The internal oppressor and black identity wounding

Aileen Alleyne identifies an internal dynamic that affects black* attachment patterns to the white Other.

*The inner enemy is as much a formidable foe as the most manipulative associate* (George Bach)

'I don't do deference where white people are concerned'; 'you can never trust the white man's intentions'; 'white people will never get accustomed to, nor comfortable with black people in positions of power'; 'people will always see your colour first and personality second'; 'no matter how hard you try to succeed, people will always want to beat you down'; 'we always have to work twice – even three times – as hard to get to where we want or be on par with the white man'; 'we don't seem able to come together and sustain anything good as black people'.

The above examples might seem to come from a past era, a time when things used to be more overtly and permissibly divisive in black/white relations. Yet these opinions were all expressed quite recently - in the last year during my research study on race-specific workplace stress. So what has changed and what still remains?

These examples (and many more) drawn from black workers' stories, were typically referred to and readily interwoven into the narratives bearing their experiences of workplace difficulty. So what has changed and what still remains? These experiences have been perceived to be more overtly and permissibly divisive in black/white relations.

The above examples might seem to come from a past era, a time when things used to be more overtly and permissibly divisive in black/white relations. Yet these opinions were all expressed quite recently - in the last year during my research study on race-specific workplace stress. So what has changed and what still remains?

These examples (and many more) drawn from black workers' stories, were typically referred to and readily interwoven into the narratives bearing their experiences of workplace difficulty. So what has changed and what still remains?

The above examples might seem to come from a past era, a time when things used to be more overtly and permissibly divisive in black/white relations. Yet these opinions were all expressed quite recently - in the last year during my research study on race-specific workplace stress. So what has changed and what still remains?

These examples (and many more) drawn from black workers' stories, were typically referred to and readily interwoven into the narratives bearing their experiences of workplace difficulty. So what has changed and what still remains?
continue to transmit trauma and grief through the generations of an oppressed group or race of people.

**The internal oppressor**

Much has been written – Akbar, Freire, hooks, Lipsky, Lorde – about black internalised oppression, which is the process of absorbing consciously or unconsciously the values and beliefs of the oppressor and subscribing to the stereotypes and misinformation about one’s group, at least in part. Such a process leads to low self-esteem, self-hate, the disowning of one’s own group, and other complex defensive interpersonal behaviours that influence and impair quality of life. Although this concept has been fully explored by the writers mentioned above, only a few (for example Lorde) have dealt specifically with the concept of the oppressor within ourselves - the ‘internal oppressor’. I maintain that the internal oppressor – an aspect of the self that becomes the inner tyrant – is distinct from internalised oppression. The latter is the way in which we allow external beliefs and value systems to invalidate our authenticity and inhibit our personal agency.

The internal oppressor is in my view an aspect of the self that appears to carry difficult historical and intergenerational baggage across the generations. In terms of black/white relations, the internal oppressor seems to create a post-slavery/post-colonial mindset that colours our (black people’s) dealings with the white Other. It influences our inter-relational dynamics and attachment with this Other and may even collude unconsciously with the prevailing external difficulties. The internal oppressor seems to be ever present, but lies dormant for the most part. It is only when it is in contact with an external oppressive situation – real, perceived, or a mixture of both – that the historical memories are re-awakened, opening up old wounds that can lead to silent, invisible re-wounding of the self and identity. Prejudices, projections, intergenerational wounds and the vicissitudes of our historical past are all aspects of this inner tyrant – the internal oppressor. They are kept alive within the transgenerational transmission of trauma, and this suggests a degree of a persistent post-traumatic syndrome in black people’s existence. Alongside these historical aspects of the internal oppressor, are other factors such as, our narcissistic injuries, personal unresolved difficulties where power and control predominate, and painful unresolved family dynamics.

**Cultural enmeshment and ontological health**

What are the consequences of this conscious and or unconscious holding on to the past? Fusion of the historic past and present, as well as the internal and external, begins to look and feel very much like states of co-dependence and, more specifically, enmeshment (Minuchin). Black people’s historical past and its effects on the present seem largely to determine their ontology (rooted sense of being in the world) in any given situation with the white Other.

Enmeshment as a psychoanalytic concept begins to help us understand why this is so. Enmeshment is unavoidably linked to the concept of Self. For example, mother and young child are likely to be functionally enmeshed temporarily at the ‘expense’ of father – but later the situation will reverse to leave mother less proximal and father more engaged. This is a normal state of affairs in most family systems and allows the child to experience both parents and negotiate the process of autonomy in a healthy fashion. Dysfunctional enmeshment according to Minuchin, is seen as a disorder producing developmental arrest that leads to difficulty in disengaging from internal objects, e.g. one's mother, father or (as in the case of black/white relations) the coloniser – the oppressor.

Enmeshment of this kind becomes inflexible and prevents or hampers change, growth and achieving one’s fullest potential. It breeds dependency and anger (not always recognised) over the reliance on the Other. Specific to black/white relations, this enmeshed state has, in my view, undoubtedly created patterns of parent/child and symbiotic attachments, where both sides perpetuate and continually seek mutual advantage from each other. Sampson illuminates this point in his analysis of the context of power in black/white relations. He suggests that ‘dominant groups and individuals create serviceable others whose creation gives both the self and the Other the very qualities that define
their human nature. He continues: ‘the [black] Other is a figure constructed to be serviceable to the historically white dominant male group. In order to provide this service, the Other cannot be permitted to have a voice, a position, a being of its own, but must remain mute or speak only in ways permitted by the dominant discourse.’ He adds the point that ‘the other is an essential presence without whom the dominant protagonist could not be who they claim to be’.

Dependency issues between majority and minority groups can clearly be identified in the above viewpoints.

A key finding from my research has indicated that amongst the respondent group, a majority seemed to share a common mindset. They were more predisposed to waiting to be given opportunities, openings and permission to be ‘actional’ (exercising personal agency) as opposed to actively taking opportunity, initiating, leading, creating openings and being more self-governing. The recurrence of this theme in respondents’ stories has highlighted real difficulties with issues of entitlement, personal rights and self-actualisation (seeking one’s full potential).

Co-dependence and enmeshment would suggest then that there is a propensity for us as black people to seek self-definition through the white Other, whilst also being extremely critical of this other. This tricky ambivalent situation can lead ultimately to difficulties in experiencing oneself as separate in one’s own identity. Dependence on the white Other in either conscious or unconscious ways, whilst carrying around historical baggage and angst, can create a focus where the white Other is forever present – a function of the superego. This preoccupation can lead to strong connections (cultural and spiritual) with the individual self becoming more elusive. Enmeshment and co-dependence in this context become a disease of lost selfhood. To utilise one’s personal energies in continually tracking the carer (the white Other) – as witnessed in some of the research interviews – may also contribute to biased or negative pre-transference dynamics. Such dynamics can lead to a hypersensitivity and anticipation of racial and cultural conflict in any given situation.

So how do black people go about healing from the effects of this historical enmeshment? And how can black workers interrupt the ‘spiral of events’ discussed previously when faced with the challenge of dealing with workplace oppression? **Separation and healing**

The way out of most enmeshed states is to separate, achieve autonomy, and self-sufficiency. However, separation in relation to black/white dynamics, is not to be misconstrued as separatism, isolation or alienation.

The necessary task in my view is to understand the bigger picture – which in turn enables the process of unravelling, owning and dealing with what belongs to us as black people. Ongoing work is also needed in separating out what belongs to the white Other, which may include such dynamics as irrational fear, guilt, projections, displacement of negative feelings, and over-compensatory defences. If we are unable to ‘own’ what is ours, then we cannot engage in the process of examining, evaluating, regulating or influencing its impact.

Both black and white practitioners who are themselves aware and conscious of the need for such personal work can play an important role in facilitating and affirming this task in therapy for both black and white clients. This will involve helping the client to see what is in the frame, naming it, understanding and dealing with its presence and exercising agency in regulating it. When there is a wounding to black identity, the tendency to link the historical past to present circumstances is quite common. The job of distinguishing internal and external realities, personal and historical factors, and the past and present, are all necessary and important tasks in achieving personal (and spiritual) freedom. Most writers – (sic) hooks’, Akbar’, Lorde’, Cobbs and Grier – who have addressed this issue, emphasise the need for black people to educate themselves for ‘critical consciousness’. By this, they mean the ability to show independence of mind by reasoning for oneself and having the emotional literacy and cultural competence to do things differently. In hooks’ *killing rage, muling nazi*, she reminds us not to see blackness solely as a matter of powerlessness and victimisation. Rather, there is a need to have deeper understanding of institutional racial oppression in all its facets and of the ways it over-determines patterns of black/white social and work relations.

Aileen Allyene is a UKCP registered psychodynamic psychotherapist and clinical supervisor in private practice. She is also a facilitator and consultant on diverse issues of race and culture in educational settings and the workplace. Email: aileen@kisskadee.com

**References**