

Frustration and Authoritarian Personality as the Major Causes of Racial Prejudices

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In his book, *The Social Animal*, Elliot Aronson defines prejudice as the act of having hostile or negative attitudes towards a group on the basis of generalizations obtained from incomplete information (Aronson, 1995). This research paper seeks to describe how two causes (frustration and authoritarian personality), as described by Aronson contribute to racial prejudices. In the book, Aronson explains that frustration causes racial prejudices in that individuals facing diverse problems tend to be frustrated and blame their troubles on the lesser-liked groups in the society. These groups can either be distinct in terms of race, ethnicity or religion. This theory was first developed by Dollard et al. in 1939 and it is commonly known as scapegoat theory. On the other hand, when it comes to authoritarian personality, Aronson explains that people with such personalities tend to emphasize on things such as strict adherence to rules, low acceptance of out-groups and obedience to authority. Individuals with such personalities demonstrate high racial prejudice cases. Frustration coupled with authoritarian personality are the major causes of racial prejudices throughout the world.

Frustration or scapegoat theory explains that prejudice arises when an individual blames somebody else for their troubles. Indeed, scapegoating provides the individual with an opportunity to justify their misdeeds or failures and at the same time, maintain their positive self-image (Aronson, 1995). For example, if a person who is unemployed and poor applies for a job that he does not get in the end, they may tend to use other people as a scapegoat and consequently hate or develop negative prejudices about them. In other words, scapegoating involves an individual directing aggression and frustration towards other people or groups that are not the causal agents of frustration. Although many studies approach racism from an institutional or social-cognitive perspective, scapegoat theory proves helpful in the study of responses to immigration policies and affirmative action (Ponterroto, 2006).

Frustrations theory emerged in the 1940s as psychologists tried to conceptualize the causes of racial prejudices, and to explain why aggression and frustration was directed to lesser powerful groups. A good example would be economic recession where most governments and native people tend to blame immigrants for taking their jobs and being unproductive (Aronson, 1995). It is worth mentioning that this anger and aggression is directed towards the lesser-liked groups because the cause of the frustration is vague or too big to be attacked or blamed. In other words, the feelings of anger are directed away from the true cause of frustration, something that Echebarria defined as the impossibility to obtain specific desired goals.

Gordon Allport explained that the need for in-groups and out-groups arises from the interdependent nature of species whereby humans depend on each other for resources and information. This means that for survival, human beings need to cooperate and trust each other hence it is necessary that some degree of certainty with regards to obligations is mutual (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Here, every means that every member in an in-group must treat each other with fairness and kindness provided that cooperation with other group members exist. However, as groups increase in size, some symbols and signs are developed that differentiate 'good' group members with the 'bad' group members. The 'bad' group members become out-group members and they stop receiving equal benefits with in-group members. The in-groups then gain some level of moral authority which becomes more absolute overtime.

The tolerance levels of in-groups for out-group members decline and they end up disapproving the latter and might even demonstrate outright hostility towards them. Indeed, scapegoating arises when the in-groups consider themselves independent, and when the two groups are forced to work together to achieve a common purpose, they see it as a threat. The lack of cooperation and mutual trust becomes noticeable and none of the groups trusts the other to exploit the relationship. The relationship is then characterized with distrust which then leads to scapegoating when one group, especially the in-group encounters failures or difficulties

while working to achieve the set goals. The aggression and frustrations directed towards the out-groups feed on itself which results in even worse relationships than before.

From the perspective of racial prejudices, the in-group can be said to be whites while the out-group is blacks. Negative stereotypes have been developed and passed on that blacks are inferior to whites and are responsible for most crimes in the country (Stangor, 2009). It is these stereotypes that justify the feelings of aggression directed towards them. In the case where the economy is not performing as well as it should be, the whites tend to attribute this to the huge immigration rates from Africa. They might also argue that black people are not as productive as white people. Racial prejudice as a result of scapegoating is common in today's world where African-Americans are constantly blamed for crimes and other failures in the society (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Thus, the African-Americans become scapegoats for the real sources of misfortunes in the society. Aronson reported a study that found out that when people encounter frustrations, they tend to be more prejudiced. In the study, students were supposed to solve a challenging puzzle within an unreasonably short time, and their prejudice levels were examined before and after taking the puzzle. The finding was that they were more prejudiced after the puzzle.

A discussion on scapegoating and frustration as contributors to racial prejudices cannot be complete without addressing the persecution of Jews in medieval Europe. Jews were constantly blamed and persecuted for the tough conditions existing in Europe at the time (harsh economic conditions and failed war efforts) (Aronson, 1995). Following the black plague of 1348 that killed approximately 1.5 million people in England, the blame fell on Jews who were accused of knowingly spreading the plague. Another accusation was that they had angered God because they were not Christians. After the First World War, Nazi Germany was suffering from economic hardships and used Jews as a convenient scapegoat. Scapegoat theory proposes that

frustrations of the dominant group is the reason for the aggression directed towards minority individuals and groups.

The relationship between authoritarian personality and racial prejudice was first explained by Adorno et al. in 1950. The authors postulated that an authoritarian personality is developed in childhood where parents exercise harsh discipline (Aronson, 1995). As earlier mentioned, these individuals emphasize on obeying authority, strictly adhering to rules and they have low acceptance of out-groups. The scholars mentioned that these individuals record strong racial and ethnical prejudices (Lippa & Arad, 1999). Here, Aronson mean that individual differences have the ability to influence the level of prejudice, that is, prejudice is not only affected by external influences. He states that these kind of individuals have characteristics such as possession of conventional values, rigid social beliefs, they lack tolerance to weaknesses, are highly suspicious, are highly punitive and respect authority to an unusual degree.

Aronson's study also revealed that authoritarian individuals not only dislike minority groups such as blacks and Jews, but they also demonstrate high degrees of prejudice against these groups. He used F scale to measure an individual's authoritarianism and he found out that such individuals were brought up by parents who would use love and its withdrawal as a means of exacting obedience (Aronson, 1995). They are brought up in an insecure environment where they fear their parents and have unconscious hostility against them. Aronson explained that when a child who is brought up under such conditions grows up, they show high degrees of anger due to insecurity and fear, and direct this aggression towards lesser-liked groups in the society (Nelson, 2006). However, it is worth mentioning that the individual still maintains an outward respect for authority.

Individuals with authoritarian personality traits are typically raised by emotionally distant and strict parents who emphasize on rigid adherence to commands and rules. They

ensure that this is achieved by both physical and verbal punishment, and they strongly discourage independent actions and thoughts. When they become adults, this people tend to understand the world in terms of social hierarchy, often considering themselves to be of high status (Stangor, 2009). Consequently, they project contempt and hostility towards those they regard to as inferior. Here, the inferior are usually the lesser liked groups or minorities such as Jews and black people. They are tough on those they consider inferior and in most cases, they discriminate and prosecute them. Further, this theory on authoritarian personalities also explains that they tend to show their own fears and weaknesses to those they discriminate against. Aronson states that individuals who are prejudiced against one group will also tend to be prejudiced against others.

Authoritarian individuals lack tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity and are inflexible and rigid. They strongly resist self-examination and introspection which means that even when they possess incorrect stereotypes of a particular group, they most likely won't know about it. It is worth mentioning that these personalities are developed by social forces and particularly, how they have been raised. Adorno explains that it is the harsh upbringing and the feeling of latent anger towards their parents that makes them to displace the feelings they might be having onto minority groups (Stangor, 2009). However, this theory only applies to individual behaviors with regards to prejudices and cannot be used to explain wide prejudicial attitudes of groups.

With regards to racial prejudices, Adorno's theory can be used to explain why some white people are more prejudiced against black people than others. In fact, not all whites hold prejudices against black people. Using a combination of concepts from the scapegoat theory and authoritarian personality, a reasonable explanation can be given to this difference in attitudes of members from one in-group. This means that a white adult who was brought up by harsh parents who emphasized on following strict rules will tend to be prejudiced against

minority groups. On the other hand, those raised under moderate conditions will tend to be open minded and acknowledge that all human beings are equal and should be treated as such. Another example would be the killing of Jews Nazi Germany. Germans prosecuted Jews because they felt they were superior and that the Jewish people were responsible for the harsh economic conditions existing in the country at the time (Aronson, 1995). Worth noting is that not all Germans supported this prosecution. These differences in ideologies and standpoints can be explained using authoritarian concept of personality.

A discussion on racial prejudices would not be complete without discussing its impacts on individuals and the society as a whole. The effects of daily prejudice goes beyond determining relationships between members in the society. Indeed, those affected by prejudice racial judgments tend to develop low self-esteem (Ponterroto, 2006). They lack sense of belonging in the society and become unsure of where they belong in society. Overtime, they develop anger and hatred against those holding prejudice against them, and inwardly for having those characteristics that others hold prejudices against. This shows how racial prejudice negatively affects the society because the victims of prejudice become unable to live up to their true potential.

Furthermore, the behaviors of the person holding the prejudices is also negatively affected as they harbor anger and anxieties and might even be forced to change their daily activities because of how they feel towards somebody else. Stigma can also be created due to the presence of prejudices (Ponterroto, 2006). Projection of stereotypes and insensitive actions on minority groups can create the feeling of lessened social value, something that will determine how the target group will become during future interactions. Stigmatized individuals develop anxiety and their personal expectations with regards to life are lowered. This means they are in a no-win situation as the prejudice devalues them and once their behavior does not conform to expectations of society in terms of standards and norms, they are said to be deviant.

In fact, in-groups might consider the deviance to be as a result of a physical or psychological problem. On the other hand, if the individual in the stigmatized group adopts the attitudes and behaviors of the in-group in order to escape prejudice, then they are considered deviant by their own group. For example, in the past, black people who adopt behaviors that are more associated with white people are labelled as Uncle Toms, Oreos or are said to have joined certain automotive clubs.

In conclusion, racial prejudices can be said to be caused by two main factors: authoritarian personalities and frustrations. Aronson explains that individuals tend to direct their frustrations to individuals from minority groups, something that is commonly known as scapegoating. The white person may be feeling that the tough economic conditions in the country are caused by Mexican or black immigrants hence they develop prejudice against them. In real sense, the causes of the economic conditions are way too ambiguous or complex and do not involve the immigrants (Aronson, 1995). Here, the members of the in-group (white people) develops racial prejudices against those of the out-groups (black people) and directs their frustrations to them. On the other hand, authoritarian personality is another reason described as a cause of racial prejudices. Aronson explained that children who are raised by harsh parents grow up to become aggressive towards their parents and minority groups. This means that how prejudiced an individual is depends on how they were brought up. Here, the major determinant of aggressive behavior is the personality trait of an individual.

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