Status and Conflict[*]

A Sociological Perspective on the Urban Race Problem

by

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One of the most serious problems confronting us today is the urban race problem. Sociologists are frequently called upon as experts on race relations or urban problems, but as a sociologist I am an expert in neither area. Indeed, I myself have never done any research dealing directly with race relations or urban problems. Nevertheless, as a social scientist, part of my role is to apply general principles of Sociology and Social Psychology to these major social problems. To me it is very clear that Sociology has some important general principles that are applicable, and I want to present some of these principles and point out their implications.

Before I talk about general principles, I want to make clear my view of what social science can and cannot do in dealing with the urban race problem. As the problems of our society intensify, the community looks more and more to the social sciences for solutions to these problems. They ask us for recipes and hope for panaceas. Society is somewhat impatient with us when we can provide neither, and social scientists often apologize defensively for their lack of answers by pointing to the youthfulness and immaturity of social science. I suggest that both the petitioners for answers and the social science apologists misunderstand the situation. Social science cannot now and will never be able to supply recipes or panaceas. The application of social science knowledge to social problems will always be an artistic activity requiring the social engineer to have mastery of the scientific principles as well as intimate clinical familiarity with the problem situation to which he is applying these principles.

My field of interest as a sociologist is the area known as expectation theory. Research in this area has generated principles that, I believe, have something to say to the urban race problem. What I want to do here, primarily, is to analyze the phenomenon of Black Power from the point of view of expectation theory, and draw out some consequences of this analysis, consequences which are not as easily seen from another point of view. Although I will draw some of the implications of expectation theory, I would hope that readers with practical experience in race relations or urban problems will be able to see many more applications than I can present in a short article.

I want to analyze the phenomenon of Black Power from the point of view of the beliefs of whites and blacks. I want to consider one particular kind of belief which I will call an expectation. This is a belief about how a person will behave, based solely on some characteristic of the person, such as his race. I will talk about white expectations for Negroes and black expectations for whites.

The terms "black" and "Negro" immediately pose problems in our analysis. The man who regards himself as black has different beliefs about himself from the man who regards himself as Negro. Indeed, the ideology of "blackness" is an effort to change the system of beliefs that has been associated with Negroes. The ideology of "blackness" has achieved considerable success among some segments of society in changing these beliefs, but I suspect that the majority of whites and the majority of non-whites still operate largely in terms of the beliefs associated with Negro. Hence, first, I want to consider the beliefs associated with Negro and then contrast the developing belief system of black.

I will often abbreviate, using the term "expectation for self" or "expectation for other." When I talk about Negro self expectation, I mean a Negro's belief about his own behavior. Furthermore, I will be concerned with the evaluations of "self" and "other" which these expectations imply. For example, if I expect you to be dirty, and you know I hold this expectation, then you will believe (quite correctly) that I have a negative evaluation of you.

There are several points to make about expectations:

1. Expectations are associated with status. This is an idea that occurred to sociologists very early in the game. Back in 1921, Robert E. Park pointed out that status conceptions organize the way people deal with one another. In our language today, this means that two persons, aware only of each other's status, form expectations about one another and these expectations govern in large measure how they behave toward one another.

2. The second and most crucial point about expectations is their relativity. Expectations are always relative to the particular others with whom one is interacting and to the particular situation in which one finds himself. I will return to this relativity later.

3. Status conceptions operate to give people who know nothing about each other a basis for predicting how each will act and how each should react. In other words, when you know a great deal about a person with whom you are working, you know how to predict his actions and you know how to react to him. But if you know very little about that person, you make use of his status attributes in forming your judgments about him. In fact, in the absence of prior experience with another person, status attributes become crucial in determining what your expectations

are for him. Let me emphasize that again. In the absence of first-hand, direct interaction with another person, status conceptions operate like prior knowledge and prior experience in providing a basis for interaction. They are a substitute for this prior experience.

4. My final general point is that expectations associated with statuses are very stable and very resistant to change, and that efforts to change these expectations or to break the connection between the status attribute and the expectation will generate considerable conflict and tension.

Now, the idea of expectation as I am using it differs markedly from the notion of self image. That the Negro has a low self image is an old idea, well recognized in discussions of self hatred, apathy, low aspiration; and portrayed in James Baldwin's facelessness and Ralph Ellinson's Invisible Man. Even the source of this self image has been noted frequently. The late Malcomb X wrote, "The worst crime the white man has committed has been to teach us to hate ourselves."

But the idea of self image can be misleading, because it looks at the problem either in personality terms or in historical terms. A self image is something an individual carries around with him. The hypothesis that the Negro self image is one of passivity, withdrawal and low competence is likely to be supported by observing a Negro interacting with a white. But it will often be vigorously rejected observing that same Negro interacting with other Negroes.

The fact that self image changes dramatically depending on those with whom you compare yourself, was documented in a study done some 28 years ago in which Negro college students in the South were asked to

estimate how well they would do on an intelligence test. The study had three different treatments. In one treatment, the Negro students were told how well a group of white college students did on the test. In a second treatment, the students were told how well a group of college students at their own Negro college had done on the test. Finally, in the third treatment, the Negro college students were told how Negro students in general had done on the test. The Negro students had the lowest self expectation for performance on this intelligence test when the comparison group was the group of white college students. They had a markedly higher expectation for how well they would perform when the comparison group was Negro college students.

Believing that the self image is fixed and determined by long-term historical events, like 300 years of slavery, is a conception that is completely inconsistent with the results of studies such as the one I have described. Expectations, however, are relative to others in the interaction, and, hence, are situationally determined. An expectation theory has no problem in handling a result such as the one I commented upon. Expectation theory predicts that the same Negro will have high self expectation with respect to some other Negroes and low self expectation with respect to some whites.

Because of the relativity of expectations, our analysis must concern the whole system of expectations that govern an interaction situation. What do I mean by system? In the case of Negro-white interaction, there are four elements which affect one another. These are: Negro expectations for self, Negro expectations for whites; white expectations for self, and white expectations for Negroes. These elements

form a system because you cannot alter one element without having reper-
cussions for the other three.

Up to this point, I have been developing some rudimentary tools for
analysis. Now I would like to apply these tools. My fundamental theses
are four:

1. To make significant progress in solving urban racial problems,
we must change Negro self expectations; Negro expectations for whites;
white self expectations; and white expectations for Negroes.

2. Black Power as a phenomenon, although it means many different
things and varies in rhetorical styles from Rap Brown to Whitney Young,
can be viewed as an attempt to change Negro self expectations--to substi-
tute black self expectations for Negro self expectations,--to substitute
positive evaluations of self for negative ones. This is the significance
of "black is beautiful." Now this view of Black Power is certainly not
the view of Black Power held by most whites, for certainly all but a
small minority of whites would grant the necessity of Negroes having a
better view of themselves. Why then is Black Power a fearful specter
to much of the white community? In part it is because of the methods
used by Black Power advocates, in part it is because of a lack of under-
standing of Black Power by the white community, and in part it is the
result of the failure of the Black Power advocates to appreciate the
consequences of their actions.

3. In order to break down or change the expectations based on
status conceptions, we must create situations where all four of these
expectations are operating and where experience can contradict status
conceptions.

4. These contradictory experiences will generate considerable conflict and tension, and the tensions must be controlled. Otherwise the status conceptions will be reinforced because the actors in the situation are so defensive that experience cannot contradict their status conceptions.

Let us discuss each of these ideas. It is a fact that most whites expect Negroes to be inferior. The difference between the racist and the liberal is that the racist believes that this inferiority is hereditary and immutable, while the liberal attributes the inferiority to generations of cultural deprivation, impoverishment and exploitation. Unfortunately, the liberal's expectations communicate themselves to Negroes in Lady-Bountiful, patronizing attempts to uplift the Negro. We all have many of these expectations. Let me take one belief that most of us hold: When a Negro family moves into a white neighborhood, property values decline because Negroes do not keep up the property and whites move out. Available evidence suggests that this belief is false: property values often increase and they decline only under special circumstances. Even when there is panic selling by whites, the decline in property values is only temporary. A first step toward any progress is to recognize these beliefs in ourselves.

Many Negroes are aware that whites expect them to be inferior, and this molds their own feelings of inferiority. The low self expectation of Negroes generates low aspiration ("If I am no good, I can't possibly get a good job."), low motivation ("So why try?"), and low performance. Low performance confirms the white's expectations for the Negro and the Negro's expectations for himself.

These expectations are changing. Not all Negroes have low self expectations in interaction with whites. The best illustration of these changes comes from the black militants themselves. At every opportunity they distinguish between black men and Negroes, looking with disdain on those Negroes who refuse to be black men. Without the rise of black expectations, Black Power and civil rights protests could not exist. But white expectations of Negroes' inferiority and Negro low self expectations are still sufficiently widespread to be a serious problem.

The interplay of white expectations for Negroes and Negro self expectations is well illustrated in a series of experiments by Irwin Katz and his associates.[1] In these studies, Katz investigates the behavior of teams composed of two Negroes and two whites (or one Negro and one white). These teams work for several hours on a series of tasks, ranging from those involving manual skills to those involving intellectual skills--solving puzzles and group discussions. Katz finds that Negroes behaved compliantly toward white partners. "Negroes made fewer suggestions than whites, readily accepted the latter's proposals, and tended to ignore one another. These features of Negro behavior occurred even when the men were told that they would receive extra pay if they worked well as a team, that they all had higher ability than men in other teams."[2] (The same phenomenon) also occurred . . . despite careful matching of Negro and white teammates on ability and the use of tasks where white and Negro performances were objectively similar. Negroes who actually did as well as white teammates perceived their own performances as inferior. As Katz writes, "If Negroes see themselves as

incompetent in mixed groups, they may expect to be judged similarly by white partners. Hence, when disagreements occur, they tend to assume that their opinions are probably wrong, and even if not wrong, are likely to be rejected by the whites."[3]

These studies illustrate a very general phenomenon: the association of highly generalized expectations with different positions in a status hierarchy. Katz notes that the behavior of his teams can be viewed as behavior of low status people interacting with high status people. Indeed, in our laboratory we are studying the same status phenomenon with a different status attribute. And we find the same generalized expectations--we use teams composed of one college student and one high school student, and the high school students in our groups behave like Katz's Negro team members--they are highly compliant to the college student even though all they know about him is that he is a college student.

My principal argument is that we have to operate on all of these expectation elements to produce any lasting changes. It is possible to produce short-run changes in Negro self expectations, for example, by the exercise of power through violence. There is a short-run gratification and feeling of competence that results from setting fire to a building, but that short-run gratification does not create self expectations of competence and control of one's own fate.

It is a basic tenet of Sociology that one's self expectations are determined in large part by the conception that others hold of him. To produce feelings of competence and fate-control requires experiences of success, where the others with whom you interact acknowledge that success. The power to destroy is not a success experience that others will

readily acknowledge as success. Without the total elimination of the white man, there is no way to prevent white expectations from having an impact on Negro self expectations, except in the very short run.

My second thesis is that Black Power and the ideology of blackness operate primarily on Negro self expectations. The ideology does this quite consciously and deliberately. Black Power ignores the problems created by white expectations for Negroes. When I have pointed this out to black militants, their response is, "That's your problem, not ours." Now Black Power has had many striking successes. Young blacks walk with much more pride than young Negroes did a few years ago. There is a more widespread belief that they can control their own destiny. There is an effort to progress in the ghetto; but without an attack on white expectations of Negro inferiority, the gains to self expectations are likely to be consumed in disillusion.

While I agree that changing white expectations must be done by whites, I don't agree that it is solely the white man's problem. The actions of Black Power have consequences for white expectations of Negroes that are no less important because they are unrecognized. Although we do not have data dealing directly with the effects of Black Power on white expectations, we can reasonably ask, "In what ways does Black Power operate to reinforce negative white expectations of Negroes?" A component in these negative white expectations of Negroes is the view of the Negro as primitive, violent, and to be feared. How far does Black Power go in reinforcing this view? How far does it go in preventing whites from seeing genuine gains in Negro self pride by obscuring those gains in a haze of defensive fear?

Finally, what are the consequences of Black Power for Negro expectations of whites? Many Negroes hold as stereotypical beliefs about whites as whites hold of Negroes. Many Negroes fear and mistrust all whites. Negroes are to be forgiven if they are skeptical of the public relations claim that white society takes its social responsibilities seriously. They are to be forgiven if they read special meanings into slogans like "law and order," "preserve the neighborhood school," and "protect property rights." If they interpret urban renewal to mean Negro removal, and if they don't believe the "equal opportunity" employment signs, it is understandable. After years of being the last hired for the most menial jobs, regardless of qualifications, and the first fired, is it any wonder that the slogan of "no preferential treatment" falls on deaf ears for those who have seen a wide range of preferential treatments, ranging from veterans' bonuses to farm subsidies? Even when programs are genuinely concerned with solving some of these problems, should we be surprised that Negroes look for ulterior motives and, if they don't question the motives, they do suspect that Lady Bountiful is about to ride again?

The Black Power attack on Whitey, while it may build racial pride, also reinforces the expectations of distrust and fear. How far does this go in preventing Negroes from discriminating between those whites who are "out to get them" and those whites with whom they can genuinely and successfully work? This lack of discrimination blinds many Negroes to the inter-racial situations in which power can be shared and success can be mutual, and in which the defensiveness that preserves expectations of superiority and inferiority does not occur.

This brings me to my third thesis, that changing the entire system of expectations requires situations where all four elements are operating; namely, inter-racial, integrated situations. As long as whites and Negroes do not interact, status conceptions of one another operate. No experience occurs to contradict these status conceptions. It is precisely the ghetto dweller who, by his separation, prevents these contradictory experiences from occurring to him or to the whites who live in the white noose surrounding the ghetto. The ghetto dweller's image of the white is that of Exploiter. The white's image of the ghetto dweller is that of Mugger and Stick-up Man. Just as the vast majority of ghetto dwellers are law-abiding, decent, and struggling human beings, the majority of whites are not exploiters. But our expectations make us lose sight of both these facts.

Insofar as Black Power urges separatism, it prevents the kinds of contradictory experience that I hold essential. Insofar as Black Power attempts to blackmail concessions from the white power structure through fear and violence, it reinforces rather than contradicts white expectations about the primitive and violent nature of Negroes. Insofar as the white power structure makes concessions in the face of such blackmail, it reinforces Negro expectations that whites will yield only to violence. In the long run, these kinds of actions do not contradict the expectations of whites and Negroes. There is no recognition on the part of whites of Negro competence and success. There is no recognition on the part of Negroes that at least some whites are willing to share power and are not exploiters.

It is only those situations where power can be shared, along with success or failure in coping with problems, that contradictions of the expectations of superiority and inferiority will take place. Black Power in the sense of traditional political power and power at the bargaining table, can create such situations.

How do we create integrated situations where power can be shared and success can be mutual? Let us briefly consider the public school system as an example. The problem of de facto school segregation has received considerable attention in the last few years. The analysis I have presented indicates that de facto segregated schools deny the possibility of expectation change. Various plans for ending de facto segregation have been proposed including changing school boundaries or bussing students, but even if we could end de facto segregation immediately with a snap of the fingers, we would not necessarily provide the kind of interaction situation that would deal with the problems we have described. Simply mixing white and Negro students in the same building will not change the expectations whites hold for Negroes, the expectations Negroes hold for themselves, nor the expectations Negroes hold for whites. How schools are integrated is more important than the fact of integration. Integrating schools by working with the black community rather than by working for them, working to uplift them, or worse still working on them is far more important than handing down from on high some mechanical plan for mixing bodies. Planning for ending de facto segregation should mean that all members of the community have a say in and a stake in doing something to solve the problem.

Such interaction situations, where the participants are not defensive, are by no means easy to create. Another study of Katz's is germane here.[4] In a second experiment, Katz tried to change Negro self expectations. He did so by giving his Negro subjects what he called "assertion training." It is interesting that this assertion training was also given in a bi-racial situation. He found that the Negro subjects who were given asser- tion training did raise their expectations higher than Negro subjects who were not given the training. Katz's result would be pretty remarkable if the Negro expectations were the enduring consequence of 300 years of slavery. But an even more significant result of this study had to do with the white team members--the whites were much more hostile to the Negroes who had assertion training than to the Negroes who did not have this training and who continued to behave passively. Studies such as Katz's show both the resistance to change that white expectations for Negroes have and also the tensions generated by attempts to change expectations.

We are a long way from knowing how to deal with these kinds of ten- sions and conflicts, let alone how to prevent them. Indeed research con- cerned with producing changes in expectation with minimal conflict and tension is currently in progress at our School of Education.[5] But we do know that defensiveness insulates individuals from expectation change. Conflict may be an essential part of expectation change, but what dis- tinguishes useful conflict from conflict that produces defensive blind- ness is a major question.

The implications of expectation theory, then, can be briefly sum- marized. First, expectations are changeable in the short run. We don't have to wait another 300 years.

Second, to produce lasting change we must work on the whole system of expectation: Negro self expectations, Negro expectations for whites; white self expectations, white expectations for Negroes.

Third, the proponents and leaders of Black Power must concern themselves not only with black pride but also with consequences of their actions on white expectations for Negroes and Negro expectations for whites.

Fourth, in order to change the system of expectations, we must create truly integrated situations where experience can contradict status conceptions of Negro and white.

In order to change the system of expectations, we must recognize that much of the responsibility rests with white society--in major part it is our problem--but that these changes require the working together of white, black militants, and Negroes and cannot be accomplished by any of these groups alone. It is this working together that will produce expectations which contradict the prevailing expectations.

Finally, we <u>must</u> learn to live with the conflict and tensions produced by these contradictory experiences.

Footnotes

1. Katz, Irwin, Judith Goldston, and Lawrence Benjamin. "Behavior
   and Productivity in Bi-Racial Work Groups." Human Relations,
   1958, 11, pp. 123-141.

   Katz, Irwin, and Lawrence Benjamin. "Effects of White Authori-
   tarianism in Bi-Racial Work Groups." Journal of Abnormal
   Social Psychology, 1960, 61, pp. 448-456.

   Katz, Irwin, and M. Cohen. "The Effects of Training Negroes
   upon Cooperative Problem Solving in Bi-Racial Teams." Journal
   of Abnormal Social Psychology, 1962, 64, pp. 319-325.

2. Katz and Cohen, op. cit., p. 319.

3. Ibid.

4. Katz and Cohen, op. cit.

5. Studies are now being conducted by Professor Elizabeth Cohen in
   connection with her project, "A Generalization of Status
   Characteristic Theory."