Pragmatism, Psychoanalysis, and Prejudice: Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s The Anatomy of Prejudices

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The word “prejudices” in the title of this richly provocative book concisely captures its main claim: that prejudices (in the plural), such as sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism, are not the same thing. Young-Bruehl does not deny that they have commonalities (1996, 4), but she argues that they have been misunderstood by the majority of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and others who have assumed that prejudices can be unified into a single, root form of prejudice. This misunderstanding has prevented people from seeing how different prejudices fulfill different psychosocial desires and needs. This, in turn, has hindered attempts to eliminate prejudice, which require something other than a one-size-fits-all approach to be effective. As Young-Bruehl explains, “[a]ppreciating the differences allows the diagnoses—the differential diagnoses—without which there can be no cures” (5).

The Anatomy of Prejudices is divided into three parts. The first part, “A Critique of Pure Overgeneralization,” provides a history of the treatment of prejudices in the social sciences in the United States, chiefly sociology and social psychology. The second part, “Starting Again:
Prejudices—in the Plural,” presents Young-Bruehl’s typology of prejudices, focusing on anti-Semitism, racism, and sexism (and addressing, to a lesser degree, homophobia). Finally, the third part, “Current Ideologies: The Victims Speak,” explores the effects of different prejudices on its victims, which Young-Bruehl claims have been either homogenized or ignored in most social scientific studies.

Young-Bruehl’s typology makes a crucial distinction between ethnocentrism and what she calls “ideologies of desire.” In her view, both are prejudices, but ethnocentrism is a group-sustaining, ready-made approach in which one values one’s own group (however it is defined) over that of others, while ideologies of desire are tailor-made to create new groups on the basis of satisfying individuals’ desires (1996, 167, 185, 562 n.17). Young-Bruehl implies that ethnocentrism tends to operate on a more conscious, or potentially conscious, level than do ideologies of desire, which involve “layers of feeling . . . that are deeper” than those of ethnocentrism (97). Perhaps because of its relative existence on the surface, ethnocentrism is more rationally grounded in reality than ideologies of desire, according to Young-Bruehl. It “is expressed in xenophobic assertions that have at least a tangential relation to the characteristics of real groups or subgroups, especially to those living separately” (77). Ideologies of desire, on the other hand, “are expressed in ‘chimerias,’ or fantasies that have irrational reference to [supposedly] real, observable, or verifiable characteristics of a group or marks of difference” (77).

In Young-Bruehl’s view, the mistake made by most theories of prejudice is to take ethnocentrism as the universal model of all prejudice, when most modern forms of prejudice are ideologies of desire instead. I am not sure that a sharp distinction between the two models of prejudice will hold—from a pragmatist perspective, neither the difference between real and fantastic characteristics that produce rational and irrational references to them, nor the distinction between consciousness and the unconscious, can be considered absolute (on the latter point, see Colapietro 1995, 489). Even so, Young-Bruehl rightly insists that theorists explicitly recognize the role that unconscious desires and fantasies play in prejudice, rather than elide that role by treating all prejudice as a function of interchangeable in-groups and indistinguishable out-groups (1996, 17).

Young-Bruehl makes clear that the reason it is important not to collapse ideologies of desire into ethnocentrism is not a mania for proper categorization. Rather, it is important because different strategies for eliminating prejudices will be appropriate depending on whether the prejudice in question is ethnocentric or not. Assuming that all prejudices are ethnocentric has led to the view that prejudice is borne out of unfamiliarity with and thus contempt for different groups, which an ethnocentric “us-versus-them” model tends to produce. On this mistaken assumption, integration of segregated groups (allegedly) will eliminate any kind of prejudice since increasing familiarity among groups (allegedly) will eliminate fear of and produce respect for the other. Although it may be helpful in the case of ethnocentric prejudice, however, this solution does not speak to “com-
plexes of feelings and images of the ‘Other’ that are unconscious, as resistant to familiarity as the unconscious is to reasoned arguments or progressive social visions” (Young-Bruehl 1996, 96). These complexes are indicative of ideologies of desire, which demand different tactics and strategies for their elimination.

Focusing on ideologies of desire, The Anatomy of Prejudices distinguishes obsessional, hysterical, and narcissistic prejudices. For Young-Bruehl, anti-Semitism is the quintessential obsessional prejudice, in which the prejudiced person believes that the object of prejudice—Jews—is infiltrating society with a polluting influence and for that reason must be completely eliminated. In contrast, hysterical prejudice, exemplified by the white anti-black racist, needs the continued existence of the object of prejudice because it—black people—is the site for all the racist’s sinful, sexual, “dark” desires, which the racist both disavows and craves. Sexism is presented by Young-Bruehl as the primary example of narcissistic prejudice. (Male) sexists see everyone in the world as fundamentally like themselves and thus deny female difference. Even when they focus on female distinctiveness, either to openly denigrate it or to romanticize it, sexists do so on a model in which masculinity and maleness are the norm from which women and femaleness would not differ in an ideal world. According to Young-Bruehl, homophobia is the best example of an all-purpose prejudice. While anti-Semitism, racism, and sexism can all combine with and shade into another, homosexuals are the one target that can provide psychic compensation equally well for obsessional, hysterical, and narcissistic people (1996, 240).

Let me step away at this point from the specifics of Young-Bruehl’s typology to address in more detail her overall approach in it. As the language of hysteria, obsession, and narcissism suggests, The Anatomy of Prejudices is rooted in psychoanalytic theory. Unlike some versions of psychoanalytic theory, Young-Bruehl’s is explicitly and carefully joined with social theory (1996, 5). This enables her to examine the social and political effects of individuals’ psychic lives and the social and political conditions that promote different prejudices, all of which often are neglected by psychoanalysis and other individual-level theories. It also allows her ask important questions about the psychic roots of prejudice that social theory tends to ignore. Young-Bruehl criticizes cognitive science, which currently dominates the social sciences, for its exclusive focus on cognitive contents and processes. In the case of prejudice, this focus means studying the extent to which people hold racist, sexist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic stereotypes, the ways in which they overgeneralize about particular individuals or groups, and the prejudicial associations or prejudgments they make. In short, cognitive science helps one understand that people are prejudiced in various ways, but it does not ask why they are racist, sexist, and so on. In both Young-Bruehl’s opinion (12) and my own, it is this important question about motivation, particularly the unconscious sources of motivation, that a psychoanalytic approach brings to studies of prejudice.

For Young-Bruehl, desire is the source of prejudice (1996, 167). In different ways and for different reasons, people often feel threatened by their emotions,
impulses, and wishes, and they devise—often unconsciously—different ways of defending themselves against these threats (209). The various neuroses explored by Freud are just some of these defense mechanisms; in particular, they are ones that tend to involve the individual psyche alone. Prejudices, on the other hand, are mechanisms of defense that are primarily social in nature: “they are the reflections in attitudes toward groups (and individuals as members of groups) of characteristic modes (usually complex modes) of defense” (209). Again, it is important to remember that in Young-Bruehl’s account, social, economic, and political circumstances necessarily impact the forms that prejudicial defense mechanisms will take, but that these circumstances alone cannot explain why people develop particular prejudices or, in other words, how prejudices satisfy particular needs and desires.

This latter point deserves special attention from pragmatists and pragmatist feminists. Young-Bruehl argues that to neglect the role of unconscious motivations and desires in prejudice is to imply that prejudice is solely a matter of faulty generalization that has resulted from erroneous education (1996, 12). On this model, prejudiced people “accept stereotypes from their surroundings and then conform to them, behave in conformity to them, often without realizing or acknowledging what they are doing” (73). All that (allegedly) is needed to eliminate prejudice, therefore, is heightened awareness through improved education and correction of misinformation about other groups of people. Prejudice thus is (mis)conceived relatively superficially as a matter of social learning resulting from adaptation (rather than unconscious motivation) that can be unlearned through the adjustment of educational and other social institutions (12, 73, 90).

Young-Bruehl’s criticism of social theory can plausibly be interpreted as extending to pragmatism, particularly to Dewey’s emphasis on education and environment as the main factors in social and individual transformation. The accuracy of that interpretation is a complex issue that goes to the heart of the tensions between pragmatism and psychoanalysis. In that Young-Bruehl’s target is behaviorism, Dewey would share, rather than be the object of, her concerns. Pragmatists and pragmatist feminists could agree with Young-Bruehl that it is problematic to consider “an individual as no more than a function of or player in a group, as only a tablet on which social order is stamped” (1996, 340). What the model of social imprinting leaves out, in the language of pragmatist feminism, is the other half of the transactional circle between society and individual—the half in which the individual can and does impact the world around her through the distinctive ways that she responds to and engages it. It thus is not the case for pragmatism or pragmatist feminism that the individual is a passive, blank tablet pressed upon by society. The individual actively contributes to her own constitution through her contributions to the very world that helps make her up.

From Young-Bruehl’s perspective, however, this is not what behaviorism—and presumably pragmatism—leaves out. Young-Bruehl likely would claim that a pragmatist feminist account of the transactional relationship between society and individual continues to omit what is of utmost import to psychoanalysis: the
unconscious understood as something other than a societal fund of meanings embodied in the individual psyche. I emphasize this qualification of the unconscious because both pragmatism and psychoanalysis recognize the importance of the nonconscious, or unconscious, aspects of human life. What they disagree on, however, is the definition of the unconscious. From a psychoanalytic perspective, treating “nonconscious” and “unconscious” as synonyms, as I just did, erases the distinctiveness of the unconscious, which cannot (or at least, not directly) be brought to consciousness. Pragmatists, for their part, sometimes avoid the term “unconscious” altogether, preferring “non-conscious” or “subconscious” instead, precisely because of the distinctive meaning given to “unconscious” by psychoanalysis. In his rich treatment of non-conscious life via the concept of habit, for example, Dewey avoided the term “unconscious” because he thought that psychoanalysis “retain[s] the notion of a separate psychic realm or force” (1998b, 61). For him, “the existence and operation of the ‘unconscious’”’ is found in “the dependence of mind upon habit and habit upon social conditions” (61; see also 1998b, 228). Dewey thus nonpsychoanalytically defines the unconscious as “complexes due to contacts and conflicts with others . . . [that is, as] the social censor” (1988b, 61).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, by describing the unconscious as dependent upon social conditions, Dewey has effectively dismissed it by equating it with the preconscious, which comprises what is not currently conscious but capable of being brought to conscious attention. Dewey’s description of subconscious mind as “the whole system of [societal] meanings as they are embodied in the workings of organic life” (1988a, 230) would probably sound to Young-Bruehl like the mistake made by sociology in which “[i]ntrapsychic processes become products of social imprinting, as though the unconscious were the society at large beamed into an individual’s brain” (Young-Bruehl 1996, 340). For Young-Bruehl, what is significant about the unconscious (understood psychoanalytically) is precisely that it is the site of psychic processes that originally involve desires born out of the organization of instinctual drives (anal, oral, and genital) and the resolution of conflict between the structures of the psyche (ego, id, and superego). That is, for Young-Bruehl, the unconscious does not, at its origin, concern the social world—although it can and does later intersect with societal meanings and concerns, as it does in the formation of prejudices. Such intersection is not, however, transactional. It does not bring psyche and society into a dynamic relationship in which the two mutually constitute each other from the start.

Herein lies both the main disagreement between pragmatism and psychoanalysis and the source of my reservations about Young-Bruehl’s book. Freud’s treatment of the unconscious as having a fundamental core that is uninfluenced by the social world around it produces an account of the unconscious that is narrowly focused on the sexual dynamics of the nuclear family. In the case of prejudice, this means that, following Freud, Young-Bruehl tends to present racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism as epiphenomena of Oedipal conflicts and libidinal drives. She argues that racists, for example,
recreate their family configurations in social terms, with the victims of their prejudices playing the roles of the ones who got more erotic goods generally or substituting for the mother (for men and women) or the father (for women), who was the source, the font, of erotic goods. They feel deprived of preoedipal and oedipal satisfactions, and they construct [racist] ways to get these that circumvent or avoid violating taboos upon such satisfactions. (1996, 368; see also 270)

Similarly, in Young-Bruehl’s account, a white woman’s desirous fear of all black men as (perceived) rapists is explained as the product of her forbidden desire for her father: “[i]n the purest racist variant on this fantasy [of rape by a substitute figure for the father], the attacker is a man who is quite different in appearance from the father, so the father’s identity is protected and the incestuous nature of the fantasy concealed” (369). In the case of anti-Semitism, hatred of Jews because of their (alleged) ability to accumulate wealth at others’ expense is seen as the product of equating the loss of money with the loss of one’s feces (354). And men are said to be more likely than women to act violently on their prejudices because of “their tendency to externalize affects, a tendency that is probably reinforced by the externality of their genitals” (226). In places such as these, the word “anatomy” in the book’s title becomes problematic and seems to capture Young-Bruehl’s thesis just as much as, if not more than, the word “prejudices.”

From a pragmatist perspective, an individual’s unconscious is ill understood as having an Oedipal core that is unaffected by nonfamilial social issues at a deep level. This perspective need not and should not be equated with crude social imprinting. Rather, it is a claim borne out of pragmatism’s emphasis on continuity that envisions the unconscious as dynamically constituted in and through its transactions with the social, political, and physical world around it. In Vincent Colapietro’s (1995, 499) words, “the unconscious so conceived is as much (if not more) between ourselves and our world as it is behind or beneath the conscious regions of our own psychic life.” This view is similar to the one put forward by Franz Fanon, who worried that the result of psychoanalysis’s neglect of the social environment’s impact upon the individual is the psychological equivalent of claiming that varicose veins are a result solely of the constitutional weakness of a person’s vein walls, rather than also of working conditions in which a person must stand on her feet for hours a day ([1952] 1967, 85; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1983). For Fanon, as for pragmatism and pragmatist feminism, when attempting to understand prejudice, “we are driven from the individual back to the social structure. If there is a taint, it lies [primarily] not in the ‘soul’ of the individual but rather in that of the environment” ([1952] 1967, 213). This is not to claim that the individual and the family play no role in racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism, but that these prejudices are not the results of Oedipal desires that (allegedly) are initially formed in sharp distinction from the nonfamilial social world.
By focusing on the individual at the expense of the environment, psychoanalysis tends to make the elimination of prejudice seem extremely unlikely, if not downright impossible. As Young-Bruehl explains, an ideology of desire is “a belief system that virtually forbids its holder self-consciousness” (1996, 97), and without the ability to raise unconscious motivations and desires to (at least, temporary) conscious attention, changing them seems out of the question. It is telling, as Young-Bruehl admits, that African American social scientists largely have avoided neo-Freudian views of racism because they “impl[y] that racism is too deeply embedded for social engineering to reach beyond its manifestations, to reach its roots” (488). While Young-Bruehl is right to warn against Pollyannaish approaches to social and individual transformation that do not appreciate the difficulty of making significant change and thus are largely ineffective, her caution veers dangerously close at points to claiming that the question of meaningful modification of the psyche and society is moot. While I cannot here fully engage the issue of how and to what extent the unconscious can be altered, I will point in a pragmatist spirit to the self-fulfilling effects of the view that there is a fundamental core of the unconscious that is incapable of change. I do not think we can know with certainty how open to modification the unconscious is, especially not in the abstract and apart from particular issues and situations. To make an a priori declaration to that effect is to problematically close off any existing possibilities for effecting change. In my view, we should proceed heuristically as if sometimes and in some regards the unconscious can be altered, fallibilistically aware all the while that the unconscious is likely generating obstacles that will thwart our attempts. This approach has the advantage of being neither naïve optimism (an inaccurate charge sometimes made against pragmatism) nor reactive do-nothingism (to which psychoanalysis sometimes can lead), but rather something like Foucauldian pessimistic activism, in which an improved situation is pursued even though one knows that many—but not necessarily all—of one’s ameliorative efforts will fail.

Surveying past social, economic, and psychological theories produced in both the United States and Europe, Young-Bruehl claims, “no coherent mediating notion of personality or character in which psychology and sociology could meet has ever appeared” (1996, 22). I think, however, that Dewey’s pragmatism provides a powerful example of just such a combination. Young-Bruehl’s treatment of prejudice nevertheless offers something that Dewey’s pragmatism and pragmatist feminism tend to but should not neglect: an in-depth exploration of the role that psychic phenomena such as desire, repression, imagination, and fantasy play in racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and other prejudices. The (alleged) asocial nature of these phenomena should not be a reason for pragmatists and pragmatist feminists to avoid consideration of them because the phenomena do not have to be considered as sealed off from the social world. Precisely what is needed so that nonhermetic conceptions of psychic phenomena might exist is a thoughtful and detailed formulation of them on pragmatist and pragmatist feminist terms.
W. E. B. Du Bois’s later work can be seen as offering initial pragmatist direction for this task. After briefly mentioning Freud, Du Bois comments on the changes in his thought from the late 1800s to 1940: “I now began to realize that in the fight against race prejudice, we were not facing simply the rational, conscious determination of white folk to oppress us; we were facing age-long complexes sunk now largely to unconscious habit and irrational urge” ([1940] 1984, 296). The initial direction provided by Du Bois is sketchy, however, and thus pragmatists and pragmatist feminists will need to look elsewhere for additional guidance. By implicitly criticizing pragmatism and pragmatist feminism for their neglect of the role that the unconscious plays in prejudice, Young-Bruehl’s work can be read as providing such help. While I and other pragmatist feminists might not always agree with the psychoanalytic answers Young-Bruehl gives to the question of why people are prejudiced, *The Anatomy of Prejudices* should be highly valued by us because it both asks the question and demands that we wrestle with it as well.

Notes
1. As Philip Rieff (1979, 33) remarks in the context of an explicit comparison of Dewey and Freud, “Freud himself—through his mythology of the instincts—kept some part of character safe from society, restoring to the idea of human nature a hard core, not easily warped or reshaped by social experience.”
2. As I think it does in the psychoanalytic approach to prejudice found in Jon Mills and Janusz A. Polanowski’s *The Ontology of Prejudice*: “Every person by nature is racist,” and “[t]he belief that humanity is capable of purging itself of prejudice is not only philosophically incredulous but also psychologically infantile” (1997, 11, 1).

Works Cited