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“A Psychotherapeutic Understanding of Black Identity in Workplace Contexts”

Sustaining cohesion in working groups, in businesses or institutions, is often fraught with problems. Increasing work demands may intensify levels of stress, thus diminishing a worker’s contentment in their job. The dynamics of the group can exert pressures on individuals to conform to the norms of the dominant culture, and may pose further problems for group relations. When racial difference is added to the picture, it may be the trigger for further troubles, as old and comfortable ways of upholding a culture - essentially that of the dominant group - break down or move into crisis, as an additional challenge has to be faced. The solidarity of the dominant group, hitherto asserted in benign ways, may turn a simple difference into a ‘threat’, or create an ‘enemy’ perceived as problematically ‘different’ from the rest.

This research has examined the phenomenon of racial difference through the stories and experiences of a section of the workforce who have found themselves outside the ‘pack’. They were invited to share and discuss their experiences. Their evidence forms the backbone of this enterprise.

The study was conducted in three institutional workplace settings – the NHS, Social Services and Education. The aim was to gain deeper understanding of the nature of stress observed in this particular group, and to understand the effects of stress on the individual’s sense of self and identity. The approach is designed to fit well with a person-in-environment perspective and seeks to scrutinise the experiences of black people in predominantly white workplace settings.

Drawing on qualitative research methods of Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and a Heuristic Enquiry, the study aims are to:

- a) explore the experiences of being black in the workplace*
- b) examine the impact of these experiences on the well-being of the individual*
- c) identify causes (external and internal) that contribute to ‘workplace oppression’ (my term) and trauma*
- d) give expression to the unspoken, unspeakable, unsayable*

- e) *develop knowledge that is transferable to working with issues of black identity wounding*
- f) *offer a therapeutic strategy for managing black identity trauma through a culturally sensitive and effective model of helping*

The underlying principle running through the research and the writing of this final document is that it was not a study done *on* black people, which would have necessitated a comparative research approach with a contrasting group, but research done *with* black people, sharing stories emanating from our everyday experiences. As a researcher, I saw myself as a privileged ‘insider’, researching as well as being researched. It was important that the methodology challenged oppression rather than perpetuate it, and within this frame, there was a collaborative approach to designing the study, obtaining information and testing out the analysis of the evolving data.

A mixture of personal and professional reasons has driven my passion for this enterprise. From the personal, direct and indirect experiences of racial discrimination and a determination to do something were important. From the professional perspective, meeting similar such experiences in clients’ stories and being disturbed by the hold and extent of their effects, increased my drive to investigate the phenomenon, develop new understanding and share this knowledge. From an educational perspective, there seemed to be a need to widen the discourse on racism to include the theme of *subtle racism* and its impact of the self. The research attempts to deal with this latter theme, as it reports on the problems of black workers whose stories describe what it is like to be defined as ‘different’. In their accounts of what they experienced, the subtle phenomenon of racism was shown to generate external and internal stressors, which contributed to difficult interactions, fragile relationships and effects to health.

The study’s analysis reveals a dialectic between internal and external aspects of racial oppression and an emphasis on internal matters. In this scrutiny, the inner dynamics of what black people themselves might also be bringing to these situations are explored. This thesis highlights subtleties and complexities of a historical legacy that continues to shape black people’s interactions with the white other. The main finding concerns what I call ‘the internal oppressor’, which George Bach’s work (1985)

highlights as the inner enemy, that can be more formidable a foe than the most manipulative or oppressive associate.