

THE NATURE OF RACE PREJUDICE*

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When one views the recent and present relations between races in different parts of the world he must necessarily be impressed by the magnitude, the tenacity, and the apparent spontaneity of racial prejudice. That it is exceedingly common can scarcely be denied. That it may persist as a chronic attitude over decades of time can be shown by several instances. That it may emerge immediately in new contacts between races can be easily documented, especially in the contacts of whites with other ethnic groups. Indeed, so impressive is its extensiveness, persistency, and apparent spontaneity that many students regard it as inevitable. They believe that it arises from some simple biological tendency--such as an innate aversion of race to race--which is bound to express itself and to dominate race relations.

Interestingly enough, the actual facts of race relations force us to adopt a very different view. For, frequently, racial prejudice may not appear in racial contacts; if present, it may disappear; or, although present, it may not dominate the relations. Instead of thinking of racial prejudice as an invariant and simple matter it must be viewed as a highly variable and complex phenomenon. This is shown, first of all, by the markedly differing character of race relations themselves. There are many instances where members of divergent races may associate in the most amiable and free fashion, intermarrying and erecting no ethnic barriers between them. In other instances there may prevail rigid racial exclusion supported by intense attitudes of discrimination.

Between these extremes there may be other forms of association. Further, the history of any fairly prolonged association between any two ethnic groups usually does not show the continuous existence of any fixed or invariant relation. Instead the association and the attitudes which sustain it usually pass through a variety of form. The markedly differing and variable nature of race relations should make it clear that racial prejudice is not inevitable or bound to dominate the relations. Even though it be very common and very tenacious it must be recognized as merely one form of ethnic relation. It must or may not be present; and even where present, it usually arises inside of a temporal sequence of relations.

Even more important is the realization that racial prejudice is highly variable itself. Instead of always having the same form, nature, and intensity, it may differ a great deal from time to time and from place to place. A comparison of instances of racial prejudice shows that it may differ in intensity, in quality of feeling, in the views by which it is supported, and in manifestation. The prejudice of the American southerner toward the Negro may be great, but it is recognized by many as being less than that of the South Africa white toward his colored neighbors. The attitude of prejudice of the gentile toward the Jew has varied in intensity and form from locality to locality and from time to time. Ethnic prejudice may be bitter in one situation and mild in another. The fact that we generally speak of an increase or decrease of prejudice points to its variability. Thus, while prejudice is very real and obtrusive, and while it is permissible to treat it as a type phenomenon, recognition must be taken of its changeable and differing character.

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The fact that prejudice is not a constant accompaniment of race relations, and that it is variable in its nature, indicates that it is a product of certain kinds of situations and experiences. Two problems are immediately suggested: (1) what are the situations which give rise to racial prejudice, and (2) what experiences account for the variation in its nature and form. Before discussing these two problems it is advisable to consider briefly the nature of race prejudice and point out some of the features by which it is usually identified.

Racial prejudice always exists as a group prejudice directed against another group. This means two important things: (1) it exists as a collective or shared attitude, and (2) it is directed toward a conceptualized group or abstract category. Each of these two features requires some explanation. Race prejudice is a collective or shared attitude in the sense that it is held by a number of people, who stimulate one another in the expression of the attitude. Through this form of interaction they build up, sustain, and reinforce the attitude in one another. Through conversation, through the observation of one another's actions, through relating one's experiences, through the expression of one's feelings and emotions before others, through circulating tales, stories and myths, the members of an ethnic group come to build up a common or collectively shared attitude. This shared character of the attitude of racial prejudice raises the interesting question as to how far the attitude is shaped by the inter-transmission of experience rather than by direct contact with the group toward which the attitude is directed. All that needs to be indicated here is that its character will differ in accordance with what enters into these collective experiences.

In speaking of race prejudice as directed toward a "conceptualized group" or abstract category, all that is meant is that the object toward which it is directed represents a classification of individuals and so is an abstract category inside of which we conceptually arrange individuals. For example, we may speak of prejudice against the Jew, the Negro, or the Oriental; in these cases, the Jew, the Negro, and the Oriental stand respectively for certain large classifications or categories in which we conceptually arrange people. The prejudice exists as an attitude toward the classification or is built up around the conceptualized object which stands for the classification. Or, paradoxically, we may say that the prejudice exists as an attitude toward what is logically an abstraction.¹ The prejudice is manifested against a specific individual by identifying the individual with the conceptualized object and then directing towards him the attitude that one has toward the conceptualized object. Thus one may identify an individual as being a Negro, and thus be led to direct towards him the attitude that one has toward the Negro. If a Negro successfully disguises himself (as by wearing a turban which gives him the appearance of being a Hindu) so that he is not detected or classified as a Negro, he will escape the attitude which is held toward the Negro. Perhaps all this is obvious; but it is important to recognize that racial prejudice is directed toward a conceptualized object, and that individuals come to bear the brunt of this prejudice to the extent to which they are identified with the conceptualized object.

The two features which we have just discussed--the fact that the attitude is a product of collective experience, and that it is directed toward

¹This point is of considerable importance because where the object of a group attitude is an abstraction it is possible to build up toward it very weird and extreme notions which may vary widely from the facts of concrete experience.

a conceptualized object--are intimately interrelated. Generally we may say (a) that the content of the collective experience determines the form and nature of the conceptualized object, and (b) that the conceptualized object becomes a framework inside of which collective experience may take place. Let us explain each of these two statements. With reference to the first statement it should be pointed out, first of all, that the content of collective experience of one group will determine what classifications they will make of other peoples and so what conceptualized objects they will build up. This gives to the conceptualized objects a somewhat arbitrary character. Thus the American gentile will ordinarily have a concept of the Jew which takes no recognition of the keen conceptual differentiations that the Jews are liable to make among themselves, such as between Spanish Jews, German Jews, Russian Jews, or Polish Jews. Or the American white may conceive the Negro as consisting of individuals who have any trace of Negro ancestry, whereas what the Frenchman means by the Negro is likely to be a very much narrower group. Many other instances could be given; but the illustrations will suffice to show that the particular classifications which are made or which are selected out may vary considerably. The variation seems to be due to the differences of group experience. Not only is the form of the conceptualized object determined by collective experience but the way in which the object is conceived is determined by this experience. This should be self evident. Southern whites with their experiences during slavery and following the civil war formed a conception of the Negro which was necessarily different from that developed by the whites in Brazil, where the line of experience was significantly different.

While the conceptualized object is formed, shaped, and colored by the experiences of the group, it is equally true that the conceptualized object orders, directs and constrains the experiences of the group. So we come to explain statement (b) mentioned above. When a concept of an ethnic group is formed and that group is conceived in a certain way, the concept and the conception will influence to a large extent the kind of experiences that people will have in their association with members of that ethnic group. They will subject this association to the form and framework that is laid down by their concept and conceptions of the ethnic group; accordingly, the kind of experiences they have with members of another ethnic group is largely coerced by this frame work. The southern white in his contact with a Negro acts toward him on the basis of a pretty fixed conception that he has of him, expects from him a certain kind of behavior, is sensitized to perceive certain actions, is prepared to interpret these actions in well-defined ways, and is ready to respond emotionally in a fixed manner. This will suggest how the conceptualized object which is had of a race may largely predetermine the collective experiences that come from association with members of that race. Reasons will be given later to suggest why this predetermination of experience by the conceptualized object may become rigid and extreme, and under what conditions it may be slight and malleable. Here it is sufficient merely to point out that collective experience and conceptualization interact to control one another, and to suggest that this mutual control may become so tight that they become essentially one, or their natures identical.

The experiences of ethnic group A with ethnic group B, built up as they are largely in terms of the interaction inside of group A, will reflect themselves in the conception which group A has of group B; this conception will largely control the nature of the experiences which the members of group A have with group B, and the way in which they digest these experiences in their interaction with one another. The history of race prejudice is a history of the interaction between concept and experience. This

is what is involved, then, in the statement that race prejudice is a case of prejudice of one group against another group.²

It is time now to consider what is peculiar to the attitude of racial prejudice--what distinguishes it from other kinds of racial attitudes. The usual tendency is to regard this attitude as simple or unitary, as if it were made up of a single feeling such as dislike or hatred. Such a view, however, is impossible and cannot be squared with facts. Admittedly, the chief feeling in racial prejudice is usually a feeling of dislike or an impulse of aversion; but it is a mistake to regard such a feeling or impulse as the only one, or even necessarily always the main one. Instead, racial prejudice is made up of a variety of feelings and impulses which in different situations enter into the attitude in differing combinations and differing proportions. Hatred, dislike, resentment, distrust, envy, fear, feelings of obligation, possessive impulses, secret curiosities, sexual interest, destructive impulses, guilt--these are some of the feelings and impulses which may enter into racial prejudice and which in their different combinations give it a differing character. Some of these feelings and impulses may be vivid and easily identified; others are obscure; and still others may be present without their presence been realized. We are forced, I think, to realize that the attitude of racial prejudice is constituted and sustained by a variety of impulses and feelings; and that it gets its peculiar complexion from the peculiar nature of these impulses and feelings. In this way we can account for the differences in racial prejudice that have already been mentioned. The impulses and feelings that come to be embodied in a given instance of racial prejudice have been induced and shaped by the past and present experiences of the given ethnic group. From this point of view we can regard race prejudice as a medium for the expression of various feelings and impulses, some of which may be the consequence of experiences that have no reference to the group against which the prejudice is manifested.

The complexity of the constituent and sustaining elements of an attitude of race prejudice makes it difficult to explain exhaustively the experiences and situations that give rise to racial prejudice. Yet, certain of the more important lines of origin can be pointed out. One of them, undoubtedly, is the general ethnocentrism of groups, showing itself in some aversion to strange and peculiar ways of living, and in a feeling of the inherent superiority of one's own group. There seems to be little doubt that many actions of a strange and alien group may appear uncouth and sometimes repulsive and lead to the formation of an unfavorable impression which may come to be built up into a collective attitude. Such an attitude because it springs from the perception of actions which seem to be offensive and occasionally disgusting may get rooted in the antipathies of people. In addition the general feeling of the superiority of one's own group leads easily to the tendency to disparage other groups, to discriminate against them, and to take advantage of them. There seems to be little doubt that ethnocentrism, in these two phases, is a primitive tendency of group life; as such it must be reckoned with as a nucleus around which an attitude of racial prejudice may develop. And the greater the ethnocentrism, the greater is the likelihood that it may lead to group prejudice. Something

²It is clear that whether an individual generalizes his distasteful or thwarting experiences into an attitude or prejudice against a group depends largely on the presence of conceptualized objects in his culture. An American white may have highly distasteful experiences with one or several red-headed people; he is very unlikely to develop an attitude of prejudice against the "red-head", because in American culture there is no conceptualization of the "red-head" which would encourage this.

of this is to be seen in the frequency with which racial prejudice appears among expanding imperialistic peoples.

Yet, however important ethnocentrism may be as a factor in racial prejudice, it does not seem to be the decisive factor. Of more importance is what amounts to a primitive tribal tendency in the form of fear of an attack, or displacement, or of annihilation. This is suggested by the nature of the situations where racial prejudice is usually most pronounced and serious. Racial prejudice is usually most acute in a social situation which has the following characteristics.

- 1) The two ethnic groups live together in some degree. The subordinate ethnic group is accepted to some extent, in the sense that it is associated with an depended upon by the dominant ethnic group. The relation between the two groups may be one of mere accommodation or symbiosis, but in any event, the two groups live together inside of a common territory as parts of a unitary society.
- 2) The acceptance of the subordinate ethnic group, however, is limited and involves various kinds of exclusion and discrimination. There are certain privileges and opportunities which its members are regarded as not being entitled to. In this sense, the subordinate ethnic group is assigned to an inferior status or, is frequently said, it is expected to keep to a certain place.

The same kind of experiences with Negroes might easily lead him to form a prejudiced attitude against the Negro; in this instance the form of conceptualization would easily permit and justify such a generalization of experience. Further, even if one does develop an attitude of prejudice against a conceptualized group built up out of his own experience it is likely to be weak and ineffective unless shared by his fellows. One is largely sustained in his attitude by the reinforcement which he gets from his fellows.

- 3) The dominant ethnic group has a fear that the subordinate group is not keeping to its place but threatens to claim the opportunities and privileges from which it has been excluded. As such, it is sensed and felt as a threat to the status, security, and welfare of the dominant ethnic group.

It is in a social situation with these three features that racial prejudice seems to have its primary setting. As the saying goes, as long as the subordinate ethnic group keeps to its place, prejudice toward it is at a minimum. Indications of getting out of its place are felt by the dominant ethnic group as an attack and invoke primitive feelings of tribal protection and preservation. Some of the areas of exclusion have a particularly strong symbolic significance, so that entrance into such areas is an especially acute sign of what is felt to be unwarranted and dangerous aggression and attack. Unaccustomed economic competition ranks high here; also entrance into the more intimate sphere of exclusion. What adds peculiarity to this feeling of being attacked is the fact that the dominant and subordinate ethnic groups, as mentioned above, are usually living together. This means that the attack seems to come from an "inner-enemy;" the resulting apprehension seems to be of peculiar complexity--more abiding, more perplexing, more worrisome and more unstable. The fact that the threatening group must be accepted yields an anomalous and instable character to the feelings of apprehension.

The greater the threat which is felt, the great is likely to be the prejudice. The size of the subordinate ethnic group, its degree of militancy,

its degree of clannishness, and the extent of its claims are factors which are likely to determine the extent of the threat. On the side of the dominant ethnic group, the degree of ethnocentrism, the degree of tribal solidarity, the rigidity of the idea of its own status, and the tightness of the lines of exclusion which it lays down are factors which increase the likelihood of its construing actions as an attack upon it.

The foregoing discussion should make clear the general character of racial prejudice and the lines along which it is formed. If ethnic contacts are attended by feelings of ethnocentrism, and if the ethnic group in the dominant position feels that its common status is insecure and is under the threat of an attack by a subordinate ethnic group, prejudice seems to be the inevitable result. Ethnocentrism helps to set and sustain patterns of social exclusion. Failure to observe these patterns by the excluded group are felt as threats and attacks to tribal status, security, and welfare. Feelings of aversion, fear, and hostility--all more or less in a state of suspension--seems to be the result.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the formation of racial prejudice is not an immediate or inevitable matter but that, instead, it is a product of collective experience, and is dependent upon the extent to which this collective experience fits the conditions which have been specified. The initial conditions of ethnic contact may or may not be conducive to the development of racial prejudice; if the framework of ethnocentrism is not laid down along ethnic lines, racial prejudice is not likely to get started. (As in the case of the early expansion of Mohammedanism which, while involving extensive ethnic contacts, was organized on the basis of religious ethnocentrism and gave rise to religious prejudices.) Further, the incidents of experience in the association between ethnic groups may or may not lead a dominant group to feel that it is being threatened.

When specific instances of racial prejudice are traced through it will usually be found that the prejudice has followed upon a series of experiences or incidents which are resented by a dominant ethnic group and construed as affronts, unwarranted aggressions and attacks--usually as signs of a possibly more abiding and more threatening attack. The history of race prejudice could be written (and would have to be written) in terms of such incidents, especially the more exciting ones. For it is such incidents that stir people, arouse feelings, and initiate that interchange of experience that we can speak of metaphorically as a process of collective digestion. Such collective experiences yield the new meaning and content that become fused into the "conceptualized object" which the one ethnic group has made of the other. Since these collective experiences are an outgrowth of primitive and deep seated feelings, it is not surprising that the conceptualized object becomes emotional and fixed in nature, and that in acquiring such a form it exercises a coercive control over subsequent collective experience.³ A social situation favoring (and attended by) a run of incidents, especially of a critical nature, which make a dominant ethnic group feel that its position is being jeopardized and its security seriously threatened easily conduces to tenacious racial prejudice. A very powerful complex of

³It should be realized that an attitude of racial prejudice, once formed, is transportable. It may be brought into a situation where it has not previously existed; or communicated to those whose own experiences have not given rise to it; in this way, racial prejudice may occur in situations which do not have the features which we have been discussing.

feelings and sentiments may develop, under the influence of collective experience, and become fused into the conceptualized image of an ethnic group.⁴

It is not surprising that the attitude of racial prejudice should become deeper embedded in the individual as the collective feeling becomes more intense and the conceptualized object more emotionally forbidding. It may even get deeply rooted in the individual's antipathies so that the individual's organism rebels at even the thought of entering into certain kinds of relations--especially intimate touch relations--with members of the other ethnic group. Such antipathies seem to be in the nature of strong defense reactions which seem to be symbolic of the collective feelings of exclusiveness and fear of invasion. Indeed, although it might seem incredible, the primitive feeling of tribal preservation may become transferred to the antipathies so that some of them become more important than existence itself. The Southern whites would probably prefer the thought of annihilation to the thought of their women becoming the consorts of Negroes.

The analysis of racial prejudice which has been made should throw some light on the viciousness of behavior in which racial prejudice may at times express itself, and on the ease with which it may become a scape goat mechanism. Since the attitude of prejudice is rooted in a primitive feeling of tribal preservation and may, under the influence of historical experience, become highly symbolical of such a tribal position, it is not surprising that in response to a critical incident, it might express itself in vicious and brutal behavior. Deep rooted fears, restrained and simmering hatreds, strong defense feelings, and strongly felt antipathies may all gain an expression at such a time. Indeed, many other feelings and impulses which enter into the structure of the attitude--especially the more unconscious ones--may gain expression at this time. (It is well to remember, as stated previously, that a variety of impulses and feelings may enter into the attitude of racial prejudice as a result of the collective experiences of the group.)

Light is also thrown on the ease with which racial prejudice may become a scape goat mechanism. Mention has already been made of the fact that the interexchanging of experience between members of an ethnic group may be more influential in the formation of their attitude than actual experience with the group toward which prejudice is developed. This makes ample room for the development of myths and for the focussing on a given race of feelings that have nothing intrinsically to do with it. In this way the attitude toward an ethnic group may come to be the carrier of feelings

⁴It is appropriate to note that the conditions that give rise to prejudice may likewise give rise to prejudice in other kinds of groups. Many instances are provided in American history, especially in the case of European immigrant groups. Usually, such groups were regarded as inferior by the native whites; their effort to improve their economic and social position was frequently regarded as undue encroachment and as a threat pressing themselves in discrimination and occasionally in violence. What is of crucial significance in such instances, as students have frequently noted, is that members of such a group which is incurring prejudice, in not being ethnically distinct, may avoid much prejudice and move into other groups. Group prejudice is difficult to maintain under such conditions; Where prejudice arises against people who are racially distinct and recognizable, the prejudice is more persistent and less easily escaped. This seems to be the chief reason for the greater tenacity of race prejudice as against other forms of group prejudice.

and impulses aroused in other areas of experience. This can be done with special ease in the case of race prejudice, since the ethnic group is sensed as an "inner enemy", as a more or less persistent threat to vital security and existence. At times of critical distress, disturbance, or calamity it is easy to hold it responsible for the insecurity and woes that are experienced.

Before ending the discussion, some attention may be given to the interesting problem of the breaking down of racial prejudice. First of all, it should be noted again that racial prejudice is not inevitable in ethnic contacts. Racial prejudice may not even appear; or if it does appear, it may not take root; or, if it does take root, it may not grow. All depends upon the nature of the social situation and upon the incidents which occur; for these will influence the collective experience of the group and the resulting conceptualizing of the racial object. In the association of races first of all, it is quite possible for people to classify one another on other bases than that of ethnic makeup in making their important group differentiations. In this event, the important group oppositions may easily cut across ethnic lines. This is to be seen historically in religious movements, in nationality opposition, and in some present day radical movements. Indeed, it might be declared that the widespread racial prejudice that exists in the world today is but a historical accident; that it is an expression of a historical epoch in which there is present at the same time heightened ethnocentrism on the part of groups that happen to be ethnically distinct, and a vast increase in contacts between such groups. Racial prejudice seems to have followed definitely in the swing toward modern nationalistic expansion. It may happen in the future, as it has at times in the past, that ethnic makeup will be of little meaning in the important group classifications that people make of one another, and consequently in the "tribal units" with which they identify themselves.

Where racial prejudice already exists, its disappearance or mitigation seems to turn on the condition that the subordinate ethnic group is no longer felt as a threat. This may be brought about in a number of ways. The subordinate ethnic group may keep fastly to an assigned status or to what the dominant group regards as its proper places; hence it is no longer felt as a threat. Or the subordinate group may retire into a segregated position, reducing its contacts with the dominant group, and building up a bilateral society. Both of these adjustments have gone on, and are going on today, in different parts of the world; but they seem to be only temporary appeasements--under modern conditions of communication and contact such adjustments can scarcely be expected to solidify or endure. The other way by which the subordinate group is no longer felt as a threat is by the dominant group changing its conceptualization of the subordinate groups, so that the group no longer is regarded as offensive and unacceptable. To the extent to which the group is regarded as acceptable and assimilable, to this extent it ceases to be regarded as a threat. Where the acceptance is full, the meaning of the original ethnic classification has disappeared.

Modern intentional efforts to break down racial prejudice are usually always along this third line, that is they try to change the idea which people of one race have toward another. We see this effort in the case of some churches, some educational agencies, and some humanitarian groups and individuals, all of whom try to point out the injustice and absurdity of a prevailing view of racial prejudice. The importance of such efforts is not to be minimized, but it is questionable whether they do have or can have much influence where racial prejudice is pronounced, or where the "conceptualized racial object" is strongly set. For the prejudice is certain to be rooted in the antipathies; and these do not change easily even though it be shown that the conceptualization is false and unjustifiable. Efforts to have members of different races appreciate their common human character

by entering into personal contact are likely to be more fruitful; for where people have an opportunity to identify themselves with one another and to learn each other's personal experiences, a collective conceptualization is difficult to maintain. But even such efforts are limited in possibility and run counter again to antipathies. Any profound change in antipathies is likely to come only as a result of a new body of collective experience built up either around new issues in which the ethnic factor is of no import, or based on a shift in the social scene (such as an extensive population change) in which races are brought into new forms of interdependency.

In closing this paper I wish merely to note that no discussion has been given in it to the topic of counter-prejudice--the defensive prejudice of the subordinate ethnic group against the dominant one. In many ways this counter-prejudice is more complicated, interesting and important than direct racial prejudice. It has been little studied.