

ETHNIC PREJUDICE AND THE PROBLEM OF PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN NIGERIA

Dr. Chikwe Agbakwuru

M.I. Opara, PhD

Department Of Educational Psychology, Guidance And Counselling,
University Of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper investigated ethnic prejudice and its challenges to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. The study was carried out with 300 N.Y.S.C. members who were drawn through purposive sampling technique from their orientation camp in Imo State. Relevant data for answering the five research questions posed for the study were collected from the respondents through personal contact method of administration of copies of structured, researchers' – developed questionnaire called Ethnic Prejudice Questionnaire. The reliability of this instrument was carried out through a test-retest method with 20 subjects within an interval of two weeks. The obtained reliability co-efficient was 0.81. The research questions were answered with percentage and the results among other things show that ethnic prejudice still poses a challenge to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. The results were discussed and some counselling implications were also stated. One of these is that counsellors should employ the emotive – evocative technique in helping clients to understand the differences between their prejudices and the truth.

Keywords: Ethnic, prejudice, peaceful – co-existence

Background of the study

One of the major impediments to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria is ethnic prejudice. It is negative feelings towards people based on their membership in a group (Brehim, Kassin & Fein, 2005). According to Iwe (1990), ethnic prejudice refers to derogatory stereotype, often very resistant to change which is cherished by one ethnic group against the other. Research reports (Iwe, 1990 & Agulanna 2008) as well as personal experience show that like

in any other big nation or society, ethnic prejudice is entrenched in Nigeria as each ethnic group has some negative stereotypes it cherishes about other ethnic groups.

Ethnic prejudice is passed from one generation of Nigerians to the other through the process of socialization. This has made the eradication of the problem very difficult. The problem of ethnic prejudice in Nigeria is also compounded by the country's multi-ethnic and multi-language diversity. Bamgbose (1978) opines that Nigeria has about 513 indigenous languages. This situation creates a type of social interaction and relationship that is unhealthy among them. The situation is further made worse by the high rate of illiteracy in the country. The problems resulting from this is that the multitudes of illiterate people do not know much about other ethnic groups. They simply depend and act based on selfish and biased information they have gathered about other ethnic groups from their friends and relations. This is why William Hazlitt cited in Agulanna (2008) asserted that prejudice is the child of ignorance.

Two theories appear relevant to the explanation of the high prevalence of ethnic prejudice in Nigeria. The first of these theories is the realistic conflict theory which states that direct competition for valuable but limited resources breeds hostility between groups. This is so because all the groups will not fair equally in the competition. The groups that fair poorly become frustrated and resentful while those that fair better feel threatened and protective. This situation degenerates to conflict (Brehm, Kassin & Fein, 2005). The second theory is the relative deprivation theory. It explains that people may become resentful of other groups not because of their conviction that their own security or resources are threatened by other groups but because of their sense of relative deprivation.

The harms which ethnic prejudice has done to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria are too many. Ethnic prejudice leads to the escalation of inter-ethnic group conflicts in Nigeria. It breeds antagonism and tribalism. These in turn make nonsense of the idea of a united and peaceful Nigeria. It leads to organized or group selfishness. Citing Lewis, Agbakwuru (1999) states that ethnic prejudice dehumanizes human beings from other ethnic groups. It promotes the abuse of the natural and constitutional rights of people from other ethnic groups. This leads to ethnic discrimination. According to the same source, ethnic prejudice narrows down one's perception of the world to one's own ethnic group and beclouds one's vision of the rights and goodness of members of other ethnic groups. This state of affair leads to the development of feelings of hatred against people from other ethnic groups, gives impetus to mutual suspicion and distrust among different ethnic groups, and thus poses an obstacle to peaceful co-existence among different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Ethnic prejudice also makes

the highly prejudiced groups to be anger-prone and hostile against Nigerians from other ethnic groups.

Awake (August 3, 2009) has also noted that those who are regularly treated prejudicially often live in fear of further ill-treatment. They may become sick with anxiety. In addition, victims of prejudice and discrimination may receive second-rated medical care, an inferior education and fewer social privileges and legal rights as was the case in apartheid South Africa. When officially sanctioned, discrimination can lead to such evils as ethnic cleansing and genocide. These situations are not healthy for peaceful co-existence in any nation.

The problems of ethnic prejudice also affect the physical, emotional and psychological health of individuals. This can be understood from the background that the continued self-talks or verbalizations such as “I and my ethnic group are good and you and your ethnic group are bad” which people continue to make are irrational ideas. Since according to Ellis (1973) emotion and reason are intricately and inextricably intertwined in the psyche, these cherished irrational ideas become a source of emotional or psychological disturbance of individuals in Nigeria. The most noticeable results of these psychological or emotional disturbances are anger, frustration, irritability and hostility against the assumed enemies that is, members of other ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, no study seem to have investigated the nature of ethnic prejudice in Nigeria irrespective of the fact that there is widely held view by Nigerians that ethnic prejudice has continued to hinder effective national integration and peaceful co-existence in the country. This study was therefore embarked upon to fill this apparent vacuum in knowledge. It is hoped that the results of the study will assist professional guidance counsellors to understand better the nature of the problem and thus, evolve appropriate strategies that will reduce ethnic prejudice in Nigeria. It is expected that the achievement of this goal will promote inter-ethnic group understanding, peaceful co-existence, democratic stability and general development in Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the prejudices of Nigerian youths about the Hausas/Fulanis?
2. What are the prejudices of Nigerian youths about the Igbos?
3. What are the prejudices of Nigeria youths about the Yorubas?
4. How did Nigerians youths acquire their prejudices about their fellow country men from other ethnic groups?

5. What are the effects of these prejudices on inter-ethnic group relationship in Nigeria?

Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive survey design. The sample consisted of 300 National Youth Service Corps members who were drawn from their orientation camp in Imo State. The sample was composed through the purposive sampling technique. The sample was divided into three equal groups of 100 respondents each. The first group consisted of corps members who were not of the Hausa/Fulani extraction while the second and third groups consisted of corps members who were not of the Igbo and Yoruba extractions respectively. Each of these three groups of respondents was given 100 copies of structured questionnaires titled “Ethnic Prejudice Questionnaire (EPQ)”. This questionnaire was developed by the researchers from a pool of items which were earlier generated from the opinion of 50 undergraduate students from the Federal University of Technology, Owerri as their prejudices about the Hausa/Fulanis, the Igbos and the Yorubas respectively. It was developed in a yes or no format. The respondents were simply asked to indicate their opinion about the Hausas/Fulanis, the Igbos and the Yorubas including how they acquired these opinion and their effects on their relationship with people from other ethnic groups by marking a tick in the appropriate column for each of the items in the questionnaire.

For the reliability of the instrument, a field trial of the instrument was carried out with 20 undergraduate students who were given 20 copies of the instrument to complete and after an interval of two weeks, the same instrument was presented again to them to complete. The correlation of the scores of the respondents in the first and second administrations of the test with Pearson product moment formula yielded a correlation co-efficient of 0.81. In the light of this, the instrument was considered very reliable for the study. The five research questions were answered with percentage and the results are presented in the following tables.

Results**Table 1.** Prejudices of Nigerian youths about the Hausas/Fulanis

S/N	Item	Yes	%	No	%	Total
1	People who always desire to dominate others politically.	271	90.3	29	9.7	100
2	Excessive users/lovers of charms	240	80	60	20	100
3	Unbusiness minded people.	276	92	24	8	100
4	Selfish and self-centered people.	185	61.7	115	38.3	100
5	People who easily pick offence at the slightest provocation.	169	56.3	131	43.7	100
6	Aggressive, brutal and cruel set of people.	178	59.3	122	40.7	100
7	People who have very little regard for human life.	290	96.7	10	3.3	100
8	People who do not value western education.	264	84.7	46	15.3	100
9	Very fanatical set of people.	278	92.7	22	7.3	100

The results on table one show that the percentage scores on the nine items ranged from 56.3 to 92.7. Since all the percentage scores are more than 50% which is half, all the

nine items were therefore accepted as the prejudices of Nigerian youths about the Hausas/Fulanis.

Table 2. Prejudices of Nigerian youths about the Igbos

S/N	Item	Yes	%	No	%	Total
1	Excessively money conscious	291	97	9	3	100
2	People who can do anything to get money.	252	84	48	16	100
3	Very crafty set of people.	163	54.3	137	45.7	100
4	People who like to cheat others always	230	76.7	70	23.3	100
5	Those who exploit every opportunity for their selfish gains.	249	83	51	17	100
6	Very selfish people.	240	80	60	20	100
7	Those who always feel intellectually superior to others.	187	62.3	113	37.7	100
8	Those who lack unity among themselves.	200	66.7	100	33.3	100
9	Those who can be bought with money.	219	73	81	27	100

The results on table two show that the percentage scores of all the items exceeded 50% or half. These results show that all the items constitute the prejudices of Nigerian youths about the Igbos.

Table 3. Prejudices of Nigerian youths about the Yorubas

S/N	Item	Yes	%	No	%	Total
1	Very pompous people	249	83	51	17	100
2	Very crafty people.	270	90	30	10	100
3	Unreliable set of people	286	95	16	5	100
4	Very parochial/self-centered people.	261	87	39	13	100
5	Very greedy people.	187	62.3	113	37.7	100
6	People very wicked with charms.	280	93.3	20	6.7	100
7	People who are always ready to kill others because of position.	216	72	84	28	100
8	People who segregate a lot.	277	92.3	23	7.7	100
9	People who trust only themselves.	192	64	108	36	100
10	People who are not committed to other religions except African Traditional Religion.	171	57	129	43	100
11	Very fearful people.	179	59.7	121	40.3	100

The results on table 3 show that the percentage scores of all the items is equal to or greater than 50%. These results show that all the items constitute the prejudices of Nigerian youths about the Yorubas.

Table 4. How Nigeria youths acquired their prejudices about other ethnic groups.

S/N	Item	Yes	%	No	%	Total
1	Learnt from my parents/guardians	181	60.3	119	39.7	100
2	Learnt from members of my ethnic group	280	93.3	20	6.7	100
3	Simply assumed so.	189	63	111	37	100
4	Learnt from my peers.	209	69.7	91	30.3	100

The results of the analysis on table 4 show four ways through which Nigeria youths acquire their prejudices about other ethnic groups. For each of the four items, the yes percentage scores is equal to or greater than 50%.

Table 5. Effects of ethnic prejudices on inter-ethnic groups relationship.

S/N	Item	Yes	%	No	%	Total
1	Fear them.	280	93.3	20	6.7	100
2	Suspect them always.	300	100	-	0	100
3	Be constantly on guard when I come into contact with them.	300	100	-	0	100
4	Always try to avoid them.	260	86.7	40	13.3	100
5	Feel insecure in their midst.	252	84	48	16	100
6	Hate them.	209	69.7	91	30.3	100

For each of the six items above, the yes percentage score is equal to or greater than 50%. These results therefore show how ethnic prejudice affects inter-ethnic groups relationship in Nigeria.

Discussion

The results of the first three research questions presented in tables 1, 2 and 3 clearly show that Nigerian youths have a lot of prejudices about other ethnic groups. Their responses are considered prejudices and irrational because while one cannot deny the fact that there are some people from the three major ethnic groups who behave in the way the respondents responded, it however seem very unreasonable and irrational to generalize these case to the entire members of these ethnic groups. These findings are very worrisome when one recalls that the samples are the educated and mobile members of the society who are expected to be detribalized. These findings however vindicate the assertion of Lewis (1972) that educated Nigerians are more tribalist than the uneducated.

On how the youths acquired their prejudices, the results show that they acquired their ethnic prejudices through their parents/guardians, members of their ethnic groups, their peers and through mere assumption. In other words, they came to their prejudices about other ethnic groups through hear-say.

Looking at the effects of the prejudices of the sample on their social relationship with Nigerians from other ethnic groups, the results as presented in table 5 show that ethnic prejudice makes Nigerian youths to fear and suspect people from other ethnic groups; remain constantly on guard when they come into contact with them; try to avoid them; feel insecure in their midst and hate them. These findings support the researcher's belief that ethnic prejudice is an impediment to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. This is so because; the six statements in table 5 cannot co-exist with love, peace, and harmony. In other words, they are factors which hinder peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

Counselling implications

The results of this study demand concerted efforts of professional guidance counsellors in order to restructure the prejudiced minds of Nigerians and by so doing, promote inter-ethnic group understanding, co-operation and peaceful co-existence. The achievements of these desirable states demand the assistance of guidance counsellors in helping Nigerian youths to understand that their views of other groups are irrational and prejudiced. It also demands teaching Nigerian youths how to separate their irrational and prejudiced views from reality. Furthermore, counsellors are expected to help Nigerian youths to know how to relate with and think about other ethnic groups in a rational and unprejudiced

way. These tasks can be accomplished by making use of the cognitive techniques of counselling.

Besides the above mentioned techniques, the counsellor can equally employ the emotive evocative technique of counselling. This technique comprises role playing, modelling, unconditional acceptance, humor, and exhalation. The use of this technique will help clients to understand the differences between their prejudices and the truth regarding other ethnic groups. Hansen, Stevic and Warner (1977:208) stated that Albert Ellis maintains that the counsellor might use role playing to show the client his false ideas; modelling to show the client more appropriate ways of behaving; unconditional acceptance and humor to show he is accepted even though some of his ideas are absurd; and exhalation to get him to give up his irrational ideas and to replace it with more rational thinking. In addition, the counsellor should apply the behavioural techniques of counselling to help clients to develop and strengthen more rational and unprejudiced views about other ethnic groups.

Furthermore, the counsellor should encourage Nigerians especially those that bring up children and youths on the need for them to de-emphasize competition and emphasize more on super-ordinate goals. These are goals that can be achieved only through co-operation among individuals and groups.

Above all, the counsellor must mobilize the populace to acquire basic literacy. This is necessary because education is one of the basic factors which if properly harnessed will promote peaceful co-existence and national integration in Nigeria. It will develop in the citizens a positive attitude towards the laws of the land and respect for the rights/individual differences of other people.

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