

**PSYCHOLOGY
OF RACIAL PREJUDICE**

An Aspect of Mental Health

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The City of New York



COMMISSION ON INTERGROUP RELATIONS

The following is a reprint of an address by Dr. Alfred J. Marrow, Chairman, City of New York Commission on Intergroup Relations, delivered at the Annual Conference of the National Urban League, Omaha, Nebraska, September 9, 1958.

THE CHALLENGE of restoring mental health to our society is a much larger one than merely patching up a surface truce,—an uneasy *modus vivendi* between white and Negro in our North and South.

We've only to look at the headlines, with their scare stories of conflict and hate everywhere, on the international and local scene, to realize how sick our human relations are today. Probably things are no worse than they formerly were—history is an endless, tragic story of crimes, hateful passions, fierce dynastic and national rivalries.

But certainly we're still far short of our boast that we've attained "civilization." . . . Especially if we accept the 18th-century definition of "civilization" as a state in which men are "civil" to one another.

Today we are not civil. This is still a zany world in which a majority of the population is considered inferior by a minority, merely by racial or national identification. As a result, emotional havoc has been created for both the oppressed and the oppressor.

Therefore, parallel to exploring the mental health effects of segregation on its victims, we must also consider the health impact on the segregators as well. From the viewpoint of sound mental health, we must concern ourselves with the welfare of all citizens, even those with whom we disagree. Since the problem is, primarily psychological in nature, we must turn for guidance and help to the behavioral scientists.

But consider how inadequate is the number of psychologists, psychoanalysts, and psychiatrists of any kind in our society, and how limited is the range of their practice.

For example, an accredited psychoanalyst will treat about 300 patients during his lifetime. His contribution to society might be measured with an eye-dropper! If he had worked instead, in the schools or neighborhood, introducing methods of *preventing* neuroses rather than seeking to cure them, he might have been of help to fifty times or five hundred times as many children and adults. Instead he treats the already sick, and—even then—only the already sick who can afford expensive treatment.

Certainly this must change. There is a challenge and an urgent necessity for psychological experts to enter the social field, and for them to make their important contribution there. But, they must receive encouragement from the public, and especially from organizations like yours, to do so.

The public attitude toward psychological guidance and knowledge has been largely indifferent, or uninformed, and at times even hostile. All that is tragically foolish, and it too must be altered rapidly, for there is much to be done.

I intend to talk today about some methods of treating our sick societies afflicted by rampant social neuroses. For diagnosis and some possible forms of treatment we must turn primarily to the methods of "group dynamics"—the school of psychology that I helped establish and which offers a number of promising leads in this area.

Experiments and scientific observations have taught us that when people live and work together there is inevitably a dynamic interaction between them which creates strong forces to strengthen their traditional habits and practices and to oppose changes in their customary way of behaving.

The group takes on an identity and chooses goals that influence the attitudes and behavior of all its members. It changes their individual characters, their attitudes and their beliefs, and makes them, separately and together, agents for clearer benefits or greater evil. What we have then in group dynamics, if used correctly, is essentially an instrument for infinite good.

Lately there has been some advance toward the appreciation of psychological tools, and in rather unexpected places. Some people are beginning to realize that psychological insight need not be restricted to the laboratory or consulting room, or that psychological experiments need not be limited to white mice and sophomores. They can now be applied to the wide public, to the market-place.

So today we have "motivational research" under the aegis of the gentlemen in grey flannel suits, who inhabit Madison Avenue in New York. The motives of the advertising men themselves are not the most noble but the wisdom of their method cannot be denied.

They're setting about — scientifically — to learn why people buy things, or don't buy them. The advertising people are coming up with all sorts of findings to which common sense would never have led them because the findings just don't make sense.

The motivational researchers, recently labeled "the hidden persuaders", are learning that even the most rational consumers don't always act rationally. But motivational research is not — nor should be — limited to the exploitation of corn flakes and beer.

The Federal Reserve Bank in Washington, for example, has been using the services of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, to measure consumer intentions to save or spend. For more than 15 years their findings have proven to be exceedingly accurate in predicting business cycles.

Pre-testing, projective techniques, interviewing in depth, and other public pulse taking methods, have grown more and more prevalent in the business-world.

It is certainly too bad that this has been taking place on Madison Avenue, and in the industrial realm and in the TV network offices, but not where it is most needed, in the arena of community living, where social tensions and antagonisms prevail.

How much "attitude testing" do you suppose has been done in the South, or in the North for that matter, to determine the depth and direction of white and Negro attitudes.

In our current treatment of the explosive social phenomena in this country, I am reminded of the European physicians, who, during the last century and for centuries before, believed that they had found the cause of paresis, because they had observed that most of its victims were adventurous, outdoor-type men — largely sailors.

Ergo, the learned doctors concluded — and understandably on the basis of their observations — that paresis, the dreaded disease we now know is an advanced form of syphilis, was caused by over-exposure to the sun and salt water.

This may seem humorous to us today, but it is indeed tragic to observe that here in the 20th century, Americans are attempting to solve our most serious social problems, by telling each other in effect, "don't go near the water."

Changes in method and practice are needed. We see that. But "other" people don't. They are upset by the suggestion and strongly resist the changes we recommend.

Apprehension over what one's neighbors will think, what one's fellow-workers will think, what one's friends and relatives will say, is a potent factor. The tendency to conform to our group's way of acting is likely to be the dominant one in our present social climate. Our prejudices are often shared with others whom we respect, or whom we wish to respect us.

Hence resistance to change for this reason and many others.

Whatever the reason — or reasons — resistance to change is a psychological syndrome of great complexity which must always be fully considered by those who propose to initiate new practices or standards in any culture or sub-culture.

Some of our action centered friends are often too impatient to make allowance for this factor. Thus it is possible that these well-meaning friends of integration can unknowingly at times be responsible for delay.

This can happen, if in their zeal for action, they push forward without creating an atmosphere to reduce tension, anxiety and hate. This will invariably occur when they fail to utilize psychological tools that are available to ease the community pressures and relieve the interpersonal stresses that originally existed.

The barriers to wholesome intergroup relations — like icebergs — lie largely below the surface. And, when we attempt to cope with the rational, logical facade that is visible to us, we are frustrated. Appeals to reason or conscience have availed very little in practice.

For example, religious leaders — that is, the ordained clergy — have been among the foremost advocates of racial equality. Yet, in studies cited last year at the World Federation of Mental Health by Professor Otto Klineberg of Columbia University, we learned the rather surprising fact that churchgoers generally do not follow their ordained leaders and are instead strongly bigoted.

One might, at first thought, expect lay church members who play a prominent role in church life to hold more rational attitudes. Yet, because facts don't change prejudices, they do not respond to their leader's logical, moral — and in many instances — courageous convictions.

We cannot, in this explosive world of ours, put off our social problems for future generations to solve. We must learn to live together — as white, yellow, Negro — now. And, as I need hardly point out to you, what happens in Little Rock, what happens in Norfolk, is today a factor in our international relations. It is being watched by our potential foes or friends everywhere.

Integration brought about solely by law without seeking to gain the understanding and cooperation of the community is not going to make a good enough impression on those other parts of the world. Law or administrative order is an essential first step. It sets up the moral basis for compliance. But it cannot be expected alone to alter deeply set psychological attitudes and habits without the aid of re-education and social therapy.

Irrational behavior bypasses very few of us. You *will* admit to yourself, that though highly intelligent, you *are* sometimes a bit irrational. A wee bit, perhaps . . . I'll not ask how many of you do sometimes knock on wood, cross your fingers or say "gesundheit" when someone sneezes just in case a few stray evil spirits happen to be around — or feel uneasy about taking an apartment on the 13th floor or a plane trip on Friday the 13th.

But even if, by the happiest of chances, you yourself are in perfect mental health, so far as any individual can claim to be, you are still psychologically threatened if the community or society in which you live — or the group in which you belong — is maladjusted.

Wholesome social interaction with our neighbors is a basic need in our modern society. This was pointed up recently in a very interesting study conducted by several British social scientists of a social

illness which they called "suburban neurosis" among people living in the outskirts of London.

A team from the London School of Hygiene found that in a newly built suburb to the north of London, the number of persons afflicted with anxiety neurosis was twice the average in the population elsewhere. Three times as many people complained of headaches, and four times as many suffered from insomnia, debility and excessive fatigue.

All these physical ills arose out of feelings of isolation, loneliness and a false set of values. Why? The investigators found that these residents had recently been relocated without their choice to this suburb.

Because of its newness and the feelings of being a stranger, alone and isolated, the tenants kept to themselves, and as they reported, proceeded to mind their own business. So a rash of personal maladjustments developed as a direct result of feelings of rejection due to bad social planning. While the new suburbs and the modern buildings looked good on paper, very basic psychological factors had not been taken into account.

We do the same thing almost every day in this country.

People in so-called civilized societies know that they are not supposed to harbor prejudices or show blind hostilities — so they try to swallow their irrational angers. But hostility can't be swallowed. It is poisonous and indigestible. It is bound to come up and to assert itself sooner or later in many kinds of psychosomatic ailments. Many of you may be familiar with the phrase: it isn't what you eat that causes ulcers but what eats you.

Hostility also affects the children of adults who hate. In the south the white children will ultimately be more damaged than the Negro children.

For the Negro children 20 years from now will regard their parents' struggle with admiration, whereas the white children will have to repress or rationalize their feelings of shame about the behavior of their fathers and mothers.

The problem is very complex, even in a comparatively liberal community like New York City. We recently enacted a pioneering piece of legislation banning discrimination in private housing. As Chairman of the Commission on Intergroup Relations which administers this law, I knew that we would have to run the gamut of anxieties and fears which accompany any legislation dealing with social change. To date, we are gratified that overt tensions and hostilities are barely noticeable — possibly because we have approached this change with scientific understanding and personnel.

I have said before that I am convinced that administrative and legal measures alone will not suffice. For outer compliance with inner resentment is not what we seek for good mental health. Law must be combined with intensive effort to gain a fuller understanding of the dynamics of the resistances, and then seek to find the remedies.

Effective attitude surveys — real investigations in depth — should be carried out in New York, and Chicago, and Detroit, and Los Angeles as well as in all of the southern states. When the facts are gathered and interpreted, much can be done to muster positive forces in these communities and overcome the resistance to change as rapidly and as painlessly as possible.

Who should carry out this program? If possible, the responsible leadership within the subject community. National organizations such as the Urban League and the Federal Government itself can be of invaluable help in seeking out the leadership to do the job and — if necessary — to co-ordinate their efforts.

There are many resources still untapped to assist in this approach. The United States Government is the largest employer of social scientists in the world.

Practically all Departments of Government — including the Armed Forces — are large consumers of social science skills and could hardly function without them. In addition, there are many nationally prominent social scientists on the faculties of universities — north and south — who are available to cooperate with local school officials or other administrators to prepare their communities for social changes.

These are of course no simple panaceas. The psychologist cannot wave a magic wand and dispel our proliferating social conflicts overnight. People can only be helped to help themselves.

As I have suggested, the influence that the group as an interacting unit, exerts upon its members can be beneficial as well as harmful. Much depends on groups having well-adjusted and expert leaders, and these leaders *can* be found and developed on the local level if our national leadership takes the initiative.

The great social struggle in which our nation is now engaged cannot be viewed passively — especially by our leaders — as another spectacle in the passing parade. Our social sanity is at stake. And we must have it if we are to survive as a nation.

The wonderful thing, the comfort, is that it is an attainable goal. With skill and imagination we can rid our communities of the scourge of segregation. The task is not easy, but we have the talent and the motivation to do the job. It is vital that we get to work and do it in the right way — Now!

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