

Celia Brickman: Aboriginal Populations in the Mind: Race and Primitivity in Psychoanalysis

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Celia Brickman opens “Aboriginal Populations in the Mind” by posing the following question: “How does psychoanalysis configure racial difference, and what do we learn when we consider this questions from a postcolonial perspective?” (Brickman, 2003, p. 1). My own experience as a social work student, instructor and practitioner has been that many of us either never ask this question or respond to it with a definitive “poorly!” On the one hand, Freud and the entire psychoanalytic project is often dismissed as irrelevant at best and oppressive at worst with regard to its acknowledgement and treatment of the social fact of racial difference, leading some clinicians to abandon it in favor of social theories that address such issues. On the other hand, some clinicians whose practice is helped by Freud’s theory sometimes do not focus as much on the fact of racial difference, concentrating instead on the symbolic content of the intrapsychic life of their patients. At a recent lecture on analytic technique, a well-regarded and clearly competent psychoanalyst stated, “I am interested in the workings of the unconscious. Anything that takes place outside of that is none of my business.” As social workers, we have made it our business to be concerned about both the unconscious lives of our patients as well as the external worlds with which they contend. Brickman’s question regarding psychoanalysis’ configuring of racial differences, and the exploration of the answer that follows in this book, gives a glimmer of hope at a rapprochement between the two.

The book is composed of five chapters that as a whole comprise a “sustained argument in which each chapter builds on the one(s) preceding it” (Brickman, 2003, p. 11).

Approaching psychoanalysis as a “critical discourse (that is) eminently suited to analyze and deconstruct racist and colonialist thought” (Brickman, 2003, p. 8), the author describes the book as

[A]n investigation of psychoanalysis from the perspective of the question of racial difference, [one that] is concerned with the implications of the relationship of the foundational texts of psychoanalysis to the colonial construction of race as a system of unequal power and privilege indexed to skin color (Brickman, 2003, p. 4).

Brickman’s simultaneous deconstruction and utilization of psychoanalysis is a major contribution to social workers who are interested in retaining Freud’s ideas while reworking the sociocultural biases that underpin them. Although the language that she employs is academic and perhaps obfuscating at times, Brickman’s central ideas are so relevant to social work that they remain accessible nonetheless.

In the *Introduction*, Brickman traces the impetus for her own thinking on the subject. She began by wondering if and how “the clinical usage of the term *primitive* (was) connected with the racist category which, for centuries, had classified non-white, non-western world as eligible for colonization and domination by the west” (Brickman, 2003, p. 2). Noting that in anthropology the term “primitive” had been banished from discursive use as an artifact of colonialism, Brickman became curious about what its insidiousness throughout psychoanalytic theory and practice indicated. She surmises:

That the term *primitive* functioned for Freud both as a psychological category and as an anthropological one points to its location at the intersection of numerous

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colonial signifiers that converged, at the turn of the last century, on the topic of race. (Brickman, 2003, p. 4).

In Chapter 1, *The Figure of the Primitive: A Brief Genealogy*, Brickman explores how “...the figure of the primitive in western thought [and] Europe’s cultural others came to be understood as representative of the European past and came to furnish the basis for theories of ‘the primitive mind’” (2003, p. 11).

Reviewing the semantic history of the term “primitive,” she demonstrates how

...the word *primitive* is not simply a neutral, scientific designation but, together with its opposite, *civilized*, embodies the history of Euro-American civilization’s evaluation of the relationship between itself and its cultural others (Brickman, 2003, p. 16).

Brickman emphasizes that our clinical reliance on the idea of primitivity has “layers of meaning sedimented in it” about which we are not necessarily aware and devotes the remainder of the first chapter to carefully and systematically mining them (p. 17). The author explores the role that primitivity played in Christianity, medieval Europe, Greek mythology, Darwinism and evolutionary theory as well as among Conquistadors and Enlightenment-age thinkers. By the end of this chapter, the idea of primitivity that Freud extracted is re-saturated with the centuries of meaning that produced it. For social workers who are not already familiar with this legacy, Brickman’s review is invaluable.

With the same scrutiny and precision that she applied in the first chapter, Brickman devotes the second, third and fourth chapters to further contextualizing Freud’s theoretical developments by exploring the cultural, historical, and intellectual movements of his time. In chapter 2, *Psychoanalysis and the Colonial Imagination*, the author demonstrates how Freud “fashioned a representation of the agencies of the psyche within a framework structured by the colonialist tenets of sociocultural evolutionary thought” (Brickman, 2003, p. 52). She reviews major nineteenth century cultural anthropology and the subsequent “color-coding of the evolutionary scale” constructed jointly by anthropology and sociobiology and states that:

The infancy of the human race (which European children supposedly recapitulates as they grew up) was held to be represented by dark-skinned peoples...The darker the skin color of the people who practiced a particular custom, the lower were both they and it on the evolutionary scale...Dark skin was the sign of primitivity, just as white skin was the sign of civilization (Brickman, 2003, p. 58).

Building on this foundation, Brickman allocates Chapter 3, *Race and Gender, Primitivity and Femininity: Psychologies of Enthrallment*, to an exploration of how this evolutionary influence manifested itself in Freud’s work on groups, domination and femininity. As in the previous chapter, she cogently details the major influences on Freud’s thinking. She asserts that it is in his work on group process that he “provides us with his implicit psychology of primitivity, demonstrating the ways in which the psychic configurations of members of ‘primitive’ groups differ from those of the modern individual subject” (Brickman, 2003, p. 90).

Brickman then links Freud’s treatment of femininity to his ideas about domination, desire, and separation. She establishes how primitivity is conflated with femininity and how, according to Freud, both must be repudiated for true subjectivity to develop. She connects this to the matter of domination. She states:

The formation of the psychoanalytic subject requires the psychological exclusion of qualities associated with primitivity and femininity, which are then projected onto classes of subordinated peoples, whose psychologies are held up as “natural” exemplifications of these very qualities (Brickman, 2003, p. 114).

Of particular value in this chapter is her inclusion of Jessica Benjamin’s work on mutual recognition, as it offers a psychoanalytic (thus Freudian) means by which Freud’s racist assumptions can be corrected. She states:

...By aligning the unconscious with the primitive and with the primary process, and by imagining the pre-oedipal in terms of a feeling of oceanic undifferentiation, he set the scene for a sequential, temporalized view of consciousness in which a mature, differentiated self, centered around its core agencies and identity, reflects, through its capacity for secondary-process thought, upon its inferior and shameful beginnings: primitivity. To envisage recognition, along with repudiation, as moments in the inauguration of subjectivity points to possible postcolonial conceptualizations of subjectivity where difference need not necessarily be mapped as an abjected primordiality (Brickman, 2003, p. 128).

In Chapter 4, *Historicizing Consciousness: Time, History and Religion*, Brickman continues her interrogation of Freud’s notion of primitivity by “placing (the matter) in conversation with contemporary postcolonial critiques of anthropology” (Brickman, 2003, p. 131). The author carefully reviews major postcolonial theory, and suggests that just as the anthropologists who influenced his work did, Freud

negotiated cultural differences by conceiving of them as temporal differences: the cultural other, if no longer conceived of as lower on the evolutionary scale, nonetheless has continued to be cast as less advanced in historical development (Brickman, 2003, p. 131).

Brickman's thorough discussion of postcolonial critique as well as her application of it to psychoanalysis are both quite useful, especially for social workers who are unfamiliar with this body of literature. The remainder of the chapter is focused on Freud's approach to religion and faith, as well as to the influence of the major events of his time on his work. Brickman's discussion of the latter centers on Freud's Jewish identity. Astutely, she notes that he was "simultaneously a member of a colonized and a colonizing culture" (Brickman, 2003, p. 169). The author's study of this aspect of Freud's own personal history and its influence on his theorizing (or lack thereof) on race is elucidative.

Brickman concludes with a chapter on the implications of her thesis for clinical practice entitled, *Primitivity in the Analytic Encounter*. Beginning with a discussion of contemporary psychoanalysts writing about the role of race and recognition in the therapeutic setting, Brickman contrasted these relational and intersubjective approaches with the classical Freudian situation, which she suggests is "primed to reproduce a colonial attitude toward racial difference within the clinical encounter" (Brickman, 2003, p. 197). She states that Freud's emphasis on the role of resistance on the part of the patient sets the dyadic stage for conquistador-like dynamics. Echoing a more contemporary approach, Brickman (2003) states: "Indeed, resistance may arise as a response to the unwelcome constitution of a subject as *primitive*—the locating of a subject in a position of subordination" (p. 193).

Although this book may appeal to social workers who are more comfortable with and interested in scholarly texts, and are already familiar with Freud's major papers, its ideas are germane to all of us as practitioners, researchers and thinkers. Anecdotally, I was taken with the author's

attention to the use of "primitivity" in psychoanalytic thinking and as a result became hyper-aware of the frequency with which I used this word to describe clinical phenomena. I made a concerted effort to remove this term from my conversations and, almost invariably, I would reach the end of a long descriptive substitute for the word itself only to have the person to whom I was speaking say, "You mean, 'primitive?'" as if I had lacked momentary access to the term. Time and time again this occurred, elucidating the struggle that Brickman confronts: How do we retain the clinical utility of a concept like primitivity while rejecting its racist connotations?

One of Brickman's recurrent themes is that Freud's placement of the primitive within all of us—instead of just some of us—was a humanizing act. She contends that Freud was subversive in that he "attempted to transcend the racial taxonomies of his time by creating a model of the psyche as held in common by all humans" (Brickman, 2003, p. 11). Equally true, she points out, was Freud's failure to acknowledge that the universalizing in which he engaged was based on the racist anthropological thinking of his time. About this potential for psychoanalysis "to normalize as well as to disturb," the author states that

Despite its ability to furnish the tools for such emancipatory interventions, however, psychoanalysis remains handicapped by its own ideological blindspots...Freud's assumptions concerning race are likely to be reproduced whenever his theories are used unless those assumptions have been explicitly examined and challenged (Brickman, 2003, p. 9).

This book aims to fill in those blindspots through a critical examination of how race and racism infiltrated Freud's metapsychology and how such implicit assumptions continue to exert their influence on practitioners today. The space that Brickman's contextualization of primitivity creates for re-negotiating the problematic suppositions that Freud made is essential if we are to resist repeating them in our practice in our practice as psychodynamic practitioners and thinkers.