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6421 – Scientific Basis for Brown

Guest: Dr. Ernest Van den Haag

Morphew: Introduction...adjunct professor of social philosophy at NYU and a lecturer of sociology and psychology for the New School for Social Research, born in the Hague, Holland, studied in Naples and Florence, Italy, and Paris, MA from the state university of Iowa and PhD from NYU, fellow of the Royal Economic Society and the American Sociological Association, practicing psychoanalyst and member of the New York Academy of Sciences, author of books and papers, taught at Brooklyn College, University of Minnesota, CUNY, lectured and Yale, Harvard, Columbia, and University of California and other universities...10 years ago the U.S. Supreme Court handed down Brown v. Board of Education, during the past few days there has been a landmark trial underway in Jackson, MS, where you and other expert scientists have been testifying concerning some of the factors ruled upon in Brown, bring to the federal district court some evidence not available at the time of the Brown decision...what do you think is the real basis of the Brown decision? I know you have studied it carefully.

Van den Haag: Yes, I have. The decision, as you pointed out, held that under the Fourteenth Amendment Negro children are deprived of the equal protection of the laws when they are segregated even if in all material respects they are treated exactly as white children. That is, [overruled] Plessy v. Ferguson, it held that separate education is inherently unequal and it held so on the basis of what they called modern authority which was not available to the court that decided Plessy v. Ferguson, that is, it was not available when the Court held more than 60 years ago that one could proceed within the constitution to a separate but equal education. Now, I got interested in that modern authority and that's what got me to testify. I was interested in finding out where the Court had found evidence, that the Court in effect said it had, that segregation is harmful, so harmful that it becomes unconstitutional to Negro children. And it turned out that the Court had found that evidence largely in a brief submitted to the Court by social scientists

and that brief, in turn, was largely based, though not exclusively, on certain experiments that had been performed by Professor Kenneth B. Clark of City College in New York. I think I'll you briefly what these experiments were.

Morphew: Yes, please do.

Van den Haag: Professor Clark presented white and Negro dolls, dark and white dolls, to groups of Negro children in segregated schools and asked them which dolls they liked better, which dolls they would like to play with and finally, which dolls were like them, these Negro children in segregated schools. The Negro children in segregated schools, in the majority, preferred the white dolls, preferred to play, as they said, with the white dolls, and finally, when asked which doll is most like you, they said the white doll. Professor Clark told the lower courts which handled the Brown decision before it came to the Supreme Court, he told the lower court that that shows that there's something very wrong with their personalities and that that is due to segregation. Now, I found that there were quite a number of things wrong with that experiment. Among other things, I may add, say here, that if a Negro child or a white child or a red or Chinese child prefers a light colored doll it may be simply that he prefers light colors, and our culture, for instance, and in most cultures, white or light colors stand for purity, innocence, joy, and dark colors such as black stand for...death, terror, evil, so that children of any color themselves may prefer a white doll. But regardless, what disturbed me mostly about this experiment was that it was undertaken with very few children and there's no control experiments. If you wanted to attribute the alleged damage to segregation then you should also perform this sort of experiment with non-segregated Negro children and see whether their response differs. If it does you may have a point. Well, it did. I found that Professor Clark himself had undertaken such experiments with children in a mixed school situation but it differed inasmuch as in the mixed school situation. Even more of the Negro children preferred the white doll and identified with it, so that what his experiment actually showed was that if it is true that the preference of a Negro child and the identification of a Negro child with a white doll indicates harm to his personality, what Professor Clark had really shown was that more such harm arises through intermixture, through desegregation, through congregation, than occurs when there is segregation, and I found further that Professor Clark had never told the Court about these previous experiments which had shown the result I just described and there's many children than the experiments which he submitted to the Court. So that got me interested and...to finally write an article about it, and that finally got me to testify to this effect.

Morphew: During the Jackson trial, it was brought out that the tests similar made by Clark ten years ago have been made within the past few months using Negro school children in Jackson, Mississippi

Van den Haag: Yes, these were in a segregated situation and the tests in question were undertaken by Professor Guggle (sp?) of the University of Hawaii and he found that in the segregated situation 95 percent of the negro children preferred Negro dolls as nice dolls, dolls they prefer to play with, and finally, as the dolls with whom they correctly identified themselves. So, according again to Clark's standards this would indicate in the

segregated situation the Negro children identified correctly, have therefore correct self images and therefore are mentally more healthy than the Negro children in the mixed situation which tend to respond to a great extent in terms of a preference for the children not of their group, the white children.

Morphew: During your testimony you used the term 'group orientation' or 'identification with a group' a number of times...why is this important to a child?

Van den Haag: Well, it's important to any child. Numerous observations and experiments including some related to the question we are discussing including others that we've undertaken for different reasons have indicated that a child is literally not humanized, does not become wholly human unless he has the opportunity of engaging upon the earliest time in social intercourse with a group in which he feels at home, in which he feels accepted in that he, the child himself, can accept and identify with children very early, develop a feeling of identification with other children of the same kind. And of course, identification at that age and much later, too, is very largely based on visual characteristics, on what you can see with your eyes, and the skin is one of these, the color of the skin, of course, is one that is very apparent to a child.

Morphew: So far from having a beneficial effect you feel that integration in the public schools, could indeed be harmful?

Van den Haag: Yes. I think it is harmful always when it is compulsory. So, the conclusion is very simply that the compulsory congregation, the compulsory togetherness that the Supreme Court has decreed is likely not to reduce but rather to increase the mutual hostility of the two groups.

Morphew: During the trial you defined this in terms of happiness, would you mind repeating that definition?

Van den Haag: Well, what will be involved in terms of what we have just discussed is that the Negro children were, by their being with white children, develop an aspiration level which will be contributing in excess of their attainment level. Now, William James a long time ago defined happiness in terms of the distance between what one achieves and what one wishes to achieve, what one aspires to. The greater the distance, the less happy one is...one's expectation, one's aspiration, the more happy is one. Hence, what we are doing is in effect to make these children unnecessarily unhappy about themselves, and there's no greater unhappiness than the one about oneself.

Morphew: In light of this evidence, what are your hopes for future education?

Van den Haag: Well, I think the Supreme Court will sooner or later overthrow the Brown decision not because it was legally right or wrong, I'm not competent to discuss it, but simply because the modern authority on which it was thought to be based turns out to have been misleading, as we have discussed. The factual basis for the Brown decision is simply not there, and the Court will sooner or later have to recognize it. I believe that

parents should have a right to provide for their children according to their judgment rather than to the judgment of any government authority, be it even the Supreme Court.