

Unconscious Cruelty: Exploring the Emotions Behind Genital Cutting

Richard Schwartzman

Abstract The practice of subjecting infants and children to body modification exists in many cultures and has for thousands of years. Whether it was the foot binding of Imperial China, FGM as it continues today, or male infant circumcision, such practices are always vehemently defended and extremely well rationalized. Without understanding the root cause of such societal behavior, little sense can be made of why it continues. In this lecture, psychiatrist Richard Schwartzman explores some of the emotional factors responsible for these unnecessary and cruel practices.

Sixty-two years ago, in 1952, Wilhelm Reich said, “Take that poor penis. Take a knife—right? And start cutting. And everybody says, “It doesn’t hurt.” Everybody says, “No, it doesn’t hurt.” Get it? That’s an excuse, of course, a subterfuge. They say that the sheaths of the nerve are not yet developed. Therefore, the sensation in the nerves is not yet developed. Therefore, the child doesn’t feel a thing. Now, that’s murder! Circumcision is one of the worst treatments of children. And what happens to them? You just look at them. They can’t talk to you. They just cry. What they do is shrink. They contract, get away into the inside, away from that ugly world.”

Reich lived from 1897 to 1957. He was an Austrian physician who was a pioneering psychoanalyst and considered one of Freud’s best students. However, over time, he became disappointed with the results that could be achieved with Freud’s method of free association. This prompted him to develop a very different framework for understanding people and emotions.

I am a board-certified psychiatrist and for more than 40 years have been using the unique and very effective treatment that Reich created. I also train psychologists and other psychiatrists to practice this therapy. It’s very different from any other treatment for emotional disorders that you may have heard of. And even if you have heard of Wilhelm Reich, or have some knowledge of the therapy that he pioneered, his method of treatment is often misunderstood and, unfortunately, misrepresented. It makes use of a verbal interchange that’s different from other methods of psychotherapy. It seeks to make the patient aware of the particular manner in which they approach the world. Reich called it “character analysis.” The treatment also allows the release of emotions, primarily sadness and anger, in a controlled way, in the safety of the therapist’s office.

Reich discovered that emotional traumas are not forgotten, even when they occur very early in life and remain out of conscious awareness. Physical pain is traumatic for everyone, but for an infant or young child, the shock to their system

can be terrible. This is the reason why Reich, although Jewish, spoke out so vehemently against circumcision.

Just how it is that events from the distant past can be locked away somewhere in the body remains a mystery. Nevertheless, the traumas of childhood, if severe enough, are never forgotten. They stay stuck in us—in our “armor” as Reich called it—and exert their damaging effect throughout life. This fact, that the past is not forgotten, is virtually unknown. Early childhood traumas, not chemical imbalances, are the root cause of lifelong dissatisfaction and unhappiness, as well as many severe emotional disorders, including schizophrenia.

Now what is very interesting and remarkable (and in fact this still amazes me, as it did Reich) is, in the course of this therapy, patients may actually re-experience their earliest traumas. I have seen men re-live their circumcision, with all the pain and terror they suffered. In a few minutes I am going to play a clip of one of my patients speaking about his experience when he re-lived his circumcision during therapy. I had him filmed for this symposium.

But first, I am going to show you a clip of him on the therapy couch during the course of a typical session. This clip comes from a documentary film that was made some years ago. What you are going to see may be a bit shocking, but please know that Bob has always left every session much relieved and in fine shape.

<http://youtu.be/4hC-NOSMQPC>

As this clip showed, the past remains alive. Now as for circumcision, it is so extremely harmful because it occurs so early in life. The younger the child, the less are the defense mechanisms to deal with pain. As an adult, or even an older child, we have the sum of our intellect and our experiences to put shocking events in some context and perspective.

The next clip I am going to play shows Bob telling about re-living his circumcision. This was just filmed.

<http://youtu.be/ZLNuJ0kRBil>

So now I want to turn to a different subject, and the topic of my talk, which is the unconscious cruelty that drives humans to circumcise newborns and children.

All of us here today understand that cutting the genitals of children is not just unnecessary—but barbaric—and there’s not a single, rational argument to support it. However, because there are so many sides to the issue, people can’t see circumcision for what it really is. They are confused because of the social and cultural factors, the demands of religion, the medical justifications—and so

on. But I'd like to touch on one aspect that is almost never considered—the forces that drive people and institutions to support this practice.

Can any sense be made of what it is that impels people to brutally cut the genitals of defenseless newborns and young children, male and female alike? For the answer to this question I again look to the work of Wilhelm Reich. One of his most important contributions is his exposition of what he termed the “emotional plague.” It's a very complex subject and I will try to do it a bit of justice in the next few minutes. But if any audience can grasp this concept, I think this one will.

Reich maintained that within our society, and in fact in all patriarchal societies, there are certain individuals that he called emotional plague characters. These people have very specific characteristics and ways of behaving. They are intelligent, extremely competent, aggressive, and endowed with a high energy level. And they are very good at getting themselves into positions of authority and power so they can tell others what to do for their own good.

Emotional plague characters, big and small, have existed throughout history. They are not just the Hitlers and Stalins, but also the petty tyrant school teachers who terrorize the children in their class; the religious leaders, who mandate right and proper behavior; the supervisors everywhere that keep those under them in constant fear; the heads of organizations that put into effect policies that restrict personal freedom, and so on.

The emotional plague is not just confined to individuals but also becomes institutionalized. This can be seen in many of our law-making bodies that, more and more, dictate how we should live, again, for our own good.

The reasons behind this behavior are too complex to go into here, but what can be said is that plague characters, because of the particular way they were raised, are disturbed and very angry people. But they are unaware of their anger. They are not like the average neurotic who suffers quietly to themselves. In fact, they don't suffer much at all because they act out their anger, which is unconscious, on the social scene. This is not something they choose to do. They are driven to act this way. And they really believe they are doing the right thing.

Seeing others who are lively, happy, and enjoying themselves creates in them not pleasure, as it would with a healthy person, but jealousy and resentment. These feelings are so intense that the only way they can stop them is by going out into the world and stopping people from having pleasure. This is what makes these individuals feel better.

What makes the emotional plague so effective, and so dangerous, is that their arguments are extremely well rationalized and always “partly right.” We can see with regard to circumcision how this “partly right” confuses: Maybe my boy should

look like the other boys. Maybe, as a Jew, I should have my son circumcised. Maybe the doctors are right that my boy could get infections. It's the partly right that confuses, and prevents us from seeing what's right in front of our eyes.

Because the emotional plague hates pleasure in others, and seeks to stamp it out, children, who by their very nature are lively, happy people are a prime target. So is natural sexuality. Circumcision targets both children and natural sexuality.

So what can be done? Reich said the only way to combat the emotional plague is to expose it. This doesn't mean pointing fingers and calling people "plague characters." It means exposing the work of the plague to the truth. Consistently making people aware of the lies that allow this practice to continue.

Also, to keep our focus on educating the public and the upcoming generation of doctors and others who will re-shape existing policies. We have truth on our side, and the children of the future will be the beneficiaries of our efforts.

Richard Schwartzman, DO, is practicing psychiatrist, board-certified by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology. Prior to becoming a physician, he was a licensed, practicing pharmacist. He is a graduate of Temple University School of Pharmacy (1961) and the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine (1966). He completed his psychiatric residency training at Hahnemann University (1974), and a fellowship in forensic psychiatry at Temple University School of Law and Medicine (1976). In addition to maintaining a private clinical practice throughout his career, Dr. Schwartzman also served as Hahnemann's Medical Director of Psychiatric Services to the Philadelphia Prisons from 1978-2000, where he was Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry. In his private practice, he employs the unique therapeutic method pioneered by Wilhelm Reich, MD, and is considered to be a leading training therapist in this method. Solebury, Pennsylvania, USA.