

# Cultural Identity of Colonialism: Traumatic Effects of Slavery and Racism

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**Abstract:** *This paper outlines ways of conceptualizing and understanding the intergenerational impact of slavery and colonialism. In consideration of the volatile and emotive nature of this subject I shall define what I mean by black issues. I am using a working definition of black issues rather than present myself as the expert on this theme. The term 'black' in this context is a political and sociological term applied to the most visible minority in the UK who are vulnerable to white racism. Black people are the least represented in the field of psychotherapy and counselling and there may be several reasons for this. For example Taboos about washing dirty linen in public and sharing family behaviours and culturally specific conflicts with individuals outside of their communities of origin and their networks. Suspicion about the use of traditional therapies that may be culturally inappropriate and exclusion and misunderstanding due to institutional racism may also be another cause. Having said this, although the term black is generally used to affirm the rich African and Asian heritage of colonised peoples, it is important to be clear that not all Africans, Caribbean peoples and Asians identify as 'black'. Indeed a Caribbean artist friend alluding to 'black as a transitional phase through authentic identity development insists that you are black until you are African. In the book I have referred to black issues as pertaining to the experiences and concerns in the lives of black people of which racism has a significant influence. This outlook can therefore be used as model for therapeutic understanding of oppressive influences on other minority groups.*

**Keyword:** *Cultural Identity, Cross Cultural, Colonialism, Slavery, Racism, Trauma.*

## Introduction

I would like to draw attention to the racial or cultural pre-disposition of the black or minority client in the therapeutic process. There are three main areas in this process. The first being the personal and psychological impact that derives from experiences of individual overt or covert racism from which, according to Scheurich & Young (1997) comes epistemological racism. Even if the individual does not accept they are being racist epistemological racism occurs and thus creates discourses of institutional racism and Eurocentricism.

The second area of Social and educational impact is evidenced by intergenerational oppression and trauma that can be seen in everyday attitudes. A fifteen year old teenager stands in the centre of a cultural carnival in London and states "There are Chinky's all around me" A small child points and laughs out loud at a 'little' person in a shopping centre, a seventeen year old states

that he would kill himself if he were gay. An African Caribbean child hates her hair because it is not silky and straight. These snapshots of intergenerational oppression are influenced by social, cultural and educational reference points and get passed on inter-generationally. They are usually evidenced when unconscious psychological processes are exposed. Therapy creates a dynamic emotional situation that uncovers these civilisational and intergenerational modes of response to diversity and culture. Eurocentricism impacts on the modes of response to these social and educational dilemmas and can determine whether for example the oppression of racism will be challenged and the attached emotional distress supported for both individuals within the perpetrator group and victims of racism.

Racism continues to cause trauma and depression. The examination of this problem has been halted in mid flow by a discourse of post racism. Post racism is a defensive excuse to sit in a complacent matrix on laurels and not get messy in attempts to resolve the racial aspects of a transcultural process. It is often forgotten that slavery was damaging both for the perpetrators and the enslaved and both parties must be responsible for how they move on from this atrocity. Silences about the impact of slavery and colonialism within the psychotherapy profession often means that black clients may not have appropriate support for the intergenerational impact of this collective trauma.

The traumatic effects of slavery and colonialism can create misunderstanding and lack of attention to the cultural aspects of anxiety. Several indications of this have become apparent. Negative or sole identification with the same group and rejection of members of the perpetrator group is one aspect of isolation that occurs. On an individual level, particularly when support has not been forthcoming isolation & depression can occur. There is strong evidence that don't discharge signals that emanate from the trauma of slavery prevent individuals from crying or raging about the oppression of racism.

Another context of this trauma is the better than or less than ideals that through caste systems and skintonism have widely permeated identity development. In the extreme this is seen in the promotion and use of skin lightening and hair straightening creams to alter physical features. In the book I have created the concept of Black Western Archetypes to assist understanding of the historical context of this phenomenon. An example of this is the step and fetch it pattern born out in individual fear of challenging racism and the relegation of lower status positions of black people in the labour market, particularly in the domestic field.

## **Discussion**

The third area of trauma and the cultural aspects of anxiety can be seen when denial of the experience of racism or denial of being a member of the perpetrator group becomes apparent. Fear of the enormity of the impact of racism is a major part of this type of response. Fear of isolation & rejection by peers due to recognising the powerful position of being in the perpetrator group, or naming the oppression as a victim can occur.

On top of these fears, individuals often experience fear that the associated powerful feelings caused by racism cannot be repaired. This is where the concept of recognition trauma also mentioned in the book comes in. I have stated that I believe there is a process of recovery that can happen once recognition trauma, which is an understanding of the powerful feelings, associated with racism and ways of facilitating the experience are acknowledged.

## The Process of Recognition Trauma

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.

## **Black Issues and the Intersection of Racism and Sexuality**

Holding an open dialogue about sex and relationships in the black community is a complex issue. Intercultural and intra-cultural dynamics and ruptures impacted by the history of colonialism and slavery add to this conundrum. Black men and women become objects of desire and objects of envy and hatred based on their skin tone, hair texture and the influences of racism and sexism on their internal processes and personal life histories. Black people have in common the distresses caused by living in a racist society even though some may not be fully aware. So to whom do black people talk about sex, sexuality and relationships? What are the responses and what place does racism and heterosexism play in the institutional fabrics that mirror these issues? How do therapists support conflicts that include the impact of racism without exacerbating the oppressions?

There is no single black masculinity or femininity; however the intergenerational legacy of slavery and the influence of Eurocentric influence on identity has caused black sexuality to be homogenized. The emasculation of African males and maternalising and objectifying of females through slavery contributed to the distortion of emotional connection. (Scully, 1997) Models evolving from traumatic events were based on the inhuman treatment by the white master and his family and internalized patterns of suppressing feelings of love, grief and pain of any sort. Out of these heinous crimes emerged mythology and stereotypes that became attached to the western psyche. Nevertheless black love has thrived on the wellbeing and spirituality of the elders and the extended family.

Some individuals remain numb about sexual abuse within the black family due to fear of exacerbating the racism that black families experience outside of the home. The impact of sexual and physical violence lies deep in the history of slavery and has left an imprint on the self esteem of black folks. The black woman's inferiority to white females is compounded by the use of skin lightening creams and hair straightening. In a Freudian context one might suggest that the African man and the African woman have both been castrated; therefore their relationships may forever be influenced by their history. In addition marriages between African slaves were not legally recognised.

Whether gay or straight, alienation from the family and cultural roots adds to the distortion of sexual identity and loving relationships. In some African and Caribbean countries homophobia is reinforced by legislation that permits annihilation of Gays, therefore suicide is often seen as a preferred option to sharing sexual identity with family and friends. In the UK black minority sexuality is virtually hidden. Whilst Patriarchy plays a role in supporting the expression of black gay men, it is difficult for black women in same sex relationships to live an open life, due to cultural shame and the threat of rejection from family and loved ones.

It is vital that professionals understand and address the impact of history, mythology and the intersecting dynamics of racism and heterosexism in the process of service provision to an already marginalized group. This is key to challenging some of the culturally embedded assumptions that normalize taboos and exacerbate the trauma underlying relationships with and between black people.

## **Internalised Racism and Sexual Abuse**

When I became a therapist 25 years ago, I also became aware of the marginalisation and silence about certain subjects. At the time we could talk openly about women, Freud, Jung and hysteria and not so openly about being black or gay or oppressed by mainstream society. The silence and inability to empathise was also extended to mental health and people raised in care.

Today the tables have turned slightly in that both women and men, black/Asian people, GLBT, refugee groups have drawn attention to the marginalisation of their experiences. However we have a long way to travel in terms of overcoming the obstacles to equal and appropriate support understanding and services for survivors of rape, sexual abuse and violence.

Fear of not being believed and institutional oppressions such as racism impact survivors of these heinous experiences. What is it like to be raped and abused, traumatised and not believed by institutions such as the family, social services and the legal system? In addition to this coerced denial, the experience of racism is often not believed. The Steven Lawrence case is an example of disbelief in racism. How can we help turn disbelief into belief? We first need to take a look at this systemised disbelief and explore whether support systems play a part in perpetuating disbelief and marginalisation of individual experiences.

If disbelief is occurring disassociation may not be picked up. A common form of disassociation that occurs in my practice as a psychotherapist is black adult female survivors of sexual abuse blaming the men in their current relationships or the women in their early lives rather than acknowledging their feelings about the perpetrator. They ask for therapy because they are exhausted, suffering from driveness and compulsive independence and they are concerned about difficulties in their current relationship. Through the attention given to their behaviour they realise that they are masking their feelings about racism and experiences of sexual abuse.

We know that rape has throughout history and continues to be used as a tool of domination and a war weapon. I wonder about the war that happens within when denial or disassociation of feelings about rape, sexual abuse and violence are being silenced. Internalization of the strong black woman image plays a key role in behavior patterns that suppress the pain of these experiences. Some black mothers who themselves or their children had suffered sexual abuse feel they must show they are strong and coping. These women have silenced their emotional responses but continue to suffer confusion, isolation and deep hurt coupled by fear of being seen as weak if they disclose these feelings.

## **Conclusion**

This behavior can create depression and a role model of silencing for the abused child. The strong black woman as a black western archetype is seen as infallible and she is often less supported than her contemporaries. From slavery, the mammy archetype has infiltrated her psyche; She can be driven by her distress as she tirelessly serves the extended family and the unreasonable demands of her employers.

When she expresses her rage about the injustices that she is experiencing her hurt is not seen because she is viewed as aggressive rather than vulnerable. Her cries are internal and even when she is visibly crying the responses are less empathic, less connecting, less supportive because

it rare that she cries and shows her vulnerability as she inhabits don't discharge patterns and she is usually the one to support others and push her own needs aside.

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