

## Hypnotherapy: A Treatment for Racism?

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**Abstract:** The author presents a brief review of how racism expresses itself in individuals and its roots in individual consciousness referencing recent and classic work by established psychologists, educators, social psychologists, scientists and psychiatrists. Societal pressures affecting the recent increased expressions of racism are explored and problems with diversity training mentioned. The author suggests that racism in an individual, at its most fundamental core, is a largely subconscious “habit of thinking” about other individuals or groups of people (“outgroups”), and, like most habits of thought, can be treated effectively with hypnotherapy.

***“Don’t look for the remedy for your troubles outside yourself. You are the medicine. You are the cure for your own sorrow.” - Rumi<sup>1</sup>***

Since the death of George Floyd in the United States on May 25, 2020, there have been huge demonstrations around the world protesting “systemic” or “institutionalized racism” in many countries and societies. Systemic racism I will leave to social psychologists, but individual racism – essentially a prejudice against a person, or group of people based on “race” - is an individual reaction to an identified “outgroup”<sup>2</sup> of that person, and as such could be treated by hypnotherapists and other personal counsellors.

### **The roots of racism.**

I have been dismayed by the lack of attention by our national broadcasters on roots and origins of racial prejudice (or other expressions of prejudice) in individuals. One would have thought that given the intense societal interest, outrage, violence, questioning and anxiety it would have attracted commentary by leaders in psychology. In his book, *What Babies Say Before They Can Talk*, psychiatrist

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<sup>1</sup> ***“The Forbidden Rumi”*** 2006 translated by Nevit O.Ergin and Will Johnson

<sup>2</sup> Outgroup

noun. 1. essentially, any group that one isn't a member of or with which one doesn't identify, but especially a group which is considered to be different from, and insufficient to, one's own group. 2. a particular rival group which in-group members criticize, derogate, and at times, express **violence** against. Commonly referred to as they-group. Source: *Psychologydictionary.org*

<https://psychologydictionary.org/outgroup/>

and psychoanalyst Paul C. Hollinger states that prejudice and bias can begin in early childhood development:

One of the most troublesome social issues *Homo sapiens* faces is that of bias, prejudice, and the violence that can result. Early development and affect theory may provide a lens through which to gain some understanding of these issues. ... In studies of infants, children show enjoyment and interest in seeing mother's face versus a stranger's face. The stranger's face usually elicits distress and fear initially. When a mother's face is linked to a non-mother's voice, distress and fear tend to be elicited. Distress and fear are also seen when a mother's voice is linked with a non-mother's face (Stern, 1985). And clowns' faces—with the distortion of features—usually elicit distress and fear in children until their brains are helped to process the differences.<sup>3</sup>

Writing in *Psychology Today* in January of this year, intercultural consultant Marianna Pogoyan interviewed Dr. David Amodio a neuroscientist and professor at NYU. Dr. Amodio relates that everyone has some expression or experience of prejudice:

Research on stereotypes shows that simply knowing the stereotypes of a group leads to the automatic activation of that stereotype in your mind — even if you consciously reject that stereotype. So, prejudice has automatic and deliberate aspects, and while some people reject it deliberately, everyone has some form of prejudice. . . . Although early work looked for a single neural substrate for implicit prejudice, we quickly saw that many different neural processes contribute to a prejudiced response: how we perceive people and categorize them into groups, how we store stereotypes about groups in our [memory](#), how different regions of the brain get activated when we have emotional reactions to groups. ...We also see how the brain pulls all this information together in order to make judgments and, in some cases, control our responses.<sup>4</sup>

From a neurological standpoint, prejudicial responses happen very fast. Dr. Amodio states:

“one interesting insight comes from cognitive categorization — one of the main building blocks of prejudice. Our minds categorize objects in our world in order to respond to them. The same processes apply when we look at other humans. That's why we categorize people into groups so easily, and so

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<sup>3</sup> **Understanding Bias and Prejudice—And Violence** Curiosity about novelty vs. distress, anger, and fear of differences. By Paul C. Hollinger MD in *Psychology Today* Posted Nov 05, 2018

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/great-kids-great-parents/201811/understanding-bias-and-prejudice-and-violence>

<sup>4</sup> **Prejudice in the Brain Neuroscience research can help understand how to control prejudice** By Marianna Pogoyan, Ph.D., intercultural consultant Posted in *Psychology Today* Jun 23, 2020

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/between-cultures/202006/prejudice-in-the-brain>

quickly. Social neuroscience has identified a sequence of processes involved in social categorization that begins just 100 milliseconds after viewing a face”

Dan Gottlieb, a psychologist, author, and the host of *Voices in the Family*<sup>5</sup> says that “people are hardwired to discriminate”. I don’t like the term “unconscious racism” myself because it tends to indicate we can do nothing about these habits of thinking. While our tendency to discriminate may be “unconscious” and automatic, our distrust of specifically defined “outgroups” are more likely developed by influences from parents, immediate family and care-givers. In the well known blue-eye / brown-eye “exercise” by educator Jane Elliott, Elliott wrote: “The hate and discrimination that we see in adults have their origin in their upbringing. Society made them believe they were better than other people for arbitrary reasons such as skin color or gender.”<sup>6</sup> The evidence from these and other studies suggests that as we live, have experiences, interactions and mature, the automatic tendencies to discriminate can become “habits of thinking” about other people that are “sub-conscious” and learned rather than automatic and “unconscious”.

Psychological and social neuroscience studies suggest that racism (and other expressions of bias and prejudice) can be inculcated very early in childhood, even infancy, and that all of us human beings have these discriminating tendencies to one degree or another. Further, while we may consciously reject prejudicial beliefs as we mature, our subconscious can continue to respond to early patterns of prejudice towards identified “outgroups”. Racial prejudice in an individual can be considered at its core as a habit of thinking about or towards other people or self-identified groups of people or “outgroups”, in this case based on a concept of “race”.

#### **“Protective Prejudice” and the affect of social pressures and anxiety on expression of racism.**

While the innate tendency to discriminate is there for all of us as human beings, there are conditions when racism or other forms of prejudice can be exacerbated in society. Those conditions can include real or perceived threats to the entire society or specific self-identified groups, including health threats (such as the COVID-19 pandemic in the world), or physical, economic, power or political threats. Writing in *Psychology Today*, author and editor Rick Chillot makes comments on the term “protective prejudice”:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> **Do I Make You Uncomfortable?** By Rick Chillot, published November 5, 2013 in *Psychology Today* - last reviewed on June 9, 2016

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201311/do-i-make-you-uncomfortable>

<sup>6</sup> Blue-eyes / brown eyes experiment conducted by Jane Elliot. Source: *Exploringyourmind.com*

<https://exploringyourmind.com/blue-eyes-and-brown-eyes-the-jane-elliott-experiment/>

<sup>7</sup> **Do I Make You Uncomfortable?** By Rick Chillot, published November 5, 2013 in *Psychology Today* - last reviewed on June 9, 2016

"Protective prejudice" may also fuel an instinctive distrust of strangers. It makes sense—in terms of strict self-preservation—to be wary around those whose behavior and dress suggest they're outsiders. They may bear pathogens against which we, and others in our community, carry no immunity. They may practice traditions of hygiene and food preparation that aren't as effective as our own at eliminating germs and parasites common in our region....Even if we try to hide our reactions, our instinctive concerns about those who look unusual are biases we impart to others through everyday interactions. Left unchecked, such discomfort can grow powerful enough to predispose whole societies towards [xenophobia](#), and along with it, violence against those seen as outsiders.

Dr. David Amodio confirms that societal pressures and anxieties can exacerbate the expression of prejudice towards a person's "outgroups":

Simply belonging to different groups, based on arbitrary distinctions, is sufficient to elicit prejudice. However, [competition](#) between groups, power hierarchies, and political conflicts can exacerbate prejudice and turn mere dislike into hatred and harm, ...you can layer on social dynamics like competition, threat, and [fear](#), and these lead prejudices to become more intense, entrenched, and oppressive. <sup>8</sup>

### Diversity training?

In an increasingly anxious world and with world-wide attention on systemic racism one might think that merely being "mindful" or trying to be *conscious* of our own potential for subconscious biases and prejudices would be enough to counter those tendencies. Maybe not. After Jane Elliott's blue-eyes / brown-eyes exercise Elliot embarked on a series of diversity training workshops and is considered the forerunner of diversity training. However, according to some reviews of the Jane Elliott's diversity training the outcomes were not always positive:

In some courses, participants can feel frustrated about "their inability to change" and instead begin to feel anger against the very groups to which they are supposed to be more sensitive. It can also lead to anxiety because people become hyper-sensitive about being offensive or being offended.<sup>[19][20][21]</sup> There are not very good measures of effects on long-term outcomes of these training initiatives.<sup>9</sup>

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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201311/do-i-make-you-uncomfortable>

<sup>8</sup> **Prejudice in the Brain Neuroscience research can help understand how to control prejudice** By Marianna Pogossyan, Ph.D., intercultural consultant Posted in *Psychology Today* June 23, 2020

<sup>9</sup> *Wikipedia.org*: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane\\_Elliott#Reactions\\_and\\_public\\_attention](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Elliott#Reactions_and_public_attention):

[Mirza, Munira](#) (December 12, 2005). "[Ticking all the boxes](#)". *BBC News Magazine*. Retrieved May 30, 2008.

<sup>^</sup> [Jump up to:](#) [a](#) [b](#) [c](#) [d](#) [e](#) Stewart, Tracie L. (2003). "Do the "Eyes" Have It? A Program Evaluation of Jane Elliott's "Blue-Eyes/Brown-Eyes" Diversity Training Exercise1". *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. **33**: 1898–1921. doi:10.1111/j.1559-1816.2003.tb02086.x.

If consciously trying to “force” people to be more inclusive or “less prejudiced” in thinking or behaviour, can potentially backfire and create even greater prejudice or anxiety towards or about the very groups people are trying to be more “sensitive” to, what is the answer?

### **Can Hypnotherapy treat racism in individuals?**

Systemically, racism is about power, economic and other opportunity access and fairness. Individually, though, hypnotherapists recognize that individual learned responses of habitual thoughts, self-concepts, and self-talk can be changed. There is already a “reject Racism Script” available on Hypnoticworld.com<sup>10</sup>. Destructive or no-longer-relevant self-concepts are what our clients come to us with all the time. At their core, these habits of thought are no different than other unwanted habits of thinking that no longer serve our clients’ well-being. Categorizing our ingroups and outgroups under broader, more inclusive headings that highlight our common humanity may be a better approach for a hypnotherapist, rather than suggesting more “sensitivity” per se to specific arbitrary groups.

What about it, hypnotherapists? Can we help our clients to let go of programmed subconscious responses and help them create a new habit of thinking...Humanity is One People?

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hypnoticworld.com/hypnosis-scripts/personal-development/reject-racism> Reject Racism Hypnosis Script By [Faith Waude](#) DHP Acc. Hyp. [Hypnoticworld.com](http://Hypnoticworld.com)