

Interview with **Dr. Kenneth Clark**

November 4, 1985

Production Team: A

Camera Rolls: 146-148

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**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 146]

[sound roll 1122]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: STICK. MARKER PLEASE.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: I WON—I WONDER IF WE COULD START BY HAVING YOU DESCRIBE FOR US THIS SEG—WHAT SEGREGATION WAS IN THE EARLY 1950s, IN PARTICULAR, HOW IT AFFECTED THE CHILDREN THAT YOU WERE TESTING?

Clark: Well, segregation was and is a way in which a society tells a, a group of human beings that they are inferior to other groups of human beings in the society—and it really is internalized—that children learning that they cannot go to the same schools as other children and the schools that they are required to attend are always clearly inferior to the schools that others are permitted to attend. It influences the child's view of himself as being inferior to the others this is as reinforced by other things in the society such as restrictions in public accommodations, transportation. When a whole society is organized to establish the inferior, reinforce the inferior status of these individuals it lowers their self-esteem. It makes them feel that they're not as worthy as the non-segregated groups of human beings and this continues pretty much through the rest of their lives.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT. MAKE SURE EVERYONE'S HAPPY.

[cut]

00:02:15:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SEE IT

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SOUND TWO.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: BEFORE WE GET TO THE SPECIFICS OF THE, THE BROWN CASE, COULD YOU JUST DESCRIBE WHAT, WHAT THE DOLLS TEST WAS. WHAT WAS IT DESIGNED TO SHOW?

Clark: The Dolls Test was an attempt on the part of my wife and me to try to understand how children, black children, saw themselves—whether they viewed themselves as equal to others. In fact, what we were trying to do is to see how children develop a sense of their own being, their own person we did this study before we had any idea that it was going to have any relevance to public policy, before we knew—

[cut]

00:03:12:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU.

INTERVIEWER: AGAIN, THE DOLLS TEST.

Clark: The Dolls Test was an attempt on the part of my wife and me to study the development of the sense of self, self-esteem in children. We worked with Negro children, I'll call black children, to see the extent to which their color, their sense of their own race and status influenced their judgment about themselves, self-esteem. We've now, this research, by the way was done long before we had any notion that the NAACP or that the public officials would be concerned with our results. In fact, we did the study 14 years before Brown and the lawyers of the NAACP learned about it and came and asked us if we thought that it was relevant to what they were planning to do in terms of the Brown decision cases. And we told them it was up to them to make that decision and we did not do it for li—li—litigation, we did it to communicate to our colleagues in psychology the influence of race and color and status on the self-esteem of children.

00:04:48:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, WHEN YOU GOT INVOLVED WITH CLARENDON COUNTY, WHEN THEY ASKED YOU TO GET INVOLVED, DID YOU SEE IT AS ANY DIFFERENT THAN ANY OTHER TESTING SITUATION?

Clark: Did we, well, we got involved with the Clarendon County case we got involved because the lawyers initiated the communication with us we could not talk about the results of our research in terms of the litigation because the litigation came, as I said earlier—after we did the study, and the, the dolls test and the other techniques that we used to study the development of the sense of self in these children was done purely in terms of attempting to understand the psychological process—how do people develop from childhood a sense of their own person?

00:05:55:00

INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU TALK US THROUGH A TYPICAL TEST. THE QUESTIONS, THE RESPONSES OF THE CHILD?

Clark: Well, in the, in the test, everyone calls this, by the way, the dolls test, but in trying to answer our basic problem of how do people develop a sense of their own being, we used a number of techniques. Partly the dolls technique was the most dramatic, but we had pictures of children, black and white, and we asked the children to indicate which one was like themselves, which one they liked, which ones they didn't like. We had a coloring test which I found more fascinating than the dolls test even although nobody ever talks about it. We had drawings of such things as a leaf, an apple, a mouse and a girl and a boy and we had a lot of crayons and we asked, this test was particularly concerned with trying to determine the child's sense of color, starting with three years of age and going up. And we had them to color the leaf, the apple, the mouse—and if they did that correctly, then we would say: here is a little boy, and if it were a little girl we would say to them, color this little boy the color you like little boys to be, which would, indicate preference. And if it were a boy, we would say: color this little girl the color you would like little girls to be. And then we, the final question we asked them on the coloring test, now color yourself the color you are. Well, one of the reasons I found that the most interesting and disturbing method that we used before the dolls test was that we found a number of the children who would color—when we'd say, color this little boy, if it were a boy, the color you are a child 3, 4 or 5 who could color all the other things the apple, the leaf, the mouse an appropriate color, would take a totally in—inappropriate color to color himself. For example, would take vermilion or a color that no human being was and do that. That, to me, indicated a sense of disturbance about his own color. Then finally we came to the dolls test in the same situation, and the questions were very simple, you know, show me a white doll. We had two white dolls and two brown dolls. Show me the doll that's a white doll. Show me the doll that's a brown doll. We had a series of about three or four questions that were concerned with knowledge of the difference and we had questions that were concerned with preference: show me the doll that you like to play with. Show me the doll

that's a nice doll. Show me the doll that's a bad doll. And after we asked these preference questions in which a majority of these children disturbingly rejected the black or brown doll and described positive characteristics to the white doll—not all, but the majority did. Then the most disturbing question, and one that really made me even as a scientist upset, was, we then asked as the final question—now show me the doll that's most like you. And it was disturbing because many of the children were emotionally upset at having to identify with the doll that they had rejected. Some of them would walk out the room or refuse to answer that question. And this, we interpreted, as indicating that color in a racist society was a very disturbing and traumatic—

00:11:04:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Clark: —component of an individual's sense of his own self-esteem and worth.

INTERVIEWER: JUST RUNNING OUT. OH. I WAS IN, I WAS IN—

00:11:17:00

[cut]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SOUND FOUR.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: WE'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT THE—THE TESTING AS A, AS A GENERAL TOPIC—DO YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING, ANYTHING IN PARTICULAR ABOUT THE CLARENDON COUNTY TESTING? ANY OF THE RESPONSES THERE?

Clark: The responses in, the Clarendon County testing, again, was something which was requested by the lawyers who had read the material that we had published; before we knew that there was any litigation. And then the lawyers wanted to know if their plaintiffs the, the children in Clarendon County, the black children, would have the same results as those that we had tested ten years earlier. So they asked me to, to go into Clarendon County and I wasn't all that happy about it 'cause there was a lot of violence and threats of violence in there and Thurgood would say, well, you, you have to go there anyway. So, and my wife, by the way, didn't want me to go, she had been from the south and she was aware—more aware of violence than I. But anyway, I went and Thurgood sent someone in, the head of the NAACP in South Carolina, went with me—by the way, he was threatened in my presence there. But we had to test those children. And I went in and used the same

methods and techniques that I had used in the earlier studies and the results were the same. I mean these children saw themselves as inferior and they accepted the inferiority as part of reality. I mean they, they were separated from whites. They, they went to segregated schools and these realities were reflected in the results of our, of our tests.

00:13:44:00

INTERVIEWER: IS IT IN CLARENDON COUNTRY OR IS IT SOMEWHERE ELSE, I'M NOT REMEMBERING THIS CLEARLY, THAT THE LITTLE, LITTLE CHILD WHO SAYS, I'M THE NIGGER.

Clark: No, that was in our original study. It was in Arkansas. A little boy, when I asked him now show me the doll that's like you, he looked up and smiled, I mean, and laughed and pointed to the brown doll and says look, that's a nigger, I'm a nigger, that was as disturbing if not more disturbing to me than the children, [coughs] some of the children in Massachusetts who would refuse to answer that question or would cry and [coughs], and run out of the room. The children in the South did not—[coughs]

INTERVIEWER: WOULD YOU LIKE TO CLEAR YOUR THROAT AGAIN?

Clark: [coughs] I guess that's called—remembering this thing disturbs me. The children in the south did not reject the inferior status which that last question required, in fact, they sort of accepted this as part of the reality of life that they were living in as indicated by that little boy's statement, [coughs] I'm a nigger. It's a nigger and smiled about it. The children in the north were more overtly emotionally rejecting of that thing.

INTERVIEWER: CUT THE ROLLS PLEASE.

00:15:33:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: GIVE YOU A GLASS OF WATER, WOULD THAT HELP YOU?

Clark: No, the only thing that will help me is for us—is to get this over with.

INTERVIEWER: OK. ROLL AGAIN. DID YOU TEST—DO YOU REMEMBER TESTING ANY OF THE FAMOUS DEFENDANTS LIKE HARRY BRIGGS JR. OR LINDA BROWN? TEST ANY OF THOSE CHILDREN?

Clark: I didn't, test any of the children, the plaintiffs, in Kansas, with the Brown decision, but the children in South Carolina, all of the plaintiffs, I tested there. I tested some if not all of the children in Prince Edward County case in Virginia and I don't remember exactly

whether I tested the children in the Delaware case, but I know I didn't test any of the children in Kansas.

INTERVIEWER: I MUST HAVE HAD THAT IN MY MIND.

00:16:28:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SECOND STICK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU SEE THESE RESULTS IN SOUTH CAROLINA AND ELSEWHERE AS A PARTICULAR WARNING TO PARENTS OR EDUCATORS ABOUT THE DANGERS OF THE SYSTEM?

Clark: Oh, of course. I saw there was warnings even before I knew there was going to be a case against segregation. My wife and I saw them as fairly indicative of the dehumanizing effects of racism of which segregation is the most concrete manifestation of racism, no question about that. In fact, we saw that so clearly that we were reluctant to publish the results.

00:17:16:00

INTERVIEWER: REALLY? WHY, WHY, WHY DO YOU MEAN BY THAT? WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

Clark: Because they would, some, the results of our studies were indicative of the dehumanizing, cruel impact of racism in our allegedly democratic society and, you know, these children were internalizing, they were seeing themselves in terms of the society's definition of their inferior status. That's not a pretty thing to—and it was hard for us to pretend to be objective about it.

00:18:07:00

INTERVIEWER: YEAH. THERE WAS CONTROVERSY WITHIN THE NAACP ABOUT USING YOUR METHODS, IF I REMEMBER CORRECTLY, DID YOU—DO YOU HAVE ANY MEMORY ABOUT THAT? WHETHER THEY COULD USE AS, AS—IN CERTAIN WAYS TO PROVE THINGS OR WHETHER IT WAS TOO GENERAL TO BE APPLICABLE?

Clark: Well, some of the lawyers felt that the case should not be contaminated by psychological evidence. The lawyers in order to overcome the Plessy, separate but equal doctrine, should stick to the law. The—some other lawyers, particularly Robert Carter, who is presently a federal judge in New York, he argued that you couldn't overthrow

Plessy by just sticking to the law, that in order to show the damage and violation of equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, you would have to show that being segregated actually damaged the, the children and according to Judge Carter, who was not a judge then, and others who were part of Thurgood Marshall's colory [sic], they said that you needed this evidence of the damaging effect of segregation on children. Well, that was up to them, I mean I, I, I couldn't play any part in their discussion but Thurgood Marshall made the decision and they kept us as part of these cases.

00:20:09:00

INTERVIEWER: WHEN THE SUPREME COURT CAME DOWN WITH ITS DECISION CITED THE WORK THAT YOU AND YOUR WIFE HAD DONE IN THEIR DECISION, DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THAT?

Clark: Course, how could I forget it? I was very, very happy when Thurgood called me at the college and told me not only that the decision came down but that, Justice Barne had specifically mentioned the psychological testimony as a key in repealing Plessy. Sure, I was happy, goodness, I would have to be a block of ice not to be, and we celebrated for quite a while.

00:21:02:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW AFTER THE BROWN DECISION THERE WAS THIS ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF RESISTANCE IN THE WHITES NOW. AND I'M WONDERING IF YOU HAD ANY EXPECTATIONS OF THAT.

Clark: The resistance? Course you'd have to have expected resistance. What I didn't anticipate was how long the resistance was going to last. I, I thought, you know, that we would have resistance for a few years and the white public and public officials and blacks would adjust to changes in the segregation matter and accept desegregation. I must confess I, I published articles making that kind of prediction. I wish I could get them back now because obviously the resistance not only persists, continues up to the present, but seems to be much more effective than the early forms of resistance. The northern type of resistance to me, is more insidious and more effective than the Faubus, Wallace, you know, blatant type of resistance—

00:22:33:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE. I THINK WE MUST BE OUT. ARE WE ROLL OUT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YES WE HAVE FORTY FEET.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs] I HAVEE ABOUT TWO MORE QUESTIONS THEN WE WILL RELEASE—

00:22:42:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 148]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SOUND SIX.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS IT THAT THEY WERE SO AFRAID OF? WHERE DID THIS RESISTANCE COME?

Clark: I've often thought of that, and I suppose closely related to that question is the question of—what were the people who were persecuting witches in Salem afraid of? What were the Nazis afraid of? As a psychologist, I suppose, I should have some clues to the answer to those disturbing questions, but I must confess I do not have the answer. It, it seemed to me that type of cruel—there and sometimes cruel to the point of destruction of human beings is evidence of deep-seated ignorance and superstition among human beings which they can rationalize by such things as, you know, pointing out the inferiority of the people whom they are destroying actually or psychologically. They can give you all sorts of good reasons, but when you examine those reasons what you really see is ignorance and superstition which is rather pervasive, unfortunately, very common among human beings and they, they destroy each other or go out of their way to hurt their fellow human beings and you say—the question that there, there must be something deep down that they fear that it doesn't, whatever it is, it doesn't seem to me to be rational and obviously not moral or human.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT.

00:25:02:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: I'M INTERESTED IN A SORT OF GENERAL QUESTTON OF YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE LEGACIES OF THE PERIOD THAT WE'RE COVERING. LET ME EXPLAIN THIS—THIS IS A, A SERIES THAT'S COVERING THE FIRST TEN OR ELEVEN YEARS AFTER THE BROWN DECISION SO WE



COVER LITTLE ROCK AND WE COVER THE SIT-INS AND THE FREEDOM RIDES AND THE YOUNG ACTIVISM. WE COVER THE MARCHES, WE COVER—

Clark: And after this I can ask you a question? Who is, we?

INTERVIEWER: YES, AC—ACTUALLY, DO YOU WANT ME TO TELL YOU THAT FIRST?

Clark: No, that's all right.

INTERVIEWER: OK. WE GO THROUGH THE, THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964, THE SELMA CAMPAIGN, AND THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965. SO THAT'S BASICALLY OUR ELEVEN YEAR PERIOD THERE. AND IF YOU PLACE YOURSELF AT THAT PERIOD AND THINK ABOUT IT I'M WONDERING WHAT YOU WOULD SAY IS THE LEGACIES OF THAT FIRST PERIOD OF THE MODERN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT.

Clark: I'm not sure I understand your question—"legacy of that first period"—what do, what do you mean by that?

INTERVIEWER: GOALS ACCOMPLISHED BY THAT—IN THAT FIRST PERIOD. GOALS LEFT UNDONE. A SENSE OF THAT. WHAT WERE THE BIG CHANGES IN, IN THE NATIONAL COMMUNITY, IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY, WHAT WAS LEFT TO COME? THIS IS WHY I THOUGHT I'D ASK YOU FIRST TO LET YOU THINK FOR A MOMENT. [pause] YOU READY?

00:26:24:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SOUND SEVEN.

[sync tone]

Clark: That period after the 1954 Brown decision was clearly one in which major changes in race relations were occurring on the surface. I mean, the flagrant forms of segregation being removed, you know, such as segregation in public accommodation and transportation. The Brown decision certainly stimulated the, the Martin Luther King civil disobedience approach which had terrific impact. I mean moving the more stupid manifestations of racism and segregation. And that excited the, the civil rights movement, it certainly—and the media, television, brought the, Selma, Montgomery, the Bull Connor type of things into the living rooms of Americans and the conscience of, I think, the majority of American people was aroused and reinforced by the leadership of Martin Luther King. And one could have thought, during that period, that there would be continued progress toward racial justice and there was. There was some progress. I mean one can't say that nothing happened because some things did happen so, there were so

many changes that younger people can't imagine. The quality of stupidity that characterized American racism before they were born. But something happened later in the, in the '70s and '80s, you, you got backlash. And certainly you got frustrations on the part of black Americans that manifested itself in separatism by blacks. [pause] And the, the problems that have been premised [sic] today are much more insidious than the problems which we faced in the '50s and the '60s which we seem to have gotten over and solving—I mean, in solving the, the flagrant segregation signs we left the insidious segregation. The fact of segregation that you don't need signs and we now have a kind of pervasive deep-seated racism that's sometimes supported by liberals.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:30:08:00

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