

Teach to reach!

## Content Unit 3



SAY:  
„BYE, POLARITY“



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## 3 Polarisation in our psyche

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### 3.1 Introduction (building knowledge) - 10min

#### What does "polarisation" mean?

Our world is a diverse place. People have different ideas, needs and desires, they pursue different goals and see meaning in different things. They have changing concepts of good and evil, they have not all had the same upbringing and education, they have not grown up in the same circumstances and have had very diverse life experiences.

This diversity can be a significant enrichment if we learn to deal with it. This is an excellent mission, especially in a rapidly changing world that is becoming ever closer through modern technologies. However, if we do not learn to do this, different life models can also lead to multiple conflicts and disputes. The emergence of these conflicts is called *polarisation*. This means that rigid *poles* develop among people, which, just like the north and south poles of the earth, are far away from each other and can even be opposite to each other. Polarisation can occur wherever different ideas, habits, circumstances, attitudes or expectations clash and are not mediated with each other. If, on top of that, polarisation between people remains unaddressed, many difficulties can develop: Ignorance, exclusion, arguments or even violence.

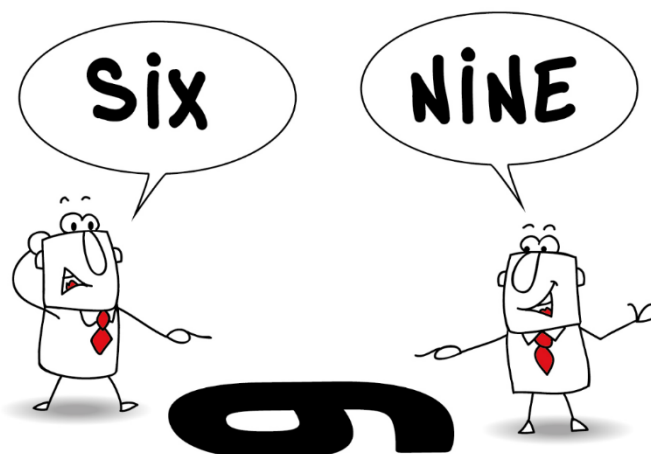
Recognising, addressing, and overcoming polarisation is therefore part of shaping a peaceful, communal and respectful world in which all people can find their home, on both a small and a large scale.

#### What is "polarisation in our psyche"?

Polarisation occurs in many ways in our thinking, feeling, wanting, and living together with others. The following introductions and exercises will help you to recognise the connection between our inner psychological life and possible forms of polarisation. You will learn how even our most simple forms of perception can contribute to polarisation and how our motivations, judgements about others, prejudices, and so on can contribute to polarisation. In all this, we naturally ask what can be done about it.

### 3.2 My perception - your perception (building knowledge) - 25min

Have you ever thought about your perception? This means your senses, i.e., your sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch - and many other things you can do. You have probably noticed that we quickly encounter many differences when discussing our perceptions. Have a look at the following picture.



### Practical Relevance

This picture should characterise a basic problem of human perception. Interpret the picture and try to work out the problem. Then find two or three examples from real life where this problem occurs. Share your results and examples in class.

You have probably noticed that people perceive the world in different ways. That this is the case is based on three mechanisms of our perception:

- a) Adaptation
- b) Selective attention
- c) Social perception

Adaptation means that in life, we slowly get used to perceiving things in the same way all the time. This is deeply connected to the function of our brain. If our brain always processes information in the same way, it will also tend to continue processing it precisely in this habitual way. This effect is called adaptation. Unnoticed, we get used to looking at the world through the same glasses repeatedly.

Selective attention means that we never perceive our environment and ourselves completely. We always *select* (= choose) certain particularly important, significant, or foregrounded parts of our field of perception. Others play only a subordinate role or are not perceived at all.

The effect of social perception finally answers why people get used to very different ways of taking in information (= adaptation) and perceive very different stimuli (= selective attention). The reason is that they have different life experiences, bring different imprints, and are confronted with different social environments.

All in all, adaptation, selective attention, and social perception are responsible for the fact that each person is *used* to perceiving the world very *differently* because of his or her *social conditioning*. One person may be used to looking very much at the appearance of others, another person may be more interested in the actions of others, a third may be interested in the way or what someone talks about, and a fourth in the way someone moves.

Based on this information, consider how the three mechanisms of perception presented here are reflected in the examples you invented yourself earlier.

### 3.3 Polarisation in perception (apply knowledge) - 75min

In the last task, you learned about the effects of *adaptation*, *selective attention*, and *social perception*. Now we want to consider how these effects can be a ground for the emergence of polarisation and what can be done about it.

#### Practical Relevance

Act! Now form groups of at least three people. Invent a fictitious situation and a fictitious role for each pupil. The situation should show that each person has different perceptions of this situation, leading to conflicts (e.g., in a discussion about a film, politics, or a famous person). Think about this:

- How do these different perceptions come about?
- What different life experiences and social conditions might lead to one person perceiving something or someone differently than another (= social perception)?
- Why does the person prioritise certain information and ignore others (= selective attention)?
- What things is she perhaps used to through her life and therefore perceives something or someone in a certain way (= adaptation)?

To do this, you must think about a short biography for each of your fictional roles. Get to know your character and think about how and what might have shaped her perception of the world. Has she perhaps experienced certain things? In what circumstances did she grow up? What are her likes and dislikes? How is all this reflected in the situation you have invented? You can also create an avatar for your role with an avatar maker online in the browser.

Take enough time and then act out the situation in class. It does not have to last longer than 2-3 minutes. Alternatively, you can write down the dialogue between the roles and read it out to the class. Try to portray a conflict that arises based on different perceptions.

When all the performances are done, return to your seats.

#### Practical Relevance

Now discuss the following question: How can such conflicts lead to polarisation, i.e., consolidating division and separation among people? And more importantly, realising that the effects of adaptation, selective attention, and social perception work on all of us, how could we still prevent conflicts from arising?

Collect your ideas in class, write them down, and create a poster.

### 3.4 Intelligence and Polarisation (Building Knowledge) - 60min

A complex and, for many people, a susceptible factor of the human psyche is intelligence.

#### Practical Relevance

For a few minutes, gather your ideas in class about what intelligence actually consists of. What do you think is a sign of intelligence?

You may have formulated very different answers to the questions above. That is only natural because it is not so easy to define intelligence once and for all. That is precisely what can lead to polarisation. Why?

In psychology, it is better not to speak of "intelligence" but of certain "concepts of intelligence." This means that what is considered *intelligent* depends very much on the requirements of certain situations. Intelligence, therefore, follows different concepts. In one case, it can be regarded as intelligent to be able to drive a car; in another, this ability does not help at all, and it would be better to be able to start a fire, for example. In yet another, the person who can recognise and satisfy the needs of a child is intelligent. In yet another, it is the person who can solve a mathematical problem.

The fact that intelligence has so many possible definitions has led psychologists to develop a critical model. This is because we usually tend to label certain abilities as intelligent rather than others. However, this categorises people strongly and divides them into groups between "more intelligent" and "less intelligent." This can result in certain advantages and disadvantages for people in life.

#### Practical Relevance

Discuss in class which concepts of intelligence are prevalent in our society and which get little attention. Also, research it on the internet, if necessary, and look at different intelligence tests. What is expected of them? What is not considered? Talk about how focusing on certain concepts of intelligence and neglecting others also affect the treatment of people and their life possibilities. Collect your ideas and record them in class.

Concepts of intelligence are thus a way of emphasising certain qualities in human coexistence and relegating others to the background. This also reduces people to certain abilities that are considered relevant.



### Practical Relevance

Develop presentations on areas of life where certain concepts of intelligence can lead to polarisation, i.e., how can polarisation be promoted by forcing certain concepts of intelligence on people? What conflicts can this lead to? What would need to be done to resolve this? Consider, for example, that in society, someone is considered very intelligent to manage a company successfully, but it gets little recognition if someone raises their own children to be good people. What concept of intelligence is dominant here and which is neglected?

Design your presentation so that you can give it to others at your school because a school is also a place where certain concepts of intelligence are used, and others are neglected. Start a discussion beyond your class. Involve teachers as well.

The following consideration could help you: in psychology, there is the term w.e.i.r.d. with regard to intelligence. This means that what we understand by intelligence are primarily the abilities of people who live in *Western, educated, industrialised, rich democratic* life contexts. I.e., the abilities of people in the global West who are well-educated, technologically well-equipped, affluent, and democratically educated. Therefore, also ask yourselves what concepts of intelligence follow these preconditions and what alternative ideas might exist in the world.

### 3.5 Prejudice education (building knowledge) - 40min

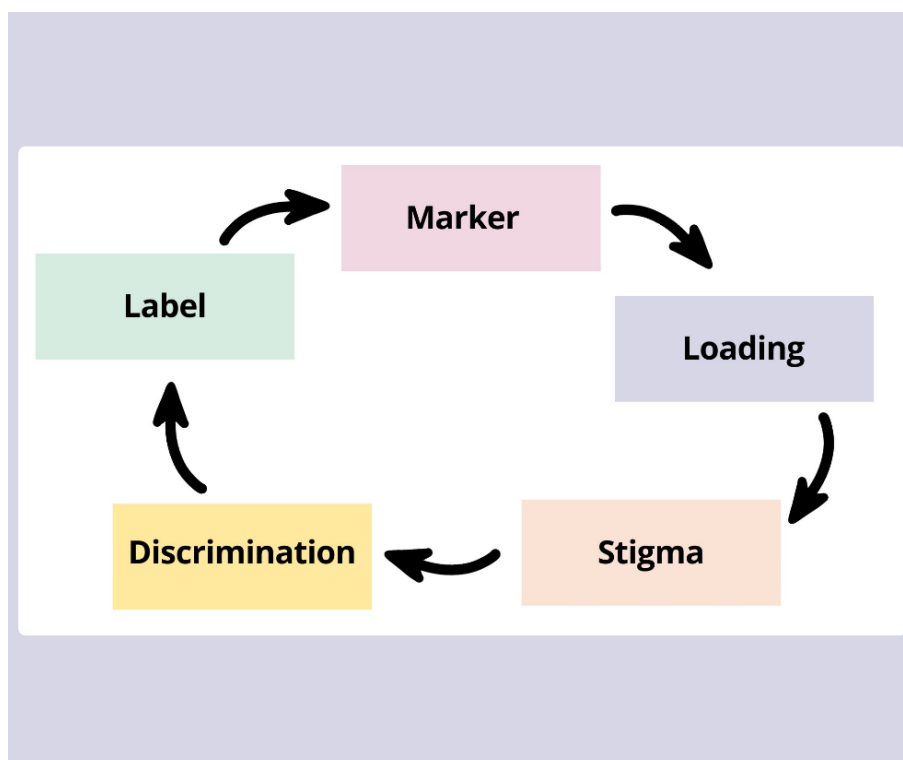
Polarisation arises psychologically when we make social judgements in a certain way. Social judgements are statements about our attitudes towards others and how we evaluate their behaviour. The way we treat other people is very often based on these social judgements.

### Practical Relevance

First, collect typical social judgements in the class that you can think of from your school life. Consider that every class has a certain reputation, for example. A "bad class," a "quiet class," a "good class," and so on. Collect such examples and ask each other how these judgements come about and how such judgements can already contribute to possible polarisation among people.

Perhaps you have already discovered in your discussion that social judgements are often based on preconceived *prejudices* against certain people. Prejudices arise from a specific psychological mechanism, which you will learn about. Take a look at the following diagram:

This is a so-called *prejudice spiral* based on the work of different psychologists. The idea is straightforward but very insightful:



Our social judgements always begin with the setting of so-called *markers*. This means that we highlight certain perceptions, observations, or impressions that we have of other people. This can be, for example, the voice, the way of moving, certain behaviours, and so on. We then focus our perception of other people on these markers.

This process is called *loading*. This means that we load our perception with individual markers and leave out other things about the perceived person. This creates a reduced image of the person.

We then transfer this reduced image to other people on whom we notice the same *markers*. This creates a *stigma*, i.e., an actual prejudice. We then think, for example, "All people who have a similar way of moving are like the person I originally perceived that way." - Such stigmas can arise *unconsciously*.

Based on the stigmata, we then begin to treat people. This then means *discrimination*; we divide them into categories and groups and disadvantage or favour them.

### Important

There is both negative and positive discrimination. We can also favour or treat people particularly well out of prejudice, not just disadvantage them. Ask yourselves for examples of where and how positive discrimination occurs.



Discrimination ultimately leads to the disadvantage or preference of certain people based on our prejudices. This is where an effect that is called a *label* in psychology becomes active. Psychologically, a *label* means that people begin to accept the behaviour attributed to them if it is only attributed to them often and strongly enough. They thus begin to be perceived in their behaviour according to the discriminatory labels, then behave accordingly and are scented even more strongly accordingly. This is one part of the spiral of prejudice.

The other part is the *label's* effect on people's social judgement because a *label* leads people to ascribe to themselves the right to label others again. Because from their point of view, the others have always started it. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant to people. If there is a feeling of having been discriminated against and labelled, people will often label and discriminate back. So, the spiral goes on and on, consolidating people's social prejudices, acts of discrimination and labels. This is what polarisation is ultimately based on.

### Practical Relevance

With this knowledge, look again at the above diagram of the spiral of prejudice. In class, find two examples from your own life to illustrate and record (on the board, a poster, etc.) the gradual progression of the spiral.

### Important

Given the spiral of prejudice, one might think that social judgement should be rejected altogether. But psychologically, of course, it has its important function. Since social judgements serve as a filter that helps us grasp the world around us more quickly and better deal with it, mistakes and prejudices always arise in the process, and polarisation can result from them. Therefore, it is advisable to always question one's own social judgements critically.

## 3.6 Faces of the Spiral of Prejudice (Apply Knowledge) - 80min

Social prejudices are based on a complex mechanism called the *prejudice spiral*. You learned about it in the previous task. Now we want to apply this theoretical concept.

### Practical Relevance

Now form several groups in the class. Each group chooses a life topic in which we often and frequently deal with prejudices. Examples that can help you are gender, language, culture, age, intelligence, poverty, professions, health, ...

Each group prepares a questionnaire of 5-10 questions to ask others in the class and, if you wish, about students and teachers beyond the class. Formulate your questions in such a way that you ask the others about their known prejudices regarding your topic, their own or observed experiences, and their thoughts on this issue.

After that, you research your topic more online on common prejudices and forms of discrimination.

From the combination of questionnaires and research, you will then make and give a presentation to the class about your findings.

Pay close attention to the results of the individual groups, as you will be asked to compare them after all the presentations have been completed. What recurring patterns can you identify in different forms of prejudice? What differences can you see? Collect your observations.

### ***3.7 Reduce prejudices (apply knowledge) - 30min***

Prejudices can develop in virtually every area of life, ultimately leading to conflict, division, and polarisation. The spiral structure of prejudice is responsible for this. This means prejudices that are acted out, in turn, lead to more prejudices.

Therefore, the question arises: what can people do to nip polarisation in the bud, namely in the formation of prejudice?

First of all, freedom from prejudice is impossible. It is itself a great prejudice that we could achieve a state without prejudice. But that does not mean that we are defenceless against our prejudices. We can deal with them reflectively and thus protect ourselves from polarisation dynamics.

Prejudices arise primarily because people already feel prejudices to which they are exposed. The effect of "the others have it first" is then used as justification to build up negative or positive prejudices against others. Often, this spiral begins when one feels victimised by the prejudices of others (whether justified or not is irrelevant; what matters is how we feel).

Therefore, we can contribute to reducing prejudice by being clear about our victim attributions and asking ourselves: where do I feel that someone is prejudiced against me? Then one can ask whether this feeling is justified, on what grounds or experiences it is based, and how it influences my behaviour and reactions to others.

### Practical Relevance

Write a short diary entry just for yourself in which you consider the following:

- Where do I feel like a victim of prejudice, disadvantage, or disparagement?
- How do these feelings guide my actions in everyday life, especially when it comes to imposing prejudice on others?
- Who or what could help me to deal better with my victim's feelings?

This text stays only with you. You don't have to share your thoughts with anyone. It is much more important that you are honest with yourself.

### 3.8 Peer pressure and polarisation (building knowledge) - 30min



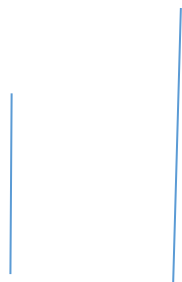
When polarisation occurs between people, group dynamics usually play a decisive role. Majorities and minorities can form, and polarities can occur between them. A critical factor in this is peer pressure. Peer pressure occurs when a majority of people exert pressure on some or individuals in some way to influence their actions.

### Practical Relevance

Peer pressure can take on many different faces. It does not even have to be perceived as unpleasant because the expected behaviour is often *rewarded* by the group, and in this way, *positive pressure* is exerted.

Record 5-10 examples in which peer pressure can be negative or positive in partner work and joint discussions. Compare your results with the class.

Psychologist Solomon Asch also studied peer pressure. He designed a simple but expressive experiment for this, which is named after him. Asch set up the following arrangement, which is simplified a little for our purposes: a group of people is led into a room. On a blackboard in this room, there are two lines.



The group is informed in advance about the experiment's aim: to get another person not yet in the room to say that the left line is longer than the right line. Then this new person is led to the group, and the experiment begins. Different paths can be taken, the experiment conducted differently, and different arguments tried out. The key here is: to get the individual to agree against their own perception that the shorter line is actually the longer one.

#### Practical Relevance

Discuss in class what methods the group and the experimenter could use to ultimately force the person to speak against their own perception. The aim is not that the person really perceives the shorter line as the longer one. It is enough if she agrees with the group against her better knowledge. What methods could be used to achieve this (think of negative, positive methods, persuasion attempts, punishments, rewards, ...).

Many people tend to go along with the group at some point, even if they disagree inside. Following your discussion, consider what can be learned from Asch's experiment about the power of peer pressure and how this can contribute to polarisation among people.

Variation: a variation in class could be that you play through and analyse the experiment in a simplified version with an uninitiated person.

### 3.9 Authority and Polarisation (Building Knowledge) - 30min

Another psychologically decisive factor that promotes polarisation between people is authority. Those who have authority over other people have the necessary influence over them to make them act in certain ways. This circumstance can be conducive to polarisation when authority is used to diffuse division, conflict, and hostility between people. This happens mainly by increasing their willingness to divide from each other.

The psychologist Stanley Milgram studied how the mechanisms of authority make people inflict suffering on each other. Particularly well-known is the experimental set-up known as the *Milgram Experiment*.



In simplified terms, the Milgram experiment was about the subjects being able to administer electric shocks to other people via a fictitious, in reality, non-functioning machine. These other people are actors who are instructed to pretend to feel pain when the subject presses the button. The actors were also instructed to make their performances more and more dramatic. At the same time, the experimenters kept reassuring the subjects who pressed the button and instructed them to keep going and increase the volts. They also said the subjects attached to the machine agreed to go extreme. Many of the subjects went very far with the fictitious electric shocks. In the beginning, hardly anyone questioned the instruction to administer electric shocks to other people.

Milgram, therefore, asked himself: Why not?

### Practical Relevance

You should also ask yourselves this question in class. You can also form groups of three and re-enact the experiment. Try to think about what the experimenter could say to the person pressing the button to motivate them further. Also, try to work out and write down what might be going on in the person pressing the button.

You then discuss your findings in class. Why do you think people did not initially question that they should administer electric shocks to others here? What does authority have to do with it?

### 3.10 Enemy images and polarisation (building knowledge) - 30min

The psychology of enemy images is also related to peer pressure and authority, which the last two exercises dealt with. Enemy images are ideas about certain people or groups of people that are perceived as a threat. These threats can be manifold. People can feel threatened by other people, for example, in terms of their interests, wealth, goals, and social groups.



Enemy images can always arise. But some conditions encourage their emergence more than others.

#### Practical Relevance

Either in class or in groups, create a mind map together. What factors and conditions contribute to the emergence of enemy stereotypes (e.g., life circumstances, social conditions, or personal aspects)? How do enemy images contribute to polarisation? Also, record the mind map in your own notes.

The following factors are a breeding ground for enemy stereotypes, especially when peer pressure and authority are added to the mix. You have probably already found some of them in your mind map:

- Poverty, social hardship, and difficult living conditions
- Fear or the feeling of being threatened, disadvantaged, or misunderstood.
- Loneliness, lack of self-confidence, marginalization
- Lack of self-reflection and manipulability
- Needs for advantages, privileges, or profit
- Existing or forced conflict situations (e.g., the others took something from me)
- The desire for strength, violence, or domination
- Pressure to perform, peer pressure, complacency
- Strangeness, unfamiliarity, depersonalization
- Needs for belonging and an ordered world
- ...

You see, the list is long and can be extended. People can polarise themselves into enemies for all kinds of reasons.

### Practical Relevance

Look carefully at the list above and discuss each point. Add to your mind map if anything is missing, and add new ideas if you have any.

Afterward, as a class, consider the following in joint discussion settings of different kinds: what would we have to do in order not to dismantle enemy images that have already arisen - because that is very difficult - but to defuse the conditions from which the enemy images arise? Where should we start as a society? Where can each and every individual make his or her contribution? Write down your results and add examples. You can also research on the internet.

### ***3.11 Reduce peer pressure, authority, and enemy stereotypes (apply knowledge)*** - 140min

We have already started the last task to ask about dismantling enemy images. Now we want to ask the question more comprehensively and clarify how we must deal with peer pressure, authority, and enemy images as a reason for polarisation. Because when polarisation occurs, it is often challenging to do anything about it directly. Therefore, it is crucial that we recognise it as it arises and deal with it.

So we are starting a polarisation reduction project at your school. To do this, divide into several teams. Each team will complete a 10-question survey. This survey must be anonymous for the data to be valuable. The questions should ask about experiences with polarising peer pressure, polarising authority, and polarising enemy images in the respondents' lives.

Team 1: The first team is the Polarisation at School team. You will interview both students and teachers about their experiences of polarisation with regard to peer pressure, authority, and enemy stereotypes in the living space "school."

Team 2: The second team is the Leisure Team. You ask everyone who wants to participate about their experiences with polarisation in the living space "leisure time." This can mean, for example, in clubs, a circle of friends, or everyday life.

Team 3: The third team is the Internet team. You ask about experiences with polarisation in the online sphere. Think about social media, chats, website comment functions, media reports, etc.

The three teams work out their ten questions each, design them into an anonymous questionnaire and then conduct the survey. Ask your teachers to help you design a meaningful survey and formulate the questions appropriately so that they yield usable data - it's not that easy.

Once you have analysed your surveys, make a presentation on the results and present it either to the class or even to the whole school. After the presentation, you start a discussion about measures that can be taken to reduce the breeding ground for polarisation.

### ***3.12 Catalogue of measures (secure knowledge) - 20min***

Together, write down a small catalogue of measures that includes recommendations on what each individual in the school can do to combat polarisation. Present this catalogue to your school for further discussion.



The catalogue should be short and concise and contain a list of recommendations, each justified by a maximum of one paragraph. Divide into groups so that each group can focus on one measure. In the end, bring all the measures together.

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