

Introduction

This book is about the racial experience and consciousness of black and white Americans. What is unique about it is the attempt to explore race and racism within the context of people's lives over the course of almost twenty years, a period spanning three decades each of which has had its own distinctive political and cultural climate. The subjects in this book were interviewed in 1968, again in 1978–79, and for a third time in 1986. The sixteen blacks and twelve whites speak in their own words about how their lives unfolded, how their political beliefs and racial attitudes changed or remained the same, and how they assess the social transformations they have witnessed. The long span of the study permits us to hold in view both historical shifts in the zeitgeist, or spirit of the time, and the processes of personal aging, as the individuals grow older, influenced by—and in turn contributing to—larger social changes.

On the day Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, April 4, 1968, we had already interviewed almost half of the blacks in the study and had just begun to interview the whites. The timing of our work intersected with the national tragedy to create a natural experiment, an unintended research design that enabled us to compare the reactions of blacks and whites to King's death and also to observe the effect of his assassination on people's opinions of his political philosophy and historical role.

There was a striking difference in the ways blacks and whites reacted. Most blacks we talked to mourned not only the civil rights leader himself but also the ray of hope that he promised, his dream that a just and integrated society might still be realized. How profoundly the assassination affected black people is suggested by the bursts of eloquence that the topic evoked. Even a year later, almost every black person could tell us exactly what they were doing at the moment they heard the news. A forty-year-old state office worker in Sacramento remembered that she was standing on a chair in her kitchen, reaching up to get something out of a cupboard, when the radio made an announcement. An eighteen-year-old in the Watts section of Los Angeles heard the news from a gym coach, who interrupted a schoolyard basketball game: "Everyone just froze for about fifteen seconds, everyone just stood there . . . and we just stopped playing completely. Everyone sat down and wondered what's going to happen in Watts. . . . It's just going to boil like a volcano and blow up."

Virtually all the blacks we talked to felt an immediate and deep sense of loss, very much like a death in the family. Even people who did not entirely support his policies strongly identified with Dr. King and his bereaved wife. Before the assassination many people had disparaged King's leadership, arguing that his moderate style and nonviolent philosophy had outlived their usefulness. Other criticisms concerned King's opposition to the Vietnam war, his support of the striking sanitation workers in Memphis, and his plans for a Poor People's March on Washington.¹

After April 4, these criticisms were muted by grief and by identification: "They kill part of me when they kill [John] Kennedy; they kill the other part of me when they kill Martin Luther King," said a hospital worker in her fifties. Sorrow was infused by anger, even in some middle-aged black men who had been brought up in the South and been taught to suppress the very awareness of that potentially dangerous emotion. Many redoubled their determination to continue the struggle for racial justice. One unusually eloquent speaker proudly noted that King's work had finally buried the myth that southern blacks were docile and would not fight back.

We heard surprisingly little generalized hatred of whites, but many blacks were repelled by what they saw as white people's pretense of sorrow and concern. Yet many whites we interviewed didn't even try to pretend sorrow or regret. A firefighter told us that his co-workers cheered when they heard that King had died. And when I reinterviewed people in 1979, in the second stage of this study, a suburban Sacramento housewife said that when she told her husband the news back in 1968, he said, "They ought to shoot more of them." But such outright hostility was not typical. Overall, King's death was just not that important to most white people. Almost no one introduced his or her reaction by fixing the moment in time when they first heard the news, and their thoughts and feelings were more abstract, less personal.

Although quite a few whites appreciated King's historical role, for some it was a grudging appreciation. "I thought he was a good man, but I think he did a helluva lot more harm than good," said a white resident of a predominantly black housing project. And a printer in his late sixties granted that King was a "very great man," but immediately qualified his praise by saying that "he was not the pacifist that he claimed to be," but instead was "one of the most inflammatory speakers" he had ever heard. Still other whites saw the martyred leader as a sinister force, a firebrand, and they held him personally responsible for the country's racial troubles, including the violence following the assassination. Many whites felt resentful, even jealous, of the time television devoted in the wake of the assassination to documentaries about King and the civil rights movement.

It is also true that television educated some people. And there were other whites, particularly some of the San Francisco hippies we interviewed, who

were deeply moved by the death of King. One young woman said: “Most men until then had either gone to one side or the other. And he was still there keeping the two middle-class masses [black and white] talking to each other. And keeping them with hope. And then he was gone. A great big silence, a big emptiness. I remember the day; it seemed very quiet. [I felt] sort of abandoned.”

As these responses to the assassination suggest, blacks and whites were sharply divided in 1968. A month before the assassination, the Kerner Commission had warned the country: “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”* During interviews conducted with the same respondents in 1978 and 1979, in the second phase of this study, great differences in outlook still remained, with many whites believing that King’s dream of a racially just society had already come to pass, while blacks were adamant that relatively little progress had been made. But in their feelings about King himself, the two groups had come somewhat closer together. Whites sounded less extreme in their racial attitudes, perhaps in part because they were no longer confronted by a strong and aggressive black movement and because the public clamor and pressure for racial equality had abated. By 1979 the suburban husband who had wanted “more of them” killed had, his wife now said, “mellowed to the blacks.” Her neighbors, she added, “look back and respect Martin Luther King’s work” even though “they felt very strongly against him during the time he was on his sit-down strikes.” Among blacks who had derided King in 1968 as irrelevant or overly conciliatory, opinions had also changed. A longshoreman who came close to calling King an “Uncle Tom” before the assassination—“turning one cheek, then the other, you’ll never get nothing over, brother”—now likened him to Marcus Garvey in historical importance (though not, of course, in political strategy) and added that blacks would have been in a much better situation had King lived.

By the summer of 1986, when I interviewed people for the third time, King’s birthday had become a national holiday, and the passage of time had softened some of the opposition to the man and his beliefs. The holiday itself is an extremely significant achievement—even if not recognized by all states. But as King has been turned into an official hero, his political agenda has been reduced to the advocacy of nonviolence. The national celebration, ironically, makes it easier to avoid facing squarely the evils of racism, economic injustice, and war that he struggled against. Furthermore, the canonization of Dr. King distorts the historical memory. The strong tendency to portray King as virtually synonymous with civil rights leads people to overlook the move-

*The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders was appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to examine the causes of the riots in the urban ghettos during the mid-sixties. The commission was chaired by Otto Kerner, Jr., then the governor of Illinois.

ment's other brave and effective leaders and foot soldiers. Ronald Reagan, in particular, has used the holiday to suggest a national consensus about racial justice. But in truth no such consensus existed in the sixties, and none exists today.

Through the oral histories in this book I have tried to evoke the late sixties as those years were experienced then, as a period rife with conflict when America seemed to be dividing into two camps: those who were for "the system" and those who were against it. The first set of interviews took place from late 1967 through early 1969, at a time when relations between blacks and whites were becoming so polarized that many people contemplated the prospect of a race war and speculated about what they would do when it broke out. Racial conflict had intensified during the sixties, and by 1968 people's nerves were on edge, their sensibilities razor-sharp, their convictions passionate. As the conventions that customarily inhibited frank discussion of sensitive issues relaxed in the "anything goes" mood of the sixties, people were eager to talk about race—but, in such a highly charged climate, only with someone from their own racial group. With few exceptions, we therefore used white interviewers to talk to our white respondents and blacks to interview blacks.

Our interest was racial consciousness, not only in its unusually pointed manifestations that year, but also as it developed in the course of people's lives. We chose the method of a racial life history to explore the ways in which various beliefs and assumptions, implicit as well as explicit, became a part of the way people viewed themselves, their society, and other groups. We looked at the role of race and racism in the everyday lives of blacks and whites—in school experiences, at work, with the law, and in other institutional areas. We were interested in the personal as well as the political, but especially the connection between the two, concurring with C. Wright Mills that investigating the relation between public issues and private troubles is sociology's special mandate.

So in addition to the life story, we focused equally on the racial politics of the day and asked people what they thought about civil rights leaders, integration, black power, nationalism, nonviolence, and other issues then under debate. We asked blacks about racism: how they coped with it day-to-day, how it affected their manhood and womanhood and the relations between the sexes. They talked about black culture, about the ways they were different from or the same as whites, and which aspects of the black experience were ethnic strengths to be preserved, which were group weaknesses. Whites were asked how they explained the inequality between the races, whether they believed racism existed or not, how they saw their own involvement in it, how important "whiteness" was as a part of their personal identity, and how they made sense of and reacted to the growing assertiveness and militancy of black people. We had a special interest in probing the tacit theories people had

about the disadvantaged status of racial minorities. Did they blame the system for failing to provide equal opportunity, or did they fault the minority group's culture and characteristics?*

Collectively, these interviews provide a picture of a decade of intensified consciousness and rapid social change in which the impact of the historical moment on individual lives was unusually transparent. They also show people "going through changes," as the phrase went, changes in their political viewpoints, self-awareness, and personal commitments. But what happened to these new values and opinions as the political climate shifted in the 1970s? Curious about this, I began reinterviewing some of the same people in 1978.

By that time I sensed that the climate had changed enough so that I might be able to interview blacks as well as whites. It's also true that I didn't have much choice; in the prosperous sixties a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health had financed the interviewing staff. Even more important, I wanted the chance to talk to the people whose life stories I had been working on and was learning so much from. I was apprehensive at first, particularly about interviewing the more nationalistic and angry blacks, the more conservative or racist whites. But I didn't have to be. Most people were pleased, almost flattered, to be remembered by a research project after so many years. No one refused to be interviewed and I sensed that only two—one white, one black—were holding back their real opinions. (They do not appear in the book.)

One goal of the followup interview was to bring the life history up to date, to catch up on changes as well as continuities in work, economic welfare, family situation, and life-style. I also asked people about personal issues—how they had grown or changed in their sense of self, how satisfied they were with their lives, how they were dealing with growing older.

Second, I was interested in consciousness. We were in a more conservative time, a more private era, and a period of *relative* racial peace and harmony. Racial issues were no longer on the front page, and public events in general did not capture people's imaginations or intrude into their personal lives as they had in the sixties. Now the most pressing issues seemed to be economic: inflation and the soaring price of gasoline. So I was interested in finding out what had happened to black anger, militancy, and nationalist leanings. And what had whites learned about minority groups in the intervening years? Had people's views changed with the new times, or were the perspectives of the sixties still a part of them?

*This question underlies one of the leading theoretical debates among sociologists of race and ethnic relations over the past thirty years. "System-blaming" explanations are called *structural*: they tend to attribute racial stratification to imperatives of social and economic structures, including racial discrimination. *Cultural* explanations emphasize internal characteristics of the ethnic group, such as family patterns, values, and other traditions.

Finally, I wanted to find out how people looked back on the 1960s from the vantage point of a very different era. How did they assess the decade's impact on American society, on racial equality, and on their own lives? I was searching for the legacy of the sixties and its special racial consciousness: was its explosive impact as ephemeral as it appeared toward the end of the seventies, or had it left significant traces on the lives and worldviews of the people who had lived through its unique intensity?

During the 1980s the policies and philosophy of the Reagan presidency both reflected and set the national tone on racial matters. The administration cut programs for the poor, relaxed enforcement of various civil rights laws and executive orders, and tried—with some success—to roll back much of the momentum minority groups had gained during the 1960s and 1970s. The problem of “reverse racism” against white males was given a higher priority than affirmative action, the mandates of the Civil Rights Commission and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission were revised, many conservatives were appointed to the nation's courts, and race-related issues such as crime, drugs, and welfare gained center stage. Throughout the 1980s we have seen both a resurgence of bigotry and racist acts and a noticeable increase in racial awareness and protest. Among the signs have been the anti-apartheid movement, the rise in incidents of racial violence and harassment (including the case of Bernhard Goetz), the unprecedented outbreaks of racism on college campuses, and events in Howard Beach, New York, and Forsyth County, Georgia.

I had originally intended my final contact in 1986 to be only a brief telephone update. But seven years had passed and we were in a new decade, possibly even in a new period of race relations. I therefore decided to do a third round of substantial face-to-face interviews, although only a small portion of that material appears in this book.

Black Lives, White Lives is not a definitive study of the course of our nation's racial consciousness since the 1960s. The 28 people who appear in this book were chosen from an initial group of more than 350 persons, but almost all were residents of the San Francisco Bay Area or Sacramento, California. Northern California, of course, has the same kinds of racial problems as the rest of America, but for reasons of history and geography, they do not always express themselves as starkly.* In California, as in the entire western region, the employment and educational levels of blacks are above the national average. Furthermore, since the 1970s the most severe problems of race and class have involved children, teenagers, and young adults living in the inner cities. Because of my longitudinal research design, I did not interview this new gen-

*Until forty years ago blacks were a numerically small group in California, and historically they have not been the state's most oppressed minority; that burden has variously fallen on the native Indians, the Mexicans, and the Chinese.

eration in the second and third phases of this study. Many of the older people talk about these youth, but the age group most locked out of the American Dream does not have its own voice in this book.

Nonetheless, the experiences recounted here exemplify many of the central themes of racial and social change in American society since the 1960s. They give us a window to view the shifting racial landscape of the past three decades.

The people in this book speak in their own words. Originally I had intended a more conventional sociological analysis written in the third person, but as Julie Lamont, one of our typists, commented on the transcript of Florence Grier's 1968 interview: "The woman, and therefore the interview, is magnificent; no words but her own could do her justice." I had to agree, not only for the very articulate Mrs. Grier but for the others as well.

My role has been to organize and edit the transcripts in order to present as faithfully as possible each person's life story and consciousness, while highlighting those sociological themes I deem most significant and retaining some sense of the interview itself as an interpersonal encounter. Although I have had to abridge extremely long transcripts, I've tried to keep enough detail so that readers can make their own analyses of the material, and I've tried to keep enough of the flavor of the original to suggest the spontaneous, meandering, and even sometimes inconsistent way people think and talk. To protect people's privacy, I have changed their names (with the exception of Elena Albert) and in a few cases have also changed place names and occupations.

I have placed my own summaries and interpretations in the introductions to each part and in brief commentary within the interview chapters, as well as in a concluding essay where I draw some lessons from this twenty-year project.