FLANDERS LITERATURE

Racism

On Wounds and Resilience

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An extract

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Introduction

Why is this book necessary?

Imagine a dangerous crossroads. Time after time, cars collide there, cyclists fall over, and pedestrians are hit. Afterwards, they stumble away. No ambulance comes; there's no one to tend to their injuries or comfort them. You're shocked and ask a group of bystanders, "Why isn't anyone doing anything to help?"

"Oh, but we are," one of them replies, pointing to their banners. "We're protesters, demonstrating for a safer intersection. We're also raising awareness among drivers, so that they'll be more careful. That's the only way to solve this problem—by tackling the root causes."

Blind spot

It's strange when you think about it. There's plenty of public debate about racism and discrimination, and even more about the broader theme of how people from different backgrounds can coexist in harmony. Considerable attention is devoted to opening children's minds to diversity; we sometimes describe this as preparing them for world citizenship. But if you look into it, you'll notice that hardly any thought is given to support for the victims of racism.

I've searched countless websites for answers to the question of how to help children cope with racism. On the parenting and mental health websites that I consulted, search terms like "racism" and "discrimination" tended not to yield any results at all. I did find a few pages about diversity, but they weren't written with the victims of racism in mind.

On other websites, I did find tips about how to respond to verbal expressions of racism. Most of this advice is intended to help educators and other professionals handle children or parents who make racist remarks. The victim remains invisible—and may well be the very professional seeking information.

The most jarring fact of all is that professionals who work with children are not given any advice about how to support a child who is the target of racism. Is this because we can assume they already know what to do? No, I fear it isn't. After all, the frequent failure of such professionals to empathize with the experiences of people with migrant backgrounds is often identified as a serious problem.

The more I've searched, the clearer it has become that support and care for victims is a blind spot in our approach to racism—this despite the fact that a profusion of studies links discrimination to health risks such as depression and physical health problems. It's clear that racism, discrimination, and prejudice lead to unpleasant, sometimes horrible, experiences that can be highly distressing, especially to children. The first-person account below is based on a message from a young person to a chat line for children and young

adults. It demonstrates how stereotyping can lead to sadness, anger, shame, and a sense of guilt, all mixed into a cocktail of confusion.

Ever since the attacks, I've felt ashamed and guilty about the whole mess we're in right now. That's why I am NOT a Muslim anymore. I'm also really ashamed to be a Moroccan. It makes me feel so sad inside when I see how people look at me, as if I'm a criminal spreading terror. Still, I also dream that one day there will be PEACE on earth. On top of that, I'd like to live in a different country. They have a very low opinion of us here, and most of the time we're totally STIGMATIZED by the media and all that shit. It makes me so sick I could puke. I'm not a racist or anything against the people of my own country, quite the contrary. But people see me as a typical "delinquent Moroccan," when I'm really not like that at all. So yes... goodbye Moroccans, goodbye Belgians, and most of all goodbye Islam (I'm becoming an atheist). And last of all: sorry, Europe, for the attacks, they make me really sad too, no joke, a great big sorry. I hope those attacks will end one day.

Despite urgent warning signals like this one, the organizations doing the day-to-day work apparently don't see any demand for support in coping with racism. Maybe that's because young people, their parents, and other adults don't tend to express this need as a request for support, but in the form of a complaint or a protest. Many victims never consciously realize that their distress signals are veiled requests for help. In other words, they are unaware that besides influencing the general approach to this social problem, they can also obtain support that addresses their individual needs. But even when victims don't explicitly ask for help, we may surely expect professionals in the fields of child-rearing, parenting support, and health care to recognize their implicit requests and develop a range of options for victim support and care.

So why is it that competent professionals do not see, or recognize, or acknowledge such requests? What strikes me is that, when ethnic diversity comes into play, the range of support available reflects a deep-seated preoccupation with cultural differences. For example, parenting support for families with a migrant background focuses on parenting "between two cultures," rather than on parenting in a context of racism and social exclusion. If any efforts at all are made to help children and young people from this background with their developing sense of identity, then those efforts focus on "growing up between two cultures" rather than on growing up in a society that they sometimes experience as hostile. The same approach to diversity reigns in the helping professions: professionals are expected to be aware and considerate of the cultural differences between themselves and their clients. In other words, helping professionals are required to be culturally sensitive. This approach based on cultural differences is not wrong, but it is incomplete. And since it is dominant, it overshadows other relevant approaches, such as an emphasis on the wounds inflicted by racism.

In the field of refugee support, the importance of psychological harm and trauma *is* recognized. But the scope of this recognition is limited to experiences in the country of origin and on the way to the host country. Such experiences can, of course, have a profound impact. At the same time, experiences of hostility and insecurity *in* the host country can do additional harm or, at the very least, form an obstacle to recovery.

When information is provided about international adoption, still another perspective is taken, with the emphasis on how children and young people relate to the story of their adoption. Problems in identity development are approached in that light. Racism, as another potential source of difficulty, remains underappreciated and sometimes even goes unmentioned.

Organizations and individuals who fight racism do point out the pain that racism causes. This issue is attracting more and more attention. But such activists often move straight on to the question of political action against racism, treating the wounds inflicted by racism merely as a supporting argument for more political action and for their particular policy demands.

Political action will always be important. The point made by the traffic safety protester in my opening example is valid as far as it goes; the only long-term solution to the problem is to tackle the root causes. Yet in the meantime, people need to use that intersection. They cannot withdraw from society, nor do they

wish to. Should the accident victims simply pick themselves up and go on with their lives? Shouldn't they have some protection, if only a bicycle helmet?

People from migrant backgrounds often seem to proceed on the assumption that they and their children are not *permitted* to be hurt by racism. That may be the message they've received from the outside world for many years. But this subject is now beginning to draw more attention. Parents are looking for information about how to help their children confront racism as effectively as possible. Young people are striving to make sense of their experiences. For example, when a school of higher professional education in the Netherlands was looking for students for a training session on responding to discrimination, thirty people registered on the first day, and they had to close registration much sooner than planned. In Flanders, too, organizations such as youth welfare services are experimenting with new forms of support.

The need for victim care and support

This book is intended as a step towards removing the blind spot in the struggle against racism: victim care. In fact, we need not less but more "victimhood culture," meaning the full acknowledgement of the pain that people experience when confronted with racism, as well as a fully adequate response to the problem. If we deny the pain and do nothing about it, there is a greater risk that victims will become embittered, disaffected, and hostile.

So the book is addressed to several different groups. I hope that people who have been victims of racism will find support and inspiration here that will help them care for themselves more adequately. This book is written for adults but devotes a great deal of attention to racism experienced in childhood and adolescence. Racism in these stages of life has a major impact, because children and adolescents are especially sensitive to it. Its repercussions often last into adulthood.

Adults can play a crucial role in offering children appropriate guidance. But adults could also use some support themselves from the people close to them. For that reason, this book is also addressed to individuals connected with anyone wounded by racism—whether that connection is personal or professional. That includes family members: spouses and partners, parents, sisters and brothers, or uncles and aunts. It also includes friends, co-workers, and close acquaintances. In the case of children and young people, the most important individuals are the ones responsible for their upbringing: not only parents—including foster parents and adoptive parents—but also teachers, youth workers, and professional child-rearers in the youth welfare system. The book's message is also relevant to professionals in health care and social work. More broadly, any member of society might at some point happen to witness a racist incident and play a meaningful role in the response.

Many people from migrant backgrounds are involved with this issue in two different roles: they are victims of racism themselves, and they know children, young people, or other adults who are affected by it. But someone who does not come from a migrant background may equally well be involved with the victims of racism, as the teacher, friend, doctor, partner, or parent of someone with roots in another country.

This book is also meant to have an impact beyond the individual lives of its readers. At a higher, institutional level, I am addressing all the people and organizations that offer facilitation or support, such as policymakers, umbrella organizations, support centres, workshop organizers, designers of methods, researchers, and foundations. I consider it a hopeful sign that many people to whom I've spoken about this subject have shown such an open mind. For them, my story has been an eye-opener, and many of them are looking into how they can take on this problem in their work. But until now, they have not had all the information they need to move ahead. So I hope that this book will encourage the whole range of actors in this area to take practical steps that will bear fruit in the years ahead.

The political message

At first sight, this may not look like a political book. The emphasis is on the care and personal development of people confronted with racism, not on how to eliminate racism from our society. The impression might

even arise that I am shifting the responsibility for racism from society as a whole and its political representatives to the victims of racism and the people close to them, or that I am stripping racism of its political dimension by telling a story about victim care and self-care. That is a misunderstanding that I must correct. Care for victims never implies approval or acceptance of what happened to them. We care for the victims of traffic accidents, we teach children how to stay safe in traffic, and we advocate safer traffic. The third step does not make the other two irrelevant. In fact, whenever we offer support and care, it implies that we acknowledge the injuries and that we recognize the cause as a problem.

We live in a social and political context in which racism is very often downplayed or even denied. The harm to the victims is underestimated or ignored. In this context, it is politically relevant to turn a spotlight on the human impact of racism. By describing the nature and extent of the harm it does, I hope to add strength to protests against racism. In other words, I seek not only to affirm the right of the victims of racism to care and personal development, but also to reinforce them in their struggle for equality.

My perspectives

I would like to make it clear to readers what experiences underlie the statements and recommendations in this book.

First of all, I was able to draw on my work experience. During my nearly thirteen years at the Minority Forum, I had the opportunity to immerse myself in issues of racism and diversity. We worked in various domains, such as education, employment, and poverty. I became acquainted with a variety of associations working in the field, including social and cultural organizations and federations for specific ethnic groups, associations for students and young people, and organizations promoting equal rights for women and LGBT individuals.

While filling in for a short time at the Coalition for Children's Rights, I learned about children's rights in depth for the first time. The report *Teaching Children's Rights in the Educational System*, which I was involved in producing, gave me additional insight into teaching and the world of education. I was also in charge of the preliminary work on the coalition's theme for the year, diversity, and that gave me the chance to dive deeper into an issue that had been on my mind for some time: the impact of racism and discrimination on children. This culminated in a report to which I was very pleased to contribute: *"It Must Be My Fault…": Tackling the Effects of Discrimination and Racism on Children.*

I've now been working at the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner for almost four years, and I learn new things every day about the relevance of children's rights to youth services, education, health care, and other areas. I have also explored the theme of poverty in depth; the dynamics of social exclusion show many similarities to racism. And I have continued to work with the theme of racism, now from the health perspective.

Thanks to these work experiences, I came into contact with fascinating people: colleagues, directors, board members, and others I met at activities and meetings. We took part in panel discussions and online forums and became better acquainted through informal conversations. I read their personal accounts and learned about their projects. Their insights, experience, and engagement formed a rich and powerful source of inspiration for this book.

As the book makes clear, I have also drawn on my own personal experience. I am the child of a Belgian mother and a father who was born and raised in Morocco. I and my sister and two brothers grew up in the 1980s and 1990s in Roeselare, a city that was then predominantly white. Because of my pale skin tone, my migrant background is not evident at first sight to those unfamiliar with my background. It is my name, more than anything else, that reveals my roots outside Belgium. I received a fairly Flemish and Catholic upbringing in a loving Flemish family. During my childhood, we went on vacation in Morocco five times. We had good relationships with our relatives there and gained some familiarity with the country.

All in all, my dual background and my life history have given me a sense of connection both to other people with migrant backgrounds and to the white ethnic group that is dominant in Belgium. As I grew up, my interactions with educators, neighbors, fellow students, and others were generally positive. Yet I was

also confronted with prejudice, stereotypes, and racism. Those experiences were real, but limited in extent when I compare them to what many other people have experienced. At the same time, my Flemish background gave me a large dose of white privilege. That helped me not only to get ahead in life, but perhaps also to show resilience in the face of racism.

For some time now, I have also had a mother's perspective. My two daughters have roots in Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia—or, in a different sense, in Belgium, Greece, and Morocco. Their father and I are trying to give them a bilingual upbringing in Dutch and French. We live on the outskirts of Brussels, and the children attend school there.

This book also stems from my research, of course, and is firmly based on scholarly and scientific sources. It must be noted, however, that most research on coping with racism takes place in the United States. My book focuses on Flanders, and the situation it sketches may be comparable to that in the Netherlands or other Western European countries. I have made my own assessment of which elements of American research were relevant to the Flemish context. This once again underscores the need for thorough research in my own region.

I have also drawn on general findings in education and psychology: information on such topics as stress, harassment, and building resilience. I hope to offer readers something new and valuable by combining insights from these varied perspectives.

At each step throughout the book, I have aimed to indicate clearly what my sources are and when I am expressing a personal opinion. Some ideas have no identifiable source, either because they are broadly accepted views or because I have picked them up over the years.

My ambition is not to write the definitive work on this subject. This book is intended mainly as a starting point for a deeper and more thorough examination. If it motivates others to make contributions of their own, based on their perspectives and their expertise, so much the better. It seems to me that there is still a great deal more to be said about this topic.

Organization of the book

Part I explores the problem that this book is about. Chapter 1 clarifies the meaning assigned to the word "racism" here. We describe racism as a widespread social phenomenon, with a special focus on the experiences of the victims. The chapters that follow build on this description.

Chapter 2 explores the impact of the many forms of racism on personal development, using four metaphors: the target, the ugly duckling, the house of mirrors, and the tightrope walker in training.

Chapter 3 reviews a number of widely used methods for coping with racism: wearing blinders, going into overdrive, adapting like a chameleon, and going on the offensive. These approaches are not effective responses but bandages on a wooden leg. Sometimes, they even rub salt into the wound and are part of the problem rather than of the solution.

Part II presents answers to the central question: how do we do more to *support and care for* people who have been confronted with racism? This part offers both general strategies and practical pointers.

Chapter 4 discusses how people can develop the resilience needed to stand up to racism. Resilience does not put a stop to racism but does limit its harmful effects. By growing a thicker skin, so to speak, a person can keep the wounds of racism as superficial as possible. So this chapter about resilience is essentially about proactive strategies.

Chapter 5 is about direct confrontation with racism. It presents a few rules of thumb for responding to racism in an assertive way and some ways of taking official steps. It also discusses coping: how to tend to one's wounds *after* running up against racism. Adequate self-care prevents those wounds from festering and causing further complications. Sometimes, however, such wounds are too deep and require specialized help.

In other words, Chapters 4 and 5 focus on what the victims of racism and the people close to them can do for themselves. Chapter 6 makes recommendations for a caring approach to the victims of racism on a

larger scale. These recommendations are addressed to organizations and support centers, to researchers, and of course to government bodies.

Even a person who adopts all the recommendations in this book can still be hurt and scarred by racism. There are no miracle cures. The aim of this book is to reduce the risk that racism will completely disrupt the personal development of its victims. Its subject is how to offer people faced with racism, in its many forms, the greatest possible scope for growth and development.

[For the purpose of this sample, all footnotes have been omitted and all Dutch-language quotations, names of organizations, and titles of publications have been translated into English.]