

# NATURAL XENOPHOBIA

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Imagine you were a lone chimpanzee in a huge rainforest. Your instinct told you to stay alive. What would you do, apart from strengthening your own surviving skills, to increase your chance of survival? The answer is simple: you would try to find other chimpanzees in the rainforest and would live together. Social animals like chimpanzees are those which interact highly with other animals, usually of their own species (conspecifics), to the point of forming a recognizable and distinct society. By cooperation, you and your congress could accomplish tasks that could never be achieved by any individual chimpanzee. When you and your congress realized the benefits of sticking together, you would encourage other chimps to join you, so that your community could have greater power to survive and finally conquer large areas of the rainforest. But remember: you performed all of these behaviors simply because you wanted to survive. Your instincts drove you to achieve self-preservation. In other words, you worked in a group and shared your means of production because you are selfish. Perhaps these behavioral choices are connected to the chimpanzee's genetic make-up. Perhaps there is a selfish gene.

Scientists have argued that the opposite may be true. In her article "The Selfless Gene," Olivia Judson explains that a "selfless gene" might exist in the human genome. William Donald Hamilton, the renowned British evolutionary scientist, developed this concept, which argues that social animals, like chimpanzees and humans, have an inborn, natural property, whereby they sacrifice themselves for the good of their own kind. A gene, a locus or region of DNA, is the molecular unit of heredity. The transmission of genes to an animal's offspring is the basis of inherited traits. Selfless people tend to protect their close family members, what Hamilton calls "kin selection"; therefore, "the gene promoting extreme altruism could spread if the altruist helped its close relations" (3). That's why people would sacrifice themselves for others—in this way, the altruist genes in their communities have a better chance of survival and thus are more likely to be passed down. Judson provides us with this idea to explain the behaviors of "extreme self-sacrifice" (3).

But then we must ask: if after millions of years of natural evolution, we have kept the selfless gene in our DNA, why does racism, a totally selfish and discriminatory belief system through which people are divided into distinct groups that can be called inferior or superior, still exist today?

When picturing racists, many of us might think of the Nazi soldiers who carried out the genocide of Jews, or the ignorant white supremacists shouting at African-American students in Little Rock, Arkansas—people from the middle of the last century who often disgust us. However, those with less explicit racist beliefs can still exhibit racist behavior. In his article “The Good, Racist People,” Ta-Nehisi Coates introduces us to a group of people whose so-called reasonable actions reveal their discriminatory biases. He begins by recounting an occurrence in 2013, when renowned actor Forest Whitaker was suspected of stealing from a deli in Manhattan. Whitaker’s popularity and fame did not protect him from the assumption that he was a thief. Why, Coates asks, in a world where racism is despised, does racial discrimination still exist? “Little has changed,” Coates answers (2). Although many have been advocating equality for decades, deep down in our hearts, there’s still a standard by which we predict and judge people’s characters and actions—often based on the color of their skin. And we do this for a reason, Coates explains. Then, citing the petition of the residents in Levittown, PA in 1957, he offers this example to point to the reason: “As moral, religious and law-abiding citizens, we feel that we are unprejudiced and undiscriminating in our wish to keep our community a closed community” (qtd. in Coates, 2). These residents wanted segregation so that they could retain their original tranquility and way of life. To Coates, these isolationist people are examples of the titular “good, racist people.” It seems that not all racists are rude, ignorant stereotypes. They can be friends and neighbors living with us. They carry out racist acts even though they don’t think racism itself is appropriate. “Systemic racism,” which refers to a largely impersonal and unconscious pattern of discrimination that is inherent within the normal functioning of a social system, likely influences this brand of unconscious xenophobia.

In “The Selfless Gene,” Judson mentions that xenophobic behavior may be acquired by humans through evolution, because “banding together to fight means that people must be able to tell the difference between friends (who belong in the group) and foes (who must be fought)” (10). Driven by this motivation, human beings learn to be hostile towards people from different ethnic groups because of

their fear of encountering enemies, and also because of “kin selection.” Looking at the people living in Levittown over fifty years ago through Judson’s lens, I find it interesting to discover that these men were somehow selfless enough to stand out and speak for the kin benefits, imagining that, in doing so, they could preserve peace for their own group, even if such a declaration was unethical and unlawful.

I also have my own experience of xenophobia, the fear or dislike of foreigners. I have been raised to distance myself from Muslims. My friends all have. We live in Nanjing in China, where most of the Muslims we know usually do manual labor. When I ask my parents why, they always tell me that Islam is a dangerous religion; it comes from a distant place where everyone has to kill each other to survive. They speak to me as if this is the most basic fact in the world.

Then, when I grew older, I read the Qur’an to educate myself. I learned that the Middle East is not a cruel and bloody place. I discovered that Islam is, in fact, a mild religion in which people are told to be kind to everyone and to serve the greater good so that their souls can rest in peace after death.

I believed I could show kindness to Muslims, but that belief changed on the first day of an extracurricular class when I was fifteen. My non-Muslim friends and I were chatting with a friendly boy after class, trying to decide where we should have lunch together. He replied to our numerous suggestions with a polite smile: “Thank you, but I can’t have pork, because I’m a Muslim.” Suddenly we all fell silent. I began to picture a furious boy in my mind, waving a knife at us because he sees pork at the dining table. “But of course I can go with you, unless you force me to eat pork,” he said with another smile, trying to lighten the mood. I didn’t feel relaxed at all. “But you must be uncomfortable watching us eating pork!” a girl faked a smile and replied in a squeaky voice. “I guess we shall leave you with yourself.”

“Strange Muslim,” one of us mumbled when we walked away. I was so relieved to get out of the room and away from confrontation that I ignored the comment.

No matter how I questioned my parents about their stereotypical beliefs about Muslims, no matter how much I had read about Islam being a mild religion, and no matter how firmly I hoped I was a person without biases, neither my classmates nor I could conceal our distaste for difference. We feared getting into

trouble with someone from another community, believing that by sticking together and estranging the ‘outsider,’ we were stronger.

My story is just one example of how civilized people can act ignorantly. Ignorance and fear-based behaviors seem, sadly, natural, which does not make the trend morally or ethically correct. When I reflect on my experience in light of Judson, the idea of a “selfless gene” makes sense, since it may encourage us to be friendly to our own group and hostile to strangers. This loyalty is good for the survival of our community.

Should we just happily embrace our selfish instincts and act savagely towards others if nature designed us that way? During the 2016 Presidential election, Donald Trump denounced the pro-religious freedom, pro-military speech of Pakistani-American Khizr Khan, father of an American soldier who died to protect American Infantry unit in Iraq in 2004, simply because he comes from a Muslim family (Yuhas). “If you look at his wife, she was standing there,” Trump said (qtd. in Yuhas, 1). “She had nothing to say. She probably, maybe she wasn’t allowed to have anything to say. You tell me [sic]” (qtd. in Yuhas, 1). Trump is known for his exclusive policy toward immigrants and certain ethnic groups. Khizr Khan later replied: “Have you ever been to Arlington cemetery? Go look at the graves of the brave patriots who died defending America—you will see all faiths, genders and ethnicities” (qtd. in Yuhas, 2). We find ourselves so quick to condemn Trump for his persistence on racial discrimination and xenophobia, but his candidacy also suggests that many continue to cling to isolationist ideas, selfishly wanting to selflessly protect their own tradition.

As Khan said, people of all faiths, genders and ethnicities live in and fight for this country, and his son was not only a Muslim, but also an American. In this sense, nationalities can also be a kind of community as well. We have to try to discover our broader identity of our community, and by recognizing each other as kin, we can hopefully reduce our hostility and quell our selfish instincts. I should be ashamed of myself for rejecting Muslims, especially those who sought my friendship with sincerity and humor. Maybe there are “good, racist people” in the world, and maybe I have acted as one of them. But perhaps I can learn from my experience and Coates's words to become more open and tolerant.

## WORKS CITED

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