

The internal oppressor - the veiled companion of external racial oppression



In this paper I will briefly present a theory of intercultural psychotherapy that has evolved from a recent study enquiring specifically into black workers experiences in the workplace. The theory is also offered as a useful perspective that could have wider application to areas such as psychic wounding and developmental arrest. The quote: The inner enemy is as much a formidable foe as the most manipulative {or oppressive} associate. (George Bach, 1998), aptly supports this key finding, and with specific reference to black/white relations, the internal enemy is of utmost importance as it rests on the very real external experiences/history/fears of oppression.

A qualitative research approach was used for the study, involving a random sample of thirty people between 30-45 from predominantly African-Caribbean, black British and African backgrounds. All held posts (managerial and non-managerial) in three well-known institutions - the NHS, Social Services and Education. From their rich and varied stories, the following key themes emerged:

a) the presence of a virulent form of racism, i.e. subtle racism (resembling the covert racism described in the MacPherson Report, 1999 and Kovel 1970).

b) a pattern to an unnamed phenomenon in these settings which I term "workplace oppression".

c) resulting harmful effects manifesting as black identity wounding and trauma.

d) the presence of an internal enemy which I term "the internal oppressor" which is distinct from the process of internalised oppression.

e) evidence of "cultural enmeshment" in black/white relations.

Here I will present and discuss two of these key findings, (a) the phenomena of workplace oppression, and (b) the workings of the internal oppressor. Further details of the study are listed in the references.

The personal accounts gathered have clearly and consistently highlighted ongoing difficulties in black/white relations at work that prove harmful and impeding to black workers. There was evidence that although these difficulties were not always overtly about race, they nevertheless targeted racial aspects of the individual's identity and occurred with such regularity that it was easy for the 'sufferer' to detect their distinct nature. Analysing the material, I identified a specific pattern and recognisable flow to these developing events. The picture presented below highlights the cycle of events:

Microaggression* - term coined by Russell (1998) to describe racial assaults that are subtle, stunning, often automatic, non-verbal exchanges by Whites that are down-putting of Blacks. The resulting effect is shame and hurt. Macroaggressions* are similar to microaggressions in many respects but differ in that they are directed at black people as well as the individual.

WORKPLACE OPPRESSION

I use the term workplace oppression in a very deliberate sense to address complex organisational dynamics and silent forces involving issues of power and powerlessness and of the dominant and dominated. The research showed webs of entanglements and dramas played out in the workplace, suggesting

certain power dynamics were at play and were enacted and re-enacted in the everyday cultures of work settings. For black workers these enactments ranged from minor annoyances and everyday cultural frustrations, e.g. referring to black men as boys, jokes, name-calling, "feeling you have to blend in", "playing down your own needs and identity", being ignored, etc., to more major incidents of racial "assaults" and discrimination. Overall the effects for the black worker were hurtful and deeply painful. All the interviewees complained of the effects of "stigmatic stress" endured over a long period. This strain arises from being 'marked' and singled out for unfavourable and discriminatory treatment; the marked person is pushed into a state of hyper-vigilance and therefore highly sensitised to their surroundings. Prolonged experiences of this kind soon resulted in raised anxiety, irritability, ruminating over events, demoralisation and paranoia alarmingly, interviewees revealed a high incidence of chronic fatigue syndrome (ME), late-onset diabetes, and clinical diagnoses of hypertension, depression and mental health difficulties. Interviewees described these insidious and relenting workplace experiences as a kind of "grinding down process" which threatened their capacity to remain resilient and positive.

These occurrences were so stunning and debilitating in nature that to simplify them as just stress, scapegoating - bullying, harassment, personality difficulties or mere projective identification, is to do a huge disservice to an unexamined phenomenon and all its complexities

"The conclusion was that race does matter in the workplace"

Initial findings clearly confirmed a long-recognised problem of institutional racism; racism that can be unwitting and pernicious. This is also the form of racism that thrives in

traditional work cultures bolstered by majority values which support “the way we do things round here”. Such cultures shape interpersonal relations, routine practices and procedures in ways where black and minority ethnic individuals feel marginalized and excluded. The conclusion was that race does matter in the workplace. However in spite of its wide-scale difficulties, subtle racism in particular seems unrecognised as a real problem in Britain. The situation is different in the US, where this pernicious process was given public credibility in 1997 by President Bill Clinton’s acknowledgement of its presence and harm:

Racism... is not confined to acts of physical violence... Every day {black people} and other minorities are forced to endure quiet acts of racism - bigoted remarks... job discrimination... These may not harm the body, but... it does violence to their souls. We must stand against such quiet hatred just as surely as we condemn acts of physical violence.” (Russell, 1998)

Within organisations that represent a microcosm of our society, it is known that black and other minority ethnic groups easily become containers for projected, unwanted and negative feelings from the other (Obholzer and Roberts, 1999; Shur, 1994). The three institutions highlighted in this study are workplaces where staff are expected to continually hold anxieties and impulses evoked by people who are needy and vulnerable. Within such milieus, the projection, re-introjection and splitting of primitive initialised object-relations can easily predominate and be evacuated into and displaced unto perceived lesser others and also sustained by the process of attributing ‘lesser’ values to others. Black and other minority ethnic workers are convenient vessels in this sense, and the perceived ‘lesser’ others. Those taking part in the study voiced repeatedly that they seldom felt held and supported in their organisations and by management. With specific regard to race matters lack of holding can be seen as institutional structures

consciously and unconsciously colluding, legitimising and disguising enactments of dehumanisation, splitting and omnipotence.

In the circumstances described, it is clear that the resulting psychic pain from this unheeded dimension of black/white relations cannot simply be endlessly absorbed without deep damage to the individual’s positive feelings and hopefulness about themselves.

A subsequent key finding from the study suggests that within these processes of projective-identification (Klein, 1964), aspects of black people’s internal trauma may “hook” onto and into elements of external racial oppression, thus setting a complex scene for the re-enactment of oppression in the workplace. The erosion of physical and internal well-being undermines black workers to the extent that they enact the injustice they experience. This can be seen as (and I think often is) attempts to ‘get fair treatment’, or move from the position of ‘object’ i.e. the container for negative projections, to proper ‘subjects’. However as these behaviours tend to bring a negative attention, such re-enactments unwittingly feed into a confirmation of racist assumptions and notions of black people being difficult, aggressive, angry, threatening, and having difficulties with authority.

THE INTERNAL OPPRESSOR

The external and interpersonal dynamics discussed so far portray only two dimensions of the triangulated phenomenon of workplace oppression. The third and most disregarded area raises important issues for what the “sufferer” might also bring to the situation. This was a secondary finding from the study, principally borne out by the language of the interviewees.

Particularly striking was the way in which interviewees described their experiences; my attention was drawn to a set of familiar, recurring phrases, themes, identifications, pre-occupations, metaphors and other

symbolic language, venting anger, frustration and recounting feelings of abject despair and depression. Examples of such language are as follows:

1. “people will always see your colour first and personality second”
2. “no matter how hard you try to succeed, people will always want to beat you down”
3. “white people will never get accustomed to nor comfortable with a black person in a position of power”
4. “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”
5. “we don’t seem able to come together and sustain anything good as black people”

Examples of comments that linked the past to the present were:

1. “this is modern day slavery”
2. “white management still want to keep black workers in chains”

Scrutiny and analysis of this language pattern suggested that powerful memory imprints from the legacy of a painful historical past were marked, and re-opened with the occurrence of oppressive workplace practices. It seemed that the inescapable past, although perhaps chronologically distant, was still present enough to be creating a persistent post-traumatic syndrome. Segregation and apartheid are current memories of lived experiences for many people, the presence of more oppressive memories is not distant. The influence of this third element suggested the presence of the internal oppressor.

The ‘internal oppressor’ (a noun), as distinct from internalised oppression (a process), is an aspect of the Self carried through the generations, historical and intergenerational ‘baggage’. I use the term baggage in this context to describe that which we as black people carry unwillingly and not a chosen possession. Much has been written about internalised oppression, Lipsky (1987), Lorde

(1984), hooks (1995), Freire (1970), which is the process of absorbing the values and beliefs of the oppressor and coming to believe that the stereotypes and misinformation about one's group is true (or partly true). Such a process can lead to low self-esteem, self-hate, the disowning of one's group, and other complex defensive behaviours in relation to one's group. Only a few, (Alleyne, 2004; Lorde, 1984) however have dealt specifically with the concept of the oppressor within ourselves - the internal oppressor and black identity development.

Prejudices, projections, inter-generational wounds and the vicissitudes from our historical past are all aspects of this inner tyrant - the internal oppressor. They are kept alive through the transgenerational transmission of trauma alongside these aspects of the internal oppressor are other factors such as our narcissistic injuries, our personal unresolved difficulties featuring power and domination, and those difficult and painful experiences unresolved within our family dynamics. The nature of the internal oppressor appears to be the sum total of these characteristics which rests in the shadow of the self. The overarching backdrop of a post-slavery/post-colonial context and the "baggage" of black people's internalised oppression from these historical experiences seem to play a crucial part in shaping our pre-transference relationship and attachment to the white other. The clear picture being created is one combined of the past and present, as well as internal and external factors being inextricably linked and fused. Fusion of the historical past with one's present functioning can lead to forms of co-dependence which I refer to as cultural enmeshment. In brief, the concept of enmeshment with particular reference to black/white relations, is a key theory to understanding complex issues relating to black identity development, trauma and resilience and the work of repairing and healing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

A central theme in psychotherapy is dealing with issues of identity, part of which should be our history and collective development which extends across generations. Questions such as, Who am I? Where do I come from? What influences have marked me? What have I developed for myself that is independent of the collective? Would all seem necessary and important when confronting the inner tyrant - the internal oppressor?

Psychotherapeutic management of emotional and psychological issues connected with workplace oppression will require a deep understanding of cultural identity trauma and the human condition in all its complexities. Central is the need to acknowledge the effects of silent, subtle dynamics of racism and its potential to hurt, harm and even damage profoundly. Awareness of the vestiges of a historical colonial past and the likelihood of such a history being carried around as cultural 'baggage' with a recurring post-traumatic effect is key, and a conceptual understanding of the potential for such 'baggage' to be enacted and re-enacted in group situations such as "caring organisations" is crucial.

The therapist working towards being more culturally competent will also need a clear understanding of vital issues pertaining to power and powerlessness and the complex ways these factors are heightened in traditional hierarchical systems. Attention to the areas presented in this paper could enable practitioners to respond more effectively to problems of trauma and black identity wounding. An inclusive approach which holds together the external, interpersonal and internal dimensions of this problem, could prove effective in helping clients/patients to tune out latent rage and castrate the internal oppressor. Such work could also help clients/patients reframe (not forget) their relationship with their past, which is a necessary ontological task to fully heal, and restore a state of grace (fulfilment, unimpededness and

elevation). It would be true to say that a reflexive identity will only begin at the point where unconsciousness identifications and fixation with aspects of one's history cease. This statement is pertinent to both sides of the black/white divide. However, as my research clearly confirms the prevalence of subtle racism and its harmful effects to many, I will turn to Paulo Freire (1970) to reiterate why this important topic is a matter for all disciplines (including psychotherapy) that deal with concerns of the human condition. In discussing change in the oppressed and oppressor Freire names three key points; (a) oppression dehumanises both parties; (b) the oppressor who is himself dehumanised because he dehumanizes others, will try to hang onto his power and dehumanising practices; (c) as a consequence, the oppressed has to lead the struggle for a fuller humanity for both. The latter is an important goal much impeded by the function of the internal oppressor.

In my experience, the significance of the issues raised in this paper is either missed, undermined, colluded with or reacted to with indifference in the psychotherapy world. The potential import of such material is not then given its rightful place in this milieu. However it is important at the same time not to overvalue such material nor assume that all black people are damaged by the inescapable fact of living with racism in their midst. The task of the therapist is to be able to distinguish between the different issues raised by the client/patient and facilitate the work of separation and healing where this material might apply in the bigger picture of their difficulties. Although this paper has focussed primarily on a study of the experiences of a specific racial group i.e. black people, its findings may also apply and be of value to other minority ethnic groups whose experience of societal prejudice and discrimination are similar or problematic.

* The term black is used throughout this paper to represent all peoples with known African heritage.

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