

Social Psychology of Prejudice:

*Historical and
Contemporary Issues*

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Autobiographical Account

Charles Stangor

(Through no fault of my own) I grew up in a privileged suburban environment. People got along with each other pretty well, and there weren't a lot of minorities to deal with. Women didn't get to earn money in that environment by and large, but they did get out of the house—to bridge clubs, PTA meetings, and little league baseball games, it seemed to me. The stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination at my high school were across cliques more than across class or ethnicity. So I cannot say that I became interested in stereotyping from being a victim, nor—at least not consciously—from being a perpetrator.

I had taken a couple of psychology courses in high school, and thought it was for me (who wouldn't be interested in trying to figure out people?) But my first psychology course at college ranged from partial reinforcement schedules to stimulus generalization and everything in-between. It bored the hell out of me. Furthermore, my friends soon convinced me that I should be a music major instead—this involved virtually no written papers, hardly any required classes, and—well, that was enough for me!

I played the piano for the next eight years, but making a living at music was tough and I was looking for something else. One day I found myself attending a hypnosis demonstration—people were clucking like chickens and flying around the stage flapping their wings. This all seemed so remarkable that it quickly it rekindled my interest in psychology. So I took a couple of M.A. level courses at NYU.

Like most everyone I suppose, my first hunch was clinical psychology. But on the way I took a course in personality with Anne Locksley, and she convinced me to apply for the social-personality Ph.D. program at NYU. Somehow I got in. Anne studied stereotyping and prejudice, and so I started down that path. I was tempted by other interests—judgment and decision-making and attribution models for instance—but somehow they never seemed quite as right or quite as important. I'm not exactly sure why, but I do remember one night when I was taking the New York subway back from a musical event in Queens. It was very late and I suddenly realized that I was the only white person on the train. It didn't take long for me to realize that race really does matter!

So for me my interest in intergroup relations was 90 percent serendipity, reinforced in part by my perception that it really mattered. Along the way I have become more and more convinced that this in an important area of study and hope I have shed some small light on the issue through my research and teaching.

Short story, but there you have it.

