Measuring Prejudicial Attitudes in a Situational Context

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I. Introduction

A VERY substantial part of the American literature in the fields of sociology and social psychology treats the problems involved in minority-majority relations. This interest is very understandable in view of the magnitude and urgency of the problems of race relations and of other minority problems in the United States. It is harder to understand, however, why European social science has taken so much less interest in these problems. The statement that European minority groups have never attained the relative or absolute size they have in America, and therefore pose less of a problem, raises a question rather than answering it. In any event it does not withstand closer scrutiny, especially not if the analysis is extended over time. For one thing prejudice is not necessarily related in a simple linear fashion to the size of the minority. After all, the worst outburst of prejudice and persecution seen in modern time took place against a numerically quite insignificant minority group – in Europe. The belief that minority problems in Europe are not as bitter and violent as in the United States conveniently neglects such cases as the ongoing Protestant-Catholic conflict in Ulster, the activities of Basque nationalists in Northern Spain and Southern France, the conflict in South Tirol, the language conflict in Belgium. Moreover, minority relations might cause serious problems before they reach the stage of proceeding by the use of guns and bombs. Finally, it should be remembered that although we are prone to identify “minority groups” with “ethnical-cultural minority groups”, minority groups need not be ethnical-cultural in character, and the greater homogeneity of European countries in this respect, compared with the United States, does by no means preclude the existence of many different minorities – and associated minority-majority problems – in European countries.

Thus it can be argued that the absence or insignificance of minority-majority problems in European countries is not as obvious as many Europeans would like to think and that it certainly does not render investigations into the matter superfluous or trivial. The examples just referred to at least point in an opposite direction. Moreover, the recent developments in the mobility of national labour forces with the associated influx of foreign workers into most Central and North European countries and their establishment there as new
minority groups seem to provide strong incentives for research into minority problems.

Nevertheless, compared with American research in this field European contributions are scanty; this is particularly true of Danish research. Despite the long and obvious existence of ethnic-cultural minorities within the Danish society and despite the quite new problems related to the sudden appearance of a token number of Mediterranean foreign workers, very little work has been done. The existing studies almost exclusively concentrate upon the minority aspects of minority-majority relations, whereas problems on the majority side – notably the phenomena of ethnocentrism and prejudice – have received very little interest. (Blum 1973; Truelsen 1970: 98–118; Miller 1948: 29–34).

Very much the same holds true for Danish public policies toward different minority groups. The policies toward foreign labourers, e.g., have primarily been aimed at securing for them an acceptable standard of living while at the same time protecting the Danish labour force against competition in the labour market. The problems of integrating foreigners into Danish society and of their relationship to Danes have attracted much less political interest. This is particularly evident when compared with the situation in Sweden. The state of official opinion seems to reflect the reassuring conviction about discrimination toward minorities that “it could never happen here”. An antidiscrimination law was, to be sure, enacted in 1971 as a consequence of a UN-convention. It criminalizes racial and religious discrimination in writings and speeches, as well as in restaurants and similar places. (Folketingstidende 1970–71: 1198). However, the bill was passed although it was met with some hesitation in Parliament; the debates contain only few hints at the possibility that discrimination and bias exist in today’s Denmark. (Folketingstidende 1970/71: 844 and 7434).

On this background, an experiment conducted by E. A. Chaples in 1972 constituted something of a novum in Denmark. (Chaples et al. 1972: 235–247). Chaples investigated the attitudes toward negroes and Mediterranean workers in a sample of students at the Universities of Copenhagen and Aarhus by means of the SAS technique. The main findings of his study (Chaples et al. 1972: 243) were that Danish students revealed a substantial and consistent pro-black orientation in their attitude patterns both in situations involving minimal and in situations involving maximal social contacts with negroes, whereas their attitudes toward Mediterranean foreign workers were positive only in the first, but clearly negative in the second type of situation.

These are interesting findings, since the amount of prejudice – positive as well as negative – does not correspond well with the predominant views held by foreigners and Danes alike as to the unprejudiced nature of Danish ethnic attitudes. Interpretation and explanation of these findings, however, as pointed out by Chaples himself, are subject to severe limits in several respects. For one thing, they are based on a sample of students only, and students almost universally have been found to be the least prejudiced group available. It is not certain, therefore, that the positive bias toward negroes is a pertinent part of “the” Dane’s attitude pattern. Also, the differences in the attitudes toward