



RACIAL IDENTITY: THE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Since starting my own private practice, I have been acutely aware of the cultural backgrounds of people who contact me for counselling. Since I have worked within higher education for most of my counselling career this was never really an issue for me; clients were allocated to me purely based on the available counsellor within the team. Occasionally there might have been a discussion within the team if a client had specifically asked for a counsellor with my cultural background but on the whole, students could not choose which counsellor they saw.

Within my private practice, one of the strongest feelings I noticed within myself was a wondering, a disbelief almost, that a white client would “choose” to see me for therapy. I explored this feeling within my personal therapy and supervision and managed to understand what this feeling was about. This feeling reflected something very important about my experience of oppression and informed me



about the unconscious process of the client I was seeing. It also unveiled a deeper understanding of my own choice of therapists over the years. I started to understand my own journey of racial identity and development more clearly and became more aware of my clients' journeys.

In this blog, I explore the model of black racial identity by Cross (1991). This model provides a framework in which to understand the journey of the person of colour. I am aware that there have been other racial identity models developed by other people which may also be used to understand racial identity. However, for the purposes of this blog, I have only focused on Cross's model. It is important to remember that although I have described each stage of Cross's model in a linear fashion, the journey of the individual may not be such – it is possible that the person of colour will experience each stage in a different order or will perhaps alternate between stages at different times. I also believe that some of these stages may overlap



Black Racial Identity

Cross related the transition of the black identity through a five-stage theory of acquisition of black identification. He called this theory Nigrescence which can be translated into “the process of becoming black”. Initially, he identified the pre-encounter stage which had the following characteristics:

Pre-Encounter

- A dependency on white society for self-definition and approval.
- Racial identity attitudes towards blackness are negative, and white culture/society is viewed as the ideal.
- Race is not a salient aspect of identity and the importance of race is denied.
- Blacks distant themselves from their own racial identity.
- A desire to be judged on own merits irrespective of race - “wearing the mask of whiteness”.



Wearing the mask of whiteness is something that I greatly identified with whilst growing up. As a child, I wished I was white/English because I did not want to be different from the other children at school - I rejected my own cultural heritage.

Reflecting on my journey as a counselling client, I continued to reject the Asian part of me by choosing a white female psychotherapist to work with whilst completing my therapy training. Interestingly, I do not remember being asked by my therapist, my supervisors or tutors on my course why I had made this choice. I believe this silence or denial unconsciously reinforced my rejection and reflected how psychotherapy and society had rejected this part of me too. The rejection of my own culture was not explored or addressed, it was ignored, as was the 'whiteness' within my training course.

As I moved on in my life and eventually decided to see another therapist, I reluctantly saw an Asian therapist – I remember being quite distrustful of her. I felt like she was going to judge me and not



understand my battle with my own culture. However, I experienced this therapy as very holding, empathic and understanding of my culture. It was with this therapist that I started to accept the Asian part of myself. I started to understand the meaning and significance of my race and realised how this difference had affected my life negatively. I had always felt that I had been treated differently and that my difference had negatively impacted my life, but I was not sure of how to verbalise this; my journey of oppression, feelings of anger and hurt remained buried deep inside me. With this therapist, I was able to talk about the racism I had experienced. I felt it was at this point in my life that I entered the encounter stage which Cross identifies with the following characteristics:

Encounter

- Begins when an individual has a personal and challenging racial experience.
- The encounter status is marked by confusion about the meaning



and significance of race.

- An increasing desire to become more aligned with one's Black identity.
- Lifting the mask of whiteness and connect with the significance of racial difference.
- Realisation that race alone can lead to negative treatment.

At this point I was able to connect the racial dots from my earlier life – it felt like a waking up. I understood now for example why I was not chosen to play for the school netball trials and when I asked to play, I was put on the side as a reserve. Ironically when I did finally get to play, I was the best player in the team and went on to play and win many tournaments for the school. I could finally make sense of my experience and attribute my anger to the right place. I sometimes hear BME clients also have this light bulb moment where they can finally breathe out and recognise how their race has negatively affected them and their lives.



Immersion-Emersion

It was with my most recent white therapist that I was able to fully enter the following stage of immersion-emersion. I started to connect with the positive aspects of being from an ethnic minority. I started to really connect with my rage towards white culture and explore the history of my own cultural background. I wonder if the growing number of extremists (both far right and IS) are at this stage- there is a rejection of the 'other' culture and a 'coming home' to one's own culture. Some of the characteristics Cross identifies during this stage seem to fit the psychological profiling of these groups of people:

- Having negative feelings towards whites and white culture.
- Anger towards whites and avoidance of white associated issues.
- Everything of value is about black or blackness.
- Tendency to denigrate white people.
- Exploring roots of own blackness.



Now, I feel like I mostly fluctuate between the last 2 stages of internalisation and internalisation-commitment but occasionally slip into the immersion-emersion stage.

Internalisation

- Realising that blacks and whites have strengths and weaknesses.
- One's black identity is experienced as a positive, important, and valued aspect of self.
- Respects whites and tolerates their differences.
- Pro-black attitude.
- Is more expansive and open, less defensive.
- A greater willingness to interact with other groups or whites.

Internalisation-commitment

- Actively promotes the welfare of black people.
- Feels secure in their own blackness
- Effectively participates in a broader multi-cultural context.



One of the factors which helped me value my experience as an Asian woman was my white therapist's ability and skill to show empathy and understanding towards my cultural background and the oppression I had experienced. My therapist was able to hold their own feelings of guilt and shame whilst I explored my journey of hurt and oppression – this felt very healing and crucial for the development of my racial identity. I have also healed through my work with white clients who have identified their privilege when exploring cultural dynamics within the therapy room.

To conclude

The stages of racial identity development which Cross identify are very important to explore in therapists' own personal therapy, counselling training and CPD. This model shows how people of colour relate to their own culture and to the 'other' culture they are in relationship with. When we consider the relational aspect of therapy, not exploring this dynamic feels avoidant and resistant.



I believe that when we choose a therapist, their racial background is significant even if there is no conscious recognition of it. Clients choice of therapist will reflect which development stage they are at, which will inform the therapist of the emotional and psychological themes present for the client in and outside the therapy room. The onus is on the therapist to understand and work with the stages of racial identity for effective transcultural therapy to take place.

References

Cross, W. E. (1991) *Shades of Black*. Philadelphia. Temple University Press.