

## ***Reflection on being a minority at a psychotherapy conference***

Only a few months prior to this experience I heard myself respond to a comment from an organizer about how to attract more of 'us' to these conferences, where I had been in a minority of one, "Put us at the front where we can be visible", I replied. Who told me to open my big mouth? I had already presented at two conferences early this year, a workshop on that day and this time around I had been earmarked as one of the main presenters. I was enjoying my first invitation to be paid for speaking at a conference. The conference theme was 'Intergenerational trauma'.

I began by sharing something about my background as a black mixed heritage African Caribbean and Jewish woman. I explained that my father had written a letter referring to his own and my mother's immigrant statuses, identifying themselves with the two most hated races in the Western world. Somehow they had found solace in each other without the use of any psychotherapeutic interventions. This prelude to my talk on 'Healing Ancestral Baggage' was a way of calming my nerves and making a connection to the listeners? I explained that having lost both my parents at a very early age, I managed to raise and support the two most recent generations in my family and break the cycle of going into care. I began by introducing my own intergenerational trauma and placing myself as a model at the centre of my work, so that others could experience me as the vulnerable human being that I am and secondly as an 'academic'. This also helped to support the split between my relationship with my theme while presenting it and the challenge to make sense to people who respond as though they are up in their heads. Hence I made it clear that my own past and present traumas would impact on the way I presented.

I was sure that I did not just want to write a paper and read it out and I am aware that images of the traumatic impact of slavery, colonization and every day experience of racism can be quite daunting to people who want to 'conference. Nevertheless I felt it was necessary to ask the question of whose trauma? I presented an image recently circulated on the Internet by friends. The image of BNP supporters cajoling a young 12 year old girl dangling a gollywog over a bonfire, prescribing the burning as a punishment for being black. I have no doubt that these intergenerational traumas have silenced intrapsychic and intercultural relationships in families, education, the mental health system and the training of therapists. Hence I produced a chapter on 'Healing Ancestral Baggage' in my book 'Black Issues in The Therapeutic Process' (Mckenzie-Maving, 2009) that is based on a doctoral study with trainee counselors. Mckenzie-Mavinga. (2005) I emphasized to delegates the importance of becoming un-gagged and finding a voice on these concerns.

*Who does the term 'Black' refer to?*

The first challenge that reflected the nature of this question was raised in the demand to define the term black. The term 'black' is a political and sociological term, identifying a group that has been most vulnerable to the oppression of white racism. As the most visible minority, this group has been least represented in the field of psychotherapy and counselling. However we cannot assume that all individuals from African and Asian backgrounds who have experienced racism identify with the term 'black'.

Black people of African heritage are six times more likely to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act than white peoples. Asian peoples are four times more likely to commit suicide than white peoples, Foundation News, November (2003). Psychotherapy and counselling provision that not only takes into account, but also works with black issues may increase resources for those at risk of the mental health system and suicide. The book mainly refers to people of African and Caribbean heritage due their greater risk of vulnerability. However the themes and discussions can be used as a model for work with most minority group experiences.

### *What are black issues?*

The word 'issues' has been linked to the term 'black' to enable a phenomenological outlook rather than a focus on black peoples per se. The phenomenon of 'black issues' was placed in the centre of the study and responses to it examined. In taking this approach the term 'black' may be used in an emancipatory way to broaden understanding of the experiences of both black and white trainees in relation to black clients. The term 'issues' in this context therefore refers to any concern, problem, dynamic, feeling or experience raised by or about black people, by themselves or by white people. Whilst this may appear to be a broad definition, it allowed for the relationships, personal development and theoretical context of experiences to be taken into account. Conclusions drawn from my experience as a counsellor trainer suggest that unless black issues are raised in the context of racism, general experiences pertaining to culture or every day life are likely to be raised mainly by black people themselves. This may occur when training approaches do not facilitate listening skills to appropriately reflect black issues or explore the impact of racism. I see this problem as an outcome of ancestral baggage.

*This quote from the work of Some` aptly describes my concept of ancestral baggage.*

*When people die, nature is the only hospitable place where their spirits can dwell. Their spirits, living in the other world, remember clearly the experience of walking on the earth. They remember the moments when they contributed to greater good and helped to make the world better. But they also remember with great remorse the failed adventures and the gestures that harmed others and made the world a less dignifying place. The more they see the more they ache, and the more eager they are to turn their attention to helping those still in this world, however, spirits need to enlist our co-operation and help. Some`, M. (1999, p.54)*

Some` uses African spirituality to understand how the unrequited human spirit may link to the psyche of the living, in a way that suggests how we inherit a sort of cultural lag. I must emphasize that not all black people or therapists may subscribe to this concept, but I find it helps to contextualize some of the concerns presented by trainee counsellors and colleagues in their attempts to understand black issues. I have created this concept in an attempt to enlist the co-operation that Some` mentions and extend the structural framework of therapeutic approaches that support the process of grieving, saying good-bye and letting go of the past. Most

therapeutic approaches encourage exploration of memories and fantasies, which link relationships to those who have gone before. The concept of 'ancestral baggage' is used in a transpersonal way to help identify how the lives of predecessors influenced by colonialism and racism may impact on current generations and the collective psyche in the present. Richards affirms the use of transpersonal healing capacities in this approach.

*We transformed suffering into an opportunity to express spirit. And through its expression its existence was reaffirmed.* Richards, D. (1992, p25)

The concept of 'ancestral baggage' can be applied contextually to the emotional and spiritual process of both therapists and clients. However, respect for individual belief systems is important and therefore this concept should not be introduced into therapy without informing the client of its relevance. Questions asked by trainee counsellors will be addressed to support the understanding of ancestral baggage, and I will present excerpts from transcripts of their discussions about black issues.

The concept of ancestral baggage can be seen as a way of understanding how the dynamics of relationships from former generations get passed on and impact on the present. I am therefore suggesting that the client's emotional disposition may be affected by their ancestor's modes of response to oppression and negative experiences. A psychodynamic therapist might view this as an aspect of transference for future exploration. I see this as a challenge to reflect on the historical context of the client's process and an opportunity to utilize this context to build a greater understanding of their experience. As we go through our individual life process we inhabit our own personal ancestral baggage. Experiences that raise our awareness of these provide us with numerous opportunities to re-write the negative aspects of these scripts on our lives. Psychotherapy and counselling is just one way of supporting the inspiration and insights that contribute to this process. The process of transformation and change that engendered naturally or therapeutically puts us in touch with our inspiration. This inspiration can be seen in daily worship and ritual, art and creativity and the repetitive actions that make up our lives. Whether responded to consciously or unconsciously historical and cultural reference points contribute to these scripts. A student proposes a question about past influences during counselor training.

*Why don't we leave the past alone if it appears to be irrelevant to the present?*

Transculturalists challenge therapists who respond to cultural questions as though they were being given an additional problem. If this question were turned on its head we might consider why we don't leave the present alone if it appears to be relevant to the past? This would evoke fear and denial, emotions often associated with the challenge of facing the impact of racism. The don't go there signal named in the conference as 'a conspiracy of silence', is ever present in therapeutic relationships and may be linked to past experiences of oppression that render individuals speechless when processing minority issues. When invited to explore the silence individuals usually share an experience of direct hurt or witnessing

someone else being hurt by racism. It is important therefore to be aware of how the counsellor's own denial in the present time may prevent them from acknowledging the historical and cultural context of denial. Therefore the past will only be irrelevant if we refuse to contextualize the present. The following question is similar in context, but more explicit as it presents an acknowledgement of attaching something 'negative' to working through the impact of the past on the present. I further propose that therapists need to consider that the something negative can be conceptualized as ancestral baggage and can be worked through.

### *Isn't it negative to focus on the hurt of colonialism and racism?*

Yes it may be negative but necessary. The therapist's role is to support clients through negative phases. Therapists and clients may choose to 'leave the past alone' if it appears, or if they believe it is irrelevant to the present. This state of leaving alone can be explored in a self-reflective way using a variety of questions. Am I in denial? Is the client in denial? Am I willing to go there with the client if they lead me there? Am I willing to address the past if the client makes reference to it or if I sense there may be links? Am I aware, informed enough or confident enough to discuss the cultural and historical context of ignoring the past? Am I attaching my own negativity onto the client's experience? Do I feel confident about either considering the impact of racism on the client or exploring the hurt of racism? Therapists need to be ready to explore the impact of racism on themselves and their clients. The therapist's denial may keep both counsellor and client in an oppressive state of ignorance and powerlessness. A wish to process this state is expressed in the following question.

### *How do we work with the dilemma of fear and mistrust related to the violence of racism?*

I am constantly reminded that the impact of racism, and prejudice, can lay dormant in the psyche. For example: When engaging counselling students in a workshop on black issues black students began to share their experiences of racism and became facilitators of white student's feelings, while white students felt silenced by their own fear and guilt. The trainees whose voices are presented below volunteered to reflect on their experiences of the black issues workshops that were presented during the study.

The issue of trust was contextualized in counseling trainee's references to 'safety' and the impact of racism. Black trainees experienced a degree of safety to share their experiences of racism from white people and internalized racism within their families. White trainees expressed their fears and concerns about being members of the oppressor group and being accused of racism if their responses to the black students were naïve and ill-informed. The onus was mainly on black students to share critical experiences and affirm their white peers. In this situation students need to be facilitated to reflect on their learning process rather than remain stuck in the their powerful feelings and the dynamics of racism.

#### *Black female trainee*

"Safety means having the same opportunities as my white colleagues would have to voice their opinion when they disagree with something. I feel that if I were to

mention something was out of place or wrong, I can't help feeling that. For example I have been paying a lot of money for my daughter's music school and I feel that there is black issue. The director has not returned my calls and I haven't felt brave enough to confront her. I am wondering whether the best I could do as a way of empowering myself is leave. But that does not deal with it. So I tend to accept, I recognize that it is not fair and I recognize that you have to move on. I have to find the best way of dealing with it for me".

#### *White male trainee*

"When I started on the training my knowledge of black issues and any other cultural issues was quite poor. The real difficulty is that it has made me look at my own prejudices. It's coming to terms with that and trying to understand what these prejudices are and where they come from that is important. The black issue workshops have created a lot of uncomfortable feelings for me. At times I have felt quite unsafe, very challenged and quite criticized being a white male. I have had to work through that. At times I have come away from the workshops feeling angry and quite defensive. Over the two years I have tried to work through that and really asked myself. Why am I getting angry, are there some prejudices I have got to face.

#### *Recognition Trauma*

I use the concept of 'recognition trauma' to identify the process that both black and white people go through when emerging from their silencing about racism. It describes the awakening of these hurtful experiences, which sometimes evoke feelings of guilt, shame, hurt and anger. Symptoms of recognition trauma emanate in a similar way to the awakening of powerful feelings related to the impact of sexism and heterosexism. Helms (in Tuckwell, G. 2002) racial identity model, which incorporates the people of colour ego status theory, is useful in understanding this phase. Helm's model proposes that the white ego status goes through a period of immersion/emersion, where a search for meaning of racism and re-definition of whiteness may occur. On the other hand the immersion/emersion ego status for people of colour may create an idealization of one's socio-racial group and a denigration of what may be perceived as white. In this situation the individual uses their own-group external standards to define. With reference to the sixth principle of Locke's model (1990), Sue, D. & Pederson, P. (1998) propose that

*Multiculturalism requires that educators and counsellors be aware of the systematic dimensions of racism and alienation and thereby attempt to understand the experiences, lifestyles, and values of students and clients. (P.517)*

This multiculturalist starting point is important in that it reminds us that racism has been systematic and this is where we can make links from past to present using the concept of ancestral baggage. Working through this phase may be likened to Klein's 'depressive phase', Rycroft (1968) that unlocks embedded feelings of the victim or oppressor.

*At about six months the baby manages this position-Whether or not it can identify with an internalized 'good' mother to the extent that it can repair the damage done by its destructive urges to the 'bad' mother or whether it must flee the*

*implications of the position-constitutes the nodal experience for the infant on which it's subsequent relative normality or psychosis depends. Klein, M. in Mitchell J. (1986, p 115)*

In a similar way if the impact of racism and recognition trauma are not understood and worked through a situation of internalized oppression (A negative, usually unconscious acting out or acting towards self, in ways that can be emotionally harmful and distort identity) may occur. In its extreme this can be seen in skin bleaching and skin scraping caused by a wish to be white). When traumatic experiences occur as a response to racism and prejudice it is not easy to remain aware that both oppressor and victim may be hurting. In counselling situations this awareness may support both counsellor and client. When working through my own awareness of these roles I try to remember that we cannot change the past where we learned the role of victim or oppressor, but we do have a choice about influencing the future.

Ragina: Indian Hindu Female, trained in Person Centred Counselling and now working as an Integrative Counselling course co-ordinator recognises the missing bits in counsellor training. She says:

*"I don't feel that I learnt a lot of theory regarding black issues when I was training. I felt that there was no didactic teaching of any theories to address the issue of diversity and difference in counseling. We did not actually look at whether any of the prevailing theoretical approaches lend themselves to working with people from a non-European culture. I was aware that our training was not readily applicable to people from my culture and therefore, my work with Asian people would have to be carefully considered keeping the appropriate values in focus. We did some workshops and I was part of a group that decided to work on equal opportunities. Then we had a black support group, which was very helpful. We took our insights back to the main group. I also went to NAFSIYAT to inform myself about these issues in terms of our training that was mainly Eurocentric. I had to do a lot of work on my self outside of the course, as it wasn't really available. My tutors were trying to create an awareness of the Person Centered Approach; they were willing, but not aware of culture".*

Ragina tells how the black participants on her training programme have mainly supported her experiences of working with black issues. Kareem (in Kareem and Littlewood, 1994) draws on an important parallel to this dilemma in his discussion on racism in therapy and the societal transference. He says that

*Most psychotherapists who are analytically trained learn to work with and understand the patient's inner world, and therefore for some there is resistance in dealing with psychological problems that originate in the real (outer) world. However, most black people would admit that the, most traumatic feature in their personal lives is to be black in a white society'. He continues 'From the point of view of the intercultural therapist, I believe that it is the responsibility of the therapist, from the very outset, to facilitate the expression of any negative transference which is based on historical context, and not leave the onus on the patient. (P12)*

I wonder if this principle can be applied to training experience by not leaving the onus on the black trainees, as described in Ragina's experience. For the black

student bearing the role of educator on training courses may experience a “continuous trauma” Straker (2004) of their often-disempowered position in a white dominated society. Straker describes how traumatic situations can impose upon the ‘self-structure’. She identifies two main types of trauma: ‘developmental and environmental trauma’ and ‘continuous trauma’ environmental situations continue to impact on the individual and stir feelings related to the original frightening or hurtful experience. These painful feelings or symptoms interrupt the normal self-building process referred to by Straker as ‘going on being of self’.

Ragina's attempt to compliment her ‘going on being of self’ with attendance at the black support group and external projects may be seen as a way of ‘soothing’ the ‘experience of environmental trauma’, produced by the dominant Eurocentric nature of her training experience. *“It is important to have another who will perceive affect accurately and sooth it”* (ibid) It is my belief that if staff on training courses are sufficiently aware and confident about black issues, they can be the ‘another’ that Straker refers to.

Continuous trauma attached to institutional racism is a shared concern and a vital component of black issues and equalities work. Straker used the term ‘empathic attunement’ to describe the important role of the therapist entering the world of the traumatized individual. My concept of recognition trauma combines Straker’s idea of ‘continuous trauma’ and the experience of awareness and response to the impact of racism and oppression both as victim and oppressor.

Ragina’s experience shows that it is important to enter the cultural and historical frameworks of individual’s lives to assist their process through recognition trauma. First looking back, as the Sankofa, at how the past has impacted on their present understanding of black issues and from this creating a model for future understanding and training in this area.

An appropriate model of training is integral to the understanding of black issues. Kareem (in Kareem and Littlewood, 1994) believed that few training organizations are prepared to take up the intercultural challenge and that individuals feel inhibited about raising issues of racism in their training. He believed that trainees might experience a great pressure to keep quiet so as to complete their training. This has certainly been an important ethical issue during transcultural training sessions and during the study. Kareem shares his own experience of training not dissimilar to my own.

*My own internal ego and superego had become replaced with the external institutional superegos of my training models.....I constantly had to battle with myself to keep my head above water, to remind myself at every point who I was and what I was. It was a painful and difficult battle not to think what I had been told to think, not what I had been told to be and not challenge what I had been told could not be challenged and at the same time not become alienated from my basic roots and my basic self. Kareem & Littlewood, (1994 p.31)*

Writing this paper has been a way of debriefing after being on the panel at the end of the conference day where I experienced my own alienation, gagging and being silenced by the white voices surrounding me. Sitting in-between four white people

behind a white tablecloth and attempting to respond to comments and questions that related to my theme was a traumatic experience. Most of the 10 brown skinned delegates who had been there earlier had left the auditorium. I am always afraid that I will be attacked rather than supported when I am in the minority and although I know this is not always true, my trauma speaks. I try to model compassion and sometimes get confused when my rage surfaces, because I forget that their ancestral baggage also damages white people.

At the close of the conference presentation I was relieved and awakened from my victim role when delegates validated my presentation with an appreciation for opening the silence on the traumatic historical impact on the lives of both black and white people was.

These responses gave me a sense of community. The silences pregnant with fear guilt and the expulsion of racist comments both from the platform and the frozen white faces gave a hint of a breakthrough into the process of recognition trauma. Thus providing an opportunity for therapists to work through the role that ancestral baggage can play in intergenerational trauma.

There is never enough time to unpack, explore and dialogue about what comes up at these conferences when black issues are explicitly placed on the agenda, but it is my hope that each vibrant response offers an opportunity to process the traumas attached to them. It is helpful to look at this process by reflecting on what recognition, acknowledgement and reflection might co-create in a situation between client and counselor.

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