

## Reworking Stereotypes for Self Identity in a Black Men's Psychotherapy Group



We as black men have important roles to play in both resistance to being negatively defined and particularly in developing loving and nurturing

relationships with our children, our sons, stepsons, grandsons and Nephews. Positive and strong fathering models are in short supply, often that black macho stuff serves to distance us from our sons and from our true selves as black men who are working hard at our survival. I think that we need to become more involved in the parenting of our children and want to particularly emphasise the deficiencies for black boys in this regard. As a black boy the statistics are against him for getting stopped and searched in the street, arrested or spending time in some institution, criminal or psychiatric. Being locked away does not have to be his destiny.

African descended black men are over-represented both in prisons and mental hospitals. I fear that the UK will become like the USA, with young black men taking their values from the streets, dealing drugs and killing each other at alarming rates. African American writers (Akbar 1991, Madhubum 1990) report that family disintegration, racism, poverty and fatherless families have led to this. Few black men in the USA have benefited from the social policies of the 1960s and 1970s.

This disintegration has not only broken up black families but served to converge and narrow the identity of African descended men in America.

Can it also happen here? What are the warning signs? What do we see other than Gangsta Singers and real life gangsters in both the black and national press? How do young men learn to be a man if not presented with better images of how we could be different, have choices like education, good fathering, or self love and racial pride. We need to have a broader education including our historical and spiritual identities. I began to think seriously about how to work therapeutically with young black men after setting up a black men's group over ten years ago at Nafsiyat. The group came about as I was working with several men of African descent who had all self-referred or been referred for psychological help. Many seemed to have issues that I can only describe as 'combat fatigue': where am I going with my life, does it matter. Shall I give up? Will I always have to fight just to survive in life can I just be a man or do I always have to be a black man?

### "Questions of being and meaning are the most difficult for therapists to deal with

I was haunted by these questions because I have asked them of myself. Several months later after discussing this with my colleague the late Jafar Kareem, we decided to assess men to work in a group with other African Caribbean men, selected from general and internal centre referrals. It was to be a time-limited six month group.

#### Group Membership

Six men were selected to attend the weekly group. Robert a forty-something youth worker who had individual therapy at the centre for depression, related to a disciplinary matter at work. He was in a settled relationship, had teenage children and wondered if he was having a

mid-life crisis. Tony, the youngest at twenty-six, had been in a Gay Men's Group for a year. He had returned to higher education in his mid-twenties, after several successful years in business, and referred himself, requesting a black male therapist. Ainsley, aged thirty was referred by his psychiatrist hoping counselling might help break his pattern of periodic hospital admissions. A quiet, thoughtful man, he was perhaps the most isolated person in the group; after his second breakdown, he gave up his career as a musician and briefly became a committed Christian. Patrick, at twenty-eight was encouraged by his girlfriend to get some therapy. He believed their stormy relationship was the fall-out from his childhood in and out of care and now wanted to change his life. He also wanted to become black, stop being, as he put it, half-caste, and get on with his life. Eden, thirty-one, lived in Ghana until he was twenty-five. He entered therapy at the centre in his final year at university having been briefly admitted to hospital after a suicide attempt. Eden's anxiety and fear of failure was such that his GP prescribed medication. He felt that the group might be supportive during his final year.

Chester came to his assessment reluctantly, sent by his social worker girlfriend. At thirty-five he seemed a successful man. He owned a record and tapes business and worked on street markets across London. He felt that his girlfriend was a hard person to live with, and that she became even more critical after social work training. I was not sure if he would stay the course as he was sure that he did not need to be in the group.

None of the men came requesting group therapy. Tony and Robert were most enthusiastic about being in a group with other black men. Ainsley was most anxious about being in a

group and had managed to avoid them in hospital. Patrick was prepared to try it out. Eden thought that it might help him and Chester was happy to go along with it.

I learned that Robert had been asking these questions in therapy and as a youth worker was being asked them by young men.

Patrick was also asking himself similar questions and Chester's partner was asking them, but he did not seem quite ready to ask them of himself. Questions of being and meaning are the most difficult for therapists to deal with. Often they are still on the path of finding their own answers or finding ways of reconstructing the question. Generally, women are many steps ahead of men in this process, and it is no different for black men and women.

### **The Work Begins**

For many years, writers from African-American communities such as Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin have explored these issues of racial identity sexuality and being from a personal view. More recently, the literature of African-American women, lesbian and heterosexual, has painted interesting portraits of their own struggle for stating I AM....

Whilst I was interested to work with the men in the group on their psychological and emotional difficulties, I was also hoping that the experience of one with each other, I AM... could be explored. I was very aware that I needed to be cautious but hoped that as group conductor I could allow for creativity. Wanting to ensure that Ainsley was not alone in his experience of hospitalisation I recruited Eden, who on the face of it was not terribly suitable. Fearing his anxiety would burden the group, I decided to take a risk and my supervisor supported me in this decision. Tony had previously been in group therapy, and some members

had experiences of social workers and probation officers in some sort of counselling relationship.

Surprisingly all turned up to the first session, and we introduced ourselves, I talked about the task and group rules; respecting others, consistency participation, not interrupting, expressing feelings, no put downs and confidentiality. Robert explored these, and I thought that he was making a leadership bid but interestingly he had no competition from the other participants. Chester, from his expressions, seemed to find it tiresome but said nothing at that stage.

Initially, group members gave accounts of their life histories and how they wanted their lives to be, to what at times seemed an indifferent membership. At the third session, Tony, the youngest in the group, revealed he was gay and worried how this would he received by the group. At first it seemed this was not heard and something else was discussed for a few minutes, until Patrick went back to Tony's concern and said that he was not surprised that it was not easy to hear what was said. Robert said that from his youth-work experience, many youngsters think that they might be gay at some stage. Ainsley said that it made no difference to him what Tony was, but he would support him because he would guess that being black and gay was not easy, like being mentally ill. This contribution seemed to silence the group for a while and Ainsley rang the next day, not sure if he should return. He did, and over the next couple of sessions the group wanted to know who I was and what my life was about. I said little but told them there was one thing that they could be certain of and that was that I too was a black man like them. After this there was doubt about the task and rules, and what I experienced as some hostility directed at me. Robert said that he had been thinking how

good it was to have a group such as this added that he would have really appreciated it when he was younger a comment clearly made to rescue me.

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Around the sixth week a couple of men were curious about why the group at times seemed OK and at other times unsafe. Tony said that he was very frightened when he made his disclosure about being gay and a couple of others said that they experienced fear when it was said, but also at other times. I asked if anyone had any feelings why this might be and there was a thoughtful pause. After a moment, Eden said that he thought it was only he who felt frightened in the group. Tony said he thought that he was the only one who was afraid on account of being the only gay in the group. He said that he felt the same uneasiness in the other group and thought that it was because most of the others were white men, adding that he did not have a problem with white people and that many of his friends were white. Robert asked “Well why did you come to this place then, you could have gone to any other counselling place.’ Tony answered that he wanted to be in therapy with a black man, Why?’ was the next question from Robert, and Tony said that he was not really sure why. Chester said that he did not feel uneasy in the group and Patrick said ‘Well good for you because you don't have any problems... I feel uneasy sometimes because I don't know if I am seen as black enough to be in the group, but I want to be here.” Robert supported him and said that it was a good thing that he was trying to discover the black side of himself.

Eden and Chester did not turn up for the following session. Eden called to say that he was ill and Chester left no word. The group speculated that maybe things were a bit too heated and wondered why I had not done my job and stopped the group getting out of hand. Ainsley in particular thought that I should have stopped it and got people to be nicer to each other. The next session everyone attended; Eden had indeed been unwell. Chester said that he had been picked on because he did not have the same problems as the others. He took the opportunity to talk about his relationship problems and his business problems of being ripped off by punters who seemed always to skank him (to pull a fast one).

It was the first time I think that the group saw him in a more sympathetic light. He said that he was a black man trying to do his best, that he worked hard to make an honest living, wasn't appreciated by his girlfriend and these black guys always wanted to do him down in his business. I asked whether or not he wondered if these black guys wanted to do him down sometimes. He said "Yes, that's why I didn't come last week, I thought they were about to do me some damage." This silenced the group, and Tony said perhaps his uneasiness was about the same thing. All the group members except for Robert admitted to having a similar fear that violence would erupt in the room at some stage and that somebody would get hurt. Although it seemed genuinely said they were all shocked at this secret revelation that black men would become violent

This was an important point in the group which was talked about at some length. Their expectation of violence was for some partly based on experiences of violence witnessed in their families but for most this was not their experience at all. What they had come to learn, from sources that

were hard to pin down, was that black men would erupt spontaneously into uncontrollable violence. At this stage the metaphorical door was pushed open and this common experience led them to wonder how they had arrived at this view of black men and therefore themselves. Was it a stereotype, how had they picked it up, who else had it, were they the mad violent black men that others saw and recognised?

I was unnerved by the impact of my interpretation on the group and feared that the interpretation might have had the force of unpredictable violence on the psychological stability of some members.

On their return however most of the men had discussed what had happened in the group with a friend or colleague. Having experienced such a degree of sameness in their thinking, it now seemed possible for the group members to explore who they felt they really were, without the fear of being attacked by this mythical black man. Robert emerged as a caring and supportive father figure in the group. Tony was openly able to explore his fear of never finding tenderness with a black partner and Chester better able to engage with his girlfriend and talk with her about their life and their future. He seemed to have changed his approach in his relationship with his partner finding that they did after all have a lot to talk about and to plan for their lives. He did not feel as pushed around by her as he had done before and considered whether or not he would have gone into therapy had she not suggested it. Patrick explored his early childhood relationships with his father who had left them and his mother's inability to manage her three children alone. He felt that he would never leave his own children if he were to have any. He said that it hurt not having contact with his parents and very little with his sister and

brother and he thought that they too could do with therapy

Eden completed his course and at the end of the group was planning to return to Ghana. He felt that he was always under pressure from his family to do well and now wanted to go back to his civil service job in Accra and have an easier life. Ainsley became less of a recluse and was supported by Robert to volunteer in a youth-club.

## Discussion

The six people in the group were able to get a clearer picture of themselves as black men from the experience of working in a black men's group. The hidden stereotype held about black men could only have been reflected back to them from the mirrored experience of working with other black men who harboured that image of themselves, but projected onto others. They were finally able to say I AM... having discarded that spoiled social identity as bad and useless black men. From the group experience of refuting this identity I feel sure that such a discourse could only take place in a black men's group.

Since this event I have become more and more interested in how young black men manage to construct a positive self identity. Images of black tough street cred not only conflate a whole range of identities for young black men, but also hide the tender loving and hard-won identities that all men are capable of having. It is only when we can dare to be our true selves that we can be of use to our black sons, nephews and grandsons. Perhaps we can explain to them about the dangers of life's hard obstacle race without needing to act it out as a way of helping them to survive it

Women of African descent in Britain and the USA have played an

important part in the civil rights movement and have developed black women's groups to help them discover who they are. Men, black and white, are slow in this quest for self discovery and self development. Many fear losing power and revealing themselves as vulnerable, without the trappings of the social structure which they have appropriated as their own. In the case of African descended men in the Diaspora, they do not own the social structures, so one wonders why a coming together of this sort for exploration has been slow to happen. Perhaps since 'The Million Man March' we as African descended men can begin to consider who we really are.

### References

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#### Biographical details

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Reworking Stereotypes in a Black Mens Group was first published in the British Association for Counselling's RACE journal, no 13 Summer 1997.