

## **The Effects of Racism on Group and Individual Identity**

**By Carmel Fröhlicher-Stines**

I will begin by telling you a story, a true story that I experienced. Last year, I went to visit family and friends on one of the Caribbean islands. During my stay, in order to meditate and think, I went to spend a few days at an old resort located in the mountains, which in earlier days had been a monastery. On my last day there I decided to visit the church near by.

What happened when I entered the church was something I never expected. There I was, standing within this vastly over proportioned church, much too large for the area that it served. The entire building was freshly painted in white, with, as its only decorations, a series of statues of saints, positioned up high in niches strategically located midway up to the ceiling. The saints too, were all white. At the lower level, on the ground really, was a sea of kneeling back faces looking up at the saints, in supplication. Praying to the statues of the saints with open arms, the palms of their hands lifted up in humility.

This clear hierarchical division of the church, which was in no way new to me, struck me as if I was seeing it for the first time. There were the blacks, at the bottom, in the weakest position, begging for mercy. The whites, midway to the top, represented [by the saints above,] with quiet, serene faces, as mediators between God and the black faces that were looking up at them.

Looking at this scene one main question filled my mind: If this religious norm is so unequivocally accepted [by blacks], what repercussions must this hierarchy of races demonstrated in that church, have in their minds and in their every day life? How do they see the white tourist in the streets, the white colleague at the office? Does the attribute of the white man being higher also happen there? The answer to this question was not only valid for the people I was observing, but also for me, since I was raised with the same unquestioned beliefs. What projections do I have when I meet a white person?

The attitude of these church-goers can be explained on different levels. From an historical perspective it can be explained as being a vestige of slavery and colonial times when the European religions were forced upon the blacks because they had to be saved. Their religion was destroyed, and the new practices were adopted and were passed on to later generations without being questioned.

From a cultural point of view it can be seen as a change in the value system of a people - one conception of God was replaced forcefully by another. And this new value system became an integral part of the society.

It must be noted here though that many ethnic groups kept their original religion and culture. In communities where slavery was practiced some vestiges of the original religion survived and was integrated in the new religion. For example this is clearly seen

in Haitian Voodoo. Although Voodoo believers were severely punished, at times with their lives, the religion is still very strong and alive today.

From a psychological point of view, this unquestionably accepted higher position of the whites within a religious practice can be explained with the concept of socialization<sup>1</sup>. What is meant by socialization? Socialization is a process by which the child growing up accepts the basic social behavior that is taught and practiced by his family. He identifies with the family of which he is a member. This teaching provides the child with an understanding of its world and forms its concept of identity. This socialization determines during the course of our lives, our every day behavior, our reflex-reactions, our moral values and in general, how we define the world.

There are two types of socialization that take place in the life of every human being. The first one begins at birth and continues until the child comes in contact with the world outside his home. Later, a second level of socialization occurs which is determined by the contacts of the individual to a wider social context, for example school, peer groups, organizations, institutions and professions.

The difference between the first and the second socialization is that, the products of the second tend to be more adaptable to changed situation. In the course of the second socialisation the individual constantly adjusts the values learned in his primary socialization to fit new situations. New elements are then added little by little to the familiar. In other words, what we learn in our socializations, especially the first, becomes part of our identity, our self. We do not question it.

Consider what happens if a child during his earliest childhood learned, that because of the way he looks, he is perceived as being less intelligent, less efficient, less competent than those of other race? And what if he learned from his parents that there was a group of special people, all belonging to a different race who were closer to his God than himself; that this group of people could even intervene [with God on his behalf] if he begged them long enough. And what if he saw that these people on the wall of the church had the same skin color as those who were believed to be superior to him. Chances are that the church scene will confirm the belief of white superiority, without him being able to pin point the reason why. The idea then becomes an accepted truth. It becomes a phenomenon that appears to him as being in the nature of things. The religious takes on a symbolic value.

The result is a positive valorization of the white race and devaluation of the black race, a cliché which is very much alive in black communities. On the social level these cliché attitudes are easier recognizable as on religious level. When the injustices connected to these beliefs are felt, an inner conflict takes place between what has been internalized and what is part of a cognitive process. An imbalance occurs within the individual which he is not always conscious of.

It has been said in psychological theories<sup>2</sup> that human beings cannot stay long in a state of psychological imbalance. It becomes highly uncomfortable. This forces them to

---

<sup>1</sup> Goslin D.A., Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research, Chicago, Rand, McNally, 1969

<sup>2</sup> Festinger L., A theory of Cognitive Dissonance, New York, Row, Peterson and Co, 1957.

try by all means to recreate a balance. A young girl may have learned and internalized that she is not as good as her white counterpart from an intellectual as well as physical point of view. She may then observe that in reality this is not at all the case. This causes an inner conflict that she will try by all means to reduce.

A group of researchers<sup>3</sup> observed the coping strategies of different minority groups in dealing with clichés and racist beliefs. One of the ways in which the individual, who is part of a discriminated group, tries to reduce to a minimum the inner conflict caused by the discrepancy between her internalized belief and the observable reality, is by accepting the negative values as being true. She will then react either by really feeling inferior no matter what, or she will take distance from her own group and try to over-assimilate in the more powerful group. A person using this coping strategy is not capable of defining or understanding the social nature of her personal situation. Her negative identity seems as a result of personal or group insufficiencies which appear to be inherent to the nature of the group as opposed to a result of the social relations which define her place in that society. A situation that could be modified by a collective action.

Another coping strategy is the semantic reversal which consists of turning the negative denomination into a positive one. The negative word is accepted but given a positive connotation. As in the case of the Black Americans who accepted the term black by declaring it something to be proud of being.

Still another strategy consists not only of changing the negative connotation of the denomination but of forming a bigger group under that same denomination for political purposes. One example that is given is the term Black British which regroups many different minority groups such as the Indians, the Pakistani, the Caribbeans and the Asians.

Coping strategies are important, not only because they help bring a unity in a divided sense of identity, but they can also be used for political purposes in order to achieve a sense of political and social power. This in turn increases the sense of personal value.

One of the solutions to the problem of our conflicting values could be, to look into ourselves over and over again and try to differentiate in each situation what is reality and what are the racist clichés. This requires a great effort indeed. For the blacks, it is important to differentiate between what was forced on our ancestors as a result of historical events like colonialisation and slavery and what the social realities of the present are. To realize that the devalorisation of the existing values in Africa was aimed at the eradication of these values for the sole purpose of achieving total control.

It is important in discussions to teach and learn from each other. To teach our children and grand children, to differentiate between the real strength and weaknesses of the group on one side, and to recognize and to denounce social and cultural manipulation by a more powerful group on the other side. To give strength and pride to each other by helping each other fight racism in a very concrete way. Racism is man made and is a

---

<sup>3</sup> Camilleri C., Kastarsztein J., Strategies Identitaires, Psychologie D'aujourd'hui, Presses Universitaires de France, 1999.

result of greed. To accept each other, our differences and our similarities by first accepting ourselves as not being better or worse than any member of other ethnic groups.

For the whites, it is essential to also look deep into themselves in order to sort out what belongs to the vestiges of colonialism and slavery -these are still very present in the form of clichés- to look at the individual for what he or she is and not what he is thought to be because of his physical appearance and denounce and fight against any racist acts no matter where it takes place.

Whether negative or positive, we all have clichés which block our access to other human beings. In order to work together and understand each other no one should or should have to assimilate in another culture. We don't need just tolerance, we need acceptance of each other with all our individual faults and qualities. The individual should be given a real chance to contribute to the good of the community where she lives to the best of her abilities. The fruits of our efforts on both sides would result in the changing of our perception of each other and reduce the clichés that are so harmful to us all.

Die Autorin:

Carmel Fröhlicher-Stines ist in Haiti geboren, ist mit dreizehn Jahren nach New York übersiedelt und lebt seit 1971 in der Schweiz. In den USA hat sie französische Literatur, Pädagogik und Didaktik studiert und anschliessend in Zürich ein sprachwissenschaftliches Studium mit dem Lizentiat abgeschlossen. Bald darauf hat sie das Fach gewechselt und sich der Sozialpsychologie und anthropologischen Psychologie gewidmet. Seit ihrem zweiten Lizentiat unterrichtet sie regelmässig am Psychologischen Institut der Universität Zürich und betreut ihre Klienten in ihrer eigenen Praxis. Sie ist Mitgründerin und Präsidentin der Gruppe 'Women of Black Heritage' (WBH), war bis 2000 im Vorstand der Paulus-Akademie (Zürich) und Co-Präsidentin des Frauen-Informationszentrums (FIZ).