



**Why to talk about emotions, when counteracting racism?
S.T.A.R project**

By Silvia Volpi and Stefania Zamparelli
REDU - Rete educare ai diritti umani

Why we talk about emotions and racism?

Before analysing the question and trying to provide one or more points of view, we would like to clear out some recurrent terms in this STAR article, to create a common scenario.

Some definitions to start...

RACE

Oxford dictionary defines race as “each of the major divisions of humankind, having distinct physical characteristics”

Furthermore, as affirmed by Janine Young Kim in “Racial emotions and the feeling of equality”, there is a broad consensus that race is a social construct. This implies that race is not purely cognitive but also imbued with emotional meaning.

RACISM

Racism is a belief or doctrine that states that distinctive human characteristics, abilities, etc are determined by race and that there are superior and inferior races. It can be any attitude, action, institutional structure or social policy. There are different theories that question the concept of race itself, therefore the concept of racism can be extended to cultural characteristics of the person (like wearing a hijab), whenever they are coming from the belief that one group is superior to other.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Racial discrimination happens when any distinction, conduct or action, whether intentional or unintentional, is based on a person's race and has the effect of imposing burdens that are not imposed upon others.

INVISIBLE RACISM

Invisible racism is a form of racism. When we talk about invisible racism, we refer to the harmful behaviours which are considered normal and accepted by the society. The line that draws between what we all know by racism and what the invisible racism is, is a line of tolerance. Some examples what invisible racism could be are the telling racist jokes or avoiding the contact with people coming from different ethnic group, by simply going in the other side of the street or deciding not to date a person with is not white. Those behaviours, although not considered by many harmful, lead to exclusion, anxiety, and influences the personal wellbeing.

EMOTIONS

According to the book "Discovering Psychology," "An emotion is a complex psychological state that involves three distinct components: a subjective experience, a physiological response, and a behavioural or expressive response."

In addition to understanding exactly what emotions are, researchers have also tried to identify and classify the different types of emotions. In 1972, psychologist Paul Eckman suggested that there are six basic emotions that are universal throughout human cultures: fear, disgust, anger, surprise, happiness, and sadness.

In 1999, he expanded this list to include several other basic emotions, including embarrassment, excitement, contempt, shame, pride, satisfaction, and amusement.

During the 1980s, Robert Plutchik introduced another emotion classification system known as the "wheel of emotions." This model demonstrated how different emotions can be combined or mixed together, much the way an artist mixes primary colors to create other colors. Plutchik suggested that there are 8 primary emotional dimensions: happiness vs. sadness, anger vs. fear, trust vs. disgust, and surprise vs. anticipation. These emotions can then be combined in a variety of ways. For example, happiness and anticipation might combine to create excitement.

Martha C. Nussbaum define emotions as not just the fuel that powers the psychological mechanism of a reasoning creature, but as parts, highly complex and messy parts, of this creature's reasoning itself.

RACIAL EMOTIONS

Racial emotions often begin to be acquired in childhood as kids begin to acquire racial knowledge and experience racial power. But racial emotions are not only feelings generated within an individual, they are also social. As, when they emerge, they permeate spaces and people around them.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others.

Why human beings are racist?

But why do we need to feel superior towards the different? In other words, why do we tend to racism? Different often is equal to unknown, and the unknown, or the not well-known, is scary, generating a battery of emotions and negative feelings, such as anxiety and the sense of insecurity due to the questioning of one's identity. In addition, the need for membership in a group can lead to the identification of the different as outsider, activating a mechanism that is used to consolidate own membership and own role in the group.

Nevertheless, the key word is fear: reactions to fear can be the escape from the threat, but also the attack, which is the file rouge of racial discrimination.

How coping strategies can support us?

Discrimination, especially when acted out on daily base, has consequences on the physical and mental health of those who receive it, ranging from anxiety, depression, traumatic reactions, to real psychosis that can lead to dangerous behaviours for themselves and others.

Fortunately, it is not said that those who undergo discriminatory or aggressive behaviour then develop a psychiatric illness. The difference lies in the coping strategies that are put into the field, that is, the way in which the person faces the stress factors.

The term "coping", introduced in Psychology in 1966 by the American scientist Richard Lazarus, can be translated as "active management" or "effective response", "ability to solve problems", and indicates the set of strategies put in place to cope with a stressful situation. The concept relates to both what a person does to address a stressful situation and how a person adapt emotionally to the situation.

What's neuroscience's point of view?

Through neuroscience, we have today reached a degree of awareness about the functioning of our brain so that we can tackle the problem of racism very closely. And we can even imagine how to intervene to mitigate as much as possible what negative can arouse "the different" from us. Elizabeth Phelps, neuroscientist of New York University and protagonist of the Conference the Neuroscience of racism, says: "There are two ways in which we manifest our attitudes towards those who are different from us. An explicit, the one we openly declare, and the so-called implicit, where we unconsciously rely on stereotypes even though we believe to behave in a fair way." The researcher argues that the ways in which we perceive some of the differences related to ethnicity or belonging to different groups are implicit and very often out of our control.

Phelps has shown that "there are brain circuits directly involved in approaches towards people who are part of a different ethnic group and the study of these circuits could prove to be a new and extremely fertile field of investigation for the understanding of social dynamics. "

The circuits to which Phelps refers are those connected to the amygdala, a part of the brain known to be involved in the management of emotions and of fear.

Neuroscience can therefore play a decisive role in revealing the foundations of racist attitudes and behaviours. But not only that, following this track we could even imagine using them to drive these circuits, for example by trying to placate the negative emotions aroused by ethnic diversity.

A neuroscience study conducted in the United States during 2012 recorded evidences that give an important contribution to a better understanding of the way in which we pose ourselves and relate to others.

The study, conducted by Jennifer T. Kubota, Mahzarin R. Banaji and Elizabeth A. Phelps, researchers at Harvard and New York University, showed how even for a fraction of a second the brains of all of us at the sight of the "stranger" live a reaction of Distrust.

During the experiment to participants of light skin is shown the image of a black man. In each of them the amygdala, a subcortical brain area involved in the elaboration of negative emotions, is activated as if it were perceiving a source of fear or disgust.

This happens at a level of our unconscious mind. At this point, however, always remaining in the order of an infinitesimal fraction of a second, it also activates a different area of the cerebral cortex that records the presence of a conflict and tries to neutralize the initial negative emotion. This area is the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, an area that is part of the nervous system structures that have evolved more recently, while the amygdala is part of a previous evolutionary stage. This type of bark can have the upper hand on the initial negative emotional reaction bringing the brain to reason, that is, pushing the person to attitudes and judgments more balanced and egalitarian and reducing the possible emergence of prejudice and racism, despite the initial sense of threat.

What this study shows is a dialectic in our minds between negative emotional reactions and judgment and thoughtful decision-making.

More recently, in the course of human evolution, the cerebral cortex has developed, a more complex structure that has the role of regulating emotions and is sensitive to education, new information and reasoning. Thanks to this area of the nervous system we are agents able to evaluate rationally, to express decisions and reasoning, but nevertheless, instinct reactions can always be in place that make us accustomed to distinguishing ourselves from others and that can Negatively affect our preferences, the way we relate to others.

It will always be changing during our life the relationship between instinctive negative emotions and weighted reflections, will be the kind of moment we are living to make us choose whether to abandon ourselves to emotional instinct or to give us a reflection.

It would then be necessary to reflect on the fact that our rational society does not take enough account of the pervasive emotions and role that they, for better or for worse, possess in guiding our lives and in influencing our rational choices. We are little trained to recognize our emotions, to talk about it, to express them. In other words, a part of our intelligence, the so-called emotional intelligence, is often sacrificed.

Why we talk about emotions and racism?

It would be important instead for the general well-being of society and to counteract the growing phenomenon of racism and invisible racism, that the culture of an emotional education was formed, to make people able to identify which are the emotions and which is their function, which of them are dangerous for us and for the others, how to recognise them, how to evaluate them and how to manage them.