



IN SEARCH

FOR the past decade, the American people have experienced the bitter harvest of 300 years of insensitivity and neglect. The "Negro problem," more recently the "black problem," has thrust itself on the consciousness of every American. Concurrently, the many facets and dimensions of this problem have slowly become apparent. The Kerner Commission has noted in its controversial conclusion that white "racism" lies at the core of America's racial turmoil. Whitney Young, Executive Director of the Urban League, has suggested, apropos of this conclusion, that the problem has been misnamed. The "Negro problem" is really the "white problem." White Americans must look to themselves, not to the Negro, for the solution to racism.

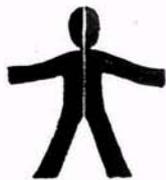
Such phrase making and allocation of responsibility open up areas that need analysis but they fail to provide the tools for any kind of resolution. "Sick, racist society" has become such a hackneyed phrase on college campuses that it has lost whatever value it ever had for analysis; to know that you are a "honkie racist" hardly promotes careful introspection.

The chorus of epithets has misled many Americans, white and black, in their efforts to resolve the wide range of issues related to the race problem. One frequently assumes when he hears the phrases "Negro problem" or "white problem" that the black American or the white American is a problem for someone. At this level of analysis, one can often

conclude that the Negro is a problem for someone else; "I've never had any problems with *them*, myself." Even Martin Luther King, whose nonviolent tactics raised important questions of conscience for most American whites, had little more impact on Northern whites than to convince them that Southerners had a massive Negro problem. Even at this point in history most Northern whites did not perceive their double standards.

More recently the "Negro and white problems" have been interpreted to mean that blacks and whites *have* a problem. The current vogue of black power, Afro-American culture, and Black Studies is an effort, not only to set the American record straight, but also to give the black American a sense of his worth, a "positive self-image," a black identity. The assumption behind this movement is that the black American has an identity problem in America. Regrettably, in concentrating on the "Negro problem" of identity, white and black Americans have failed to note that the white American also has an identity problem.

Whites feel secure and "safe" in a white society, but they seem confused and uncertain in a pluralistic society in which black power has real meaning. The white identity problem is different but it is no less real. For the white, meeting and dealing with blacks without completely dominating the situation is a new and profoundly disturbing situation. The white must now ask himself what his whiteness means, why he is, perhaps, uncom-



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fortable in this role, and what steps he can take to alleviate his difficulty. The white, no less than the black, is under pressure to "find himself" in a new society of equals.

Problem of White Identity

An awareness of the complexity and depth of the problem of white identity came for the authors during the first Greater Hartford Triple-T program held in the North End of Hartford in early 1970. Triple-T projects (Training Teacher Trainers) have grown up out of the realization that teacher education in America needs reevaluation. A willingness to depart from traditional patterns, to try new combinations of courses and methods, and to seek new experiences in learning is definitely needed. In Hartford, almost alone among the various Triple-T programs in America, the emphasis is exclusively on training teacher trainers in the educational needs and aspirations of the ghetto.

During the first two-week project of this type, some 20 white college teachers spent days and evenings in the North End of Hartford in the company of community people. After visiting homes, schools, and jails (some whites and blacks see little difference among these three) and talking with community and educational leaders, participants came away with a mixture of pessimism and hope. Discussion sessions following each day's activities further served to show the inordinate complexity of the social and educational prob-

lems of black and Puerto Rican people in the ghetto. The apparent inability of economic and political forces to meet these problems cannot help but produce a profound despair in the observer, not to mention the black who must constantly live these problems. In spite of all the adversities, the tremendous reservoir of strength in black and Puerto Rican mothers and fathers, along with imaginative proposals and programs already in existence, gave reason for hope.

At the level of observation and participation, the two-week program was valuable experience for the college professors. Yet it was at a far deeper level that the program had its greatest impact. Subtly and perhaps without the blacks intending it, participants, particularly the more vocal ones, began to encounter a curious dichotomy. The black leaders of the program tape recorded all discussion sessions, yet several professors who took notes were criticized by black participants. Repeated reference was made to white teachers failing to teach the ghetto child—all fault lay with the teacher.

In the sharp and occasionally angry evaluation sessions, black participants frequently criticized the white professors for

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Photo courtesy of the authors

Identity comes from being involved in a purpose and movement larger than oneself.

failures in the program—fault in this case lay with the professorial “students.” On several occasions, blacks asserted that they had come to work on the program with an open mind—they were above environmental influence—but whites present were charged with insensitivity, a product of a white racist society. One could talk individually with one of the black community leaders and sense the beginning of a close personal relationship, yet in the general discussion that same person could rely on stereotyped criticisms which closed off any interracial rapport. Several blacks admitted that they tried to avoid disagreement with other blacks in discussions at which whites were present.

Experience in Perspective

Recent events in the nation have only served to increase our awareness of this problem in racial understanding. Many black and white radicals have charged that blacks can-

not be held responsible for their violence in a repressive white society. Right-wing white violence is presumably another matter. The cries of white and black radicals for “power to the people” reject popular decisions which run counter to radical philosophy. In all of this the white liberal finds himself without an answer. Should he call for integration he will be criticized for tokenism; should he advocate “community control” he is charged by others with racism for refusing to work for integration.

The personal experience in Hartford's Triple-T has helped us place the broader national experience in perspective. In many respects the personal experience was profoundly frustrating, particularly to those raised and trained in the belief that talk and people-to-people understanding can somehow overcome generations of prejudice and misunderstanding. In the depth of our frustration one conclusion emerged. For two weeks the professors had been the minority, exposed

to the individual and collective views of the black community. In a sense we were asked to conform to the black view of the urban scene, to accept the black interpretation of Hartford's problems. As professors raised questions and challenged elements of the program, they appeared to be challenging this new "system." In effect society's roles had been reversed. Without intending it, blacks had denied the individuality and identity of the white professors. This vital experience gave us an insight far beyond the visual and descriptive parts of the program into the nature of the black experience in white America.

This insight into our own prejudices and the reaction that we had to a denial of our "identity" led us to other conclusions. One was an increasing awareness of the depth of commitment on the part of blacks to changing their condition. This commitment and a concurrent sensitivity are beyond the power of most whites to comprehend. Whites, generally not alert to the subtleties of prejudice, are not usually capable of sustaining zealous involvement in the movement toward black equality. For the white professors of Triple-T as well as whites in general, escape was available both physically and mentally. This has been exemplified in recent simulations of prejudice which have been tried with students of all ages. In one example, blue-eyed children in a class suffered the intolerance and enmity of their brown-eyed peers. The end of the simulation released the tension built up in the blue-eyed minority, but it is at this point that the simulation becomes a cruel game, since for blacks there is no release.

Sense of Identity

This continued pressure fuels the black movement and sense of purpose. If identity is derived at least in part from being involved in a purpose and movement larger than oneself, certainly many black Americans have this sense of identity. As black Americans gain pride from a recently discovered past and culture, white Americans have been forced to reevaluate their past in the light of their treatment of black Americans. Such a

reevaluation of black-white relations can give little cause for pride or purpose among whites. Extensive white involvement in the anti-war movement or in attempts to save the environment are indicative of the white effort to find a purpose and new sense of involvement. Yet as whites continue to search for a meaning and purpose in life outside the black movement, the resentment and misunderstanding between blacks and whites can only increase.

What then are the alternatives that are open to whites? Unfortunately, they are not all positive. A great deal has been said, and several examples have been seen in the country, of a white "backlash." Purpose and involvement can come through blatant racism which is a regression to the darkest moments in our country's past. Were this to come in the 1970's to the United States, it could only serve to dampen the democratic principles upon which the nation was built and to fuel the development of a society more at home in the Germany of the 1930's or in South Africa today.

On the other hand, wallowing in guilt and self-pity on the part of whites will not engender a society or identity that offers much opportunity for racial respect and harmony. It is not enough to intone again and again the *mea culpas* of our past despair. A great deal of wrong has been done but what we must now seek is a new understanding and a new society that is based on something beyond either a black or white identity. What we seek is a human identity—a higher level of existence.

This new identity can be created if we seek new self-concepts. The frustrated, confused, and threatened man of the old order must be broken down and replaced by a new individual who accepts, as Martin Luther King saw it, the dignity of people regardless of their color. This is a responsibility which must be faced by educators and people in any capacity which calls for social understanding.

Psychologists tell us that we behave according to what we believe. We believe because we see and feel things, what some have called our perceptual field. If behavior is indeed built upon our immediate frame of

reference, then we must increase the opportunity for human interaction so that our understandings and beliefs can be expanded.

Personal Meanings

This suggests that we need to build opportunities for confrontations so that people can discover personal meanings. This is not the usual confrontation of an accuser and an accused, but rather a situation in which we "face without flinching or avoiding" and we "take account of" all those factors that increase social distance between people. Blacks and whites need to be brought together so that they can confront one another with all the various "hang-ups" that each group has developed as a result of our past lack of understanding and awareness. Such dialogue requires an honesty generally lacking in recent black-white confrontations, the strength to tell another "you're wrong," and the willingness to accept this criticism without retreat to charges of racism.

This is more than simple conversation. Participants in a confrontation process must go beyond the niceties of a conversation hour. They must strip away the outer facades, whether friendly or unfriendly, and seek the real reasons to why people interact with other people as they do. It is necessary to perceive that there is more to people than threat. There is certainly challenge. In attempting

to confront other people after a lifetime of believing within one frame of reference, there is a great deal of opportunity to make mistakes. However, as long as they are honest mistakes, then they can be understood and excused.

By understanding others we can better understand ourselves. The individual who understands the problems of other people, singly and collectively, has a far greater chance to develop a positive view of his own self. By seeing one's "self" positively in turn one can identify with others. Confrontation, therefore, can be a means to help people become something more than they are. This offers hope, if widely applied, for reaching a higher plateau of understanding and human existence.

Man has constantly struggled to adapt to his environment and seek a better world, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We have worked our way out of the mire and there is every reason to assume that we can go further than we have. Malcolm X represents an example of a troubled human being who was attempting to make this transition. From hoodlum, hater, and demagogue, he rose to the point at the end of his life where he could see whites as human beings. If all black and white Americans could only make as extensive a transition then we could all hope for a higher plateau of life and understanding. □

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