

# Social psychology in brothers and sisters by bebe moore campbell research paper e...

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [Self-Concepts](#) \n \t
2. [Conformity and Compliance](#) \n \t
3. [Self-Serving Bias](#) \n \t
4. [Social Perception](#) \n \t
5. [Prejudice and Discrimination](#) \n \t
6. [Stereotypes](#) \n \t
7. [Friendship](#) \n \t
8. [References](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

With a setting in Los Angeles after the beating of Rodney King and during riots, the novel “ Brothers and Sisters” focuses on depicting introspective characters and their interpersonal relationships when stereotypes, racism, and gender bias influence their perception and decision-making. Various concepts in social psychology can be used to interpret how characters in the novel form relationships, build self-concepts, and make decisions, such as self-schemas, attribution, conformity, friendship, and other concepts, when they encounter discrimination and prejudices.

## **Self-Concepts**

The main characters are introspective, so they frequently question their values and beliefs. They are always willing to improve because they believe it is a shame to not improve when the opportunity arises (Campbell, 1995).

However, to achieve personal improvement, they need to struggle with various dimensions of their self-concepts, which are categorized as self-schemas.

When people develop self-schemas, they become self-perpetuating, which means they are stored in long-term memory and determine which information is relevant to that person. Schemas are determined by various environmental factors, so Esther is an example of a character with two separate schemas. Her self-esteem is high, and because of her ambition, she considers herself a capable and successful woman. With that mindset, she can endure a lot of prejudice and discrimination she experiences both at work and in her private life.

On the other hand, because of abuse at work, especially after an investigation that was launched when theft was detected in the corporation, Esther forms a different self-schema. She understands that she is a black woman with several limitations in society and believes that African Americans can only be bitter, dead, or psychotic in the USA (Campbell, 1995). However, even though she has a negative self-schema because of external influences, research shows that people who develop self-schemas based on self-worth and a sense of independence experience more well-being than people who build their self-schemas around relationships with the environment (Leite & Kuiper, 2010). Because Esther belongs to the former group, she is able to succeed in life despite the constant negative experiences that happen because of her race.

The cognitive dissonance theory also plays a role in character development. According to cognitive dissonance, people who violate their personal beliefs

experience dissonance, which leads to attitude or behavioral changes. An example is Esther's dissonance between loyalty to a friend and supporting a person of the same race when Mallory reports Humphrey for sexual harassment. Eventually, after the investigation regarding theft is concluded, in which Esther suspects the teller, who is also African American, the feeling of dissonance leads to changes in her attitude and ambitions.

## **Conformity and Compliance**

Compliance and conformity both result in obedience, but there is a significant difference between them. Compliance is involuntary because individuals are coerced by external forces, such as authority or peers, into making certain decisions. Conformity occurs when individuals willingly make decisions to obey social norms. In "Brothers and Sisters," conformity is a common theme while compliance occurs only on rare occasions.

Compliance was demonstrated by Milgram (1963), and Milgram's experiment was successfully repeated in different cultural settings, so it was concluded that moral convictions and personal decision-making decrease when individuals are exposed to pressures from authorities. After 30 years, the experiment was successfully repeated in several cultural settings, which indicates that obedience can still be a detrimental social factor because of its impact on personal decision-making and moral values (Blass, 1999).

An example of compliance in "Brothers and Sisters" is the looting of bank accounts. Even though Esther's white male colleague was responsible for looting, the investigation was launched under the assumption that African Americans are thieves, so the investigators had to comply with the orders

from the bank.

Conformity occurs when individuals voluntarily accept certain norms, which can include both acceptable behaviors and negative behaviors. An example of conformity is Mallory's advancement in the bank because she slept with a higher management. Although she knew it was unethical to use sex to advance, she believed in her disadvantage in the workplace because she is a woman, so she resorted to unethical means willingly to achieve her goal.

### **Self-Serving Bias**

While obedience is illustrated as a key issue in social psychology by Milgram (1963) and Blass (1999), Campbell and Sedikides (1999) argue that obedience is not an issue. They suggest individuals resort to self-serving bias when they experience self-threat, such as pressures from external sources. However, their conclusion is not consistent with the attribution theory that explains how self-serving bias works.

According to the concept of attribution, self-serving bias occurs when individuals want to protect their public image or self-esteem by attributing failures or unexpected outcomes to external factors they cannot control. However, when they succeed, they attribute their success to internal factors.

Self-serving bias depends on cultural differences. In individualist cultures, self-serving bias is more common than it is in collectivist cultures (Ho & Wu, 2001). As an individualist culture, people in the USA will often engage in self-serving bias. While Esther does take credit for her success and blames external factors, including racial discrimination, for her lack of career

advancement. Because prejudice and discrimination against her race was extremely prevalent after the riots in LA, her self-serving bias served as a defensive mechanism that allowed her to persist in achieving her goals, even though she was in an unfriendly environment.

## **Social Perception**

Social perception is the ability to predict thoughts, feelings, and motivations of other people, but it is not always accurate. Neurological research shows that all people have the ability to form empathic links with others. When perceivers can identify with emotional or mental states of others, their mirror neuron system will replicate the sensations described by observation targets, so the observers will show similar reactions in the brain regions related to the experience described (Zaki & Ochsner, 2011).

However, both perceivers and targets can influence the accuracy of social perception. For example, if targets do not want to be understood and use non-verbal expressions that do not match their verbal messages, the perceiver cannot utilize the mirror neuron system (Zaki & Ochsner, 2011).

Various biased beliefs, such as self-serving bias and personal preferences, can impact social perceptions and behaviors (Jussim, 2012). There are also instances in which perceivers influence the observation targets, so their beliefs shape social reality by become a self-fulfilling prophecies, even though they are inaccurate (Jussim, 2012).

In “ Brothers and Sisters,” social perception is often biased because racial prejudices and personal beliefs influence interpersonal communication.

However, whenever the characters can set aside their differences, they show

their humane and positive sides towards each other. Furthermore, Mallory's belief that as a woman she cannot succeed without sleeping with higher management is an example of beliefs that shape social perceptions, which eventually become self-fulfilling prophecies. Overall, the characters' behavior in the novel is consistent with research in social perception.

## **Prejudice and Discrimination**

Prejudice is an incorrect attitude, which is usually negative, toward an individual because that individual is from a certain social group. While prejudice can be based on various factors, the novel "Brothers and Sisters" focuses on racial prejudices. For example, the regional manager Humphrey is an African-American male who obtains a prestigious position only because the beating of Rodney King results in riots, so the bank introduces a diversity program to improve its public image. Even though Humphrey obtains a high-class position, he understands that prejudices are still prevalent, so his position depends on the attitudes of his white superiors.

In some case prejudice based on gender is introduced. For example, Mallory advances her career by exploiting a higher positioned male colleague in a relationship, but she justifies her action because it is difficult for women to move up in the corporate world by building credentials and experience. On the other hand, Esther does not agree with her justification because she believes there is a difference between white women's and black women's position in society, which indicates that prejudices are both gender-based and racial.

Her perception is confirmed when Esther and the teller are fired after a theft

investigation ignores the fact that a white male was responsible for stealing because it is guided by racial discrimination. That is an example of discrimination because it defines certain negative actions individuals perform toward others because of their sex, race, class, or other traits. Apart from the main storyline, several other examples of discrimination are presented throughout the novel. For example, designer stores monitor the movements of African-American executives under the assumption that they are thieves. Another example is when unsatisfied bank customers ask African Americans to speak with the real managers. Campbell's writing is consistent with research related to the effects of norms on prejudice formations.

In a study by Minard (1952), white miners conformed to different norms while working in a mine, so they were friendlier to black miners. Above the ground, they conformed to different social norms, which resulted in changing their behavioral patterns and basing them on prejudice. That explains why characters in the book improve their relationships whenever they set aside social norms that determine their behavior by encouraging racial prejudice and discrimination.

## **Stereotypes**

The setting of “ Brothers and Sisters” is in LA during the early 1990s, but the novel depicts racial stereotypes that are common even today. For example, the police officers responsible for beating Rodney King used a stereotype that African Americans are armed and dangerous as their legal defense (Balkaran, 1999). A recent shooting of Oscar Grant in 2009, which occurred



under the assumption that he was reaching for a weapon, showed that racial stereotypes are still prevalent in modern society (Bulwa, 2009). In “ Brothers and Sisters,” suspecting African American employees for theft is an example of how stereotypes determine decision-making.

Gender stereotypes are also a theme in the novel because Esther wants an ambitious man who earns twice as much as her. Even though she is attracted to Tyrone, she does not want a relationship with him because he is a postal worker with no interest in participating in the corporate world. Her opinion is consistent with reality because men tend to earn more than women because they choose higher paying careers, but it is also evident that the starting pay in the same industries is lower for women than it is for men (Bardaro, 2009). Even though men do generally earn more than women, her belief is based on a stereotype that men should earn more than women.

## **Friendship**

The relationship between Esther and Mallory is an unlikely friendship because they belong to different racial groups, but they still managed to form a friendship despite the recent events that resulted in riots and increased racial discrimination. However, the foundation of the friendship is questionable because it is difficult to maintain professional boundaries in personal relationships.

That is applicable in this case because Esther is in operations while Mallory holds a position in lending, which Esther desires. One of the central questions in Esther’s life is focused on obtaining a position in the lending department because it is a prestigious position, so it is difficult to determine

whether their relationship is based on business networking or personal decisions.

The strength of Mallory's and Esther's friendship is frequently tested throughout the book. For example, when Mallory accuses a new African-American manager for sexual harassment, Esther is torn between assisting her friend or assisting the manager because they are the same race and share common experiences of discrimination in personal and professional life.

However, despite the obstacles in their relationship, the introspective nature of the character helps introduce their emotional growth in the novel. Esther is often bitter and angry at the privileged white members of society, something Mallory helps her realize and overcome in their relationship once Esther displays an outburst when Mallory begins moving up the corporate ladder. Mallory is unaware of various racist attitudes, which Esther uncovers. Despite the frequent conflicts in their relationship, Campbell (1995) depicts a strong relationship, which has a potential for bringing out the humanity and compassion in characters when they set aside their racial differences and personal prejudices.

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