

# **SECTION THREE**

## **FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING**

**From surviving to thriving**

**Understanding 'surviving'**

**And**

**Learning to 'thrive'**

**Chapters 8 & 9**

### **Section 3 - From Surviving to Thriving**

## **Chapter 8 –Understanding the Black woman's context**

### **Introduction**

The core aim of this chapter is to unpack our experiences in order to reveal the nature of the relationships between Black and White individuals in organisations and to consider how these interweave to form a context or culture –against and within which Black women perform.

In this chapter I:

1. Explore 5 incidents from the AL cycles identifying the messages communicated within these transactions and the subtle ways in which the relationships between Black and White people are constructed.
2. Consider the information generated about the meanings we give to the term "surviving" and the statement made as we, without exception, claimed it to be descriptive of our experience in organisations.
3. Use the information generated from the various incidents encountered and our descriptions of our experience of surviving to consider what we can learn about the nature of the environment.

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## Explorations of Selected incidents from the Action Learning cycles

### Annette's Dilemma

Annette, a very competent and talented senior manager had recently been invited to join a recruitment panel.

On attending a short-listing meeting she found that the third member of the panel was away from work, so they decided to defer the meeting, as no decisions should be made without the third person. She then discovered that the third member of the panel **had** returned to work and that the other two had met, short-listed and formally invited the candidates to attend for interview – without any consultation with her.

She was amazed, hurt and, even at the time of telling the story, still finding it hard to believe that this had happened. She said that she had known that she had been invited to the panel because the organisation had a policy that there must be a Black officer on each recruitment panel, and there are only a few Black managers in the organisation. However her experience and competence made her eminently suitable for that position and she had assumed that she was perceived by her colleagues to be a fully-fledged and authentic member of the panel. She was unsure of what to do:

- Should she withdraw from the panel and in doing so make it impossible for the interview to proceed within the organisation's policy?
- Should she demand that the process is declared null and void and that a new short-listing process, which includes her, is undertaken?
- Should she stay and do nothing?

### Issues emerging

In unpacking this incident many organisational issues become apparent but I am choosing to pay less attention to these as my focus in this chapter is to uncover the means by which the experience of surviving –so familiar to Black women – is constructed.

- **What invidious options** – all responses identified are likely to be costly to her. She is trapped in a situation, where it is difficult to see a way of winning. This reminds me of a comment made by a Black woman participating in an Equal Opportunities Course. She suggested that we were not in a position of winning - just simply of reducing our losses! I do not share her cynicism but certainly, our lives contain many situations from which it was not easy to see a way out.
- **Double binds** - The incident holds conflicting messages within it.
- **Sought out, but not valued** – She is sought out and invited to be a panel member but she is clearly of less value than the other colleague without whom short-listing could not take place. This is related to the issue of having only

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her skin colour perceived. Consequently although she perceived herself as eminently qualified, others did not appear to view her in this way. Essed (1991) in her study of Black women in the Netherlands and in the US found that they are "systematically undervalued" (also Davidson 1997, and Dickens and Dickens 1991).

*Highly visible and yet invisible* – It is her skin colour that both makes her visible and blinds observers to the unique human being within the skin. Thinking that her management qualities had been recognised and valued she is disillusioned to discover that she had been chosen on the basis of her skin. As she is sought out and invited to participate in so many recruitment panels, she is perceived by her White peers to be privileged by the system, in that. Yet the experience of having judgements based on one aspect of herself (that she may perceive to be irrelevant to the context) and finding that other more pertinent aspects are overlooked, is alienating, dehumanising and therefore painful. She finds herself unable to become more than cardboard cut-out.

- **Tokenism**- In Chapter 7 I identified this as a pattern of experience common among Black managers. The organisation's policy of having a Black person on each recruitment panel was overtly intended to challenge the discrimination identified in the system. However in practice it was tokenistic as they did not go beyond the superficial appearance of change. Attention was not paid to the ways in which isolated voices were silenced, nor to the various ploys that may be used to exclude certain groups. The policies did not identify what knowledge, skills and qualities were being sought when the decision that each panel must include a Black person was made. Without such specification (in a context where stereotypical notions of the Black person do not include managerial skill) the policy is likely to be perceived as tokenistic. Black managers were asked to sit on panels for positions about which they had little relevant experience. In such situations they necessarily became 'sleeping partners'. Often incoming post-holders resented their presence on the panel, when they discovered their position in the hierarchy. This resentment resurfaced some years later when the organisation underwent a major restructuring and most managers had to apply for their own jobs. Many of the Black managers were anxious that they might find managers selected by panels in which they had participated on their own selection panel, and that their resentment may be vented.
- **Overload** – many managers complained that with so few Black managers the demands on them to attend recruitment panels and to "bring the 'Black perspective'" to other initiatives was great and yet no recognition was given to subsequent increased workloads.
- **Struggling to be seen** – This is obviously closely related to the issue of invisibility, yet it is different. I believe that a large part of the pain in these experiences comes from the despair we encounter when despite our efforts we are still not seen. Our uniqueness, the individuality of our 'personhood' is not appreciated. In this incident there is a disjunction between her perception of self, and the messages received. She defines herself as a competent manager and the struggle is to be seen as such. I believe that this struggle to be seen – to be recognised for who we know ourselves to be - is at the heart of a lot of

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the survival strategies that I will focus on later. I also think that it is at this level we (the group to whom this story was told) connected with, and felt her pain.

It reminded me of a discovery I made sometime ago through observing my reactions to the H.G. Wells (1977) story of the Invisible Man. I became aware that during childhood there was a point in which my view of that story underwent a significant change. It was a story I liked because I saw the invisible man as having the power to go to many places without being seen. Then one day I became conscious of the significance of an incident in the story. He has been hurt, and this is only known because of the trail of blood that is left behind as he walks away. From then on it became a scary story for me. I did not notice or understand the shift that had taken place in my reaction to the story until some years later. Reflecting on the shift I became conscious of thinking "he was trapped - he could not be seen." The tragedy lies in the fact that he could not make himself visible.

Phillida Salmon (1985) says:

"Racist or sexist attitudes are given expression in the refusal to recognise the person within the black skin, the female body. Within this perspective individual human beings are grossly diminished – reduced to the typification of a social category".

## **Zeinab 's dilemma**

A few months prior to the recounting of this incident, Zeinab, an experienced training officer, developed and offered a training course designed to address needs identified in her Department. She was puzzled that each course she ran attracted negative feedback – she said "I somehow could not get it right". Following each course she reflected on the feedback and adjusted the course, but still the negative feedback came. Then in the weeks just prior to our meeting, on two separate occasions, participants told her that they had been asked to attend the course to "cause her trouble". One participant named a manager who had asked him to attend the course and to record everything that she did. He was determined to get her out of the organisation. Knowing that this manager had been instrumental in the departure of other Black officers, she felt upset and powerless. She said the participant who gave her this information told her he had found the course helpful and, having got to know her, he did not want to continue with what he had been asked to do. However he was not willing to support her in confronting his manager. She was disturbed by this incident, and repeated a number of times - " I know the manager's name, but I do not really know him. I have never met him."

- **Tokenism by another name** – This is, I would argue, the reverse of the same tokenism coin. This manager does not need to know her to want to get rid of her. He knows all that he wants to know about her. He knows that she is Black and this attracts his behaviour. Yet again another Black woman struggled to accept that her colour was all that another sees when he looks at her. In this incident at least some participants were able to move beyond her colour to

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make human connection with her. It is this contact that changes their behaviour. Yet from my own experience I know that it is possible for this lack of connection to occur within the context of a personal relationship. The confusing pain of some of my early experiences in the church context and with colleagues and bosses, with whom I had a relationship, stemmed from receiving information which told me that they had not moved beyond my colour or ethnicity to make contact with the human being within (Chapter 2 & 3).

- **Affected by invisible power** - Zeinab is anxious about the power of someone she has never met because she feels and sees evidence of his power, though she had never seen him – yet another scary story. In this situation Zeinab's existence is put at risk in two different ways:
  - a. She is struggling to experience herself as real. Buber (1957a) quoted in Laing (1961) says:

" The basis of man's life with man is two-fold, and it is one – the wish of every man to be confirmed as what he is, even as what he can become, by men; and the innate capacity in man to confirm his fellow-men in this way [...] Men need, and it is granted to them to confirm one another in their individual being by means of genuine meetings."
  - b. Her physical survival is at risk. She knows of this man's campaign to rid the Council of Black people, and of his success in doing that.

## **Pamela's dilemma**

Pamela was headhunted by her line manager about six months previously. She works in a part of the city that is predominantly White. She is the only Black person in her office and she is having problems with her staff. They bypass her, taking their questions to other managers and check her decisions, with her peers. She has challenged incidents when she has encountered them but she knows that this represents the tip of the iceberg. She feels very isolated and unable to trust her staff and colleagues.

Both the manager and her line manager, who was aware of what was happening, told this story to me but were unsure of what would constitute effective support for her. Over the years of running these AL groups this story was often re-told - by other voices, with different characters. I believe it to be quite a common experience of the Black woman manager. In some stories the staff were mixed (Black and White), and in others all White and one situation the staff team was all Black.

- **Struggle for credibility** - Like any new manager, she is trying very hard to establish her credibility. It is possible that she has anticipated resistance but she may be unprepared for the actual experience of negation, rejection and isolation. 'Jack' in the Dickens and Dickens study (1991) of American Black managers says:

" Black and intellect are antithetical in this country. Man, I mean for Black and whites! For some people, black intellectual doesn't even exist as a concept."

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This raises the issue of internalised racism in many of the stereotypes of the Black woman are not commensurate with those of 'the manager.' Therefore the Black woman manager may find herself struggling to establish her credibility with Black as well as White staff.

- **Lack of support** –This particular manager talked a lot of her lack of support. Her effectiveness and competence in her previous job had been because she had a competent and trusted staff team. She had played a big part in creating that team, though at the time she was not very much in touch with that knowledge. As she found herself unable to make things happen, her confidence in her competence was being eroded. Her only point of support was her boss but she was wary of allowing him to think that she was struggling. Another manager who brought the same story in a different guise said that she often thought that her line manager might assess her effectiveness by comparing the amount of support he had to give to her by comparison to her other colleagues. So she tried not to let him know some of what was happening. Part of the feeling of not having support was the alliances she perceived between her staff and her peers.
- **Isolation** - She did not trust her colleagues. She felt that they were colluding with her staff to exclude her. She lacked friendship.
- **Overwork** - When her boss spoke to me about it, part of his concern was the number of hours he knew that she put into her work. At home she was also supporting an elderly mother and mothering a young son. He was concerned about burn-out. Yet, feeling unsupported she was working harder – trying to attain similar outputs with less support. A common survival strategy is the determination to succeed against all odds. The higher the odds the harder we work.
- **Emotional stress** - As is so often the case, these experiences trigger past experiences of negation and rejection and therefore may be more keenly felt. Mitchell and Herring (1998) writing about Black women, stress and depression comment on the stress of racism.

## Mary's Dilemma

A recurring issue emerging from this group was the feeling that there were some areas where experiences of racial harassment were so high that many Black women excluded themselves from working and living opportunities in those areas. Mary, a young and very talented manager told about gaining first hand experience of this. She said that following her training she had spent her probationary period working in one of these areas. She said that in the course of her duties she had been followed by children, called names and had even had eggs thrown at her. At the end of her probationary period she had been offered a permanent position in that team, but she said, "Of course, I turned it down."

- **Differences between perceptions of Black women and those of the organisation** - As Mary ended her story with the words "Of course, I turned it down." it was clear that there was an assumption that it was obvious that she would not be able to accept that job. Indeed, except for myself who had no knowledge of the area, everyone seemed to understand her response. However

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it appeared that this was not knowledge held by the area team who had offered the job.

- **Reduced opportunities – A double bind** - At the time when this story was told I did not probe very much into the organisation's response to her actions except to identify that they had not expected her to turn down the job. Reflecting on it later it occurred to me they might have experienced themselves as getting double messages. She had worked hard to establish her competence and appeared interested in her career yet she had turned down what might have appeared to be a good job. In chapter 2, I described my growing awareness that to protect myself from some of the harsher experiences of racism I had severely restricted my list of possible job opportunities.

## **A group dilemma**

As mentioned earlier, the established pattern for these AL Management Development programmes was that each group had an allocated budget from which they were entitled to have a two-day residential in a hotel. The third and fourth groups chose to be self-catering and to have their residential at a Leisure Park. In keeping with the procedure, the appropriate forms were completed and passed to the training manager with responsibility for management development. At that time that position was vacant and the Deputy Head of the Staff Development Unit, a Black woman was covering the work. We received acknowledgement of our request and confirmation that we had been booked in on the required dates. It was agreed that two of the women would arrive earlier with equipment and prepare our working space for the group so that we would be able to make the best of our time together.

Less than half an hour before I left home to travel to the event, I received an anxious call from the two women saying that they were at the Leisure Park, and that our booking had not been confirmed. We had a hurried discussion, decided that our first objective was to stop the others arriving and then to find alternative accommodation for a two day non-residential meeting. We managed to do both of these things. At our meeting we dealt with our feelings and discussed a strategy for responding to this situation. One of the women had spoken with the Deputy manager and discovered that she was as surprised as we were that our booking had not been confirmed. She promised to investigate it and let us know the outcome. The investigation took a while and finally identified that the administrator with responsibility for such issues had disapproved of our group's decision to hold the residential at a Leisure Park and had decided to withhold the payment of the invoice for the accommodation. She had ignored reminders from the Park, knowing that the reservation would be cancelled, and chose not to let anyone know that there was no accommodation for our residential.

The Deputy manager was furious on many counts. When she had first handed over the authorisation of the booking to the finance administrator she had overheard her querying it and saying that she had no intention of paying it. The Deputy had followed it up a few days after and discovered that she had not taken any action on it. She had then advised her that she had heard her comment, and instructed her that it was not her role to make decisions about managers' training, but simply to administer the process. She had not thought that her instructions would be ignored for a second time.

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The group and I made separate formal complaints to the Head of Training and Development. The Deputy manager requested that the Officer concerned should be disciplined and that she should be asked to make an apology. The handling of this situation took months and in the process the deputy manager became scripted as the aggressor, with inferences that the situation had occurred due to her incompetence. This proved the 'final straw' for that manager and she left the organisation soon after this incident.

- **Difficulty in getting Discrimination recognised** – I am not sure that the organisation ever recognised this as a racist incident. Yet every Black woman involved knew that both conceptually and experientially. It was this knowing which caused the Deputy manager to demand both a formal investigation **and** an apology. This was not simply a mistake, it was the active use of power to control the actions of a number of Black women. In this way:
- ***We had been disadvantaged*** – It was very possible that the residential would be lost. We were now within three months of the end of the programme and bureaucratic processes take time. Also it had not been easy for many women, including myself.
- ***Our lives had been made more complex*** – To take time away from the many domestic and professional responsibilities we managed daily, each of us had to engage in a great deal of forward planning and hard work. In addition, each of us had undertaken preparatory tasks for the residential. Many dishes had been cooked and frozen in advance, shopping had been done and training equipment collected for transportation. Now we were facing having to do it all again.
- **Treated differently** - Essed (1991) asserts that " to evaluate particular acts as cases of racism, one first tests the acts against norms of acceptable behaviour or acceptable reasons for unacceptable behaviour and then against notions of racial dominance."

Testing this situation against a course for White male managers at the same level, we found it difficult to imagine that such a scenario might have occurred. We thought it unlikely that the administrator would have, knowingly, created the possibility of a group of eight middle and senior managers and a management Consultant being publicly embarrassed and inconvenienced as a result of her actions. It also seemed unlikely that she would have unilaterally decided to override the decisions of the Deputy Head – given (twice) and in writing.

- **Negating messages** – Bateson (1972) makes the point that the relationship is immanent in the message. In ignoring the decisions of the group and the authorisation of the Deputy manager messages of "You are of no consequence" and "You do not matter" were sent and received. And the very old relationship of White supremacy was once again re-established.
- **Continued struggle for credibility** – The credibility of every woman involved in this incident was directly challenged and indirectly it was a challenge to **all** Black women managers in the organisation. This point is related to the previous one. The points at which this challenge took place, the form it took and the effect of the challenge varied. But in all of our lives there were many points at which our credibility was brought into question. The

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women who arrived at the reception desk of the Leisure Park, laden down with equipment and discovered that our booking had been cancelled were probably the first to experience the challenge. The Deputy manager's credibility was challenged on various counts – with her boss, all the staff in the Unit and with us. As the officer covering the vacancy had direct responsibility for management development initiatives in the Department, the payment of the invoice for the event and the notification of the cancellation were her responsibility –though delegated. Through racism she had been unable to achieve these basic things. In her role as Deputy she had been unable to get her instructions to a junior member of staff acted upon. All of us had our credibility challenged many times over - with family and friends as they were told or discovered that we had failed to realise this residential opportunity, and as the story circulated the organisational networks. A manager's credibility lies in his/her ability to make things happen. Incidents of discrimination are about the demonstration of the dominance of the oppressor group, and of the powerlessness of members of the oppressed group. Therefore in each experience of discrimination our power is subtly or overtly undermined and we must struggle to regain it.

- **Tir – ed – ness!** Encounters of discrimination produce a profound tiredness. I believe that this results from a combination of despair and sadness as in each encounter we come face to face with the process by which we are stopped from experiencing our God-given power – and alienation from the essence of ourselves. In those moments we see the process by which we are dehumanised and we face the scale of the effort demanded to both survive and thrive. I have been noticing how hard it has been for me to retell this story and to explore it. I am presently experiencing feeling of weariness. I keep going with this analysis because of my commitment to myself to reveal this process. Our tiredness increases when others around us do not perceive that an act of discrimination has taken place or the significance of the transaction and the messages that have been communicated and we are faced with the situation of having to educate others about these issues. In addition to the emotional work that this incident created there was also extra physical work, involved in challenging what had happened and to ensure that the group does not lose the opportunities offered by residential training. An entry from my diary at the end of the hastily reconvened meeting expresses the emotional impact of this experience.

### *Journal entry - Sept 8, 1994*

*The extent to which we have been affected by the non-happening of this event seems incredible. It has drained a lot of the group's energy and made so much of what we have achieved in the past seem meaningless. The distribution of Sam's notes symbolised this. As I read our plans for the event, in a context of knowing that they won't happen, the time and energy spent doing them seems pointless. Today it was as if someone had placed a huge wall in our path. It seemed hard to move beyond our anger to seeing possibilities for our continued relationships with this organisation.*

*Also I noticed that I could not seem to recall what had happened prior to this point. I found myself reviewing my notes from past meetings. My suggestion*

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*of a group 'stock-take' of what had been gained and learnt from our work together to date seemed to fill a need in the group.*

*Was I trying to reassure myself of the value of this group, and of all that had gone before? I noticed that the possibility of linking this work with the Department's NVQ process, that had been resisted so much in the past, was raised. Were they too searching for ways to reassure themselves of the value of our work? Do we now need the approval of an external assessor to verify the worth of our work? This incident seems to have called into question everything that this group represents. This was a very powerful act.*

**Process reflection Sept '98** - *I am amazed that I am still affected by these stories. The pain inherent in them lessens very slowly! Sometimes, I wish that I could return to that numb unfeeling state in which I survived for many years. At this moment, innocence seems blissful! Some years ago a woman discussed with me the possibility of joining one of the AL groups and then declined saying "I am not sure that it is better to know about these things. At the moment I do not see discrimination - I am the same as my other colleagues." I understood her then, and I understand her now. In choosing to become aware and I am choosing to live life fully, I am choosing the less easy, and therefore less trodden Path.*

- **The power of Discrimination to mask and distort processes** - At some point during the formal investigation of this incident, an important though unfortunately not unusual switch took place. The 'victim' became perceived as the 'aggressor' and the 'aggressor' was placed in the role of the 'victim.' In chapter 6 I considered the way in which 'race' often clouds the perceptual lens and makes problem definition difficult. The anxiety often produced by the appearance of a 'race' problem triggers a tendency to avoid looking.

The Deputy manager in her demand of a written apology was perceived as unreasonable and as victimising the administrator who refused to apologise. Essed (1991) describes this process as a "form of pathologizing Blacks". Many women in her study talked about being labelled "oversensitive", "paranoid" and "difficult" when they raised issues of racism.

Her demand of an apology, became a problem for the organisation as she was then naming the transaction as a racist expression of domination, which had successfully undermined the power of all the managers involved. In this action she was forcing the Authority to acknowledge the dissonance between its highly publicised anti-racist policies and procedures and the acts of racism at play in everyday practice. The organisation's denial of the need for the administrator to apologise, expressed its refusal to address the issue of everyday racism and to make real its rhetorical commitment to challenging discrimination. In choosing to treat this as a technical mistake to be rectified and omitting to address the covert but clear messages communicated by the actions, the organisation had itself sent messages that publicly and powerfully ( though covertly) underwrote the messages of negation sent by the administrator. Racism in the form of interpersonal interactions is often communicated at non-verbal and pre-verbal levels.

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These messages were likely to have been 'read' by all who heard about the incident, and it is yet another example of the conflicting double-messages that create such distress in Black staff.

- **Black and White women in relationship** – At the heart of this incident, and of many others that were brought to the AL group, was the relationship between the 'White woman' and the 'Black woman'. Over and over we encountered this painful issue. There were many situations in which, through mutual work, relationships with individual White women were repaired and healed, and productive bonds were made across the chasm of racism. In this instance, the relationship between the Deputy and her boss rapidly worsened until finally disconnection took place, and I perceived both women as having been hurt and disappointed in the process. The Manager was upset that the Deputy insisted on "making this a racist incident" and the Deputy expected her understanding and support. The difficulties are not simply about the individual difficulties in relating together, but also about the challenges of the fissures created by the presence of racism and other discriminations among the collective group 'women'. This particular incident revealed fissures in Black and White women's relationships - individually and collectively - that had not previously been known and, rather sadly, removed some bridges that had been costly to build.

This is an important issue that has recurred so frequently, in all the cycles of the research.

- **Black manager - a contradiction in terms** - In most of the transactions observed the Deputy manager was treated as " a Black member of staff in conflict with the administrator" rather than " the Deputy Head of Training and Development." Most people are not able to construe " Black manager" as a valid concept. Therefore they categorise him/her as either "Black" or "Manager". When categorised as " Manager", a process of making the individual "honorary White" occurs. I wrote about this in chapter 3 and will also return to it in one of the other cycles. In Chapter 6, and in Pamela's dilemma, it is observed that this confusion is also experienced by Black people. We too carry narrow definitions of the terms "Black person" and "Manager" that do not overlap. Yet, in practice we live the contradiction without experiencing them as contradictory – most of the time. Collette was Deputy Head of the Training and Development Unit because she was a very good manager *and* she was a Black person *and* a woman and indeed there were many other ways in which she could be defined. She was all of those things at the same time. However, it is hard for most of us to deal with this.

## Reflective Sense-making

From the stories presented we are able to see that the degree of racism experienced, and *felt*, by Black people is not related to the numbers of racist incidents that have taken place nor even to the status power of the individual performing the racist act. In many of the incidents the perpetrator of the action was at equivalent or lower graded in the organisation. Nevertheless they were able to very powerfully impact on the Black manager. We can see that in any one story a variety of different messages are sent and that some may conflict. As the incidents overlap these messages are communicated more and more clearly and loudly.

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The experience of racism is cumulative. This is an understanding that is fairly commonly understood by Black people – often intuitively, but of which White people are often unaware. Therefore, when Black people complain about the degree of racism being experienced they are asked to specify incidents. However, on their own each incident may appear trivial. Yet a quick review of just 5 incidents indicates the degree of overlap in the messages which we are sent and reinforce messages sent earlier. There is also a similarity of the experiential impact of the messages received e.g. tiredness, disillusionment, confusion, irritation, extra work.

Having demonstrated the way in which our experience is gradually constructed, I will make a shift in emphasis to bring together in one place facets of the Black woman's experience so that we may gain a better subjective understanding of the impact of racism and sexism on Black women. Information about our experience is intentionally located *throughout* the thesis. However in this chapter I want to allow us to gain a better sense of the holistic nature of the experience, and also to communicate something about the various forms it takes. Racism is both diffuse and specifically located. In switching emphasis I will move from recounting incidents to posing themes and illustrating those themes in our experience. This will enable us to better see that the recurrence of the themes across organisations.

- **Isolated and excluded**

This theme appeared repeatedly in the lives of the women in the AL cycles, and was reflected in a number of different ways in all the cycles. In the Personal Development Cycles women talked about being excluded from informal networks and not being able to count on getting information from colleagues. One woman said:

*" I will get the gossip, and I will get the circulars but no one will take responsibility to tell me about anything of importance that may have happened while I have been away. I am the only Black person in my section and I see them doing it for each other but no one does it for me."*

Another woman said that she experienced herself as creating hostility by daring to say something different to others. She knew that they talked negatively about her behind her back, and she felt the hostile atmosphere that was created when she spoke. She wanted to make her contribution and to express her point of view but found it hard to cope with the hostility she experienced herself as creating. In this woman's story we catch a glimpse of yet another process by which the Black woman is silenced, negated and made invisible.

- **Pressure to conform**

This is a familiar theme in my own experience and is part of the experience of being the 'only Black person' or 'only woman'. A woman on one of the Personal Development courses experienced it as a refusal to recognise and accept her difference. She said that she felt that there was no acceptance that the difference in her cultural and religious background prohibits her from enjoying a visit to the pub - a favourite retreat for her colleagues on Friday lunchtime. Her unwillingness to join them there was interpreted unfavourably. She does not drink alcohol. Her passion is shopping, and she enjoys spending lunchtime looking for bargains in a local market. In an effort to make connections with her colleagues, she has invited them to join *her* on her shopping jaunts but they have declined. Prior to leaving for a maternity break,

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she had brought food and wine to the office for a lunch time celebration, but having presented her with a gift it was "now down to the pub, and of course this time you *are* coming." She said that she had felt unable to refuse and that they ended up sitting outside of a pub, with her trying to drink Colas that she did not want.

She does not think the issue is one of whether they want her company. It is rather that her workmates are more concerned to keep control of the social milieu than to establish friendships across differences.

- **Pressure to disconnect from other Black people**

This is the other side of the 'pressure to conform' coin. Acceptance is usually made on condition that the individual is willing to disassociate herself from the group. In the AL groups this issue was discussed in relation to people who refused to attend their "Black workers forum" and women who chose to join generic management programmes instead of the Black women's AL programme. In both of these situations there may be a number of unrelated reasons for the

individuals' actions, but regardless of their reasons, I would argue that their actions were perceived to be about a discomfort in associating with a group Black women, *because* this is a known experience. We recognised disassociation from other Black people as a familiar survival strategy.

A woman in the Collaborative Inquiry cycle told a story of not being acknowledged by the only other Black woman manager in the organisation. In the Personal Development courses, they described this as a paradoxical, 'no-win' situation. They were never allowed to be the same and yet at the same time they were not allowed to be different. They said that when they had got together with other Black colleagues it had been perceived that they were 'up to something' or 'plotting'. Women in both the AL cycles and the Personal Development course spoke of growing up in all-White areas where, except for their families, they met only White people in every arena of their lives. This resulted in them feeling "out of it" when they moved to Black environments, and having difficulties "fitting in". One woman told about growing up in her native country but not being taught her own language and being sent to an English boarding school so that she learnt English culture. In all the cycles of research, there were illustrations like these of ways in which the internalisation of racism inhibits the easy development of relationships between Black people.

- **Inadequate supervision and lack of mentoring**

*"I feel like a stunted tree. I have been in the Service for years and no-one would tell me ... maybe you should say this or maybe you should do that."* (From Personal Development Courses)

In all cycles women talked about not receiving adequate induction, supervision or support. They talked about "always having to do things for themselves". One said that when she joined her office it had been some weeks before she realised that she needed to fill in a flexi-time sheet, she had been told that there was flexi-time, but not how and where time was recorded. Fortunately she had recorded her times in a notebook that she kept in the office, otherwise she might have been in serious trouble.

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On the Personal Development courses it was said that information about their entitlement, terms and conditions of service had been gained through reading the personnel handbook, and training manuals. Some who had not yet discovered these manuals were strongly advised to find and use them. The message was "to survive you must take responsibility for yourself - don't expect anything from others".

In my personal experience I had many experiences of good supervision and mentoring, however I have always regarded myself to be fortunate as I had observed that this was not true of other Black people in both my professional and personal life. I have also provided supervision, as an external consultant to many Black women managers, where it was acknowledged that the line manager was unable to provide adequate supervisory support.

- **Little concern about their development**

Managers in the Black Managers' Focus Group, when asked to identify factors perceived to have contributed to their career progression and effectiveness in their organisations, named factors that were all located outside of their organisations.

This was an issue of concern to the women on the Personal Development Course. One woman said that she "often had to fight for and justify training needs." Another said that she was "not given space for development." Mandy offered the story of two incidents that had taken place just prior to the training event, and had left her feeling very confused. As Finance Officer, she manages the training budget. Realising that the budget was unspent, and in line with her Department's active encouragement of staff to go on training courses, she had booked some courses for her return from maternity leave. She had hoped to use these to re-introduce herself to work after her break. On her return she found that all of her courses had been cancelled. Inquiring about this, she was told that someone else had attended one of the courses for which she had applied, and had not found it very helpful so it was decided that it was better for her not to attend.

She said that as she was the only person in the office to whom those courses were directly relevant, she could not understand why relevance of the course to her was being based on someone else's opinion. Her colleagues had been allowed to choose the courses they perceived relevant to their needs, so she could not understand why courses directly relevant to her work had been cancelled.

Women in the AL groups had to work hard to protect their development time. In many instances, this meant working double shifts i.e. going from the course to a 'late' or 'night' shift or coming to the session straight from a night shift.

As seen in some of the stories offered at the start of this chapter the issue of double messages is a common experience in the lives of Black women.

- **Under scrutiny and treated as suspicious**

This was a commonly expressed issue on the AL programme. It was not unusual for some managers to routinely return to the office after our meeting to "show my face". On the Personal Development Course when this issue was raised by a participant it

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produced stories. Some women then ‘confessed’ that they had omitted to leave information of how they could be contacted during this training, to avoid being interrupted. The tension and anxiety they carried about this became evident when, later on that day, the course administrator entered the room with a note, and all eyes became fixed on her waiting to hear to whom the message referred. I was surprised to find from the ensuing discussion and laughter of relief, that they had not assumed, as I had, that she was bringing a personal message. Instead, they had thought they had been ‘tracked down’ by their offices.

One woman said that her office always rang her, wherever she was, with one problem or another. She said that during a recent pregnancy she had been telephoned on the labour ward – to find out the location of a file! She perceives these calls to be checks to ensure that she was where she says she would be. Another woman said that since their training manuals, and terms and conditions had been computerised she was afraid to read them. She said that there was a deep suspicion of Black and ethnic minority people in her Department. The dominant stereotype of Black people was that of ‘the fraudster’. She had become afraid because on occasions when she had tried to look something up she had been questioned about why she was reading those pages.

These women were at first line management or just below, so it may be that the experience of being watched is more severe. However this issue of mutual mistrust appeared in all cycles.

- **Carrying heavier workloads – overload**

*" When I am away I don't get help with my work. Others get help, but when I come back my in-tray is always full. You have to scream to get help"* (Personal Development Course)

It was also generally felt that on their return from the course they would find that their work had been left untouched. One woman who had just returned from maternity leave, said that she was still working her way through the backlog that had been allowed to build up. She cited an example of recently having to reply to an important memo that had been left on her desk since August. She said that when she challenged her boss about it he had said that her work had been left because she is the only one in the office able to do it. She felt angry and resentful about this because she had been trained on other colleagues’ areas of work to enable her to cover their work when they were away, but her work is not covered when she is away. She was the only Black person in a White staff team.

In chapter 7 I mentioned that the women in the AL programmes often carried heavier workloads than their counterparts, and were often extremely tired. Many of the stories at the start of the chapter identify some of the various ways in which Black women managers gain additional work. In my own Living Inquiry I identify links between many of our survival strategies and the experience of overload (Chapter 9). So it is an issue in which we collude.

- **Under-use of skills**

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This issue was raised in both the AL cycles and in the Black Managers Focus Group. It was felt that line managers did not recognise the range of skills and abilities, brought to the organisation by Black managers, and as a result their skills were vastly underused. Black managers often experienced themselves as being restricted to stereotypical roles and functions on the organisation. This both reduced their job satisfaction, and did not give them opportunities for strengthening and developing a wider range of skills and abilities than those used in the narrow roles prescribed them.

- **Exclusion from policy-making processes**

Managers in the focus group felt that the ability to contribute to policy development was deemed to be critical to progression in their organisation. Yet, even when they had attained the required level of seniority in the organisation they were often excluded from contributing to policies. In the AL programme Black managers participated in these processes but only as tokens, so they were not perceived as acquiring skills.

- **Establishing and managing boundaries around issues of sexuality**

The issue of managing the boundaries of sexuality in the work place only appeared in the Manager Focus Group. It is surprising to me that this issue has only appeared in this cycle, (except for sexual harassment in my own inquiry). Its absence has caused me to wonder if it was an issue that I was not ready to deal with, and so missed it when it appeared? I can only comment on its absence from the data and wonder what lay behind the comments from this group, as I did not pick up on them at the time when they were raised, and so missed the opportunity of exploring this issue.

- **Challenges of being a Black professional and a mother**

At the time of my discussion with Elly I was very heavily pregnant. Towards the end of our discussion, as we became more relaxed with each other and more able to take risks, Elly mentioned that she had an older child and really wanted to have another. However, she was afraid of the way in which this would affect her image at work, and of how it might affect her career. As she spoke I felt both angry and sad that she had to confront the making of choices between having children and a career. They were both separate ways in which we manifest and experience ourselves in the world and I experienced great resistance to having to make such choices. I knew that those considerations were not just hers. I remembered that my joy at my pregnancy had been tainted by concerns that this may adversely affect my business. I was anxious that my struggles for credibility might be increased. People often did not expect a management Consultant to be a woman and/or Black, so a pregnant Black woman may be even more of a surprise.

Talking with other professional women in my NCT (National Childbirth Trust) class, I realised that these were concerns for both Black and White women. In my class we were all women who had chosen to establish our career before becoming mothers. I noticed that although they all seemed to very much welcome their pregnancy, they expressed concerns about the ways in which their careers might be affected by their pregnancy and by the coming of their baby. One woman said that she had been trying to hide her pregnancy because she felt that she needed to get the timing of her news to

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her boss right. She knew that he was considering recommending her for a promotion, so it seemed critically important that this should happen before she told him her news. She feared that this would trigger all the old stereotypes of women that she had worked so hard to avoid.

The issue of children was one that featured highly in the AL groups. On each programme there was a pregnant woman, and three-quarters of the participants were women with children. On two programmes the single women were actively exploring the dilemmas of combining careers and children and trying to decide what they wanted for themselves.

Those who were already mothers struggled with issues of finding adequate childcare, and managing the illness of school-age children. Two women had grown up children with mental illness, to whom they tried to give support, and grandchildren in need of care. One woman summed it up when she said, "Everyone wants a piece of me." The managing of caring responsibilities and careers sometimes left women feeling very stretched.

- It is in our struggle to manage work and home that we become most aware of the effect of sexism on us. So often in the working environment we experience racism as the more oppressive force, but it is in this issue which sits on the boundary between the home and organisational arena that the controlling power of sexism is most keenly felt. In chapter 4, I considered ways in which legislation, both by its absence and presence is used to control women. We are affected by the fact that the severe reduction in state provision of nursery care makes the finding of reliable childcare very difficult. Managers are often expected to work very long hours and in the context of Local Government to attend evening meetings. This poses difficulties for dual earner households and for single parents. Many nurseries offer care from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. which, when travel between nursery and work is deducted, falls very much short of the average manager's day.
- Momsen (1993) indicates that Caribbean women do not make the same clear separation, which are made in many industrialized societies, between working in and out of the home. However many of the support structures that families and communities in the Caribbean use for providing more flexible management of work and home have been interrupted in this setting. For a number of reasons, relationships within the extended families have been weakened or strained, and these families themselves no longer sit in a wider community that values collective support. There is not space in this study to explore the ways in which the replacement of values of community with those of the individual has impacted on the opportunities of Black women managers. It is an area worthy of exploration in its own right.

## **An exploration of surviving**

Another important strand of this research was the exploration of the question:

*"Are we, Black women managers in Britain, surviving or thriving?"*

In exploring this issue I attempted to:

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a) Inquire into the notions held about these terms; and b) generate stories that illustrate that experience. I wanted to establish what degree of commonality existed in the meanings given to this term. In exploring our meanings I engaged in 'freefall' writing (Natalie Goldberg), drew pictures, and brainstormed the concept to identify the ideas I held within me. I then took the following questions to Roseanne, to the Personal Development Courses run in 1994 and 1995 and then to the Collaborative Inquiry group:

*"I once heard Maya Angelou say that her objective was not simply to survive but to thrive, what do these terms mean to you? Can you think of an image that for you sums up the states of surviving and thriving? How do you look and act when you are (or if you were) in those states?"*

In my own work I had found that it was difficult to start the exploration of meanings given to the terms in words. Images had given me a much deeper insight into not only the conceptual ideas held about surviving and thriving, but it had told me something about how what that term meant for me. I had noticed that the use of imagery interrupted the pat 'common-sense' response to these questions. Therefore, I asked participants to first state what images the terms conjured up, and then to undertake a brainstorm in response to the statements "Surviving is about..." and "thriving is about...". In all cycles, both parts of these activities were done individually and then shared with others, in this way I avoided getting group meanings, and I was able to identify similarities and differences. In this chapter I deal only with the information gathered about "surviving", our notion and thoughts about thriving are expressed in the next chapter.

## **What emerged**

Everyone who participated in these activities made the immediate response that they felt that as Black women we were surviving not thriving. We found it difficult to engage with the exploration of surviving, and there were pockets of resistance. One group said that they were surprised to find that by the end of the day they had become increasingly angry. In exploring the reasons for their anger it emerged that this activity had put them in touch with the opportunities that had been lost as a result of discrimination. One woman said that she had realised that she had been "too busy surviving, to give any time to looking at what was happening to me and to us". Another woman, from the Personal Development Course, said that she was not at all sure that there was any point in going over such things as we were unable to change anything. She said that the day had not helped her to see anything that she could change, it had just made her angry. These experiences confirmed how painful it is to revisit experiences of oppression, and to be the recipient of abusive power. It was commented on that it was much easier for them to recall experiences of thriving. One woman said, "Focussing on the experience of surviving triggered all the feelings of depression, however it was not so bad as we were also looking at stories of thriving".

In my work with Roseanne she chose to start the reflection with an exploration of thriving, saying at the time that she did not feel up to dealing with surviving. In practice we never returned to explore that issue together.

- **Notions of surviving**

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All images were ones in which death was being faced. The one that recurred most frequently was of someone drowning. There were a number of images clustered around that theme. In some the swimmer was sinking and "clutching at straws". In another she was out of her depth - barely head above water - and with no land or help in sight. In another she was being thrown lifelines and missing them, and in yet another she had managed to reach a raft and was desperately clinging on - too tired to pull herself up. Other images were of being buried alive; sat upon; swimming against the tide; being stifled; being submerged; being in a dark tunnel with little air space; a bird with clipped wings; trying to move and unable to move; dreaming of escape; standing on something with no solid base.

I was surprised that despite the range of settings in which these issues were explored, and the differences between the circumstances and backgrounds of the women involved there was such commonality in the images. We observed that the images expressed encounters with our deaths, and of a sense of powerlessness to change our circumstances.

- **The experience of surviving**

From the responses to the statement "Surviving is about" the following themes emerged:

- **Alienation from others**
  - "Feeling not part of a whole"
  - "It's got nothing to do with me - it's a White man's world"
  - "Is there anybody there?"
  - "Isolation, loneliness and depression"
  - "Feelings of rejection and frustration"
- **Alienation from self**
  - "Needing to deny self and to conform"
  - "No longer true selves"
  - "Feeling lost"
  - "Forgetting values"
- **Protective of position**
  - "So glad to be alive that don't want to make any move – just pleased to be still alive"
  - "Always defending"
  - "Grabbing things"
  - "Justifying self"
  - "Feeling that you are sinking"
- **Reduced opportunities**
  - "Lack of support"
  - "Poverty"
  - "Poor housing and diet"

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- " Little money"
  - "Illness, stress and worry"
  - " Harassment"
  - " Having few choices - Hobson's choice"
  - **Alive but not living**
  - " No voice, no say"
  - "Worn down"
  - " Going through the motions - but not living."
  - " Not living just existing"
  - "Waiting to exhale"
  - **Blaming self**
- " I must be wrong"
- **Grateful for what given**
  - " Choosing something - not because it reflects what you want, but simply because it seems the best way of being able to keep head above water"
  - "Denying ability to have choice"
  - "Always making compromises"
  - "Not asking for much"
  - " Accepting whatever help is given"
  - **Rage and resentment**
  - " Feeling resentful about opportunities lost"
  - " Wanting to scream, feeling that I must scream"
  - **Struggle**
  - "Single parent – little or no support"
  - "Must survive against all odds"
  - "Undertaking survival acts – education, self-help, sense of community spirit, keeping hope alive"
  - "MUST SURVIVE , if I did not it would lead to extinction"
  - **Exhausting**
  - "Carrying a heavy load"
  - "Draining effect of survival"
  - **Produces Creativity**
  - "Teaches you about positive thinking"
  - "Having a sense of success when you have survived against all odds"
  - " Teaches you to be independent"
  - "Teaches you about community and helping each other"

The last theme appeared only twice, while the others frequently recurred. In the groups where it appeared it prompted a lot of discussion. Many women reacted strongly against the thought that this experience could be perceived to be positive. The contributors of those views explained that despite the pain of this experience, they/we had been pushed into discovering strengths within ourselves.

Observing the range of factors given to define the experience of surviving, we noticed that it is a process, constructed in multifarious ways. It has within it:

- Messages/concepts that denote the spatial relationship of self to others e.g. " It's got nothing to do with me - it's a White man's world";

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- Tangible, observable structures, policies, procedures and actions that result in the removal of the means by which our basic survival needs (food, clothing, heat, shelter (Maslow 1968)) might be satisfied e.g. "poverty", "few choices";
- Triggers which activate old inherited information (in Bateson's terms (1972) 'transforms') for decoding and responding to these situations, e.g. alienation, rage, self-blame;
- The 'gestalt' of its various aspects e.g. "not living just existing".

From this exploration it became apparent that to understand our survival strategies we must:

- 1. Consider the context from which they arise;**
- 2. Maintain the link between actions and reactions ;**
- 3. Appreciate the internalisation of the messages of the oppressive system in the oppressed.**

Before outlining the various strategies identified in the research, I will say a little about each of these issues.

## **1. The nature of the Black woman's Context / frame**

If I don't know I don't know I think I know; if I don't know I know I think I don't know. (Laing)

Having gathered the information about Black women's experiences and explored the notion and experience of surviving and thriving, other questions arose and my interests shifted from the experiences to the desire to explore our habitual responses to these incidents and the impact of those responses on our development. For some time the value of the information about our notions and experience of surviving, to my conceptual thinking about the changing of my own and others' experiences was not apparent. I had not related the data about Black women's encounters in organisations with the experience of surviving. I seemed to be treating Black women's encounters as no more than an account of idiosyncratic incidents that together created stress and disease in Black women. I was not fully appreciating the significance of this information.

However, as I tried to write about our survival strategies and particularly about our perception of our selves as perpetually on the edge – surviving, for this thesis, I started to realise that this information increased in significance when placed in the specific context from which it arose. It started to become apparent that our description of our subjective experience of surviving mirrored our objective everyday encounters, and that in this information was knowledge about the nature of the context. The true significance of the material lay not in seeing these as individual, though often repeated and patterned experiences, but in recognising them as containing information about the nature of the frame.

At a subjective level I knew this. Indeed, I did not respond to these incidents as isolated encounters. The degree of rage, and despair that each incident threatened (even though it was often suppressed and not properly felt) indicated to me a knowing

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that these incidents signified something of greater importance. I recognised each incident, in itself, as both a symptom i.e. a product of the environment from which it emerged *and* also as an act that confirmed and consolidated the context. These acts were signifiers of the *nature* of the relationship between Black and White people in, and out, of organisations. In gathering information about our everyday encounters, and about our experience of surviving I was creating knowledge about the taken-for-granted, familiar and so unnoticed, backcloth against which Black and White people enacted individual scenes. To fully appreciate the picture we need to understand that we are looking at the components of the scene, *and* the constituent parts of whatever provides a background and frame for those scenes. The picture is highly complex.

From this insight came questions about the context. Claire, in the collaborative inquiry group puzzled about the impact on her of growing up in Britain. We considered perceived similarities between our mothers' responses to certain situations that were so different to our own, and wondered in what ways were those differences attributable to the fact that we had grown up in very different environments? In an interconnected system it is really difficult to know such things. However from these conversations we were beginning to see the context as a 'thing' in any situation – i.e. an important aspect of the problem to be examined and considered.

Characteristic features of the context seemed to be a) the continuous negation of Black women's contributions to the work and culture of the organisation b) the attribution of inferior ability and worth c) shaming and frustrating d) alienating e) the sending of conflicting messages that create double binds.

In 1995 on one of the Personal Self-Development courses, we asked pair and trios to depict or portray significant aspects of the Black woman's experience. One pair produced a sketch, and a poem, of a promotion board interview that one of the women had experienced. As they acted it we, the audience, were powerfully moved. *We felt* the dilemmas that we so often experience as we struggle to act effectively in situations where the 'action' is both explicit and implicit, and spoken and unspoken questions and statements conflict. The sketch and poem were also a very good illustration of the relationship between the scene and the frame/context, so I asked permission to use them. I present them here as a case study that enables us to explore the nature of the frame.

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### ***Case study - PROMOTION FOR ME***

*(Cassandra, introduces herself and the sketch to the audience)*

I am a Black woman, a Civil Servant of 16 years. I was successfully promoted after 8 years of service to an Executive Officer. What follows is the story of my promotion interview to Executive Officer. I was encouraged to believe that good performance on the day and a report with a 'fitted' mark were the essential elements to success but my experience as a Black woman contradicts that theory. Regardless of a 'qualifying report' as Black women we are continuously subjected to scrutiny due to preconceived ideas.

#### **FIRST QUESTION**

*Interviewer (White person, speaking in middle-class southern accent):*

What makes you think you're suitable for the higher grade?

*Cassandra (Black woman, speaking her thoughts as an aside to the audience, in middle-class southern English accent):*

I denied my own feelings by responding in an acceptable manner to ensure my success. It wasn't the question asked - it was the *tone* of the question.

It obligated me, as a Black woman, to challenge the ambiguous question, but denied me a just cause to have that opportunity.

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Cassandra (*change in tone and stance and spoken in a Caribbean accent*)

So me pass the promotion board

Because me bite me tongue and

Swallow me pride

Now we go back to the job interview.

## SECOND QUESTION

Interviewer: (*in middle-class Southern English accent*)

Will it be possible for you to cope with the demanding duties of an Executive Officer and the problems of being a single parent? I am right in assuming the father of the children is not around?

Cassandra: (*Speaking her thoughts to the audience, in middle-class Southern English accent*)

This question is asked to belittle me – insult, ridicule, abuse and persecute me.

Assumptions were being made about me **BEFORE** the interview began. They believe that a Black woman can only perform well within the lower grades. And there is the stereotypical belief that because I'm a Black woman I must be a single parent. This is being used as a lever to challenge me. **THIS IS NOT AN INTERVIEW!**

I will respond immediately and assertively. I will not comply with the racism maintained by the system's philosophy. The complaints procedure will be sought – advice from the Union, and the assistance of the Equal Opportunities team. **JUSTICE** is a must. I will carefully put together a strategy.

## POEM

Your perception of me is reflected by the questions you ask me,

The questions you ask me are constructed just for me,

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But do you know me? Do you care to know me?

I am a black woman living in a society which victimises me,

I am a black woman living in a society which seeks ways to suppress me,

And my history – the essence of my being. The media employs propaganda to distort me,

Acceptable image expurgates me. My face is never shown to illustrate beauty,

My children, My Worry, My Vulnerability – by abusing them, you continually bruise me,

My brother, a relished brother of our community is removed by avenues of conspiracy,

But a black woman, strong yet exquisite spirit of the utmost beauty is my heartfelt belief.

**THIS** is what sustains me.

My Mothers and Sisters before me with dignity against all odds went down in history.

With all our strength, clarity and soul we will be winners, for we are true rarities.

Verne, July 1995

This sketch is a good illustration of the Black woman's context, and of the dilemmas it presents to the Black woman.

- a. The continuous negation of Black women's contributions to the work and culture of the organisation.

A significant aspect of the organisational cultures in which Black women operate is the continuous denial and obliteration of our contributions to the work and development of our organisations. Verne, in her poem above indicates in the first two lines a knowledge of a process in which actions are a reflection of ideology. She sees the construction of the questions put to her as mirror images of the belief system that influences the interviewer's perceptions of her. She, at least subjectively, knows that she is performing in a 'false position' (Laing 1961), as the image held of her has not been constructed from personal knowledge about her. To the interviewer, Cassandra, the unique individual does not exist. His /her questions are *not* designed to generate information about the unique individual but instead to confirm the stereotypical images of 'the Black woman'. Laing (1961) says that false positions are created when a "false self is confirmed and the real self disconfirmed." In the series of transactions that represent the promotion board interview Cassandra's real self was disconfirmed

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and a false notion affirmed, and in that process she was negated. Whether the interviewer intended this, or is indeed consciously aware of the effect of his actions (Verne believes that his actions are intentional), he has sent important messages that have been received loudly and clearly.

Laing points out that there a number of different ways in which people might be confirmed or disconfirmed. Throughout my inquiry I repeatedly saw evidence of negating processes. In Annette's dilemma it occurred when her colleagues chose to affirm her colour (and maybe her gender), by inviting her to join the selection panel. As both Black and a woman she amply satisfied the organisation's requirement that selection panels represent people from oppressed groups. Having confirmed her in the 'token' position of 'Black woman' her potential for making a worthwhile contribution to the recruitment process is negated by a series of actions in which her managerial skills and competences are obliterated. In Zeinab's dilemma the manager who persisted in harassing her repeatedly negated her professional competence. In his eyes she was simply a 'Black woman' and as such she had no legitimate place in the organisation. Therefore it became his mission to rid the organisation of Zeinab, and others like her.

From my own experience there were many instances in which I had first-hand knowledge of this process by which my actual or potential contributions to the various organisations with which I worked were negated. In chapter 3 I recounted the incident in which I was perceived as a threat to the Senior Probation Officer when my presence in her car was questioned. It was the same process that caused me to be asked to open the kitchen while lunching in the staff restaurant.

It is a culture that seeks to deny our presence, so that each generation of Black women believe themselves to be in 'ground-breaking' situations.

### **b) The attribution of inferior ability and worth**

Our case study illustrates that messages of inferiority and superiority are often communicated non-verbally. In this situation the tone of the interviewer infers to Cassandra that the question is ambiguous. Although she is seemingly being asked a routine interview question at another level, as Black and White people, they are engaged in another conversation in which her ability, as a Black woman, to work at a managerial grade is queried.

An interesting form of this process is presented in the incident in which I ended up counselling a man who had become distressed as a result of me describing myself as a Black woman. I am explicitly asked to retract my description of myself as a Black woman and assured that he (and others) did not perceive me as Black. Implicitly the 'Black woman' and 'professional' are presented as opposing, incompatible identities, and I am invited to collude with the identification of myself as 'professional' and to deny my identification as a 'Black woman'. This is a knotty problem.

He approached me as both his trainer/counsellor and as the person who holds the solution to his distress. It was made clear to me that I simply had to retract my statement, and explain why I had chosen to describe myself so 'negatively'. Empathy is an important feature of the counselling role (Mearns and Thorne 1988), yet to

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empathise I must see myself as the source of his distress; accept, problemise my action, and in doing so, see the identification of myself as 'Black' as wrong and negative. I must accept his definition of me, and of course in relinquishing my own self-definition and using his I would be affirming him in the superior naming role. In this example it was not sufficient that my capacity to be Black, female **and** professional (i.e. capable of executing power) was being negated, my active collusion with this process was also demanded.

Laing (1961) exploring the issue of collusion in interpersonal relationships says:

"Collusion is always clinched when self finds in other that other who will 'confirm' self in the false self that is trying to make real, and vice versa. The ground is set for prolonged mutual evasion of truth and true fulfilment. Each has found another to endorse his false notion of himself and to give this appearance a semblance of reality."

In this situation the real problem is my refusal to collude with the attribution of inferiority to Black people, and therefore implicitly in the attribution of superiority to White people and therefore to the course participant concerned. In return for my confirmation of the attribution of inferior/ worthless status to Black people I am offered acceptance and inclusion in the powerful group. My/our collusion is necessary because without it the 'false' identity of the 'Other' is called into question.

In exploring these incidents I was learning that the rejection of the inferior/ victim role challenges the identity of the powerful group, and is likely to attract resistance and punishment. Without the inferior, submissive 'Black' there cannot be a superior, all-powerful 'White'.

### **c) Double Binding**

From the first three chapters, in chapter 7, and the case study above, and some of the other stories offered in this chapter could be observed that the Black woman often finds herself in double binding situations. In Chapter 1, I introduced Bateson's theory of double binds. Bateson says, and I have found, that double binds set up tangles in the mind. So before discussing the process by which in this short sketch double binds were created, and considering the complex challenges these pose for Cassandra, I will use a very familiar fairy tale to allow us to get into and explore the way in which the process works.

In Hans Christian Anderson's story of the Emperor's clothes we have a beautiful example of a double binding situation. In this story the Emperor of the kingdom loves, and is passionately interested in beautiful clothes. It is well known that he will see anyone who wants to talk about silks, brocades, and fine velvets. His love of clothes and his willingness to see anyone wanting to discuss them, create a context for the two strangers who arrive in the town intending to make themselves rich. They go to the Emperor and tell him about their skills as weavers and about their ability to make marvellous materials and clothes. The Emperor is impressed and asks them if they would make some for him. They agree but impose a condition. They tell the Emperor that the materials they use are of such rarity that they can only be seen by people who are not stupid and who are worthy of their office. The whole story hangs on this

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simple condition, and from then on every action is made and interpreted in relation to this condition.

In Bateson's terms this condition is the rule for transforming the information received. It is this rule that created anxiety in the Emperor and caused him, despite this curiosity, to delay going to see how the weavers were progressing. Although he did not believe that he was either stupid or unfit for his office, he could not risk not being able to see the cloth. So he sent his oldest and most trusted minister – surely he would be able to see the cloth.

The old man went along, possibly not doubting his worthiness and intelligence, but he was faced with what appeared to be a man sitting at an empty loom and then the confusing process began. The weavers invited him to admire the beautiful and unusual patterns, and the colours and quality of the fabric. However the old man's eyes told him that there was no fabric. In that moment he had two conflicting messages. In any other context this would probably not be a problematic situation, for the old man would simply denounce the men as liars, frauds and cheats. However in **this** particular context, he does not do this. Instead he scratches his head and ponders what to do, for he is caught in a dilemma. It is a complex problem created primarily by the fact that he has been given double messages, and because this happens in a context where his collusion is demanded. The penalty for not colluding is professional death. Information about the cost of breaking the grand collusion is clearly communicated, but never explicitly stated.

Before moving on to explore the process by which collusion is invited and punishment threatened, I want to dwell further on the creation of the double binding tangles. An important aspect of the double binding process is the layering of message upon message. The initial conflict experienced by the old man occurs when his senses inform him that there is no cloth, *and* the weavers persist in graphically describing it. However, the weavers in acting as if they knew that he was seeing the beautiful colours and patterns of material at which they were all looking, affirmed the message of his intelligence and worthiness for his office. This message had first been communicated to him when the Emperor told him that he was chosen as the first person to view the cloth. When he could see no fabric, he was trapped. If he questioned the veracity of the weavers' claims then he would implicitly be proclaiming himself as not worthy of his position, and as stupid. If he agreed with the weavers he would lose his integrity. He would become the weavers' accomplice in cheating the Emperor, and in this way would prove himself unworthy of his position as a trusted minister of the Emperor. Also he would be complying in a process in which, like a fool, he admires fabric that does not exist simply because these strangers have told him that it is beautiful, and in this way he proves his stupidity. In those moments he knew that he was trapped in a complex dilemma from which there seemed to be no escape. He was in a no – win situation.

Trapped, the old man compliments the weavers on the beauty of the cloth and goes back to tell the Emperor about it. In these transactions he becomes an accomplice in a process which will demand "further evasions of the truth" and a distancing from the self. In that act of praising the cloth to the Emperor, another thread was added to an already tangled weave. It is also quite possible that further threads may have been added as the old man internalised the problem. Because so many of the interpersonal

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transactions were implicit it may be easy to see the problem as comparatively simple and he may be puzzled by the difficulty he had in telling those people that they were lying. Taking the dilemma apart, as I have just done, it is clear why he made the decisions he did, but it has been repeatedly pointed out that we often do not know what we are doing while we are in the process of action (Schon 1983, Torbert 1991, Field 1932). Bateson (1972) uses an image of a man cutting down a tree to illustrate that in an interconnected system information is processed *throughout* the system. He says:

" Consider a man felling a tree with an axe. Each stroke of the axe is modified or corrected, according to the shape of the cut face of the tree left by the previous stroke. This self – corrective (i.e. mental) process is brought about by a total system, tree-eyes-brain-muscles-axe-stroke-tree; and it is this system that has the characteristic of immanent mind."

Therefore, while in action we are often unaware of the information being gathered that influences our actions. Without the conscious awareness that produces such practices as "reflection – in-action", we are often ignorant of the information triggering our responses. Therefore, in a state of unawareness it is possible that the old man may himself question his wisdom, and he may doubt his competence if he is stymied by what appears to be a simple problem of dealing with the weavers' deception. In blaming himself for not being able to deal effectively with these men's tricks, he takes into himself responsibility for a problem that was not of his making; he undermines his belief in his competence and wisdom, and in this way makes his escape less likely.

Definition of the old man's problem would have been made more difficult by the either /or dualistic mode of thinking. In this way of thinking paradoxes cannot be properly seen, as it is assumed that there can only be one truth. To understand his problem he must accept that he is both wise and competent *and* also stymied by what appears to be a simple problem, and that the problem is both straightforward and complex.

As the story progresses, further threads are added to the double bind, and it becomes even more difficult to break it. The next minister who was sent to see the cloth, had to deal with the fact that the messages received from the weavers had been affirmed by the old and trusted minister who had been faithful to the Emperor for so long. Returning to the Emperor and praising the material he too added another thread to the weave. So that by the time the Emperor went to see the cloth a context that assured his complicity and made challenge suicidal was already tightly woven. Seeing nothing, but believing himself to be the only one unable to see the cloth, he praised it even more loudly. It is in this context that the Emperor walked down the street in his underwear! Such an action can never be understood outside of the context in which it takes place. Bateson (1972) says

"This weaving of contexts and of messages which propose context, but which like all messages whatsoever have "meaning" only by virtue of context – is the subject matter of the so-called double bind theory."

Double binding situations appear simple. Coercive demands for collusion are rarely explicitly stated, they are self-reinforcing and leaves the 'victim' feeling caught in a

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process that they know they have contributed to but do not know how to escape except through actual or metaphorical suicide.

#### **d. Shaming and frustrating**

I have put these two things together as I perceive them to be very connected. Returning to our illustration of the old man in the Emperor's clothes, we are able, with a little empathy, to see the connection quite easily. It is likely to have been shaming for a man of his age and status to be duped. He knew that he was being fooled *and* he felt a fool. The frustration would have arisen from his inability to extricate himself, and as a man of great age, competence and status it would be very humiliating to be unable to do so.

The Black woman's context is one in which she is perpetually shamed and frustrated. In our case study Cassandra observed "This question is asked to belittle me – insult, ridicule, abuse and persecute me." She feels belittled by the attribution to her of the Black woman stereotype of the single parent. Laing suggests that "Shame ... appears to arise when a person finds himself condemned to an identity ... he wishes to repudiate." In our case we constantly find ourselves condemned to false notions of the Black woman, which have their base in an ideology designed to place and maintain us in an inferior position. A perpetual struggle in which we engage is to avoid having this identity attached to us. In doing this we do not struggle against being seen as or described as Black women, but rather against the dominant stereotypical view of the Black woman. In the case study when Cassandra senses that those negative inferior stereotypes had been attributed to the term 'Black woman' she feels "obligated to challenge it". Realising that the context would make such a challenge seem unjustified she has to resign herself to "biting her tongue and swallowing her pride". Her attempt to change the 'Other's' definition of herself is frustrated as she is "denied an opportunity" to challenge it. Pragmatically, she trades career advancement for self-esteem and self-worth. In the sketch she ridicules her choice, it is clear that she does not feel good about herself in making this trade. Yet her decision is made in the context of having "Hobson's choice".

This scenario provides an illustration of the link between frustration and shame in the lives of Black women. Laing (1961) suggests that " a person's own identity cannot be completely abstracted from his identity for others". We need others for determining our sense of worth and also for giving meaning to our lives. In the stories at the start of this chapter we catch glimpses of the disappointment, disillusionment and despair experienced as we tried to force others to change their perceptions of ourselves, and as we got feedback which told us that *again* we had failed! Zeinab repeatedly reviewed and adjusted her course. Annette cannot understand how her colleagues failed to perceive the valuable contribution she is able to make to the recruitment process. Mary has to come to terms that to the people in the street she is not "the social worker", but another Black woman at whom eggs should be thrown. And Pamela works long hours, and doubly hard, to try to prove herself – to force those around her to acknowledge her competence. Laing suggests that:

"One can feel physically empty when not putting oneself into what one is doing, or when what one is putting oneself into feels intrinsically meaningless to oneself. But emptiness and futility can arise when a person has put himself into his acts, even when these acts seem to have some

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point to him, and he is accorded no recognition by the other, and if he feels he is not able to make any difference to anyone."

As Black women we are over-represented in those areas of organisations where jobs are often narrowly defined, detached and therefore meaningless. In these situations we struggle to create for ourselves a sense of being worthwhile. All of the women in this study were located at the more senior levels of organisations where jobs are broader, and the links between individual tasks and the organisation's mission, goals and priorities are more easily established. So, theoretically, it should be easier for a sense of worth and fulfilment to be attained. However in practice we continuously struggle for, and fail to get recognition of our work. Laing (1961) says "every human being, whether child or adult, seems to require *significance*, that is, *place in another person's world*."

Daily we struggle to prove ourselves, to re-define others' [and our own] perceptions of ourselves, for opportunities to challenge the false notions of the Black woman that are repeatedly acted out *and* create possibilities for ensuring our physical survival. Daily our efforts are frustrated and we experience defeat, and like the old man above, our self-pride is injured and we experience shame – individually and collectively.

#### **e) Alienating**

Throughout this study, in many of our stories are experiences which alienate and/or send messages to us that we are different and do not belong. In Cassandra's story that message is part of the communication in the question "What makes you think you're suitable for the higher grade?" This experience results from the construction of notions of the Black woman in ways that make her presence in organisations - in any roles other than domestic ones - surprising, exceptional and 'a freak', unlikely to be repeated. It is closely linked to the negation of the Black woman's capacity for making a valuable contribution to our world – whether as a professional or as a human being.

## **2. Maintaining the link between the action and the reaction**

It was mentioned earlier (Chapter 1), that in the making of cultures the problem for which the responses were designed is over time forgotten. I think that it is true to say that this also happens in the present. It is very common for survival strategies to become detached from both the context and the actions that gave rise to them, and to be perceived as pathological behaviour of the individual or the group. This is particularly so when the perceptual lenses are clouded by ideology designed to make a group less than human. Rather stark examples of reactions, consciously or unconsciously, being separated from actions are the mental diseases *Drapetomania*, and *dysesthesia Aethiopica*, which were said to affect slaves. *Drapetomania*, was a mental disease where the main symptom was the persistent urge to run away, and *dysesthesia Aethiopica* caused "happy-go-lucky slaves to begin to slight their work and raise disturbances with their overseers" (Mama 1995).

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However, more concerning for me as I try to identify the issues pertinent to our ability to self-actualise and thrive, is the realisation that we too, detach our reactions from the stimuli that prompted those responses. Time and time again I observe it in myself and in others. We catch a glimpse of it as Cassandra derides herself for not challenging the ambiguous question, and for trading her advancement of her career for her self-worth. The creation of the sketch itself, as well as other actions described in the sketch, indicates to us that this trade was not done easily. Cassandra is, I would argue, being unduly punishing of herself. She was in a 'catch 22' situation where self-worth was pitted against basic physical survival. It was in **that** context that she made her choice.

This detachment can be observed in the condemnation of the older generations for their inability to fight the system and for some of the choices made. A whole range of punishing terms exists for those we perceive to have done that – 'Uncle Toms', 'coconuts' among others. There are indeed people who chose to gain their own advantage by 'climbing on the backs' of other Black people. And it is critically important that we continue to reflect on and challenge the choices we make. However in doing this, individual actions must not be lifted out of the context from which they emerged. In our appraisal we must struggle to keep both in focus. We must struggle to acknowledge individual responsibility *and* the power of the system to constrain, restrict and control our actions. Maya Angelou<sup>1</sup>, in her poem about old men, draws attention to the fact that whole generations of Black people 'kept the race alive' through their submission.

### **3. Internalisation of the system**

To properly understand some of these strategies it is important to recognise that as Fanon and Freire state, the goal of the oppressed is to be as like the oppressor as possible. In chapter 4, I quote Memmi's amazement at finding his ambivalence towards his colonisers, and at first glance this appears surprising. Yet, when we remember that people from both the oppressed groups and the dominant group alike, receive and absorb as if through osmosis, the *same* messages of the system, we realise that it would be surprising if it were otherwise. Essed (1991), generating the concept of everyday racism, says that racism is interwoven in the very fabric of the social system. Notwithstanding, its messages of White, male supremacy are stated in, received and internalised from, the spaces between the lines of most books. They are communicated both in what is said *and* what is not said. They are in the stereotypical images of the pictures that appear in our journals, papers, magazines and on our television screens, and again, we interpret and learn those messages from what appears, as well as from what has been omitted.

The standards by which behaviour, norms, ideas *and* people are assessed and judged are the prerogative of the dominant group. They create all the rules, criteria, conditions and habitual ritual forms of the organisation. So the proving of worth becomes a double bind in which people of the oppressed group are trapped. Knowing within themselves that they are human, and therefore of equal value they try to prove it. However, to do so they must use the standards, criteria, and measures designed by the dominant group to maintain its dominance, and to ensure the Other's powerlessness and inferior status. Explicit statements of this ideology *and* of the problems faced by the oppressed are taboo. Expressers of such ideas are bracketed off from 'normal' society, and treated as if abnormal and /or on the lunatic fringe. To

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make the implicit visible disturbs the system. Recognition of our internalisation of the system, though often extremely painful, is an important act of resistance and a step towards our freedom.

## **Survival Strategies**

*Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action reap a habit; sow a habit reap a character; sow a character reap a destiny. (A popular maxim)*

Survival or coping strategies are learned, practised and habitual responses to unfavourable life-threatening situations. They are most effective when we are able to trigger them into action without thinking. They give best protection when they are as automatic as reflex actions. They are largely defense mechanisms deemed to be necessary when we perceive ourselves to be operating in a hostile environment. It is clear from the information produced that we perceive our environment to be extremely unfavourable.

Therefore, as implied in the maxim above, such perceptions and thoughts produce defensive, protective actions. Having practised these responses for a long time they become part of our normal way of operating and we begin to see them as a part of our nature. When these responses are passed from one generation to another we then fail to see them as defense mechanisms designed to assist us in coping with hostile circumstances, but rather they are perceived as part of our family or cultural heritage. As such we become vested with a responsibility to perpetuate them if we are to be true to ourselves. The habitual nature of these responses and the number of years over which they have operated hides from us the possibility of alternative responses. Also in many instances these are collective strategies.

As Trompenaars (1993) reminds us, culture is simply the way in which a group, over time, organises itself to deal with the problems it faces. Eventually the link between the problem and the behaviour is lost and it becomes perceived as an intrinsic characteristic of the group. The collective nature of our survival strategies means that they are constantly reinforced by others around us, and also that it may be perceived as taboo to break them. It is also very scary to experiment with survival strategies. If you really are on the edge, as you perceive yourself to be, and these strategies have proved themselves as effective in stopping you from going over the edge then it is difficult to consider and try out untested alternatives. When survival is at stake a mistake may have dire consequences.

## **Overview of survival strategies**

As I meditated on the various forms of defense I observed in others, and myself, it seemed that these could be loosely clustered under three main headings. Strategies which were about a) learning and teaching fear; b) detachment and alienation of the true self, and c) the protective masking of the self. At the heart of all our protective responses is the safety and survival of the inner self. The clusters overlap with some strategies being multi-purpose, but for the sake of analysis I am attempting to separate them.

- **Learning and teaching fear**

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*"To listen to me, you would think that my life was one big fear"*

(Aisha - Collaborative Inquiry Group)

As I worked with myself, and in the various inquiry cycles, it became apparent that our lives are dominated by fear. This is a consequence of living in a hostile context - with an awareness of always being on the edge. Some years ago my mother told me that she felt that one of her greatest weaknesses was her fearfulness. As I became more aware of my self and discovered the extent to which my own life was influenced by fear I assumed that it had been learnt from my mother. However as I dialogued with other women, and read their stories I began to recognise that this was not personal or familial but related to the collective experience.

In examining our experiences, I saw the fears they aroused. Fears of:

- not having our basic needs sufficiently satisfied to survive
- not being good enough
- having too much, and / or being too good and so attracting jealousy and attack
- having our inner self betrayed and /or abused,
- not being seen or heard – "Am I real? Do I exist?"
- not being liked and rejected
- intimacy and closeness – of others getting close to us and discovering that we are not very good and rejecting us
- having no support and not being able to manage
- asking for support and fulfilling the stereotype of being inferior, not up to it or able to 'hack it'
- taking risks, failing and proving ourselves as not able and so worthless
- not taking risks, stagnating and dying
- feeling and expressing emotions
- being treated as if we are automatons – dehumanised.

I would argue that these contradictory fears emerge from living in a system which consistently sends conflicting and contradictory messages. This fear characterises Fanon's encounter with the system in "Black Skin White Mask". Alice Walker in her story 'The Colour Purple' through the character of Sophia demonstrates how those of us who challenge the system and fail to acquiesce to its demands are broken by the system. In our shared history of slavery, runaway or resistant slaves were publicly humiliated and mutilated to teach us lessons of fear. Many of our survival strategies are the means by which our mothers, and significant others in our lives, in their concern for our survival taught us the art of submission. Sometimes through fear-inducing methods we were forced to learn that it was dangerous to be courageous, to act powerfully, to trust others and to honestly speak our truths. As I worked in the different cycles of this research, and particularly as I dialogued with the women in the Collaborative Inquiry, it became apparent that within our present day survival strategies are these old well learnt lessons.

- **Detachment and alienation of the self**

Having inquired into my own life and worked closely with the various women in the different cycles of the research, I generated a long list of survival strategies. However

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looking at them very closely, considering how they worked and why they were used I realised that they were either about teaching us fear or they were a form of alienation. Although in this chapter I have chosen to address the issue of 'masking' separately, I also view it to be a form of alienation. However it is a very important strategy that warrants its own space. Under the heading of alienation sits two main sets of strategies – some designed to distance us from the system, and others aimed at creating distance between others, and ourselves.

- ***Withdrawal from others***

These are frequently used responses to the complex and challenging situations we face. I have chosen to put these issues together as though separate but they are closely intertwined.

***Withdrawal*** is both a physical and psychological response to highly complex and dangerous situations in which we can see no ways of winning through. As adults we had a variety of sophisticated ways for doing what my five-year-old daughter does to protect herself from losing a game. She hates losing so she keeps close watch on the game and as soon as she begins to believe that she will not win she disrupts it or decides that she does not want to play any more. It is a response to situations that feel out of our control and where we feel ourselves unable to make an impact on them. To protect ourselves we withdraw.

In the course of this study these responses appeared in many forms. They were also critical challenges to the success of the study. In Section 2, I explained that I saw participation as an assurance of the quality of the work and also as important to the challenging of the oppressive system. However this study was being undertaken by a group of people who had learnt that participation was dangerous and were skilled in processes of alienation. Throughout this study and in all cycles of the research the gaining of participation challenged me. In the pieces of writing presented in chapters 7 and 9 evidence of these strategies at play in the research process and of my/our engagement with them can be seen.

- ***Alienation from the system: Separation of the public and private self*** is also a form of withdrawal, but it is a strategy that might also be easily put under the umbrella of masking. It is a way in which we are able to psychologically detach while appearing to be engaged. It is extremely useful in a setting where we have learnt that the environment is highly dangerous and that we should trust very few people, yet access to the things needed for our survival can only be gained through relationship with the powerful other – whom we should not trust. In this strategy we develop skills at keeping our private self extremely private, allowing very few people access to her.

***Withdrawal*** - There were many instances of Black women choosing to physically or psychologically 'leave' organisations, because it became too stressful for them to stay.

- **Masking - The Strong Black woman**

Link to:

[http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc\\_theses\\_links/c\\_douglas.html](http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/c_douglas.html)

We wear the mask  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes  
This debt we pay to human guile,  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties,  
And why should the world be otherwise  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

(Paul Laurence Dunbar)

Masking is a well-developed art form in our cultures. Growing up in the Caribbean I was able to understand it as a process by which the individual was able to be present but remain unseen. As a child I found Carnival both exciting, and terrifying. I was terrified by the invisibility of the person and it is precisely for this reason that we use these psychological masks. In a setting where we have learnt that it is unsafe to be present /visible the mask becomes invaluable. As I worked with others, and myself, I discovered that we had a wide variety of ways by which we protected ourselves from the eyes of, and from contact with, others. We learn to:

- **Numb ourselves** – Our masks function as a type of armour allowing us to function in hostile and abusive situations without being overwhelmed by pain.
- **Not to show certain emotions** – emotions that challenge the oppressor become taboo so we learn not to express anger directly, to give the impression of acquiescence.
- **Not to show vulnerability** – crying, asking for help and all forms of expressions that may indicate weakness are avoided.
- **Be perfect** – We set high standards and only permit the attainment of the highest. We do not allow the making of mistakes.

For the Black woman the image of the ‘strong Black woman’ becomes the perfect mask. The only problem is that if the mask is worn for long enough after a while we start to believe that it is real. It is a problem similar to that for the actress in a ‘soap’. After a while the role takes on a life of its own and it becomes hard for distinctions to be made between the role and the actress. The strong Black woman who survives against all odds, starves herself to feed her children, ploughs the fields while pregnant and stops temporarily to give birth, straps her baby to her back and returns to the fields was a ‘creation’ in response to extremely adverse situations. But after centuries of playing the role we seemed to have forgotten that we are not the role.

## Closing Remarks

Link to:

[http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc\\_theses\\_links/c\\_douglas.html](http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/c_douglas.html)

In this Chapter I have explored links between the individual incidents of discrimination experienced by Black women in everyday life, and the nature of the environment, in which we live and work. I have then suggested that our survival strategies have been developed in response to those contexts. They have been created because it was unsafe for us to be our naturally responsive open selves. However, our dilemma is that in trying to save ourselves we lose contact with ourselves. Therefore the primary task of any recovery programme is finding, and re-establishing contact with, the self.

Link to:

[http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc\\_theses\\_links/c\\_douglas.html](http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/c_douglas.html)