

# **Social Psychology of Prejudice:**

*Historical and  
Contemporary Issues*

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# How I Became a Race Relations Specialist

Tom Pettigrew

Calling your seventh-grade history teacher a bigot was not appropriate student behavior in 1943 at Albert Hill Junior High School in Richmond, Virginia. My only defense was that, given her use of derogatory names for African Americans and praise of Hitler's anti-Semitism, the epithet was fully justified. The principal expelled me for the day, the first of several such incidents. These bruising encounters taught me early the power of southern norms in support of racial and religious intolerance. A tyranny on white as well as black citizens was required to maintain the region's racist system.

Growing up in the South of the 1930s and 1940s sensitized everyone to race as a primary social category. A half-century later, I hesitate to speculate on why I resisted the tyranny. One levels and sharpens old memories in reconstructing an explanation that connects with later events. But two important influences were undoubtedly critical: my immigrant Scottish family and Miss Mildred Adams.

Most of my boyhood friends felt much the same as I about racial matters. They lacked, however, the support of a family that sanctioned, even encouraged, resistant behavior. My father was a Scottish-American engineer, born and raised in the Virginia mountains. He conformed to the culture's dictates, but lacked the visceral racist feelings and attitudes of the Black Belt. My mother and grandmother were Scottish immigrants who harbored doubts about many aspects of American life. They reacted to my school expulsions by appearing at once in the principal's office to defend my actions.

Just as important was the influence of the family housekeeper. I have dedicated several books to Mildred Adams, for she fired me early with indignation over racial injustice. Gradually, gently, she allowed me to glimpse into African American life and sense how white supremacy limited the life chances and choices of black Richmonders. I vividly recall sitting in the basement every Wednesday afternoon when she did the wash. She would tell me about her life – its harsh beginnings in rural Virginia, her disappointment with New York City, where she went to escape southern segregation, and the limitations of her present life. Repeatedly, I experienced with her incidents that demonstrated the cruel reality of racism for everyday living. By the time I was 10 years old, the many psychological and cultural defenses that blind most white Americans to the racial injustice that surrounds them were no longer available to me.

It was not until 1951, however, that I learned I could pursue a career studying race relations. It occurred during a social psychology class at the University of Virginia. Until that point, I had thought of my concerns about race relations as strictly political, something you focused on outside of your career. It was an exciting revelation to me that social psychology allowed you to study, conduct research, and even make a living specializing in race relations.

Once my instructor learned of my interest, he advised me to apply to Harvard University's Department of Social Relations for doctoral work. Somehow he knew that Gordon Allport was writing a book on prejudice. I immediately followed his advice. Unaware of how arrogant it appeared, I mentioned in my Harvard application that I wanted to work with Allport on race relations; otherwise I was not interested in attending. Fortunately, Allport himself was in charge of graduate admissions, and my naïve impertinence did not prove fatal. Acceptance into the social psychology program began my 28-year association with Harvard University and gave me the special opportunity to work with Allport, a great teacher, social psychologist, and human being.

In sum, I did not become a social psychologist first and then chose race relations as a specialty. Instead, I chose social psychology in order to specialize in race relations.

*This account was adapted from:* Pettigrew, T. F. (1993). The power of events to shape theoretical frames: A personal statement. In J. H. Stanfield, II (Ed.), *A history of race relations research: First generation recollections*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.