Prejudice and Me: A Sociological Memoir

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Memoir

“My parents are communists.”
“I hate Mexicans.”

These two secrets permeated my childhood years in the Boyle Heights community of East Los Angeles during the late 1940s. The first secret, I couldn’t share with most of my friends and classmates. The second, I couldn’t share with my parents. Both weighed me down.

Both Mom and Dad were active members of the Communist Party during the McCarthy years of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Some of their friends—one of whom was a favorite teacher of mine—were fired because of their Party membership. A few others served jail sentences for their political beliefs. During the same period, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a Jewish couple from New York, were executed in 1953 for allegedly conspiring to give atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. Worldwide protests failed to stop the execution.

My paternal grandfather, who lived with us, and my maternal grandparents, who lived in the next house, were also communists. They were part of the secular Jewish movement of the early twentieth century that emerged from labor union struggles of Eastern European immigrants. Jewish-identified, in terms of culture and history, they were all atheist in terms of religion. The struggle for racial equality, a worldview supported

by my family members, was always a major issue in the Communist
Party’s working class organizing and was a common topic of conver-
sation in our house.

A thin cloud of fear cast a shadow throughout my childhood. Mom
and Dad told my sister, Laurie, and I that we could not tell our friends
and classmates about their Communist Party membership. **Would
Mom or Dad be arrested or killed? Would I inadvertently say some-
thing that would get them into trouble? What would happen to me if they
weren’t around?** These fears dominated my thoughts as a child.

When I was seven, for example, I was playing in our living room
while the front door was open and the screen door latched. I heard a
knock on the door and saw two men in dark suits and hats. Before
I could stand up and ask them what they wanted, my mother rushed
past me and practically snarled at the two men.

“What do you want?” she said.

“We’re from the FBI,” one of them said as they flashed their badges.

“We’d like to talk with you.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” she said firmly and slammed the door
in their faces. When she turned toward us, her face said that she was
furious.

“What’s wrong?” I said. “Why did you slam the door on those men?”

“They were from the FBI,” she said. “That’s how you deal with the FBI.”

“What’s the FBI?” I asked. “They had badges.”

“They are like the police and they are trying to harass us,” she said.

“But, why? What did we do?”

“They don’t like communists.”

“Why not?”

After a few seconds, she said, “They don’t believe in equality between
Negroes and whites like we do. They also don’t respect the rights of
workers.”

“But they had badges.”

“It’s ok now. Don’t worry. Go back to your game,” and she left the
room.

The FBI men knew we were communists. **How did they know? Who
told them? Mom is usually a very polite person but she slammed the door
on them. Are they mad? Will they do something to hurt us? Maybe it
would be better if we weren’t communists. No secrets. No FBI visits. No
threats from the president. If only we could be just like everyone else.”
Prejudice

My parents and I held sharply different views about Mexicans. Ending racial prejudice and discrimination was always a big issue in our house since Mom and Dad were strong advocates for racial equality. The People's World, the west coast Communist Party newspaper, always contained articles about fighting for racial justice. The paper also sponsored annual picnics which would now be called “multicultural ethnic celebrations.” We purposely lived in a racially integrated, working class neighborhood. My parents never told us directly not to use terms like “nigger” and “wetback,” but I knew that they were bad words that shouldn’t be spoken. When we finally got a television in the early 1950s, Mom and Dad prohibited us from watching “Amos and Andy,” a sit-com featuring two white men with darkened skin acting out negative racial stereotypes about blacks. The second censored program was “I Led Three Lives,” a fictional account of an FBI counterspy who infiltrated the Communist Party. I don’t recall having any negative feelings toward Mexicans or blacks while attending Evergreen Avenue Elementary School. I even remember taking a Mexican girl on a group “date” to celebrate our graduation.

Everything changed for me in September 1954 when I entered Hollenbeck Junior High School in the seventh grade. An integrated school, Hollenbeck had the well-deserved reputation of being one of the roughest in the city because of fights and gang activity. Being a tall, gawky, introverted kid who knew nothing about self-defense, I was both terrified and terrorized at Hollenbeck. It was not unusual for my friends and me to be confronted by some of the older Mexican boys.

“Give me your money,” one of the boys would say.

“I only have a nickel,” I would reply and would reach into my pocket and hand it to him.

“You’re bullshitting me. Give me the rest.”

“No, that’s all I have.”

“Let me see,” and then he would search my pockets.

“Shit,” they would say and walk away, sometimes after delivering a sharp punch to my stomach. The nickel in my pocket was for them; the rest of my money was stashed in my shoe. Most of the time, this strategy worked. Sometimes I was forced to take off my shoes and they took the rest of my money.
Even our food wasn't safe from the Mexican American students. Some would come around and demand the food that my friends and I would bring from home. These "moochers," as we called them, sometimes responded to a firm "no" and other times simply took what they wanted. My friend, Andrew, who was even meeker than me, brought an extra sandwich to give to the moochers.

The locker room in the gym was also a dangerous place. My bare buttocks became a favorite target for snapped towels. The Mexicans laughed when I flinched. Once, I tried to defend myself by putting my hands out to absorb the snap of the towel, but that wasn't acceptable. The guy said, "Let me do it once and I'll leave you alone." So, I did. And he did stop, until the following day when the process repeated itself. I stopped showering and would leave the locker room as quickly as possible.

I hated Mexicans. Virtually all the people who harassed me were Mexican. At some level, I knew that not all Mexicans were bad but I had enough negative experience to fuel my prejudice. In light of my parents' egalitarian politics, I felt guilty for being prejudiced. I knew that they wouldn't understand or approve.

When I finally told them about my prejudices toward Mexicans, Mom and Dad were extremely troubled by my experiences and my reactions to them. "Maybe they are hungry," Mom suggested. "There's a lot of poverty in the Mexican community due to discrimination."

"No," I replied, "they are assholes. They just want to hassle us. Anyway, what about the towel snapping in the locker room?"

"Maybe they're angry because of the racism that they and their families experience," Dad said.

"I don't care," I replied. "They have no right to take it out on me. I didn't do anything to them."

"Just because a few Mexicans are bothering you," Mom said, "it doesn't mean that all Mexicans are bad people."

"I don't give a shit. Everyone that hassles me is Mexican. Why are you taking their side? What about me?"

These conversations were difficult for both my parents and I. Mom and Dad were upset because they weren't sure what to do or say. Of course, they wanted me to be safe and were concerned that I was being hassled. On the other hand, my Mexican classmates were fulfilling
many of the negative stereotypes that my parents always denied; not exactly the vanguard of the proletarian revolution. I was mad that I didn't get more support from my parents and I resented being on the frontline of their political battles. They never asked me if I wanted to live in an integrated neighborhood. I felt guilty about being prejudiced and felt bad that they were disappointed in me. I stopped talking to my parents about my feelings toward Mexicans. After the first semester though, we moved to a safer neighborhood.

The House Across the Street

Our next house was in another transitional neighborhood farther east. Metropolitan Park was right across the bridge from City Terrace where my grandparents and aunt had moved. A lot of my parents’ left-wing Jewish friends also lived in the area. The local school, Woodrow Wilson Junior/Senior High School, was much safer than Hollenbeck because it had fewer fights and fewer gangs. Things were looking up, but my complex experiences with Mexicans continued.

Shortly after moving in, I began to hear things about the house across the street. It was a white stucco house with Spanish tiles on the roof. Although the living space was on a single floor above a garage, the house was built into a small hill so it was necessary to walk up an external stairway to the front door and patio. A few scraggly vines wound around the railing. It looked down onto our ranch-style house on our quiet street consisting of eight or nine detached, single-family homes.

The house itself was less significant than the people who lived in it. The Sanchez family was rumored to be the center of Mexican gang violence in the neighborhood. Older, tough-looking teenagers with hair slicked back into ducktails hung out in front of the house, drinking and talking in loud, Spanish-accented voices. Their beat-up cars were either low-riders where the bottom was only a few inches off the ground or on a "dump" where the back stood about one foot higher than the front. Both styles were associated with Mexican gangs. I was usually uncomfortable, but sometimes I was scared.

One day, when my parents weren't home, a dozen teenagers and their cars gathered on our side of the street, right in front of the picture
window that looked out onto our narrow strip of lawn, only five yards from the curb. They talked and laughed and drank while puttering with their cars. The open curtains in the window were another reason for my fear because the teenagers seemed so close to the house. Not only did I have to protect myself, but I also had to protect my ten-year-old sister who was left under my care. I remember being afraid to enter the living room. I feel so exposed. They’re so close. They can see me. I have to close the drapes. How can I do it without being seen? My solution: crawl across the living room floor, military style. With my heart pounding, I got down on the floor, slowly inched my way across the living room and finally reached the cord of the drapes. I could hear them talking outside, but I kept my head down so as not to be seen. As I lifted my hand to pull the cord, I began to worry about what would happen if they saw the drapes closing. Would they know it was me? My heart pounded even faster. So, I decided to close the drapes very slowly so that no one would hear or see them closing. It must have taken me 15 minutes, but I managed to close them. Only then could I relax and feel secure in my own living room.

While I remember this incident rather vividly, I cannot recall my exact source of fear. What did I think they would have done if they had seen me? I also realized that I did not have any hard evidence that anyone from the Sanchez family were gang members. I can’t ever remember the police being called to the house. I don’t remember being hassled by anyone who lived in the house. I had a cordial relationship with Victor, one of the sons who was closest to my age. One of the younger Sanchez girls, Betty, was friendly with my sister and they were frequent visitors in each others’ homes.

My mother and sister confirmed the lack of police presence at the Sanchez house. My sister also heard the rumors of gang activity, but never saw any proof.

“What was it like inside the house?” I asked her recently, many years after the incident.

“Neat and orderly and large,” she replied, “with an aroma of fresh tortillas.”

Not the image of criminal headquarters.

Maybe, the Sanchez family was just another family, different from ours but living normal lives like any other family in the neighborhood. Maybe the house across the street was just another house.
Birdie

The school bus stop was just up the block and several dozens of us piled on each day for the 15-minute ride. Aside from occasional name calling, the trip was usually uneventful. One punk kid, smaller and younger than me, was called "Birdie" because of the high-pitched whistles he would make. He could get away with a lot because he was reputed to have older brothers who were in a Mexican gang. Although I disliked him, we didn't have much to do with each other.

One day, he got on the bus just before me. Instead of taking a seat, he lay across the aisle, blocking my way and the rest of the line. We all asked him to move but he just lay there whistling. I stood there with increasing anger welling up in me. *What an arrogant punk! What right does he have to hold up the whole line?* I fantasized about what I should do to him. *Kick him with all my might! Put my knee on his back to crush his spinal cord! Sit on him! Smash him with my book bag!* Then I thought about his brothers and this made me even angrier.

Eventually he got up and took a seat. Still seething, I too sat down. My intense anger frightened me since I normally saw myself as a laid-back person in full control of my emotions. *Where did it all come from? How could I even think of doing such violent things?* A few minutes later, the bus left for another day at school.

Hostage

Some friends and I were playing handball against the garage behind David's house. A year older than me, David was my best friend who also had communist parents. He, too, hated Mexicans. He was shorter than me and had red hair with freckles. Howard, who had non-communist parents, was even shorter than David and was a little chubby.

While we were playing handball in the alley behind David's house, Juan, one of the neighborhood toughs who had just gotten out of reform school, came walking toward us. Since he was older and bigger than us, we looked at each other anxiously.

"Let's go inside," said Howard. "Juan is a mean Mexican."

"I never had any run-ins with him," said David. "Let's just ignore him. He's got just as much of a right to be in the alley as we do."
"I'll go along with David," I said, with some trepidation. "Let's play."
"I don't know about this," said Howard.
When he reached us, Juan stopped and said, "Go get me some empty bottles so I can take them to the store and get the deposit money."
"Where are we supposed to get the bottles?" David said.
"Go into people's yards and take them," replied Juan.
"That would be stealing," David said.
"Get me the bottles," Juan said with a cold stare.
He spoke in a normal conversational tone but his threats were all implicit. We were so intimidated that it didn't occur to us that there were three of us, while he was only one person. We began to leave, each of us thinking that we would just disappear into Howard's house down the block until Juan left. Suddenly, he grabbed my arm and said, "You stay here with me." I was a hostage. Shit, what do I do now? Are they going to split and leave me with Juan? We were really stupid for not going inside like Howard had said.

I was too scared and too slow to run away. During the interminable time it took my friends to return, I must have been terrified. Did we talk? Did we play ball? Did we just stand there? My only memory is of Juan showing me how low he wore his khaki pants, a symbol of being tough at the time.

David and Howard finally returned, having stolen a sufficient number of bottles from the neighbors' yards to please Juan. "See you," he said and walked away with the bottles.

"I'm so glad to see you," I said to David and Howard.
"Are you ok?" David asked.
"Yah," I said.
"We should go tell our parents," Howard said. "Maybe we should report this to the police."

"My parents would probably tell me that Juan is an oppressed Mexican whose family has been victimized by discrimination," I said. "There's no way that they would call the cops. I'm not going to say anything."
"Me neither," said David. "That's the Communist Party line."
"My parents don't believe that crap," said Howard.
"Fucking Mexicans," I said. "I'm going home. I hate feeling so helpless. I wish I knew how to defend myself."
The Jews versus Mexicans Game

David, Howard and I, along with several other friends, were playing touch football on the street in front of David’s house one morning, as we often did. The quiet side street was perfect for football. It was wide enough to accommodate parked cars on each side of the street and two cars passing each other in the driving lanes. There were often lots of empty parking spaces which gave us more room to play.

During the game, Victor Sanchez, my across-the-street neighbor, rode up on his bike and stopped in the middle of our playing area.

"I'll bring some of my friends this afternoon," he said, "and we'll play you guys. You up for this?"

We looked at each other, timidly, trying to figure out how to say "No."

"Well, what do you say? You afraid to play us?"

One of us must have said "Yes" because Victor told us he'd be back later with his friends. "Shit," said Danny. "What do we do now?"

"We're going to get killed!" said Howard. "What are we going to do against Mexican gang members?"

"Maybe we just shouldn't show up," said Danny.

"We'd look like chicken shit idiots," I replied.

"We have a couple of hours," said Mort. "Let's practice and hope for the best."

When David's father heard about the game, he was delighted. Ed, like my parents, was a communist and he was thrilled that the Jews were going to have a social interaction with members of an oppressed minority group. A loud, assertive man, Ed insisted on refereeing the game. We never had referees in street football but we agreed. I hope that this would reduce the chance of my getting hurt.

At the appointed hour, Victor and his four friends arrived on their bikes. A few of them were bigger than us and a few smaller. They're Mexicans. They must be stronger than us. We agreed on some ground rules in terms of boundaries and goal lines. They also agreed to the referee. The historic Jews versus Mexicans game began. We were evenly matched in our skills. In other words, neither team was very good!

I have two distinct memories of the game. The first is that the referee was outrageously biased—against us. Ed continually cheated for the Mexicans! He spotted the ball in their favor. If there was ever a question
of whether a pass was complete or incomplete, they got the benefit of the doubt. Communists had to lay low during the McCarthy period but here was an opportunity where Ed had direct control over Mexican–Jewish relations. Politics took precedence over both family and fairness.

The second memory is that one of the Mexican players broke his arm during the game. This type of injury was unusual in street football and I don’t know how it happened. He was lying on the ground, writhing in pain. Ed stopped the game and ran over to help him. He glared at us and said, “This is your fault. You’re being too rough.” Although we were all pretty upset too, we looked at each other in disbelief. How could meek Jews be too rough for Mexican gang members? Ed packed the kid into his car and took him home and the teams disbanded.

“It’s too bad that guy got hurt,” I said, “but we really did ok in the game.”

“Yah, the Jews stood up to the Mexicans,” said David. “Do you think they’re going to beat us up for hurting one of their friends?”

“I thought about that too,” I said. “Victor seemed worried for his friend but he didn’t seem mad at us.”

“We better watch our backs,” said Howard.

Later, when David and I were alone, I said, “Your dad cheated for the Mexicans.”

“I know,” he replied. “Then he yelled at us for breaking the kid’s arm.”

“My dad probably would have done the same thing,” I said. “Communists are so concerned with helping Mexicans that they can’t even give their own kids a fair shot.”

No retaliation occurred and everything returned to normal. Although the big game had no impact on Mexican–Jewish relations in the neighborhood, it has stuck in my memory for more than 50 years.

Jason

All in all, my years at Wilson Junior High School did nothing to alter my anti-Mexican prejudice. This sentiment prevailed even though I wasn’t physically hassled by Mexicans at Wilson. Ironically, the one physical confrontation that I can remember at Wilson was with another white kid in the eighth grade.
Jason was also tall and lanky although he had blond hair and a big mouth. Usually, I ignored his curses and occasional anti-Semitic comments but, one day, after he called me a “four-eyed asshole,” I replied, “Fuck you, shithead.”

He stopped about ten feet from me, turned around and said, “What did you say?”

*Shit, what have I done? How do I get out of this and maintain any kind of respect from my classmates?* “You heard me,” I replied, trying to look fierce and self-confident.

He walked halfway toward me, stopped and shouted, “What did you say?”

“You heard me,” I said, trying to stand straight and tall with my fists clenched.

He walked closer until he was only a foot away. “Repeat what you said?”

By this time, I could smell his bad breath and stared directly into his blue eyes. I couldn’t tell if he was scared or angry. Anticipating a fight, a crowd started to form around us. I couldn’t back down even though a part of me wanted to run as fast as I could.

“I don’t have to repeat it,” I said in my most masculine voice. “You heard me the first time.” To my surprise, my voice sounded strong and steady. We continued glaring.

Jason then said, “I’d smash your face but I don’t hit people with glasses.”

I was terrified and didn’t know what to do. Remembering something I once saw in a movie, I turned around, handed my glasses to a friend, and turned back to scowl at Jason. We glared at each other for a while. I had no idea what to do when the punch would come, but I just couldn’t back down. Everyone was watching! I could barely remain standing I was so scared.

Finally, Jason said, “Fuck you” and turned around and quickly walked away.

I couldn’t believe it. I had called his bluff and he actually backed down! As he walked away, I thought about saying something but decided to let him have the last word. I had stood my ground and my masculinity and body were still intact. The crowd disbanded.

“That was great, Fred,” said my friend as he returned my glasses. “I’ve never seen you do anything like that before.”

“Thanks,” I said proudly. “He’s a prick.”
“Do you think this would have worked if he were a Mexican?” my friend asked.
“T don’t know,” I replied. “Mexicans would be more likely to throw a punch.”
“What would you have done if he hit you?”
“I have no idea,” I admitted.
I wanted to share this with my parents but I wasn’t sure how they would react. I wanted them to say, “We’re proud of you. You stood up for yourself.” More likely, they would say something like, “You should have just backed away. It was just words. You could have really gotten hurt.” I didn’t say anything to Mom and Dad.

On Blacks

I always wondered why I did not have the same prejudiced feelings toward blacks. First, I didn’t have any negative experience with black peers in junior high school. Vance, one of my few black classmates at Wilson Junior High, and I were candidates for the American Legion Award given to the top student at graduation. We were both studious kids whose competition with each other was a very friendly one. He ultimately won the award and although I was really disappointed, I knew that he was as deserving as me. Had I won, I would have felt a great irony as the child of communists receiving an award from a conservative, super patriotic organization.

The second reason for not having a strong anti-black prejudice was my experience working in black neighborhoods with my father. He was a slipcover cutter and I was his apprentice. We would take rolls of clear plastic into people’s homes and cut and pin it so that it fit snugly on each piece of furniture. We would then take the slipcover back to the shop where it would be sewn by black and Hispanic women. We went to poor black neighborhoods like Watts (now known as South Central) where some of the furniture should have been thrown out rather than covered in plastic. We also worked in black middle-class neighborhoods, like Baldwin Hills, where the homes were more upscale. We even worked in the home of Nat King Cole, the black singer who lived in an exclusive area called Hancock Park. We covered a couch in his den and I remember seeing a real gold record on the wall. During the course
of this work, I observed a wide range of blacks, some of whom fit the negative black stereotypes but most were hard-working people, just like my family. Some were very pleasant and others were not. Some were slovenly and others were fastidious.

Observing my father’s reaction to working in black neighborhoods also influenced my feelings toward blacks. During all those years, I never saw my father express any fear of being in black neighborhoods. We locked the car, just as we did in other neighborhoods. He selected restaurants based on the quality of the food, not the quality of the clientele. We were never robbed or hassled while on the job. His laid-back behavior reinforced the idea that it was safe to be in those communities.

Recently, I asked my mother about my father’s work experiences and she confirmed my perceptions. “He sometimes came home with stories,” she said. When I asked for an example she related the following:

My dad was in a working-class black home when the young son came in crying and told his mother that someone had hit him. Rather than consoling the child, the mother told him not to come crying to her but to go hit the kid back. My dad must have had a strange look on his face and the mother said: “You must think that I am a bad mother but, in this neighborhood, boys have to learn to protect themselves.” Ironically, my wife tells an almost identical story of how her middle-class Jewish mother dealt with a similar incident involving her brother when they lived in Brighton, a white working-class neighborhood in Boston.

Plastic slipcovers were less popular in the Mexican communities of Los Angeles and we did some work in a variety of Mexican homes. But, this was not enough to overcome my negative experiences with Mexican peers. I held onto my prejudices for many more years.

Los Angeles High School

By the end of the tenth grade, Metropolitan Park had become predominantly Mexican and most of our friends had moved to the Westside, so we moved to a third transitional neighborhood, this one tipping from Jewish to black. Mom and Dad had a better understanding of neighborhood dynamics, this time, and figured that they would live in the Pico/Fairfax area long enough to get my sister and I through high school. Our house was about five minutes from David and ten minutes from Howard.
I enrolled in Los Angeles High School, the city’s oldest institution. It was a diverse school, both in terms of race and ethnicity as well as social class. The students were about one-third middle-class Jewish, one-third working-class black, with the remainder being affluent whites and middle-class Asians. There were very few Mexicans.

At one level, the different groups got along pretty well and there were few fights. It was the safest school that I had attended. However, you didn’t have to look too deeply to discover racial problems. It was at LA High that I became aware of tracking, sometimes called ability grouping. My college preparatory classes were predominantly Jewish, middle-class white and Asian. The one or two blacks came from professional families. I saw other black students at lunchtime or during gym. My integrated school was internally segregated.

I was selected to be a member of Boys’ Senior Board, an honors-like organization that served as hall monitors. We had our own room where we hung out and wore distinctive-looking navy blue sweaters. We were the only students that could walk the halls without a pass. Members were exclusively drawn from the college preparatory classes and, therefore, were almost exclusively white.

Racial prejudice lay just below the surface. I remember my friend Lou—who was smart, athletic, good-looking, Jewish and liberal—was trying to decide which of two girls to ask to a dance. Lois was black and considered to be very attractive. Bobbie, white and non-Jewish, was considered to be plain looking.

“What should I do?” Lou asked me. “I have a choice between a shiksa skag and a schwartz.” “Shiksa” was a derogatory Yiddish expression referring to a non-Jewish woman, “skag” was the sexist term used to describe a girl who wasn’t pretty, and “schwartz” was a derisive Yiddish word (one step above “nigger”) used to refer to blacks.

“What do you like best?” I asked.

“I like Lois,” he replied, “but my parents would freak out! I think I’ll go with the skag. My parents can deal with shikses better than schwartzes.”

In spite of being uncomfortable with the language, I didn’t reply to either the disgusting racism or sexism of Lou’s comments. Since he was one of the few friends I had in the popular group, I was afraid to alienate him.

A few months later, several other white friends and I got together at someone’s house to form our own off-campus fraternity. We began
writing a constitution and got to the section about criteria for membership.

"No niggers," Doug said.

"What?" I said. "That's bullshit. That's outrageous. How could you say something like that?"

"I won't be in a fraternity with any niggers," he replied.

"I won't be in a fraternity that has that written into the constitution," I countered, "and I'm offended by your language."

I was shocked and upset that a good friend, someone I thought I knew, could think this way. Somehow, Doug's use of "nigger" seemed more outrageous than Lou's use of "schvartz," although both remarks were prejudicial. The other friends of mine who were present supported my position to be inclusive. But, something in their demeanor led me to believe that some of them would vote against individual black members but just didn't want it written into the constitution. The fraternity never got off the ground.

**Sociological Reflections**

By the time I graduated from high school, I still disliked Mexicans, but my prejudice had begun to dissipate. It was a product of not being harassed any more. I was neutral toward blacks because I didn't have any bad experiences with them. I also recognized the internal diversity of blacks. My parents' political beliefs may have "inoculated" me from some of the anti-black prejudice that was part of American culture. That is, their strong beliefs about racial equality, along with my own absence of bad experiences, counteracted culturally based prejudice.

On the other hand, my negative experiences with Mexicans, along with the negative cultural stereotypes, weakened the influence of Mom and Dad's pro-equality ideology.

Since I observed prejudice in some of my close friends (and in me), I never believed that all prejudiced people were monsters, like the Ku Klux Klan. The prejudiced people that I knew abhorred white supremacists, like the KKK, and wouldn't think of supporting legal segregation. It was an indirect and a more sophisticated form of prejudice.

It wasn't until graduate school that I was able to gain some perspective on my early experiences with race. In a course on race and ethnic
relations, I learned that although people of color are oppressed in the United States, individuals react to oppression in different ways. Some become political activists and revolutionaries, just as my parents expected. Others become involved with gangs and aggressively harass members of other groups as well as their own. Most, of course, are hardworking people who try to reach the socially prescribed paths of upward mobility. This is as true today as it was in the past.

Neither my parents nor I appreciated this complexity back in the 1950s. Mom and Dad romanticized Mexicans (and blacks) and couldn't figure out how to give me the support that I needed, both intellectually and emotionally, to deal with the harassment that I experienced. I overgeneralized from my limited experience and felt guilty about it. We all had simplistic views of race relations in the 1950s.

My next racial awakening took place as I began to teach and write about prejudice and discrimination as a professional sociologist. My childhood experiences helped me to appreciate the differences between different levels of discrimination. Institutional discrimination, which refers to the policies and practices of the government and its institutions, of the media and of large corporations, is almost always practiced by the dominant group against subordinate groups due to the power of the dominant group. In this case, Mexicans and blacks are the victims, as my parents always argued.

Individual discrimination, on the other hand, refers to the actions of individual members of one group against individual members of another. Just as dominant group members can harass subordinate group members, the opposite is also true. In this case, I was victimized during my middle school and high school years. The institutionalized white privilege that helped my parents get decent jobs and buy their own home, didn't keep me safe from individual Mexicans who were intent on harassing me, perhaps because they saw me as a member of the dominant group who was perceived to have unlimited access to social resources.

My early experiences also helped me to understand the complexity of race and ethnic identification which is both an individual and social process. I was white, a member of the dominant group, but I was also Jewish. Jews were heavily discriminated against prior to World War II, although anti-Semitism had begun to subside by the 1950s. Yet both of these identities paled in comparison to being the child of communists,
a group that was marginalized and stigmatized in the 1950s. As a child, this political identity was primary in my mind, followed by being Jewish and lastly, by being white. Most of my classmates, probably saw and treated me as white since they had no idea about my parents’ politics or my cultural background. Given my own experiences, I have empathy for people whose personal identity is inconsistent with how they are perceived; for example, dark-skinned people from Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic often identify as Latino or Hispanic, but are treated as black by the rest of society.

Even today, my views about racial conflict in the United States are still evolving. Having a black president was unthinkable in the 1950s when I was in high school. When Barack Obama entered the presidential race in 2008, I, like most sociologists, didn’t think he had much of a chance. Like millions of other Americans, I was elated when he was inaugurated in January 2009. Yet, I knew that we hadn’t entered the post-racial society that some proclaimed. Progress, yes. The end of racial conflict, no. But, in my lifecourse, such changes in race relations are important to note. What this means, only time will tell. On a personal level, I feel gratified to have the skills and the knowledge to question the racial status quo. The changes within me are something I would like to recognize. The kid who hated Mexicans became a sociologist of race relations. Who would have thought?

Note

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