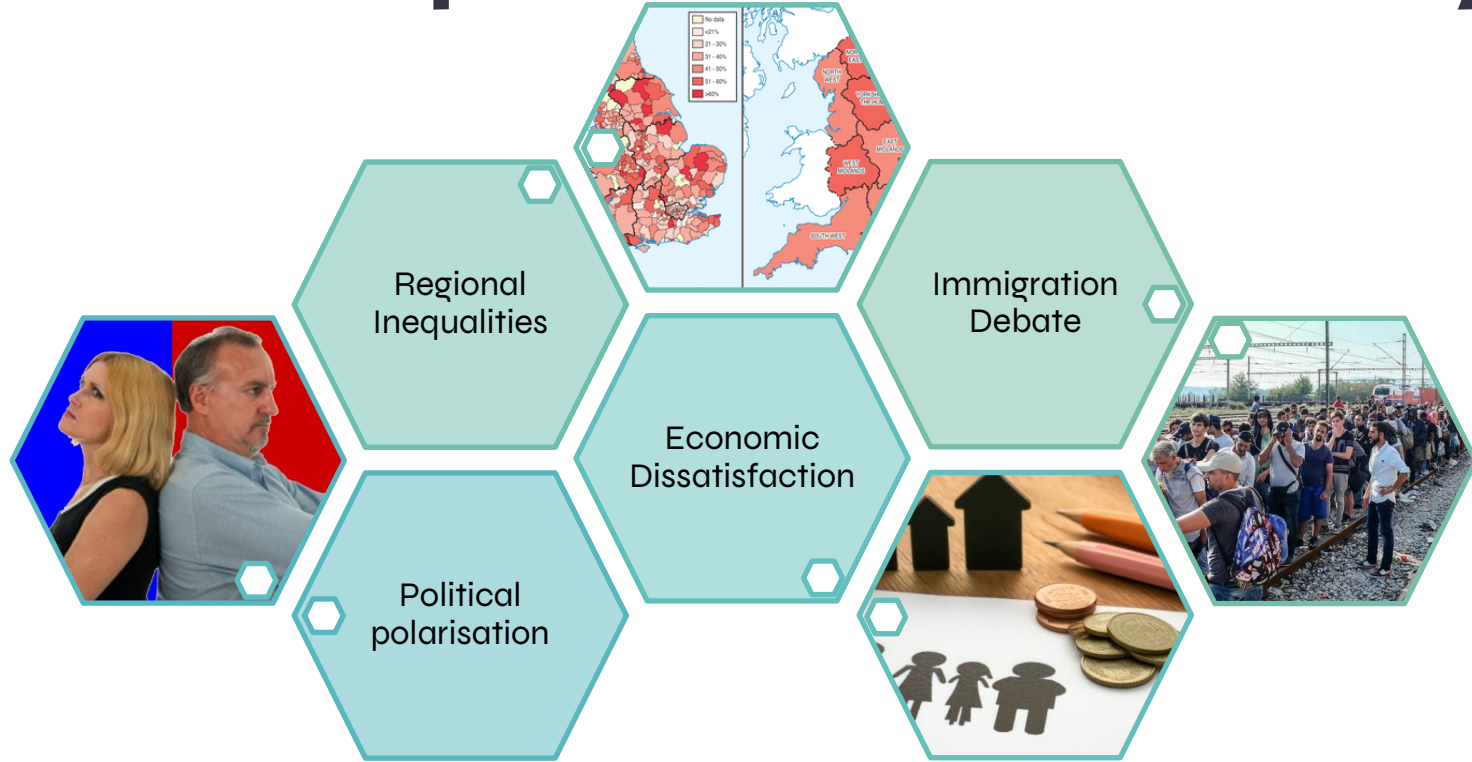
Resentment

Blame

Prejudice & Discrimination

It is the perception of unfairness that matters.

Relative Deprivation in Modern Society



Do people react to actual inequality or perceived inequality?

Scapegoating Theory

Core Idea: When frustration cannot be directed towards its true source, aggression may be displaced onto a more vulnerable target.

Key Assumptions:

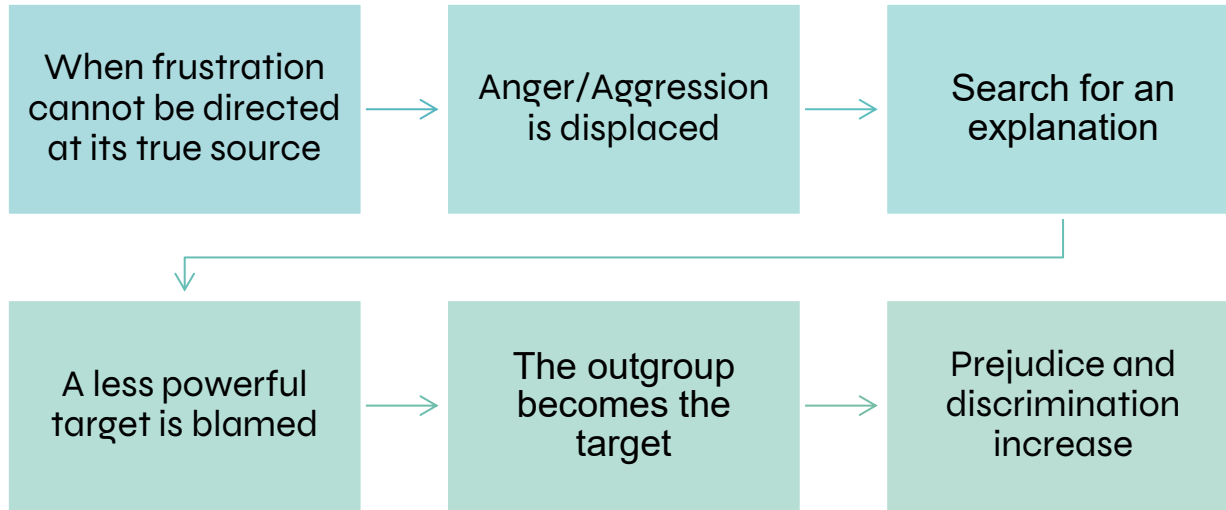
- People seek explanations for problems
- Frustration creates anger
- Direct retaliation is not always possible
- Outgroups can become convenient targets

Key Researchers:

Dollard et al. (1939)

Allport (1954)

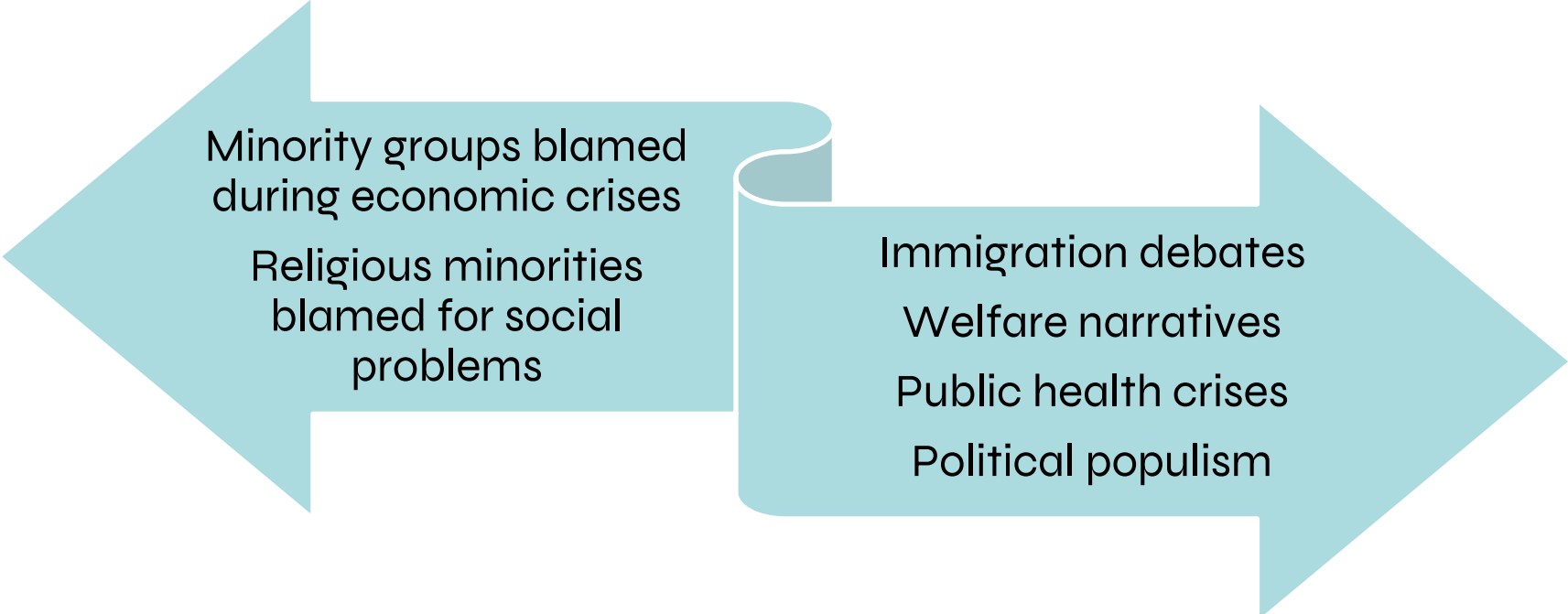
How Does Scapegoating Work?



Outgroups can become convenient targets for frustration.

- Economic downturns
- Political instability
- Rapid social change
- Public health crises

Historical and Contemporary Examples



Minority groups blamed
during economic crises

The diagram consists of two large, light blue arrows pointing in opposite directions. The left arrow points left and contains text about historical blame. The right arrow points right and contains text about contemporary blame. The two arrows are connected by a small, curved, light blue bridge-like shape in the center.

Religious minorities
blamed for social
problems

Immigration debates

Welfare narratives

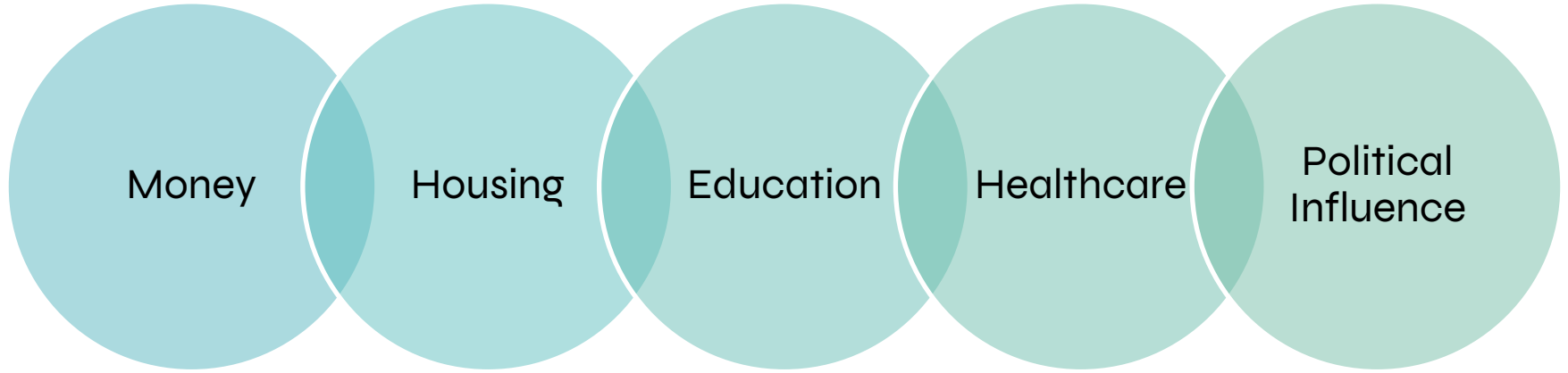
Public health crises

Political populism

Critical Question

Why are some groups blamed more than others?

Why Do Resources Matter?



Why Resources Matter

Resource allocation influences:

- Threat perceptions
- Relative deprivation
- Fairness judgements
- Conflict between groups

Allocation of Resources

Allocating Limited Resources

Imagine resources are limited.
How should they be allocated?

Possible principles:

- Equality
- Equity
- Need
- Utility (greatest overall benefit)

Can different allocation decisions create conflict?



**Who is
deserving
of resources?**



Resource Allocation Challenge

You have a budget of £10 million.

Allocate funding between:

- Housing
- Healthcare
- Education
- Employment Programmes
- Social Welfare



Questions

- How did you decide?
- Who benefits?
- Who loses?
- Could your decisions create intergroup tensions?

From Threat to Prejudice

Threat Perception

- Threat

Emotion/Attitude

- Anger
- Resentment

Behaviour

- Avoidance
- Hostility
- Discrimination

Critique of Threat Theories

Strengths

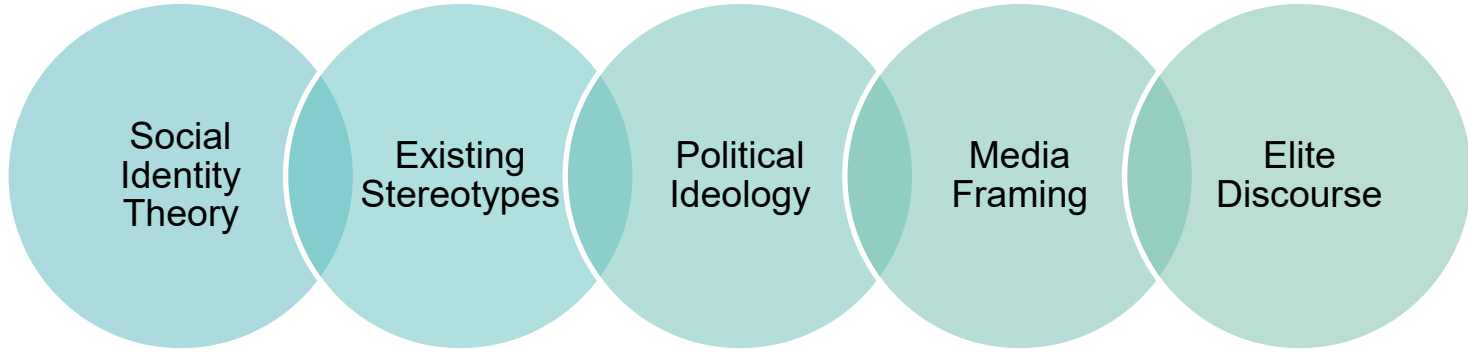
- Strong empirical support
- Explains many real-world conflicts
- Accounts for prejudice as a situational process
- Useful for policy and intervention

- Threats are often perceived rather than objective
- Cannot explain all prejudice
- May overlook structural inequalities
- Threat narratives can be socially constructed

Limitations

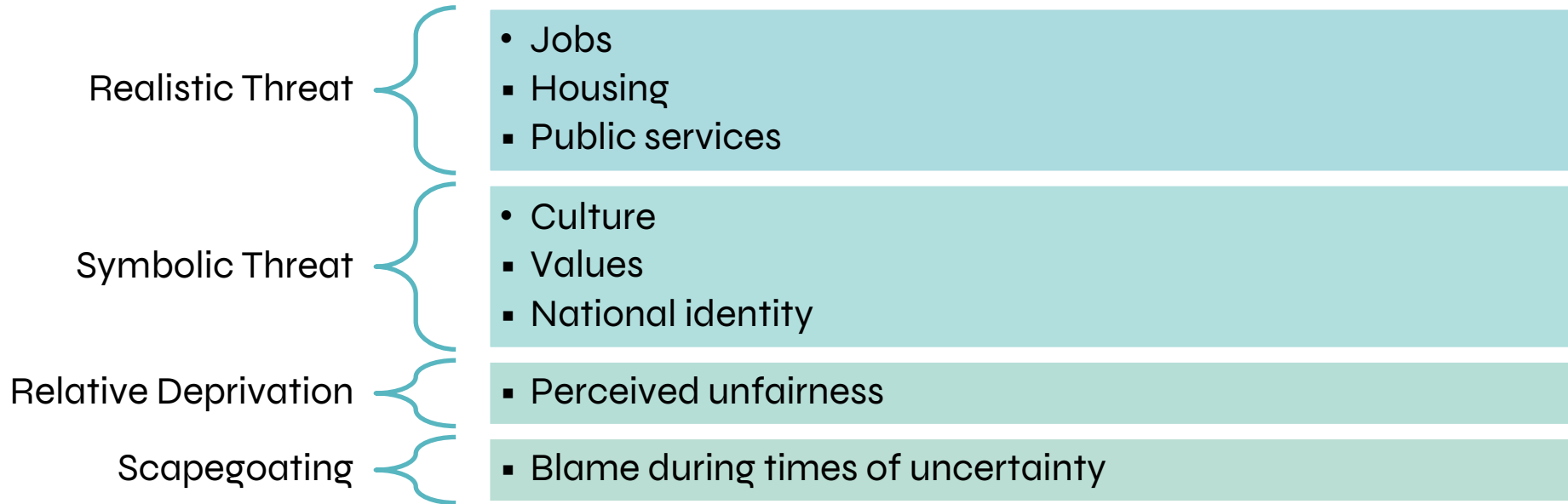
Do Threats Actually Cause Prejudice?

Alternative explanations:



Are threats the cause of prejudice, or are they used to justify prejudice that already exists?

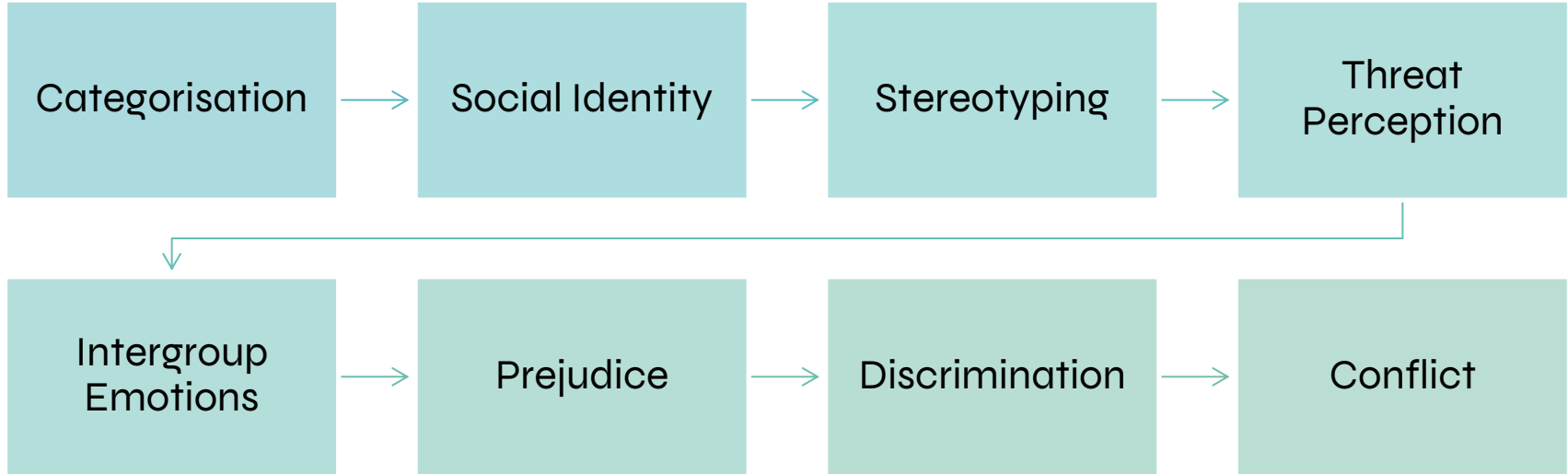
Applying Threat Theories to Contemporary Issues



Multiple theories often apply simultaneously.

Putting Weeks 2 & 3 Together

A Multi-Level Explanation of Prejudice



No single theory fully explains prejudice.

Is prejudice caused more by how we think about other groups, or by what we believe those groups threaten?

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Threat is a powerful predictor of prejudice
- ✓ Threats may be realistic or symbolic
- ✓ Perceptions matter more than objective reality
- ✓ Feelings of deprivation can generate resentment
- ✓ Threat perceptions influence emotions and behaviour
- ✓ Multiple theories contribute to our understanding of prejudice



**Thank you for
listening!**

