

Psychohistory News

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Changing The World

Teaching Parenting in Schools

by Margaret Kind



At a time in psychiatry when more attention was given to psychodynamics in the diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric disorders (in contrast to the recent widespread use of Medications), a famous psychoanalyst, Dr. Leon Saul, wrote “Childrearing is fraught with ignorance, impatience, and hostility.” Notwithstanding the enormous progress in childrearing over the course of history, this description continues to ring true. But it also points to a powerful way of systematically

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Life-Affirming Strategies in the Management of Existential Anxiety

by Kristina Blake

Existential anxiety, a postulated unconscious and bio-evolutionary phenomenon, has the potential to either enrich or encumber human relationships (Becker, 1975; Kerr and Bowen, 1988). For the purpose of this research,

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Psychic Slavery and Trust in African American Intimate Relationships

by Sametta Hill

What experiences do African Americans report that may create trust or mistrust in romantic relationships? How does the psychic legacy of slavery continue to affect the issue of trust in contemporary African American

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Psychohistory and Politics

MEETING THE NEOLIBERAL CHALLENGE, p. 8

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LIFE AFFIRMING STRATEGIES

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existential anxiety encompasses both Murray Bowen’s and Ernest Becker’s constructs of anxiety. It is defined as the fundamental fear of nonbeing and is also known as death anxiety (e.g., Kierkegaard, 2004; Yalom, 2008). Both theorists examine the consequences of successful and unsuccessful anxiety management. Bridging these theories to understand existential anxiety at the individual, familial, and communal levels may provide interventions for effective anxiety management.

Theoretical Background: Becker’s Death Anxiety

Human beings may be the first species to self-exterminate (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2002). Paradoxically, when the quintessential human quest for creating meaning becomes actualized in the defense of meaning, the human potential for evil is also often actualized. It is this aspect of human creativity that might ultimately destroy us. Becker theorized that individuals manage existential anxiety by identifying with their culture, which they assume and hope will live on after they die. Self-esteem is gained when the individual lives up to or exceeds the ideals prescribed by their culture. With cultural identification thus serving the individual as a defense mechanism against death anxiety, those who are strongly identified with their culture are at risk for feeling significantly threatened by competing cultures. According to Sowell, competing cultures is the primary crucible within which human progress occurs (1999). But as he observes, along with Becker, it is likewise the context within which the most puerile and ultimately violent human activity occurs (exemplified by racism, colonialism, and even genocide). The defeat of competing cultures theoretically provides validation for the “right” culture. Validation of culture, which upholds self-esteem, hypothetically buffers against existential anxiety (Becker, 1975).

Theoretical Background: Bowen’s Self-Differentiation

Self-differentiation purportedly facilitates successful, that is, non-destructive anxiety management. Self-differentiation is the process of “managing anxiety and retaining one’s individuality while remaining in a

significant and effectual relationship with others,” (Hill, Hasty, and Moore, 2011, p. 44). Separating emotions from intellect; resolving conflicts with minimal reactivity; self-assertion, increased levels of empathetic understanding, and the toleration of autonomy and intimacy are the hallmarks of differentiation (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). When individuals aren’t sufficiently differentiated, anxiety is more likely to be managed by psychological fusion with others or through an emotional cutoff from others. In either case, empathy for others declines while coercion of others increases.

Individuation: The Bridging of Theories

“Authenticity refers to autonomous self-creation of who and what individuals are to become....individuals must transcend enculturation” to achieve authentication (Miars, 2002, p. 211). Managing death anxiety includes the essential task of individuating. “If you remain fixated to the source of support and protection, you never do find out what it means to stand on your own and edge reality for yourself,” (Becker, 1971, p. 161). The tolerance for ambiguity is necessary for individuation, since the ability to psychologically embrace both aloneness and togetherness is the essence of individuation (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). According to Becker, worldviews that promote the democratic concepts of tolerance, flexibility, education, and autonomy can empower societies and its members to viably achieve individuation and a sense of significance while minimizing harm to others (1975). Bowen’s advocacy for differentiation (Kerr and Bowen, 1988) is parallel to the process of promoting individuation on the communal (and hence cultural) level, and this process promotes autonomous thinking, feeling, and behaviors on the individual and familial level.

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that self-differentiation predicts the successful management of existential anxiety. This research will examine the relationship between the successful management of death anxiety and the process of differentiation within a sample of college graduates. If correlations are established, it can then be postulated that both theories of death anxiety and differentiation can be utilized in the search for integrative and non-violent solutions to the management of existential anxiety.

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PSYCHIC SLAVERY AND TRUST

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relationships? This research is important because it may help discover ways of dealing with mistrust and building stronger connectedness. The research will undertake a systematic study of the impact of historical trauma on contemporary African American culture and heterosexual relationships.

In 1712, Willie Lynch wrote a now infamous letter outlining what he claimed was a fool-proof method of indoctrinating and controlling black slaves:

“Let us make a slave. What do we need? First of all we need a black nigger man, a pregnant nigger woman and her baby nigger boy. Second, we will use the same basic principle that we use in breaking a horse, combined with some more sustaining factors. What we do with horses is that we break them from one form of life to another that is we reduce them from their natural state in nature. Whereas nature provides them with the natural capacity to take care of their offspring, we break that natural string of independence from them and thereby create a dependency status, so that we may be able to get from them useful production for our business and pleasure (Lynch, 1712).”

Lynch was convinced that his methods were highly efficient; in fact, he believed that even the Romans would have envied them. Individuals today are still intrigued by Lynch’s letter and continue to have conversations, write books, and create movies about his methods and the intergenerational trauma associated with them. As an African American, I am passionate about confronting this legacy and its continuing effects on romantic relationships between the descendants of slaves.

Whatever this study reveals will be beneficial due to its systemic approach to the issue. Most psychological research today examines problems of the African American family and relationships in terms of contemporary factors such as substance abuse, gang violence, the racial achievement gap in academic performance, low-income, absentee fathers, etc. Missing from this picture is the effect of intergenerational trauma on contemporary culture and relationships. My research will bring this psychohistorical perspective to bear on contemporary African American relationships. It will examine which lived experiences contribute to mistrust and which contribute to rebuilding trust.

The research will be conducted using a phenomenological approach. In describing this approach, Creswell (2012) writes, “Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (p 58).” This method can help the researcher understand how individuals make meaning of lived

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experience. These described meanings provide roadmaps for how to address individual and social problems (Creswell, 2012).

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TEACHING PARENTING

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preventing pathological aggression and many other psycho-social problems—education in the process of childrearing, or parenting, or as a famous family therapist Dr. Virginia Satir called it, “people-making.”

Inasmuch as large scale violence and other collective failures are rooted in individual psychology, parenting education meets a compelling need of our increasingly interdependent age. The world's population has grown nearly 300% in my lifetime, from about 2.5 billion people in the mid-1940's to over 7 billion today. We live in closer proximity—one-half of the world's population lives in cities today—and thus are less protected from each other by geography. Added to this, increasingly deadly weapons make populations more vulnerable to war, terrorism, and gun violence.

The urgent need for parenting education is evident from recent news events. Two stories in the past year stand out. A young man, about 20 years old, was thrilled to become a father of a handsome baby boy. One day, it was his turn to babysit while his wife bought groceries. He decided to play video games in the living room. The baby became fussy from a soiled diaper, so the father decided to place the baby in a bathtub for several minutes, to soak the baby's sensitive skin while he resumed playing the video game. The baby died from drowning! The father did not know that an infant eight months old can drown

in six inches of water. He was charged with negligent homicide. The despairing father and infant were victims of ignorance. The father had no malice toward his adored son. The best mode of prevention, I would argue, is education in the teenage years, wherein all high school students, and many soon-to-be young fathers, can be educated.

The second story is a positive one, but points in the same direction. A news story called “America’s Strong” (highly-admired citizens), featured a man who put his papers aside in an airplane to play with a two-and-a-half year old in the next seat, giving him careful, playful attention for several hours. Is respectful, caring attention so rare, that a fellow passenger giving a toddler attention is actually newsworthy? On the computer, this news item received 70,000 hits. Is it so rare for a two-and-a-half year old to be given sustained, respectful attention? We must bring to consciousness the need for attachment, empathy, and healthy love in relationships. Many people do not even know what healthy love is. In my parenting course, we list and discuss six components of healthy love.

I worked in New York City’s Metropolitan Hospital for about 25 years. I would treat numerous anxious and depressed patients, as well as psychotic patients. It was not unusual to witness a toddler who would accidentally drop a bottle and get in return an automatic slap from the mother. The mother or caretaker had no idea that she was both expressing and teaching automatic, thoughtless aggression to the two-year-old. The best way to bring this to social consciousness is to educate the parents and caretakers of such children *before* they become parents. High school is the ideal venue for such education because it is mandatory in the teen years, prior to parenthood.

Parenting education involves information one must have to prevent the terrible, violent acting out which we experience in our cities daily. This is said explicitly in a book entitled *Violence in America: A Public Health Approach*, by doctors working for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The authors state that one should learn about child development so that potential parents know what the needs, abilities, and limitations of children are at every stage of development. Additionally, they should learn about healthy childrearing behaviors, especially the difference between discipline and punishment.

In the 1980’s, I called the New York City Department of Education, and presented my wish to be involved in teaching a parenting education course. I was sent the rough draft of the Family Living and Sex Education curriculum, and wrote a 16-page critique including suggestions and comments. I was then invited to give a presentation on parenting education for the March of Dimes, wherein I met a high school teacher, Mr. Louis Howort, who also saw the serious need for a parenting education course. The need became apparent when he asked one of his health education classes, “What would you do if an infant threw his food off his high chair?” The majority of his students gave answers involving violence, such as “I’d give the baby one big smack.”

In the 1980’s, then-Comptroller Harrison Golden, who also saw the need for parenting education, set aside funds for an elective course in high-risk New York City high schools. Mr. Howort, and I as the consultant, wrote the curriculum—*Child Development, Parenting, and Parent Development*—which was taught in over 30 high schools. The students loved the course. I gave a presentation about it in May, 1991, at the American Psychiatric Association. Here is the abstract of my presentation:

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES: To understand how a curriculum for the general (non-pregnant, non-parent) high school student will contribute to the prevention of psychopathology in students and their families-to-be. The audience will learn about the curriculum’s content and implementation. . . .

Unit I deals with motivations for studying the curriculum, motivations for becoming a parent, the status of children in our society, and a short history of childrearing. Unit II is the study of child development and parent development, as well as special situations of parenthood. Unit III is the study of healthy childrearing skills, and the problems resulting from their absence, including lessons on emotional and physical child abuse. Unit IV includes stress management, problems of combining career and parenthood, and the changing fathering role.

Here are some student evaluations of the course:

- *I think this class is a wonderful thing. I even think it’s better than learning about math and science. This class is 100% worth it.*
- *I think this course is an extremely valuable course. It’s actually one of the few academic classes in this school that can actually change our bleak future to a better one.*

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QUESTION: If you found this course of value, discuss in what way (s).

- *This course is of great value because it teaches the future parents of this country how to be better parents. We aren't just born good parents, we need to learn how to be good parents.*
- *This class is very different. You get more out of this from any other classes. It had brought me a good understanding of life for me.*
- *This class kept me from dropping out.*
- *This class made me want a child much later in life.*
- *Raising children is a lot of work and I want to have the time that a child needs to grow up in a healthy environment.*
- *The course was valuable because now we'll know what to expect, and know what's wrong and what's right.*
- *I learned a lot about my body and diseases that I didn't know before this course. I learned that I should not do things or have things that I am not ready for.*
- *I found this course of value because being a good parent means a lot to a child. Today's children are the future and in order to have a bright future, we the teenagers have to learn to be a good and caring parent.*
- *I learned not to smack a baby.*
- *It should be a requirement at every school. It taught me so much about children, as well as myself and my parents.*
- *I think more people should have the opportunity to take a course like this, and avoid a lot of mistakes . . . mistakes that are a matter of life and death.*

In dealing with anger:

- *Using Language—expressing your feelings with language. This is a very important topic because it teaches the child to do the same. This is very important for good communication between parent and child throughout life.*
- *I learned that children aren't always capable of what's expected of them, and they are not necessarily trying to go against you. Most important, I learned that having children is a big deal!*

I saw an advertisement for UNICEF on television earlier this year stating, upon showing a picture of a family room, "A child was smacked here for dropping a glass of liquid. No one saw it. It was behind closed doors." There is great hope for the world, when the United Nations has an advertising campaign against the corporal punishment of children. It is thereby addressing the mental and emotional needs of children, not just the physical well-being component of raising children.

The parenting curriculum we created had an enduring impact on New York City public schools. Parts of it have been absorbed into the one-semester high school health education curriculum. But there is need for an entire course devoted to parenting, which the original curriculum filled. The subject of discipline versus punishment, for example, is given a quarter hour of discussion in the health education course. Is that really sufficient time for attitudinal change promoting a change in parent behavior? Not likely, but funding for the original program, including teacher training, was decreased and then discontinued. In most New York City high schools today, the original parenting course to my knowledge is no longer available as a self-contained elective.

At a time when mass shootings and other gun violence have taken on epidemic proportions in the United States, can we afford to continue neglecting such a promising social intervention? Can we afford another generation of adults who support war as a solution to international problems because they learned at an early age that might makes right? No, it is long overdue for every high school student in America to have a course about which they can say, "I learned not to smack a baby."

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NEOLIBERAL CHALLENGE

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emergence and re-emergence of the 'with us or against us' fallacy, with all that entailed in terms of playing the victim, blaming the victim, demonising one's enemies, refusing to acknowledge any grey area, refusing to accept any responsibility for conflict, and so on.

This is the point where my thinking began to focus. My relationship with the psychology student ended, so I had more time to focus on other things. I enrolled in a masters program not long after that, which gave me an opportunity to do sustained research into the background of a specific moral panic (the first Red Scare), and the way the illogic of 'with us or against us' manifested there as it has done so many times throughout history.(4) All the while I continued to look into moral disengagement studies and think about how that kind of social psychology might be deployed to enhance social history and establish a solid foundation for new approaches to both the humanities and the social sciences.

This became even truer as I remembered having studied *The Crucible* in high school English, and the fact that Miller wrote it in the process of critiquing the McCarthyist Red Scare of the 1950s by means of allegory. I realised around that time that the parallel Miller drew between the Red Scare and the Witch Hunts in Salem was based more or less on the mechanics of moral disengagement — though Miller of course had not had the benefit of having those studies to draw on to identify it as such. This seemed to me a huge boon to the study of psychohistory since the historical parallels upon which *The Crucible* turns are already accepted as legitimate; the task then would be to expand this analysis to many other manifestations of the parallel.

In essence this defines the purpose of the Institute for Social Psychohistory. It seems possible to be able to find similar parallels to the one established in *The Crucible* as far back as Rome; as often as not, when I discuss these ideas with friends and other people I meet they're able to think of others.(5) In addition to specific instances of moral disengagement in political history, the phenomenon of discrimination in general seems worthy of study — especially given all it involves in terms of the socially vulnerable being scapegoated for

the insanity and injustice produced in the process of upholding social and economic privilege.

Einstein once defined madness as making the same mistake twice and expecting a different outcome; if humanity continues to allow our history to repeat — especially where the re-emergence of 'with us or against us' logic is concerned — then madness would seem to be part of the present state of things, or part of our condition at this point in our evolution. I believe we can change this through research, education and activism, and in support of that end, have begun publishing a quarterly newsletter, *Intersection*. If you want to morally engage with history and make it something that serves individuals rather than the other way, I warmly invite you to join the Institute for Social Psychohistory.

NOTES

(1) For the sake of reference, *On the Waterfront* by Elia Kazan who 'named names' and was allowed to return to work, and *Crossfire* by Edward Dmytryk, who refused to betray his friends and submit to the inquisition in Hollywood, and was duly blacklisted; no prizes for guessing which film came out on top. What do you think it means that Kazan had Marlon Brando's character say, "I could have been a contender, but I didn't betray my friends!"?

(2) See <https://archive.org/details/TheIrrationalInPolitics>

(3) I prefer the term "Terror Scare" to the ideologically loaded term "War on Terror." In reality, it was a Terror Scare, a moral panic based on the fear of terrorism and the manipulation of that fear by political elites.

(4) My masters thesis is available here: <http://repository.unimelb.edu.au/10187/8812>

(5) For one example from Rome, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/30/opinion/30harris.html>

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Dispatch from Australia**MEETING THE NEOLIBERAL CHALLENGE****by Ben Debney****Director, Institute for Social Psychohistory**

As stated on our website at www.isph.org.au, the Institute for Social Psychohistory is a research institute I registered last year in Melbourne, Australia, for the purpose of promoting research into and advocating on behalf of the field of social psychohistory. Our goal is to enhance the study of history, by focusing on the intersection point between history and psychology, with a view to overcoming the marked tendency to repeat it.

I personally have come to psychohistory from a humanities background; I have an MA in history from the University of Melbourne and am currently a doctoral candidate at Deakin University (though in politics, as there is no psychohistory department anywhere in Australia as far as I'm aware). I had been doing a mixture of formal and independent research as an antidote to the intolerably authoritarian and oppressive tenor of the decade after 2001, and began noticing bizarre parallels in history in the course of doing so (not least of which being the CIA-backed overthrow of Salvador Allende on 11 September 1973). As a result, I only found myself asking ever more questions about the operating assumptions of neoliberalism being rammed down our throats at the time.

Around 2005 I wrote an honours thesis comparing films produced by two different directors called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities during the McCarthyist Red Scare of the 1950s.(1) This was a product of and in turn further stimulated my increasing interest in moral panics as a specific manifestation of what Maurice Brinton once referred to as the 'Irrational in Politics,' which in turn was, I guess, a general reaction to the political conditions of the time.(2) I was already interested the role of the irrational aspects of human nature, especially in terms of why people seemed to defend political and economic hierarchies even as the latter oppressed and exploited

them; as the moral panic of the Terror Scare(3) raged, it became more and more clear to me that some kind of relationship existed between 'the Irrational in Politics,' what Wilhelm Reich once described as the 'mass psychology of fascism,' and the 'with us or against us' paradigm into which public discourse had resoundingly degenerated.

Over the course of the next few years I read widely on the above topics, and had a breakthrough when I began dating someone who was doing a psychology course online. Part of her course involved looking at the work of Albert Bandura on moral disengagement, which she described to me one day, and I had a bit of a 'Eureka' moment when I began to look into it — principally because it provided a meaningful (and, even more importantly, demonstrable) way to connect otherwise unrelated episodes and documents such as the political assassination of Sergei Kirov in the Soviet Union, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the use of religious terror against women during the Middle Ages, and the NSC-68 document that brought us the domino theory mythology that characterized the Cold War.

Naturally, to make any direct comparison between any of these episodes would be indicative of the kind of emotionally potent oversimplification one would expect from a not-very astute teenage radical; one might as well call George W. Bush a Nazi. While a direct comparison between Bush and Hitler seems to suggest more a visceral reaction to authoritarianism and does not really aid any kind of cool-headed understanding of either, there are by the same token clear parallels between the two — arguably, and most significantly, on the terrain of moral disengagement, especially where this applied to such things as the doctrine of pre-emption. It seemed to me to do so most significantly where history tends to repeat with the

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