

Race, Relations and Therapy

A number of the members in the group start a dialogue sharing that they need to talk about race relations. The topic is a very confusing one. How do we deal with the topic of race relations, particularly when one party is black and the other is white?

A therapist volunteers to offer a case in point. She is working with a young woman who is beginning to find her voice. Her background consists of one parent who is black and one who is Puerto Rican. The patient has always been aware of her difference with others, and struggles to stand alone. She feels that she does not belong to any one group. The therapist hears how tortured and yet forthright the patient is, and tears come to her eyes. The therapist does not understand these tears. She likes this patient very much, but what are all these tears all about? Is she feeling sad for the patient? Is she being intrusive? She does not know.

Her family is proud of her ability to write down her new thoughts and feelings. Being a white therapist does not seem to matter to this patient, and yet I wonder out loud, "Are we all part of a cultural trap, where one party plays the master, and the other the slave? Have we all, in a very subtle way, profited off of the exploitation of one race? During this period of chaos, we take a deep look at our history." I wonder if some of my thoughts regarding our current state could be shared with the patient. The therapist fears that such a sharing would only lead to a disruption in their communication. "Maybe this is not bad," I say. The group is evenly divided about how much of this should be shared in the context of therapy. I wonder whether it is possible not to.

I share with the group my personal associations. I tell them that I have such a big problem with Germans. I can never forgive what has happened to the Jews in the Holocaust. I recognize that the German society has gone through their own period of soul searching. I also recognize that we as a culture have been part of a system of annihilation, race superiority, and passive compliance. By ignoring our outrage, we have cooperated and furthered a system that exploits, utilizes, and kills others. We see ourselves as good liberals, as many in Germany saw themselves as good Germans. Are we finally being able to not only face ourselves but actually change a very maladaptive system?

From the very beginning of our country's history, we have been part of a master-slave mentality. A civil war occurred, but we still continued a deep form of racial prejudice. Do we have some responsibility to own up to this, especially with our patients? We deal with

our patients with intrapsychic and interpersonal issues. Do we also need to include our current situation, that has impacted all of our behavior? Can we divorce ourselves from the black-white upheaval that is taking place all around us?

By introducing the current political conflicts, I do not know how much we are imposing our own issues into the therapeutic dialogue. I do believe we have a collective unconscious of shared guilt and shame. The picture of a knee on this black man's neck intrudes into our consciousness. Do we all share a piece of that picture? I am not pushing for any degree of confession, but merely want to bear some responsibility for our role in the culture. In another group, a young Puerto Rican woman shares that she is full of sadness. She cannot let go of her black-white struggle. She confesses that she sees a black supervisor who can be better attuned to her black patients than we have been in this group. The group wants to look further into how this state of affairs has occurred, without becoming defensive. Others talk about their own prejudice. A Chinese member of the group talks about being visible. She does not belong here, or anywhere. The group seems very open to looking at this picture in depth.

Another group also brings up the topic of there being "good blacks" and "bad blacks", just as there are with the white population, one member proclaims. Others admit that they carry their own prejudice and have a stereotypical picture of Blacks. There is thought and sharing about each member's struggle in living in a racist society. They lament that there are no Black supervisees in the group. Unfortunately, much of therapy has become the White man's province. Do we do enough to encourage people of all races to join us? We have more questions than answers, but there is relief in giving voice to our confusion and pain.

I now realize that I have much to learn regarding my own prejudice and biases. In previous sessions, I insisted that I saw a person of color in border terminology rather than a political category. I recognize that I was to turn a political category to one of meaning. If I were to ever really understand this woman and she would feel some trust from me, I will have to work on understanding the trauma that is carried from one generation to another in one's body. One does not have to have immediate traumatic history to recognize the sociological burden that life has imparted on people of color. The trauma of intergenerational history lies in one's genes and one's body. It will take many dialogues to redo.