

Social Psychology of Prejudice:

*Historical and
Contemporary Issues*

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Thanks to “old” friends! Retrospections and speculation about why I study prejudice.

Stephen C. Wright

When I was 8 years old my family moved to Montreal, Quebec. While we lived in the predominately English West Island, the neighborhood bordering ours was predominantly French. However, schools and communities were quite segregated, and I had relatively little contact with “the Frenchies.” When we did end up playing soccer or baseball in the same places, things went relatively smoothly. I don’t recall any serious intergroup conflict. Nonetheless, I clearly recall wondering why these kids who seemed so similar to me were simply not considered by my group to be candidates for friendship. However, a more significant event occurred when I was 11 years old. You see, our next-door neighbors were Jamaican immigrants, and 12-year-old Louis was one of my best friends. In those days, Montreal’s West Island was mostly white, and Louis and his family were the only Black people in our neighborhood. Louis and I were absolute contrasts. I was the smallest kid in the class, and a hyper, outgoing, big-mouth. Louis was the biggest kid in the class, and as quiet and gentle as they come. But we were buddies. One day another kid in our class called Louis a “big, dumb ape” and used the “n” word. My sister and I overheard this and were outraged. We immediately told the teacher, who condemned the outburst and admonished the offender. However, my sister and I were not satisfied with what we saw as inadequate punishment, and we began to organize. By the end of the day, we had recruited a large group of classmates. We quickly gathered on the front lawn, loudly demanding that we be allowed to deal with the offender. Imagine how we felt when most of our group of 11 and 12 year olds refused to leave when the principal told us to go home, and when the offending classmate’s had to be escorted to his mother’s car. The next morning, the Grade 5 and 6 classes were called to the gym. I was sure that my sister and I were in serious trouble, and we worried that we had made things worse for Louis. However, the principal’s speech that morning was about tolerance and the evils of name-calling. That was the first time I remember hearing the word “prejudice,” and that day sticks in my memory as one that confirmed for me what was right and what was wrong. And perhaps, it can also be blamed for instigating both my naïve conviction that sometimes enough noise can make the system do the right thing, and my continuing interest in collective action.

In my teens, I had the great fortune to get involved in a number of social agencies that served people with disabilities, recent refugees to Canada, and kids from the inner city. These experiences made me very aware of how my schools, and even my city were so much easier for me

to navigate than for members of these other groups. I was often angered by the ignorance, fear, and intolerance that many people showed, and like that day in Grade 6, many of these experiences came when it was someone I cared about who was the target of intolerance. There were many influential people in those years, but none more than Charles. This 9-year old taught me more about courage and resilience than anyone I met before (or since). Charles was blinded at birth as a result of a medical error. His father was never part of his life and his mother was an alcoholic. Charles had few chances. He lived in the worst part of town and his blank white eyes made him an easy target for bullies. It was easy to underestimate this kid, and initially I did. But, I learned so much as I watched this surprising kid take the jabs and ignorant comments of other children with a smile and a nod, and then with amazing skill quickly turn things around so that he was the center of a positive circle of friends. He easily attracted the help he needed from other kids not because they felt sorry for him, or obligated, but because they really wanted his attention and company. He had the most wonderful positive way about him. He would tell stories that were magical and well beyond his years. Yet, every time he entered a new situation, he would have to face the discomfort, the intolerance, and even the outright meanness of others. Yet, he thrived. In his presence, how could I, at 20 years old, not feel deeply the enormous privilege that I received as an accident of my birth.

Another influential day was the day my Grandmother's indignant rebuke humbled other members of her church organizing committee who had balked at an application from a Gay Men's organization to rent office space in the church basement. At a time when gay-bashing was still common, this small 80 year old woman stood up to point out the hypocrisy and intolerance of her colleagues and ensured that the room was rented and the new tenants welcomed with enthusiasm—somewhat disingenuous enthusiasm for some, but enthusiasm nonetheless.

As social psychologists, we are well aware of how we reconstruct our memories to fit our current understandings. Thus, I am certain that there are many other much more mundane influences on the many decisions that have led me to my current career and research directions. On the other hand, I like to think that I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Louis, to Charles, to my grandmother, and to a dozen other wonderful people who through their examples and their friendship allowed me to glimpse parts of the world I would otherwise never have seen. And maybe, just maybe, it isn't too surprising that I find myself intrigued by the important role that cross-group friendships seem to play in improving intergroup attitudes.