

## **Empathetically Dysfunctional Prejudices**

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Prejudicial behavior varies not only in its intensity but it appears to have major variations in the dynamics and processes that result in prejudicial behavior. The connection between an inability to be empathetic and being strongly prejudiced has been observed since the 1950s.

What we have known about prejudicial behavior seems to be understood differently now that we have a greater grasp of neurobiology. Recent studies showing that empathy, a process that is lacking in strongly prejudiced people, resides in the right hemisphere. Before the age of 4 years the right hemisphere is dominant and still developing and much of the development is pivotal upon the quality of the parental treatment and the responsiveness and reliability of the nurturing parent.

Abuse, neglect or poor parenting at this early age seems to prevent the development of the systems which allow for or support the empathic response. Thus, these individuals are unable to respond with a genuine empathic response. To the casual observer the prejudicial response seems very intentional and deliberate but it seems that these people are really not capable of a strong empathic response.

To understand how we have misconstrued these reactions it might be valuable to compare the empathetically dysfunctional person to the attention deficit child. Parents and caregivers have too often seen the attention deficit child as one who just *wouldn't* mind or one who just *wouldn't* stay on task, while in reality the attention deficit child *cannot* remain focused. They forget what it was that they were about to do or they just get distracted.

Like the attention deficit child whose behavior is driven by the way his or her brain functions, the empathetically dysfunctional individual looks like they are intentionally prejudiced. However, it is very likely that they see differences as a threat more often because the right hemisphere of their brain does not function to detect threats in an automatic sort of way as it does for most people. The empathetically dysfunctional person has likely adapted by using the left hemisphere for this function. For this process the left hemisphere is slower, more cumbersome and less efficient. It likely sounds alarms more often and is more central in the person's awareness.

While the right brain is dominant during the first couple of years of life, it is developing and loading up patterns of learning based upon the interactions within the relationship with the parent who provides the primary care. This early learning of parental facial cues appears to make some functions automatic. For those who develop to their fullest the systems of detecting danger become automatic and seems to take place intuitively. For those who receive a less intimate and less healthy parenting style, perceiving danger seems to be learned by the left hemisphere of the brain and is not automatic or intuitive. Detecting threat via the left brain hemisphere is crude and slower. It depends more upon crude signs or cues and responds with less speed or spontaneity. In addition the person probably feels more often threatened by unfamiliar life experiences.

If we look at the early experiences of those who are strongly prejudiced they have had more corporal punishment during childhood. We know that the punishment was more often administered to the child for self-expression or for disagreements with the parent; and the punishment was often unpredicted by the child. We have only recently been able to learn more about the processes within the brain and the activation of the different parts of the brain so that we can come closer to fully understanding acts of prejudice by those who are strongly prejudiced.

We already know that many people do not respond well to diversity training but now we seem to have even more reason to push for differential methods for those who are strongly prejudiced.

All this is not intended to assign or dismiss blame, but to understand those who cause so much pain within our world. These individuals don't seem able to identify with, or have empathy for, those who are different from themselves. They are even at times working in organized ways to protect themselves from those they feel threatened by, or those who are different than themselves.

One of the cardinal rules in psychotherapy is that people change most easily when they are not threatened. Those who feel threatened see fewer possibilities and become rigid and closed. To place empathetically dysfunctional individuals who are easily threatened and prone to overreact to perceived threat into a diversity training program invites a strong negative reaction. This backlash often results in increased prejudicial activities. There are better ways of managing their prejudicial behavior. I believe it is

increasingly clear that we need to treat prejudicial behavior in ways that respect the variations in processing by utilizing differential methods.

I am **not** suggesting that we go easy on those who are committing acts of discrimination. They should be held completely responsible. I am also **not** suggesting that they be ignored when they are behaving in prejudicial ways with comments or actions. I am asserting that their behavior is more effectively managed by methods other than diversity training.

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