

# The existence of prejudice in our society essay sample



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Prejudice has been with man since time immemorial. The earliest community of men might not have been consciously aware of it then, but prejudice could very well have been behind the tribal wars and the low status of women in almost all primitive societies. In fact, even the prophets like Abraham, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad were once objects of prejudice during their time. It is safe to assume, therefore, that prejudice was born as soon as men started living in communities. As time passed, prejudice became so prevalent that the appointed leaders of men could no longer pretend that it did not exist. This prompted the founding fathers to declare, in 1776, that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights" (Declaration of Independence). Unfortunately, their declaration proved inadequate. Prejudice not only persisted in the country - it even spawned slavery which divided Americans and ultimately caused the Civil War more than 80 years later.

But what causes prejudice? For years, social scientists have debated this issue. Although they agree that prejudice is "an attitudinal system of negative beliefs, feelings, and action-orientations regarding a certain group or groups of people," they have not yet reached unanimous agreement as to its cause (Parrillo 505). The essay "Causes of Prejudice" which was written by Vincent N. Parrillo is one such attempt to explain this phenomenon. After reviewing the extant documents and theories, the author comes up with his own theory that prejudice is not caused by a single factor but by a combination of factors which are psychological and social in nature. His theory is valid since it could be confirmed by looking at the actual behavior of at least one individual, C. P. Ellis who, as a former president of the Ku Klux

Klan, used to harbor a strong feeling of prejudice against African-Americans (Terkel 521).

In his essay, Parrillo suggests that prejudice could best be understood by looking at the psychological (subjective) and social (objective) perspectives of the issue. Psychological perspective refers to the “ state of mind of the individuals” and could be characterized as *behaviorist* (beliefs are conditioned), *cognitive* (beliefs are perceived), or *psychoanalytic* (beliefs are due to specific personality traits of individuals). On the other hand, the focus of the sociological perspective is on the prevailing social conditions surrounding and therefore affecting the individuals involved (505).

From among several theories so far advanced under the psychological perspective, Parrillo singles out the “ frustration-aggression theory” as a possible explanation for prejudice. He defines frustration as a result of the relative “ lack of resources or rewards” in the standard of living of individuals when compared with the standard of living of the other members of society. According to him, the tendency of frustrated individuals is to attack the cause of their frustration. In cases where they could not readily identify the cause of their frustration or if the cause is too powerful to attack such as the American government or the American society as a whole, “ displaced aggression” results. This means that the affected individuals tend to direct their anger or hatred at whoever is available and who are not only easily identifiable but who do not possess enough resources to resist or fight back. In other words, they look for “ scapegoats” for their feelings of frustration. In the United States, this group used to be the African-Americans because they possessed almost all of the characteristics of a suitable scapegoat suggested <https://assignbuster.com/the-existence-of-prejudice-in-our-society-essay-sample/>

by Gordon Allport. First, they looked really different. Second, they did not have the strength to strike back. Third, they were living very near the White Americans who were the dominant group. Fourth, their being former slaves made them a favorite object of prejudice (511).

Although Parrillo himself is not completely satisfied with this theory because, according to him, “ frustration does not necessarily precede aggression and aggression does not necessarily flow from frustration” (513), it was nonetheless validated by the behavior of Ellis in Studs Terkel’s article entitled “ C. P. Ellis.” In his narrative, Ellis says that he suffered from an inferiority complex when he was a child because he felt that other people always had nicer clothes than him and his dad. However, he went on to explain that he could not blame his dad despite his failure to provide him with more expensive clothes because he knew that he was working very hard all week just to meet his basic needs.

As a matter of fact, according to him, he pitied his dad because he could never make both ends meet no matter how hard he tried. When it was his turn to raise a family, Ellis recounts that the same fate befell him. He remembers working “ all the overtime [he] could get and still could not survive financially.” Finally, he was able to open a gas station out of the proceeds of a \$4, 000 loan. He operated it personally, working seven days a week. Unfortunately, two months before the loan could be fully paid, he suffered from a heart attack. That was when he started thinking that something was really wrong with the country. He became frustrated and bitter and started looking for someone to blame because, according to him,

it is hard to blame the country itself since “ you can’t see it to hate it.” So he chose the Blacks to be his scapegoat (Terkel 521).

Parrillo considers the “ socialization process” and “ economic competition” as possible causes of prejudice under the sociological perspective. Under the *socialization process*, children acquire the prejudices of their culture or their parents and other elders of their society. Prejudices could also be acquired because of their pervasiveness. This occurs when such prejudices are “ embedded” in the custom of society or the laws of the land like the Jim Crow Laws which provided that public facilities in the South should be segregated. Because of these laws and the belief of their parents and elders responsible for the same, the young people from the South grew up believing that it was not wrong to be prejudiced against the African-Americans (Parrillo 514).

This theory was also validated by the behavior of Ellis. His father hated the African-Americans so he believed that it was only right that he should also hate them. His father was a member of the Ku Klux Klan – an organization of White Americans who were deeply prejudiced against the Blacks – so he also started admiring the Klansmen. When an opportunity to join the organization came his way, he immediately made a grab at it and became a very active member because he started believing (like his father before him) that the Klan was the only hope of the white people – particularly the poor Whites like him who had been suffering from deprivation. He rose from being just an ordinary member to become a chaplain, then the vice-president and finally the president who held the title “ Exalted Cyclops.” As a Klansman, he vowed to “ uphold the purity of the white race” (Terkel 521).

According to Parrillo, economic competition is another sociological cause of prejudice. Specifically, he points out that “ People tend to be more hostile toward others when they feel that [they threaten] their security” both economically and politically. He cites the experience of the Chinese laborers who competed with the American workers for jobs in the railroad construction projects during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The direct result of that competition was for the White Americans to direct their hostility towards the Chinese and subject them to “ open discrimination” (Parrillo 515).

Ellis behaved exactly as Parrillo suggests, thereby validating his “ competition theory.” When Ellis said that the Blacks were the natural choice to be his scapegoat, one of his reasons was because “[The Blacks were] beginning to come up, [they were] beginning to learn to read and start votin’ and run for political office.” In other words, Ellis feared that if nothing was done, time would come when the Blacks would totally edge the poor Whites out of every opportunity in the country. According to him, the white Americans were already starting to feel deprived of these opportunities as he himself experienced. In fact, he was sure that most of the members of the Klan had the same experiences since, like himself, they also did not have adequate education and were not earning enough. This was his main motivation for working doubly hard in order to help the Ku Klux Klan realize its objectives (Terkel 521).

Aside from the three theories mentioned in the foregoing discussion, the behavior of C. P. Ellis also conformed to a fourth theory: the *social norm theory*. According to this theory, it is highly probable that an individual like

Ellis who harbors prejudice could simply be doing so because of his desire to conform to the norms of society. It further contends that the degree of prejudice depends upon the level of the prevailing prejudicial norm of the area wherein he moves. In other words, if an individual like Ellis is moved to an area where there is a lesser prejudicial norm, his prejudice would decrease accordingly (Parrillo 516-517).

This was why a radical change occurred in Ellis. His prejudice against the African-Americans was reduced to nil when he started working with people who either had no prejudices or were trying to deal with their own prejudices. It came about when the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) organized a broad coalition of people for the purpose of eliminating racism in the school system and he and a black woman were elected co-chairmen. The first several days became hell for Ellis because he had no idea how to work with a black woman. As a matter fact, he was wondering whether he should be working with her at all, considering that he was an active member of the Ku Klux Klan. However, since the ball was already in their hands, they were forced to work as a team in order to make the project a success. Ellis soon realized that Whites and Blacks could work together once they stop hating and blaming each other. In his narrative, he described how he was amazed that people "who's never talked to each other before, all of a sudden came up with resolutions." This development in the life of Ellis effectively validates the "social norm theory" (Terkel 524-525).

The foregoing discussion supports Parrillo's contention that prejudice is not as simple as it appears. This is evidenced by the fact that up to now, social  
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scientists could not agree on a single cause and could not come up with a standard response to the problem. Its complexity, therefore, requires a complex solution. Parrillo is correct. Prejudice could only be understood and consequently dealt with by taking into consideration all the psychological and sociological factors responsible in its formation.

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