

# Racism: The Psychology Behind It

Kate Amato

PA History, Period 5

Mr. Grybos

Shamokin Area School District

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During a time period where unity was most needed, William Penn was given the land of Pennsylvania and established Philadelphia, the city of Brotherly Love. Penn provided a tolerant safe haven for the individuals being persecuted for their beliefs in England. Penn, who was a quaker, believed everyone should live in harmony, regardless of their religious beliefs or race. Although these beliefs and ideals of peace were shared by many, racism was, and still is, very much alive. Racism is not to be associated with mental illness, however, it has been proven that there are mental factors.

Racism is a term that was first recorded to have been used by a man named Richard Henry Pratt in 1902<sup>1</sup>. Pratt is best known as the founder and longtime superintendent of the influential Carlisle Indian Industrial School. This school was a boarding school specifically designed for Native Americans and converting them to behave as though they are white. Pratt was also credited with the creation of the phrase: “Kill the Indian... save the man.” The history of mistreatment of Natives can be traced back even further. As the colony was being developed, settlers were moving further west. This meant that more and more natives were being wiped out by diseases brought over by the colonists, which then led to more land being available to the settlers. Sometimes they paid for land, but other times they stole it. After William Penn had died, the land of Pennsylvania was left to his sons. However, they did not share their father’s beliefs. They desperately wanted more land so they argued with the natives, specifically the Delaware tribe, for a deal. The Walking Purchase was agreed to allow the land a man could walk in a day and a half to the settlers. The Penn brothers, however, had cleared routes and trained runners to

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/01/05/260006815/the-ugly-fascinating-history-of-the-word-racism&sa=D&ust=1576170462486000&usg=AFQjCNEtUel-DatxoPKWxg0O-4iIS\\_99aA](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/01/05/260006815/the-ugly-fascinating-history-of-the-word-racism&sa=D&ust=1576170462486000&usg=AFQjCNEtUel-DatxoPKWxg0O-4iIS_99aA)

cover more land than the natives had expected. This caused the Delaware to lose around 1,200 square miles in land.<sup>2</sup> In reaction to their frauds, the tribe joined the French in the Ohio country and returned to battle against Pennsylvania in the French and Indian War. Later in 1758, the northern half of the purchase was given back to the Iroquois Confederacy. Four years later, the Delaware received £400, equivalent to \$20,154 in today's money.<sup>3</sup> Some may say what the colonists did to the natives was fair, however, it is also argued that the colonists took advantage of the natives.

For decades, psychologists and sociologists have been trying to understand the psychological components behind racism. Although racism is not a mental illness, it has been proven that there are mental factors. These may help us to understand the epistemology, the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion, of this manifestation of hate. For many, the goal is to eradicate this bigotry, but it is impossible to do so without properly understanding the concept and where it comes from. It is important to acknowledge that racism and prejudice are not synonymous concepts. Someone who is racist is prejudice, but someone who is prejudice is not racist. If someone is prejudice, they have an opinion towards someone that is not actually based on any facts or reasons. On the contrary, someone who is racist believes that people of different races are intrinsically different. There are many speculations behind extreme hate, however, there are some theories that are more logical than others.

One major theory is fear. The feeling of hatred towards something that is different comes from the primitive survival mechanism of avoiding danger and fearing anything that appears different. "When one race of persons unconsciously feels fear in response to a different race

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Walking-Purchase>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1758?amount=525>

group—fears that their own level of security, importance, or control is being threatened—they will develop these defensive thoughts and behaviors,” says Dr. Renee Carr<sup>4</sup>, “They will create exaggerated and negative beliefs about the other race to justify their actions in [an] attempt to secure their own safety and survival.” Some evidence to support the idea that fear is behind racism is the theory and belief that a “White Genocide” is happening. This term is coined by white supremacists for propaganda purposes for one of the most prominent modern white supremacist beliefs: that the white race is dying due to a growing non-white population.<sup>5</sup> White supremacists are claiming a Jewish conspiracy is controlling “forced assimilation”, and that they are to blame for trying to destroy the white race. This same thought is present in the most popular white supremacist slogan in the world: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” They strongly believe they must take action, even if it’s violent, or the white race will perish from Earth. In summary, fear is a natural instinct and survival mechanism, however, it is no excuse to act in hate or violence.

Another natural instinct, specifically pertaining to defense, is projection. Projection distracts us from our own flaws by allowing us to project them onto others. “The things people hate about others are things that they fear within themselves,” says Dr. Dana Harron, “The idea here is, ‘I’m not terrible, you are.’ The individual holding the hate believes on some deep level that these things may be true about themselves.” Applying this concept of psychology to race relation in the US, some scholars argue that much of the dominant white community alleviates itself of the shame about the history of slavery and the oppression of blacks by projecting certain

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/nurturing-self-compassion/201709/the-psychology-behind-racism>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/white-genocide>

self-perceptions onto the African-American community.<sup>6</sup> This is in order to preserve its own good self-image and to diffuse psychological tensions, such as our racial past and history of lynchings. Following the end of the era of lynchings, this country began incarcerating blacks disproportionately and executing them through capital punishment, often times with false convictions. “Slavery was never abolished,” says Bryan Stevenson, “It only evolved.” Scholars also argue that in order to turn a blind eye to its own past criminality, whites criminalize the black community. One critic puts it this way: “Through projection the white community seeks to transform its genocidal characteristics and intentions... to defend its own positive self-perception against knowledge of its own criminality.” Projections such as this distort one’s reality, and can cause someone to become isolated from the truth, thus they remain ignorant. Not only do these projections make the white community ignorant, but they also negatively affect the black community. If this is the case, African-Americans internalize these concepts, distorting their own perception and identity. The media reinforces stereotypical characterizations of blacks and other groups of people of color, and constantly fuels prejudice between dominant and minority groups.

As previously addressed, William Penn founded Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. Ironically, some of Penn’s ideals are still carried out today, but not in the way anyone could have predicted. Some members of extreme hate groups are motivated by the need for love and belonging. For those who have difficulty forming genuine social connections, identifying with extremists and hate groups, such as neo-Nazis, is a way to do so. Members start to have an “us-versus-them” mentality, thus making them feel closer, or even like they’re brothers, with their fellow group members. This is an extremely skewed view of what healthy social support

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-me-in-we/201708/projection-in-race-relations>

should look like, however the longing to identify with and be close to others is a healthy desire that's shared by everyone.

One might say there is no longer racism in the world because slavery has been abolished, but that is the farthest thing from the truth. One day in the summer, the camp leaders of the Creative Steps Day Care Camp had signed a contract with a swim club to have a private swim. Upon arriving at the club, the students, forty-six African-Americans and ten Hispanics, were harshly criticized by some of the club's members and say they could hear them using racial slurs. The swim club then refunded the money and told the campers not to return. It may be assumed that this incident happened in the south, but it happened at the Valley Swim Club in Huntingdon Valley, Montgomery County, a Philadelphia suburb. What's even more surprising is that this incident did not take place in 1809, or 1949, but just over ten years ago in 2009. Three months after it happened, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission found probable cause that the swim club's actions were motivated by racism.<sup>7</sup> The Swim Club argues that they simply could not allow all the children to swim because they did not have enough lifeguards, but the Daycare thought otherwise. A settlement agreement for \$1.1 million was to be split between the seventy-three African-Americans involved.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the case was not intended to be racist, but it has definitely highlighted some of the struggles faced by African-Americans.

The findings on the psychological links to racism are significant, but unfortunately they are not always exact. Research gets skewed because individuals from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies make up the bulk of samples in

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<sup>7</sup><http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/pa-heritage/african-americans-civil-rights-pennsylvania.html>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/national-international/settlement-in-swim-club-discrimination-case/1938088/>

psychological research. This is misleading because about eighty percent of research participants are from WEIRD societies, even though these people only make up about twelve percent of the world's population.<sup>9</sup> Upon reading facts such as this, one can get a feeling of hopelessness, almost like racism will never be abolished. Perhaps that is true to an extent, but there are things we can do not only as a nation, but as everyday citizens to make the world a better place. For example, one easy solution is to simply think before we act. To hate is human, but it is not necessary to project this hate. It also is not necessary to fear things that are different. Different does not mean something is dangerous, by all means it is always a possibility, but the color of someone's skin does not dictate whether they are a threat or not, their actions do, but of course it is much easier to believe fallacies than it is to understand oneself. The overall takeaway is that we will never eradicate racism, or even come close, if we cannot first fully understand it.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.apa.org/pi/about/newsletter/2015/12/racism-psychology>

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