

## **Editorial**

### Towards an Understanding of Prejudice Racism and Community Violence

*Mohammed Khalil Al Haddad, FRC Psych\**

Throughout the history of mankind, humanity has been faced with conflicts, festering and unsolved from the aurora of time. Both the Holy Quran and the Bible speak of the story of the first violent crime when Cain slew Abel, his brother of flesh and blood.

The strife of discrimination, prejudice and racism is barbed and brutal, converged with the theory that due to certain differences in traits (physical, intellectual, cultural or religious) some people are superior to others. Therein begins the power struggle for economical, political dominance and social advantage. Violence is very often the voice of this contorted struggle, surging forth and as volatile as ever.

Prejudice is an attitude, however when it results in an action it becomes discrimination. At the heart of prejudice lie two concepts, ignorance and fear. Most of what passes for prejudice in society is due to ignorance of other groups and their way of life and social conditions. Fear on the other hand, comes from much deeper sources than ignorance, for it strikes at the daunting issue of losing the privilege of power. Prejudice thus becomes the mental framework to protect from fear, thereby safeguarding a position of social advantage and privilege over others defined as "different" and therefore undeserving.

Prejudice operates on three levels. First, the cognitive level, which deals with what people believe about others. Stereotypes are a set of emotionally toned, exaggerated, and inaccurate generalizations about a group or category of people and are either favorable or unfavorable. These generalizations are maintained because they are shared beliefs and receive strong support from one's reference group.

The second level is the emotional, which deals with the feelings that others arouse in an individual. These may be negative feelings of fear, dread, caution, fight or flight. They might also be positive feelings of joy and solidarity depending on how the other is viewed. The emotional level is basically unconscious and is very influential. Even after the cognitive level has been challenged and undermined, the prejudice on the emotional level hangs on due to its unconscious nature and the psychological needs it fulfills. For instance, the need to feel superior in psychoanalytic interpretation reflects a state of inferiority within that person.

---

\* Associate Professor  
College of Medicine & Medical Sciences  
Arabian Gulf University &  
Consultant Psychiatrist  
Psychiatric Hospital  
Ministry of Health  
State of Bahrain

The third level is the behavioral; which is the tendency to engage in discriminatory behavior on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age or social class membership.

Racism is as old as mankind itself. Cicero (100 BC) had advised Atticus not to get slaves from Britain because they were stupid and incapable of learning. Racism refers to the belief that one race is superior to another race in significant ways, and that it is entitled by virtue of its superiority to dominate the other race and enjoy a larger share of society's wealth and status<sup>1</sup>. This answers the query as to why neighbors and countrymen in Bosnia, Lebanon, Rwanda and Kosovo turn against each other in war and bloodshed? What animal killer instinct was in the likes of *Radovan Karajich, Samir Jaja, Baruch Goldstein, Melosovich and Adolph Hitler? (the first three are physicians!)* What made those people who were trained in the most compassionate and human profession turn to become vindictive, destructive and killers is very hard to explain.

All the aforementioned nations and individuals were definitely beyond the cognitive level and well into the behavioral when they lashed their power of aggression against what they perceived as different and inferior others. The beguiled group then rises against its inferior status in a quest to gain power and self-respect, and another cycle of hostility results. This was the case in the French Revolution and in the communist takeover of the Russian Zaar; both revolutions produced far more violence and prejudice than what they set out to fight.

The persistence of racism in society can be understood at different levels and in different categories. Richardson and Lamberts (1985) identified three associated aspects of racism: ideology, social, and practical structure<sup>2</sup>. Within the context of ideology racism in society plays a role in allowing the majority to identify "the other" who can thus be pitied, looked down upon, hated, or marginalised. Such a concept makes the majority of society feel pure about itself. Racism may operate through overt beliefs and actions or through less conscious attitudes in society as a whole, as in not offering housing, education or care to ethnic groups.

Under societal structure, institutional racism is the enforcement of racism and maintenance by the legal, cultural, religious, educational, economic, political and military institutions of society<sup>3</sup>. Lock (1993) suggests that race is to be seen as a politically motivated category which allows for an inherent racial difference and thereby reinforces a continuing ghettoization of ethnic groups<sup>4</sup>.

With regard to practical structure, many societies have been placing meaning on the perception of physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, gender, age, sex orientation, ethnicity, language and social class. Rationally we know that there is nothing wrong with having different skin color, be it black, brown or yellow. It is not skin color that forms the basis for discrimination, but the negative meaning given to the color of the skin. Color is neutral; it is our own perception that gives it meaning. Another example of the power of perception is the way we react to a piece of cloth. A simple green cloth arises a neutral reaction if it is used for wiping or cleaning a table. The same cloth can be made into a shirt or a table cloth and it will still not arise much feeling, yet if it is raised on a post and turned into a national flag it will start to have a different meaning. People will stand to attention for it in military parades and will be willing to kill and die for the namesake it bears. During riots, demonstrations and wars, it becomes the focus of hatred directed against an enemy and is torn

to pieces, burnt and stampeded by angry crowds. The same green piece of cloth used for cleaning the table now develops significance and national symbolism.

This leads to the conclusion that we often treat others especially those who are different from us in race, class, or gender as inferior and regard them as menial and insignificant much like the green cloth used for cleaning. At the same time, we regard ourselves, our friends, and still more importantly our leaders as the green flags, before whom we pay overdue respect and share obedience and allegiance.

It would be reductionist and simplistic to think that racism is just to do with the perception of the mind, because the implicit presupposition would be that a change of attitude and mentality would put an end to racial oppression. However, such an understanding ignores the real factor behind racism; it being a power that can afflict any person, gender, community, culture or country in a quest of dominance that over-rides the respect of others.

The first step in trying to deal with racism should be the recognition of its existence and then the development of ways and means for dealing with individual stereotypes, and encouraging communities to work together.

Community violence is a very complex and difficult issue as it includes many social, political, economic, and value systems within its parameters. In community violence, the victims are usually advocates of one of the violent factions, if not, themselves active adversaries<sup>5</sup>. Community violence involves identifiable adversaries, whose knowledge of and feelings towards each other often have a long history of serious contemporary grievances against each other. This is a result of breeding different perceptions of reality between respective groups.

It's been well established that many events in a child's development contribute to the formulation of a prejudicial mental attitude as a precursor to the developing the concept of "the enemy". Piaget has found that the roots of this mental attitude start with patriotism learned from parents, which becomes manifested in children at around the age of ten<sup>6</sup>. As children move towards adolescence, which is the age of the most active participation in community violence, they coalesce into groups. The identification of a common enemy helps them maintain a cohesive sense of self and reinforces a sense of self in ethnic, nationalistic, religious and cultural terms. It has been suggested that members of a group who share affectionate bonding, also share the "commonly renounced targets of aggressive bonding"<sup>7</sup>. When this happens, preoccupation with the enemy becomes the salient feature of life. One's own identity becomes tightly linked to that of the enemy, even requiring it. It becomes increasingly important to distance oneself from the enemy by violent acts of dehumanization and through the distortion of the enemy's meanings. Essentially, this entails a total loss of empathy for him or her. It is often the case that enemies serve as suitable targets of externalization. An example of this is when people, objects or institutions are invested with feelings originating from conflicts within the person himself. This notion is reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's much earlier use of the idea that there are suitable targets for projection<sup>8</sup>. In the traditional Freudian Psychoanalysis, aggression like other urges must be released and expressed. Its expression is similar to the expression of sex in being direct or indirect, social or asocial. It may be directed to self or others, and it is also innate, invisible and irrational.

Since the genesis of time, aggression has been an element of human history. Like the carnivores that mutilated their prey with predatory instinct, man exhibits similar callus and

killer aggression, though disguised by displacement. In fact civilization is the cage that binds such belligerence, which is often channeled via acceptable and controlled manners as in sports, varying from overtly aggressive boxing to covertly as in football.

The morbid conclusion to this analysis is that no matter what the distances mankind traverses into an apparently scintillating future, it will always be dogged by the adversities of aggression.

## References

1. Bhugra'D, Bhui K. Racism in Psychiatry: Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained. *International Review of Psych* 1999;11:236-43.
2. Richardson J, Lambert J. *The Sociology of Race*. Lancaster: Causeway press, 1985.
3. Feagin J, Sikes M. *Living with Racism: The Black Middle Class Experience*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994.
4. Lock M. The Concept of Race: An Ideological Construct. *Transcultural Psych. Research Review* 1993;30:203-27.
5. Leslie J, Macfarlane. *Political Disobedience*. London: Macmillan Press, 1971.
6. Kendell R, Zeallery A. *Companion to Psychiatric Studies*. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 1993.
7. *Proceedings of the World Federation for Mental Health Working Conference*. Cairo: Egypt, 1988.
8. Freud S. *Mourning and Melancholia*. Strachey J, ed. *Collected papers*. Vol. 4. London: Hogarth press, 1952.