

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'; 'while 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. These I will refer to as workplace oppression. Workplace oppression is my specific choice of term because it addresses directly issues of power and powerlessness and of the dominant and dominated. Central to this topic are quiet forms –

silent acts – of subtle racism and racial prejudice that have a negative and detrimental impact on black and other minority ethnic groups.

This article is written to support both white and black practitioners who might meet these unconscious dynamics in their work with black clients. Such experiences can be painful for both therapist and client, particularly as there are many cases where black clients in beginning to feel stronger from their therapy, also start to feel angry. This might have a special intensity if the therapist is white.

What has struck me about the opening remarks quoted, is the way these statements are internalised to create life scripts for a large number of respondents. These scripts had the tendency to determine such things as personal drives, values, worldviews and the individual's relatedness to the white Other. For example, many respondents referred back to slavery and colonialism when describing their work difficulties, and significantly used such language connected to the past as: 'this is modern-day slavery' and 'white management still want to keep black people in chains'.

This evidence suggests that although we, as black people, are nearly two centuries removed from our historical past, we still carry the intergenerational scars in both our mental and social lives. The ever-present past, with its conscious and unconscious effects on black people's here-and-now experiences, suggests

to me that relations between workers and management, and clients and therapists, will inevitably bear aspects of these historical interactions.

In my last article¹, my description of the 'spiral of events' highlighted how certain workplace events occur and escalate to critical proportions with negative and traumatic effects on black workers. The depiction of these events brought to light some complex intercultural dynamics similar to those of the more classic three-stage process of scapegoating namely, *identification* (being singled out), *transference of blame* (projection), and *banishment* (isolation and attack). Furthermore, I would argue that compounding the experiences of workplace oppression, is the issue of what black people bring of their own (both personal and historical) to these difficult situations. This piece focuses on the presence and function of the internal oppressor, which arises from black people's history and which has the tendency to conflate with present, here-and-now experiences of identity-wounding, stress and trauma.

It would be quite tempting in our modern times to dismiss this unheeded dimension of black people's historical past, or of any other oppressed racial or cultural group's past, as a factor determining identity. But the work of Karpf², Lifton³ and Schaverien⁴ show that this would be short sighted. Schaverien in particular deals powerfully with the unconscious, showing how collective memory with its painful imprints, can

continue to transmit trauma and grief through the generations of an oppressed group or race of people.

The internal oppressor

Much has been written – Akbar⁵, Freire⁶, hooks⁷, Lipsky⁸, Lorde⁹ – 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 Lorde⁹) 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.

‘The task is to enable the process of unravelling, owning and dealing with what belongs to us as black people’

The nature of the internal oppressor appears to be the sum of these characteristics, which rest in the shadow of the self. The legacy of (our) black people's historical past, along with the burden of our internalised oppression, both seem to play a crucial part in shaping our pre-transference relationship and attachment patterns to the white Other. The picture being created here is one of the past and present, as well as internal and external factors being inextricably linked and fused. How black people manage this aspect of the self is a key factor in our ontological and mental health security.

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 (Minuchin¹⁰). 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 Minuchin¹⁰, 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. Sampson¹¹ 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 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) hooks⁷, Akbar⁸, Lorde⁹, Cobbs and Grier¹² – 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, ending racism*'⁷, 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. ■

**The term black is used in this context to indicate people with African heritage.*

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