ABSTRACT

                This article reviews research from the 1940's,
1950's and 1960's on the effects of discrimination on blacks. Data
from these studies indicate that adverse cultural restrictions have
fostered a unique and distinctive black personality. Among traits
identified are: a negative or inferior self-image, pessimism about
the future, attachment to the group, and an intense need among
adolescents to appear in a personally favorable light. Geographical
location was found to be a significant variable in anxiety over self
identity. Discrimination on the basis of color was found to be most
detrimental to the black's sense of dignity and integrity. A
pessimistic philosophy, high aspiration level, and low frustration
tolerance define the core conflicts of the black personality. A study
(Goff, 1949) of the perceptions and attitudes of upper and lower
income New York City children and adults showed that Negro-white
relationships, ridicule, radio and movie stereotypes, aggression from
white children, and physical abuse from white adults rated as the
most difficult experiences. Victimization is seen responsible for
negative attitudes and skepticism over American ideals. (KG)

Is There A Unique Black Personality?[1]

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The Black American represents one of the minority, oppressed and under-privileged groups in the United States. The available opportunities for achieving economic, social, personal and political needs are more limited for the Negro group than for the majority White group. And for blacks such opportunities are greatly more limited than for any of the other minority groups in America. Since the overt behavior of the suppressed groups in America tends to differ from the behavior of the majority group, it may be inferred that the needs of these two groups are also qualitatively different.

As early as 1924, social scientists and writers have inferred that the black personality is possibly unique. It was felt that the social and psychological reactions of blacks, as well as those of other oppressed groups, differ from reactions of the majority culture. Herbert Miller (1924) spoke of the "oppression psychosis" of oppressed groups. Oppression meant the domination of one group by another in one particular area of functioning or in all areas of activity. Psychosis was defined as persistent and exaggerated personality traits and emotional attitudes produced by being oppressed. Miller indicated oppressed persons are defined by a characteristic "chip-on-the-shoulder" attitude; a supersensitivity to inferred slur; suspiciousness of others' intent; and a subjective point of view which

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severely limits their capacity to take an external or objective view of others. One outgrowth of their exposure to the constantly unpleasant and lowly opinions of themselves is the internalization of a massive inferiority complex. Such inordinate inadequacy feelings characterizes the "Negro" groups. The constant frustration of being in an inferior position readily breeds aggressive motives. The object of the aggression is the perceived oppressors. For this reason, Miller conceptualized the "Negro" group as unduly aggressive in some situations. But the common traits of inferiority, frustration and mutual restriction among blacks serve to create a group solidarity and an unverbalized closeness. This solidarity is one predicated on mutual suffering. Thus, the mutual banning together and aggressiveness aimed at a common enemy serve to compensate somewhat for the generally internalized inferiority. In a positive vein, the compensatory mechanism may also involve the internalization of those traits felt to be good in the White majority culture. This role adoption, based on identification with the aggressor, leads to over-achievement in the intellectual area, or an intensified drive to accumulate the materials, goods, and wealth which are perceived to be dominant motives in the major culture.. Within the in-group, the forced restriction has resulted in the creation of a unique black culture in the areas of music, drama, humor and the arts. Many of these traditional black cultural traits have spread to the majority culture and have been adopted into the mainstream of American life.

Kardiner and Ovesey in 1953 studied 25 "Negro" residents of the Harlem ghetto in New York City. They concluded "the acceptance of the White ideal has acted on the Negro as a slow but cumulative and fatal poison." (p.267) This conclusion is based on the premise that "the conditions of life for the Negro are so distinctive that there is an actual alteration of the pressures to which he must adapt. Hence, he develops a distinctive

personality." (p.266) Limitations in social opportunities are thought to account for the difference in the personality pattern and the specific personality traits shown. These limitations are particularly detrimental to the black personality because a black is held to the same ends but is severely handicapped in the means made available to him.

In 1958, Karon undertook an extensive investigation of the personality of Negro and White residents in the South and North. He found eleven personality traits unique to the "Negro." These traits centered in the areas of handling aggression, interpersonal relations, attitudes toward work and affect. Differences between Negroes and Whites could not be accounted for by the extraneous factors of age, education, vocabulary, residential region, and so on. But Karon did find that Northern Negroes who had never lived in the South were more like Whites in their personality configuration than like either the Southern Negroes or the Negroes who lived North after having emigrated from the South. The findings were not felt to be an artifact of the research method but were directly attributed to the severe effects which caste sanctions can have upon the personality of oppressed groups.

The present writer in a study in 1965 found that black adolescents in the Greater St. Louis area show more indications of pathology in their personality, a greater tendency to falsify data about themselves and a more intense need to appear in a personally favorable light than did blacks or Whites of the South previously tested with the same psychological test. Adolescent black males revealed more pathology in the personality than did adolescent females or black adult females. Some variability in findings was attributed to the greater discrepancy in ideology and practice in the Midwest than that which exists in the South where caste sanctions are more definite and behaviors are more overtly defined. The sex differential reflected the greater pathology usually found in males although in black males

the pathology is compounded by the lack of adequate masculine role models
and scapegoating by black females. (Mosby, 1965)

Other research efforts in the 1960's continue to show that no matter
how investigations attempt to partial out the effects of living conditions,
family income, type of neighborhood, number of children in the family, edu-
cational level of the parents and so on, final results continue to depict
evidence of a qualitative difference between blacks and Whites. Deutsch
in 1960, and Lott and Lott in 1963 arrived at these same conclusions. There-
fore it is possible that though the black and and White child live in proxi-
mity to each other, even in the same slum environment, that they do not
share the same world. The physical world is the same but the psychological
world is not the same. Indeed the experience of reality varies with per-
ception.

The psychological world of stimuli, perceptions and responses for the
White child appears to be one of hope, optimism and the chance to better his
life--if he struggles. The psychological world for the black man appears
to be one of frustration, apathy and no chance to better his life--even
if he struggles. The parallel of expectations is then qualitatively dif-
ferent for the black child than it is for the White child. The inevit-
ability of frustration, failure and feuds with the majority environment at
an early period results in suppression or denial of the positive assets,
creative ability and psychological resources which the young black child
has. Too often the formalized school setting, instead of serving to
encourage these positive abilities, merely serves to eradicate them for all
posterity.

It appears then that the difficulties of the black are not due entirely
to factors of poverty, sensory or cultural deprivation but to the differen-
tial fact of color. The differential social valuation accorded because of

color is inferred to be finalized in a specified set of behaviors and attitudes. Since these behaviors and attitudes figure significantly into later personality development, it can be expected that the later personality of the mature Negro adult will be qualitatively different. Different personalities encompass different needs. Satisfaction of these needs require different remediation or circumvention policies. Therefore, if the end product is to be the same for the black and White child, then a qualitatively different approach has to be utilized. The approach required is differential for the White and black child simply because the two are subjected to qualitatively different experiences.

The most detrimental effect of social valuation based upon color lies in the impact upon the self-image. The central problem of adaptation for the Negro involves attempts to salvage his self-esteem. Traditionally this self-image has been seriously deflated. Basic pessimism rather than optimism pervades as he confronts the daily stress of discrimination and poverty. Adaptation attempts, in spite of the stresses encountered, a basically pessimistic philosophy, high aspiration level and low frustration tolerance, comprise the core conflict for the black personality. From this core conflict radiates a host of specific adjustment patterns and behaviors calculated to maintain personal integrity, in spite of the adverse conditions which comprise the nurturing environment for growth and development.

In that the modes of adaptation will vary for different blacks, as reactions vary among all people, then there is no one basic personality characteristic of the black group. However, there is a core conflict which all black persons must master, if the resulting personality is to be an adequately functioning one. It appears that no black person escapes all of the frustrations presently inherent in being black. Rather, he meets these difficulties "on the way up" as well as "on the way down." If he is not

exposed to the overt restrictions and rules, then he is exposed to the covert, "socially nice" type of discrimination. Whereas overt restrictions may be met on a larger scale by lower-class blacks, the covert discrimina-' tions of avoidance, exclusion and indirect aggression are encountered more readily by middle-class black persons. In many urban areas there was a time when black teachers were not denied positions of teaching black pupils. They were simply processed and interviewed for employment in rooms different from those used to process White applicants. Administrators could then maintain to their consciences and to the public that discrimination was not being employed in the hiring of qualified applicants--while they rational- ized that separate facilities were equal and hence not discriminatory, and that a differential pay scale was necessary, for some unknown reason. This example typifies the covert, less direct discriminatory stress to which well-educated, well-groomed, well-mannered and even distinguished blacks can be and are exposed. And this one example can be multiplied to many with documented instances from the interpersonal, political, housing and other economic areas of the black's life. When a multitude of such instances are encountered daily, it is no wonder the black man struggles to control aggression, that he grows impatient with his lot and that he demands a restoration of integrity. It is a mark of and a tribute to the resiliency of human nature and to the Black American that his cries have remained silent this long.

What evidence is there to document the premise that the effects of prejudice and discrimination are only adverse in quantity and eventually lead to qualitative alterations in personality. Many persons have felt that prejudice or the resulting caste sanctions was good for the black person or at least did him no harm. Others have simply shut their eyes to the practice, facts or effects. The reasoning has been that because the

Southern culture was a "self-consistent" one the Negro was given a secur-
ity he did not find in the North. Therefore it was felt that the Southern
black person, most severely exposed to caste sanctions and discrimination
on both overt and covert levels was not disturbed by these practices.
Others generalized the prevailing life conditions did not differ for either
Southern or Northern blacks appreciably, that in general they were un-
promising--and that there was little anyone could do about it. The state
of affairs was shrugged off simply as "that's life" or felt to be best for
the black because he is inferior and does need someone to care for him,
if he is to survive.

But the impact of oppressive and discriminatory experience does appear
to be adverse and most threatening to the black's sense of personal inte-
grity and dignity. A report on research into the perceptions and attitudes
of those who receive the blunt of discriminatory practices follow. The
study reported is dated 1949. But it is one of the few research efforts
into the feelings of the victims of prejudice. Since this date research
efforts devoted to the topic have been meager. The lack of effort apparent-
ly reflects a minimum interest in this area.

Goff (1949) interviewed 150 black children, 10-13 years, and their
parents about types of prejudiced treatment, their reactions to it, and
advice given by parents. She used upper and lower-income groups in New
York City (where overt sanctions against the free movement of minority
groups was slight) and St. Louis (where more restrictive practices are in
effect with reference to Negroes).

She found 95% reported difficult experiences in Negro-White relations.
The most frequent problem was ridicule (77%), radio and movie stereotypes,
(50%), actual aggression (41%) from White children and physical ill-
treatment from White adults (11%). Girls were more alert to subtle mani-

festations of prejudice than boys; lower-income children were more sensitive
to implied prejudice than upper-income children. Heavily segregated com-
munities led to cultural isolates (such as the St. Louis area ghettos). What
of the feelings of the children? Their most frequent feeling was resent-
ment in situations where they encountered ridicule, physical ill-treatment,
aggression, and indirect disparagement. Inferiority feelings were most
often aroused by rude treatment and discrimination. Fear was not often
admitted (probably because the children were ashamed to do so) but occurred
most frequently in response to aggression. (Girls admitted fear more
frequently than boys). Indirect disparagement was the derogatory treatment
most likely to be accepted as "true" by the children. That is, such treat-
ment caused them to question their own adequacy. Boys and upper-income
girls were more likely to fight in response to ill-treatment than lower-
income girls. Parental counsel to the children stressed withdrawal and
and avoidance when confronted by discrimination. Only 42% of the children
reported this as helpful. The inefficiency of these traditional modes of
acting may have implication for the current militant impatient movement
among young blacks today (who were the children of this study).

To summarize, this study on prejudice as seen by the victimized
stresses a cluster of three perceptions. First, feelings of victimization,
that is, that the victims are subject to irrational rejection, criticism,
hatred, ostracism, fear and negative stereotypes. Secondly, such negative
attitudes are felt to evolve simply because the victims differ in racial,
religious or social-economic factors. It is felt few attempts are made
to see what's good in a person, to judge him by his individual character
rather than by his minority reputation. Third, is a realization that
democratic ideals so highly displayed and preached in our educational or
religious institutions and home rearing, more often than not,

are not actually confirmed, in daily face-to-face situations with minority members, either in the neighborhood, at work, at church or in business contacts. This discrepancy in American ideals and daily reality jolts one's conscience, faith and belief.

To reiterate, is there such a thing as a unique and distinctive personality of the Negro? Data from studies conducted in the 1940's, '50's and '60's would appear to show that there is. The distinctive configuration of personality traits and problems found in Negroes appear to be unique to them rather than an outgrowth of artifacts in research procedures, techniques or measures. This distinct configuration also confirms the fact that indeed "there comes a point at which quantitative development releases qualitative change..." (Cox, 1965, p. 5). Developmentally and psychologically for American blacks, too much all-encompassing and adversive cultural restrictions appear to have engulfed blacks so that qualitative alterations (not necessarily maladaptive but in response to an alien and exploitative environment) develop in and behavioral functioning. Thereafter, the black organism is distinctly different from "a normal."

I submit, therefore, that the frontiers of psychological research and application in the 1970's must include objective, respectable and normative data, within a separate field of inquiry broadly labeled "Black Psychology," if Psychology is to deal with the fact of individual differences in man.

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