Chapter 7

Race in the therapy relationship

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Introduction

One of the main tasks of the brief psychotherapy project, introduced in the previous chapter, was to address the needs of Black women and examine the particular experiences which influence the development of the Black woman's psyche. In pursuit of this aim we looked at the issue and its implications for the therapy relationship.

In this chapter we firstly explore what racism is, and how it employs one of the psyche's most primitive defence mechanisms, the unconscious process of splitting and projection (Klein, 1946) as its means of operating. Secondly, we go on to examine the depleting and fragmentary psychological and social impact that racism has, both on the person or people onto whom it is projected, and also on society as a whole. We then go on to look at the particular ways in which the experience of living in a society in which 'Black' is associated with 'bad' and 'inferior' becomes internalised and affects the Black client's inner and outer world. These issues are complex, requiring an exploration of intercultural issues, issues of loss, separation and dislocation, and an understanding of the ways in which the (largely unconscious) 'mechanics' of racism might be played out in the therapeutic relationship.

In addressing the inter-play between external and internal experiences, psychoanalytic theory has a lot to offer our understanding of racism. However, what may sometimes be missed is a real recognition of the fact of racism and its impact on Black and white
people, at both a conscious and unconscious level. If this is not acknowledged within the clinical setting, there is a danger that Black women's experience may be pathologised.

Written on the whole by white practitioners working with white patients, psychoanalytic theory often fails to include a Black perspective, although more recently this is beginning to be addressed. By offering a general account of the development of the psyche, which is located within a specific (Western, Eurocentric) cultural context, psychoanalysis concentrates on similarities based on this assumed context, rather than looking more widely at the implications of cultural differences. The fact that intercultural therapy is usually (if at all) presented as a topic on its own, as if it were outside mainstream analytic therapy, highlights the marginalisation of the impact of race and culture on the psychoanalytic process. In order to offer a service that we perceived to be working interculturally, we therefore needed to develop an understanding of what being 'Black' actually means.

A Women's Therapy Centre study group on race, in lecture and discussion group format, and an experiential group for our mixed Black and white staff team gave us an opportunity to explore the issues theoretically and experientially. In the tradition of the Centre we felt that it was important to maintain a dialogue between theory and what we were encountering in our clinical practice. We were questioning the universality of the application of analytically based theory and whether this was equally valid when working with Black women. Given, for example, that the structure of Black families does not fit into the Western stereotype, did the theories offer a framework for understanding the totality of the Black individual's life situation?

In seeking to understand the complexity of ways in which 'good' and 'bad', 'Black' and 'white' are expressed in the transference relationship, we concluded that differences need to be understood within the context of each person's individual experience of culture and personal history, and that the large number of variables make it difficult to generalise. However, one thing we can be sure of is that the impact of racism has a profoundly debilitating effect on society as a whole, firstly in inhibiting the establishment of a positive sense of identity, well-being and self-esteem for the Black person, and secondly in creating an impoverished sense of the white psyche, whereby aspects of the self which have been disowned become lost and are no longer available to be integrated within the self.