

Emerging from the hurt of Racism

Dr Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga September 2011

I have said in my earlier paper that the concept of recognition trauma relates to the process of pain and recovery that both black and white people go through when awareness of being a victim or perpetrator of racism occurs. Recognition trauma can manifest in a variety of ways. For some it emerges through a gradual understanding of their own subservience to white peers, colleagues and associates. For others it shows up as a manifestation of inherent family dynamics. For example ridicule due to being the darkest skinned child in the family. In the case of Caucasian families it may be that racist thoughts became a norm in everyday conversation. There are those who become aware of how they have oppressed others due to skin color or colluded with stereotypes and negative responses to skin color. Even the smallest self doubt arising from these experiences can contribute to a compilation of trauma resulting in low self esteem, loss of personal power and denigration of self or others. A black counseling trainee states that black issues is not just about racism. "It is to do with the way black people relate to other black people and how they relate to white people". This trainee wonders whether white clients think she is good enough to work with them. I see this as a clear manifestation of internalized racism. Her awareness of being black is a negative awareness. Internalized racism can contribute to trauma in an unconscious way. For the trainee a moment of recognition trauma that imposes doubt about her professional ability to perform with a white person because of the many ways in which she has experienced negativity towards herself and other black people. This moment of awareness provokes a need to heal the hurts of racism and empower the self in order to move on past the trauma of racist provocation, whether it is from others or the internalized self. A white trainee shares her experiences of not feeling understood as a white person. This can arise when she is challenged about her racist stereotyping of black people, or her denial of the impact that racism can have on others lives. Not feeling understood as a white person can mean being dismissed because of association with the perpetrator group. This kind of dismissal can further damage the intra psychic disposition of white perpetrators of racism as often this response creates a silence that blocks the process of emerging through the trauma of racism. A bit like, well you stay in your patch and I will stay in mine. Like two stags locking horns. At some point the horns become unlocked and possibility of a stand away can occur rather than a stand off. In the case of emerging from recognition trauma it is important to understand that the process can be transformative if viewed as a process rather than the end point of an unpalatable phase. Recovery and reflection away from the situation can help promote greater self-love and some understanding of how humans are impacted by racist dynamics. For black people, association with empathic peers who accept that racism is an every day experience that requires loving support, acknowledgement and sharing, rather than denial is useful. For white perpetrators, some supportive reflection on the historical influence of racism on their psychology and exposure to positive black models can be helpful.