

Social Psychology of Prejudice:

*Historical and
Contemporary Issues*

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Why I Started Studying Prejudice

John F. Dovidio

I was born in 1951, and since then the United States has wrestled with profound racial issues and landmark legislation that has reasserted fundamental democratic values. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision occurred in 1954. I grew up during the civil rights movement and was a teenager when the civil rights legislation of the 1960's was enacted. Although these and related events no doubt had a significant influence in shaping my scholarly interests, I have to admit that the issues seemed somewhat distant and abstract to me at the time. They were about *someone else's* problem. Instead, probably reflecting the self-centeredness of the typical adolescent, these events mainly provided a background to a series of personal experiences that crystallized my interest in the study of prejudice and racism.

I grew up near Boston, in a community that was largely racially and ethnically segregated. I lived in the Italian and Irish section of town. Historically, the Irish had emigrated to Boston first, in the late 1800's; the Italians arrived in a subsequent wave, in the early 1900's. For the 40 years before I was born, they had competed in Boston for jobs, housing, and economic opportunity. Although both groups had found their economic niche in my working class hometown, ethnic identities remained strong. And as I discovered on some occasions when I dated girls from Irish families, significant ethnic tensions were just below the surface. I still remember how wounded, angry, and helpless I felt one day when I picked up my Irish girlfriend and I heard from inside her father, a man who had seemed to be nice to me before, yelling to her, "That Wop's here again for you!"

I had accumulated enough accounts and experiences in my life to feel comfortable in my role as victim as I entered college. While there, I had a semester as an intern in a program called *A Better Chance* in which I lived and worked with Latino and Black high school students in an all-White New Hampshire town. Because I came from an urban environment, like these students, we shared a common bond in that environment. Because I had a dark complexion and lived with these students, the townspeople assumed that I was Latino. My time as an intern thus gave me an opportunity to see and experience victimization in the form of overt and covert racism at a level and complexity that made my previous experiences pale in comparison.

However, at the end of the semester I was able to pass seamlessly back into the world of White America. Soon after, I returned to my hometown for a friend's wedding, and Italian guy marrying and Irish woman. On the night before the wedding, over more than a few drinks,

he recounted the prejudice he had experienced from his future in-laws and his puzzlement at what we, as a group, had done to deserve this treatment. In his struggle to understand the situation he turned to me and said, “Jack, why do they treat us like this?” He paused and added, “after all, we’re not Black.” That single statement helped me to understand instantaneously that, although I had gone through much of my life feeling like a victim, I shared the responsibility of racism that was embedded in our society, culture, and history. I no longer had the right to complain about my personal injustices as long as the profound injustice of true racism dominated our society. Soon after, I entered graduate school. Sam Gaertner, who was studying aversive racism—racism among the well-intentioned—was my advisor. This confluence of personal experience, recent insights, new academic opportunities, and the support of an advisor who became also my close friend and professional role model initiated my career as a prejudice researcher and has continue to sustain my commitment to this area over the past 25 years.