

## Contemporary Conceptualizations of Prejudice: A Psychoanalytic Perspective<sup>1</sup>

Jill Betz Bloom

*This paper first addresses the history of the study of intolerance, or prejudice, in the in the social psychology of the United States Secondly, the article locates the study of prejudice in American social history. Historicizing prejudice illustrates the specific historical and cultural dimensions of prejudice and, specifically, reveals the irrational and unconscious modern forms of prejudice, conceptualizations that are undertheorized in social psychology. A psychoanalytic depth analysis is presented, one that attempts to broaden both the conceptualization of prejudice and its context to include the social cultural world and the world of the unconscious. In this respect a distinction is made between the conceptualization of prejudice as a rational, universal occurrence, and “modern” forms of irrational prejudice, that are revealed to be more “symptom” of cultural anxieties than their cause.*

**Key words:** American history, intolerance, prejudice, psychoanalysis, social history

1. Trabalho apresentado nos Encontros sobre Psicanálise e Intolerância - 18 a 22 de fevereiro de 2008. Realização: Centro de Estudos sobre Psicanálise e Intolerância (CEPI), em parceria com o Laboratório de Estudos sobre a Intolerância (LEI), da Universidade de São Paulo.

## Introduction

Racism in the United States has replaced anti-Semitism as the contemporary North American preoccupation and obsession. But, what is “race”? Who is raced? How stable is it? Does race matter? As a U.S. Supreme Court Justice replied when asked to define obscenity, that while he could not intelligibly define it, “I know it when I see it” (Higgenbotham, 1992). So, too, do most North Americans assume they know race when they see it, and they, too, are at a loss to define it. Or, is there not such thing as race? Contemporary race scholars argue that race was a tool invented by white Europeans to justify their conquests. Ancient Greeks had no word for race, and Jews, Irish and Italians were all once seen as members of inferior races, who over time became “white” as they moved into mainstream North American culture.

Historically and culturally, definitions of race, and accordingly of racism, are shifting and contradictory, leading one prominent race theorist to define race as the “ultimate trope of difference”, and as artificially and arbitrarily contrived to produce and maintain relations of power and subordination (Gates, 1986). During most of the last two centuries the prevailing notion was that race was inborn. Law and science were then used to argue that skin color or facial structure was a window into one’s racial status. Modern molecular science, however, reveals that the boundaries of “race” are not skin-deep; at the molecular level there is more variance within racial groups than between them (Gilroy, 2000). The outward signs on which most definitions of race are based – skin color and hair texture – are dictated by only a hand full of genes. But the genes of two people of the same “race” can be very different. Conversely, two people of different “races” can share more genetic similarity than two individuals of the same “race” (Bamshad and Olson, 2003).

These facts and refutations have contributed little to the understanding of race or to the revision of racial prejudices and racist practices. Which inevitably raises the question, what are the inroads into the revision of racist and other prejudicial beliefs? What theories, research and methodologies are adequate to the task? Exploring these avenues, and assessing their adequacy, is the subject of this paper.

Intolerance, or prejudice as it is called in the US, has historical dimensions both in its call for greater comprehension, most notably following WW II; but also in the study of prejudice itself, largely within the disciplines of social psychology, sociology

and to a lesser extent within history and philosophy. In the States, prejudice has, for the most part, been the subject matter of the social sciences, alternating between focusing on the individual level or on the societal level, or both.

Understanding intolerance or prejudice, is to begin with a problem of definition. I mean this not just as a semantic issue, that is, what words or concepts to use among those commonly cited in social psychology and sociology. To iterate these commonly used definitions would fail to acknowledge that words and concepts are not static, universal terms; rather, they are dynamic, historical and cultural and have shifted in usage, motive and agenda over time and place.

What I want to point out is that we've been confined and consigned to a set of definitions to particular ways of conceptualizing what prejudice is, and by default, how prejudice "works". Such definitions restrict us to descriptive, individual and societal based cognitive, social learning theories. Moreover, they prohibit us from a more historical, dynamic, depth-based understanding of prejudice. How and why such limitations have come to be is specifically what I want to focus upon here, and the discussion I want to engage in with you this evening. What I want to offer, as my title suggests, is a psychoanalytic perspective that dynamically addresses the needs and desires different prejudices fulfill. Rooted in psychoanalytic theory but situated within American history it considers unconscious characterological factors as well as social and cultural ones that reflect and promote, or refuse and demote different prejudices.

First, I will review the history of the study of prejudice within the academic disciplines of American psychology and sociology. I will then locate the study of prejudice in American social history, in order to illuminate the historical and cultural dimensions of this work, a focus too often absent in North American psychology. I will conclude with a psychoanalytic perspective that attempts to broaden both the conceptualization of prejudice and its context to include the social cultural world and the world of the unconscious.

### **History of the Study of Prejudice**

The earliest work on prejudice in the US was part of the developing field of social psychology in the 1920s, originally as part of the study of attitudes. Following World War II, Social Psychology came into its own and was refocused in its efforts to make sense of the atrocities of the War through the study of conformity, compliance, obedience and specifically, prejudice. Gordon Allport's seminal book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, set the course and terms for much of the study to this day. Where the definition of prejudice has shifted over the last 50

years, the variations are of degree, not magnitude. In 1954, Allport defined prejudice as “an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization”; in 1965, social psychologists defined prejudice as “an emotional, rigid, attitude... toward a group of people”; in 1996 as “an unreasonable negative attitude towards others because of their membership in a particular group”; and in 2001, “as a positive or negative attitude directed toward people simply because they happen to be members of a specific group” Jones, (2001).

These definitions suggest several specific things. First, the “universal-feature argument” (Cushman, 2000), that prejudice is understood as a universal occurrence caused by natural processes or inherent structures of the mind and is activated by a supposed universal tendency to create in-groups and out-groups by generalizing about others and creating stereotypes. Prejudice, it is said, is directed toward people solely because of their group memberships, not, for example, toward individuals’ dispositional traits. Secondly, prejudice is generally considered to be an *attitude* towards others because of the groups to which they belong (Jones, 2001). Of note, prejudice has usually been thought of as a negative attitude directed toward members of other groups or “out-groups”; more recently, prejudice has been considered to be positive as well – noting that at the same time people view out-groups unfavorably or negatively, they also view members of their own group, or “in-group” favorably or positively. Because prejudice is considered to be an attitude, it has been thought appropriate to study prejudice as one would study any attitude. Attitudes, for example, are evaluations that are based upon affect, cognition and behavior; thus, attitudes towards social groups are assumed to be based upon three sources of information: 1) *affective information* or feeling toward group members; 2) *cognitive information* or beliefs about the characteristics of group members; and 3) *behavioral tendencies* or overt acts that treat individuals differently according to group membership (Jones, 2001). Viewing prejudice as an attitude has also provided a way to integrate such related constructs as stereotypes and discrimination. In this regard, it is theorized that a negative stereotype leads to a prejudiced attitude that may lead to discriminatory behavior and practices. Much of the research, empirical and theoretical, that has evolved from these concepts addresses the function and formation of prejudice. In regard to function, three aspects are identified: the *cognitive function*, a process of categorization and sorting self and others; the *ego-defensive function*, the notion that negative perceptions of others elevate self concept; and the *social function*, it is what helps individuals to fit in and identify with their own group. Cognitive processes are thought to lay the foundation upon which stereotype and prejudices are built or formulated, as do social learning models that, in effect, teach one what and how to think, believe and behave (Jones 2001).

Such a focus is consistent with the concept and theory of *ethnocentrism*, a form of prejudice that protects group identity in economic, social and political terms. Ethnocentrism is thought to be universal – where groups are, ethnocentrism is – and is thought of as singular, one of degree not multiple with different kinds of prejudice.

For the most part, what such research and theory directs one toward is the understanding of prejudice as more of a conscious process than an unconscious one; as functional more than ideological; as universal not historical or cultural; and as something that can be worked through, eradicated or de-formed through institutional means, e.g. legislation and science. Methodologically, such research historically has approached the study of prejudice empirically more than theoretically; with descriptive analyses rather than depth analyses; leading to more simplistic as opposed to complex models of theory and analysis. This is not to diminish the explanatory power and importance of such research; yet, it is but one dimension of a multi-dimensional subject, that by design – that is research design - occludes or diverts us away from the multi-dimensional aspects of prejudice.

### **The History of Prejudice in North America**

What I want to turn to now is the history of prejudice in North America, in an attempt to illustrate that prejudice is both cognitive and cultural, and a conscious and unconscious process – that beyond the cognitive dimensions is the non-rational or irrationality that is in need of explanation. This historical rendering is undertaken for several reasons. First, in an effort to add more dimensionality to the conceptualization of prejudice, I will outline the changes that took place historically and culturally that moved the focus of prejudice in the US from descriptive ethnocentric differences to irrational ideological ones. Secondly, drawing attention to the historical and cultural dimensions of prejudice reveals the inadequacy of descriptive models of explanation and calls for more dynamic, and I will argue, psychoanalytic analyses. Further, the US, given its particular history and culture, has come to be preoccupied with the pathology of prejudice that has overshadowed its more dialectical reality, a reality that acquires more meaning through an appreciation of unconscious processes.

Anti-Semitism, racism, classism and sexism are historically specific modern forms of prejudice. Attention to the history of the generalized – or as some argue, over-generalized (Young-Bruehl , 1996) – notion of ethnocentrism allows for a more limited use of the term. We see historically that there are prejudices that are not universal, ones that appear and grow in specific contexts. They are prejudices

aimed not at limited groups – a tribe, an ethnic group, or a nation – but as *marks of difference*, particular qualities that are found in and across groups. “A person who hates what “black” signifies hates “blacks” wherever he or she finds or imagines them – in one’s own family, as well as in groups one does not belong to and places one has never been” (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 28). Antisemitism, for example, flourishes in Japan, where Jews are absent. These more ideological prejudices are “prejudices that have consolidated – not originated, but consolidated – uniquely in the modern world”(p. 28); they presuppose specific modern conditions. Ethnocentrism, too, have a history. Prejudices against different out-groups have changed over time; however, the distinctions between ethnocentric prejudices and what I’m calling, ideological prejudices are ones that are fundamentally different.

Historically, this distinction is marked by a shift, using anti-Semitism as an example, from ethnic prejudice against Jews’ religious practices to a more intense and generalized, ideological prejudice against Jews – the key sign of anti-Semitism – the charge that there is a powerful Jewish money conspiracy, reflects the fear and envy among America’s emerging entrepreneurial middle class during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Anti-Semitism was something different from anti-Jewish hostility.

The rapid pace of industrialization in America following the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Civil War, along with the many social, economic and political changes that followed, contributed to the solidification of “modern” ideological prejudices, as they were increasingly institutionalized by science and legislation.

“Jim Crow laws” that restricted African Americans’ political and social progress after the Civil War freed them from slavery – and, bolstered by pseudoscientific eugenic race theory – relegated them, as a prominent American historian notes, “to a second American slavery” (Vann Woodward, 2002). Immigration restrictions similarly reinforced by “scientific racism” and legislation limited the migration of “nonwhites” – southern Europeans, Irish, and Asians. Women, too, were theorized into a separate sphere of biological reproduction, and characterized as an inferior sex with limited social and legal rights.

The intensity and rapidity of social and economic change, industrialization and urbanization during these years, was bewildering, disorienting and uprooted the young and shallow roots of American social order (Wiebe, 1967). What took centuries to develop in Europe, for example, occurred over a few decades in America. A community based rank-ordered social system turned instantly into a class-based system. A personal social order was supplanted by an impersonal one – that along with unheralded opportunities – was characterized by competition, distrust, fear, anxiety and uncertainty.

Modern ideological prejudices are generally, backlashes against movements of equality; “they are regressive prejudices that reinstate inequalities and

distinctions when the force of movements for equality has been registered and often (unconsciously) rejected (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 30). As psychoanalyst Ernst Kris (1975) noted, “Everywhere in Western civilization there exists some sort of link between egalitarian beliefs and the growth of prejudicial attitudes. Prejudice replaces social barriers of another kind” (Young-Bruehl, p.469).

Since the Second World War and specifically following the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that championed the civil rights of African Americans, women’s rights and gay rights, individuals and agencies have moved to foster equality and to eliminate prejudices. As such movements have been undertaken, the specific qualities of ideological or irrational prejudices have become clearer, largely because they are so resistant and recalcitrant to change and so difficult to understand. For example, “overt racism”, or open racist attitudes have been replaced by what is referred to as “modern racism” or “covert racism”. Intolerance goes underground. Legislation that reinforced prejudices earlier has been replaced by legislation that prohibits prejudice. But the needs these prejudices serve stay very much the same. Sometimes the need simply finds new targets when the familiar ones are harder to hit. “Political Correctness” a contemporary North American social form of anti-prejudice sanction, a kind of social modeling, may usefully suppress anti-Semitic, racist, sexist or homophobic slurs, however, it has been less than effective in reducing prejudicial beliefs, in that it serves more to inhibit than to analyze. An alternative contemporary explanation for racial difference has been to naturalize difference, an approach that relies upon biological and genetic explanations of difference. In different ways, each falls short.

### A Psychoanalytic Perspective

Literature Nobelist Toni Morrison has argued that to understand race and racism, and I would broaden this to include all forms of intolerance, one needs *perspective* not attitudes, *context* not anecdotes and *analyses* not postures (1992).

In this final section, I want to focus on the specific contributions a psychoanalytic perspective provides in the analysis of irrational ideological intolerances. Within psychology, as detailed earlier, the study of prejudice has been conducted largely by social psychologists, with a focus on cognitive and learning models. There are of course exceptions within social psychology, most notably Adorno, Horkheimer and Frankel-Brunswick’s work on the “Authoritarian Personality”. Following WW II, this was a theory specifically focused on anti-Semitism, and one that was indebted to psychodynamic motives and character traits in its description and explanation of both the authoritarian and tolerant

personalities. My intent here, however, is not to address specific psychoanalytic theorists or theories; rather, to look more broadly at psychoanalysis' structural theory of the unconscious that theorizes how needs, desires, drives, fantasies and fears operate - that which can be said to be the irrational dimensions of beliefs and behaviors. It is not Psychoanalysis, *in toto*, that I hold up as a model, or one to provide models for understanding prejudice; for it is only recently that Contemporary Relational Psychoanalysis moved North American Psychoanalysis outside the realm of the intra-psychic to include the cultural and relational context. That is the subject of another paper. Instead, I want to describe an approach, an attitude, or as I've called it, a perspective that takes account of irrational unconscious and conscious processes that, I argue, are historical, and accordingly constituted in and by culture. Again, North American culture is my focus; other cultures, with their own histories, and sets of values, have their own unique intolerances, though of course there is overlap across cultures in kind if not in construct.

To illustrate how psychoanalysis as a structural theory can contribute to a more depth-analysis of modern ideological prejudices, I will present a formulation put forth by Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, an historian and psychoanalyst. Clearly formulaic, and even reductionistic in its diagnostic distinctions it nonetheless, offers an inroad to what I noted in the introduction of this paper, was lacking.

Young-Bruehl (1996) considers her study of character structure to be both psychological and social. She notes that there is no empirical evidence that people who are prejudiced are any more pathological than the general population. In fact, many people have prejudices instead of pathologies. They have targets outwardly instead of inwardly at themselves.

Anti-Semitism she suggests is an obsessive prejudice, the sort of prejudice that people of rigid, superego-dominated characters often display. Of course, other forms of prejudice have taken this turn in America - it is the "new enemies" in any number of forms; currently in the US the "new enemy" is illegal immigrants. Obsessional characters, she points out, are cut off from their own feelings and intentions, and project onto victims the capacity for economic or social conspiracy, or cleverness. Obsessive characters' envy and turn on their "enemies"; are fearful of and admiring; paranoid and threatened (Young-Bruehl, 1996).

Racism in America is a hysterical prejudice, a prejudice used unconsciously to appoint a group to act out in the world the forbidden sexual and sexually aggressive desires that are repressed. Racism symbolizes sexual power or prowess and sexual desires by bodily features - skin color, thick hair, muscularity, and equates strength, size and darkness with primitivity - all that is prohibited in "civilization". The "victims", like with classism are "lower". Racism is a prejudice of desire for regression. And racists are people, in the manner of hysterics, who



prevent themselves from regressing by cordoning, or splitting off their desires. In the unconscious, a fantasized part of themselves is not “killed off”, but kept in its place – inferior to and lower than.

Sexists, finally, are usually men, who cannot tolerate the idea that there exist people not like them. Their prejudice has a narcissistic foundation. The narcissistic prejudices, she argues, “are prejudices of boundary establishment, of genital intactness asserted and mental integrity insisted upon”. On the other side of the narcissist’s boundary is not a “them” but a “lack”, or a mystery. Men who “defect” from masculinity, as homosexuality is viewed, threaten men as much as women do. In either situation there is a felt threat to their control, body integrity, and hold on what they believe is inherently theirs’.

What Young-Bruehl’s typology begins to sketch out is that individuals’ felt inequities in the social world – real or fantasized – are played out and enacted psychically through prejudicial beliefs and projections. Prejudices, it becomes clearer, are multiple, not singular and universal, and each has its own sets of dialectics on display. Sexist or narcissistic preoccupations, for example, concern dominance and subordination, lack and fulfillment, the haves and have-nots; and obsessional prejudice is beset with anxieties about powerlessness and control, envy and rage. Where, racist and classist unease is around regression and control, privilege and deprivation, “primitive” urges and “civilized” restraint. Psychic anxieties in the form of prejudices, are, in a sense, windows into cultural anxieties. Through psychic structure we see social structure; psychic economies reflect social economies. Coded and internalized in the unconscious, often below the threshold of conscious awareness, the psychic mechanisms of projection, projective identification, displacement, denial, repression, rationalization, intellectualization, among others, do the “work” of converting social, cultural conditions into variously felt injustices, envies, fears, perceptions and beliefs – in short, into prejudices. In this respect, it is not prejudices that need to be eliminated, or for that matter, can be eliminated, which is what mainstream social psychologists have worked toward, they are “the symptom”. It is the social and cultural structures that institutionalize inequity, that constitute and pit “self” against “other”, that requires rethinking, reassessment of the economic and emotional “costs”, and revision.

Returning to my opening discussion on race and racism in North America, despite the public rhetoric of diversity and multiculturalism, race continues to be one of the most charged, difficult and vulnerable discourses today. This is because of the ways in which racial experience has been constructed in the US. It is polarized and polarizing, trapped in a dichotomy of deprivation and domination, inclusion and exclusion. Race in America is a black and white issue, literally and

metaphorically. As Kimberlyn Leary (2000) points out, this is the “deep structure” of [North] American cultural conversations about race. “In a sense”, she writes,

... racial experience [in North America] may have something in common with what psychoanalyst Donnel Stern called unformulated experience – that is, experience that is not yet reflected on or linguistically encoded but that nevertheless remains part of our everyday psychic grammar. (p. 6)

What is called for is a new consciousness on the individual and systemic level, each in dialectical relation with the other; it is a raised consciousness to break down defensive barriers and makes invisible structures visible. An awareness that can reveal the interdependency of “self” and “other” that is, an understanding of what Edward Said calls the “oppositional logic” through which the culturally normative “self” is made normative in opposition to the non-normative “other”. African American writer Ralph Ellison, in his essay, “What Americans Would Be Like Without Blacks” describes this clearly.

Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the ‘outsider’. Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. But this is tricky magic. Despite his racial difference and social status, something indisputably American about [blacks] not only raised doubts about the white man’s value system but aroused the troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, his is also somehow black (West, 1993, p.1).

In closing, my hope is that what I have outlined here – North America’s particular expressions of prejudice – is understood to be just that: North American. It is what I am most intimately familiar with. More specifically what I hope is that it provides a framework and jumping off point to discuss the cultural “fault lines” that give rise to other “symptomatic” expressions of intolerance, here in Brazil, as well as in other cultures and other countries.

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### Abstracts

*Este trabalho aborda, em primeiro lugar, a história das pesquisas sobre a intolerância, ou preconceito, na psicologia social norte-americana. Segundo, aponta o lugar de tais estudos dentro da história social daquele país. Esse tipo de estudo revela as dimensões históricas e culturais do preconceito e, especificamente, mostra as formas irracionais e inconscientes mais modernas de preconceito, que são pouco teorizadas na psicologia social. Apresenta-se, também, uma análise psicanalítica profunda que procura ampliar tanto a teorização do preconceito como seu contexto, para englobar não somente o mundo sócio-cultural, mas, também, o mundo do inconsciente. A este respeito, faz-se uma distinção entre a conceitualização desse tema como fenômeno racional e universal, e as formas “modernas” de preconceito irracional, que podem ser vistas como “sintomas” das ansiedades culturais.*

**Palavras-chave:** História norte-americana, intolerância, preconceito, psicanálise, história social

*En primer lugar este trabajo aborda la historia de las investigaciones sobre la intolerancia o prejuicio en la psicología social norteamericana. En segundo, señala el*

*lugar de tales estudios dentro de la historia social de ese país. Este tipo de estudio revela las dimensiones históricas y culturales del prejuicio y, específicamente, muestra las formas irracionales e inconscientes más modernas del prejuicio que son poco teorizadas en la psicología social. Presenta también un análisis psicoanalítico profundo que busca ampliar tanto la teorización del prejuicio como su contexto, para englobar no sólo el mundo social cultural sino también el mundo del inconsciente. E ese respecto se hace una distinción entre, la conceptualización de ese tema como fenómeno racional y universal y las formas “modernas” de prejuicio irracional que pueden ser vistas como “síntomas” de ansiedades culturales.*

**Palabras clave:** Historia norteamericana, intolerancia, prejuicio, psicoanálisis, historia social

*Ce travail aborde, en premier lieu, l'histoire des recherches sur l'intolérance ou le préjugé dans la psychologie sociale nord-américaine. Deuxièmement, il relève le lieu de ces études dans l'histoire social de ce pays. Ce type d'étude dévoile les dimensions historiques et culturelles du préjugé et décrit, plus spécifiquement, les formes irrationnelles et inconscientes plus modernes du préjugé qui sont peu théorisées en psychologie sociale. Ce travail présente d'ailleurs une analyse psychanalytique profonde qui a pour but d'élargir, et la théorisation du préjugé, et son contexte, pour y englober non seulement le monde socioculturel, mais aussi le monde de l'inconscient. À cet égard, nous faisons la différence entre la conceptualisation de ce thème en tant que phénomène rationnel et universel, et les formes “modernes” du préjugé irrationnel qui peuvent être considérées comme des “symptômes” d'angoisses culturelles.*

**Mots clés:** Histoire nord-américaine, intolérance, préjugé, psychanalyse, histoire sociale.

Versão inicial recebida em fevereiro de 2008  
Versão aprovada para publicação em março de 2008

**JILL BETZ BLOOM**

Ph.D. Psychologist, Doctor in psychology from Boston College, Core Faculty at the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology, in Boston, MA, USA.

33 Garrison Road, Brookline, MA.

02445-4445 USA

Phone: (1 617) 734-3243

jill\_bloom@mspp.edu

zabb@aol.com