Eliminating Prejudice through Education: The Foundation for Justice, Unity and Peace

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A definition of peace and the major causes of war are presented. The nature of prejudice is briefly explored. The five most harmful prejudices—racism, nationalism, classism, sexism, and religionism—are introduced and ways of eliminating them through education briefly discussed.

Almost everyone desires peace and many are willing to work for it, but most people do not even have a clear idea of what peace is. Many people define peace as simply an absence of war. Such a limited conception fails to acknowledge the positive and broad influence of peace and makes war the active force. It is as if we defined light as the absence of darkness or good as the absence of evil, rather than the other way around. Peace is the constructive force, like light and good, and war results from its absence. Peace is the state of health, whereas war is the state of disease, peace is life, war is death, peace is light and war is darkness. The UNESCO definition is comprehensive in scope.

Peace cannot consist solely in the absence of armed conflict but implies principally a process of progress, justice and mutual respect among the peoples designed to secure the building of an international society in which everyone can find his true place and enjoy his share of the world's intellectual and material resources. (cited in Brock-Unite, 1985, p. 3)

Peace is principally a process, not an event. The essential elements of the peace process, the prerequisites that must be met before peace can be
established, are progress in the areas of mutual respect, justice and unity necessary to build an international society. This broader concept of world peace is needed before the cessation of war will be possible.

Mutual respect is based upon knowledge of others. This knowledge is the basis of justice, which is the foundation of the unity needed to build an international society necessary for peace. Figure 1 illustrates the hierarchical relationship between the foundations of peace and the absence of those foundations that lead to war.

**Peace / War**

**Unity / Disunity**

**Justice / Injustice**

**Knowledge (Education) / Ignorance (Prejudice)**

**Figure 1.** Foundations of Peace / Foundations of War

Education to obtain true knowledge is vital to eliminating the prejudice resulting from ignorance that is the cause of injustice, disunity and war. The five most harmful prejudices in the world today—racism, sexism, classism, nationalism and religionism—deny the people of the world their "true place" and "share of the world's intellectual and material resources" (cited in Brock-Unte, 1985, p. 3).

Prejudice has always been with us and is the result of four main causes: 1) self-centeredness, 2) passion, 3) lack of morals and 4) blind imitation.

Self-centeredness or egotism is a natural trait in all of us. It plays an important role in our survival and development, but it can be destructive. Self-
centeredness causes us to value ourselves more than others, therefore people who are different from us tend to be looked upon as inferior. If we are full of ourselves and our own limited knowledge, then we are not open to others and new information. These idle fancies, vain imaginings and corrupt inclinations lead to prejudice.

Self-centeredness or egotism can be characterized in terms of identity and loyalty to expanding and more-encompassing structures of human relationships. First we have identity and loyalty to ourselves, then identity and loyalty to our family, then to our community, and so on, until it includes all humanity and life. Identity and loyalty are like expanding circles, with the larger circles encompassing the smaller as illustrated in Figure 2. Being loyal to one's self, family or community does not preclude loyalty to broader more encompassing levels. The peoples of the world have successively accomplished identity and loyalty at ever-higher levels. The current stage of human development is calling for identity and loyalty at the world level.

**Figure 2.** Circles of identity and loyalty.
As long as self-centeredness and its resultant prejudice and limited views of identity and loyalty are dominant in our world, the struggle for existence will continue along with injustice, disunity, and war.

Passion is related to self-centeredness and often involves the lust for power and possessions. Passion as used here refers especially to the lower or more animal characteristics and drives of people. Such things as jealousy, hatred, anger, and even love, are the compelling emotions that drive people to do irrational and harmful things. For instance, extreme love of a religion or country can lead to the killing of those of other religions or countries. When these passions overpower our spiritual and higher natures, then the struggle for existence with its attendant violence and affliction is dominant. Until humanity rises above the world of nature, they are captive to its influences and behave essentially as animals.

The lack of morals is the third major cause of prejudice. There is a general confusion about what is right and wrong. The breakdown in our moral order and the breakdown of the spiritual influence of religion are connected. People everywhere are turning away from religion because of its corruption, fanaticism and prejudice. Religions have been and can be important for building character, establishing love and unity, inculcating morality, protecting the welfare of humanity, preventing crimes and linking humanity with a higher power. The lack of morals has resulted in the over-emphasis of the materialistic and animal aspects of humanity.

Blind imitation of practices and beliefs is the fourth major cause of prejudice. People tend to believe and do what others around them believe and do. They
accept what their ancestors believed and did without much thought or independent investigation. Much of the prejudice that exists in the world today is the result of this blind imitation. Blind imitation is related to stereotyping. Stereotypes can be either favorable or unfavorable generalizations about groups of people. Stereotyping is a natural mental process humans use to make sense of their environment by developing categories. Stereotypes begin in the home and community and guide our thinking, values and behavior. Unfortunately, many of our categories of thoughts, feeling or actions are based on wrong information or blind imitation. Many of these are unconscious and unintentional, which makes it all the harder for them to be acknowledged and changed.

Blind imitation also leads to the belief that justice, unity, and peace are not possible. It is said that we have always had prejudice and war and will always have them because we are inherently selfish and aggressive. These conceptions must be examined because without resolving them our hopes and efforts for building a peaceful world will be paralyzed. Unless we independently investigate the truth, we will not be able to free ourselves from the outworn and harmful forms and ideas of the past.

We might better understand and deal with the prejudice that results from self-centeredness, passion, lack of morals and blind imitation if we see it as part of a continuum of social relationships. Allport, one of the world's foremost authorities on prejudice, has developed such a continuum that might be used for this purpose (see Figure 3).

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Predilection is a preference. These predilections are natural and inevitable, but if not monitored, can lead to prejudice. Prejudice is a rigid, inflexible and exaggerated predilection. A prejudice is impervious to change, even in the light of overwhelming contrary evidence. If a prejudice is acted out, it becomes discrimination, and if that discrimination is marked by aggression in word and deed, it is called scapegoating (Allport 1979b).

All prejudices that lead eventually to war are harmful, but five stand out as the most potent causes of war and as inflicting the most harm on the world today. These five prejudices are racism, sexism, nationalism, classism and religionism. Most people acknowledge that these are wrong, but few people have been able to address and rid themselves or their communities of them. All of them are propagated in our societies and schools.

Probably the most harmful and virulent prejudice in the world today is racism. Racism is the belief that one race is superior to another. This belief legitimates
unfair treatment of the so-called inferior race. No one is spared its derogatory influence. Racism not only harms those who are oppressed by it, but also negatively affects the oppressors. It divides humanity unjustly without scientific or moral foundation and leads to conflict.

Racism may be expressed on an individual or psychological level and the institutional or structural level. Individual racism is when a person believes that members of another race are inferior and feels justified in treating them inferiorly because of their race. Institutional racism is when the society or its institutions of an area systematically treat different races unfairly through such things as laws, customs and practices.

To understand the fallacy of racism, one most first understand the fallacy of race. Montagu calls race our most dangerous myth.

   It is not possible to make the sort of racial classifications that some anthropologists and others have attempted. The fact is that all human beings are so mixed with regard to origin that between different groups of individuals . . . 'overlapping' of physical characteristics is the rule. (1974, p. 7)

People artificially divided into various races according to physical characteristics such as the size and shape of their head, eyes, ears, lips and/or nose, and the color of skin, hair and/or eyes. The human race cannot be meaningfully segmented according to these superficial and secondary traits. For example, how does one classify people of mixed racial heritage? How do you classify people who have characteristics of more than one race? When one understands
the history of racial classifications, one begins to suspect its value in our world. This system of classification is not in itself necessarily harmful, even though its accuracy and usefulness are highly questionable, but its use as a method of categorizing people as inferior or superior has caused untold damage in the world.

We do differ in physical characteristics, but to suggest that these physical characteristics are legitimate reasons to put people in various degrees of subordinate status is not acceptable. It is quite clear that we all come from common descendants and that our physical differences are due to adaptations to our environments. To use these superficial physical differences to infer inferior mental, behavioral, or psychological traits is grossly unfair. It is even more unfair to deny human rights and separate people based on these differences.

Progress in eliminating this evil has been made during the past few decades. The outrage concerning racist practices in the world today is a sign of the growing awareness that racism is wrong. Racist policies and practices which have been existing for centuries are being discredited in this day and laws and institutions are being established to overcome the past wrongs, but much more must be done.

Like racism, sexism is based on physical, noticeable differences. It is obvious that there are genetic physical differences between the sexes. These differences are necessary for our continued existence. It is also possible that these genetic differences may result in differences that go beyond noticeable physical differences, but like other physical differences, these do not indicate
superiority or inferiority, justify inequity, or the denial of rights. Sexism or gender prejudice afflicts one-half of the world's population and is the cause of much direct and structural violence. Because of its harmful effects, much of the potential for improving the world is not available.

From biology we know that on the average, men and women differ in their rate of maturation and in their hormone production. We also know that these things can affect social, psychological, physical and intellectual functioning, but beyond that knowledge, it is only relative and value-laden conceptions that determine how we view these differences.

Women were considered of inferior physical strength and were relegated to inferior roles in all domains of life. Women have also been considered inferior to men intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and in other aspects of life. This prejudice is not founded upon scientific evidence and deprives both men and women of the benefits of the equality of the sexes. It has been manifested in the home, family, community, work place, politics, economy, and religion. Male-dominated institutions throughout the ages have encouraged this prejudice. Only as women are accepted into full partnership with men will the attitudes of society be balanced enough to allow the consciousness of peace to emerge.

Another structure and attitude that must be adjusted is excessive nationalism. Loyalty to one's country is important, but it need not be the cause of prejudice, hatred, or war. Like all loyalties, national loyalty need not exclude broader, more inclusive loyalties, such as loyalty to the world.
Nationalistic practices that were acceptable and helpful previously, are dangerous and inappropriate at this stage of development. At a time when the excessive nationalism displayed proudly throughout the world should naturally be decreasing because of the growing interdependence of nations, its pernicious influence seems to be spreading. Through advances in science and technology, particularly in transportation and communications, the planet has become a global village. Every nation is connected and interdependent with every other nation. As the world becomes a smaller and closer-knit global village, people will need to realize that the advantage of the part is best served through the advantage of the whole. The very concept of nationhood must be called into question in this age when the changing conditions call for a worldview and cooperation, instead of the current antagonistic and self-centered approaches.

Classism is another major barrier to peace. Economic and social class prejudice and injustice are rampant in the world today. The inequities are obvious, but solutions are withheld. Studies throughout the world have documented the disparities that exist between the opportunities and accomplishments of individuals in the higher and lower socio-economic classes. A comparison between economic wealth and life expectancy, education and other social indicators reveals a similar pattern of inequity (World Bank, 1985).

The gross inequities that presently exist between the higher and lower classes create a condition that is unlikely to allow peace. The extremes of wealth and poverty create instability, suffering and injustice on a level that is unacceptable. We cannot expect the poor and deprived of the world to sit by passively without food and the basic necessities while the rich have more than they need or can use, nor can we continue to expect the lower classes to continue to
receive unfair treatment and be victims of structural violence without more opportunity for justice.

The final major prejudice that must be overcome in our effort for peace is that of religionism. Religion has had a far-reaching and enduring influence on humanity and the development of civilizations. It is paradoxical that the same religions that have been the cause of the advancement of individual and collective development at one time should also be the cause of blocking that development later. Religion has inspired great contributions to humanity on one hand, and has been a barrier to advancement on the other hand. The same religions that preach love, brotherhood and the golden rule have also been the cause of tremendous hate, wars and prejudice. Throughout history we have examples of how religion has been used to regard the non-believers as unsaved and inferior. Such practices are contrary to the spirit and teachings of these religions.

Religious leaders of today continue to breed prejudices in their followers and continue to allow secondary theological differences to be the cause of disunity. Their encouragement of bigotry, fanaticism, imitation of old and harmful forms, superstition, attachment to outward forms and hatred of other religions is growing intolerable to both believers and non-believers alike. Their attachment to their own imaginations and their lust for power have divided and afflicted humanity for far too long. Religion must be combined with science in our search for truth and its true spirit of unity and love allowed to exert its beneficial influence on the world.
One of the first obstacles to realizing the goal of the elimination of prejudice is to accept that it is possible. If we are not convinced of its feasibility, its hopes of success are very small. Education is the primary and most potent means for eliminating prejudice. The first and most important step in this process is to eliminate these prejudices from us. Only when we have successfully dealt with these problems within ourselves will we be able to influence positively those around us. We must first acknowledge that we have prejudices before we will be able to deal with them.

If we take a developmental view of the progress of humanity throughout history, we will have a framework for understanding why, although our past has been filled with prejudice, injustice, disunity, and war, education, justice, unity, and peace should characterize our present stage of development. In much the same way that individuals experience successive stages of growth and development, humanity has gone through the stages of infancy, childhood and adolescence, and is now entering the stage of adulthood. The aggressive and selfish qualities that characterized our earlier stages of development must be cast aside for the more mature qualities of cooperation and reciprocity characteristic of the adult level of development. Understanding history according to the developmental view of the human race should help us in our process of enabling this world of conflict and selfishness to become a world of peace and unity.

We can live together in unity while retaining our differences. Such an environment of unity in diversity is the richest environment for growth and development. Being of a certain race, sex, class, nation and religion does not preclude the acceptance and appreciation of a different race, sex, class, nation
and religion. Each group has something to contribute to the whole and each can learn something from the others. We can accept people who are different from ourselves without losing our identity or denying our loyalty to our particular race, sex, class, nation or religion.

It will take time to realize the goal of the elimination, or at least some alleviation, of prejudice. The sooner we start and the more we can do to eliminate these prejudices from the body of humankind, the better it will be for everyone. If we cannot avert the natural consequences of continuing these misguided and harmful ideas and attitudes, at least we can lessen their destructive influence.

Formal education can play an instrumental role in the elimination of prejudices in our world today. We can enlist the services of the many dedicated teachers throughout the world in the battle against these life-threatening prejudices. By introducing the scientific knowledge that presently exists to support the concept of the oneness of humankind and the non-violent nature of humankind, and by developing the emotional, social and moral atmosphere for the translating of this knowledge into practice, such things as racism, sexism, classism, nationalism and religionism can take their place along with other outmoded ideas, such as slavery and female infanticide, in the history books as strange practices of the past.

World peace is imminent. It is the hallmark of humanity's adulthood. The process by which we will reach this level of development is yet to be seen. We can continue our present adolescent behavior in this world of adult needs and responsibilities until we destroy the world, or we can address these needs and
responsibilities in a more mature fashion to bring about the justice and peace for which we are longing.

We can play a leading role in assisting humanity to make the right choice by developing this desire for peace and by teaching how peace can be achieved. Peace has more to do with raising the consciousness and conscience of the people than with the signing of treaties or the limiting of arms. Education, both formal and informal, is the best means for creating the knowledge and attitude needed for peace. Establishing peace in the world is primarily a process of changing how we think about peace, which will affect how we feel about peace, and ultimately guide our actions in creating peace.

We often use scare tactics or negative reinforcement to get the message of peace across. This approach better suits the war mentality. A better method of encouraging peace is to use positive approaches, such as showing what a wonderful world it will be when peace is established. We need to give people the vision of peace by showing them models or examples of peace and its benefits. We need to begin the process of psychological and structural transformation fundamental to peace.
References


