

Survival: Black/White

By Florence Halpern, Ph.D.

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Preface

This book is about black people. Since I am white I think some explanation for what may be regarded as presumptuous behavior on my part is indicated. My purpose is to communicate to others how I became involved in the lives of the southern black people and how my perception and understanding of them changed as the result of that involvement. My hope is that what is written here will help other white people “feel and think black.”

What follows is the product of close, sustained living with the black people of the rural south. I went to Mississippi originally, not to study the black people or write a book about them, but rather to relieve the guilt I experienced when I learned through the communication media what was happening to black citizens in the south.

My first experience in the south was with Head Start in the summer of 1965. The Head Start program in that state, known as the Child Development Group of Mississippi, consisted of eighty-four centers, scattered all over the state. The program, directed by Dr. Tom Levin, a clinical psychologist, was a highly controversial one. Because of the philosophy of the project and the goals it had set for itself, the local white people in the area were very unhappy with the program and tried to hamper and do away with it. To this end they harassed the people working with the project and brought pressure to bear on local and federal politicians to have the project's funds rescinded.

What was particularly distressing to the white residents were the efforts that were being made to develop feelings of dignity, self-respect, and self-confidence in the black people of the area. One way this was being

done was by turning over authority to the black people, not only permitting them to make their own decisions but urging them to do so, rather than constantly looking to “white authority” for assistance and direction. So they were assured that if the solutions they found for a given problem did not work out well, no great harm would result and a new answer could always be reached. In this way it was hoped that their longstanding dependence on and deference to white people and resulting negative self-image would be overcome. Similarly, the children who initially appeared afraid to speak to or even look at the white workers were encouraged to engage with them in verbal exchange and spontaneous play. By the end of the summer most of the children were quite responsive and outgoing. In fact, several of the mothers reported that when they took the children to the integrated school to register them for the fall term, they were very pleased at the way the children “picked up their heads and spoke their names,” in contrast to the behavior of some of the white children who cried and clung to their mothers during the registration.

There were actually over a thousand people in the program—teachers, teacher-aides, cooks, social workers, psychologists, doctors, nurses, clerks, and secretaries. Only about a hundred of these people were white professionals from the north, while the remainder were black people whose concepts of child development and child rearing derived solely from their experiences in raising their own children and grandchildren.

Functioning as a psychologist in the program, it did not take me very long to recognize that the needs, the values, and the motivation of the black people were in almost all respects quite different from those of middle-class white people. As a result, I had to acquire a whole new set of concepts and values before I could communicate meaningfully with the people with whom I was working.

Following the Head Start experience I became involved with the people of Strike City. The residents of Strike City were a small group of black people who, for the first time in the history of the United States, had gone on strike, refusing to work in the cotton fields for three dollars a day. Such unprecedented behavior on the part of black people was met with anger and rejection by the plantation owner who promptly fired the striking workers. This meant that they not only had to leave their jobs, but also the shacks that were their homes. For a time they were in dire straits as they traveled around Mississippi trying to find new homes and the means of staying alive. Finally, they were able to procure a few acres of ground from a black man. Here they pitched tents and lived

in them during one of Mississippi's coldest winters. They survived and even produced two new babies. By their behavior they demonstrated a capacity for independence and self-determination that few white people believed they possessed.

During the winter of 1965–1966 I visited the tent community sporadically, doing whatever could be done to ease the wretched condition of the people. Their needs at that point were very immediate and concrete, so bringing them much needed supplies was important. However, providing them with emotional support was also important. The fact that someone from the white community, someone from the north, knew about them and cared about what happened to them, helped lift their spirits and strengthen their morale. So they held on and eventually left their tents and moved into the houses that the men had built with their bare hands.

Many of the children in Strike City were going to attend an integrated school in the fall and so, during the summers of 1966 and 1967, I ran a one room class with children ranging in age from five to eighteen years. From 9 a.m. in the morning until late in the afternoon we worked on reading and arithmetic. Naturally I came to know all the children and their families very well and they learned to know me, and I was soon seen by all the members of Strike City as one of them. Thus a woman might ask me to drive her to town because she had to buy something, or she wanted to visit a relative. Another woman might ask me to go to a clinic or the Welfare agency with her. In general I was a member of the community, not an outsider.

In 1968 I became a member of Tufts Delta Health Center, a project set up by the Department of Community Medicine (later known as the department of Community Health and Social Medicine) of Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston, Massachusetts. The program was financed by OEO and served the indigent population of North Bolivar County, Mississippi in the the Mississippi Delta—about 15,000 people residing in an area of 500 square miles. Much of the work of the Center is discussed in later chapters. As staff psychologist I gave talks to professionals and paraprofessionals on issues related to mental health, “did therapy” with the patients (most of whom were black) and with members of the white staff and their families when they became discouraged and depressed, counseled and encouraged members of the black staff when they questioned their ability to carry out their assignments, visited sick and disturbed people in their homes and in the small local black hospital, and attended church and went to church sociables and

picnics organized by the black community. I also taught two days a week for one semester in a small, all black college.

Briefly then, what I have learned about the black people comes from living closely with them in their homes, working in their schools, their Head Start Centers, their hospitals, churches, colleges, and other organizations. This kind of living enabled me to participate intimately in the every day experiences of the people, sharing with them their joys and sorrows, their illnesses, births and deaths, their disappointments and rejoicings when there was reason to rejoice, and more recently sharing with them the gradual realization that change might come, that there was the possibility for a better way of life for themselves and their children than they had ever known before.

Out of this living with the black people have come not only new concepts and values, but the realization that feeling guilty about the condition of the black people, being sympathetic and well-intentioned toward them, or being "liberally" oriented does not result in constructive change. What is needed is a solid understanding and appreciation of the life styles of the black people, how they came to be and what purposes they serve. Only then is it possible to consider how blacks and whites might come together with mutual trust and respect, and work toward the survival of both races.

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Part I How It Has Been

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