

## **The concept of Recognition Trauma and emerging from the hurt of racism - Dr Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga September 2011**

Following on from the concept of 'Ancestral baggage', I have introduced the concept of 'recognition trauma'. This concept identifies the process that both black and white people go through when emerging from being silenced about racism. It describes the awakening of hurtful experiences, which sometimes evokes 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 color 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 the meaning of racism and re-definition of whiteness may occur. On the other hand the immersion/emersion ego status for people of color 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 self define. This multiculturalists starting point is important in that it reminds us that racism has been systematic and this is where links can be made from past to present using the concept of ancestral baggage. Working through the phase of recognition trauma may be likened to Klein's 'depressive phase', Rycroft (1968) that unlocks embedded feelings of the victim or oppressor. Usually this phase can be worked through. The individual comes through a process of emergence and finds their normality in relation to the painful experiences.

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 counseling situations this awareness may support both counselor and client. When working through my own awareness of these roles I try to remember that we cannot change the past where we may have learned the role of victim or oppressor, but we do have a choice about influencing the future.

Ragina, an Indian Hindu Female, therapist recognises the missing bits in counsellor training *I had to do a lot of the work myself about these issues outside of the course, as it wasn't really available in terms of our training that was mainly Eurocentric*

Kareem (in Kareem and Littlewood, 1994) recognizes this dilemma *'Most black people would admit that the most traumatic feature in their personal lives is to be black in a white society'*. He continues *'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)

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In summary it is important that therapists enter the cultural and historical frameworks of individual's lives to assist their process through recognition trauma.