
TELEVISION

Discovery Docuseries: 'Why We Hate'

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Heard on All Things Considered

6-Minute Listen

NPR's Sacha Pfeiffer discusses the new documentary series "Why We Hate" with directors Sam Pollard and Geeta Gandbhir. It debuts Sunday on the Discovery Channel.

SACHA PFEIFFER, HOST:

As your mother may have told you, hate is a strong word. Some people use it lightly, like to describe their dislike of broccoli. But it's also a powerful human emotion at the root of racism, violence and even genocide.

(SOUNDBITE OF DOCUMENTARY, "WHY WE HATE")

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UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: A lot of people thought it was inconceivable that the German people could as a whole turn to tyranny, could turn to Nazis and fascism in the way that they had. A whole nation was, in a way, swept up in this tide of hate.

PFEIFFER: That's a clip from "Why We Hate," a new documentary series premiering tomorrow on the Discovery Channel. The series looks at the origins of hate, and the scope is wide-ranging. It covers everything from school bullying to radicalism to mass murder. It's directed by Sam Pollard and Geeta Gandbhir. Both have long careers exploring social justice issues through film. When I spoke with them earlier this week, I asked them about their motivation for the series. And Sam Pollard said his inspiration came as a result of the current political climate.

SAM POLLARD: If you think about where we are in the United States with Trump as president, the idea that he demonizes people from other countries, specifically Mexico, and basically say to those of us in America they're going to come here and take our jobs, they're going to bring crime. They're going to bring drugs. That's another way to sort of separate us from them - you know, to say that these outsiders will destroy our society. If you go back and look at the Holocaust, you know, Nazism, if you go back and look at what happened in Cambodia, it's always this notion of the outsider having an impact, and we have to keep them away from us because they may destroy our world.

PFEIFFER: That seems like a key point - that if you emphasize differences, that becomes the kernel of hate. Did that feel like a key finding to you?

POLLARD: Absolutely. I spent on one of the episodes some time in Israel, and I could feel it in my bones every day when I was talking to Palestinians or I was talking to Israelis. You could see the differences in terms of religion, in terms of culture, in terms of the economics. You know, you could feel this sort of divisiveness in that country.

PFEIFFER: Some of your guests also talked about how if someone is feeling small and sad and ostracized from society, and a fringe group - say, a neo-Nazi group - makes them feel important, like there's a higher purpose for them, that's very empowering in a very dangerous way.

GEETA GANDBHIR: Absolutely. I think that there is a real connection between grievance and extremism. The same mentality applies to recruitment of gang members here in the U.S. And any extremist group, it is easy - much easier to recruit people who are suffering in some way or lacking in something in their lives. Often, it's - it could be resources, education, solid family structure, enough food to eat. I mean, essentially, you become much more vulnerable to be drawn into a group that becomes like a family to you if you are lacking at home for that sort of structure.

POLLARD: You know, so, for example, Sacha, in Episode 4, perfect example is this gentleman named Frank Meeink.

PFEIFFER: This is the former skinhead.

POLLARD: Former skinhead, grew up in Philadelphia. His mother was a drug addict. He had an abusive stepfather. You know, he went to a school that was all black, and they used to bully and beat him up every day. And so one day, he went and found a

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family. He found some love. He found the connection. And he was pulled into that, and he embraced it totally.

PFEIFFER: We have a piece of sound of Frank talking about this. Let's hear that.

(SOUNDBITE OF DOCUMENTARY, "WHY WE HATE")

FRANK MEEINK: So when I'd go up to my cousin's house in Lancaster, he had newspaper articles about neo-Nazis on his wall. And he had, like, a picture of Hitler, and he had, like, a swastika flag. And so he would have all these other big, bad skinhead guys come over to his house, and every night...

PFEIFFER: It became a sense of community he never had, but not a community that ultimately was good for him or for society.

POLLARD: Exactly.

GANDBHIR: That's right.

POLLARD: (Laughter).

GANDBHIR: That's right. And I think that's what happens with a lot of extremist groups. Again, that's playing on our tribal nature. As we join extremist groups, or we get drawn into an ideology because we think - it gives us a sense of family, but there's also a sense of righteousness. A lot of times, when people, again, are part of some extremist ideology, they think they're actually doing something good. They think they're doing something right.

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PFEIFFER: The series also tackles the issue of bullying - something that used to be viewed almost as a rite of passage, and now we don't tolerate or we try not to tolerate. Here's a clip of a young woman who had been bullied and then describes how she turned into a bully.

(SOUNDBITE OF DOCUMENTARY, "WHY WE HATE")

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: I will never forget what I did in middle school. And I remember a specific student. I took her to the restroom. I took her into one of the stalls and just punched her because I just thought she was so weak and vulnerable, you know. I did see myself in her.

PFEIFFER: This young woman talks later about realizing that this is not the way to get respect and power, and she eventually learns to unhate. She basically becomes de-radicalized, in a sense. I guess the hopeful message of the series is there is a way out. What's the process of de-radicalizing someone and getting them to let go of hatred?

POLLARD: It's the ability to be able to listen to other people who can talk to you and articulate how you can be a different human being.

PFEIFFER: That sounds almost too simple, though. I mean, some people are so immersed in hate. How do you get them out of it?

POLLARD: Well, you know, it's not like we're going to eliminate hate from the world. We know that. But if a human being can look inside themselves and reflect who they are, what they're doing and how they can maybe change, that could be a way out. It sounds simple, but sometimes that's the best way to approach it.

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PFEIFFER: What do you hope this series will accomplish?

POLLARD: I hope it would give the opportunity for people to sort of reflect and look at themselves and look at how they interact with other human beings.

GANDBHIR: The series is really meant to look at hate as a human condition. It is something that we all have in common. It is not unique to one society or one group of people. And the idea is that if we can understand where it comes from, if we can understand our own behavior, if we can understand the way our brains work, we can look at ways to change our behavior. And hopefully - it gives me hope that we can make change. I think we have to be vigilant. We have to think about the leaders we elect. We have to think about how we structure our societies. We absolutely - there's tons of work to be done. But in the end, I think we can do better.

PFEIFFER: That's directors Geeta Gandbhir and Sam Pollard. Their six-part documentary series "Why We Hate" premieres tomorrow night on the Discovery Channel. Sam and Geeta, thanks to both of you.

POLLARD: Thank you.

GANDBHIR: Thank you so much.

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