

Social Psychology of Prejudice:

*Historical and
Contemporary Issues*

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Lewinian Press

B=F(P,E)

For Charlotte and Jasper

PUBLISHED BY LEWINIAN PRESS
1415 Jayhawk Boulevard
Lawrence, Kansas 66045

Printed in the United States of America.

Cover photo © Doug Hitt, 1996.

This book is based on a conference supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 9910732. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

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Growing Up Black in America: Where My Interest in Prejudice Came From.

James M. Jones

I moved to a small town in northern Ohio, Elyria, two years after my birth in Detroit, Michigan. Elyria is a smallish town, about 40,000 when I was growing up, twenty-six miles southwest of Cleveland, and nine miles northeast of Oberlin where my father's family came from and where I went to college. Elyria was an industrial city, thriving mainly on steel mills and industrial plants like American Standard. It was a highly segregated town, but because of its size there was only one public high school. We black students came from the South and West, the Whites came from the East and North. Like other northern cities, the prejudice was subtle and the codes while often unspoken, were nonetheless clear. We did not follow our white classmates to cabins on Lake Erie in the summer. We could set pins at the local bowling alley but we couldn't bowl there. We could roller skate at the local arena, but only on Thursday nights. I grew up in a segregated town that alas elected me as president of the Student Council.

This background is part of who I am. We had a close-knit group of friends who, while aware of the racial disadvantage, were not intimidated by it. Nevertheless there were clear problems to be overcome. Guidance counselors routinely directed black students to shop course for guys and home or business economics for girls. Friends who now are presidents of hospitals and own their own marketing businesses or are physicians, were still steered into the non-college prep curricula. However, resilient as I think we were, there remained issues related to the psychological consequences of second-class status. We who lived in the projects on the south side of town, enjoyed each other and our lives and did not long to "be with" whites. However, we did know that whites had more, money, status, prestige, opportunities, and value. We knew this because what we loved was reflected in the television programs we saw. It was as if the culture had two tiers and we were ordained to be on the bottom. I would later understand this as DuBois' "color line" the problem of the twentieth century.

As I moved through life, I somewhat stumbled upon psychology. At Oberlin, I sought a degree in mathematics, but quickly abandoned it for the promise of a more human relations study of psychology. But the psychology I found was behavioral genetics which, while fascinating and an excellent tool for learning about basic research and theoretical analysis, was in some ways not much closer to my interest than mathematics. At the Franklin Institute Research Laboratories in Philadelphia, I found myself pursuing a research project as an engineering psychologist. That

too was interesting, and provided the research that led to my first publication on the effect of displays on human decision-making in military settings. But it was during this time at the Institute, in 1965, that my awareness of the connection between psychology and my childhood experiences could be made. I read a *New York Times Magazine* article by Kenneth B. Clark about his work in Harlem. Having been a classmate of his daughter Kate at Oberlin, I knew well his pioneering research on racial identity and his famous doll studies. But this work was special because it was the *New York Times*, and captured many aspects of my growing up and I felt inspired to become Ken Clark.

However, when I enrolled in the social psychology program at Yale University in 1966, I was the first black graduate student ever in the department, and becoming Ken Clark did not seem to be in the cards. But only a year earlier Malcolm X was assassinated in New York. I happened to be there that Sunday afternoon, and heard about when I went into a small coffee shop on the East side of Manhattan. I was involved to tears and felt deeply Malcolm's loss. In 1968, while still studying psychology at Yale, Martin Luther King was assassinated and the cities went up in flame. Ken Clark became more important than ever, and I felt the need to do something relevant more than ever.

I taught black history to housewives in a New Haven suburb. About the same time, Chuck Kiesler was editing a new series on social psychology and asked me to write a book on prejudice for the series. It seemed somewhat preposterous to consider writing a book when I had yet to write my dissertation. Chuck was persuasive that I could do it, so I agreed.

I began the book two months after I defended my dissertation and four months after beginning my first job as assistant professor at Harvard University. But as I began thinking about how to write a book about prejudice, I was troubled by its seeming inadequacy to capture the subtle feelings I knew we had as black adolescents in a segregated white northern community. It was inadequate to capture the complexities of racism, and the anger and volatility that bred hatred and self-destructive behavior. Black Power was symbolic representation of all of this and the clear signal that times they were a changin'. Carmichael and Hamilton publish their book *Black Power*, and Knowles and Pruitt wrote about Institutional Racism. The Kerner Commission, appointed to determine the root causes of the riots blamed white racism on the problem. So why was I writing about prejudice?

When I raised this concern to Kiesler, he had a simple solution, change the book's title. Thus *Prejudice and Racism* was born. The book captured the psychological reality that I took from Elyria, that racism was not limited to the prejudicial attitudes that people had, many of them had genuinely positive feelings for many of us. But rather was nevertheless, a clear cultural system that maintained, justified and rationalized the dual

status of blacks and whites in our community. It had consequences for both the whites and blacks that lived there. To understand the race problems was not to simply explain why whites were bigots, and why blacks perhaps internalized that denigration in low self worth. My friends and I did not feel inadequate in the main. We enjoyed each other and welcomed some of the battles we had to wage to get things that whites took for granted. I wanted to somehow represent these feelings and beliefs and experiences in whatever I wrote about the subject of race. I felt that we had to go beyond the level of the individual to capture it.

So my own interest in the topic is a direct reflection of experiences growing up black in America, and my training as a psychologist, and the vision of what was possible provided by the compelling and important work of Ken Clark.

Note: James Jones attended the Seattle Conference, and presented excellent material on the history of the social psychological study of prejudice. The interested reader is encouraged to read Prof. Jones' (1997) *Prejudice and Racism (2nd Edition)*, New York: McGraw-Hill, for an extended version of his comments.

