Chapter 7

Black on Black Encounter

Introduction

In this chapter I will attempt to summarise, or restate, some of the issues and main themes from the co-operative inquiry. The chapter illuminates, clarifies, and examines black professionals' and black students' issues in welfare organisations and in higher education as we interact with each other as black people. I offer my own theoretical analysis of the themes and sub-themes which emerged. I make clear my voice as the sensemaker by using a different typeface.

The field texts for this chapter have been taken from the audio tape recordings made during the cycles of inquiries. I paid particular attention to the Practitioners'/Students' recordings as well as to those of the Lecturers/Academics. Material from the Managers' tapes have been analysed in the next chapter as they focused on some specific needs and issues. However, the analysis in this chapter will be inclusive of the issues the managers and workers explored which connected with the other group's issues. This is by no means a comprehensive account of all that happened of all that we produced. The inquiry produced a wealth of material and I selected particular areas to focus on. In particular, the analysis will focus on the responses to inquiry questions that were asked within the co-operative inquiry; questions such as: "what do we look for in a black person or a group of black people when we meet them for the first time?" "What factors contribute to the ways in which we interrelate as groups of black people in white welfare organisations?" These were crucial questions, given the orientation of the research project, which emphasised that this was a black on black study. It, therefore, meant paying attention to the black on black interaction at all levels which, in the context of this research, can best be identified as black lecturers/black students; black managers/ black workers.

Listening to the tape recordings of the meetings and reflecting on the inquiry questions, I noticed that there were some similarities and some consistency in the questions asked. There were also some similar issues which emerged from all the groups which related to our experiences of interacting with other black people. There were some key words and phrases emerging from the discussions which were associated with that interaction and I

have brought together what was said about our experiences under the themes of the research.

In my attempt to make some sense of what had been said I chose to return to some of the inquiry questions (reported in Chapter 5) which emerged consistently and were of particular interest to me. These derived from the following themes: our needs as black professionals, our differences and commonalties, and accentuating the positives.

***Our needs as black professionals**:*

- Where do we get our support?
- Whom do we as a people look to for that support?

Differences and commonalties:

- What are the issues around difference?
- What do we do to accommodate difference?
- What do we do to prevent us from coming together? Trust is a big issue. What criteria do we use to judge whether we can trust each other or not? We need to be explicit about the criteria.

Accentuating our positives:

- How do we ground ourselves in the positives? To arrive at this point a process of deconstruction and reconstruction is necessary, one that also looks at the negatives in terms of what blocks us from focusing on the positives. So what are the negative experiences black students and black professionals face both generally and in black on black interaction. In an attempt to explore this major question, which featured highly in relation to 'accentuating the positives', some other inquiry questions were asked such as:

1. Why is it we start off with being suspicious when we meet another black person rather than giving them the benefit of the doubt?
2. What is it that generates that suspicion?
3. What happens to us as we try to work together?
4. What are the good things about working with each other?
5. What are the things that are not so good?
6. What behaviour do we look for that tells us that a black person is ok?

The themes and sub-themes that I chose to focus on were chosen because they were of major concerns and interest to participants. We focused more on how we related to each other, how we lived with those processes and how we coped in organisations. These were foundational elements for looking at other things like our achievements and successes. My choice also reflected my own interest and own story as a manager, of coping as a student and my story as an educator interested in understanding black students' needs. I chose to highlight these themes and questions, not because I believed that I could answer the questions nor because there were answers given in the inquiry sub groups for each question, but because I wanted to use the themes and questions to assist me to reflect on what was said and to offer a more inclusive analysis and theoretical understanding of the issues raised through the exploration.

Issues explored - Themes and Patterns:

I have selected for analysis those patterns, themes, and sub-themes that were common to our stories, which were taken from the mappings I made on flip charts and notes made whilst listening to the tape recordings of all the subgroup meetings. I have referred to in Chapter 7 the process via which I arrived at these themes and patterns. I have included in my analysis how we think about these stories and I have suggested ways in which we could think about them differently.

I have selected the following sub-themes under the general themes. Under the theme 'Our Needs as Black Professionals and Students':

- **need of support,**
- **need for black support groups and support networks,**
- **dealing with alienation and isolation,**
- **struggle and survival,**
- **need for connectedness,**
- **sense of community identity and self - identity,**

And under the themes 'Accentuating our Positives' and 'our Commonalties and Differences':

- **Suspicions, lack of trust, fear of getting close,**
- **lack of support amongst ourselves,**
- **making negative judgements about other black people,**
- **stuck in complaint culture -fighting/complaining, competing in black groups,**
- **we oppress ourselves by engaging in negative stereotypes of each other**

- **too many expectations of each other,**
- **fear of challenging self and other.**

The above list and some of what is to follow may present as being imbalanced with more of an accent on the negatives. It is worth noting here some possible explanations for this. One possible explanation is that the process in the group was about engaging in the understanding of the factors at play that push us into the negatives so consequently we spoke a great deal about our negative experiences.

Another explanation stems from my understanding of Gestalt theory. In Gestalt theory opposites demand each other. There is a mutually interdependent relationship, so that where there are negatives, positives will be found and vice versa (Mackewn, 1997). Opposites can also be found within themselves. So there are some positives in negatives and negatives in positives. If we take an opposite to its very ultimate extreme, if we make it absolute, it turns into its opposite so if we just focused on the positives we could be blinded by our positives and if we focus on the negatives our negatives could blind us. Dialectically if we see our experience in a one-sided way we may be living a life of illusion. So opposition has to be included rather than kept out, the opposite of our negative experiences as well as the opposite of our positives. This process could result in conflict – conflict with the self and with 'other'. Hearing all the negatives, for example, did not make some of us feel good, but it was a necessary time of introspection.

A further explanation is that although our experiences may have pushed us into a position to see things differently, our lack of control over the ideological apparatuses of organisations and society may have made expressing some of the positives more difficult. According to Patricia Hill-Collins (1990) groups' unequal in power are correspondingly unequal in their ability to make their standpoint known to themselves and others. In our case, some of these standpoints could have included our inability to state our positives and, in particular, our successes. As a consequence, the focus in this analysis is more on the themes of our needs and our experiences of trying to get those needs met.

As a group we may have had experiences that provided us with a unique sense of vision but expressing a collective, self-defined black professional and student consciousness proved at times problematic. Nevertheless, some of us were having a positive experience whilst engaging in what was sometimes problematic and, in the experience of

the positive, we spoke of the negatives. In order to get to the stage of focusing on the positives we had to engage in the content of the negatives, so we went into the negatives in order to focus on our success in surviving and coping. We had to reflect on the obstacles that were in our path and in doing so some of us realised that we had had successes. There had to be synthesis of the opposites, which included contradictions, so that growth and change could take place and for some it was a regenerative, transformative experience.

I shall present extracts from our discussions and stories told in the inquiry group with an analysis of the themes and sub-themes. The analysis will not be presented in a strict linear way, or in the order listed above, but in a circular fashion with discussion and analysis going back and forth between the sub-themes. However, I shall use some of the sub-themes as discussion headings. There will be positive and negative experiences interwoven under the headings.

Need for support

We expressed the need for a more positive experience when we interact with other black people and the themes that emerged were the need for support and having and needing a sense of connectedness. As black professionals and black students our experiences in organisations and grounding in our own culture suggest that as a group we experience a world differently from those who are not black. These concrete experiences can stimulate a distinctive black professional consciousness concerning that material reality. Being black and a professional practitioner or black and a student may expose us in organisations to certain common experiences. These experiences may predispose us to a distinctive group consciousness, but they in no way guarantee that such a consciousness will develop amongst all black professionals or that it will be articulated as such, by the group. However, I was interested to note that the Practitioners' Group, and in particularl the students focused a great deal on their experiences of 'support groups' either as workers or as students. The Manager's Group also focused on black worker's groups and, interestingly enough, the Lecturers/Academics paid more attention to the theme of connectedness.

I was not surprised to note the theme, 'connectedness and the need for connection', as there is an absence of an identifiable tradition uniting black social work professionals and students. There are connections amongst us as black professionals that are to do with

concrete experiences with oppression, developing a self- defined position concerning those experiences, and the acts of resistance that can follow. Our concrete experiences as members of specific race, class, profession and gender groups, as well as our concrete historical situations, necessarily play significant roles in our perspectives on the world. The sharing of these perspectives contributes to our knowledge of ourselves and our identity, knowledge gained by black professionals and students as socially constituted members of a group. Within that group, connection and support are central as our support systems can underpin our actions in the world.

From a gestalt perspective support is the background from which awareness takes place, connections are made and growth arises. Black professionals and black students are likely to be looking for some extra environmental support from other black people in an organised form, either formally or informally, because we may be lacking environmental support in our daily life or work life.

We inquired into our experiences of support and asked where do we look for support and how do we get support? It was felt that some of us might feel unable to support ourselves effectively in respect of the key problems we face as black professionals in white organisations, and black support groups were looked to by many of the participants as offering specialised forms of support.

Black support groups

Our explorations revealed that our need for black support groups was paramount as they acted as a strategy for dealing with the isolation that black people feel in white institutions. It also filled the gap that some white institutions leave by not providing adequate support structures.

Some people felt that they had to 'dig deep' to find support in organisations, especially structured support. Some said that they feared asking for support from public forums such as support groups for fear that such action could be viewed negatively by some white organisations. They feared the organisation might view them as not capable of coping with difficult situations. Also, in a climate of fear, some of us are likely to be more concerned with watching our backs than with supporting each other.

Nevertheless, there was a unanimous expression that **"Support is key".** Some said that they felt reassured when there was a support group for black people. Some were surprised to find black students' support groups existed and that some organisations had black workers' groups. Some students experienced black students support groups as places where they could go to when they were experiencing difficulties. This they found to be necessary and helpful as their general experience of support during their training was that it came but it was very fragmented and inconsistent. Some students said that they needed the group support because their training had caused a great deal of change in their lives which, at times, they found frightening and they needed a place in which they could makes sense of it. The experience of the change was so frightening that they constructed it as a negative experience. They, therefore, felt reassured when there was a support group.

Black professional groups, student groups and general support groups can be lifelines and there were some general comments in support of the need for meeting in groups for support. One participant said these were places where **" I am asked what do I really want for myself, a place where I am willing to give and I have to be willing to share".** Some of us felt that we needed opportunities to talk to each other so that we could be influenced by each other and grow together, otherwise we ran the risk of oppressing ourselves. Support groups could provide such opportunities.

The notion of safety in numbers was also spoken of in relation to the experience of being in black support groups. One participant's positive comment on support groups was that these were **"Established networks and forums for other black professionals to meet other black people".** Becoming active in groups gives many black professionals a safe space to talk about job related pressures and stresses that might not be able to be discussed in the workplace. In the words of one participant, **"it's a place to meet to explore our journeys".** In the comfort of a 'safe' meeting space within the organisation, through serious conversations and sometimes through humour, black workers and/or student have the opportunity to affirm each other's humanity and specialness, to validate each others experiences and take the right to speak those experiences. The valuing of our experiences comes from a shared recognition of who we all are in the world and how we survive in white organisations. **"We have a universal strength and it can act as a reminder of how we can survive and handle difficult situations"** said one participant. This shared recognition operates among black people who do not necessarily know one another but recognise the need for valuing of each other.

These feelings were experienced by some as empowering because expressing them allowed them to be 'more themselves'. Being able to do so offered some people a sense of family. One participant said:

"I expect support from family and friends and I feel the same about black support groups. I am surprised we do not offer love and nurturing to each other especially when we want to be a family again".

Another said:

"That is why support groups are so important for me, because I view a support group as a family. We do not see each other often but when we do we fall into place again".

In talking with each other, many of us discover we have similar experiences and recognise the need to really listen to one another, to support each other to speak, use our voices and tell our stories. But, in the creation of the space for the telling of our stories and 'envoicing' ourselves, we discover that there are many issues and difficulties to do with negotiation; negotiating how to get to a space, self-revelation or the transformation of silence into language. These issues are experienced negatively by some.

There were other positive reasons why black support groups were necessary. It was suggested that they could act as vehicles for increasing our body of knowledge, a place where we could share our ideas, a place where creativity could flourish. However, some of us felt that we did not take up the opportunities and behaved, instead in contradictory ways that did not allow for support. One participant said:

"Instead of sharing our ideas with each other openly we do it in our pigeon holes at work - in hospitals and social services canteens, but we have to develop what we know and do it in public. We also have to pat ourselves on the back and say in public 'I have done well and feel good about ourselves, about our achievements".

Some of us experience difficulty in admitting that we have done well, or sharing with others what we have done well, although we pressure others and ourselves to do well. One male participant said that he felt that **"We give ourselves and each other a hard time about the pressure to do well and the pressure to make black groups or black teams work. The pressure is sometimes too great to bear".** He told a story of his football team's match when they won the game, and said that he noticed that **"If we lose we argue, we win and we still argue about how we could have done better. We cannot see the positives in ourselves".**

Some of the same people who found black support groups to be positive had also contradictory, ambivalent and mixed feelings about them because they felt that some black groups came together to offer support only when there were problems or difficulties. Indeed some people used them for problem solving or when they were having difficulties. One participant said:

"For five and a half years as the only black worker in my team I was ringing up ex-students/colleagues, family and friends, open-minded white colleagues for support. I believed that I had to have a problem before asking for support".

Complaint culture – complaining, fighting and competing

The question was posed whether these groups had become too problem focused. Some thought that issues were made more problematic than was in fact the case so that it was difficult to find solutions or strategies for moving forward. There were times when the people with problems were stigmitised, stereotyped and seen negatively. Some people appreciated being in a black group, for support, but did not want to take on some of the values of the group, especially if these were negative. They felt that they would become identified with the negative identity which is ascribed to some black groups when they are not functioning effectively. Some defined black groups as not functioning effectively when they became stuck and when individuals were not able to help one another. One participant stated, **"we seem to be stuck in complaining**". Some individuals became quite destructive by engaging in unsupportive challenge, quarrels, name calling, infighting, competing and silencing which sometimes resulted in unresolvable conflicts. **"There is a battle between black students when we are altogether, we become highly competitive",** stated one participant.

Some participants thought a possible explanation could be that some black people were reluctant to examine their internalised racism and that this was the source of many disagreements and conflicts. In my view, another possible explanation of this situation could be that when we meet we are at different stages of development in terms of politicisation of ourselves. When we meet each other we are sometimes meeting as *subjects* and *objects* or *objects* and *objects* and we interact in these ways because for some of us have not decolonised our minds (Fanon, 1967), so we may have decolonised and colonised minds meeting.

We might have people in a group who are experiencing feeling victimised by organisations and society and are taking up victim positions interacting with others, who

are feeling less victimised and are working through a political process of freeing themselves. Those feeling victimised may also be interacting with others who have worked through rage and freed themselves towards empowerment, and who, having decolonised their minds, are able to see things more clearly. Black rage is released as our different minds interact to make sense of our experiences and we may not always allow room for difference. In such situations, we might experience negative behaviours such as arguing, complaining and fighting.

Consequently, we are not experiencing a subject-to-subject encounter, mutuality between individuals who have decolonised their minds. Lack of mutuality in subject-to-subject encounters makes it difficult for back rage to be used constructively (hooks, 1995). It becomes represented negatively since we are always fighting rather than seeing its necessity for transformation and change. Rage instead is constructed as always and only negative and destructive. As a result, some black support groups become places to avoid, owing to the dynamics and processes that are experienced between them and because of the ways in which some people experience themselves behaving. One participant said:

"I can become very negative in all black groups. I use up much personal energy anticipating and worrying that something will go wrong. My antenna goes up. I have a lack of trust generally for all groups, but more with black groups it's my internalised stuff".

Another said:
I have a resistance to meeting in an all black group. We don't really engage in genuine dialogue. We compete for space".

Some also find it difficult to appreciate the complex dynamics of groups. They have high expectations of each other and become impatient with the group process. One participant said **we don't allow each other to have our voices heard in these groups and we speak for each other as if we are all the same. We don't want to hear different voices".**

Reflecting on this last statement I wonder if one explanation for this is that some of us do not operate with the awareness that the voice which a person seeks is their own voice, not the one we have made for them. We cannot see that using our voice for them only perpetuates their bondage rather than offering freedom.

hooks (1994) spoke of her concern that when black people are not allowed to challenge critically that their voices are silenced by self appointed groups which she called the 'secret police'. In our inquiry groups people spoke of their fear of speaking out in public and of being challenged or challenging other black people, because reprisals from other black people might further isolate them. One participant said, **"We have a fear of being challenged, we do not want to challenge ourselves and others. I have been taught to 'keep it in the family', to not wash my dirty linen in public".** And another said, **"I fear bringing half-formed ideas into the group for fear "I" will be attacked instead of what I "say" being challenged".**

hooks describes an act of censorship, which is a troubling issue for black people. Everyone is taught to value discretion and secrets keeping. Even in so-called 'safe' spaces, where groups come together to share ideas and experiences, there is a fear of silencing by rigorous challenge and fantasies are constructed that it is easier to challenge in white groups or with white workers. This was reflected in these participants' statements:

"It's easier to confront white people, and more difficult to confront black people".

"Black and white workers are interacting better than black workers with each other. I find that sometimes white workers are more welcoming to black workers than black workers are to each other".

hooks argues that groups sometimes disintegrate when the speaking of diverse opinions leads to contestations, challenge, confrontation, and out and out conflict. It is sometimes common for individual dissenting voices to be silenced by the collective demand for harmony. In some cases we impose sanctions in the form of censorship. Exclusion and ostracisation are sometimes used to punish those voices.

My Reflections and Sensemaking

It is important to understand that intergroup relations in some of these groups are complex and that the dynamics are no different from those of 'ordinary' group life. Adapting a theoretical perspective from field theory could help our understanding. Field theory has a set of principles that emphasises the interconnectednes of events and settings in which those events take place. Field theory looks at the total situation, affirming and respecting wholeness and complexity, rather

than reducing that situation by piecemeal, item by item analysis (Mackewn 1997). We cannot understand ourselves in isolation but as interactive wholes within the complex systems of our environment.

When a group of black professionals or black students meets we jointly create a relational field which consists of all the interconnected aspects of our environment and ourselves. These multiple aspects include the ecological, cultural and economic environment, each individual's current functioning, or backgrounds and past experiences which include such factors as age, gender, class, race, economic and social circumstances as well as the character structure of the individuals. As the cultural fields of the many individuals in these groups come together to co-create the field of the group, the situation becomes more complex.

Understanding black professionals and students in context involves paying attention to what lies in the background of our lives. That is, the person's whole life experiences which consist of their race, culture, gender or social values, as well as to what is uppermost in our attention or in the foreground of the group session. Many black support groups meet within institutions - work settings, university settings. The fields in which these groups operate are complex organisations and social systems with multiple possibilities and complexities. Within the groups we have complex phenomena which are interconnected and we cannot separate them without destroying or changing the meaning of the whole. All aspects of the field are potentially significant and interconnected (Yontef, 1993). Therefore the process in some black support groups cannot therefore, be understood in isolation, but only in relationship to all aspects of the field. Addressing issues of racism, cultural and ethnic diversity is a matter not only of content but also of process (Kareem and Littlewood, 1992). It means trying to understand the intercultural and interracial dimension to any encounter between people.

It also means having an understanding of intergroup relations in organisations. We also need an analysis that helps us to understand how members relate within their groups and how expectations placed on them by others can be highly dependent on the nature of intergroup forces. In order to understand our process in groups, from the perspective of intergroup relations, we also need to understand the relationship in groups and between groups of member to non member, white and black and

also our relationship to other groups in the organisation. An intergroup perspective on group dynamics could help us to understand how race and cultural dynamics determine black on black dynamics in oganisations. We need to understand that groups are embedded in social systems, organisations or society. Therefore, it is important to consider wider political and social groupings, in terms of the social relationships we make as well as in terms of one to one relationships. Our experiences of these relationships have an impact on black professionals and black students and we bring these experiences to black support groups.

The power dynamics within black on black interactions in groups are vastly different in some significant ways. The difference in power dynamics and in their underlying issues might be due to the cumulative effects of racism and sexism, the scarcity of black men in the social work profession and the common socio-economic class differences between black males and black females. Consequently, some black groups might take on a more potent life that brings with it its own difficulties. Such difficulties often lead us to behave in ways that can be unproductive and ineffective in terms of support. One participant expressed it as follows, **"We have a fear of getting too close to each other so we have problems when we are together in large numbers, we get into conflict".** Some black people cannot cope with their need for support being met by other black people. This may provoke intolerable feelings. They may fear that their needs may not be met and that they may be rejected with resulting feelings of abandonment. They may instead construct the individual or group as worthless, yet, they continue to seek out those individuals or groups as a necessary part of their need to belong and an important part of their racial identity.

When black people meet and truly engage in an interactive process an unconscious process may be present in the support group whereby vulnerable, hostile or otherwise difficult feelings may be disowned by an individual and attributed to another, who may then (as a result of the interaction) actually experience the feelings as his or her own. This process is referred to as projective identification. "Identification by projection implies a combination of splitting off parts of the self and projecting them on to (or rather into) another person"(Klein 1975, p.143). There are two purposes to projective identification; the first is simply to get rid of difficult feelings which cannot at that time be tolerated, by expelling them into another. The second is to communicate the importance of these feelings by getting

another person to experience them, in the inarticulate hope that this person will be better able to tolerate, struggle with and give meaning to the feeling in the interaction between the people involved (Hughes and Pengelly 1997). So, for example, in undertaking this research, some of us were mindful that a similar process could happen in the inquiry groups. What was most marked was the need for safety; the need for a supportive environment, as fear was present in the form of anxiety about the potential for hostility, rejection and challenge. At times we facilitated the groups to enable these feelings to surface, and made explicit.

Highly intense feelings were evoked. The process stimulated untapped anger, repressed anxiety and a great deal of fear, including fear of murderous rage, which needed containing. There was some outlet for these feelings but I wonder if the process would have been different if white people had been present. Some people might have perceived them as the persecutor for the anger to be unleashed and projected on. In their absence, the anger was either internalised or projected out onto each other.

Projectors at times get rid of their destructive, attacking parts in some black support groups. Hence, some experiences are those of conflict rather than support. Some black people may experience powerful rage as a result of their experiences of racism, which can result in built-up, unreleased tension in the body. In some black groups or with some black individuals such interactions could provoke feelings of identification with and awareness of experiences of powerlessness and lack of control in aspects of their lives. Group members may use the opportunities that an all-black group offers to release some of these tensions and experience some degree of power in what is perceived by some as a safe environment. The need for some is to feel safe and get support and, for others, it is to get rid of bad parts, feelings of violence, rage, anger and negative experiences. What is released in the room is disagreement, mistrust, anger, argument and competition (as stated by some participants) all of which can invite retaliatory anger, mistrust, and lack of safety; negativity takes over and controls the dynamics of the group.

What can be particularly confusing and misleading about the power dynamics and other aspects of black professionals' relations in these

groups is that, on the surface, these dynamics can appear to be no different from the power dynamics found within white groups. Black professionals and black students exhibit the full range of group behaviours and dynamics as exhibited in other ethnocultural groups. There are distinct and unique differences, however, which are also in part due to black professionals' unique socio-political position. This is not to imply a homogeneity or lack of acculturative or assimilative difference existing within black groups.

Specifically black professionals and students may prioritise their black identity as having more importance than their work, student or professional identity and, in some organisations, reflect that prioritisation of identity in highly visible ways. This occurs sometimes as a result of the boundaries which some black groups erect. The boundaries are both physical and psychological depending on group membership and the transactions among groups are regulated by variations in boundary permeability, that is, the ease with which boundaries can be crossed.

Our experiences of our social relationships in the dominant group and in organisations might be reflected in our social relationships in our identity groups. There is more than one kind of group with which we have to interact in organisations. Some of those we belong to are accepted by some people and rejected by others. According to Zagier Roberts (1994) organisations comprise of identity groups which have common experiences and shared experiences, and organisational groups which have common organisational positions and shared work experience. These groups overlap and interrelate because individuals have multiple membership. Group membership and group relations shape how an individual perceives others and how others react to him/her. If the group which the individual belongs to is rejected, this could affect her/his self-esteem. Whether a black person was accepted or not by the organisation would affect her/his evaluation of 'self' and interaction with others. Being valued, validated, devalued or rejected would affect how the person feels about her/himself. In organisations black groups, whether worker's, students or support groups, are highly visible and their identity is recognised both by their members and by their non-members. White non-members especially, feel threatened by all black groups and sometimes feelings get polarised with positive feelings being

attached to identity groups and negative feelings attached to other groups.

Requesting Mentors

This situation was confirmed by many participants who expressed their concerns and anger at white colleagues who display negative behaviours and make disparaging comments to them when they return to their teams from black workers meetings. What they thought would be helpful was for the organisation to invest in acquiring external resources in the form of: a) black consultants to assist these black identity groups to manage their group dynamics and assist white identity groups to appreciate the need for black only groups; and b) the use of mentors for black staff. Mentor schemes were viewed as a way of dealing with our development. Participants believed that having these external personnel would be helpful in knowing what other people were doing and might offer opportunities for finding out how other black people were coping in other organisations. One participant supported the idea of having mentors as **"A way of ending isolation, we need to talk to someone, to get tips on survival strategies".**

Some participants commented that organisations were now operating mentor schemes, albeit as part of their positive action programmes, and they welcomed the initiative as a positive support strategy. This, they felt, was one way organisations could give something positive to black staff. They thought that many organisations and higher education establishments rarely had enough black senior staff or faculty members to call on for support and help. Those of us who were mentors spoke of feeling so stressed by the demands of our job (and by having to prove ourselves as well) that we did not have much left to give as extras to students or workers. Those of us who tried to be available were sometimes overwhelmed by the needs of some black students and workers who relied on us. Nevertheless, participants still felt that to be a mentor for another black person was a way of giving something back to the black community. As one woman said, **"I want to give something back but I don't know how to give it. I have a lot to give and more, so for me, support groups are necessary as well as mentoring schemes".**

Some participants thought that when black people collectively experienced racism and racist oppression in similar ways, there was greater group solidarity. It is possible to argue that racial integration has altered in fundamental ways some of the common ground that once was a foundation for us in our struggle for freedom and that having black support groups and mentors offers some solidarity and connectedness as forms of support in this changed context.

Need for Connectedness

It is difficult for black professionals and black students to survive in organisations and white institutions without connectedness to each other and to black communities (Wimberly, 1997). Maintaining a connection to each other and to the community is an important vehicle for black professionals in that this relationship enables us to stay in touch with cultural values, a vital source of comfort and strength for black professionals and students. Hence, being relationally connected to the cultural heritage through each other and in black communities can make the difference between surviving and not surviving in a racist and hostile environment. As a result many of our conversations, stories and the complicated relationships which we spoke about in the co-operative inquiry groups were related to the theme of connectedness. A few questions were asked and explored which generated this theme. These were:- What are the good things about working with each other? What happens to us when we try to work together? What does being black and the notion of blackness mean to us? What behaviour do we look for in order to make contact?

Skin colour was used as a point of connection. It was said that it allowed for immediate recognition of each other. One participant said, **"White people notice our skin colour in a particular way but black people notice it for contact".** Contact, attachment and solidarity were also words used to associate with being connected. There was an expectation by some who strongly stated, "**black is black**", that if someone were black then they would know what it was like to be black. An underlying assumption in that statement is that in some way one could be an expert on blackness by virtue of being black or that there is only one black experience.

We need to be careful that we do not narrow and constrain our concept of black or our notion of black experience. It is important not to assume, as some participants did, that a black person coming from a background which is not predominately black, would have an experience based on their mixed racial and cultural identity, that is assimilationist and not 'truly' black. We could acknowledge their experience as being a different black experience; an experience that might mean that they may not have had access to life experiences that were common to those of us raised in racially segregated worlds. It is not productive to dismiss these people by labelling them 'not black enough'. Some of these people may not have chosen the context of their upbringing and, if they had chosen

it, it would still have been a valid experience. Our experiences are multi-layered and complex. We need to challenge the idea that there is only "one" legitimate black experience. Facing the reality of multiple black experiences offers more opportunities for unification and for taking into account our diversity (hooks, 1991). It is important that we value all black experiences and share knowledge with one another so as to begin to build anew, black communal feelings.

Some of us did not subscribe to a 'one black experience' model and thought that differences in culture created opportunities for varied and creative experiences. It would also have an impact on our relationship in terms of identification. One participant questioned, for example, how well someone of Caribbean descent identified with someone of West African descent. There might be identification based on skin colour but not on culture. The point was made that identification offered security and that some black people found different ways of identifying whether it is skin-colour or gender. The following was said about criteria for identification.

"I look for someone who will be interesting, interested in black issues. I will be checking out what they say and how they are communicating, if it is like a black person and if I am interested in what they are saying I respond positively".

"When I meet another black person I will have a cool response whilst looking for mutual interest and to see if they are OK".

Identity – The meaning of 'black' and 'blackness'

The practitioner's group asked the question: how was it that some people were seen as 'OK' and others as not 'OK'? In response to that question some said that they looked to see whether a person behaved as if they were 'black'. When asked what "black" or "blackness" meant when used in that context, some said it was about the way a black person behaved. However, when we tried defining what was meant by black behaviour it proved difficult.

In its significance for some of us, blackness is above all, a relation between people. A way of thinking about this is to reflect on how we define and embody our blackness. A sense of blackness may offer ways of knowing and habits of being that can help sustain us as groups of black people. "We can value and cherish the "meaning" of this experience without essentialising it"(hooks, 1991 p. 38). For others, we find that we have a greater success if our images are altered to affirm or equate with "whiteness" by seeking to take on the

characteristic look of “whiteness”. This is seen as enhancing class mobility in public arenas, in educational systems and in the work organisations.

Some participants said that they would look at language, non-verbal behaviours, clothes and lifestyle as bases for connection. This led to our asking the question ‘what is a black lifestyle’? After several attempts that question was not fully answered. Clothing may provide us with some information about a person; it also tends to block input of other information by causing us to perceive selectively on the basis of our stereotypes of clothing patterns and personality type. The following are examples of what was said in terms of the importance of language.

"When I meet another black person I lapse into a different language; my Standard English goes. I use that as a way of connecting and identifying" said one participant.

And another participant said, **“ To be heard using your own language is an outward sign that you were still black, you still valued your culture”.**

Some black people often feel the need to switch between their own cultural language code and that of the more dominant white society. Speech which marks out the individual as a member of the group can be important for in-group acceptance. Accents and dialect carry with them stereotypes of the speakers employing them and these stereotypes can affect the impressions black people form when interacting. What is of importance to this discussion is not the linguistic aspect of language usage, but its symbolic import. Here the use of black language promotes identity and may be reinforced by group members.

It can be argued that our history has put pressure on us to conform, to speak white, and each one of us has responded in different ways, at different levels and to different degrees. Some ‘speak white', which is speaking Standard English with a polished English accent, when at work and differently when at home. Others are consistent in when, where and how they speak. Others actively decide to challenge overtly and move to what some students described as 'black talk', that is to speak in ways that would separate them out from white people.

There is an assumption, in racist society, that if black people are to be heard by white people they must speak white, constructing themselves in the same manner in which they have been constructed thereby loosing their own particularity, specificity, identity and becoming less authentic. Black people, in such circumstances, are then called derogatory

names and treated in a derogatory manner by some black people. They are people to be pitied, hated, scapegoated and projected onto. When this happens many black people seize the opportunity to denigrate, alienate and reject, not want to be part of.

Suspicion and mistrust

The core of this rejection stems from mistrust, suspicion and fear. If they are seen with a person who is seen to be all those things then they fear being tarred with the same brush and being themselves alienated and rejected by other blacks. Some of this mistrust and suspicion is reflected in the following statements:

"There is a black syndrome that is for us to be highly suspicious about each other".

I believe we have a fear of being open, honest and trusting of each other".

"We do not want to associate with each other for fear of 'ghettoisation'"

"When we see each other we believe that we would automatically not 'get on'. So we give off negative 'vibes'".

Other participants said that when they met a black person in an organisation they looked to see if that person was 'part of the establishment' and, if they were, then they might become suspicious of them. One participant said, **"When I am amongst a group of black professionals I question their identity. Who are they? Are they black? Are they middle class? Are they professional?**

If the person were perceived to be middle class with a professional status then they would be viewed with suspicion and mistrust, they would be subjected to a great deal of scrutiny and to being 'checked out'. In the words of one participant, **"We are always looking at each other suspiciously when we meet each other, 'checking' each other out until we prove ourselves".**

If those people were seen to have taken on the establishment or institution's values then they would not be seen as black. Their "blackness" was questioned due to their other intellectual interests and their comfort in being in a predominately white work or learning environment. If people in that category in particular were seen to be **"mixing with too many white people"**, as some practitioners put it or had a white partner they were stereotyped as being a 'coconut', a 'bounty', or an 'oreo'. These are terms given to someone who is

seen as being black on the 'outside', in skin colour, and white on the 'inside', in views and attitudes. It was sometimes expressed in strong statements as:

"They love white people too much".

"The closer we see black people are to white people the more suspicious we become of them and we make negative judgements about them".

Signs that was looked for in a back person in order to attach this label to a person was speaking English with a middle or upper class accent which some people considered to be making them "**more English than the English people".** Other signs were the number of white friends a black person had as compared to, the number of black friends they had. Some looked to see if "**they spoke to black people in the organisation"**. If a person had what was considered to be **"too many white friends, did not speak to black people in the organisation and spoke 'white English' too well"** or if they **"created a niche for themselves and feared that it would be disrupted by another black person".** Such person was not considered to be black and was seen as having 'sold out'. Such a person would be rejected and they would not be chosen to work with or to speak to.

More Reflections and sensemaking

History plays a part in determining our behaviour in black on black encounters. The notion of mistrust, which figured largely in the inquiry group discussions, and has been developed into a stereotype in the black community, has some of its base in the historical context of slavery. During that period black people were believed to be bad people and thieves who were not to be trusted. Slaves were set up by their masters to tell on each other, to 'sell each other out'. The house slaves who enjoyed more privileges than the field slaves, were encouraged to report on the field slaves. As a consequence, suspicion and fear were engendered and have travelled through the passage of time. This has affected some of the ways in which black people have learnt to interact with each other. The 'mulattos', who were biracial and whose skin colour was lighter, were the most privileged blacks who acted as mediators between the white world and the disadvantaged mass of black folks with dark skin. They were valued more by whites than darker skinned blacks. They, too, were viewed with suspicion and mistrust because of their privileged status. Hence, the belief that some people carry into their interactions with other black people, that if a black

person is seen to be mixing with ‘too many white people’ or, has a white partner or, ‘resembles’ white in any way they are not to be trusted.

In one way not only do some of us need people to be clearly either black or white, male or female; their maleness or femaleness, blackness or whiteness seems to represent the fundamental ground for things as they are. Sometimes we project negative bad parts onto each other. Our history has taught us not to think well of each other. The way we see whiteness has had an impact on how we perceive one another. We are silent about any representation of whiteness in our psyche (hooks, 1995). The thought of having whiteness in our imagination might fill us with horror. One consequence is that some of us, in our denial, pretend to be comfortable faced with whiteness. Others are uncomfortable and cope with this discomfort by evoking an essentialist “us and them” dichotomy. Such a dichotomy suggest that some black people invert stereotypical racist interpretations so that black is synonymous with goodness and white with evil so that any black person seen to be imbued with ‘white’ ways of behaving will be part of that dichotomy (hooks, 1995). Some of those people will be met with disapproval.

In disapproving of each other we are also disapproving of ourselves. What we sometimes see in other black people can be what we unconsciously project. For example, our fear of becoming 'too white' gets projected onto others who are seen to be taking on a lifestyle that represents whiteness. We also want to repel the thought that we may have taken on white parts and white values. Therefore, we put it in others whose skin colour is closest to white or whose language and behaviour is closest to a white person. We see each other in fixed ways and do not see all the parts that make up the whole. What stops us from seeing the whole? To help answer this question the notion of projective identification described previously can help our understanding of what takes place.

Some of the black students in the practitioner group spoke of their fears of becoming a professional and, by that token, middle class. They feared these parts would take over and they would lose their black identity. One of the ways in which they seemed to have coped was to empty those parts of themselves into other black students or professionals whom they perceived as being comfortable with their role and identity. They did this to black people in senior positions, black lecturers, managers and Practice teachers. They were then freed up to

think and believe that they were O.K blacks. They also used the defence of “distancing” to separate themselves from what they saw as 'not O k’ blacks, or indeed blacks whom they felt were 'too black. Both of these images are stereotypes which, according to hooks (1995), some of us maintain and they are representations of whiteness in the black imagination. hooks went on to say that stereotypes are one form of representation that is created to serve as substitution, standing in for what is real. A stereotype is a fantasy, a projection onto the other which makes her/him less threatening. “Stereotypes are an invention, a pretence that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken or are not allowed”(hooks, 1995).

When we call black people derogatory names such as 'coconut', 'bounty' or ‘oreo’, or challenge their identity, we are basing this on some lack of knowledge or acceptance rather than on a challenge to social categories, divisions and definition as objects. We are instead treating them as 'givens' of the world, for example, categories like 'black' and 'white'. This implies that there are sets of behaviours that go with 'being white' or 'being black'. We continue to participate in a political act that helps affirm current formulations by never examining how they have become current and whose interests they serve. Who one is and what one is like is established through discursive acts.

When a black person calls a black person “white” or a 'coconut' they are implicitly making a comparison with white people and granting privilege to the implicit but absent standard represented by whiteness. The standard remains unexamined and becomes the evaluative frame or ground within which compromises are made but it does not come under scrutiny. We judge the black person as an inferior representation of the superior qualities contained in whiteness and a white person. The absent standard is the white heterosexual male of western origins and of the dominant social class. All others are defined in terms of this standard. This judgement is the outcome of a process yet it appears as a statement of pure, impartial description.

Self appointed groups or individuals emerge and mete out punishment to those whom they perceive to be representing a form of blackness, which they deem to be unacceptable. What is not struggled with enough is the fact that all parties are the same and are different at the same time; they are the same in terms of being subjected to racism and a process of

internalised racism, and are different in terms of how those experiences are lived out. What is not struggled with either is that another consequence of the representation of whiteness in the black imagination emerges as a response to traumatic pain and anguish, from racism. Such pain and anguish informs and shapes the way in which some black people see 'whiteness' and, in turn, 'blackness'. Rejection, isolation, abandonment, punishment are all destructive actions that do not assist dialogue or improve the political discourse.

In black interactions our self-perception and levels of self-esteem could be one set of factors influencing how we view one another. If our self-esteem is low, it is likely that our self-acceptance is low too. If we have problems accepting ourselves the chances are that we will wonder how others would accept us. Sometimes this wondering can turn into a fear of rejection and this fear can be projected outwards and manifest itself in behaviour which can be perceived as rejecting others. In other words, "I will reject you for fear that I will be rejected". This process sometimes takes the form of attributing negative judgements to others on first encounter.

If some of us perceive ourselves as O K and others as not we have little chance of clearly seeing the other for who they really are as a whole person in their totality. We begin to see people in parts. This can also mean that some of us have grown to be excessively other-directed. By that I mean that when people lack self-approval, it usually means that their self-doubts outweigh their self-esteem. These people learn to seek self-acceptance indirectly. They will be more concerned with trying to figure out what others want them to do and very much less concerned with trying to figure out what it is that they want to do. In other words they may end up living an 'other directed life'. So 'other' becomes very important in meeting their needs. Therefore the need to know whether the person is a 'good type' of black or a 'bad type' of black person - a 'black-black' or a 'white-black' becomes the focus of attention. We set up a kind of hierarchy and in the process of operationalising hierarchies of blackness, by ascribing value to attributes; it is not simply a case of prejudice (or the lack of prejudice). It is a case of whether we (as black professional or student) are aware of the effects that our behaviour or activity may have on others. So the act of defining another black person as 'good', bad or 'not black enough' will deprive some people of the opportunity of

forming relationships in whatever way they might choose. The assumption underlying the notion of not black enough might mean that some people are allowed only a limited range of social environments with limited choices and rights (McDonald, 1996).

Fundamental to the notion of most hierarchies is the concept of the 'ideal human being' where each attribute a person may have is given a relative value. The notion that personal attributes have a value means that it becomes theoretically possible to judge how close each person or group comes to matching the 'mythical norm', the artificially created notion of human perfection. A black person's skin colour, language, status, lifestyle, having white friends, assimilation into the English culture or integrating into the white establishments is being used, in this research inquiry, consciously or unconsciously in an attempt to define a person's position within this given hierarchy of 'blackness'.

Hierarchies of blackness therefore have many negative effects. They encourage the notion that is both possible and desirable to create hierarchies of humanity and to measure human beings accordingly. Those hierarchies are ultimately inconsistent, creating social divisions and stimulating social conflict among us as black professionals and students. We might compete with other black professionals and students over which of us is most oppressed, and which is least oppressed, which of us is more black and which of us is not, creating yet another hierarchy while fighting for the morale high ground. So we need to see each part of a person and not just a fixed totality. We need to see the parts that make up the whole so that we don't make judgements from a polarised way of thinking in terms of positive or negative, for example, this is a 'real' black person and this is not.

Indeed, some participants in the inquiry did not take such a restricted view in relation to attributes of blackness and said that clothes and language were not as important for them, emphasising that they made connections on the basis of a shared experience. They would look to see if there were some shared things in common. So that whilst the point of contact might be skin colour, interests in black issues, similarities and differences of experiences of racism in Britain were also important. They were aware that there might be cultural differences, so that just relying on skin colour, language, dress,

status or lifestyle, as a way of making meaningful connections, could be a fallacy.

Disagreements, strain, tension and even neglect can mar interactions between black people but we share in common an experience and identity. These identities are riddled with problems and complexities which are not necessarily features imposed by individuals but are historically, socially and politically constructed. This means that we have to maintain an awareness and connectedness with the broader but complex socio-cultural experience of being black. Without such critical reflections on the impact of socio-cultural and socio-political realities we will not be able to attend to the salient impact of these important factors.

Concluding Comments

As a group of researchers we examined how to live with these tensions and disagreements. We discussed the meaning of being a black professional or black student and the impact this has on the psyche. This discussion integrated a critical reflection on how the experiences of being a black professional or black student reflected dimensions of class, gender and race. Furthermore, these reflections revealed how monolithic views of a black professional or black student blackness contributed to our experiences. We also examined how to contest the limiting representation or negative multiple meanings of a black professional or a black student rather than deny or ignore the fact that there are multiple ways of being a black professional or black student. One of the most important issues left to be addressed here is how we liberate or differentiate a sense of intact 'self' from 'other' - black professional or student - while maintaining a healthy emotional connection with each other. We need also to consider how to affirm liberating representations both internally and externally, how liberating action is about challenging the internalised cognitive and essentialistic representations of blackness that cause us to question our own identity.

I want to advocate some strategies as a way of moving forward. I believe that the "Field" perspective, which I referred to in earlier discussions, encourages us occasionally to stand outside the current situation, whatever it is, and see alternative ways of understanding it. For example, our experiences of complaining, competing, fighting, and raging during some of our encounters have a multi-dimensional nature to it and require a more sophisticated understanding. We need to be able to understand the psychological

displacement of grief and pain into rage and fight. So when we create forums and political spaces for sharing our experiences, grief, pain and rage about racism and internalised racism would be released or deposited. We need to understand that strong emotions like rage erupt because we have spent so much time acquiescing to white power structures in order to assimilate and, in so doing, some of us have subordinated our integrity, suppressed ourselves and our true feelings. According to hooks (1995) at times our anger and rage may express themselves pathologically. However, they can also be expressed itself in ways that lead to constructive empowerment. So we need not be too frightened by our strong emotions; we should allow ourselves the space to acknowledge and release strong emotions, including rage, so that we do not end up, with mental disorder, but instead allow our psychological wounds to become unmasked and attended to (hooks 1995).

Adapting a "field" standpoint, that is, looking at the whole could allow us to lose any sense of certainty about the right way to be. People organise their field psychologically and emotionally sometimes in self-limiting or fixed ways. Maybe some black people enter an encounter looking at life through the lens of a fixed attitude, or experience life through a whole network of fixed beliefs or gestalts. These beliefs may have been formed in earlier life and continue to be applied unconsciously to present circumstances even though the attitudes are now out of date or not working. The fact that we actively organise and give meaning to our field has important implications for the way we as black professionals and students interact and interrelate to each other, especially in black groups.

There are difficulties inherent in affirming each other within white organisations and in a society which denigrates black people as 'other', so, at times, the dynamics that ensue are mirroring 'otherness' and further objectifying the 'other'. We also, at times, do not allow the full range of our voices to create safe spaces. We, therefore, run the risk of reproducing the position of oppressor and oppressed and re-creating relationships that control and repress rather than support and renew.

We need, therefore, to create a space and an atmosphere in which analysis can take place. The atmosphere can also be personal and individualistic. Reflecting back on our experiences in the Co-operative Inquiry Groups, I noticed that we spoke intensely of personal and intellectual matters individually but, in the process of our 'telling' 'discussing' and 'sharing', we were also simultaneously expressing our collective experiences. In the

process of engaging in dialogue with one another we were able to explore subjects that helped some people to discover and acknowledge how they were interpreting their reality.

Exploration can help us become aware that we are currently organising and interpreting our personal space in personal or subjective ways. Some of us do believe that our interpretation of reality is the only possible one, especially if this interpretation is born out of a fixed gestalt or web of interconnected fixed gestalts. Exploration in dialogue may enable people to loosen fixed ways of experiencing the field, to reshuffle the way they organise their field, to choose to interpret their experience differently as well as possibly changing their circumstances. It can enable people to realise how they are active and selective in most of the ways they chose to tell their stories both to themselves and others. Those aspects of their stories which they choose to focus on and to repeat have a profound effect upon how they configure themselves and feel their circumstances. If we genuinely learn to tell our story differently, we may change our subjectively experienced reality. Alternatively when we change our subjectively experienced reality, we change our story. Reconsidering and loosening fixed ways of perceiving ourselves and others can precipitate internal conflict and we need to be prepared to explore the complex internal processes which support fixed perceptions.

So exploration and discussion within a dialogic framework is what is needed; a framework that allows for conversation between black people. It is important human action which could lead to social action.