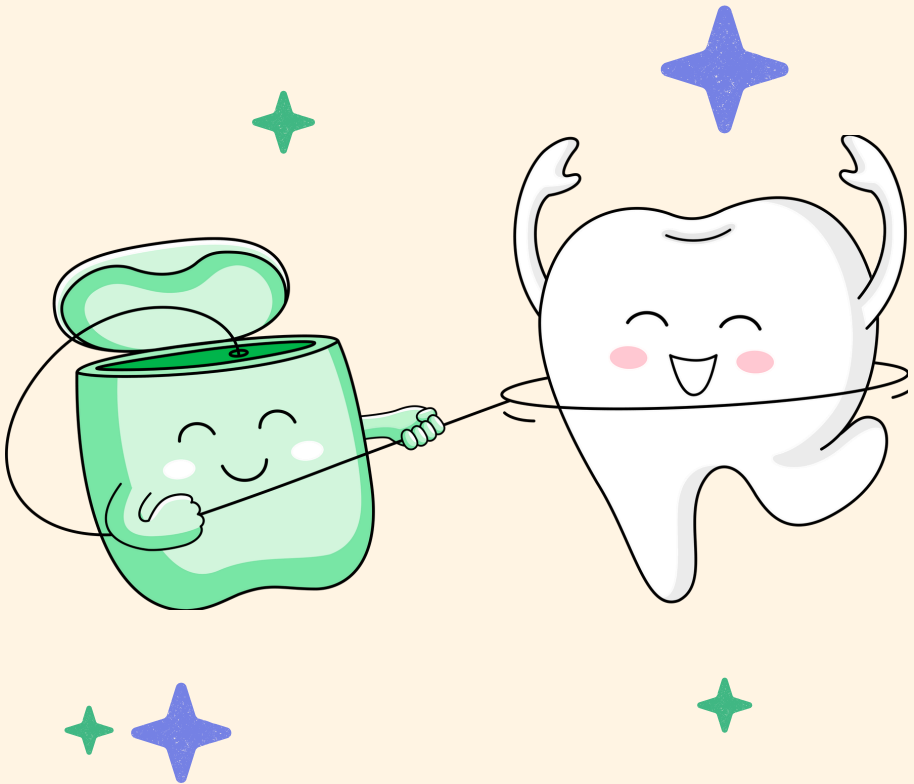


Jay Smooth on Antiracism



**BRUSHING AWAY BIAS:
EMBRACING IMPERFECTION IN
RACE CONVERSATIONS**

- This factsheet will explore the complexities of race conversations, from Jay Smooth's 2011 TEDx talk on how to improve these often-fraught race interactions. Smooth is a critic and blogger who discusses issues in race discourse. In this Ted talk, he discusses how Americans frequently avoid discussing race, and when these discussions do occur, they often become unproductive and defensive. His analysis centres on the common reactions individuals have when it's suggested that something they said might have unintended racist connotations.
- A key aspect of this defensiveness stems from what Smooth identifies as the **"all-or-nothing, good person, bad person binary,"** or the "tonsils paradigm".
- This framework assumes that one is either entirely racist or entirely not racist, leading individuals to deeply personalize any critique as an accusation of being a fundamentally bad person. To counter this mindset, Smooth proposes a shift towards a **"dental hygiene paradigm,"** which views addressing prejudice as an ongoing practice of acknowledging and working on our imperfections, rather than a fixed state of being.
- This factsheet will show Smooth's perspective on how understanding our inherent imperfections and moving away from the **"good-person, bad-person binary"** can lead to more productive and less defensive race conversations.

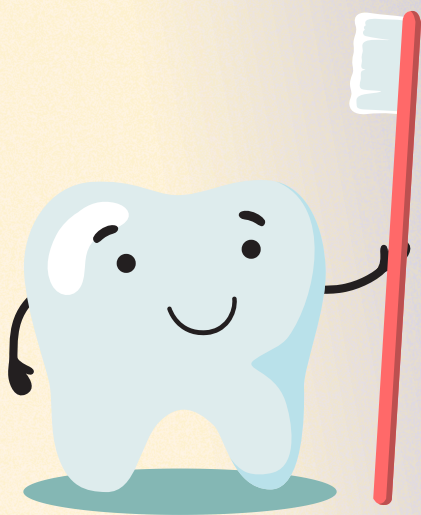




- The “**good-person, bad-person binary**” is often used when discussing race and prejudice. In this framework, someone is either entirely racist or entirely not racist.
- This creates an impossible standard where anything less than perfection is equated with being a racist. Consequently, any suggestion that someone has made a mistake or held a prejudiced thought is perceived as a personal attack on their character and goodness, leading to defensiveness.
- People can immediately respond with statements like, “**Are you saying that I am racist? How can you say that? I am a good person!**” Smooth contends that this binary is damaging because it makes individuals averse to recognizing their own inevitable imperfection.
- When you believe you must be perfect to be good, acknowledging a mistake related to race feels like admitting to being a “**bad person.**”
- This aversion prevents people from working on their own biases and allows those imperfections to “**stagnate and grow.**”
- The very belief that one must be perfect to be good becomes an obstacle to actually becoming as good as one can be.
- To counter this unproductive mindset, Smooth proposes a shift in perspective.



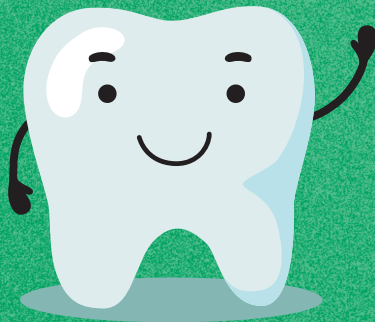
- Smooth suggests moving away from seeing “**being a good person [as] a fixed, immutable characteristic**” and instead viewing it as “**a practice.**”
- This practice is carried out by “**engaging with our imperfections.**”
- Smooth draws parallels to being a clean person, which is not a permanent state but something that requires continuous effort and maintenance, just like brushing your teeth daily.
- We don’t assume that because we consider ourselves clean, we never need to brush our teeth.
- Therefore, being a ‘**good**’ **anti-racist person**, in Smooth’s view, is akin to practicing good dental hygiene. It requires ongoing mindfulness of our personal and common imperfections.
- Prejudice has been ingrained in society to “**make us circumvent our best instincts.**” Just like plaque develops on our teeth every day due to various stimuli, “**little pockets of prejudice**” build up in our brains daily from mass media and social influences, as well as unconscious internal processes.
- When someone points out a potentially problematic statement or action, it should be viewed similarly to someone telling you that you have something stuck in your teeth.



- This leads to Smooth’s central “**dental hygiene paradigm**” as opposed to the “**tonsils paradigm**” of race discourse.
- Smooth contrasts these two to understand and engage in conversations about race and prejudice.

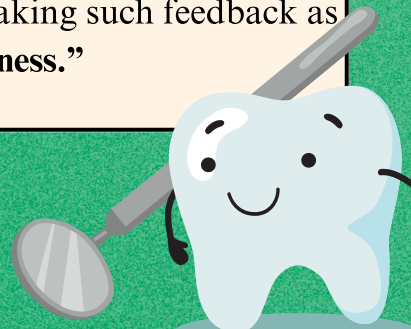
Tonsil Paradigm

- The tonsil paradigm represents flawed and unproductive ways of thinking about prejudice.
- It operates in an **“all-or-nothing, good person, bad person binary.”**
- In this view, a person is either entirely racist or entirely not racist.
- It treats prejudice like having tonsils: **“You either have tonsils or you don’t, and if you’ve had your prejudice removed, you never need to consider if someone says: ‘I think you may have a little unconscious prejudice,’ you say: ‘No, my prejudice was removed in 2005.’”**
- This implies that once someone believes they have confronted and overcome their biases, they are permanently free of prejudice and don’t need to give it further thought.
- Smooth illustrates this by imaging someone saying, “No, my prejudice was removed in 2005. I went to see that movie *Crash* (a film which confronted people who hold race-based prejudices about one another).” This highlights the misconception that addressing prejudice is a one-time fix.
- This paradigm makes it difficult to accept feedback that one might have said or done something racist, as it is perceived as an accusation of being fundamentally a **“bad person.”**



Dental Hygiene Paradigm

- In contrast, Smooth advocates for the “**dental hygiene paradigm**” as a more accurate and constructive way to approach race discourse.
- This paradigm recognizes that “**little pockets of prejudice**” build up in our brains everyday due to the pervasive ideas about race in mass media, social stimuli, and unconscious internal processes. This is analogous to how plaque develops on our teeth daily.
- Just as plaque requires regular dental hygiene practices like brushing and flossing to prevent build-up and maintain oral health, addressing prejudice requires ongoing effort and attention. It is not a one-time fix.
- Being a good person, in this framework, is seen as “**a practice, and it is a practice that we carry out by engaging with our imperfections.**” This is similar to “**being a clean person,**” which requires daily maintenance like brushing teeth. But we don't assume that because we are generally clean, we never need to brush our teeth.
- When someone points out something problematic that was said or done, it should be viewed like someone saying “**theres something stuck in your teeth.**” The appropriate response is not defensiveness about one's inherent goodness (or cleanliness), but rather an acknowledgment and a willingness to address the issue (to pick something out of your teeth).
- Smooth hopes we can move towards taking such feedback as “**a gesture of respect and an act of kindness.**”



So, How do you Tell Someone They Have a Little Prejudice Stuck in Their Teeth?

- Jay Smooth discusses approaching race conversations, particularly when point out that someone has said something potentially racist (akin to having “something stuck in their teeth”), by emphasizing the importance of focusing on **“what-you-said”** rather than **“what-you-are.”**
- Smooth suggests that when offering critique, the aim should be to address a specific statement or action, clarifying that you are not attacking the person’s character or labeling them as inherently racist.
- However, Smooth acknowledges that even when the critique is framed carefully, the vast majority of the time, the conversation lapses into a defensive **“what-I-am”** conversation.
- This is because people tend to deeply personalize such feedback and respond by asserting, **“Are you saying that I am a racist? How can you say so? I am a good person!”** This defensiveness stems from the tonsil paradigm, an **“all-or-nothing, good person, bad person binary”** that often characterizes discussions about race.
- In this framework, any suggestion of making a mistake related to race is equated with being a bad person.



How can you Respond When Someone Tells Says You Have Some Prejudice Stuck in Your Teeth?

- Given the difficulty in preventing defensiveness when voicing the critique, Smooth also emphasizes the importance of how we receive that critique.
- Smooth suggests that we might be about to improve these conversations if we can learn to **“take a suggestion that we may have said or done something racist in stride, and not completely freak out and assume that the world thinks I’m a bad person.”**
- Smooth offers several things to keep in mind to facilitate a less defensive reception to such feedback:

1. **Recognize the making mistakes is inevitable.**

In most other situations, we can accept that we are only human and everyone makes mistakes. We need to extend this understanding to conversations about race.

2. **Understand that race is a complex and illogical social construct.**

Race was "not born out of any science, or reason, or logic" and was "shaped specifically by desire to avoid making sense" to rationalize "indefensible acts." Navigating such a construct is inherently challenging, and we should expect to make missteps.

3. **Acknowledge the “dental hygiene paradigm” of prejudice.**

Prejudice is not like tonsils that can be removed permanently. Instead, "little pockets of prejudice" build up in our brains every day due to various influences like mass media and unconscious processes, similar to plaque on teeth. This means that even well-intentioned people can have unconscious biases.

4. **Shift towards seeing being good as a practice of engaging with our imperfections.**

Instead of viewing goodness as a fixed characteristic, we should see it as something we actively work on, just like being a clean person requires daily effort. Acknowledging our imperfections is crucial for growth.

5. **Aim to take feedback as “a gesture of respect and an act of kindness.”**

Similar to someone pointing out something stuck in your teeth, the intention is to help you, not attack your character.

Smooth, J. (2011, November 13). *TEDxHampshireCollege – Jay Smooth – How I learned to stop worrying and love discussing race* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU>

