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White Identity in Psychotherapy: Can dialogic, intersubjective psychotherapy help white people work more effectively in a racialised context?

I feel very honoured to have been invited to speak today and to have the luxury of outlining my ideas to you about being white in our racialised society. It is particularly gratifying to have been asked to speak at the Marianne Fry lecture. I did meet her on a few occasions and much admired her indomitable nature. I feel sure that she would be encouraging me if she were here now, (which maybe she is - certainly in spirit.)

So, my subject is about being white. I have divided this talk into three parts. The first is about being a white person within a racial context, the second about working as a white therapist and the third introduces a model for understanding the process of becoming more white-aware. There will be short breaks between the three so you don't have to concentrate for too long at a time.

I can't say that I often think about being white, even after having done all this research. There is little call to. Even if black people are around I might automatically think 'you are black' not 'I am white'. The most powerful element I discovered was how unaware we are of the huge privileges each one of us have as white people. During my research I discovered the mostly American discipline of White Studies which helped me to make sense of my findings. Here are some quotes from some White Studies authors. One of their main preoccupations is that 'there is nothing so powerful as being just normal':

But the idea of whiteness as neutrality, as that which is not there, is ideally suited for designating that social group that is to be taken as the 'human ordinary'. (Apple 1998)

'There is no more powerful position than that of being "just" human' (Dyer 1997:2)

'An unmarked marker of others' (Frankenberg 1999:16)

'A predominant construction in American literature is undoubtedly whiteness as 'unraced' or racially neutral.' (Aanerud 1997)

'Whites alone can opt out of their own racial identity, can proclaim themselves non-raced.' (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998)

I'd like to tell you about how I came to research whiteness. I had enrolled onto the PhD course at the University of Bath at the Centre for Action

Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) because I wanted some support in writing about my work. I had an interest in intercultural matters and had already written a paper on this subject. I thought I might write about it, though I did have other ideas as well. When I discussed this with my supervisor and supervision group at the University they were very sceptical. They questioned my motives, thinking of me as a typical white liberal, venturing into an area which was not hers.

We were encouraged at CARPP to start with our own experience just as we are in therapy which made it a natural home for me. That set me thinking: how can I research this subject and start with myself? The answer was pretty clear - research your own cultural position, not the cultures of 'others'. On reflection, I decided that the most challenging aspect of this was my whiteness. Focussing on culture would have watered it down as it could soften the starkness of the white race as a subject. Cultural difference is a much wider concept and also quite slippery which could have lead me to include class, region, nationality etc. In some of these I could place myself as a victim rather than potential perpetrator. Whiteness confronted me with a stark reality.

In fact, one thing that marks out my research and my book from others on similar subjects is that it explores the position of the 'perpetrator' rather than the 'victim' of racism and I put myself clearly in this frame. It is not therefore about exposing a position that I have not taken myself. Before coming to this conclusion I thought about times when I myself had been on the wrong end of cultural power, particularly when at a boarding school where most of my fellow pupils were above me in the class hierarchy. I thought that in this way I could know what it feels like to be black. An important moment in this shift in my thinking was an exploration of my relationship with a black school friend. The story I had previously told myself about my relationship with this girl was that I was one of the few who lacked prejudice but this more in depth exploration showed me a less palatable side of myself. To a certain extent it must be true that our ability to empathise with an under privileged position helps us as therapists to know what our client feels but it is also true that by doing this, we deny our position of power and become blind to its meaning in our relationships. Being on the same side of the power divide as one's client is certainly a much more comfortable position to be in when working with someone who might well feel angry about our privilege.

Having decided on my subject someone drew my attention to a book already written on this subject called *Racial Identity: White Counsellors and Therapists* by Gill Tuckwell and I am indebted to her book for giving me some pointers and help along the way. Although I found a whole raft of scholarly books and papers within the discipline of White Studies, there are few therapists who have written specifically on this subject. I will provide a book list at the end. I think the only other person to write in a way which

includes her own subjective experience about being white as a therapist is Lynne Jacobs, an American gestaltist, probably known to many of you. Her paper, For Whites Only was a huge help and support to me and Lynne became one of the examiners for my PhD.

So what is it like to be white if we push past the idea that it is 'just normal'? As I proceeded with my research I began to realise that the white race really consists of a European diaspora - even possibly a western European diaspora. Besides those in Europe, this includes all the white people in the continents of North and South America, Australasia, South Africa, Israel and scattered elsewhere across the globe. Although all others may not think of themselves as 'black' they often do not regard themselves as 'white' either and some use the expression 'black' to show a political alignment against white people.

It would be hard to deny that white people have been very successful at gaining the ascendancy around the globe. Their political systems, economic arrangements, mores, languages (particularly English), consumer brands, armed forces, educational systems, sports etc dominate the whole world. Although the old fashioned way of colonising other countries by annexing them to the sovereignty of our nations has all but disappeared, it may be that more insidious colonisation has taken over, a sort of economic, cultural and racial colonisation.

The election of Barrack Obama to the presidency of the United States is a hopeful sign but has hardly done away with race discrimination. I don't know if any of you have read his books but they are testimony to appalling institutionalised deprivation amongst blacks in America. Our own black populations are often in the same state of disaffection, their young people often without hope and turning to drugs, guns and knives.

Although I did realise when I started my research that my privilege as a white person was important, it really didn't come home to me until I had seen the 46 privileges that McIntosh lists in her paper White Privilege and Male Privilege. I have 10 of these to put on the screen but before I do that I would like to try a little exercise with you. With a partner think of about 3 privileges you have as a white person or don't have as a black person.

Here are some of the list that McIntosh gave.

So how did I go about researching whiteness? As many of you are gestalt or humanistic therapists, you will appreciate that I started with myself, writing in a self-reflective way about my own difficulty of focussing on whiteness and reading all I could on the matter. I decided that I needed others to help me with my self reflection so that their ideas could spark off my own and challenge my findings. I put together a small cooperative inquiry group of white therapists. Cooperative inquiry is a form of collaborative research which uses cycles of action and reflection to guide the research. These were the questions which arose within the group.

- ◆ Is guilt useful in exploring racism?
- ◆ Can we find a way to talk about our racist thoughts?
- ◆ Can we talk about 'whiteness' without talking about 'blackness'?
- ◆ Is it racist to find 'black' people 'interesting'?
- ◆ What meaning does 'white' have?

Some of the people who were in the group or otherwise helped me by becoming co-researchers are here today and I would like to acknowledge how indebted I am to them as they helped me to refine and deepen my experience and therefore the findings that I came to.

As a group we reflected on experiences in and outside the group to come to tentative conclusions from which further questions arose. The most contentious and oft spoken about finding from the group concerned the guilt and shame felt by white people (including therapists) about being white. For that reason I have concentrated on it here and not the other findings because there is not time to look at them all.

Guilt in relation to my whiteness is something I felt all through my research and was hard to know how to understand. Was this just a self indulgence - something that did not help address the issues? Was it evidence of white liberal unproductive hand wringing? I wondered if guilt could ever be useful and purposeful. Was it a sign of pathology as it is often viewed in psychotherapy circles?

I decided first of all to explore more about guilt and shame as such before looking at it from the point of view of being white so that I was clearer about what I was looking at. I sent out a questionnaire to the people on my email address book and 20 people responded. My question about what made people feel guilty and ashamed revealed that my respondents felt ashamed of what was perceived as a fault in themselves and guilty about hurting others, though they might have felt ashamed because they judge themselves to be guilty. This led me to tentatively wonder if guilt is in fact more of an idea rather than a feeling. The *feeling* being of shame *because* of the guilt - albeit with a certain tint - as on this occasion shame arises from guilt rather than other reasons for feeling shame, such as being over exposed. We could call it 'guilt-shame' as opposed to 'exposure-shame'. If this were the case, guilt would be simply a matter of doing something that transgressed an ethical, social or legal code. We may accuse ourselves or be accused by others of this transgression. In either case there may or may not be an agreement between ourselves and others as to whether or not we are in fact guilty. If we *do* think that we are guilty then we *feel* ashamed. If we do not then we do not feel ashamed.

I then turned to feelings of guilt and shame about being white. These are the questions I asked:

Inquiry into Guilt and Shame felt in Regard to Racism

1. Do you consider yourself to have, consciously or unconsciously, racist attitudes or beliefs?
2. To what extent do you feel ashamed or guilty about having racist attitudes?
3. Do you consider yourself to be a beneficiary of endemic racism in society?
4. To what extent do you feel guilty or ashamed about this?
5. If you do feel any shame or guilt do you think these form any purpose, useful or not?
6. To what extent do you feel shame or guilt about racist manifestations that your own country perpetrated in the past such as the colonisation of other countries?
7. Would you like to expand on any of your answers or do you have any other comments that you would like to add?

I will give you some idea of the kind of replies I got to these questions. They are more fully explored in the book.

1 Racist attitudes and beliefs

To question number 1: 'Do you consider yourself to have, consciously or unconsciously, racist attitudes or beliefs?' Most answered 'yes' and 2 answered 'no.

One respondent, called Alice, had a particularly interesting response to my question about whether she had racist attitudes or beliefs:

'Yes, though I wish I didn't. But I do feel nervous of 'black' people, without any good reason. Also, I couldn't really fancy a Negro, so there is some fundamental sense of difference there. On the other hand, I do have one or two Negro friends, and once I get to know them my nervousness disappears. My nervousness is fundamentally of all strangers, and I think is accentuated by the enhanced "strangeness" of Negro appearance and body language. This is much more true of 'black' people than of Asians, and definitely comes from some unconscious promptings.'

My reflections at the time on this answer to the questionnaire were as follows:

'It is interesting that she uses the 'politically incorrect' term 'Negro'. My sense is that this does not in her case show disrespect to 'black' people. All her responses here and in the rest of the questionnaire are thoughtful, own her own racism and show that she knows that her feelings reveal herself rather than say anything about 'black' people. Her response here shows that she considers the

'strangeness', maybe the not-like-herness, of 'black' people to be at the root of her fear.'

I interviewed this respondent separately to explore this issue which I won't go into now. It is written up in the book. It became clear that Alice felt that her espoused values and those she lived by were not congruent with each other. Alice was struggling with difficult feelings and was prepared to share these with me however difficult this process was.

I continued to wonder about her use of the word Negro. I decided to inquire further by asking my 'black' respondent to the questionnaire, what *he* thought of the word. There is a longer exploration of this matter in the book

2 Shame and guilt about racist attitudes

The second question was: *'To what extent do you feel ashamed or guilty about having racist attitudes?'*

All felt guilty and ashamed to some extent using the terms interchangeably though one said she felt more guilty and two felt more ashamed.

There were some interesting comments including:

'I feel guilty about my nervousness of 'black' people, knowing that it is totally unreasonable, but on the other hand I do not consciously espouse common myths about them, e.g. that they have lower IQs or are more inclined to crime. That is just nonsense.'

3 Being a beneficiary of endemic racism

Question 3 was *'Do you consider yourself to be a beneficiary of endemic racism in society?'* One respondent said that she was not a beneficiary without elaborating on this. All the rest felt that they were such beneficiaries including the 'black' respondent who interestingly said:

Yes - only in the sense that I have been 'allowed to advance' as a member of the minority black middle classes.

This brings up an important class issue which is entangled with that of 'race'. I asked myself whether he feels that if he behaves like 'white' people and in a 'good middle class way' he will be 'allowed to advance'. This is discussed further in the book.

4 Guilt and shame in endemic racism

Question 4 was: *To what extent do you feel guilty or ashamed about this [endemic racism]?*

Although the great majority felt guilty to some extent, the weight of the answers had slipped further towards the 'not guilty' end though there were hints of awareness in their comments that maybe they should feel more guilty than they do. Here is one of the comments which reflect this:

'Not very guilty or ashamed - except perhaps of not doing enough to change things, but I am not really in a position to. Classic get-out, of course.'

It is interesting that there seem to be two levels of responses. There is a response to the question and then a reflection on that response - 'I don't feel very guilty.....maybe I should feel guilty about not feeling guilty'.

5 Purpose of guilt and shame

Question 5 asks: *If you do feel any shame or guilt do you think these form any purpose, useful or not?*

Most thought they were useful and there were several helpful elaborations on this including:

'Yes, I think so. I have always thought of both feelings as a wake-up call'

'Guilt is useful as it encourages you to do something about it'

One thought guilt and shame were not useful:

'I think these feelings can have quite unhelpful consequences, such as making me feel angry and defensive.'

and 3 thought that there are useful and not useful aspects. An example of a comment from this group was:

'Well, they could make me more receptive to social change that improved opportunities. On the other hand, guilt and shame can make one very resentful towards the cause of those feelings, and feed the original antipathy, so I am not sure whether these things cancel each other out.'

6 Shame and guilt relating to national identity

Question 6 asked: *To what extent do you feel shame or guilt about racist manifestations that your own country perpetrated in the past such as the colonisation of other countries*

Several did not feel personally responsible and there were some interesting comments including:

I don't feel that much guilt, because it was done by others, who had a different set of values, without my consent.

Others did feel guilty. Here is a typical remark:

'The legacy of the past still means that I benefit from colonisation because of beneficial trade agreements etc I think the past is very much alive in the present.'

I was interested to see from these comments that less shame and guilt seems to be felt about endemic racism than personal racism. It is very easy

to feel helpless, uninvolved and not responsible for underlying cultural assumptions in our own society. Of course these are very hard to change as an individual but my own sense is that we are all contributors and help to maintain it if we do not try to become conscious of our own assumptions and reflect on what these mean. The question remains whether or not shame and/or guilt - or guilt-shame - are useful in helping us *respond* well to this situation.

Altman (2000) suggests that our embeddedness within an institutionally racist society leads inevitably to unconscious racism in a 'white' person and feels that the best we can do is to be reflexive with our clients. My feeling is that, through being alive to a sense of guilt about racist attitudes, we can tackle our own patterns of thinking and the racist attitudes that result. That way we can work towards a change in societal attitudes. For instance, when considering the matter of black people entering the psychotherapy profession, I find myself feeling sceptical about their ability to meet academic requirements. By becoming aware of this racist thought I can think about this more rationally. The fact that the first black person I knew was also the cleverest girl in our class does not affect the way I have subliminally picked up an attitude of white clever/black stupid.

Before we take a little break I want to try an exercise with you. Close your eyes for a minute. I want you to imagine that you are walking along a street. It is empty of people. Now imagine that a black person is walking towards you. Notice the first bodily sensation you have and the first thought that comes into your mind. The person is going to pass you and walk on. Allow yourself to become aware of any thoughts, sensations, images, memories or emotions that arise as this happens. Now come back to the room and, if you wish, turn to a neighbour to share any of these. After that we will take a short break before we go on to look at working as white therapists.

Part 2: Working as a white therapist

So how does this relate to working as a white therapist in a racialised field? As 'white' therapists, we inevitably bring with us the attitudes and assumptions of the 'white' world and these will necessarily affect our practice.

I will show how various approaches have influenced me and have helped me to work in a more aware way as a white therapist in a racialised field. These include:

- ◆ Theories regarding cultural difference
- ◆ Non-dual awareness
- ◆ Intersubjective systems theory
- ◆ Dialogic gestalt therapy
- ◆ The 'participative worldview' of action research

Theories regarding cultural difference

There are numerous differences between cultural groups and these are often pointed out by authors who write about cultural difference (Donald and Rattansi 1992; Lago and Thompson 1996). The focus is often on a description of 'other' cultures with a base line of the 'white', western culture as the norm. Focusing on differences *in this way* lies at the heart of a great deal of the frustration that 'black' people feel in relation to 'white' people (Hall 1992:257). It is similar to the way 'received' pronunciation' is considered the norm, so that, from the point of view of those who speak in this way, others 'have' an 'accent'. In fact Trew (2002:164) has pointed out that if we use the term 'different', which is often used in the field of diversity training, there is an implication that there is a norm to be different from though this is never acknowledged or articulated.

Of course it is also useful to think about 'other' cultures - those that are different to our own - and has been very instrumental in making people aware that cultural difference is an important factor when working in a diverse world. However, I am stressing the importance of focusing on our own cultural assumptions here because I am trying to get behind how we, as 'white' therapists, see the world. This is for three reasons. One, because the western worldview is not the only or best way of understanding how to live, two, the 'white' western culture predominates globally and is assumed to be the best way and three, because the 'white' western way is problematic when it comes to taking diversity on board, as I will show.

Of the many dimensions of cultural difference that have been identified (Hofstede 1980) there is one which I think is particularly important and pertinent to difficulties 'white' westerners, and in particular, therapists have in understanding many other cultural groups. It concerns the importance afforded to the individual over the group. Our most dearly held

values are built on the rights and responsibilities of the *individual* and we, as westerners, have a clearly defined image of ourselves as complete units, boundaried by our skin. This view is by no means universal. Although I am not suggesting that western culture is the only one to take this view, many cultures understand the family or the community to be the unit of society so that responsibility is held communally and individuals do not have rights over the common good (Pederson 1998:79). Our attachment to our individuality has encouraged a narcissistic attitude in which our own sense of self is felt to be all important.

This difference has many ramifications pertinent to our work as white therapists, beyond the relatively simple one of misunderstanding our clients who may see the world in a dissimilar way to ourselves. In this sense my point is a cultural rather than racial one. Not all black people have culturally different backgrounds to white people¹. Some black people are steeped in a western philosophical worldview just as white people are, but many of our black clients will be culturally different as well, or will be second or third generation immigrants for whom these cultural tensions may be the backdrop of everyday life as they live in several cultures simultaneously. Their entitlement to individual rights and freedoms may not seem a simple matter to them. So how do we, as therapists who regard our job as being to facilitate our clients towards becoming more authentically themselves and ensure that they make choices which do not play into destructive patterns, work with people who do not think in individualistic ways?

Non Dual Awareness

I have found that having a 'non-dual', intersubjective way of understanding truth works for me in both worlds. It is a way of understanding truth, not as an absolute, but as something that emerges *between* myself and others. It is a truth that arises in the space between us, thus belonging to both of us and neither of us at the same time.

The stance of understanding truth to be emergent in the spaces between us has become more embodied in my practice and has led me to understand my work as an inquiry process in which the subjectivity of both myself and my client is acknowledged. The process of allowing a sense of what is 'true' to emerge in the spaces between us seems to uncover what feels to be a basic truth whilst not denying its relational rather than 'objective' nature. Stolorow, Atwood and Orange say:

'We must attend to truth-as-possible-understanding and not truth-as-correspondence-to-fact.' (2002:119)

¹ It could be argued that 'black' people's experience of racism is a cultural experience thus giving them a different cultural experience to 'white' people whatever their background.

If we are to discover the knowledge that arises in the space between people, it is often necessary to experience and acknowledge the *differences* that we find within that space. Skating over differences and rushing to find commonality can make the contact much more superficial, as the values and assumptions that underlie our attitudes will be hidden. Questioning these values and assumptions becomes all important - particularly when exploring differences in 'races' and cultures. As we engage in dialogue across difference, 'our' truth - that which arises *between* ourselves and our clients - emerges, even if it contains conflicting ideas. For example, a supervisee reported that one of her immigrant clients had a damaging and conflictual relationship with her 16-year-old daughter, as the client felt she should not mix with boys. That was not a view held by the therapist for her own daughter but they sat with their different cultural values on this subject and the uncomfortable clash that they felt between those held in her culture and those held in the dominant British culture. The therapist nevertheless could empathise with this difficulty and with having a stroppy teenage daughter. Finally, by thoroughly exploring the issues and by understanding this as a difference that had arisen between them, the client found a way forward which allowed her daughter to make friends with boys in a way which the client felt was safe, thus allowing the close relationship between mother and daughter to resume. In working in this way, we first have to question the *way* that we think when faced with differences so as to allow ourselves to just sit with a conflict rather than rush to find a solution.

Making sense of the world from an individualistic stance implies seeing it in a dualistic way. For this purpose it is simplest to understand dualistic thinking as 'either/or thinking' (Hawkins 2005:29). The most fundamental way of understanding non-dualism is to see reality as the mystics from all religions view the world - as interconnected and undivided - not therefore opposing units. Dualistic thinking, on the other hand, views the world as divided into conflicting camps - either something is black or white, right or wrong, male or female etc. This dualistic thinking has informed western philosophy over many centuries and eventually allowed the west to proceed with a project of colonisation which is justified by seeing the colonised as an inferior type of human being (Dresser 2007:56; Ennals 2007:140). Dualistic thinking allows this kind of certainty and results in splitting the world into 'good and bad', 'us and them' etc.

Western society is so steeped in these dualistic notions that we cannot avoid but be part of it. 'White' therapists tend to give value to the flourishing of their individual clients, rather than the individual in the context of their environment, as the aim of their work (Sue and Sue 1990:35), thus reinforcing a split between the individual and society. Here is an example. A supervisee had an Asian client who rejected her mother's insistence on her having a marriage arranged by her family. Her mother was so worried by her having a European boyfriend that she was constantly

on the phone to her daughter. I asked how she felt about this situation and the supervisee said that she thought the mother was very intrusive and that her client had a right to find her own way in life. This revealed a 'white'-centric, individualistic way of seeing her predicament. I felt that it was likely that the client felt ambivalent about her situation with her boyfriend and her mother's concerns and that holding the dilemma between them for a while to be thought about might be a more useful way of finding a way forward than just encouraging an individualistic solution which would no doubt cut her off from her family and culture. A less reactive stance to her mother resulted and they were able to explore this issue in all its complexity which helped the client to move forward in a way which did not involve rejecting her family.

Intersubjectivist systems theorists

The Intersubjective systems theorists regard contemporary western society as suffering from an epistemological mistake - that of believing in the 'Myth of the Separate Mind' (Stolorow and Atwood 1992). These theorists view the self as only existing within a co-created relational context.

Bob Stolorow and his colleagues (maybe some of you are familiar with them) understand intersubjectivity to be an ontological state - a universal 'given' rather than a developmental achievement as Daniel Stern suggests (Stern 1985:28). Although ostensibly psychoanalysts, they make it clear that they position themselves as phenomenologists counter to traditional psychoanalysis thus:

'The assumptions of traditional psychoanalysis have been pervaded by the Cartesian doctrine of the isolated mind. This doctrine bifurcates the subjective world of the person into outer and inner regions, reifies and absolutises the resulting separation between the two, and pictures the mind as an objective entity that takes its place among other objects, a 'thinking thing', that has an inside with contents and looks out on an external world from which it is essentially estranged.' (Stolorow 2002:1)

Intersubjective systems theorists understand their relationships with their clients to be co-created and regard the very nature of the self to be understood only within relationship. They challenge the view that the professional has special knowledge of the client that is only available to them. Instead their work involves an exploration of what is discovered when the two meet. My own experience is that this intersubjective stance is helpful when working in a diverse society although this has not been discussed specifically by Intersubjectivists. Only Jacobs, who is a member of the Intersubjectivist school as well as being a dialogic gestalt therapist (see below), has written about being 'white' as a psychotherapist (Jacobs 2000: and see Chapter One).

Dialogic Gestalt therapists

The Intersubjectivists' view is closely allied to Dialogic Gestalt Therapy which came to a similar view independently. This perspective opens naturally from Gestalt psychotherapy because of its espousal of field theory (Lewin 1935; Lewin 1952:42). Clarkson and Mackewn describe the 'field' as:

'all the coexisting, mutually interdependent factors of a person and his environment.....All aspects of the person and of his field are interrelated, thus forming a whole or a system' (Clarkson and Mackewn 1993:42).

and Yontef says:

'The field is a whole in which the parts are in immediate relationship and responsive to each other and no part is uninfluenced by what goes on elsewhere in the field'. (Yontef 1993)

and Parlett:

'The essence of field theory is that a holistic perspective towards the person extends to include the environment, the social world, organisations, culture. The more assiduously we can navigate the various field theory maps, the more we are likely to perceive and recognise the indivisibility of people from their surroundings and life situations.' (Parlett 1991)

Dialogic Gestalt therapists, such as Hycner and Jacobs, built on field theory and the philosophy of Martin Buber (1958). In *The Healing Relationship in Gestalt Theory: a Dialogic/Intersubjective Approach* (Hycner and Jacobs 1995) one of the authors (Richard Hycner) says:

'At the heart of this approach is the belief that the ultimate basis of our existence is relational or dialogic in nature: we are all threads in an interhuman fabric.' (Hycner and Jacobs 1995:6)

As I have shown above, it seems to me that both Intersubjectivists and dialogic Gestalt psychotherapists see the self as existing *within* relationship and that their work entails understanding what arises in that meeting. This understanding is not a merely intellectual exercise but is grounded in allowing deeper and deeper awareness of subjective experience.

Participative World View

A holistic way of understanding experienced reality and our place within it has been described by Reason (1994; 1998) as a 'participatory worldview' and is similar to the non-dual, intersubjective stance shown above. The usual boundaries between different activities in our lives tend to break down when viewed in this way. In particular those who accept a participative world view accept the maxim: *I cannot view any part of the world without myself affecting it*. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury say:

‘Within this perspective, human persons are centres of consciousness both independent and linked in a generative web of communication, both with other humans and with the rest of creation.’ (Reason and Bradbury 2001:8)

When reflecting on my own work, I view it in this way so that I know that any experience I have is profoundly affected by my own presence and perspective. I cannot view my clients ‘objectively’. Our relationship is instead understood to be dialogic, intersubjective and participative – one in which the subjectivities of both meet in the space ‘between’ (Hycner and Jacobs 1995:119). In acknowledging my own ‘whiteness’ I understand myself to be ‘participating’ in a cultural and ‘racial’ field and know that I cannot be separate from it. This field also contains its history, including colonisation and slavery as well as dualistic attitudes which have permeated the culture over centuries.

A non-dual way of thinking can serve a double purpose as it helps us to work across cultures by challenging the way we split the world into good and bad etc. and, at the same time, gives us an insight into some non-western ways of thinking. As we have seen, some non-western thinking is less dualistic in its understanding of the nature of ‘self’. For instance the southern African idea of *ubuntu* (Ryde 2005; Dominelli 2006:202), which can be translated as

I am because you are, reveals a less individualistic cultural assumption than is usually found in the white, western world.

But does this mean that our desire to be ‘true to ourselves’ or ‘authentic’ as human beings has to be abandoned? John Rowan (2001:120) says that humanistic thought is fundamentally based on an idea that there is a ‘real self’. He goes on to say that, if this idea is to be challenged, then it is not possible to honour the fundamental tenet of humanistic psychology that human beings are authentic, autonomous and self-actualising. However, in my view we do not have to understand the ‘self’ as

- ◆ a unitary structure in which all indwelling and potentially meaningful experience ‘belong’ to a discrete, bounded, individual *or*
- ◆ the self to be fragmented and meaningless *or*
- ◆ just one possible discourse within a narrative context (Shotter 1993:4).

If instead we understand ourselves to be

embedded in a co-created, participative universe which ‘does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author’ (Reason and Bradbury 2001:6)

then authenticity, autonomy and self-actualisation remain meaningful and exist within a web of relating rather than being situated within an individual. We ‘self actualise’ (Maslow 1972:40) within and through

relationships. This non-dual 'web' allows for differences amongst individuals and groups and is consistent with 'non-white' approaches such as the African notion of *ubuntu* and the non-individualistic way of understanding the world found in native American culture (Sue and Sue 1990:177).

Reflections on these approaches

My approach to the work brings together various concepts which all regard the individual as being inextricably woven into the web of their culture and environment and, as such, the individual cannot be made sense of as a separate entity. What is more, the cultural milieu in which each of us exists is redolent with its history, the past and present experiences which give it shape and meaning. Because of this, a meeting between a 'white' and a 'black' person can be a very crowded space. 'White' supremacy, racism, colonisation, slavery etc. accompany them into that meeting within the intersubjective space. Field theory shows how past patterns and experiences are in reality still present as part of the 'field' (Parlett 1991). This is graphically illustrated to be true in the work of Bert Hellinger who, through 'constellations' workshops shows how family relating is badly affected for generations by past traumas and unresolved relationships (Hellinger and Hovel 1999).

These influences naturally have implications for me beyond my professional life, but of course have a profound influence on my work. I have come to see that there is a disciplined but free-floating 'being with' that which arises in the space between myself and my client. I consider this way of understanding my relationship with my client to be highly suitable when working within a diverse society for the following reasons:

- ◆ there is an attempt to examine prior assumptions as well as an openness to appreciating others', thereby creating a broader base for understanding different and comparable experience.
- ◆ I understand that I am myself within the 'field' when working with my client so do not regard myself as being able to be 'objective'.
- ◆ There is an acknowledgement that the intersubjective 'field' includes the past and present cultural realities of both parties (Parlett 1991).
- ◆ There is a natural loosening of the narcissistic idea of the importance of being right.

In other words, I regard what arises between myself and my client as coming from or originating in an intersubjective field to which we both contribute. I listen both to the client and to my own responses in a way which brings Freud's term 'evenly suspended attention' to mind (Freud 1912). I become interested in, and inquiring into, that which arises in this space. In this way the issues that do arise are not reduced to 'problems'

found in the client which have nothing to do with my also being present. Clients, after all, experience their lives in a relational context and my experience with them more often than not seems to be similar to that experienced by other people in their lives. This is an intersubjective way of understanding what psychotherapists call a 'transference' relationship.² Donna Orange has recognised the similarity but difference in this way of understanding the transference relationship by coining the word 'cotransference' (Orange 1997:63).

Conclusion

In proposing a non-dual, intersubjective way of understanding our relationships with our clients I am suggesting a significant journey away from our individualistic dualistic assumptions which will profoundly affect us in every nook and cranny of our lives, not just in our relationships with 'black' clients. Rather unsurprisingly, the epistemology which leads to racism also leads to a great deal of other conflicting and destructive behaviour in other areas of life. It is a view in which we naturally lose, not our individuality, but our *attachment* to our individuality and, in that sense, is of a spiritual nature.

Elias Amidan, a Sufi teacher, has this to say about non-dual awareness:

'As we learn to open to non-dual awareness we start by noticing the vast field of our preferences and the thoughts, feelings, and actions that arise from those preferences. We just notice. Gradually our noticing them begins to reduce their insistence and reactivity. There comes more space around our thoughts, feelings, and actions. That spaciousness begins to be experienced as a greater and greater sense of equanimity. Serenity opens in our life. We no longer lead with our likes and dislikes and opinions. We simply are present to what is. No clamoring for it, and no avoidance or denial of it. We accept what is because it is, including emotions.' (Amidan 2007)

Non-dual thinking leads us to be *interested* in our experience rather than attached to it in a narcissistic way. If we find an assumption or prejudice we are interested in it. We do not hang onto it for dear life. We see our 'whiteness', for example, and think 'what is this that we take so for granted?' It helps us to loosen our hold on our ego identity and allows us to meet others afresh, without prejudice, including our clients - a way which recognises our own attachments and assumptions. We do not then punish ourselves for failing to do this which merely creates another dualism. Instead of that we notice it and hold it more lightly.

² Classically this is one in which the client 'transfers' feelings and attitudes originally experienced in relating to care-givers, usually the parents, to the psychotherapist. (R. D. Hinshelwood 1989),

We will take another short break before going on to look a model for developing white awareness.

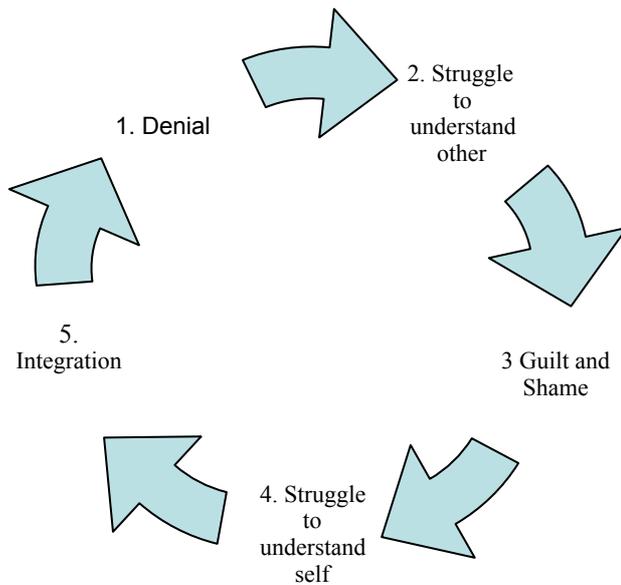
Part 3: A model for the development of 'white' awareness

We can see from what I said before the break that the development of 'white' awareness is a process that involves the whole person. It is not something that can just be understood and accepted intellectually. 'White' awareness involves our emotional responses to unconscious prompts that have developed, not only over our lifetime, but in the cultural consciousness of the society in which we live.

I have developed a cyclical model showing the process which can lead to 'white' people becoming more aware of their 'white' privilege. This cycle may go through several turns during our life as over and over again, and at different levels, we deny the issue of the effect of our 'whiteness' in society. If we are at all sensitive to issues of race, the issue of the responsibility of 'white' people for 'race' tensions, both in the present and historically, are likely to become evident. Feelings of guilt may follow which can lead to a more internal exploration - 'how am *I* responsible?' A struggle to make sense of these feelings and to own our part in 'white' privilege can lead finally to a sense of integration in which we fully own and accept our part in this privileged position and naturally act in the world in a way that, as far as is possible, does not perpetuate the situation.

Diagrammatically this cyclical model looks like this:

Figure 1



Cycle of white awareness

I have devised the model as a cycle because this is not a once-and-for-ever process but one that recurs and the learning deepens through every turn of the cycle.

The model builds on two other models. One is the Helms White Identity model (Helms 1995) and the other is van Weedenburgh's Intercultural Sensitivity model (van Weedenburgh 1996; Brinkman and van Weedenburgh 1999) Like mine, Helms shows a period of ignorance or acceptance of the status quo, a period of struggle and disintegration followed by a more thorough understanding which she calls 'autonomy'. Van Weedenburgh's model is not specifically about 'white' awareness but shows a similar

process for understanding intercultural working that goes through denial, defensiveness, acceptance, cognitive adaptability and behavioural adaptability.

Neither of these models includes feelings of guilt or shame as part of this process. My own view is that these feelings, as I have shown earlier, are often important to a deepening of understanding and a genuine sense of acceptance.

It is quite possible and probably quite common, to be stuck at the different stages which lead towards 'integration'. So what does happen if one is stuck at any of these stages?

Being Stuck at the stage of Denial

Maybe most of the population is in a state of denial about the responsibility 'white' people have for racism. It is quite common to hear a 'white' person say 'I am not racist but.....'. As there is now more pressure on the borders of Western countries from people who wish to immigrate, either for economic or political reasons, racist views have become more prevalent with an accompanying tendency to deny them. For instance, there is a debate in Britain as to whether it should encourage (or even force) minority ethnic groups to integrate into British mainstream culture or whether 'ethnic'³ communities should be encouraged to keep their identities within British society. This issue has become very 'hot' and words are chosen carefully so as not to inflame the situation. The word 'culture' is more often used than 'race' but issues of 'race' seem to be present as non 'white' groups seem to be most feared in this regard.

This whole debate looks different if 'white' Western people see themselves as also having a 'race' but one which is privileged. A more complex view of the interrelating of cultures becomes possible when 'white' people are not seen as the 'normal' ones. This issue is further inflamed by 'white' British people who live in poverty feeling that they have been forgotten in the priorities that are set by local and national government. All these pressures can lead to racist views emerging whilst also being denied.

Being stuck at the stage of the struggle to understand others

Many people, maybe therapists in particular, who desire to work well within this complex intercultural environment, are stuck at this stage. There is a tendency here to keep the understanding at a cognitive level so that ways of behaving in a 'politically correct' manner can be taken on board. (In the book I explore more about the meaning and use of political correctness.) A rational understanding of the issues can be present but the full implication of being 'white' is not deeply understood and feelings of guilt and shame are resisted.

³ The word 'ethnic' is also usually applied to 'black' groups as if 'white' people have no ethnicity but 'black people do.'

Being stuck at the stage of Guilt and Shame

As I have already shown, a sense of guilt or shame can warn us that something is amiss and can deepen our understanding. It alerts us to how we are complicit in 'white' privilege. However being stuck in a guilty or ashamed position can lead to feelings of impotence and helplessness and in no way improves the lives of those that one feels guilty or ashamed about. In fact it can lead to 'black' people feeling that they should absolve the people who feel guilty and ashamed in order to put them out of their misery!

Being stuck at the stage of the Struggle to understand self

In so far as the meaning and effects of 'whiteness' are far reaching and run deep in the psyche, maybe it is not such a bad thing to be stuck at this stage. However if we are to engage in our racialised society in a way which fully owns our complicity in 'white' privilege, then coming to an understanding from which it is possible to relate and act with integrity is a powerful and political act. Just staying in a place of struggle may absolve us of a need to do this and our actions will be less graceful because they will not be fully integrated.

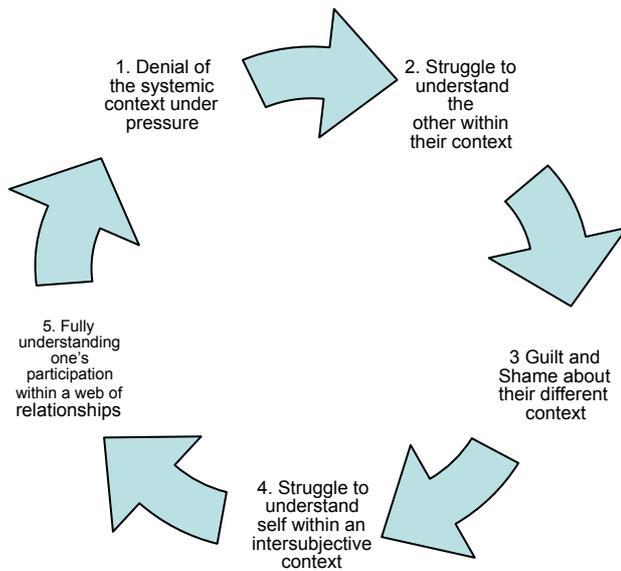
Being stuck at the stage of Integration

This may seem like the Shangri-La of 'white' awareness but it can lead to complacency and its own sort of denial - a denial that further understanding is possible. Another turn of the cycle may lead to an even deeper understanding.

Those who have fully integrated an awareness of their 'whiteness' with all that means in terms of their privilege, are able to step back from an over-identification with 'whiteness' and understand the situation within its systemic and intersubjective context. As I mentioned before the break, if we understand the world in a systemic or intersubjective way, we see the interconnectedness of everything and understand that we take part in a complex web of relationships. This deep understanding of the whole picture including ones own complicity in racism, can lead to a more authentic and less defensive way of relating within a racialised environment.

This is not easy and, typically, defensive denial in the face of ridicule or hostility from others can return. In this case a further turn of the cycle might occur. There may be an understanding that racism occurs within an intersubjective context but it is hard not to be personally reactive when put under pressure. A further turn of the cycle might look like this:

Figure 2



A further turn of the cycle in white awareness

In each position an understanding of the context in which racial relationships occur will deepen the understanding possible. By now racism is understood to be woven into the fabric of society rather than just personal. By taking an attitude in which one is *interested* in the returning racism we find in ourselves which may otherwise feel dispiriting, enables an ability to deepen understanding rather than a return to entrenched denial. The more one re-visits this place, the more a trust in this exploratory process is strengthened. We can be both really in touch in a painful way with our own racism and the part that plays within the embedded racism in society and, at the time, have a sense of non reactivity and non attached interest in the process we go through.

Conclusion

It is not easy to fully understand our own position as 'white' people if what we think we are seems to be just 'normal', particularly if that normality affords us an easy, privileged position in society. I find, when I try to explain to white people what my book is about, that they have trouble 'getting' it. Black people have no difficulty at all. We white people are like fish that swim in a white sea. A fish does not know that 'sea' exists. We find it hard to stand back and see what is going on in the way that black people can.

I have tried to bring this invisible white context into focus and I hope that, by becoming more 'white-aware' that we will work more sensitively and effectively within a racialised context. Maybe this will help to contribute to a more peaceful world. In conclusion, I have discovered that, when considering matters of race, it is good if we:

1. Start with ourselves because 'white' is a privileged racial category,
2. Remember that racism is built into the organising principles of society,
3. Develop a dialogic and an inquiring attitude,
4. Don't dismiss feelings of shame and guilt,
5. Remember that change in us as psychotherapists and counsellors comes as part and parcel with change at both individual and societal levels.

Having identified these factors I will finish by making some concluding statements about each of them.

Start with ourselves because 'white' is a privileged racial category

If we are to really tackle racism we need to stop looking through binoculars and look in the mirror instead. I find that, once understood, this statement seems more and more evident.

As I have shown, I do not think that understanding one's place as a 'white' person within a racialised environment means that our values have to be abandoned or even put to one side. Dialogue across these differences can lead to changes or just to tolerating and allowing for difference. In either case there is a genuine respect for difference and the 'white' way is not seen as the only or best one.

Remember that racism is built into the organising principles of society

As I have shown, it now seems to me that racism exists within the 'organising principles' (Stolorow and Atwood 1992:55) of both every individual and within what I call the 'organising principles' of one's culture.

I have drawn on the work of the intersubjective psychotherapists, Stolorow and Atwood et al, who describe the 'organising principles' of the mind, so

called because they refer to its structure rather than its content, and are thus unavailable to be directly reflected upon. These principles are not conscious because, like the blueprint or architectural drawings of a house, they are not evident in daily life. We are conscious of the floor and the walls but not of the original ideas about them when they were conceived. The drawings can be referred to but not actually *experienced* in the way that we 'experience' *living* in the house. The values and assumptions that underlie our way of being in the world are arranged according to our organising principles and we live our life by them most of the time without questioning or even noticing them.

I find it helpful to understand cultures as well as individuals as being organised around a set of structured principles in the same way. These provide the way that assumptions and values are 'held'. It is within this scaffolding or web that racism shapes itself so that it is built into the fabric of society in a way that we are normally not cognisant of. The web is something we partake in as individuals as the culture shapes our ways of understanding the world. It passes, as it were, through us whilst also running through the culture.

If we see racism as existing within the organising principles that run through society and individuals, it is not surprising that we find racism so difficult to eliminate. Getting rid of racism is not just a matter of finding it within us and expunging it. We cannot merely change our mind about it. Larger shifts in cultural consciousness need to occur. We can, though, contribute to bringing to awareness the underlying organising principles and help reveal them within the culture.

I have become mindful of the way in which 'white' people have imposed their own organising principles globally by racialising the world and by seeing themselves as a superior 'race'. Although racism is largely condemned in contemporary western society, it continues, deeply held, within our personal and cultural organising principles. Our very 'forgetting' of our culpability reveals just how embedded these ideas are, and how deeply most of us take for granted what we regard as obvious 'reality'.

As a psychotherapist I have wondered whether what I provide is always appropriate or is it just another way of 'performing' 'whiteness' on my 'black' clients. Nevertheless, I find that by staying dialogic and open to communication with them, that my intervention in their lives can be experienced as helpful, particularly when the extended family has broken down or is absent. One asylum seeker client tells me that it makes a difference to him that I am 'there'. He has told me things that he has not been able to talk to others about and my acceptance of him and desire to understand him mean a lot. Nevertheless, he also says that it would be nice if there was a sympathetic person living in the room next to him to whom he could open his heart whenever he felt like it. I notice this and wonder if he also needs to be angry with me for not being there for him all

of the time. I am aware of feeling guilty for the small amount of time I am giving him. Can I 'take' his anger that does not feel safe elsewhere?

These experiences have strengthened my belief that dialogic, inquiring and respectful work can offer something that can run along the web that connects between and across cultures. In any case complex interrelationships between different cultural groups make the question of whether our work is suitable for non-Western groups too simplistic to be answered with just yes or no. I have certainly found that it can be. Developing an ability to be in a state of on-going inquiry is more important than looking for clear cut answers.

Develop a dialogic and an inquiring attitude

I have found that to keep learning I need to maintain an inquiring attitude. This idea is current in psychological theorising. For example, Winnicott's notion of playing within a 'potential space' is similar (Winnicott 1974). This 'play' space is part of what Winnicott calls 'transitional phenomena' (Winnicott 1974) which exist between the internal and external world and allows something new within our sense of self to emerge. As therapists our exploration of our own responses (or 'countertransference') also exists within a space of this sort. This notion of a 'play space' allows anything to be held within it, however fanciful or violent or bizarre, as it has not yet entered external reality. It may be important to explore and play with these fantasies with a supervisor (Ryan 2008:77). We might find that we are thinking⁴ something that is, under normal circumstances, completely unacceptable like 'I want to pin this client up against a wall and shoot him'. Not a thought to be conveyed to the client undigested but I think most of us will have felt something like this from time to time! We might then think 'what on earth is that all about? Something is happening that draws me to feel murderous and in that particular way! Do I feel under threat? Would I enjoy feeling sadistic? Maybe an old experience of mine is being restimulated. Maybe I am picking up a fear or desire of the clients!' We might then put it to one side until something else is said which seems to make it clearer. My point here is that we do not push away an unacceptable thought but put it within an orbit of 'playing' so that it can be thought about safely and trust that something can be learnt through it.

Do not dismiss feelings of shame and guilt

Guilt and shame tend to attack our sense of ourselves as good people and can either immobilise us or mean that we defend ourselves against it by denying our guilt. If instead we let it alert us to what is amiss in our relating with those who are not 'white' or western then it may be helpful in finding a way to understanding our privilege and gives us some idea of how we make reparation or show us how to behave differently in future.

⁴ 'Finding that you are thinking' something is different to having a 'thought'. It is like catching the unconscious on the wing.

However, we cannot expect to be forgiven or 'understood' by 'black' people. Seeming to say 'look how I suffer too' is naïve and beside the point. It is likely to alienate 'black' people even further.

The natural outcome of a real understanding of one's guilt is reparation and restitution. There is often controversy around the idea that colonisers should make reparation and/or restitution to those who have been colonised on the grounds that it was all a long time ago and people living today were not responsible. However, 'white' people are still benefiting by the advantages that colonisation gave us. The concomitant attitudes to 'black' people, that are hard wired in to us at quite a fundamental level, originate from those times. Our connections with our ancestors are subtle and deeply held. Looked at like this, our guilt appears more evident and reparation and restitution seems more important. Genuine and significant reparation and subsequent restitution could put some of the deep-seated anger and hurt felt by 'black' people to rest. Refusing to do so and only apologising reminds me of a story told at a conference on forgiveness: A man graciously apologised for taking someone's bicycle. The bicycle owner was pleased to receive the apology but understandably said: 'thank you, but where is the bike?'

Remember that change in the professions comes as part and parcel with change at individual and societal levels.

I haven't said much about organisations here but a chapter is devoted to it in the book along with chapters on training and supervision.

However it is clear that therapy institutions exist within a wider environment and will affect and be affected by factors beyond their confines. To make a change there needs to be a movement in two directions - from the widest institutions like governments and training institutions who make policies, to individuals and their personal explorations. Both can feed into and support the other to provide a virtuous rather than a vicious cycle.

I cannot advocate then that institutions should just come up with better policies or that individuals change their consciousness. Both work together in a synergistic way. Thought is in the culture and we are affected by it and affect it just as drops of water make a pool and a pool is full of drops of water.

So in conclusion, I have found ways in which supporting frameworks, such as the 'White' Awareness Model, brings together the personal, interpersonal, group and societal, particularly through understanding the ways that 'organising principles' run through individuals and groups to provide the ways in which thought is structured within, through and around us. This feels to me to be an important shift in perspective that could lead to less attachment to our own narcissistic desire to have our

own point of view 'win', and lead instead to a real acknowledgement of our membership of the human family and the wider world.

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