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# INTOLERANCE AND THE INTOLERABLE: THE CASE OF RACISM

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## Abstract

*I take racism to be a typical example of a social phenomenon of intolerance and prejudice. It is also a state of the mind of an individual. This paper will explore the relation between intolerant attitudes such as racism on one hand, and, on the other, states of mind that are felt to be intolerable. As racist attitudes impact on the individual, what exactly in the individual do they impact upon? And how in turn do they recreate social groups characterized by that species of intolerance? I shall present clinical material to demonstrate the existence of a connection between these two phenomena, intolerance and the intolerable. Two forms of this identification – a rigid permanent form and a more flexible form – are identified from two psychoanalytic cases briefly described.*

## Keywords

ego-ideal; pathological organization; intolerable states of mind; intolerance; racism

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**H**ow do external prejudices within the social group impact on the internal state of mind of the individual? And how do they become stabilized within the individuals to support the social prejudices of a group? My starting point will be Freud's theory of the super-ego and especially the ego ideal, which he placed at the centre of his social psychology (Freud, 1921). I shall draw on the more recent understanding of



the intolerable “ego-destructive super-ego” (Bion, 1959; O’Shaughnessy, 1999, Britton, 2003). And then I shall turn to clinical material to show that intolerable states of mind can contribute to social intolerance, which in turn can impact on intolerable states of mind.

### Social psychology and the ego-ideal

When Freud turned his attention to social psychology (Freud, 1921), he specifically concluded that individual psychology must first of all give pre-eminence to relations with others – in effect giving precedence to social psychology.

In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the word, is at the same time social psychology as well (Freud, 1921, p 69).

The basis of this account is the interactive processes between the individual and his social group, which give rise to an internal structure he called the ego-ideal. This was separate from the ego, arising as a “grade in the ego” (Freud, 1921, pp 129–133) by which the ego-ideal stands over and separate from the ego. The idea originated in Freud’s development of Havelock Ellis’ idea of narcissism (Freud, 1914). Just before WW1, Freud was impelled by his work with Jung to look at psychosis; his “analysis” of the Schreber case led to a study of the narcissistic self-involvement of paranoid patients. However, he became interested in how the libido could be withdrawn; interest in, and attention to someone external comes to be re-invested in the self. The ensuing extreme interest in the self leads to the creation of an image of the self as especially favourable and lovable.<sup>1</sup> It replaces some loved object in the external world. This idea of the specially lovable aspect of the self was transformed in his later paper on mourning and melancholia (Freud, 1917). In the pathological state of melancholia the self again becomes the object of love, although it becomes the focus of hate as well.

In 1921, this separated-off aspect of the ego had become a concept of considerable interest to Freud. It represented the internalized remnants of actual relations with external persons – the ego is “a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes” (Freud, 1923, p 29). These relations with external objects remain as significant others *within* the person’s mind, and the individual can then identify himself with them as the basis for social roles.<sup>2</sup> For example, visiting my grandchildren entails resuming a long-standing set of attitudes I associate with an ideal parent, originally derived from my own parents’ way of relating to children. I may then go to give a lecture to my students, and draw then on figures that I retain from my own teachers at University, or further back to my schoolteachers. Then, in my practice as an analyst, I will draw on internalized

versions of my own analyst and supervisors. These figures seem to exist inside me as a set of alternatives at any one time. I might think of them as different garments hanging in the cupboard, which may be brought out and worn for particular occasions. Often in ideal form, they imply standards and attitudes against which I can measure myself in whatever relationship I take up socially.

The ego-ideal is thus very fluid. Each variant is an aspect of the internal world, with which the ego may identify, changing as required by being replaced with other variants. These precipitates of past object cathexes remain susceptible to both continuing interaction with, and considerable modification by, the external world of other people. Freud worked this concept hard. The ego-ideal can be replaced by an object taken in from the actual social world. Freud's illustration is a Christian congregation, in which the individuals we say have Christ "in their heart". This indicates a process in which the figure of Christ is taken into the intrapsychic world (an introjection), which then functions as an internal inspiration rather than an external compulsion. Freud also described falling in love as a similar process, in which a person sets up the loved one as the object of an abject devotion and allegiance. The person thereby becomes depleted in himself as his loved one absorbs more and more of his interest. Freud compared this abject allegiance to the hypnotist. A person going into a hypnotic trance can be said to be establishing a new ego-ideal – the hypnotist takes over as the ideal to whom the person gives his allegiance. For the duration of the trance, the hypnotist becomes the dominating influence over the person's mind. Then, as the person comes out of the trance, the *status quo ante* is restored.<sup>3</sup>

### The group ideal

Freud was not only interested in the replacement of a person's ego-ideal. He also saw this phenomenon as the basis of group life. It is not just a way for people to acquire a repertoire of social roles; it is also the very basis of group solidarity. The individuals in a group appear to converge or coalesce in the sense that they adopt the same ego-ideal; then it becomes a *group* ideal. The group is united as it were in its common allegiance to the same ideal. In the example of the Christian congregation, the individual feels bonded with all the others by the same common ideal, Christ, which they have each installed in their hearts.

The ego-ideal becomes as it were a condition of entry into a group. The sense of being part of a group comes from the acceptance of the ego-ideal promoted by the group. In the sense that it is common to all the members of the group it is then a group-ideal. The various ways in which the group ideal may be related to by the individuals, and the role of leadership in that, is not a topic to pursue here.<sup>4</sup>

### Intolerable states of mind

The ego-ideal – more properly, plural: “ego-ideals” – have the characteristics of others. They are ideals to which we compare ourselves. This comparison is the super-ego function, which Freud described in his structural model (1923). Basing itself on the standards of the ego-ideal of the moment (and of the group), the super-ego can function extremely harshly. Freud (1930, p 130n) commented on the work of Melanie Klein who described the extreme *internal* persecution effected by internal objects, of which one was the moral super-ego. As O’Shaughnessy (1999) pointed out, late in her life Melanie Klein (Klein, 1958) described a very harsh and intractable root to the super-ego. Bion stressed this:

...an object which, when installed in the patient, exercises the function of a severe and ego-destructive superego (Bion, 1959, p 314).

The idea of an “ego-destructive super-ego” derives from the primary self-destructiveness of the death instinct. Freud himself (1930) acknowledged human “aggressive instincts” as having particular relevance in arousing super-ego guilt.

Internal self-directed violence may not be suicide explicitly, but rather attacks upon the ego’s good relations, upon love and upon the need to survive (Riesenberg-Malcolm, 1999). As it is self-directed, that destructiveness is a *negative* narcissism, as Rosenfeld (1959, 1971) called it, and the ego has to organize itself to struggle with this internal anger. Characteristically, the ego splits itself along the natural fault line between good feelings (and impulses) and bad ones. That splitting creates an internal conflict – not just between wishes, but also between parts of the self. In this way a “negative self” separates off as the instincts defuse (see also Meltzer, 1968; Steiner, 1993; Williams, 1998). The negative self then relates to the “good” aspects of the self in an omnipotent way, dominating the more life-enhancing aspects of the person. The negative aspects are experienced as alien, an ego-dystonic ego! This compares with Freud’s notion of a “grade” in the ego that forms the super-ego (Freud, 1923);<sup>5</sup> but it is extremely harsh, dangerous and intolerable.

Negative narcissism is a pathology of destructiveness, creating an omnipotent hegemony of inhuman attitudes, beliefs and actions embodied in the pathological organization. The *good* object is hated even when it is actually feeding and satisfying and being good. It is a hatred of the object simply because the object wants the baby to live – and by extension, it is equally a hatred of that life-affirming part of the baby, which wants and does engage with the object when in need (Segal, 1993; Riesenberg-Malcolm, 1999). Such a retreat avoids the pains of life, and the achievements and maturation of overcoming them. The negative narcissistic part of the ego can be experienced as an alien object within. Impelled by the death instinct, it debases needs and dependency that are at the

root of both persecutory and depressive anxieties. This internal structure is intolerable because it is intolerant of human values and humane attitudes.

In addition, this object that repudiates the life-giving aspects of the self, objects and relations, can provide a protection from ordinary frustration in which the good object is sought because of its goodness, but not found. Thus, the pathological organization both satisfies the negativity and is also a defence against the pain of love.<sup>6</sup> In Steiner's (1993) terms, this is a retreat from both paranoid-schizoid and depressive anxieties. The result is a brutalized internal world that often feels dead and at the mercy of the alien internal object that demands the devaluation of external objects and relations, and of all human values, which might be represented by good internal objects. This pathological object, an abnormal super-ego, made of "anti-matter" as it were, is a creature of the death instinct, not the heir of the libidinal Oedipus complex. The aggression towards the self is particularly apparent when loving and dependent relations with another valued object are recognized. Those relations become intolerable, because the attitudes demanded by the *internal intolerant object* have consumed the self.

In this description, an intolerable internal object does not arise from Oedipal primary figures or their substitutes that form standards and attitudes. The harshness of the super-ego develops in a different way. To the extent that the ego organizes itself on the basis of a negative narcissism – a pathological organization – the super-ego will exert an intolerable ego-destructive force. As a result, social intolerance has as its counterpart and psychological basis the intolerable states of mind arising from negative narcissistic pathological organizations.

The hypothesis is that the pathological organization is an internal potentiality for socially intolerant attitudes, such as racism. Those social attitudes of racism – an ego-ideal of cultural "whiteness" shall we say – come to have an affinity with an internal object that is intolerant of human values, such as need, dependency, gratitude, honesty and concern, which are replaced by superior, dominating, cruel and dishonestly unreal attitudes. Thus, an internal intolerant object may acquire a "content" of social attitudes. I hypothesize that these brutalizing internal psychic relations of the pathological organization can become hooks within the individual on which external prejudicial relations are hung.

In the following clinical material, I shall show two forms of that coming together of the external attitudes with an intolerant internal object.

### **Clinical material**

A superior, denigrating aspect of Miss A had the omnipotent narcissistic character of a pathological organization. In the right circumstances, after a

specific external occurrence, the pathological organization suddenly became invested in racist attitudes.

### Case A

Miss A struggled between the pull towards, and her push against, an omnipotent narcissistic object relationship. This was exemplified at one point in the analysis by an external occurrence with a member of a terrorist organization fighting a racist war. Her internal world, as evidenced by the transference situation, acquired a racist character.

She was in her early 30s, brought up in Britain by émigré Middle Eastern parents. She strongly identified with her parents' culture while also admiring her father's pro-English intellectual interests. She had a good education and a professional training, although she did not practice in her profession. She was in conflict over her cultural identity as a woman, caught between her parents' traditional view on one hand, and her professional standing on the other.

In the first phase of the analysis, I heard a good deal about her English boyfriend, described as a somewhat ineffectual man. There was some fairly overt scorn of him; for instance, she could bully him into her way of thinking. She also complained of having to look after his things in their flat. The impression was of some annoyance at his helplessness and vulnerability, indicating her debasing attitude towards vulnerability and the need for help. Her characterization of him brought to mind a grubby little schoolboy which enabled her to feel a superior, "motherly" figure taking care of his washing and clothes, and so on. This was suggestive of an omnipotent attitude undermining in a destructive way any recognition of her respect for, and emotional dependence, on him. In another mode at other times, she conveyed a different axis of superiority and vulnerability. She showed a respect for him as an experienced academic scholar in the department she worked in, and where she had met him. She herself found the rigors that academic life demanded of her research very hard, and felt far from superior, and she struggled to cope. Either she felt superior in a denigrating and destructive way, or she felt inadequate.

In the analysis, she sustained a somewhat similar pattern of superiority in the transference to me and towards the process of the analysis. Her responses to my interpretations were frequently to tidy them up, giving a summary that was more articulate than mine. Often, she gave no other response to what I said, leaving me feeling a bit ineffectual. When I tackled that reaction, she became anxious. For instance,

Once she gave some material about losing her way and then she had become afraid of being late. I interpreted a problem of identity, as if she was not sure if she was coming to see an analyst or a father. She quite cleverly understood me to be referring to getting lost in her ambiguous feelings about whether she wanted a sexual partner or a paternalistic security. I had meant something like

this, though she put it more clearly. She did not give any further associations. I felt a little uncomfortable about my muddled efforts, and remarked that she wanted to make sense of my interpretations, as sometimes she felt I did not express myself very effectively.

She became tense on the couch, and after a moment said: No, she understood what I said and was just repeating it so she could think about it. In fact, I did not at all have the impression she had thought about it. On this occasion, I pursued this by saying I thought she wanted to reassure me because she felt I might be sensitive to her opinion. It seemed to make her a bit cross that I had not accepted her reassurance. There was a rather tense silence.

In this little sequence she had seen me, I believe, as a bit ineffectual, which counter-transferentially I did feel. At the same time, she wished to conceal that element of denigration, because she felt it as destructive of me. She then attempted to restore my peace of mind by her own efforts. I often described this to myself as “grovelling”, but it was clearly a complex transference situation, which took a long time to sort out. The “grovelling” had a component in it which was overtly acquiescing towards me. She claimed a respect for my interpretation, yet it had a hollow ring, and I wondered how much she really thought about what I had said. There appeared nevertheless to be a positive attitude to me and my efforts, yet, on reflection, there was an unspoken sense not just of my weakness and need for help, but of her rather haughty acceptance of my neediness, leading to a compensating debasement of herself. So it was that the apparent helpfulness, acquiescence and reassuring had made me think of the word “grovelling”. It was made up of a genuine wish, on one hand, to put me in good and tidy order, and on the other hand, a superior attitude to me because of my neediness, which avoided thought and led her to want to conceal that haughtiness. The complexity here was difficult, both the struggle to rise above her own neediness by making me the needy one, and a struggle against that superior self, which led to trying to restore me, but in a way that confirmed me as the needy one in need of restoration. The capacity genuinely to have good feeling seemed to have been taken over by a subtle system that denigrated and reduced me. Thus, I was becoming acquainted with an object characterized by being ineffectual, vulnerable and in need of care.

A rather omnipotent and denigratory object faced and complemented the weak and dependent one. The complexity of this deepened when coupled with the apparent social requirements of a woman from her culture, where she occupied a lowly position in relation to men. It was as if she could nevertheless sustain a hidden belief in being the instrument of a man’s elevation. It would make sense simply as a cultural expectation of women in a lowly position, a position that she was also reacting against, turning the relationship around at times. This cultural pattern of gender roles was hardly psychoanalytic, though stereotyped gender relations in a non-European culture often came to the fore in

her thoughts, and I often found myself interested and commenting on them. I began to be aware that the configuration in the transference resembled other situations, notably relations with her boyfriend. I could begin to suspect that this was not really a cultural pattern (or not only a cultural pattern). It was something to do with her own omnipotence and its camouflage.

I did not proceed very far with these speculations, which came rather slowly to my attention as I got my bearings in this transference-countertransference dynamic. My progress was interrupted by the key occurrence, which makes this case telling for the purpose of this paper. After about a year, the same complex dominance struggle was represented, but about a different issue. It was not about cultural gender relations, but racial ones.

She came to one session rather shocked. She was uncomfortable on the couch, and though she was silent for a while, her movements were conspicuous. She was clearly disturbed by something, and I wondered what had happened. She told me in her articulate way that, the previous evening, she had been approached by a member of a radical group involved in violent action in the Middle East. She was embarrassed that this contact was a highly attractive middle-aged man, who clearly evoked sexual interest in Miss A. He invited her to become his mistress – or rather one of his mistresses. She was shocked at how tempted she was to give in to this dangerous man. She seemed to disapprove of his unrestrained and unashamed sexuality whilst also being captivated by it. I found myself also surprised by a number of things, not altogether coherent: that she was so close to terrorism; that such a man with a mission should be so lecherous and dishonourable (as he seemed at that moment); that she seemed to be drawn to follow such a brutal, violent lead; and not least, at a loss to know what I could do interpretively to make this into a therapeutic occurrence.

My first thought was of her English boyfriend and the cultural choice with which she was confronted. In my own perplexity, this was what I took up, because the gender problem was a well-worked theme in the analysis, and gave me, I suppose, a handhold to lock onto, as I found myself concerned about this seductive approach that had clearly affected her so much. I made a comment to the effect that she was again trying to grapple with the experience of being an Arab woman, almost a possession; and that she had hesitated to tell me, because of the illicitly sexual quality, but also because she was nonplussed and didn't want to present herself to me as at a loss.

She was quiet and seemingly thoughtful, but I felt that it was not a very powerful intervention in comparison with the overwhelming impact the man had had on her. I felt doubtful she would consider this line of thought on gender, when she had such excited turmoil in her mind over this man's offer. In fact, she continued with some details of his approach to her, implying some

sense that she was devalued by the view of her as a female possession rather than a person.

Because this was an articulate and well-worn response to my well-worn interpretation, I tried a new tack – focusing on her turmoil. I then said that I thought this encounter had caused such a turmoil in her mind that it was a bombshell, so that she was unable to collect her thoughts together again properly, but she was intrigued and fascinated by a man who could have this effect on her.

She did seem a little more thoughtful after that, saying “Mm, I don’t know.... It’s a fantasy. He’s a typical Arab...” Now, she had difficulty in recovering her articulateness, but she seemed to acknowledge that I was at least trying to understand the problem he had faced her with.

Curiously, the next day she said nothing spontaneously about this occurrence, and it was almost as if it really had been a transient fantasy. But the day after, she told me that she had declined his offer.

Clearly, it is understandable that she might be excited by a libidinal situation of this kind. However, it occurred in the context of her internal landscape of omnipotence and debasement. It raised the question whether the bombshell that had gone off in her mind was in fact merely an overwhelming sexual urge. Alternatively, the terrorist omnipotence of her own mind could have been suddenly overwhelming, provoked by the encounter with this actual terrorist – giving rise to an internally (as well as an externally) experienced struggle with terrorism. It gave a new twist to the regular occurrence of her focus on my ineffectual quality. Was the real bomb the one in the analysis that blew up my confidence?

By declining his offer, she appeared to be settling the struggle. However, as it transpired, in phantasy he became a very prevalent figure for some time. His importance was not in terms of gender as I had taken up. What began to emerge instead was anxiety over racial identity that we had not previously encountered. She had not previously shown very much interest in race differences, which she now began to express in terms of the attitudes this man represented. A significant change overtook her. She had presented this powerful moment as a potential seduction – to become a mistress of this man; but gradually a full racist influence became apparent.

Shortly after this, she told me she was concerned about her appearance. She was an attractive woman, but it troubled her that she was noticeably Arab. She knew there was no particular cosmetic “treatment” to change her skin colour or her features – or even if she would have it if available. There was a sort of self-mocking quality to this, as if ashamed of a thought she did not quite know what to do with. She told me she had never thought about herself in that way. I said that although on the surface it is unlikely that she had not thought of being Arab, she was trying to tell me there was something new

about the way she was thinking of it now. She responded by saying she had wondered, given my profession, and my name, whether I was Jewish. When she said this, I felt some alarm, not so much that she was mistaking my actual identity (which I am used to) but that suddenly there might grow up an alienation or hostility between us, which might be unmanageable. It was a transitory moment of alarm. When I put it into words, that there could be an unmanageable conflict between us if she had to recognise that we belonged to two separate races vying for supremacy, she remained quiet. Later, she said with some bitterness that her boyfriend had once called her “dark”.

I think I may have underestimated at the time my own sense of alarm. We had done a good deal of work on her capacity to undermine respect for her boyfriend, and to some extent her undermining of me, and I had some understanding of how she dealt with this. I connected her “terrorism” with this implicit form of damage. However, this new moment was on a different scale. It set going alarm – not merely a feeling of being ineffectual and needy. There was an explosive bomb set to go off between us. She might have been as frightened as I was. The reference to something unmanageable (though perhaps it was *technically* correct to address) may have served to bring us together in fearfulness to counteract a deep gulf that might have exploded between us – me Jewish, and her Arab.

The sessions during the ensuing period were characterized by quietness, perhaps thoughtfulness, less anxious than previously, but more withdrawn. She became troubled by her concerns that her boyfriend was English; at the same time, she was unable of course to tell him of the encounter she had had with her terrorist. She felt the Englishness in him devalued her and in turn she retaliated with her superior thoughts of her imaginary “affair”. Once again her working through was in terms of her boyfriend. It may really have been that her fear of my “Jewish” retaliation led to distancing in this way: an attempt at a terrorist disengaging.

However, the encounter had confronted her with a need and a vulnerability arising from the sexual need. Underlying a sexual entanglement, she was in a struggle with her omnipotence and vulnerability. Her anxieties led to a stormy period in the relationship with her boyfriend as well. In the analysis, the moments when she felt superior to me and debased by me became increasingly clear to see, and the sense of a race friction between us gradually lessened.

Although she had rejected the man – as an external object – something quite radical had happened, and the episode had created a new internal situation for her. Whatever the sexual gratification the man had offered, he had also offered her a new racist consciousness. It seemed this was a moment of similar transformation in the analysis. If for a year there had been a degree of deadness about the contact between us, typically as we attempted to talk of her cultural conflicts, there was suddenly a new moment that felt more alive, heralded by

alarm. Behind the cultural conflict, there was a determined, and perhaps unmanageable, conflict between herself and me, a Middle East war in the consulting room. She could be seduced, as it were, into a quiescent discussion of gender problems, but it deadened the lively engagement with me on the other level, where she sorted out her omnipotence.

This patient's thoughtfulness allowed working through, over time, with a relatively good outcome. It was possible to approach the omnipotent terrorist as a part of herself. This "racist" phase of her analysis was in a way more straightforward, because it showed up more starkly how the terrorist in her, by whom she had so nearly been taken over, was some counterpart to a vulnerable, needy self. It was also more straightforward because we could directly address the complexity of who was needy and who was providing for the neediness, and how this might evolve in a more alternating way. Through this, the dominance and terrorism could be felt more in the analytic situation, and slowly she could identify with the violence and with her antagonism towards help, need and life. She did become curious, often still anxious to restore me, but slowly she could see the value of, and her dependence on, my help for understanding this. As a result, she began to feel more relaxed in her analysis. Eventually (after 4½ years by now), an incremental step in her appreciation of her boyfriend occurred – he had nice fair hair! – and over a period she tried with some difficulty to acknowledge how hard it must have been for him to tolerate her.

In this case, Miss A needed to sort out the difference between having a particular racial identity and the exciting power of a racist terrorism. Her external encounter with a racist person occasioned the internalization of troubling prejudicial attitudes into an internal world where the intolerance naturally adhered to the available omnipotent internal object. This "internal racist," constructed from both the ego-destructive object together with racist social attitudes, was driven within her by omnipotent rejection of her own vulnerability. This occurred in a woman whose relations with the internal object were labile, so that she sometimes appeared as debased and weak, sometimes as omnipotent, and sometimes as denying her omnipotence with a servile "grovelling" attitude.

So, Miss A illustrates how external social attitudes can be swiftly internalized into an existing omnipotent narcissism, to create a racist *internal* object. The rejection of the external racist took a couple of days, but the rejection of the internal state of racist intolerance took a matter of years, and depended on analytic help. I claim that the tenaciousness of the *internal* racist came about because there existed an internal "hook" characterized by intolerance, as previously described. Prior to its racist politicization, the intolerance in her was observable as a clinical feature of her transference as well as in her relations with her boyfriend.<sup>7</sup>

It is serendipitous that studying this patient revealed something of the social phenomenon of racism. It demonstrated how fluid the ego-ideal is. An encounter

one evening evoked a sudden and potentially overpowering internalization of social intolerance. Given her potentiality for intolerance, it took years to dispel this internal object. Other people do not suffer such a dramatic internalization. They seem to live with racist attitudes on a permanent basis. A state of racial prejudice inhabits their world without modification, although concealed to a greater or lesser extent. From a social point of view, we might think of the latter as “carriers” of a racist culture. This applies to the next patient, Mrs B.

### Case B

Mrs B was a middle-aged woman from South America. Her identity was sufficiently European for her to have married a successful English diplomat, and to have settled in England to bring up a family for more than a decade. However, she had inherited and still owned a substantial farm in her country of origin. She had to oversee the professional manager of her land, and to do so from this distance caused some difficulties. Her possessions had to be looked after by an intermediary, an expert whom she employed, but who seemed to maintain an independent point of view. The notion of distance was significant in her analysis. This pointed to transference manifestations; her response to interpretations was cool, as if she really was surveying my efforts from a distance. For instance,

She gave some material in which she described a fish on a fishmonger’s cold slab; it looked at the world with an appraising eye. I interpreted her own cool appraisal of the world, including the world inside her, which she had invited me to look at with her. She responded, after a moment, with a good humoured comment about lying on the couch like a cold slab, and then her view that English people thought that South Americans, like herself, were usually rather hot-blooded. There was an implication that she was somehow different and therefore wrong to be a cold-blooded South American. But, quickly she seemed to indicate that I as an Englishman must be contradicting myself by interpreting her as cold-blooded when I knew she was South American. I was not sure which of these fleeting impressions was correct. I wondered how I would find out, and on the basis of past experience I thought I probably would not. So, on this occasion, I waited without saying anything further. My experience of such moments was that she was already getting on in her mind with something else, and would ignore me if I remained quiet in my uncertainty. In effect, she left the interpretation, and I did as well. The moment became distant and rapidly lost intensity.

This kind of “dead fish” quality to the analysis was frequent. In fact, anything in her mind beyond her surface associations seemed remote from real investigation and understanding, and from any encounter with it or between us.

To manage this distant land in South America, she adopted an imperious attitude to the manager, and I frequently felt a tone of that in her analysis. Her

attitude could be as haughty to me as if I were an analytic manager, employed by her. Her manner had the characteristic that she talked of what she wanted, and moved on as she wished.

For instance, she talked of the frustration she felt towards her husband who spent so much time in his job, leaving her to feel idle and not entertained. Whilst I formulated some thoughts about how she felt frustrated by my concentration on the analysis, she moved on as if, merely having mentioned the frustration, it was already dealt with. She then talked of her unruly son away at boarding school, who constantly needed things sent to him. Further thoughts involved her giving a dinner party, etc.

She was not curious about such a punctuated stream of thoughts, which I could have taken to reveal unconscious themes. Rather the thoughts were left as a trail, for me to follow and enjoy as crumbs from the table. I gradually became accustomed to her lack of interest in the content of the thoughts, and began to notice the process.

On one occasion in response to this sort of sequence, I described some fragmented quality to her thinking and said it made it difficult to serve up well cooked food for me in the way she provides for her house guests. She told me, slightly stiffly, that I seemed slow to follow her today - but she spoke it calmly as if indifferent to whether I did follow her or not.

My role, to manage her psychic affairs for her, consisted of following her thoughts around in the ways she determined. If I said anything arresting, she dealt with it in an intelligent, formal way before moving on in her own direction. Reports of her attempts to control the manager in South America repeated a version of what I so often felt. These reports conveyed a haughty, imperious attitude. She attempted to control him with various communications and visits from time to time to check what he was doing. The impression she gave was that she conducted a busy and superior interference, while he did his best to please her. This reflected the experience of the analysis, where she relied on me to manage her possessions, that is mental states and internal objects, but to do so according to her requirements.

Like my previous patient, Mrs B could also be described as under the dominance of a superior part of herself, an omnipotent narcissistic self that perverted her relations with those valuable experts (farm manager, psychoanalyst) whom she needed to depend on as experts. She retreated from her dependency on experts behind a haughty manner, and such feelings of need were carefully excluded from her actual transactions and communications.

In one session, she told me of her serious suspicions, "He didn't seem to listen. You know, he phones me every other Monday. It's too much sometimes," she added woefully. "I'm here, I tell him what I want done, and I have no idea if

he takes any notice.” She sounded perplexed, as if her authority were beyond question. “He’s there, he’s one of them – mixed, a mulatto, you know. So, I expect the usual respect. I do. Sometimes I tell him. I don’t know if he understands”. Again she seemed perplexed that he might be calling into question the whole social fabric. She believed she instructed him on the best method to develop the land (though in practice, she actually knew far less than he). She continued by insisting, “it’s my land, and it is my country.” She conveyed a sense of arbitrary power.

I had believed for a moment that she was implying, unconsciously, that I did not satisfactorily respond to her demands in whatever way she determined, and whatever my better judgement. This dealt with the risk of her dependence coming to the fore. So as always, I could not be quite sure if I was truly being asked to listen to the dependent and vulnerable self, or whether I really did have to restrict myself to accord her the imperial authority she expected. I was very familiar with the sense that I was not quite sure to whom I was speaking – the dependent needy self or the autocrat. I also had the enduring conviction that I would not find out; it left me once more in the passive accepting role of powerless indecision.

However, in that material I was struck by her mention of his colour, a mulatto. I had not until then been aware of this. Her frustration at his insubordination seemed self-evident to her when she was telling me. So, I recognized a feeling in me of wanting to remonstrate with her about her denigratory attitudes. I realized suddenly that she probably did not think of her remarks as denigratory, and for all I knew of race relations in her country, it was perfectly acceptable. Anyway my job was different. It was not for me to respond to her racism as such. I had to think about that protest in me – clearly, I identified with the manager who was subjected to her attitudes that were now explicitly racist.

I said I thought she looked down on me, too, as the person who was supposed to look after the distant aspects of her experience, and I listed some of the problems she had come to analysis with – now rather distant in our memories. I said I thought she took a view of me rather as she did of the black man managing her estate, and that she regarded me as a servile assistant she directed, rather than as a guide for her own exploration.

“Hmm,” she said, “you do seem a bit like him.” And she gave a short laugh as if owing to something she felt a little bad about. She added that she was not really racist but that she did think of people like that as natural servants. Momentarily, she seemed to feel a little awkward about her own racism. It was an unusual moment when she could think in a concerned way about herself, her conflicts, and her relationships. However, it seemed somewhat feeble, “I suppose we all have quirks”; now she conveyed it did not really matter to her anyway.

Then she told me, with a rising anger, of something he had done, over which she had not had control. It resulted in some mildly damaging consequence for her. It was a small moment, but it entailed a recognition of her own problems, her need for help and her dependence on him, and it sent her quickly back into a rage about his insubordination.

So welded were her racist attitudes to her imperiousness that I think previously she must have thought that her racial differences were so natural to her, and therefore so obvious to me, another white person, she hardly needed acknowledge them. Moreover, my reference now to something so trivial was evidence of my insubordination.

I put to her in an explicit way, "You saw my previous interpretation as my refusal to accept your control of my views. Then it made you feel disadvantaged by it, and particularly you felt suddenly small and dependent on me." She was silent, and apparently silently furious. She did not speak for the rest of the session. The next day she told me two things. First, rarely for her, she had had a dream, though she did not tell me the dream. And second, she was thinking about finishing her analysis.

In this material, there was a lot of evidence of her superior attitudes; a racist component of it emerged almost by accident, and demonstrated how unquestionably equated her superiority and her racism were. However, a brief moment emerged and disappeared in rage when she struggled, weakly, against these domineering and debasing attitudes towards another race. She struggled with this so much less successfully than Miss A. In the end, the analysis was not a success.

In the last session she presented me at the end with a book. Its title was *The Book of Heroic Failures*. She laughed very pointedly, indicating the failure of our efforts and her haughty and amused indifference to that outcome. However, there was some hint in her smile, which suggested a rueful regret – and even a comradely regret – at our failure.

I was left afterwards with a prolonged sense that some part of her that might have valued her opportunity had existed but was dominated by her resilient haughtiness. I had never found a useful way to that part of her. Instead, Mrs B maintained a haughty attitude to those who helped her. Importantly, that attitude was strongly linked to racial differences, racial superiority and inferiority. Her dominant haughtiness seemed designed to keep the dependent side of herself a dead fish. Racism was aligned in the most natural seeming way with social attitudes, which she must have acquired while young. There seemed in this case to be a much more enduring welding of social attitudes to a haughty, omnipotent side of her against which she could struggle only weakly. It was not simply that her racism was the source of her haughty superiority, in fact rather the opposite: her haughtiness was very evident and emerged in an obvious

manner in the analysis. It could be shown there, I think, to be derived from her vigilant repudiation of weakness and dependence on my help. She managed and controlled my help completely. The racism was not the cause. It was an add-on feature, perhaps because it was easily available in her culture.

A reaction to her own entrenched attitudes did still exist, although feebly and transiently. In the last but one piece of material, she did move away towards a more reflective questioning of the racist attitudes that seemed forever unquestioned. However, any small collaborative moment with me was fleeting. Neither she nor I could sustain it. She returned to her entrenched, unthought prejudice, and retreated from her more vulnerable and dependent experiences. The outcome of her struggle seemed a long-settled defeat for her more vulnerable but more human self.

### Conclusions

I have presented both these cases to illustrate how a domineering side of the personality was linked with socially racist attitudes. I present these as illustration of, and indeed (in these cases) as evidence of the way that something internally intolerable meets social attitudes of intolerance, mutually enhancing each. So, social attitudes are not simply internalized and installed like a piece of computer software. There is a receptive “hook” on which such attitudes can be hung. It is a “hook” which contributes anti-human brutality and the poison of intolerance.

At the same time, we could say, certain social prejudices give a particular focus and content to already existing intolerant anti-human attitudes. Thus, a racist society would provide the wherewithal for an individual’s harsh internal object to be clothed in a racist intolerance. The internal hook can attract the garments of racist attitudes.<sup>8</sup> In one case, the analysis showed this formative process in action; and in the other case there was a more extended occupation by a racist internal object that had taken up apparently permanent residence.

In both patients, there was some transient movement back and forth between an intolerable sense of helplessness and the domineering attitudes of intolerance. However, the two patients made this movement in an importantly different way. I presented Miss A to show a moment in which a racist structure erupted within her mind. An internal structure became suffused or infected with an internalized figure embodying external social attitudes – those of racial terror. A fluid oscillation between a self-destructive denigration and a denigration of her external loved object suddenly threatened to harden into a racist intolerance. And specifically this potential change was sparked by a particular kind of intolerant person, who could seductively enter her. This potential new ego-ideal, carried in a person from a racist group, offered a stability organized around intolerance. An internal, intolerant object within her personality could absorb some socially meaningful content – a group-ideal. If her receptive internal

situation absorbed the external social phenomenon, she was offered a group solidarity of people aligned with the same set of racist attitudes (group-ideal).

In the event, Miss A was able to disconnect and to move away from the racist attitudes. With the help of analysis, Miss A could disengage from the new racist pre-occupations of her intolerant internal object.

For Mrs B, instead, the link between her internal intolerant object and social attitudes of intolerance was a permanent one. It was so longstanding and so implicit she never needed to mention it explicitly. The investment of her personality in socially accepted complacent attitudes made her struggle against the omnipotent, narcissistic part of her personality so weak that it defeated analysis. Mrs B's racist attitudes were habitual and thus she was somewhat different from Miss A, who could adopt them or put them down. Mrs B's case is important psychoanalytically when we consider the possibilities for therapeutic change; but it is also important socially in considering the possibilities for social change.

From a social point of view, it seems useful on the whole to think of racist attitudes as potential. They can be donned at moments when there is a suitable social context. Football fans suddenly assume xenophobic aggression in the midst of a mob. This fluid situation fits the notion of "contagion", which Freud (1921) adopted from LeBon (1895). LeBon's observation was that in a group the members are particularly prone to pick up the emotionality of others and that emotion flies around like a contagion. For group attitudes to suddenly flare up in this way suggests some potentiality exists in a latent form in individuals, awaiting realization in some social situation. Thus, Miss A may be more applicable as a model of this liability of the intolerant omnipotent attitudes, awaiting social clothing.

For Miss A, an internal condition met a group with racial differences. That group included individuals with a more permanent internal racial object, ones such as Mrs B had. Miss A may represent something like the racial potentiality of most of us. In this way, we could understand how it is that quite ordinary people can be drawn into the prejudices of racism (for instance, almost overnight the entire population of Germany, after 1933, became murderously racist). Mrs B exemplifies certain rarer individuals who act perhaps as "carriers" of social intolerance of one form or another, and can infect others.

If it is the case that racism is a convergence between a social intolerance and an internal intolerant object, we have to turn to the psychoanalytic method to investigate at least one pole of the phenomenon of racism. A social science point of view is not sufficient. Of course, psychoanalysis is not sufficient either; psychoanalysis can say little about the social conditions that make racism a prevalent social intolerance. However, psychoanalysts may have the clue to how such intolerance can suddenly spark up and break out on a wide scale. We are all prone to states of mind which feel intolerable, and so we can all be rescued from such states by group dynamics that substitute intolerance.

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## About the author

The author is a Member of the British Psychoanalytical Society, and currently Professor in the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex, UK. He was previously Clinical Director of the Cassel Hospital. He has written extensively on psychoanalysis and social science, including *Observing Organizations* (with Wilhem Skogstad, 2000), and on the therapeutic community, including *What Happens in Groups* (1987); on Kleinian psychoanalysis, and its history, including *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (1989), and *Clinical Klein* (1994); on psychoanalytic ethics, including *Therapy or Coercion: Does Psychoanalysis Differ from Brainwashing?* (1997); and on psychodynamics of psychiatry, including *Suffering Insanity* (2004).

## Notes

- 1 Here (Freud, 1914, p 101) he calls it the “ideal ego”. As Mancina and Meltzer (1981) note there is no general agreement on the use of the terms ego-ideal, ideal ego and super-ego. In the present paper, the most general conception is adhered to: the narcissistic withdrawal of the libido results in a remnant of the object cathexis within the ego, which remains somewhat detached as a separate ego-ideal, and ideal notion of what the ego should be. Finer distinctions are not necessary for the argument of this paper.
- 2 This notion of active internal objects was greatly extended of course by Melanie Klein (1935, 1940); Hinshelwood, 1997).
- 3 There are varied processes by which the ego-ideal is replaced by some internal object, by some newly internalized object, or by some external object. I shall not pursue this phenomenology of ego-ideal replacements – although Jaques (1955) says something of introjective and projective processes.
- 4 See instead, “Leadership and authority: making a difference” (Hinshelwood, in preparation).
- 5 Conceptualizing the “grade” in the ego in this way as a defusion of the instincts differs from Freud, where the “grade in the ego” results from a self-observing agency in the mind derived from his theory of a libidinal narcissism (Freud, 1914). In this paper, I explore the more virulent “negative narcissism” as the source of intolerant states of mind.
- 6 Kernberg (1994), in his review of Steiner’s book, stressed the defensive nature of the pathological organization
 

an alliance or conglomerate of primitive, extremely cruel, corrupt and tyrannical objects... dominating the patient’s infantile, dependent self, as a destructive force that apparently promises the patient a protection against the vicissitudes of the pain and terror of unconscious conflicts, but, in fact, perpetuates a self-destructive reality that paralyses the patient within a particular level or type of pathology (Kernberg, 1994, p 160).

However, Steiner is also clear that this part of the ego’s organization is an instinct derivative; it is a derivative of the death instinct, which is idealized. Pathological organizations are complex in that they have a defensive aspect as well as gratifying primary negative impulses. O’Shaughnessy (1981) called them “defensive organizations”, and the aim is to organize the ego in such a way as to create

some degree of separation between one's good self and a bad part, however inadequate that separation.

7 In terms of a psychoanalytic treatment, the social character of her attitudes was less important than the intolerant nature of the pathological organization. However, in some circumstances, for instance when patient and analyst are from different races, then the actual social "content" of the pathological organization may become relevant and highly useful defensively for the patient (Tan, 1993).

8 Other prejudicial "garments" can also be stored in the psychic cupboard as intolerant attitudes to be taken out and worn on appropriate occasions. For instance, totalitarian attitudes can be inhabited by this harsh internal object (see Sebek, 1998); various anti-feminist, class-ist or religious sets of attitudes could also adorn the intolerant internal object with specific social prejudices. So various sets of social attitudes, the wherewithal of the ego-ideal, can be kept, and worn as it were, or thrown off for a while.

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