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THE ROLE OF PREJUDICE IN PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND PSYCHOANALYTIC HISTORY*

Abstract: Psychoanalysis has a checkered history in relation to prejudice. Some psychoanalysts have fought against prejudice in word and deed, while others have promoted bigoted views. Contemporary cognitive neuroscience has shown that we all harbor certain prejudices of which we may be unaware. Our unconscious prejudices may even affect our willingness to act for victims of genocide. The boundary between prejudice and sound moral judgment changes over time. The more diverse the community of psychoanalysts becomes, the more we can be sure that our theory and practice apply fairly to all humanity.

Keywords: prejudice, psychoanalysis, women, sexism, racism, sexism, homophobia, bigotry, Banaji, IAT, genocide

Psychoanalysis has a checkered history in relation to prejudice. On one hand, some psychoanalysts have fought against prejudice, not only in their writing but also in political action. On the other hand, some psychoanalysts have put forth prejudicial views and attempted to justify them, both in their writing and in political action. I cannot cover the entire history of psychoanalysis and prejudice, but I would like to survey a few of the high points and the low points of psychoanalytic history.

Since the beginnings of psychoanalysis, hatred and prejudice have been studied by psychoanalysts, at times abstractly, at other times in a very personal way. Freud himself was a pioneer of the study of one’s own experience of hatred. The Interpretation of Dreams (Freud, 1900) was not only a landmark in the science of unconscious processes; it was also a relentless airing of and protest against the prejudice against Jews in his time.

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Most of the dreams that Freud analyzed are his own. There are frequent references in his dreams to the shame and anger Freud felt at his father’s being humiliated on the streets of Vienna by anti-Semites and to the struggles Freud had in becoming a university professor because of “denomina-
tional considerations,” a euphemism for anti-Semitism (p. 139). Anti-Semitism and racial self-hatred are also a prominent theme in Freud’s (1905) Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious.

Freud resisted prejudice against homosexuality, too, both in his famous letter to the mother of a gay man and in his strongly worded opinion to Ernest Jones (1957) that no one should be excluded from psychoanalytic training just because of homosexuality. Sándor Ferenczi (1902), a pioneer among psychoanalysts in the political fight against homophobia, defended a lesbian transvestite against involuntary hospitalization. He argued that homosexuality is not a disease but a psychic disposition (Lorin, 1983).

A. A. Brill was in a way the most astonishingly forward-thinking psychoanalyst of his time. He asserted, in 1913, that “homosexuality may occur in persons just as healthy as normal heterosexual persons” This was 44 years before Evelyn Hooker’s (1957) landmark empirical study showing, in a blind reading of projective tests, that the mental health of homosexuals was no different than heterosexuals. Brill also condemned some of the ignorant treatment of homosexuals by physicians of the time. He wrote: “I can never comprehend why physicians invariably resort to bladder washing and rectal massage when they are consulted by homosexuals.” He also said that, for a homosexual, the experience of having heterosexual relations was just as much a perversion as for a heterosexual to have homosexual relations. Harry Stack Sullivan also fought prejudice in word and deed. He wrote eloquently about anti-Semitism and what he called anti-Negroism. One of the black youths he interviewed in the deep South commented, “Dr. Sullivan was one of the nicest white men I’d ever met. It is unusual to have a white man really interested in Negroes. You can’t learn to trust white people by one nice one. I guess there are others but I’ll bet they’re far between” (Sullivan, 1964, p. 98).

Sullivan’s own homosexuality may have contributed to his being shunned by orthodox psychoanalysis despite his obvious genius. His most famous clinical achievement was his founding, in the late 1920s, a ward for schizophrenics at the Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital that had an 86% cure rate. The patients in that ward, we now know, were all gay men (Chatelaine, 1981; Wake, 2005). By sheltering those patients
from a homophobic world, Sullivan lessened their enormous anxiety and helped them to get better. To this day, as far as I know, we have not followed up on the profound implications of that work—to determine the extent to which psychosis is made worse by any kind of prejudice and the degree to which removing psychotic patients from a prejudicial environment can have a positive effect on their psychopathology.

**Bigoted Psychoanalysts: Homophobia**

In the middle of the last century in the United States things took a turn for the worse. Psychoanalysts must bear the shameful legacy of having become a mouthpiece of homophobia during that time. A few psychoanalysts, especially Bergler (1956) and Socarides (1968), issued disgraceful, hateful statements about homosexuals. For example:

> Homosexual circles or clubs consist of ‘a regrouping of outcasts.’ Homosexuality means an element of embarrassment and of aggressiveness toward normal human society. There is always a narcissistic element present and a more or less conscious and more or less super-compensated element of inferiority anxiety. . . . The “solution” of homosexuality is always doomed to failure. . . . Homosexuality is based on the fear of the mother, the aggressive attack against the father, and is filled with aggression, destruction, and self-deceit. It is a masquerade of life in which certain psychic energies are neutralized and held in a somewhat quiescent state. However, the unconscious manifestations of hate, destructiveness, incest and fear are always threatening to break through. Instead of union, cooperation, solace, stimulation, enrichment, healthy challenge and fulfillment, there are only destruction, mutual defeat, exploitation of the partner and the self, oral-sadistic incorporation, aggressive onslights, attempts to alleviate anxiety and a pseudo-solution to the aggressive and libidinal urges which dominate and torment the individual [Socarides, 1968, p. 8].

But for decades, most analysts did not protest such statements openly, as Kenneth Lewes (1988) has documented in great detail. We should remember the words of Reverend Martin Niemoeller, a Protestant minister who was arrested and persecuted in Nazi Germany:

> In Germany they first came for the Communists and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist. They came for the Jews and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists. Then they
came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me – but by that time no one was left to speak up.1

Prejudice and the Brain

No one is free of prejudice. There are reports that Freud occasionally said something homophobic in his private conversations (Kardiner, 1977) and that Sullivan occasionally said something racist in private (Wake, 2005). What does this tell us? That all of us, no matter how enlightened and well meaning, never fully escape the prejudice that we learned at a very early age and that is inscribed in our brains, probably, to some degree, forever. None of us can become aware by ourselves of the full extent of our prejudices. When we give a talk about prejudice or publish a paper about it, someone will be able to point out the prejudice in what we are saying of which we were not aware.

In this respect, we all are indebted to Dr. Mahzarin Banaji (2001), whom I consider one of today’s leading psychoanalysts, although, as far as I know, she has never worked clinically with a patient and is primarily known as a cognitive neuroscientist. I consider Banaji a psychoanalyst nonetheless, because she has greatly advanced our understanding of the unconscious processes involved in prejudice (Greenwald and Banaji, 2000).2

I think that in most discussions of prejudice there is a presumption that prejudice is a bad thing. Yet prejudice is so widespread, I think we must

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1 Being victims of prejudice does not stop people from harboring intense prejudice themselves. There is, for example, racism in the gay community and anti-Semitism in the African American community. Probably every group that is the object of prejudice also harbors its own prejudices against other groups. A few years ago, while I was going into a gay fundraiser at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, I was accosted by a group of Chassidic Jewish demonstrators carrying posters saying I should die for being gay. I told them they should be ashamed of themselves, that in Hitler’s Germany, we Jews and gays would all have been gassed together.

2 If you want to find out about how much prejudice is inscribed in your brain, I recommend you go to a website, based on Dr. Banaji’s work, where you can take the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and actually measure your unconscious bias reactions. You can get a numerical score on your own prejudice toward many groups: gays, Jews, women, old people, black people, Asians, and more. The website is: implicit.harvard.edu. You may think you have no prejudice, but if you take all of the Implicit Association Tests, you will get a profile of your personal bigotry. I am sure the results will surprise you; my results certainly surprised me. I ran the full battery on myself. I will not tell you my results. You will probably not want to announce your results publicly, either.
ask: What is prejudice good for? We usually think of prejudice as a biased, negative, inaccurate, and unfair judgment. But there is positive prejudice as well as negative. Really, prejudice just means prejudging, judging someone or something quickly as good or bad, before you have all the information processed rationally. And the fact is that humans and other animals need to have a system of the brain that makes very quick judgments. This system gives us quick responses when slowness could be lethal. If we used only unemotional, rational processes, they would probably be too slow to save our lives (Sloman, 1996).

Many of these quick, formulaic, and automatic judgments are determined not by instinct, but by early teaching of basic information—Don’t talk to strangers. Look both ways before you cross a street—which eventually becomes automatic. We may learn this information from the culture, from our parents, friends, teachers, or religious leaders. Some of that information is essential, but some may be misguided and show terrible ignorance. Yet we may never know it, especially when it is about groups of people with whom we have no first-hand experience.

Motivated Group Hatred versus Prejudice Based on Ignorance

We need to make the distinction between prejudices motivated by hatred or internal psychodynamics and those which are mainly the product of ignorance, a simple lack of accurate information. Abraham Verghese (1994), an Indian physician who worked with AIDS patients in rural Tennessee, realized how little he knew about homosexuality, and he coined the term “homo-ignorance.” Verghese felt that he had no animus against gay people, but he realized he just did not know a lot of basic facts about them, and some of the things he thought he knew were false. Homo-ignorance is an important word that helps distinguish between the simple lack of knowledge in well-meaning people and the pernicious bigotry of homophobia. We can probably make a similar distinction between Jew-phobia and Jew-ignorance, between woman-phobia and woman-ignorance, and race-phobia and race-ignorance.

When I was in college, one of my classmates, who was from rural Wisconsin, was staring at my forehead. I asked him, “Why are you looking at me that way?” He replied, completely seriously, “I was looking for your horns. I was always told that Jews have horns, but I don’t see yours, and I was looking to see how you were hiding them.”

Many of these sorts of false “facts” can be disseminated. The more often
they are repeated, the more people will believe they are true. And they will continue those beliefs if they never run into contrary evidence. Here are a few such widespread but false beliefs: Jews drink the blood of Christian children. Black men are hypersexual and want to rape white women. Gay men tend to molest children. Catholics will do whatever the pope tells them, so they cannot be president of the United States. Women have a weaker character and moral sense than men.

That last one, by the way, came from Freud (1925), who wrote:

I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women—that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility—all these would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their super-ego which we have inferred above. We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denials of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the two sexes as completely equal in position and worth [pp. 257–258].

So, according to Freud, men are worth more than women, no matter what women would have us believe. We may look askance at such a view today, but it was common in Freud’s time; even today, the view that women are inferior to men is still prevalent in many societies.

Even the most open minded of us cannot completely eliminate the prejudices that were programed in us from a very early age. Yet, if you are able to get control over those prejudices most of the time and not let them lead you into destructive behavior, you are doing quite well. Interestingly, research has shown that one of the best ways to shift deeply rooted prejudicial feelings toward another group is to be involved in an intimate relationship with someone of that group (Stanley, Phelps, and Banaji, 2008).

Tolerance of Prejudice, Then and Now

Bigotry has always existed. At its worst, it has led to mass murder and genocide. It is only at our peril that we assume that the worst bigotry of the past can never come back. When I was a child, growing up with many
relatives who were Holocaust survivors, I often wondered, How could Germans let such persecution of Jews happen? How could America not have bombed the railroad tracks to Auschwitz? But I do not ask those questions any more. The events of the last eight years have given me perspective. In the United States today, we have to ask similar questions: How is it that we let genocide happen in Darfur? How did we allow our own concentration camp in Guantanamo, where people were sequestered for years with no way to prove their innocence and where psychologists gave advice on how best to torture people? I think that this is a legacy of shame that we all must come to grips with.

How did we let these things happen? It was easy. Most of us did nothing or very little. As the historian Ian Kershaw (2008) wrote, “The road to Auschwitz was built by hate, but paved with indifference . . . [reflecting] the low level in the ranking of priorities which the fate of the Jews occupied in German consciousness” (p. 5).

Our unconscious valuing, or devaluing, of different groups of people leads to “prejudice about prejudice.” Not all genocides have an equal impact on us. We are prejudiced about genocides. In the last 20 years, the United States intervened vigorously in the genocide in Kosovo, where the victims and the perpetrators were white skinned. But in Rwanda and Darfur, where the victims are black skinned, we have shied away from active intervention. Is that a coincidence? I do not think so. I would like to see Banaji’s study of the Implicit Attitudes Test applied to groups of genocide victims; I suspect that the results would show how our unconscious prejudices affect our attitudes and our willingness to act for different victims of genocide. Of course, we may all say we are against genocide. But unconsciously, if we are white, we may be more outraged about white victims of genocide than about black victims. This was stated plainly by Edgar Bronfman (2008):

“There have been holocausts since our Holocaust. We [Jews] should be the first people to stand up and say this is unacceptable, but we don’t. We say, ‘Never again,’ just for us. We have to say, No, it’s for everyone, this ‘Never again.’”

Changing Cultural Views of Reality

Not only is there prejudice about prejudice; we often make prejudice worse when we deny our own prejudices with rationalizations. We say, “I am not prejudiced; I am objective.” For example, in the 1960s, when ho-
mophobia among psychoanalysts was very common, analysts argued that their view that homosexuality was pathological was science; whereas the argument that homosexuality in itself was not pathological was based on politics, not science. Their argument missed a basic point—all bigots presume that they have objective knowledge about the victims of their prejudice. As I have noted, none of us can by ourselves be aware of the extent of our prejudices. The only way to have accurate information about any group is to include that group constantly and intimately in the discussion. The political act of excluding certain groups from becoming psychoanalysts has damaged the scientific integrity of psychoanalysis. If you keep out the gays and lesbians, then you will not become aware of your homophobia. If you keep out the feminists, then you will not become aware of your prejudice against women. The prejudice of the psychoanalytic establishment has hindered psychoanalytic understanding of prejudice (Blechner, 2009).

Yet, despite resistance, there has been progress. In the psychoanalytic and psychiatric history of the last 150 years, we can see how much judgments of mental health and pathology have shifted. Ambitious women were once diagnosed with penis envy, black slaves who wanted their freedom were once diagnosed with “drametomania” (which was the pathological wish of a slave to gain his freedom), and gay men and lesbians were once diagnosed as homosexuals—all were once diagnosed with certainty as pathological, much to our shame and embarrassment today. Nevertheless, psychoanalysts continue to claim that our culturally shaped prejudices are scientific. As Roy Schafer wrote in 1995: “[M]any moral judgments have been taken for granted as factual statements, while many other moral judgments have been presented as reasoned conclusions based on careful exercises of curiosity in the form of purportedly scientific investigation or, even more simply, uncontroversial reality testing” (p. 189).

Yet where do we draw the line between prejudice and legitimate, fact-based moral judgment? This is a crucial question. If someone commits premeditated murder in our current society, that behavior is considered criminal, and the person who commits first-degree murder is imprisoned. We do not call this “prejudice against murderers.” Our society has agreed that deliberate murder is not acceptable behavior and must be punished.

But often the boundary between prejudice and sound moral judgment is more difficult to demonstrate. What are the facts? Gordon Allport (1954), in his brilliant book on prejudice, cited the example of the Hindu
caste system: It has a consistent set of beliefs that involve reincarnation: If you belong to the lowest caste, the untouchables, it is because in previous incarnations, your behavior was bad and you did not merit elevation to a higher caste. Therefore, in your current life, you must accept your position; you earned it, and only by good behavior as an untouchable in this incarnation may you achieve a higher caste in your future reincarnation. If you accept this belief system as "true," as most Hindus do (or, at least, did), the caste system is not prejudicial. It reflects fair retribution for one's actions in previous lives.

And while slavery today seems to be an extreme abuse by one person of another, throughout most of human history, slavery was accepted. The Old Testament outlined how slavery should operate (e.g., Leviticus 25:44–46), and even Jesus spoke about slavery without condemning it (e.g., Matthew 10:24–25). Before the American Civil War, it was common for slave owners to cite the Bible as proof that slavery was justified. And who knows how many people still believe it? There was an episode on television of "Da Ali G Show" in which Borat, a supposed visitor to Mississippi from Kazakhstan, is served by a black waiter and then asks an elderly white man at the table, "Is that your slave?" The Southerner replies, "Oh, no, we don't have slaves any more." Borat asks, "What is wrong with slavery?" The man replies, "A law was passed that they cannot be slaves—which is a good thing for them." And Borat says, "But not so much for you. I think it is a good thing to have slaves." And the old Southerner whispers in reply, "We think that, too, but we can't say it."

Or consider homosexuality. In Allport's (1954) book on prejudice there is no mention of prejudice against homosexuals. The reason is probably that in 1950s America antihomosexual sentiment was not considered an unwarranted prejudice. Homosexuality was considered a sin, a crime, a perversion. That was called reality. It was widely accepted that gay people were a menace to society and that they suffered from a psychopathology. In other words, they were ill, and they were bad. They were thought to have a propensity for depravity, seduction of children, and treason.

In those days, gay people usually hid their homosexuality. Most people thought they didn’t know any gay people, and so these false beliefs could go on mostly unchallenged. It allowed Bergler (1956) to write:

I have no bias against homosexuals; for me they are sick people requiring medical help. . . . Still, though I have no bias, I would say: Homosexuals are essentially disagreeable people, regardless of their pleasant or unpleasant
outward manner... Their shell is a mixture of superciliousness, fake aggression, and whimpering. Like all psychic masochists, they are subservient when confronted with a stronger person, merciless when in power, unscrupulous about trampling on a weaker person [pp. 28–29].

Is that fact? Prejudice? Projection?

Again, to quote Schafer (1995): “We all have personal reasons for those aspects of reality that we see clearly and emphasize as well as for those we remain blind to or deplore out of bias” (p. 188). How then are we to draw the boundary between moral judgment and prejudice? And how much can this boundary shift? Surely, facts are important. But are there any sure guidelines to what the facts are and how to find them?

Last summer, I met a man in his 40s who confided to me that he was a pedophile. He liked to have sex with early adolescents, both girls and boys. He wanted to convince me that prejudice against pedophiles stemmed from ignorance. He argued that his desires had an evolutionary justification, that adults who sexually interact with children often help children who were abandoned by their families. His argument sounded spurious to me, and I told him I did not think that such so-called advantages balanced off the harm that he was doing to young people. It all seemed clear to me, but that conversation made me aware that we have to draw a distinction between moral judgments based on true facts as opposed to those which are false. And there is no guarantee that we will get it right.

After all, we have the case of Marcus Dwayne Dixon, an 18-year-old boy in Georgia who was convicted four years ago of aggravated child abuse after he had consensual sex with a 15-year-old girl (Ringel, 2004). Is that the same phenomenon as a 40-year-old man who seduces teenagers, even if our legal system gives it the same name?

I do not think there is a foolproof solution for drawing the line between moral judgment and prejudice, but the best we can do is to be sure that victims of prejudice take part in our discussions. Since there are many Jewish psychoanalysts, and many of them survived persecution in Europe during the World War II it is no surprise that anti-Semitism has received more attention in the psychoanalytic literature than has hatred against other groups. The problem of prejudice that Muslims,

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3 We could call this characterization “standard prejudice” — almost the same thing has been written about Jews by anti-Semites: that Jews are disagreeable, sneaky, and unscrupulous.
non-Jewish Germans, Native Americans, and the Japanese may feel in America has not received much attention. The problems of racism, and the particular issues of prejudice against African Americans, have also received less attention, partly because there are relatively few African American psychoanalysts. At the White Institute in 2008, there was one male African American training analyst; there were no female African American training analysts. And while there have always been gay and lesbian psychoanalysts, most have kept their identities hidden to protect their careers, at least until about 20 years ago. Even today, as far as I know, there are only two openly gay male training analysts in institutes of the American Psychoanalytic Association throughout the United States and no openly lesbian training analysts. Interestingly, at the White Institute, which is not an institute of the American Psychoanalytic Association, there are also two openly gay male training analysts but no openly lesbian training analysts.

The absence or silence of certain voices from psychoanalytic discourse is itself a symptom; now that that silence is being lifted somewhat and more African Americans, open gays and lesbians, and Muslims are part of the psychoanalytic community, there is hope that hatred against those groups may have a chance to be understood and ameliorated, much as voices of feminists have significantly altered the psychoanalytic theory and treatment of women. We still have a long way to go before other minority groups are included enough in our discussions. The more diverse the community of psychoanalysts becomes, the more we can be sure that our theory and practice apply fairly to all humanity.

REFERENCES


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