

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PREJUDICE

by — PROF. D.J. JAYASURIYA

Over the last three or four decades the sciences of man have been acutely concerned with the study of Prejudice, especially racial or ethnic prejudice, because of its seriousness as a social problem. Even today the social and human tragedies that have taken place because of the upheavals caused by Prejudice, are sufficient to make us pause to think about the true character of this ghastly phenomenon.

Indeed, the cost of prejudice is so great that only after the havoc do we realize the price we have to pay; it's only after a world war, a race riot, a brutal murder or assassination do we understand the terrible price we have had to pay.

No wonder then, that the late Professor Arnold Ross draws pointed reference to the grave dangers inherent in prejudice when he says that:—

“Prejudice can provide an excuse or rationalization for economic exploitation or political domination. It can enable a man to justify to himself acts that he would ordinarily be unwilling to engage in. It can be exploited by shrewd self-seeking manipulators when it occurs in other people. It can offer opportunities for taking sexual advantage of minority group women, and it may give people at the bottom of the social ladder an apparent superiority over the minority group.”

These words were uttered in the context of the United States of America, but you have only to change the words “minority group” to “underprivileged” or “subject group” and it will still retain its meaning and have the widest application.

But, what in fact do we understand by this term prejudice?

In the popular mind ‘prejudice’ is immediately associated with discrimination, hostility and even violence. These associations are often justifiable, but prejudice itself is quite different from discrimination. Discrimination really belongs to the realm of action, in particular of social action. Prejudice, on the other hand, is a covert phenomenon and is best described as an attitude of mind; it is an attitude, let us readily admit, which may but not necessarily eventuate in discriminatory acts. For the behavioural scientist, an attitude signifies a state of readiness, an emotional predisposition to act towards an object (this may be a group of persons, something material or abstract like an ideological concept). When we are so predisposed to act we feel emotionally involved about the object of an attitude so much so that we have very distinct feelings about it. It is a question of our liking or disliking, of our being favourable or unfavourable, etc., such that we have always a pro or con attitude.

What is also essential to an attitude is the

fact that we have formed certain impressions about the object in question and that we have made some judgements on the basis of this knowledge. For the moment, it is not important as to how we have come by this knowledge, or whether it is veridical knowledge.

Without delving further into the nature of attitudes, let us at the outset recognise that prejudice refers to one class of such phenomena, in particular, to social attitudes. Therefore, the social and psychological study of prejudice belongs to the study of attitudinal phenomena and it is from this general area of inquiry that we draw most of our understanding of prejudice as a social and psychological phenomenon.

What is distinctive of prejudice — as, indeed, the etymological derivation of the term itself implies — is that it is a prejudgement made about the object of the attitude. Put differently, what is being asserted is that in having a prejudice we over-generalize in the face of insufficient data. For example, we often make a generalization about a whole group, e.g., that “women are bad drivers” and then we proceed to apply this to a particular case. Thus, “Syliva is a woman”, and immediately we draw the inference — “Syliva is a bad driver”. This is obviously a fallacious mode of reasoning, but one which is typical of the thought processes implicit in prejudiced thinking. This tendency to over-generalize is characteristic of what is termed a stereotype — “a stock mental picture”, or, as W. Lippman referred to it “pictures in our head”. In this manner we can have stereotype of some object, say a social or ethnic group. The ‘stereotype’ is a convenient summary of our prejudgements and is, often, greatly exaggerated, and completely misleading.

The important point for us is that, prejudices are based on such stereotypes which are indiscriminately applied and rarely tested against reality. Consequently, the true nature of each individual case is rarely considered in the use of stereotypes. Let us take an illustration from studies of Racial Prejudice — the context in which most studies of Prejudice have been carried out. In the U.S., for instance, the stereotype of the negro would allege or attribute certain psychological differences between whites and Negroes. For example, it is often said that Negroes are inferior, are lower class, dull, lazy, dirty, immoral, oversexed, quarrelsome and childish.

Since prejudice and discrimination are ultimately based on such stereotypes, it becomes a moot question as to whether these descriptions belong to the realm of fact or fancy. This is crucial because it will make a difference to our analysis

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Clearly, groups which live separately according to their own ways will develop common characteristics. Indeed, we might even account for the existence of some of these stereotypic characteristics in terms of what Robert K. Merton calls the "self-fulfilling prophecy" whereby one begins to resemble the alleged characteristics. It has been suggested with much justification that some Negroes may in fact be lazy because the assertion of white supremacy denies them the fruits of industriousness. This exemplifies what some have called the "kernel of truth" hypothesis about stereotypes.

The crucial fact is that such differences point only to group differences and that the range of individual differences within each group is far greater than that between the different groups; and, in any case we should bear in mind that such differences are the results of both heredity and environment.

One important fact stands out from the discussion so far — viz. — that it is a small and pardonable mistake, if in the absence of proper and adequate knowledge we have to make all sorts of prejudgements as evidenced by our stereotypes. It is an undeniable fact that such prejudgements in the light of insufficient evidence are continuously being made by everyone, not only with regard to ethnic and racial groups but also many other categories of human experience. There is no doubt that in so doing we introduce an economy of mental effort into human experience. However, what is most significant is as to what we do with these prejudgements or stereotypes. The danger we face continuously is that we are gravely in making fallacious deductive or inductive inferences from such prejudgements, e.g. in attributing isolated characteristics to whole groups, or in characterizing individuals in terms of broad generalities.

Prejudice, therefore, becomes a social problem primarily in terms of the adequacy of inference, especially when it becomes an irrational mode of thinking and reasoning. In psychoanalytic terminology this refers to the adequacy of reality testing, the primacy of reason over emotion, of "secondary process" over "primary process" thinking, where you make judgements in terms of what is the case rather than what should be the case.

Prejudice behaviour exists as a social issue only where prejudgements and stereotypic thinking about an object hardens into rigid and set ways, and eschews "reality testing" even when relevant facts are available. It is this irreversibility of thinking that is so markedly evident in the study of prejudice.

To quote the social psychologist Marie Jahoda: racial or ethnic prejudice is "an attitude towards 'out-groups'" which refrains from reality testing not just because the mental effort is too much but because the attitude itself fulfills a special irrational function for its bearer." As she very rightly observes, one has perforce to distinguish between two kinds of prejudice — one rational though misinformed and the other highly irrational and stubbornly misinformed.

It is the latter which is irreversible even when exposed to incompatible evidence.

Viewed in these terms the task of the psychologist in his quest for the psychological roots of prejudice is to discover what "special irrational function" it has for the person who is prejudiced. It should, however, be clearly understood that the study of prejudice and correlated phenomena such as discrimination, hostility and violence is a multi-dimensional task and one which requires a social, political and historical as well as psychological examination. We confine ourselves to one aspect, viz, the psychological roots of prejudice, and consequently our focus is limited to the manifestations of prejudice in the individual, i.e., as an aspect of individual behaviour

Guided by recent trends in this area, we will restrict ourselves to examining prejudice as a unitary phenomenon while not denying that different kinds of prejudice may require special kinds of analysis. Most of the knowledge we have in this field comes from studies of racial and ethnic prejudice, especially the study of anti-semitism and anti-Negro prejudice. It is knowledge derived from such studies which provides us with an outline of a general theory relating to the psychological roots of prejudice.

One of the oldest of prejudice against "out-groups" e.g. ethnic, racial or religious groups other than one's own — is in terms of fear or dislike of differences. It was presumed that there was some instinctive fear or antipathy for anyone who was different. The instinctive aspect of the theory was however soon modified and it was assumed instead that one learns to have prejudices about "out groups." Studies of prejudice among children not only disproved the instinctivist bias of these early theories but also made explicit the tremendous significance of the factor of social learning in the development of prejudice. The irrational beliefs and stereotypes central to prejudice are all acquired by individuals in the course of their social development. Various social institutions and groups beginning with the family and ending in one's work group or leisure groups contribute to inculcate, support and sustain prejudice beliefs as

well as modes of action consonant with such beliefs.

It also remains true that not all those exposed to such learning environments become prejudiced. In order to explain this we have to understand the psychological dynamics of prejudice — the inner supports and motives underlying prejudice. In short, one major concern of social psychology has been to understand prejudice as an individual phenomenon by showing its relationship to various facets and aspects of personality. In other words, we have to look for the psychological roots of prejudice in the psychology of personality, especially in that aspect of personality which has to deal with motives and emotions. In other words, we turn to the psychodynamics of prejudice.

The key trends of the psychodynamic approach are apparent in this analysis of prejudice via the study of personality dynamics. One is the isolation of various personality mechanisms, which are relevant to the understanding of prejudice; the other dominant trend being the attempt to link prejudice as a unitary phenomenon with a personality type or a specific type of personality structure.

Let's briefly look at each of these approaches to get some idea of the kind of conclusions that emerge from these studies. Looking at the study of personality or psychological mechanisms involved in prejudice, we must bear in mind that these mechanisms never really "explain" prejudice. To quote, one prominent theorist in this area, Bruno Bettelheim; "they help us to understand why persons had levels of ethnic prejudice markedly higher or markedly lower than the norms of their social groups." Most of these psychological mechanisms have their origin in psychoanalytic theory which is focussed mainly on the psychological function of irreversible attitudes such as prejudice. These accounts point to the irrational component in prejudice — the role of unconscious motives, the hidden sources of prejudice.

To give an example, it is suggested that one can discover the unconscious irrational aspects of racial prejudice by examining the content of the beliefs about "out groups". As pointed out earlier the Negro stereotype describes him as lazy, dirty and oversexed. In Freudian terms one would characterize this stereotype as highlighting the ID elements i.e. that Negroes have little control over their instincts. Contrast this with the common stereotype of the Jew in Western society as avaricious, ambitious and get-ahead. The Jews one would say are super-Ego or conscience dominated, i.e. the Jews have too much control over

their instincts.

The Freudians point out that these two types of stereotypes roughly correspond to two types of neurotic conflict which man has to contend with. One type of conflict arises when a person is unable to control his strivings and fit them into rational and socially desirable modes of conduct; and the other when a person cannot live up to the aspirations and standards set for himself by the Super-ego or conscience.

One cannot fail to observe here the interesting parallel between the racial stereotype and the basic conflicts of man. Qualities which one finds lacking in oneself or temptations which one is unable to satisfy are attributed to, or "projected" on to the target group the object of one's prejudice. One hates the Negroes or Jews for possessing the very qualities which the prejudiced person desires or does not have the courage to manifest. What is absent or wrong in oneself is made more bearable by attributing it to an outsider — say a Negro or Jew. This is the precarious equilibrium that the prejudiced person achieves for himself as a measure of resolving his underlying conflicts. It is an equilibrium or a type of conflict resolution achieved by employing what the Freudians called Ego Defense Mechanisms. One such mechanism, frequently evident in Prejudiced behaviour as we have just seen is that of PROJECTION. A person "projects" what is wrong in himself on to an outsider and thereby achieves mental peace by a denial of his inner conflict.

Petergorsky has, in the following quotation, very cleverly like so many other theorists employed this concept of Projection to give an account of the psychodynamics of anti-Semitism:—

"Ours is a period of uncertainty, and therefore, of fear. Men fear what they do not understand, they shrink from that which they cannot see; they shun the path whose end they cannot discern. And because men fear, they persecute. They persecute so that they may project upon others the fear that is gnawing at their own hearts. By creating in others terrors greater than they themselves experience, men seek to build up for themselves an illusion of security and safety."

According to Petergorsky, the Jews are chosen as an object of projection because for one reason or another they have been traditionally disliked and at the same time are weak and cannot fight back. Therefore one gets rid of one's inward fears by attacking the Jews.

Another Ego Defense Mechanism relevant to the understanding of prejudice is the concept of DISPLACEMENT. It is customarily employed in the context of the influential frustration-aggression hypothesis which posits that hostility is a very frequent response to frustration.

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theory that high prejudiced persons have a great deal of pent up hostility, presumably arisen as a result of enduring severe psychological frustrations. This accumulated or stored-up hostility finds a suitable outlet in an object other than the source of frustration which is often quite powerful. For example, if the source of hostility is a parent, it is an object which one cannot easily attack and consequently, the built-up reservoirs of hostility are reduced by being DISPLACED on a defenceless object such as a helpless, socially inferior group. Projection and displacement mechanisms become fused when the "out-group" members are seen as possessing qualities which are unacceptable to the "in-group" members. The super-ego cleverly redirects the expression of anger and hostility against the "out-group" which allegedly possesses these qualities instead of attacking one's own self for having these impulses.

This process is also technically known as "scapegoating" and refers to the discharge of aggression by a prejudiced person by displacing it on a non-offending social object such as a minority group against whom the culture sanctions the use of aggression. The essential weakness of this theory is that it does not necessarily explain why one group rather than another is chosen as the object for venting one's aggression. What we have, therefore, is a limited though helpful understanding of prejudice; — it is one, which essentially tries to discover the inner cause of prejudice — the psychodynamic origins of prejudice.

The study of prejudice as Projection and Scapegoatism belongs to the classical period of psycho-dynamic theory, dominated by orthodox Freudian theory. The newer Ego Psychology has adumbrated a different and more promising approach which tries to relate prejudice to the developmental struggles of the individual in achieving a sense of personal identity. This kind of thinking takes off from the work of people like Eric Erikson on the need for securing one's identity as a basic condition of achieving maturity in adulthood. The important point for the present discussion is the suggestion that this need may feed ethnic hostility and prejudice.

The basic proposition being advanced is that uncertainty about one's own position, about one's ethnic occupational, sexual and social position, may find expression in hostility to others. It is certainly true that Prejudice can act as a very effective means of buttressing a weak sense of identity. This is what is meant by saying that intolerance and ethnic hostility can avoid the fear of "identity diffusion" — i.e. the failure to have a clear conception of one's personal

identity, such that it vacillates or becomes merged in several distinct disparate identities. Identity diffusion, put simply, is the failure to "take hold" of some kind of life. In such a situation Erikson has spelled out the sort of refuge one seeks. He speaks of the defense against "identity diffusion" for the adolescent in the following terms and deserves quoting in full because of its applicability to other age groups:—

"In general, it is primarily the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs young people. To keep themselves together they temporarily over-identify, to the point of apparent complete loss of identity, with the heroes of cliques and crowds. On the other hand, they become remarkably clannish, intolerant and cruel in their exclusion of others who are "different", in skin colour or cultural background, in tastes and gifts and often in entirely petty aspects of dress and gesture arbitrarily selected as the signs of an in-group or out-group. It is important to understand (which does not mean condone or participate in) such intolerance as the necessary defense against a sense of identity diffusion".

Whoever fails to secure a personal identity of one's own, a clear self-image of oneself, is invariably threatened by feelings of self-doubt, by confusion about who one is, a nagging anxiety that he may be a "nobody" etc. This fear, this almost universal conflict and insecurity, one tries to silence by telling himself something like this — "At least I am not a Negro or a Jew; and this makes me at least something more than a nobody". Being VISIBLY different is an attraction in that it confers in a negative sense a clear-cut identity for the individual. At the same time, being different is unattractive because it confers on the "out-group" member a clearer identity than one's own. Therefore, the weaker one's sense of personal identity, the stronger the threat one experiences from the "out-group" and the stronger the emotional response to this inner conflict and anxiety.

Interestingly, we find strong confirmation of this trend in studies of prejudice among those who are affected by social mobility, i.e., those who move up and down the social ladder. It has been repeatedly found that rapid upward or downward social mobility — which points to conditions where the fear of identity diffusion is likely to be most marked — i.e. associated with high ethnic intolerance and prejudice.

This suggests that any situation which brings to the fore anxieties about oneself as, e.g. when there are sudden changes in the external conditions of life, may often thrust the individual to buttress himself, to reassure himself by insisting that he is at least, white, or a member of this or that group and that in so doing he will accentuate stereotypes which reinforce the superiority of the "in-group" status. It is for this reason that much

recent work on prejudice as an intrapsychic phenomenon has emphasized the idea that uncertainty about oneself is at the root of ethnic hostility and, indeed, of all kinds of prejudice.

The basic finding is also strengthened by the other dominant trend in the study of the psychological roots of prejudice, i.e., those studies which link prejudice with a certain personality type. This approach to the study of prejudice was pioneered by the classic American study entitled "The Authoritarian Personality."

The Authoritarian Personality set out first to show that Prejudice was indeed a unitary phenomenon in that the anti-semitic was also by and large anti-Negro, anti-Catholic and anti-Japanese. In other words, he was Ethnocentric. Furthermore, these prejudiced attitudes also cohered with other social attitudes especially conservative, political and social ideas. They then went to discover that the prejudiced, conservative was also highly authoritarian or potentially fascist type of person who exhibited certain typical personality characteristics — all these put together define for the Authoritarian Personality type, the sort of personality most prone to strong racial or ethnic hostility and prejudice. One author has summarized the main characteristics of the Authoritarian Personality in the following terms:—

"A rigid adherence to conventional values, a submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized authorities of the in-group; a tendency to condemn, reject and punish people who violate conventional values; an opposition to the imaginative and tender approach to life; a disposition to think in rigid categories, a pre-occupation with the theme of dominance and submission, a generalized cynicism about human nature; a tendency to project outward unconscious emotional impulses; and an exaggerated concern with the sexual behaviour of others."

It is characteristic of such personalities to demand a clear-cut unambiguous perception of the outside world — metaphorically and even literally — a black and white perception. In other words, like those given to the fear of "identity diffusion", authoritarian personalities too, wish to see things in clear-cut terms as "insiders" and "outsiders" so that they know where they belong to and who they are.

The authoritarian personality theorists also posit certain conditions of child rearing and socialization as crucial for this type of personality. Thus, we know that those highly prejudiced have had an unhappy childhood and are likely to have experienced severe frustrations arising from the use of severe disciplinary techniques, which in turn have built up in them strong aggression and personal hostility. The "prejudiced authoritarians" idealize their parents and themselves and are, therefore, not able to see themselves or their

parents objectively. Thus, undesirable characteristics are not accepted as being typical of themselves or of their parents; and these are usually projected outward on to others, typically on to minority groups.

For these reasons the Authoritarian Personality study may be seen as bringing together many of the significant trends in the psychological analysis of prejudice; it ties up the approach to prejudice involving personality mechanisms with that involving a characterisation of a personality type. In conclusion, it seems that the most fruitful line of future inquiry into the psychology of prejudice would be on the lines of Authoritarian Personality study, i.e., to view a particular type of personality. Structure as influencing attitudinal characteristics — especially the structure of organisation of belief systems and the individual responsiveness to different types of peoples, roles or groups as sources of influence.

One last question remains to be answered — Is the foregoing account of prejudice as an intrapsychic phenomenon suggestive that prejudice is a type of mental illness? To many it might seem to be so for we have pointed to the irrational unconscious aspects of prejudice and analysed some of the unresolved conflicts and anxieties which lie at the heart of prejudice.

The evidence in answer to this question is rather ambiguous and confusing. On the one hand studies with mental patients would seem to suggest that there is some sort of relationship between psychological disturbances and prejudices; whereas studies with "normal" persons fail to substantiate such a relationship.

Marie Jahoda observes that most of the confusion results from a lack of clarity as to the meaning of the concept of mental health. It is very often used in a euphemistic fashion as a synonym for mental health, or, in the alternative, it is equated with the absence of mental disease. This, however, tells us very little about the positive attributes of mental health. Jahoda in an exhaustive study has listed six major types of concepts in analyzing the positive attributes of mental health. We may, therefore, look at prejudiced behaviour in relation to each of these six categories of human functioning.

First, there is the view that mental health expresses itself in the individual's attitude towards himself, e.g. that the mentally healthy have a good self-image, are more aware of themselves and have a mature, stable sense of identity. Clearly, from what we have said earlier, the prejudiced person who has a poor sense of identity and no clear self-image rates low on this attribute.

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Secondly, there is the criterion of self-actualization — or the extent to which a person has been able to develop his full potential as a person. On this score one again must rate the prejudiced as falling short of the ideal because a person torn with deep unconscious conflicts is not likely to be able to develop his own potential to the utmost.

Thirdly, it is argued that good mental health is characterized by integration and unity of the personality, i.e., of the various psychic functions. The prejudiced person is again unlikely to achieve full integration of his functions because the ego defense mechanisms will interfere with such integration.

Fourthly, some have emphasised the sense of autonomy, independence from external pressures as a positive attribute of mental health. On this account too, the prejudiced rate low. They succumb to outside pressures readily as in the choice of target groups — decried by society — to vent their hostility.

Fifthly, poor perception and awareness of reality is cited as distinctive feature of poor mental health. Here clearly the prejudiced rates very low as he is guilty of inadequate reality testing.

The last criterion is the ability to master one's own environment e.g. ability to cope with love, work and play. On this criterion the prejudiced may rate highly because being prejudiced serves the function of dealing with his inner conflicts and anxieties so that he has a better sense of his own worth. This would certainly facilitate mastery of the environment. In the light of his evidence, we may conclude that prejudice, especially high prejudice, is a symptom of poor mental health. Whether some extreme cases of prejudice are indicators of mental illness remains as yet not fully answered in the light of the available evidence.

Therefore, it would appear that racial prejudice is functionally adjustive to the individual who ranks low on the various indices of mental health, and strives for a solution to his basic conflict of personal identity. There is some unavailability of prejudice if one accepts the universality of this psychological need for identity in so far as it seems to underlie manifestations of prejudice and racial antagonism. Where a social system enables a person to have a clearer identity of who he is, then there is less likelihood of prejudice, e.g. heightened social mobility may serve as an occasion for the manifestation of prejudice. On the other hand, it must be admitted that there are people who can accept the psychological fact of difference without envy or fear. In other words, not all who experience this basic conflict of personal identity are prejudiced. Clearly the experience of this inner con-

flikt alone is not sufficient for it to become a social problem. We need to consider other factors in society which increase the likelihood of the manifestations of prejudice. Such a social structure may provide a screen on which we can throw our inherent human frailties and weaknesses in the form of envy, fear and hate.

1. Being the text of a talk delivered to the Anthropological Society of New South Wales.

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