

RACISM: THE HIDDEN AGENDA IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

How a child born into a racist society learns to operate within it.

Bob Scott
Mitzi Naism

National Council of Churches and Catholic Church Programme On Racism

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Slowly, but very slowly, many New Zealand pakeha people are accepting that we live in a racist society.

From the meeting between two sovereign peoples at Waitangi in 1840, a bicultural society might have emerged. Each sovereign people would contribute something in a beneficial exchange. But instead of both sovereign peoples retaining their self-determination, the then majority was gradually subjugated by the minority. Important steps in that subjugation were rapid increase of European immigration (until the minority had become dominant numerically) and the transplanting of institutions and social structures from Europe.

Today we have a situation in which the pakeha group now control all the institutions of our society and, because of that control, are able to require other cultural groups to conform to their expectations of conduct, performance and aspirations. This is not exactly dictatorial, for variations or cultural diversity are tolerated. But the significant point is that the pakeha group at important stages of our history, or for major events, has sufficient control or veto to determine that our expectations or aspirations will prevail if we feel it necessary.

To believe that it is inevitable that the majority group, because of its numeric advantage, will dominate is naive. Rather, we are required to address deeply-felt claims of white supremacy, encouraged, often, by a monocultural view of God and inspired by a history of colonial authority.

We believe that one of the tragedies of this country is that, despite our small population and therefore a potentially easy access and exchange with one another, we are witnessing the emergence of a compartmentalised society. Gone is the dream of the egalitarian society.

There are poor areas and rich areas. There are Maori areas and Pacific Island

areas. People now choose to live in a certain area - not so that they can be with their own cultural group (which is an understandable need) but in order to keep away from the other groups.

Residents of Pakuranga in Auckland speak with satisfaction of the low proportion of Maori people in the area. (TV Documentary "A Tale of Two Cities" 1982)

Residents of high income areas speak of the risk of a drop in property value if Polynesians move into the area. Land agents steer Maori or Pacific Island buyers away from certain areas, even if they can demonstrably afford houses in those areas (Conversations with Land Agent).

The Springbok Tour of NZ was a time when the racism in this country came to the surface, according to some people. That may be true. Certainly it was the first time substantial numbers of New Zealanders faced one another in hostile complaint. There were strong feelings on both sides, and anger gave expression to deeply-felt prejudices.

But that sad period of NZ history probably only gave a window insight into what had been happening and been felt for many many years. The man who screamed that Bob's 73 year old friend was a "nigger lover" as she passed in the anti-Springbok demonstration, did not muster his hatred overnight. The woman in the Parnell bus queue who insisted that she, as a white, should precede two young Maori girls did not learn that arrogance the previous day.

The statistics provided by Government departments and agencies clearly indicate that they deliver most benefits to those who belong to the same cultural group as ^{those who} have authority in those departments and less benefit to those of other cultural groups, particularly Maori and Pacific Island people.

The Education Department generously provides annual evidence of how it is failing to meet the needs of the indigenous people of this country. The Justice system gives ample evidence of what seems to be two systems of law. A Maori commentator has said "There's no doubt about it, when you go into the court you are not a New Zealander,

This points to white supremacy. The conviction that the white dominant group are the norm by which other people must be judged; that the lifestyles, cultural aspirations and economic expectation of the Pakeha group are somehow the legitimate ones and all others are either tolerated or rejected.

We hear angry, cynical pakeha voices which complain with stereotypes and anecdotes of how "difficult" the Maori or 'Polynesian' is, and how sensitive, misunderstood and tolerant the Pakeha is. And they sound like voices from a prison!!
How did this come about?

It is our thesis that most pakeha people lack knowledge and understanding of other cultures, and this ignorance, or even fear, has opened them up to actively participate in racism.

There's no doubt at all (and ample social science evidence) that prejudice is learned and not inborn. Work done in the early 1970's by Graham Vaughan of Auckland University brings together considerable research data. Using a series of doll and picture materials, he sought to determine at what age young children could identify themselves as being different from the members of other ^{racial} cultural groups, and how they viewed those other groups. His study demonstrates that pakeha children show clear own-race preference at least as early as four years of age. By the age of six this own-race preference is at a peak and remains high to 8 years of age.

Donna Awatere's work (M.A. thesis 1974) bears out these findings, and concludes that young Maori children prefer pakeha identity, and are reluctant to accept own-race identity up till the age of 9 or 10.

Our contention is that habits and attitudes learned in these very early years provide the basis for general community attitudes and prejudices among Pakehas later in life. Those early childhood experiences, or lack of certain experiences,

help determine how the person will think or act towards members of other cultural groups or - more significantly - how they will view themselves as part of the white group, whose culture and attitudes are to be regarded as superior.

Of course it is difficult to say exactly what it is we teach young children which brings about an openness to racism. There are few people who actually plot a course for their children to ensure they have little or nothing to do with people of other races and who do that because they do not want their child "contaminated". There are not many like that - but please do not assume there are no people like that.

Most parents have thought little about the matter. So it's not the overt teaching, in those early childhood years. It's the informal attitudinal transference or exploration of concepts which is the target area for our investigation. After all, the early childhood years are spent in the company of people who have themselves been socialised to fit into a racist society.

*> prejudice a stereotyping
having prejudice without it → hypocrisy, double message*
Let us look at a couple of examples.

One of the things pakeha parents teach children is a sense of possession. A series of statements will serve to illustrate.

"Keep your toys in the box when you've finished playing."

"You must keep your bedroom tidy."

"I'll buy Sally the toy she wants and I'll buy you one as well so there will be no arguments."

"Take that toy back next door - it belongs to them".

"If you break your toy you can't have another one. And you can't play with your brother's toy. You broke yours."

And so it goes.

We teach possessiveness - individual ownership: and being judged on how we

keep our possessions.

There are a number of 'concepts' or 'precepts' being inculcated here.

1. Individual ownership
2. Tidiness, cleanliness and neatness are important
3. People are judged by how well they keep their possessions tidy and in order.
4. Not to do so will probably incur punishment or inconvenience.
5. What happens to you happens by your own fault.
6. This is the right way to do it and you can expect punishment or rejection if you do not learn that.

It's the last which is probably the most damaging. Because it ignores the possibility of other alternatives. Or - to go some years down the road - probably means that any alternatives which do appear in other people's behaviour is a departure from the norm.

Another example: how we expose our young children to other cultures.

Books are bought with tales from other lands. The physical, clothing and behaviour differences are intriguing, and rightly so. But, from observation, it's almost always an "over there" "far away" thing. It's not something which is close and which I could explore.

Perhaps this is why we so often show our children cultures of other countries but very rarely encourage them to explore the indigenous culture of this land.

Of course there are school projects on 'the Maori' along with those on the Eskis American Indian and the Aztecs. In school, we are excited if, when doing a project on Japan, a Japanese visitor arrives. But when doing a project on NZ history we rarely, it seems, regard ourselves as the visitors (manuhiri) or enable Maori people to teach us.

But that's late in childhood years. What about the very early years? It is our observation that, certainly in the urban areas, young children have minimal exposure to the very culture which depends for its continued existence on there being a NZ - the Maori culture.

The tendency is to regard that indigenous culture as foreign.

Bob Scott, who has travelled a great deal in the last decade, and stayed with NZ families in many parts of the world, reflects that almost without exception those families have encouraged their children to become familiar and at ease with the culture they are now living in. They speak with pride of how their children have adapted, have so quickly learned the new language and even gained new and helpful insights about life. But none of those families had encouraged their children in such a way about the indigenous culture of New Zealand, which they had also grown up alongside.

Another example While teaching the images of our culture, we are generous and persistent in the range we explore. Royalty, rugby, book-reading and learning, private possessions, what is luxury and what is not, clothing, money, health, eating styles, good taste, food, family the list can go on. Under each word one can make a long list of attitudes and responses which are integral to our culture. In total they make up what we recognise as our culture.

We are careful to pass these on to our children, and are rarely critical of them. But when we teach our children or speak to our children of other cultures, we do not have the same generosity and persistence. We use stereotypes, we are often critical. How often have you heard the disparaging remark that someone (from another culture) "doesn't even wear shoes!" Did God design shoes, or did we? There are many people who seem to think that shoe-wearing is some kind of sign that one is civilised. Certainly our children realise that, after a certain age, it is the right thing to do. So that anyone they meet, in later years, who does not

wear shoes, or who thinks shoe-wearing is unimportant, is not only quickly branded as different but, as "not as good as me, the one who does wear shoes".

We teach an exclusivity about our culture. Do we encourage our children to understand that our culture is but one of many cultures in the world? And that there are other ways of living and (most importantly) one way is not more important or "civilised" than any other.

Of course all these examples and impressions can be argued at great length. It is possible to produce anecdotes from the experience of every one of us which will prove the exception to almost everything we have said. And we also know that there are many thousands of people in this country who are exploring alternative life-styles. And who have thought seriously about rejecting cultural arrogance and opening themselves up to other cultural influences and experiences - and that has included their children. We have no intention of denying that. But much of what goes on, within our families, with very young children, is a preparation for attitudes and feelings later in life. The obvious evidence that our society has a large proportion of white supremacists or active racists suggests that we should investigate those childhood years critically.

An illustration. One of the frequent and destructive attitudes used by pakeha New Zealanders is what is called "blaming the victim". The 'social casualty' or disadvantaged person is said to share most of the blame for their position.

"If only he'd get a job".

"If they worked harder in school they wouldn't fail..."

"Their parents love them too much and don't give them discipline."

"They eat the wrong foods and smoke too much."

Very few questions about why - what is happening in the situation which has produced the result. It's much easier to blame the victim than deal with the causes,

It's an easy

and convenient "out" for people. Don't look at the causes, look at the symptoms and put the blame on the victim for not overcoming or changing the situation, and if they can't then somehow or other they did it wrong.

This links back to the concepts we spoke of earlier about keeping your toys neat. Behind that thinking, and transmitted in that sort of package, is the conviction that we can change the situations we are in, that if we do it right then we will be alright; and if it goes wrong for us then it's us who are at fault. From there, it is a short and logical step to assume that whoever is in trouble has not done it right. There are other clear echoes of early childhood training.

"If you behave yourself, toe the line, follow father's rules, then everything will be OK."

"If you keep everything neat and tidy (i.e. follow the rules) then you will win approval and you will succeed."

"Mother and Father know everything, they make the rules and life is about sticking to those rules."

What effect there would be in our society if families with young children slept in one room, shared all the chores, shared all possessions (so they were our toys, our clothes) shared the fears and joys.....

Perhaps, in later life, the children would be less judgmental of others, have fewer feelings of superiority and more leaning towards sharing in the wider community.

But this presentation must not confine itself to pointing to the negative things - we note that we have only scratched the surface and there are other, far more learned voices and writings to refer to.

How can we develop positive racial attitudes, especially with very young children.

First, of course, it is important to get rid of or minimise those negative things: the exclusivity, the possessiveness, the judgmental attitudes towards

towards others who are different from me. This involves examining some of our own attitudes, and making conscious choices for change.

Because there are positive things to do. Here we must express our gratitude to the Council for Interracial Books for Children, a New York based Council which produces a wide range of extremely useful materials.

The major thing is to develop a healthy, exploratory attitude to cultures which does not depend on judgments of right or wrong but of variation.

- * Initiate activities and discussions which not only build a positive racial/cultural self-image, but also promote other racial and cultural identity. Don't wait for enquiries - initiate.

- * Even when a child is very young, feel free to talk about skin colour (such a taboo subject in M.Z.) Admire physical characteristics in children from other cultures. Compare them favourably with your own.

- * Initiate appropriate discussions about the difference between being superior and having feelings of racial pride.

- * Initiate discussions, by reading material, about the great people in other cultures.

- * Display pictures, posters which include photographs of people/customs from other cultures; especially those who have struggled for their people.

- * But don't leave it only at discussions. Explore new situations.

- Don't avoid the Maori or Indian doctor

- Introduce the children into cultural situations where they are the minority or where they may initially feel ill-at-ease; and by your own behaviour show that you enjoy that exposure and have gained from it.

- * Watch your own language - we use quick phrases which have little meaning to us but are instant conveyors of attitude and feeling.

- "The new doctor is an Indian but he's very good, they say".

- "Mrs Potae had eleven children but she managed to bring them up remarkably well - two of them actually went to university."

"All the gardens in the street are looking so lovely; it's a pity that Maori family has to spoil it by not mowing their lawns or planting flowers."

"She's a Tongan woman, but she's really quite intelligent."

* Or avoid the generalisations which can be so damaging. Challenge them in front of the children.

"That's the trouble, all Maoris are too damned lazy."

Now, if pressed, the speaker will readily admit they didn't actually mean that. But our words have passed on a certain attitude to our children.

* Avoid derogatory linking of language. The most obvious one is the linking of dirt or uncleanness with black.

* Answer children's questions on race when they come up. Don't avoid or scold them because they have entered (in your opinion) a scandalous or sensitive area.

* Buy toys which develop interest and identification with other races. (We don't mean Black Sambos). But wouldn't it be good if we produced dolls with Maori features and characteristics (not the tourist souvenirs) so that both Maori and Pakeha children might have Maori dolls.

* Pay attention to feelings. Children often need confirmation of what they have observed and felt, as well as reassurance and interpretation. They may need emotional support. A friend recalls his early fear of the bagpipes, screaming when they were played. It wasn't until his father started dancing to them that he realised they were fun, and the Scotsmen who played them were not nasty messengers from the devil.

* Speak specifically about racism and not merely about being fair to everyone. As soon as a child can understand, explain that racism exists when one group feels superior to the others and tries to impose its ways on others. Explain that it is wrong.

* And give a lead by your own efforts to oppose racism, either individually or in the community. Encourage the children to oppose racism themselves and help them develop skills appropriate to their own age level.

* But above all one is asking for a willingness consciously to counteract exclusivist or supremacist influences. The child will get them: at school, at play, in other homes, or wherever, and they have to be consciously countered.

The myths and misinformation need to be corrected. This may mean, at times, explaining that you do not agree with the parent of a friend, or with the teacher, or with the person on T.V. You may find yourself working at odds with what is being taught in schools - especially in the area of history.

It is our experience that those who have come to understand racism in this country have done so because they have gained a sense not only of what is happening now but also what has happened in the past. If we were to bring children through their early years learning of the true history of our country, instead of the sanitised, white-washed views we so often read, then maybe we would have a different situation in NZ.

Finally, let's try to explode a myth, a myth which does untold damage to race relations in this country, and which is certainly shared with young children. The myth: We are all one people in N.Z.

We are not. The indigenous culture of this country is markedly different from the culture we pakeha people imported from Europe.

The people from Pacific Island states have brought culture of their own.

We are not one people. We are not the same. We are different.

The "we are one people" claim is usually made by colonists - have you noticed?

Captain Hobson murmured it as the chiefs signed the Treaty. Prime Ministers and other Government leaders use it on occasions such as Waitangi Day. It most often represents a demand for "sameness" which, if you belong to the dominant group, really means others should become the same as us.

Of course cultural diversity is tolerated, even welcomed occasionally. But the "one people" claim seeks to make light of minority cultures and the aspirations of other racial groups. Historically we are two peoples, one country.

- Bob Scott
Mitzi Nairn
National Council of Churches and Catholic Church Programme on Racism