



Racism as Projection

How early childhood
can help it take root

Psychologist **Helene Lewis** documents how

The child's first experience of 'the other as enemy' occurs at approximately eight months.

IT IS GENERALLY ACCEPTED that it is psychologically far more comfortable for the individual to despise another person or group, than to abhor him- or herself. Most psychologists would also argue that racism cannot be simply understood as some 'force of evil', but rather as a phenomenon that manifests as a trade-off among positive objectives associated with identity, community and society as a whole.

As a psycho-historian, I hold an underlying assumption that people have, as individuals and groups, a psychological investment in the continuation of conflict, racial and otherwise. The individual both needs and uses 'enemies' as external stabilisers for a sense of identity and inner control. Racism is one means of defining and categorising these 'enemies', whose perceived flaws elevate the racist's sense of self.

To understand racism better, it is important to understand childrearing, and the evolution of childrearing over time. Racism is learned behaviour, originating in early childhood rearing and training and often centred in adolescence. The good news is that what has been learned can be unlearned, if the individual's psyche hasn't been too wounded.

The realisation of harmonious humankind – of a 'non-racial society', to use a once-popular South African phrase – is still far off. Yet over a 1000-year span, there has clearly been progress from a psycho-historical perspective – progress based on improved childrearing. Improved childrearing over the ages has rendered healthier individuals, healthier societies and thus less projection, more compassion and more tolerance towards others.

In studying childhood over many generations, it is important to concentrate on the moments that most affect the psyche of the next generation: primarily, what happens when an adult is face to face with a child who needs something.

Three options exist:

1. The parent can use the child as a vehicle for projection of the contents (mostly disowned by himself) of his own unconscious.
2. He can use the child as a substitute for an adult figure (parent) in his own childhood.
3. He can empathise with the child's needs and act to satisfy them (empathic reach).

up, abandoned, raped, battered and tortured. Wounded and damaged children have led to wounded and vengeful adults (societies).

Six main childrearing modes have been identified by psychohistorians. Infanticide was a dominant mode centuries ago, and has diminished but not entirely disappeared. The intrusive childrearing mode (beginning in the 16th century) was primarily one of controlling the child, to make it 'obedient'. This mode still persists today, alternating with other earlier childrearing modes, the abandonment and the ambivalent modes, and more progressive modes like socialising and helping, presently the most prevalent mode.

Parents from each of the six childrearing modes co-exist in modern nations today. Each mode leads to a specific psychoclass comprised of individuals who have had similar childrearing/upbringing. Much political – and racial – conflict occurs because of the psychoclasses' vastly different value systems, particularly their vastly different tolerance for 'freedom' in its various forms.

RACISM AND CHILDHOOD

The child's first experience of 'the other as enemy' occurs at approximately eight months. The 'enemy' (stranger) is perceived by the child as an 'external object' ('not mother') that he has to protect himself against by his ego-defense mechanisms: externalisation, projection and displacement.

- Externalisation is a primitive mechanism by which the child rids himself of unpleasant self-images and feeling states (eg, aggression towards mother is displaced onto a doll by hitting it). The child still has to learn to integrate these feelings within his own being.
- Projection develops at a later stage and is a far more sophisticated system. Different from externalisation which pertains to the individual himself, projection is used by the individual to ascribe his own unacceptable thoughts, impulses or traits to someone 'out there' in an effort to be rid of them. As individuals we project our own unacceptable (disowned) parts onto another person or onto another race. This projection lies at the roots of racism.
- Displacement is the investment of feelings about one object onto another, feelings which you were not able to openly express (eg, antagonism felt for an oppressive father onto a boss).

anger onto someone else.

This displacement results in a precursor of the 'enemy'. Someone else on whom the aggression is displaced becomes dangerous – and may also become a suitable container (poison container) for the unwanted (split-off parts) of the child's sense of self.

This displacement is a necessary part of the psyche's growth. However, its nature can vary from acceptable to poisonous/destructive. With (ego) maturation there is a growing ability to repress these unintegrated parts, these split-off parts, waiting to be



CHILD TRAINING

Various studies indicate that mothers (or other caretakers) of prejudiced children – far more often than mothers of unprejudiced children – believe that:

- Obedience is the most important behaviour for a child to learn;
- A child should never be allowed to oppose the will of his parents – the parents' word is law;
- A child should never keep a secret from his parents;
- A quiet child is preferable to a noisy one;
- Early sex-play (masturbation) should be punished.

In summary, mothers (caretakers) of prejudiced children tend to insist on unquestioned obedience, suppress the child's impulses and discipline harshly.

This leads to a child constantly being on guard. Consequently, the child learns that power and authority dominate human relationships – not trust and tolerance. The first stage is thus set for a hierarchical view of society. Equality doesn't prevail. But much worse, the child learns to mistrust his impulses: he must not get angry, not have tantrums, not disobey, not play with his sex organs (he is 'dirty' and must fight such 'evil' within himself). The seeds of prejudice ('outsiders' become the threat) have been sown.

Through not trusting his own impulses, the child comes to fear evil impulses in others. Not capable of recognising his own destructive impulses within, he recognises them in 'the other' and starts to punish them for these projected, 'disowned parts'. He needs his misguided projection to maintain his own fractured self. Without it he will disintegrate, collapse. And this is the pathology behind racism.

As individuals we project our own unacceptable (disowned) parts onto another person or onto another race. This projection lies at the roots of racism.

projected under the right circumstances (eg, when the individual feels vulnerable or anxious) onto an external object (person/group/another race etc). No doubt, the potential for having individualised enemies as a child finds its way, in the long run, into the formation of shared enemies.

THE HOME FACTOR

Home influence presents as the dominant factor in the development of racism. Children have good reasons for adopting 'ready-made' racist attitudes from their parents. Little children, in particular, are 'delivered to their parents' – totally dependent on them. For survival, as a 'captive audience' they have to comply.

The first six years of life are important for the development of social attitudes. However, early childhood alone is not responsible; we are not fully developed by age six. As such, there is a significant difference between adopting prejudice and developing prejudice.

Adopting prejudice is a 'taking over of attitudes' and stereotypes from family and the cultural environment – an adoption of

as children we begin – with the projection of our 'dark, split-off sides' – to construct 'the enemy' at the core of racism...

The central direction of evolutionary progress among humankind is from personal neediness to personal independence; from family enmeshment to family caregiving; and from social dependency and violence to social dependability and empathy (Lloyd de Mause, *Foundations of Psycho-History*, 1982). Childhood must always first evolve before major social, cultural and economic innovation can occur.

What is needed, in fact, is an evolution of parenting. Through history, many children have been routinely murdered, neglected, tied

Studies have indicated a "striking upsurge" in a child's aggressive drive at about nine months of age, which accounts for the development of obstinacy and willfulness (Vlamić Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies*, 1976). This upsurge presents a need to master and channel aggressive feelings, which brings both conflict and ambivalence to the child; because the child depends on his mother's love, these angry and aggressive impulses threaten him with the possible loss of her love, should they be expressed directly to her. This leads children to displace their

parental views. However, there is also the reality of training, in which a dysfunctional home atmosphere is created, that develops prejudice as a lifestyle.

In training, parents may or may not express their own prejudices (though they often do). The crucial factor is the specific childrearing mode – the way the parents discipline, 'love' and threaten their child. If it is such that the child develops suspicion, fear and hate, he will sooner or later project onto other (out) groups.

Yet we project not only our dark, split-off sides. We also project our unacknowledged strengths. For the first we need our enemies, for the latter our allies. The irony is that we are much more similar to both our foes and allies than we'd ever care to realise.

HELENE LEWIS is a professional psychologist in private practice in Cape Town, South Africa. She is at present doing her doctoral studies, focusing on 'The Development of Social Conscience within the Afrikaner', through the University of Port Elizabeth.