

Identity, History and the Therapeutic Process

A Workshop Facilitated by
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I am researching the link between history and the exploration of black issues in the therapeutic process. My interest in this issue emanates from knowledge that sensitivity about addressing black issues pervades therapeutic relationships, training and supervision. Training programmes are still lacking in direction and theory on how to process these issues. The following quote exemplifies the need to focus on these issues:

“It is also necessary to be aware of our own roles in the history, institutions and social processes of the inequality, which frequently confront us in cross-cultural work. Beyond this for our part we must avoid essentialising and totalising our clients as ‘black subjects’ (Hall, 1992) and search for ways in which we may help them discover a range of representations of themselves and in this way encourage a critical dialogue around personal politics.” (Krause, 1998, p.161)

It is not my intention to essentialise black clients, but to draw attention to the many issues that link to the essentialising of black peoples and therefore perpetuate denial of the effects of racism and interracial relationship in Counselling and Psychotherapy.

My interest also links with bits missing from my own experience of growing up in British Multicultural Society. The bits left out of my self image and identity process, the bits left out of my upbringing and education and those vital bits on black issues that have been left out of Counselling and Psychotherapy training and practise.

In the early nineties during a period of hibernation and healing from the onslaught of institutional racism I was asked to take on a locum job as clinical team manager at the African Caribbean Mental Health Association. This became an intense period of four years, building therapeutic services for individuals and families affected by mental ill health and lack of appropriate resources in the mental health system. During this period I frequented Broadmoor and regional psychiatric hospitals and care centres. My work ended when the project became a victim of internalised oppression and began to decline and have its own breakdown. Ironically, the breakdown occurred at a point when therapeutic services were expanding. We were offering a variety of talking therapies and also African-Centred therapy and Reiki therapy. I was in the process of setting up splinter support groups in the hospitals surrounding the project in Brixton. This would have reinforced links with hospitals and community groups and enhanced working relationships with both carers and clients. Whilst exploring these possibilities two questions came to light:

1. What attracted clients to the project?
2. Why did many clients not attend after referred by doctors and social workers?

These questions were raised as a result of noticing that many people did not turn up for their appointments. I was curious because those who did attend the project either for counselling, legal advice or the support of a befriender, seemed to view the project as a home from home. There was an association with home and the shared experience of being black in Britain. An experience of shared identity. So I decided to carry out a small study with clients who had been able to attend at least one counselling session. I used a questionnaire asking 21 black counsellors and 21 black clients what it meant to receive and offer therapy between black people. (Presented at the Conference 'Black & White Therapy' Freud Museum, 1991) The research concluded that:

- a) All clients were happier counselling with 'someone like me' and felt they did not have to work so hard to be understood.
- b) Therapists thought that their training was lacking an acknowledgement of black people's perspectives and experience.

Conclusions:

Strengths: This gave an answer to question 1.

Weaknesses: This did not answer question 2.

As a result of these findings the project introduced alternative and culturally appropriate therapies to increase the options of users. Following this, I became curious about what happened to those who did not attend, but managed to rebuild their lives without any formalised talking therapies. My rationale being that music, dance, storytelling and ritual have always been used in traditional African and Asian societies as a means of relaxation and transformation. As a poet and writer I wanted to explore the links between other forms of expression and healing. So I decided to focus on how recovery happens outside of the therapy room. This time there was an emphasis on the collective unconscious and expression of shared experiences of identity.

Further research during my MA studies culminated in a paper on the expression of black women's experience through poetry. (Mckenzie-Mavinga, 1997) Literature research on published writing by and about black women's writing.

Summary

I found that:

- a) Themes developed by black women writers often related to identity issues, slavery, colonisation, and migration.
- b) Repetition, expression and sharing of common themes could be viewed as a form of catharsis.

I concluded that:

- a) Sharing of common issues is important.
- b) On the other hand, there was no way of evidencing whether a 'therapeutic' process had taken place.

This raised other questions:

1. Are writing and other forms of creative expression used to process black issues?
2. What is the role of history in the therapeutic process of black issues?

Psychologists such as Niam Ackbar have been the forerunners of theory on this question:

“Although we are five to six generations removed from the actual experience of slavery we still carry the scars of the experience in both our social and mental lives. Psychologists and sociologists have failed to attend to the persistence of problems in our mental and social lives, which clearly have roots in slavery. Only the historian has given proper attention to the shattering realities of slavery, and has dealt with it only as descriptive of past events.” (Ackbar, 1996, p. 3)

The mention of slavery often puts peoples backs up when discussed in psychology forums. It taints the white therapists persona with a legacy of guilt and the black therapists persona with a legacy of being recipients of the pain and degradation of white supremacy. Perhaps that is why, as Ackbar suggests it has not been sufficiently attended to in the history of psychotherapy and counselling. African-Centred approaches would advocate that the affects of slavery are key elements in the process of what I call ‘black issues’.

‘Black’ in psychotherapeutic language has mainly been referred to as a colour or an image linked to the dark, negative, shadow side of the psyche. Perpetuation of this concept through the English language has had a negative impact on the collective psyche and become the linchpin of racism.

For the purpose of moving forward politically and psychologically on this issues, I am introducing a definition of ‘black issues’, which creates a move towards healing the internalised negative elements associated with black identity, and invites a more culture centred dimension. This invitation often stimulates concerns about focussing on racism and the rage and fear that invariably goes with it. This further suggests a parallel to the emotions of racism, rage and fear that may lie within the therapeutic relationship. It is this area that my project will be concerned with. An over focus on racism, rather than the wide spectrum of experiences of black peoples serves to undermine discussions on black issues. This may in some situations mean that a layer of issues pertaining to racism needs to be attended to in order to move into both the counsellor and the client’s story.

This pre-amble to my workshop presentation is necessary, because I want to fill the reader in with where I, as a black therapist with 17 years experience have pitched my current practise and research endeavours. During the first part of the workshop, I asked the participants to think of a question about ‘black issues’. Then they were asked to break into small groups and explore some resolutions to at least one of the questions offered by a group member. I choose to lead this part of the workshop in a very person-centred/group-centred way to allow for information to flow uninfluenced by me. Each group then shared their conclusions. Following this, a selection of questions were offered to me as a contribution to my research project.

Then we viewed a painting and listened to an interview with a young Caribbean artist. W. aged 21 lives in Trinidad. His first exhibited painting immediately attracted my attention. It is a very mystical painting with many characters, all floating upwards. Central to the painting is an alien figure covered in red hearts under a ray of golden light. There are many intricate cosmic shapes such as stars and satellites, floating above the characters and around the central being. This character has a blue fairy clinging to its waist. The other characters are floating up from what appears to be red and yellow clouds beneath the central character. Underneath the clouds are dome shaped dwellings with a central spike, waterfalls, plant life, a river, swans and a unicorn. The painting appears esoteric, magical and intriguing.

I shared a few minutes of my recorded interview with W. where I asked him to tell me about the painting. He told me that many people find it difficult to listen to him. He sees his painting as his psychiatrist because he can put his unusual and very original thoughts into it. He was watching TV and a blinding golden flash of light came. Then he felt different and his skin was tingling and looking different. He was levitating. He was enjoying this ecstasy. Like static electricity. A most powerful feeling. He can float into other dimensions and this experience is like. "It is the most comfortable position being able to float in mid air. It comes like the softest pillow, without being able to touch it". You and the air is the same thing. He believes that the dream is an image of what will happen to him.

I ask him about the characters in the painting that appear not to have any flesh. He replies, "The golden character in the centre is an abstract of how I wish to be. I have really seen the blue angel, she is a spurt that god sent to follow me and help me do things. She could fly and move objects, be seen and unseen. She has a silver blue sheen when the light is on her. Like when the light shines on us we show up in different colours." I asked him whether he was saying that we are not really the colour we appear to be. "I am not really here", he says, "I am over there, only feeling here. I am not here but I am here. I am strapped up to something in another world". He asks me if I understand. At this stage the conversation becomes more complex and difficult to stay with, yet I understand some of what he is trying to put across.

I clarify, "So you are saying that what ever happens here makes you feel that you are here, but you are not really here". He continues, "I am in so many places at once. Dreams made me aware of this. I believe that I have been around millions of years. Coming and going". I ask him, "So do you know what you were before you came here?" He replied, "I have always been a black man and I was a slave in my last life. I was looking through the bars when they packed the slaves into the boat. They may have packed me on the top because I was a strong man". I ask him if any information about him as a slave comes through in his paintings. He says "not really because I try to always move forward". We agree that there is quite a lot of black in the top of this painting and W. tells me that black is very positive for him. Our conversation becomes a lot clearer as we discuss the link with his experience of different dimensions and dreams and I share what I know of the African experience of travelling through different dimensions. According to Some,

"...for healing to last, the healed energy in the spiritual plane must be brought across to the physical world. Bringing it through a gateway between the spiritual and

material worlds does this. The gateways that are maintained in certain places in nature are themselves important technologies for healing. Technologies such as these are viewed as magical and supernatural and are therefore suspect, sometimes frightening to the Western mind.” (Some, 1998)

I must admit that I have been in touch with some fear when facing my own spiritual development. When listening to W. I feared that I would not be able to stay on course with him. That my Eurocentric concepts of madness will overwhelm my listening and that I would judge him by my western standards. I am back on course when I share my experience with W., how my trips to the mountains, countryside, my Caribbean home and Africa help me to feel myself and know who I am. These are the gateways to my own spirituality that assist my ability to remain a willing listener to W. and know that we have something shared which connects us. I ask him if he is wanting me to know that his flights to other dimensions, his urge to fly, and his dreams strengthen him because I have heard him tell me that “I know I can fly, I know I am in the various dimensions, I know certain things will happen to me in the future.”

He tells me that where he has agreed to have this power and becomes aware of it, this is a very positive and strengthening experience to be able to say “I am”.

Conclusion

I believe the shared interview with W. had quite an impact on workshop participants. Workshop participants agree that if W. had told this story to a Psychiatrist in Britain it is likely that he would not be taken seriously and assessed for psychiatric treatment. I found it very challenging to stay with his story which poured out to my willing ears and it was difficult to end the conversation. He was clearly suffering from isolation, which could easily be perpetuated by responses from a Eurocentric/medical approach. W finds solace in his canvas and the artists community that support his creative expression.

I learned from his story that he understands himself in many contexts including that of historical links with slavery as a black man, which came quite unexpectedly into the conversation. He was able to talk about his magic and spiritual self, his psychic vision, his skin, and his striving for power and perfection.

It is clear that W. uses creative mediums to express feelings about his life as black man. Using W.’s art as a focus for discussion has reinforced his self-knowledge. This kind of discussion is rare within traditional counselling or psychotherapy settings that are mixed or predominantly white.

Returning to the issue of identity, history and the therapeutic process, my experience with W. has shown that other mediums, yet untapped can be used to process black issues. Also that within this process lays important historical material that may serve to inform therapists about the formation of identity and homelands within the psyche of black clients. Can this be the challenge for the future of Counselling, Psychotherapy, training and supervision. If so how can we facilitate and support this kind of dialogue without politicising or essentialising these issues and our black clients.

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