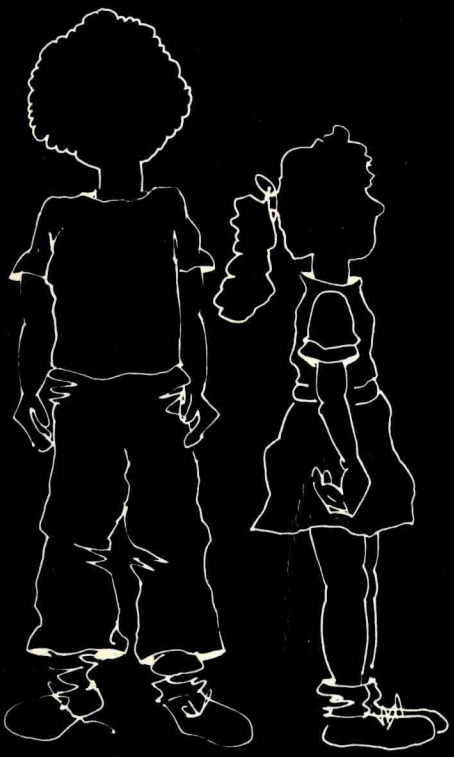
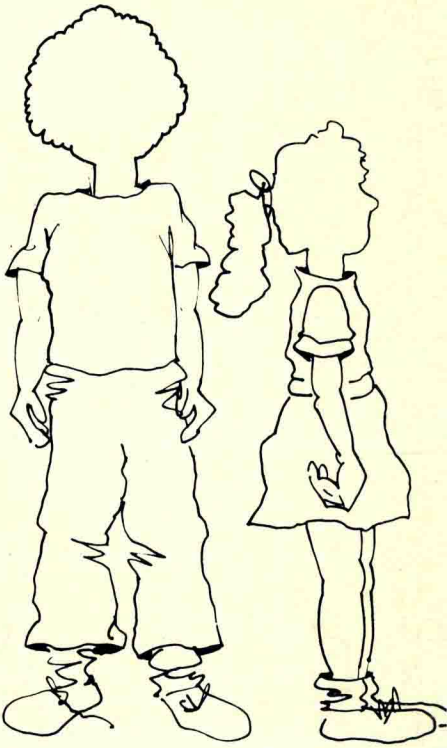
CHILDREN & RACE





David Milner

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Contents

Introduction	1
1 Prejudice: a pre-history	5
2 Psychology and prejudice	25
3 The socialization of attitudes and identity	52
4 Culture and prejudice	75
5 Children's racial attitudes	106
6 Race and the black child	132
7 Race and education	164
8 Education for equality	192
Appendix	229
References	231
Index	253

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Introduction

The first edition of this book was written nearly ten years ago; it was an attempt to provide an account of racial attitude development in young children and to describe some of the effects of racism on the development of black children. There was, at that time, no adequate single source of information on these processes that was accessible to teachers, social workers and others who, it was felt, would be assisted by more knowledge of this area. In some ways the book enjoyed an undeserved celebrity, precisely because it was the only contribution of its kind; but in a controversial and volatile field like race relations, writing has a more limited 'shelf-life' than elsewhere, and although the book has continued to appear in reading-lists, it has needed revision for some time.

Some of the first edition remains intact in these pages, principally the historical material; some has been discarded, for example the coverage of the West Indian and Asian cultural backgrounds. Despite many people's unwillingness to accept the fact, Britain's black population are no longer 'immigrants' and it is not helpful to treat them as such. The sending societies and the migration factor have receded in influence on the settlers, and as far as the children are concerned, may seem very remote indeed. In fact some 95 per cent of children of West Indian parentage now in the schools were born in Britain[310]. The very different perspectives of a native black population from an immigrant one are reflected in these pages; perhaps this also brings their experience rather closer to that of their American counterparts, from whom a good deal of the research material in this book is drawn.

The basic account of racial attitude development remains essentially the same, while taking note of recent developments in research and in the wider society. Through talking to a wide variety of audiences in the intervening period it was clear that the 'message' of the book had not penetrated far beyond a self-selected constituency of teachers committed to the principles of multiracial education. One of the imperatives that has emerged over the same period is the

need to cultivate an awareness of these issues beyond multiracial areas and it is to this end that this basic account is directed.

The remainder of the book has been updated and some entirely new material and emphases have been introduced. The principal changes reflect (in order of appearance not importance) my wish to ground the account on a more thorough foundation of social psychology than before, and the need to take note of the radical changes in black identity that the past decade has seen, both in this country and abroad. My own views on this latter issue have changed significantly (and they have certainly 'changed' a great deal from how others have represented them), though, in response to changing *evidence*, not vogue, social pressure or wishful thinking. If there is another change of emphasis, it derives from a growing realization of the dangers in the psychologist's concern with 'prejudice'. Psychologists have reified 'prejudice' so that it is sometimes seen as a psychological phenomenon with a life of its own: something that people 'are' or 'are not', an affliction of their personality which determines whether they will feel and act favourably or unpleasantly towards minority groups and individuals. It can be that, but more often the racial prejudice with which this book is concerned is simply the individual manifestation of social, political and economic forces. This has been styled 'institutional racism' and refers to all those social processes, overt and covert, by which black people are (intentionally or effectively) devalued and disprivileged in a systematic way. This is not to say that we should solely restrict ourselves to a study of these wider forces of racism, excluding any psychological perspective in the process; in the final analysis, racism (even institutional racism) is mediated by and to *individuals*, alone and in groups. Individual and institutional racism should be seen as indivisible counterparts, mutually-reinforcing and regenerating each other. The term 'prejudice' has been retained, however, as a convenient shorthand for the psychological dimension of racism.

This book has no pretensions to being a handbook for multiracial education. Despite the recent proliferation of books with titles which sound as though they are precisely that, I rather doubt that such a book is possible, and certainly I am not the person to write it. I am writing as a social psychologist, who, while having spent many hours in classrooms, is not a classroom teacher in a school. I have been concerned rather to provide a theoretical and empirical background for those who are concerned about children's racial attitudes, and to try to spell out the principles on which, I believe, any ameliorative educational strategies should be based. These are not

issues and principles which are restricted to any one cultural context or period of time; just as evidence and insight from the United States and elsewhere constantly 'feeds in' to this discussion, so too can the contribution be reciprocated, it is hoped, by illumination of other problem areas 'in the light of' the British experience described here.

In the introduction to the first edition of this book I wrote: 'This book has been difficult to write through attempting to satisfy at least two different audiences; on the one hand, social psychologists and educationalists, and on the other, teachers, local education authorities, community workers and others, who have rather different needs through dealing with these issues at a practical rather than a theoretical level. Academic readers, therefore, should try to forgive the occasional intrusion of the real world, while other readers must try to bear with the anaesthetic prose style of the research reports from which so much of the material is drawn.' I can only say that the implicit apology applies with still more force to this edition.

It is a pleasure to be able to record in print my gratitude to a number of people who have helped me in various ways: my colleagues at the Polytechnic of Central London, particularly Stuart Menzies; the Commission for Racial Equality; the staff of the Research Centre for Human Relations, New York University, and Professor Thomas Pettigrew of the Department of Psychology and Social Relations, Harvard University for the facilities they provided for me; and a long list of people who have sustained me when I needed it, including Mollie Lloyd, Isidore Pushkin, Louise Derman-Sparks, Brad Chambers, Adrian Smith, and of course my family. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my enduring debt to my friend and teacher, Henri Tajfel, who died so tragically early this year. He will be remembered as a great scholar, but more important than that, as a *mensh*.

D.M.
London, October 1982

1
Prejudice: a pre-history

Prejudiced attitudes have almost certainly existed since groups of people first distinguished themselves from one another. Essentially, they are irrational, unjust or intolerant dispositions towards other groups, and they are often accompanied by stereotyping. This is the attribution of the supposed characteristics of the whole group to all its individual members. Stereotypes exaggerate the uniformity within a group and similarly exaggerate the differences between this group and others. The entire group is tarred with the same brush, obscuring individual differences. Of course, this process is made much easier when there are visible physical differences between groups; these can be persuasively depicted as signifying other, more profound differences and these differences of 'nature' can provide a reason for differential treatment. In this way prejudices and stereotypes have expedited the oppression of groups of people throughout history, and where there have been differences in skin colour, the most obvious and intractable of physical differences, the process has been facilitated.

This 'racial' prejudice is not essentially different from religious, political or other prejudices in its psychological dimension, as we shall show later; similar derogatory ideologies may develop between peoples who are visually indistinguishable but who differ according to other, more abstract criteria. Indeed, prejudiced attitudes need bear so little relation to real distinctions between groups that they can be fostered where no such differences exist. Walter Lippman[241] described how Aristotle understood this very well: 'to justify slavery he must teach the Greeks a way of seeing their slaves that comported with the continuance of slavery', for no obvious differences distinguished slaves and masters. Aristotle decreed that 'He is by nature formed a slave who is fitted to become the chattel of another person, and on that account is so.'[10] In this proclamation he was imputing certain constitutional characteristics to the slaves which predetermined their social role, thus justifying their exploitation as part of the natural order of things. As Lippmann puts it, 'Our slave

must be a slave by nature if we are Athenians who wish to have no qualms.'

The essence of this is the recourse to quasi-scientific explanations of imaginary group differences to rationalize an exploitative social arrangement. It is a common feature of such social relationships, regularly repeated over the course of the following millenia and no doubt pre-dating this era also. The superstructure of group prejudice has invariably been supported by formal or informal theories of group differences, purporting to justify these attitudes.

It was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that 'scientific' theories of race became widespread, and only comparatively recently that race attitudes themselves came to be studied. This chapter will convey something of the climate of racial thought in the period leading up to the time when social psychology came to focus on these issues; we will show how the study of race and racial attitudes has been influenced by both academic and lay conceptions of racial groups, and by the prevailing context of social relations between them.

Hostile attitudes towards black people in Britain, for example, are not a new phenomenon. Queen Elizabeth I declared herself 'discontented at the great number of Negroes and blackamoors who had crept in since the troubles between Her Majesty and the King of Spain', a theme with which modern British politicians have been happy to associate themselves, despite the intervening centuries of civilization. The voyages of 'discovery' to the African continent and its subsequent colonization marked the first sustained contact between the 'white' peoples of Western Europe and the 'black' peoples of Africa and provided a great stimulus to popular attitudes towards these 'races'. Long before this, however, notions of dark and mystical beings were common in Western cultures and may have influenced the ways in which black people were later to be regarded. One of the earliest instances of this is found in the writings of John Cassian, a monk of Bethlehem around AD 400. He tells of his conversations ('Conferences') with the Egyptian hermits who directed their lives towards the attainment of a vision of God. The experience of one such ascetic is described in the following way:

> And when at last he sat down to eat, the devil came to him in the shape of a hideous negro, and fell at his feet saying: 'Forgive me for making you undertake this labour.'[63]

Another pilgrim to the desert, having had only palm leaves and dry

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bread to eat for twenty days,

> . . . saw the demon coming against him. There stood before him a person like a Negro woman, ill-smelling and ugly. He could not bear her smell and thrust her from him.

The hallucinogenic circumstances of these visions are less important than the evidence they provide of an early association of 'the Negro' with the Devil, with filth and with ugliness.

The association of blackness with evil is a common theme both historically and cross-culturally. 'Black' had a highly pejorative connotation in England in and before the sixteenth century. Its meanings included 'deeply stained with dirt, soiled, dirty, foul . . . having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; deadly, disastrous, sinister'[204] and so on. White had a correspondingly pure connotation. The two colours, 'being coloures utterlye contrary'[204] denoted the polarity of good and evil, virtue and baseness, God and the Devil. The association of these colours can be seen in literature, folklore and mythology for centuries before this time and indeed till the present day. James I wrote a book on witchcraft called *The Demonologie* in which many of the stories relate to the 'master of the coven' who was not only the personification of the Devil but was also always portrayed as black. Nor is this usage restricted to the literature of the occult. Gergen[133] points out that in the mainstream of English literature, 'a tendency to use white in expressing forms of goodness and black in connoting evil is discernible in the works of Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Poe and Melville'; and Bastide[28] detects the same tendency in religious art and literature.

The same colour usage has been shown to exist in a variety of different cultures. Gergen[133] cites anthropological evidence from Tibet, Siberia, Mongolia, West Africa, Zimbabwe and from the North American Creek Indians, for example, all of which provide parallel instances of these same colour values. This evidence has persuaded some writers that there may be universal cultural experiences which have given rise to these associations, and that both may influence racial attitudes. The argument is a controversial one and it is reviewed in Chapter 4; for the present, suffice to say that these colour values have certainly helped to provide an evaluative context within which black people have been accommodated, and which may have influenced their evaluation.

It was not until the mid-sixteenth century that English travellers

landed in Africa although Portuguese exploration and trading in the continent had been under way for a hundred years. Shortly, the first accounts of these 'black soules' reached London, as did a sprinkling of the black people themselves, imported as manservants and indentured labour. This was a rather sudden introduction to a people whose existence had been virtually unacknowledged, save for mention of Ethiopia in the Bible, and reference to the 'sub-Sahara' in the literature of antiquity. Moreover, the colour of these persons was the antithesis of the contemporary ideal – of alabaster skin and cheeks like roses. Extending the highly negative connotations of blackness and black objects to black *people* was therefore a logical step. The equation of whiteness with goodness, purity and humanity defined these totally 'opposite' beings as somehow inhuman. In Hakluyt's *Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation,* Robert Baker described the beings he encountered in Guinea in 1562, 'whose likeness *seem'd* men to be, but all as blacke as coles'[154]. From the unwittingly ethnocentric perspective of Europeans, this sub-human character was thoroughly confirmed by the black man's 'heathen' religions, 'savage' behaviour, his geographical proximity to the most human-like animals, the apes, and his libido. Interestingly, Bastide[28] detects a progressive change in the portrayal of Christ in religious painting dating from this time. Whereas previously unmistakeably Semitic features were depicted, these underwent a gradual Aryanization in an effort to avoid the stigma attaching to darker physical characteristics.

Curtin[79] argues that the travellers themselves were not unduly antagonistic towards black people and that the savage image of Africans was fostered less by them than by writers at home with a taste for the exotic; the public's curiosity and the 'libidinous fascination for descriptions of other people who break with impunity the taboos of one's own society' ensured that these aspects of African life were related in the greatest and most lurid detail. These writings inevitably affected popular conceptions of black people although they were not markedly hostile at that time. Jordan[204] suggests that 'It was not until the slave trade came to require justification in the eighteenth century that some Englishmen found special reason to lay emphasis on the Negro's savagery.' The colonization of the New World demanded an unlimited supply of cheap labour in order for its enterprises to survive. Native crops required labour-intensive cultivation and Africa contained unlimited amounts of the human commodity. From the fifteenth century onwards the Portuguese had captured Africans, 'put yrons upon their legges'[154], and carried them

into slavery. Early in the sixteenth century black slaves were supplied to their settlements in America; later a few Englishmen supplied the Spanish with slaves, but the English did not enter significantly into the slave trade until the seventeenth century.

When they did, they did so with a vengeance. Some fifteen million slaves were landed in the Americas from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. As Segal[340] wrote:

> The slave trade was more than the hinge of colonial exploitation . . . it was the basis of British — as well as French and American — mercantile prosperity and the source of industrial expansion. . . . It was the huge profits from the slave and sugar trades which produced much of the capital for Britain's industrial revolution. . . . The technological achievements which were to give the West political and economic dominance over so wide an area of the world were made possible by the miseries of the middle passage.

The brutalities of slavery have been amply documented elsewhere and will not be reiterated here. Accompanying and rationalizing the system were certain racial ideologies which were quite as brutalizing as the material conditions of plantation life. These were largely a reflection of the uncomfortable contradiction between whites' actual treatment of the slaves, and the high moral tone of the puritan ethics they piously espoused. Explanations of the discrepancy had to be generated, and these were couched in terms of the inferiority of the slaves, and both their sub-human status and the social arrangements embodied in slavery were legitimized in law. The code of South Carolina portrayed Negroes as 'of barbarous, wild, savage natures' and many states passed laws which confined the slaves (and their offspring) to bondage for life, forbade marriage, education, religious practice and even social life for slaves.

Racial thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

Coincident with the period of slavery was the infancy of scientific thought about human types. This was not fortuitous, but the result of intellectual curiosity aroused by white Europeans' first prolonged contact with the apparently different variety of human beings they had found in Africa. Developments in biology and later in anthropology stimulated interest further. The earliest racial theorizing in Europe sought to explain the political ascendancy of particular European races by their superiority according to certain mental and

physical criteria. Boulainvilliers was a proponent of this type of view as early as the seventeenth century, eulogizing the Germanic race. Though this was not a new notion, it helped to refurbish the myth of Nordic superiority which in turn undoubtedly influenced the evaluation of the starkly contrasting dark peoples of the world.

As well as being politically expedient, theories which sought to classify and order human types reflected similar developments in biology. In 1735, Karl Linnaeus[233] published his *Systema Naturae,* a classificatory scheme for all plant and animal life, including humans. This attempted to make sense of the wealth of information about living things emerging from the scientific discoveries of the period. Later Linnaeus distinguished four varieties of human beings — black, yellow, red and white, but he did not order them in any way. At about the same time, an ancient equivalent, 'The Great Chain of Being', was resurrected. This was a conception of all living things as an ordered hierarchy, headed by humans (who had a special relationship with Heaven by way of the next link upwards, the angels). This notion reassured people that they were both superior to animals and nearly divine, and as Jordan[204] notes, served 'to satisfy the eighteenth century's ravenous appetite for hierarchical principles in the face of social upheaval'. Fairly soon a synthesis of the various systems emerged, and although few explicit references were made to the hierarchical ordering of the races, there was an automatic assumption that the white European race was the primary stock, a matter which was obvious from its civilization and cultural ascendancy. And, as Curtin[79] points out, 'If whiteness of skin was the mark of the highest race, then darker races would be inferior in increasing order of their darkness', assigning the Africans to the lowest human station, the nearest link with the apes.

The following 150 years, until the start of the twentieth century, was the most fertile period for the development of racial thought. Barzun[27], Curtin[79], Gossett[147], Stanton[357], Bolt[41], Walvin[413] and Kiernan[218] provide admirable histories of this scientific era. Two themes of the period are particularly relevant for our purposes: the implicit racism of so much racial theory, and the relation of that theory to wider social and political circumstances.

To take the second of these first, it is possible to relate particular currents of racial thought to their authors' declared positions on wider racial issues. This is not to suggest a simple cause-effect relationship between the two, in either direction. But it is equally wrong to deny the intercourse, conscious or otherwise, between these two kinds of beliefs. The teachings of science, then as now,

are enlisted to justify social and political policy; similarly, existing social arrangements are adduced as the living proof of scientific theory. Thus in the debate over slavery some of the Polygenist theorists, (who believed in the separate — and inherently unequal — creation of the different races), were themselves pro-slavery in their writings, while the teachings of the Monogenists who adhered to the 'official' account of Adam and Eve's procreation of the human race spoke for (or were recruited by) the other side. When we set aside individual examples and look at the whole period it is impossible to ignore the clear correlation between scientific thought and its social context. Scientists are inevitably influenced by the social arrangements and climate of values around them, and their own ideologies; at the same time, scientific theory plays a role in sustaining those arrangements. It is, as they say, no coincidence that the period during which white people were most directly engaged in the exploitation of black people — through the slave trade, slavery itself, imperialism and colonialism — was the period which saw the zenith of racist scientific thinking. There is clearly a sense in which it was *necessary* for certain ideologies concerning black people to develop among the public at large, in order to reconcile humanitarian religious beliefs with the barbaric treatment meted out to black people, and the scientific community was not immune from this process of rationalization. This is the other theme which emerges clearly from this era: that whatever the individual persuasions of racial theorists on the origins of the races, or the significance of racial differences, the common thread that runs through virtually all racial theory of this time is the fundamental assumption of the inferiority of black people.

A small sample of the principal racial theorists is sufficient to illustrate this. Edward Long, a biologist resident in Jamaica in the eighteenth century, exemplified both currents. He maintained that Africans were 'brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful and superstitious people'[247]. An avid pro-slavery campaigner, it seems that he was not above fabricating evidence from his Jamaican experiences to support his arguments. At a more scientific level, Robert Knox's *The Races of Men*[224] was the first systematic racist treatise, and according to Banton[24], 'one of the most articulate and lucid statements of racism ever to appear'. His writings were enormously influential and his ideas found their way into the speeches of politicians, Emerson and Disraeli amongst them. His predecessor in Edinburgh, James Pritchard, was far more enlightened, and in fact anticipated much of Darwin's evolutionary

theory. But although, as Curtin[79] points out, he attempted 'to defend the racial equality of mankind through the theory of monogenesis', he shared the assumption that Africans were presently an inferior race.

In Europe the French Count Arthur de Gobineau was the most prominent of racist thinkers and was internationally influential. Barzun[27] discusses the complex relationship between his thought and the social and cultural climate of his time. Nietzsche and W.S. Chamberlain, for example, were to take up his theories, and if they 'were the visible agents of dissemination for the Count's ideas of race, it is also true that they were helped by others, anonymous and unconscious propagandists about whom we can talk only as the 'forces' and 'movements' of the century'. The political influence of Gobineau's writings survived him by many years; his belief in the supremacy of the Nordic-Aryan race, and in the degeneracy of 'semitized' and 'nigridized' races was resurrected to bolster the doctrines of National Socialism in pre-War Germany.

In the New World, racial theory had a more vital aspect: it spoke to the immediate domestic relations between black and white, slave and master. The polygenist teachings of Morton and the 'American School' (primarily Nott and Gliddon) underwrote Southern slavery in justifying Negro subordination through 'scientific' evidence of innate inferiority. In an obituary of Morton, Gibbes[134] stated the matter quite plainly:

> We can only say that we of the South should consider him as our benefactor, for aiding most materially in giving to the Negro his true position as an inferior race.

In retrospect it can be seen that the opposing monogenists, though more humanitarian in motive, abetted this process by conceding the central tenet of Negro inferiority. Some, like Bachman, were prevented from admitting the possibility of racial equality by their own ownership of slaves.

To assert that racial theory in this period was implicitly or explicitly racist is not to make a value judgment from a more informed contemporary perspective; perhaps with the exception of the out-and-out propagandists, 'these were the teachings of science at its best for its own time'[79], and we would do well to evaluate current theory in the same critical light.

The advent of Darwinism might have diverted racial thought into more enlightened avenues, having established the fundamental kin-

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