CHAPTER FIVE

An Exploration of Guilt and Shame in Individual and Societal Contexts

The sooner we admit our crimes to others,
To other peoples, creeds, genders, species,
The better and lighter the human
Future will be.
The more we deny, the greater will be the horrors
And vengeances of time
That wait silently in the wings
Of the bloody drama of our future
From *Mental Fight* by Ben Okri

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, which concern my inquiry into my own experience of being white and 'western' within a racial environment, I became increasingly aware of feeling guilty and ashamed. This was so striking to me that I decided to look into this in more detail. I wondered about the effect that these feelings have on me, how far they may be productive or useful as feelings and whether they are commonplace among white people like myself in relation to racism. It occurred to me that they could be useful feelings in understanding my position as a white person or could be irrelevant and indications of an obsession with my own feelings. It led to the question: Can guilt and shame be useful in drawing attention to the privilege of whiteness?

I decided that, if I was to engage with this question, I must first understand the nature of guilt and shame in any context and their foundation for individuals and society. In this chapter I therefore introduce the area of guilt and shame in relation to racism, briefly explore the place that shame and

guilt have in personal psychology, particular how they affect our sense of self, as well as in society, and what generative functions they may serve in our exploration of racism. I then go on to think in more detail about how guilt and shame's place within individuals and in society is relevant to shame and guilt in relation to being white, particularly the function that guilt and shame play as a response to white supremacy and racism.

My questions as I started this inquiry therefore were:

- What role do guilt and shame play in my life and those of other people?
- Can guilt and shame be generative – in other words can they further my learning about myself and lead to more creative and fulfilling lives and relationships?
- Can the guilt and shame that I feel about racism be generative?
- Can the ways that other people feel guilt and shame (or not) about racism enlighten me about the place that shame and guilt about racism plays in my own life?
- Can writers in the fields of psychotherapy and sociology help to enlighten me about how I might use shame and guilt about racism positively or negatively in my life?

Before describing and exploring the inquiry that attempts to engage with these questions, I will follow the path I took that led me to inquire into this in more depth. I was aware that in my earlier explorations into racism in psychotherapy, I rushed to show how I had learnt the lessons of racism before fully owning my guilty feelings. I suspected that white people, including myself, tend to project unwanted destructive and inadequate parts of themselves on to black people. Altman explores this by considering how white people avoid a sense of guilt:

> '….on one hand the defensive need to deny that certain unacceptable psychic characteristics are indeed part of me, as I have just described. On the other

> hand is the need to ward off guilt: the pain of knowing that damage has been done to human beings like myself, by me, or in my name, or with my collusion, or passive consent. Avoidance of guilt is a powerful force motivating continual reinforcement of racist attitudes, for to the extent that we experience black people as 'me', as people with feelings just like mine, realizing the suffering to which they have been subjugated could generate an intolerable level of pain.' (Altman 2003:97)

In struggling with similar feelings of guilt whilst on the equal opportunities committee of my professional body, I wrote a letter to its journal in which I said:

> 'I also have an emotional response which is very familiar to me in working in this field. It is one of pain and shame and guilt. The feeling is very special to 'getting it wrong' in the area of 'equal opportunities'. My responses include wanting to protect myself, to hide, to defend myself, to punish myself. Then I tell myself that all this is unnecessary and that debate and dialogue are healthy and lead to a deepening understanding. I make a statement like the one above. Then I breathe a sigh of relief. I am not a bad person after all (I hope).'
>
> *May 1999*

I know from speaking to people that I am close to, including colleagues in the white co-operative inquiry group, that others tend to have similar feelings. Maybe it makes sense of the painful interactions endemic in this area. I say this in the hope that an open acknowledgement of this state of affairs may help us to move forward with the important task of working across difference in the field of psychotherapy.

I also wrote an example of this 'getting it wrong' in a piece of writing called *Englishness* that I wrote in preparation for my PhD transfer paper when exploring an incident on a training course:

'I noticed that all the energy in the group was between [a white group member] and the black women in the group. Picking up on this I asked what other 'English' people in the group felt. This laid bare my own assumptions and prejudices. Of course not all the white people were English and two of the black people were! I would like to explore the complexity of my feelings and responses here. They go something like this:

Searching for excuses: 'Of course I know this, it was a mere slip of the tongue, it was because I am writing about Englishness at home. I don't normally make such a crass error.'
Feeling ashamed: 'Shit! How could I expose myself like this? My credibility has flown out of the window.'
Fear: 'I will now be attacked and demolished.'
Angry and defensive: 'For God's sake it isn't a hanging matter. Most of the white people are English, they would just rather pretend they were not in this company and the black people's parents were not English.'
Interest. I am interested in my response and want to understand it.

My first response is to hide and lick my wounds as I fear digging myself further into a pit. However I am just able to recognise that these are familiar feelings and have the thought that others might have this painful mix of responses. I point out the complexity of my own feelings in the hope that at least what has happened can give some permission for us all to explore this when we are caught in these moments of 'getting it wrong' without just flying to defensive positions or going into hiding.'

November 2000

This piece of writing shows how I used diaries to help me to reflect systematically on my experience in order to understand it more clearly. My PhD supervision group at the time challenged me to focus more on myself and my own whiteness and in response I wrote:

'I think that in order to do this work I need to be able to stay with the complexity

of the issues involved. Some of these come from living with the political and societal realities that affect our psychological and interpersonal experience:

- Everyone who is English has to live in some way with the reality of their history – that their country dominated the world in a way that was very damaging to many nations while unquestioningly imagining that they were doing everyone a favour. Much of England's wealth is still based on exploitation of the wealth of other nations and peoples – including my own.
- That as first world countries go, England is not particularly powerful or influential.
- That England is still in a powerful position in relation to much of the rest of the world as a 'first world' power and that in colluding with multinational companies is still exploitative. (There may be other ways in which it is exploitative as well).
- That England still seeks to protect its interests by excluding those in need who apply for asylum.'

November 2000

In remembering past work I am very aware of how much easier it is to jump straight into the active mode of righting wrongs whilst missing out the stage of owning to guilt which is far from comfortable. It is also easier to try to make an identification with black people by stressing areas in which I have been on the receiving end of prejudice. In doing so I am possibly perpetuating a subject/object split by 'joining the other side' and seeing myself as 'oppressed' rather than allowing myself to feel the guilt of the oppressor.

The experience of guilt and shame

I will now turn my attention to exploring ways in which guilt and shame are used more generally by individuals and in society in order to help me look at how this might apply to white people in relation to racism. Although this became an important part of my research I describe this briefly here as this exploration is not the main focus of this inquiry.

My own thoughts led me to believe that there are occasions when it is important to own guilt but I came across many who thought that shame and guilt were useless emotions and burdensome for those we feel guilty towards. In the light of this thought I decided to undertake an inquiry into the phenomena of guilt and shame to begin from first principles rather than start with ideas that have been written in the literature. Having gained that perspective I look at what psychotherapy as well as sociological theorists have to say about shame and guilt.

An Inquiry into the phenomenology of shame and guilt

In first approaching this subject I wanted to know more about the *felt* experience of guilt and shame in order to hear about others' experience from an embodied rather than a cognitive place. I thought that the more the responses were grounded in actual felt experience, the more I would learn about how people really experienced guilt and shame rather than how they understand them as intellectual concepts. I therefore emailed 65 people with a questionnaire.

I did not do so to 'prove' anything but to provide a snapshot of the felt experience of guilt and shame. Any of these individuals may have answered differently on a different day and if they had had a conversation with each other they may have agreed on reflection with other people and then have added to what they had said or even altered or refined it. They could have strongly disagreed with others and that may have led to them altering, adding to or confirming their views. Another day different things may have occurred to them. If several say the same thing that is interesting in itself but does not give it more validity. One view that is quite different from all the others may throw an interesting light on the subject.

Nevertheless I have found this exercise to be valuable as it has given me some impressions of the kinds of experiences and ideas that others have about shame and guilt. These have helped to spark off, confirm and challenge my own ideas. I was not interested, therefore, in a statistically valid outcome, but to engage friends and colleagues in helping me think about this. I chose people from my email list with whom I had had similar sorts of conversations and were used to inquiring in a thoughtful way. Of the 65 I had 16 responses (about a quarter). The questionnaire I sent was as follows:

A Little Inquiry into the Phenomenology of Shame and Guilt

I am interested in finding out about people's experience of feelings of shame and guilt. If you are interested I would be very grateful if you could give some thought to the following:

1. If you think of something that makes you feel ashamed
where do you experience this in your body?
How would you describe the feeling?
Does the feeling suggest any images, shapes, sounds, tastes etc to you?

2. If you think of something that makes you feel guilty
where do you experience this in your body?
How would you describe the feeling
Does the feeling suggest any images, shapes, sounds, tastes etc to you?

3. Could you finish these sentences (taking your first thought but allow yourself more than one answer if you wish):
When I feel ashamed I want to……
When I feel guilty I want to……..
If I never felt ashamed I would be…….
If I never felt guilty I would be……
What kinds of things make you feel ashamed?

4. What kinds of things make you feel guilty?

5. Do you have any other comments about being ashamed or guilty?

November 2002

The data of my findings are included in appendix 6.

Having received replies from about one third of the people I contacted, I immersed myself in the answers so that I received a sense of the kinds of images, feelings and sensations that my respondents had given me. My first impression was that my respondents found the experience of both extremely painful, with shame possibly being the more painful of the two.

Later I sorted the replies into those that were similar to each other. I found that in answers to where shame and guilt are experienced in the body, there is some similarity between the two although guilt was reported to be experienced in the heart and chest and shame in the face, neck and chest. The *descriptions* of the two feelings, as opposed to the place they are experienced in the body, tended to be more dissimilar although there this was some similarity in feel.

My question about what made people feel guilty and ashamed revealed that my respondents felt ashamed of what was perceived as a fault in themselves and guilty about hurting others though they might have felt ashamed because they judge themselves to be guilty. This leads me to tentatively wonder if guilt is in fact a cognitive idea. The *feeling* is of shame *because* of the guilt – albeit with a certain tint – as this time shame arises from guilt rather than

other reasons for feeling shame, such as being over exposed. We could call it 'guilt-shame' as opposed to 'exposure-shame'. If this were the case, guilt would be simply a matter of doing something that transgressed an ethical, social or legal code. We may accuse ourselves or be accused by others of this transgression. In either case there may or may not be agreement between ourselves and others as to whether or not we are in fact guilty. If we *do* think that we are guilty then we feel ashamed. If we do not think we are guilty then we do not feel ashamed.

I asked my respondents what it would be like never to feel ashamed. The answers ranged from feeling that it would be inhuman never to feel ashamed and feeling that it would be liberating. About never feeling guilty at all, there was a divide between those who feel they would be immoral and those who would feel lighter and happier. Taking both shame and guilt together the split goes something like this: if I never felt guilty or ashamed I would be 1, inhuman and immoral or be 2, liberated, light and happy.

I have put some analysis of my findings from this questionnaire in Appendix 8. It will inform my understanding of guilt and shame in my further inquiry into the relevance that guilt has to people's response to being white.

Considerations arising from this questionnaire regarding the 'white' inquiry
The questionnaire brought to light two ideas in particular which were interesting in my wider inquiry into being white.

1. That guilt may in fact be guilt-shame – shame about being, or thinking oneself to be guilty, rather than shame which exposes our supposed inadequacies. This is relevant to my inquiry because in regard to being white, there is nothing *intrinsically* wrong with the colour of anyone's skin but we may feel guilt-shame about how

white people do or have treated black people (more about this below).

2. That there is a dilemma between the importance of acknowledging guilt on the one hand and becoming weighed down by unnecessary guilt which can lead to injuries to our sense of self and/or burden the people about whom one feels guilty. All of this is taken further below.

Some Ideas about shame and guilt from psychotherapy theorising

In western psychotherapy, concepts of shame were not much explored until relatively recently, although notions of guilt were central in classical psychoanalysis. Freud stressed its role in the resolution of the oedipal conflict (Freud 1924). Klein (1946:176) understood babies as coming into this world full of destructive fantasies that could only be tolerated by splitting the mother into a good one and a bad one. Becoming mature enough to understand that their attacks on the bad mother also hurt the good as they are one and the same, led to what she called the 'depressive position' where the child feels guilt and the need to repair the damage that had been done to the mother. This same 'position' was called the 'stage of concern' by Winnicott (1988:73) who took a more benign position about the emotional experiences of babies.

In the 1960s, guilt, which requires the internalization of an apparatus of self-repression, seemed to play a less important part in western society generally as can be seen in child care practices which stressed the original innocence of children. Individuals tended to become more flexible and adaptable to rapidly changing encounters and social circumstances. The mores of western society were changing in many fields. It was becoming more secular and child care practices were now being informed by psychotherapists like Winnicott (1964) and Bowlby (1953) who tended to be more child-centred. They promoted the approach of supporting the growing

child's sense of him/herself as loved and welcomed. In that context the harm that shaming children does to their sense of self became more evident and the use of shaming mechanisms in socialisation processes became questioned. A more individualistic society requires flexible, self-supporting individuals with a positive sense of self enabling them, as individuals, to respond and adapt to changing circumstances without relying on group support.

In the light of this it is unsurprising that none of the theorists I have come across have much to say about shame and even less about a positive value of shame as a self-regulating mechanism. There are two exceptions to this that I will come to later. Most theorists understand shame to be connected to a sense of self, as in feeling ashamed *of oneself,* thus seeing shame as a feeling with no external referent. Shame is experienced as a narcissistic injury so that the sense of oneself as good disappears as is acknowledged by some of the respondents to the questionnaire. Guilt, however, is felt in relation to someone else. Guilt is about transgressions, and shame is about shortcomings. This is also borne out by my respondents' answers to the questionnaire. However, as I pointed out above, one can lead to the other, as in guilt-shame, as we can feel ashamed because we are, or think ourselves to be, guilty. Psychotherapy theorists tend to concentrate on the roots of shame and guilt in childhood where the pointing out of shortcomings and transgressions are probably most painfully felt and are often used by adults to control children. A child's sense of shame frequently arises from a parental failure to show the child that s/he is loved unconditionally. Kohut writes about the mirroring function of parents for whom the child is a 'gleam in the eye' (Kohut 1984:192 - 193). The child looks into the eyes of the parent or carer and knows that s/he is beautiful and loved. If s/he looks and sees that s/he is disregarded, s/he feels ashamed.

Mollon (1993:52) says that shame 'seems to be associated with a sudden, disruptive awareness of separateness, of *self and other'* (italics in original). In his view, shame is associated with a devastating loss of a cohesive sense of self which is slowly emerging in the child and leads either to a shame-prone adult or one who defensively becomes shame-less. Mollon (1993:44) mentions two defences against shame – the avoiding of exposure to risks so as not to be shamed, and what he calls 'countershame' or what Lewis (1971) calls 'bypassed shame' where feelings of shame are cut off and nothing is felt at all. This is borne out in the responses to my questionnaire by the prevalence of the desire to hide in the face of shame. No doubt white people hide in the face of shame too, as we will see below.

Stolorow and Atwood (1992), from the Intersubjective School (see chapter 6), say little about shame in so many words. Their theories develop further the need to support the growing sense of self of the child through a process of mirroring and correct affect attunement so that the child is received and validated. Without much needed mirroring they say that the child

> 'may 'conclude' that his own unmet needs and emotional pain are expressions of disgusting and shameful defects in the self and thus must be banished from conscious experiencing (Stolorow and Atwood 1992:55).'

Jacobs, a Gestalt therapist who also trained with the Intersubjectivisists (Stolorow et al, and see chapter 3), writes much more directly about shame (Jacobs 1996). She points to the way that feelings of shame may lead people to enter therapy and this is compounded by feeling ashamed of their very need for this. She says that shame is a 'gatekeeper' and interferes with our ability to feel our feelings and thus our capacity for contacting and self-regulation. She suggests that successful therapy is contingent upon the therapist's capacity to tolerate a risk of shameful exposure and shows resilience in the face of shame (1996:1). She points out that it often feels

shaming to the client that the therapist is more important to the client than visa versa but that this can be resolved more easily if a person's sense of self is not 'coloured by shame'. For those whose self image is 'laced with shame' this differential can be exquisitely painful (Jacobs 1996:2). When a therapist is white and a client is black, feelings of shame may well be very complex and often remain unexplored, with both therapist and client experiencing shame in different ways. She stresses that if the therapist can show real sensitivity to the client's sense of shame and resolve the disruption that takes place when there is shame in the dialogue between them, then a truly transformative process has occurred.

In my own work with psychotherapy clients I have been aware of the need to walk very carefully with the fragile sense of self of some of my clients. During the therapy some of them have come to an understanding that they are good enough as human beings to be loved and I have felt that they have come to accept my care of them. Others have come with genuinely harmful things they have done to others and I have had to struggle with my own sense of judgement about that. Together we have managed to work back to the fragile and tenuous sense of self that can be loved and accepted. One asylum seeker client had lied to me about the basic story of her life and, although her actual experiences made this very understandable, facing up to telling me that she had lied was so shameful that she could not bear to come again in spite of my encouragement. I now wonder whether my very understanding of her need to lie was in itself shaming. No doubt my own sense of shame about my relative good fortune made the interaction between us hard to reflect on adequately.

Jacobs also says that shame can be positive in that, because we as human beings feel shame, we are able to empathise with others' sense of shame. She acknowledges that it is human to experience shame and, in our

humanity, we know others' shame and can develop a sensitivity to know how we might avoid shaming them.

The experience of guilt and shame in white people about racism

With the background of these thoughts about guilt and shame I now turn my attention to the experience of shame and guilt in white people. As described in chapter 3, part of this inquiry involved a co-operative inquiry for white therapists in which we explored how we felt about our racial identity as 'whites'. This emerged as a theme, particularly but not solely for me. Views about guilt in this context held by members of the group ranged from 'guilt is 'useless' in that it is a burden to others who are expected to absolve us', to 'I often feel wracked by guilt which is probably neurotic' to 'as white people we ought to feel guilty'. Some of these themes I explore below as well as further material that arose in the group.

While the group was current I immersed myself in an exploration of the part that guilt and shame play as a response to both personal and institutional, endemic racism. In order to further my inquiry into guilt and shame in this context I discussed it in the group, devised and sent out another questionnaire and explored various theorists and papers (Dyer 1997; Brandyberry 1999; Dalal 2002) which caste some light on this subject. I start here with the questionnaire.

A questionnaire regarding shame and guilt experienced by white people in regard to racism

Having had many interesting responses from my questionnaire on guilt and shame *per se,* and feeling that responses in the White Co-operative Inquiry Group were throwing up further questions, particularly about the usefulness or not of guilt and shame in white people, I decided to ask the same group of 65 people (as those approached to answer my last questionnaire) for responses regarding racism.

With the same caution as to its validity that I had with the first one, I devised a questionnaire as follows:

Inquiry into Guilt and Shame felt in Regard to Racism

1. Did you fill in the questionnaire A little Inquiry into Guilt and Shame sent to you in November? Yes/No
2. Do you consider yourself to have, consciously or unconsciously, racist attitudes or beliefs?
3. To what extent do you feel ashamed or guilty about having racist attitudes? (Mark yourself from 1 – 5 on a scale which has 1 as very guilty and 5 as not guilty at all. If you feel that shame and guilt have different marks then give yourself a mark for each making clear which is which).
4. Do you consider yourself to be a beneficiary of endemic racism in society?
5. To what extent do you feel guilty or ashamed about this? (mark yourself from on a scale from 1 – 5, see question 3).
6. If you do feel any shame or guilt do you think these form any purpose, useful or not?
7. To what extent do you feel shame or guilt about racist manifestations that your own country perpetrated in the past such as the colonialisation of other countries? (mark yourself from on a scale from 1 – 5, see question 3).
8. Would you like to expand on any of your answers or do you have any other comments that you would like to add? *Judy Ryde January 2002*

There were 14 respondents to this questionnaire, 9 of whom also answered the first one (Question 1)

All the answers to the questions can be found in appendix 7. I have considered these answers below and will describe how I followed up some responses with in-depth interviews which in turn opened up further reflection. As will be seen, reflecting on my own responses to their answers

helped to open up interesting avenues for further inquiry. Here follow the ways in which I have pursued the question further.

Racist attitudes and beliefs

To the question: *'Do you consider yourself to have, consciously or unconsciously, racist attitudes or beliefs?'* 12 answered 'yes' and 2 answered 'no. One of these was a white person who did not regard herself as a racist and therefore did not answer subsequent questions. The other one was black. This has brought up an interesting issue for me. He was the only black person I asked to engage with this inquiry and I had clearly not thought about the questionnaire from this point of view. It reveals, however, my automatic white consciousness by assuming that all those that I did contact were white. This respondent answered my previous questionnaire without his being black emerging as an issue. I find his answers are nevertheless an interesting counterpoint to the others.

One respondent, called Alice, (not a therapist) had a particularly interesting response to my second question about whether she had racist attitudes or beliefs:

> 'Yes, though I wish I didn't. But I do feel nervous of black people, without any good reason. Also, I couldn't really fancy a Negro, so there is some fundamental sense of difference there. On the other hand, I do have one or two Negro friends, and once I get to know them my nervousness disappears. My nervousness is fundamentally of <u>all</u> strangers, and I think is accentuated by the enhanced "strangeness" of Negro appearance and body language. This is much more true of black people than of Asians, and definitely comes from some unconscious promptings.'

My reflections at the time on this answer to the questionnaire were as follows:

'It is interesting that she uses the 'politically incorrect' term 'Negro'. My sense is that this does not in her case show disrespect to black people. All her responses here and in the rest of the questionnaire are thoughtful, own her own racism and show that she knows that her feelings about black people reveal herself rather than say anything about black people. Her response here shows that she considers the 'strangeness', maybe the not-like-herness, of black people to be at the root of her fear.' *Note made in August 2003*

This reflection led to further action as I decided to interview her to push forward my inquiry further. Here is an extract from that taped conversation:

J. The other thing I wanted to talk to you about was the use of the word 'Negro' which you have used just now and you used in your….which you…..because that is often thought of as politically incorrect as a word to use and I wondered if you used it as a…..

A. [interrupting] I'm using it in a very specific biological sense as a racial type. The Negro races who…….I mean not all black people are Negroes.

J. Yes, I think these days there is a question about whether we can make that kind of distinction.

A. Probably, yes, but people with certain racial characteristics which…….

J These days the usual word is African. Do you mean African with a broad nose and woolly hair?

9th January 2004

I cringe at myself for saying that and then wonder why. Is a sense of shame alerting me to something amiss? On reflection maybe it is because it betrays my underlying assumption that a thin nose and straight hair is the norm or even that it is more beautiful. The nervousness about talking about this issue is evident in the hesitation with which we speak of it. The clarity that I am beginning to develop, and which now normally alerts me to a western-centred way of thinking, had deserted me. The conversation continues:

A. Of course not all Africans are of that type. Most North Africans are not for example. So that's really an unclear word but yes if we are talking about sort of Africans with curly hair and large lips……

J. [interrupting] I think the reason why these words have that kind of *frisson* to them is that they are often used as pejorative but also the whole thing about race as a concept is questioned as well – that there is any significant difference between them other than genetic variations that come out…..

A. That's right. And I wouldn't question the equality of that but we have to acknowledge that people do have different genetic structures.

J. But of course when they start intermarrying with other people it starts dissolving

What I wonder as I write this is why it is necessary to make these distinctions at all but then remember that we are talking about what frightens Alice. She perceives people she calls 'Negroes' to be the most different and therefore the most fear provoking. She knows this is not a rational feeling. She is brave to talk about these feelings which I imagine are often too shameful to be admitted. A little later in the conversation I say:

J. Just to say then……in using the word Negro you are saying that they are the people who look the 'most different to me' on the face of it,

A. On the face of it yeah.

J. And therefore of the ones that….[pause]

A. It is superficial…..[pause]

J. Yes but it has an effect that is based on something unconscious in you – that fear of strangers so that is what you are talking about really. One of the questions is 'are you afraid of other sorts of differences' but you are saying 'that is the most different' and therefore the most fearful?

A. I think I am yes.

It does seem then that it was Alice's sense of guilt that alerted her to an understanding that her fear of black people was irrational. She says she

does 'work well with black people' when she gets to know them and manages to get over her fear through gaining familiarity. At one point I asked her about guilt:

> A. Well very probably I felt that this should not be. I had been brought up to believe that there was absolutely nothing wrong with, for example, mixed marriages if the 2 people were in love with each other and therefore I suppose, yes, there was some sort of educational process here then that meant that when I actually tried to put it into practice – well just saying yes when someone asked me out instead of no. Theoretically there should not have been a problem. In practice there was, so that I felt in some way I had not lived up to what I believed in.

In other words Alice felt that her espoused values and those she lived by were not congruent with each other. Alice was struggling with difficult feelings and was prepared to share these with me however difficult this process was.

I continued to wonder about her use of the word Negro, which after her explanation still did not seem congruent. I decided to inquire further by asking Rotimi, the black respondent to the questionnaire, what *he* thought of the word.

For him this word evoked a time when 'Negroes' were thought to be like animals. In answer to my query he said:

> 'That is really interesting because it reminds me of the pseudo-scientific theories about Africans being like animals. They were so unlike us that they must be different and the word 'negro' was used to describe people in that way. Language is very important because language is power. Because negro was used then and is still used now people are still in that way of thinking.'
>
> *February 2004*

Rotimi thought that by facing up to the way this idea is evoked it might help to dissolve the fear:

> If people used the name of countries where these people come from I think she would start thinking differently about them. She would know that Africans have a history.
> J. It might mean that she feels less fear?
> R. Yes very much so – that is what these scientific theories are about - Africans are like animals and we should be afraid of them.

He also pointed out that black people hadn't chosen the way they are described and this was compounded by the colour black that has negative associations of darkness and evil:

> 'Since slavery people of African descent have not been called something they have determined themselves: slaves, niggers, then from niggers to negros to coloured and coloured to African American and in this country, coloured, black British, Afro/Caribbean. All these names that have not been determined by Africans themselves. Even the word 'black' I have problems with. Black is always associated with the negative whether you like it or not.'
>
> *February 2004*

No doubt at one level Alice was far from thinking that Africans were like animals. She was aware that her fear was irrational but maybe Rotimi touched on something important about certain words evoking past fears and keeping them alive, and was imposed by others in order to facilitate imperialist domination of indigenous peoples. There is a conflict between Alice's insistence that the word 'negro' is merely a straight forward description and Rotimi's rejection of the word as it has often been used pejoratively and was not chosen by African people themselves. It may be a good example of the kind of difficulty that can arise when considering

politically correct language that I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. Although Alice may be consciously unaware of the complex dynamics behind the use of this word, it does carry these resonances whether she intends them or not. I draw from this that it is important to take into account, not only what we think we *intend* by our communication, but the meaning it may hold for others.

Shame and guilt about racist attitudes

The third question was: *'To what extent do you feel ashamed or guilty about having racist attitudes? (mark yourself from 1 – 5 on a scale which has 1 as very guilty and 5 as not guilty at all. If you feel that shame and guilt have different marks then give yourself a mark for each making clear which is which).'* [1]

Most scored guilt and shame with the same mark but three didn't. Two felt much more ashamed than guilty and one felt more guilty than ashamed. Generally the respondents felt more guilty than ashamed with one person putting 4 and another 5 (towards the not ashamed end) under shame. There were some interesting comments including:

> 'I feel guilty about my nervousness of black people, knowing that it is totally unreasonable, but on the other hand I do not consciously espouse common myths about them, e.g. that they have lower IQs or are more inclined to crime. That is just nonsense.'

[1] I asked the question in this form so that it would be easy for people to give a sense of the extent of their feelings. I thought that busy people may be able to indicate *how much* they felt using this scale. This contrasted with asking them to write in more detail or give a yes or no answer. I also welcomed and encouraged further writing by asking for this in question 8. Although this gives the questionnaire a somewhat traditionally positivistic 'feel' as though I want to find statistics on this subject, this is not my intention. As I have said above I am interested to have my own feeling and views challenged and/or confirmed and see the questionnaire as part of a dialogue with the people I have questioned. I have sent my writing back to those who responded and asked them for further thoughts.

And

> 'I find this a very difficult differentiation. I think I feel more ashamed about doing as little as I do to address the issue e.g. I would not challenge every single racist attitude I came across in another person and within myself. I only realize this when I'm asked to fill in this sort of questionnaire. So I would put ashamed: 1. Guilt – this is difficult for a different reason – I was born White and British so that gives me a cultural inheritance that I would sometimes like to disavow but can't. I feel guilty that I don't do more even when this isn't observed by anyone else, at about a level of 3.'

The first response brings out how we may know something intellectually but have a different emotional reaction. In the second response I wonder about the way that guilt can drive us to have unreasonable expectations of ourselves such as challenging every racist remark we hear. The complex feelings about wanting to disavow a cultural inheritance is also painfully clear here, and one I can identify with.

Being a beneficiary of endemic racisim

Question 4 was '*Do you consider yourself to be a beneficiary of endemic racism in society?'* Of the thirteen respondents one said that she was not a beneficiary without elaborating on this. All the rest felt that they are such beneficiaries including the black person who interestingly said:

> Yes – only in the sense that I have been 'allowed to advance' as a member of the minority black middle classes.

This brings up an interesting class issue which is entangled with that of race. I ask myself whether he feels that if he behaves like white people and in a 'good middle class way' he will be 'allowed to advance'.

I decided to interview this respondent, Rotimi, and this verbatim report comes from the same interview that I reported above. He felt that there were both class and race issues mingled here:

> R. As far as race is concerned I often think about the issue of tokenism where by the 'powers that be' want to see black people in the right places – so as to fulfill racial quotas etc.
> J. Then they can't be accused of racism?
> R. Yes exactly. [He goes on to describe what happens in institutional racism and the way he feels used.]
> J. That must feel pretty awful.
> R. Yes, but at the same time someone said to me, maybe it was yourself, 'think of yourself as a pioneer.' So yes, whether I like it or not I am a member of the middle classes because I am in a well paid job.
>
> *February 2004*

He was clear that the issues of race and class were intertwined and that, while he can feel guilty about advancing where others cannot, 'stepping on them' to get to where he wants to go, he is also a pioneer who is 'standing on the shoulders' of others, such as his parents, who have paved the way for him.

Another of the respondents thought that, although she benefited by endemic racism, she was also on the receiving end:

> 'Yes and no, as a white person yes, as a Jewish person I suffer from endemic racism.'

Two others further illuminated areas in which endemic racism is shown up:

> 'I think we all are indirectly – many black and Asian people do the grotty jobs that we don't want. A lot of that starts with them not getting enough

encouragement at school, and not having enough successful role models. (My cousin teaches in a largely Asian school in Bradford, and despairs of persuading her pupils that there are higher aspirations than taxi driving.)' [respondent's brackets]

And

'Yes as I am part of the white majority I know that I must have / will have benefited in a wide variety of areas….employment, education etc'

Guilt and shame in endemic racism

Question 5 is: *To what extent do you feel guilty or ashamed about this [endemic racism]? (mark yourself from on a scale from 1 – 5, see question 3).*

Although the great majority felt guilty to some extent, the weight of the answers had slipped further towards the 'not guilty' end though there were hints of awareness in their comments that maybe they should feel more guilty than they do. Here are some comments which reflect this:

'Not very guilty or ashamed – except perhaps of not doing enough to change things, but I am not really in a position to. Classic get-out, of course. '

'Actually more angry than guilty or ashamed and wanting to blame my parents for not giving me a better attitude.'

'Regarding being a beneficiary, 3 (which I immediately feel guilty about writing; I think it is easier to be out of touch about noticing how white people benefit.)'

It is interesting that there seem to be two levels of responses which takes the reflection into a 'double loop' (see chapter 2). There is a response to the

question and then a reflection on that response – ‘I don’t feel very guilty……maybe I should feel guilty about not feeling guilty’.

Purpose of guilt and shame

Question 6 asks: *If you do feel any shame or guilt do you think these form any purpose, useful or not?*

Of the thirteen who replied one had a quite neutral response in terms of whether or not shame or guilt were potentially useful as follows:

> I feel the shame might come from exposing to myself and you the feeling of racism that I feel I 'shouldn't have'. I guess this might be a primitive response to 'showing', which from a cultural point of view might be viewed as letting the side down and appearing weak in front of the enemy. The guilt might be a result of turning inward a feeling of (not sure what of? anger maybe? possibly hatred) of 'them' being different to me. I think this may also be a primitive response which may be a readiness to engage in combat/defend my family from attack from outsiders/generally be ready to defend.’

Of the others, 8 thought shame and guilt were useful. There were several helpful elaborations on this as follows:

> 'Yes, I think so. I have always thought of both feelings as a wake-up call'

> 'Guilt is useful as it encourages you to do something about it'

> 'Yes, for me they do as they make me question what has given rise to these feelings which in turn makes me question my beliefs, or make them conscious. Sometimes I’m guilty of lazy self-interest and do nothing further; other times I compensate almost in a condescending way by acknowledging a stranger because he/she is different from me in a way I know is often discriminated against…this one I definitely feel ashamed of, as I think it’s stronger and more subtle / insidious than primary racism.'

'Yes, might help me not act like that. It is worse to feel shame but not act on it'

'I think they are essential feelings otherwise how would anything ever change?'

'It serves the purpose of heightening awareness and spurring to rebalancing action….'

'Guilt and shame might give us some idea about how and why we do things and whether we are fundamentally responsible.'

One thought guilt and shame were not useful:

'I think these feelings can have quite unhelpful consequences, such as making me feel angry and defensive.'

and 3 thought that there are useful and not useful aspects:

'Well, they could make me more receptive to social change that improved opportunities. On the other hand, guilt and shame can make one very resentful towards the cause of those feelings, and feed the original antipathy, so I am not sure whether these things cancel each other out.'

'I think both feelings could get in the way of making a relationship in the present, but they are important in staying aware of my potential racism.'

'Could be useful, could be not – depending on whether it translates into action and to what extent it is simply selfblame for being born white. I have experienced both these.'

Shame and guilt relating to national identity

Question 7 asked: *To what extent do you feel shame or guilt about racist manifestations that your own country perpetrated in the past such as the*

colonialisation of other countries? (mark yourself from on a scale from 1 – 5, see question 3).

One did not score herself but made the following comment:

> 'I feel less shame or guilt about this; as given my heritage, England doesn't feel like 'my' country (given that my ancestors weren't British).'

Of the people who scored 5, one was the black respondent. He said:

> 'I don't feel at all responsible as I am a member of a minority group whose country was colonised and still endures neocolonialisation.'

There were some interesting comments from others:

> 'Very ashamed – what the hell did we think we were doing? Lack of respect for indigenous cultures is cringe-making. So probably 1 on that. But I don't feel that much guilt, because it was done by others, who had a different set of values, without my consent (cf. modern Germany and Nazism). Where I do feel guilt is that we do not do enough now to repair the damage we did. We should be making more amends. '

> 'Having recently visited India for the first time I feel strongly about this ; the colonial wealth; the slaughter of thousands in the interest of commerce…..the third world trade issues /sweat shops. The person I was with felt that 'we' had done much to benefit the country ….infrastructure, education etc …some of this also feels insidious as if the end justifies the means…..I also read Arundati Roy for the first time and she verbalized the depth of this kind of damage where a culture does not know itself enough due to suppression / oppression to claim its identity consciously.'

'Shame 1 guilt 1 because the legacy of the past still means that I benefit from colonialisation because of beneficial trade agreements etc I think the past is very much alive in the present.'

It feels to me that some of the most heartfelt responses were in answer to this question. However I wonder if two questions have been confused here. One is ‘Should I feel guilty or ashamed about abuses perpetrated by my ancestors?’ and the other is ‘Do I benefit by the results of these abuses?’ I will come back to this below.

Further comments

Question 8 asked for *further comments*. Six did comment further as follows:

'Guilt carries responsibility to do something about it but not shame as it would imply you want to hide this.'

'I think racism stems from fear, and the more people can be helped to understand others and empathise with them, the less fear and therefore the less racism we will have.'

'As I haven’t aided endemic racism I don’t feel guilty. Feel guilty as a member of society but not personally.'

'I think I hold different qualities of shame or guilt depending on how general or how particular the manifestation of racism is… for example, can feel intense shame over an incident where my action betrays a racist assumption, but less acute guilt over, say, the English colonial exploitation of Ireland/my ancestors in colonial Africa and India.'

'I feel appalled by what western culture has done to other cultures, but I don’t feel it is helpful to judge myself harshly for being born into this culture and being affected by it. There was a time when I did do that, but now I feel that I want to extend compassionate understanding also to myself.'

'I did in the past feel terribly ashamed of Israel's actions towards Palestinians; in fact it came as rather a cathartic revelation when I identified this feeling. I expended much energy campaigning for Palestinian rights, and, clearly, there is a connection to be made here. Now I feel less identified with Israel, and have been able to separate out being Jewish from being a Zionist, and, whilst still having strong opinions about Palestine, am no longer driven in the same way by feelings of shame. And, I think it was more shame than guilt that was the motivator.'

Difficult and uncomfortable feelings about endemic racism are most evident in these further comments. Many people feel that they should not feel responsible for society's wrong-doings but have nagging feelings of shame or guilt nevertheless.

Discussion of questionnaire outcomes with reference to relevant literature and aspects of the group exploration

I am interested to see that, from the comments above, less shame and guilt seems to be felt about endemic racism than personal racism. It is very easy to feel helpless, uninvolved and not responsible for underlying cultural assumptions in our own society. Of course these are very hard to change as an individual but my own sense is that we are all contributors and help to maintain it if we do not try to become conscious of our assumptions and do something about them. The question remains whether or not shame and/or guilt – or guilt-shame - are useful in helping us respond well to this situation.

Altman (2000) suggests that our embeddedness within an institutionally racist society leads inevitably to unconscious racism in a white psychotherapist whilst dualistic thinking is in place and feels that the best we can do is to be reflexive with our clients. My position is that, through being alive to a sense of guilt about racist attitudes, we can tackle our own patterns of dualistic thinking and racist attitudes that result. That way we

can work towards a change in societal epistemology in the way that Bohm suggests (see chapter 2).

In thinking further about whether shame or guilt are useful, I come back to my realisation that in question 7 (regarding the racism perpetrated by our own country in the colonisation of others) that there were 2 different questions and some of my respondents had replied to one and some to the other. One question was: ‘Should I feel guilty or ashamed about abuses perpetrated by my ancestors?’ and the other: ‘Do I benefit by the results of these abuses?’ I think there is an important distinction here. The first question is often, in my experience, one that people object to in its suggestion that they should be held responsible. They ask, 'How could I be responsible for something that was done without my knowledge or consent?' One answer to this is the subject of the second question. We feel guilty because we are still benefiting. Some of these ways I show in chapter 4, including the 46 ways that McIntosh (1988 and appendix 2) found that she benefited by being white. We also benefit in many other ways including by protectionist trade agreements which benefit the west at the expense of the 'developing' world. The racism that is endemic in society is 'fed' by images and assumptions handed down to us by our colonial ancestors. Benjamin Zephaniah reflected on this when he turned down his OBE (Zephaniah 2003, 27th November). He says:

> 'I get angry when I hear that word 'empire'. It reminds me of slavery, it reminds me of thousands of years of brutality, it reminds me of how my foremothers were raped and my forefathers brutalised. It is because of this concept of empire that my British education led me to believe that the history of black people started with slavery and that we were born slaves, and should therefore be grateful that we were given freedom by our caring white masters. It is because of this idea of empire that black people like myself don’t even know our true names or our true historical culture.'

He points out that the British establishment are still living off the spoils of empire and still using black people when it suits their 'image':

> 'I've never heard a holder of the OBE openly criticising the monarchy. They are officially friends, and that's what this cool Britania project is about. It gives OBEs to cool rock stars, successful businesswomen and blacks who would be militant in order to give the impression that it is inclusive.'

So what about acts perpetrated by our ancestors that do not apparently directly benefit us in the present? I concur with some of my co-researchers in feeling guilt or shame can prompt us to take responsibility for the actions of our ancestors and heal the wounds of the past. Wounds from the past are still felt by those who inherited them as can clearly be seen by Bejamin Zephania's comments. The black respondent to my questionnaire likewise expressed the pain of colonialisation and neocolonialisation. ‘Unfinished business' will continue to cause conflict until it is acknowledged and amends are made.

Following the exploration above I have identified several stances my respondents take on racism prompted by feelings of shame and/or guilt:

1. I feel guilt/shame about my own personal racist feelings, responses and actions or inaction.
2. I feel guilt/shame about the way I benefit by racist policies which have been put into effect both currently and in the past
3. I feel guilt/shame about the institutional, endemic racism within society.
4. I feel guilt/shame about the racist actions that have been committed by my forefathers both in this country and in other countries.

My respondents in the questionnaire tended to feel guilty about all four but less acutely about them in descending order.

Although this makes sense to me in that one's own personal responsibility becomes less direct as we move from 1 to 4, I find myself to be more interested in and concerned about the last three. As I understand that the world is relational and that 'watertight' individuals do not exist (see chapter 1), I am becoming more interested in racism as a relational phenomena which comes out more in numbers 2 to 4. (See chapter 7). I therefore want to understand the place that guilt and shame may take within relational/societal setting where there has been some 'wrong-doing'.

Although I had not fully articulated this to myself at the time, this may be behind a dialogue that I had with a member of the White Co-operative Inquiry Group. I was concerned to show that I think that we do have responsibility for racism within society. This group member felt that even if we are responsible for abuses through colonlialisation we should not feel guilty or ashamed as in doing so we made as assumption that this guilt and shame were of ‘some use or interest to non-white people.’ He thought their primary function was to comfort ourselves. He went on to say that he thought that abuses that white people carried out in relation to black people were no different to the abuses that many groups carry out in relation to others such as Nazi over Jew and Protestant over Catholic. He was therefore not clear whether the issue was about whiteness and blackness or just about abuse of power. He therefore saw engaging in ‘generalised shame’ as a defense. He said he felt

> anxiety, disappointment and fear at the human tendency to split and project, but I don’t relate these feelings only to issues of skin colour. I also feel sickness and horror when I think of such atrocities as slave trading, the ghettoising of native Americans by European settlers, apartheid in South Africa, the theft of aboriginal land in Australia, and any other abuses carried out on the basis of skin tone difference. But isn’t skin tone just one of many convenient hooks to hang hatred on in the pursuit of tribal/ethnic/cultural dominance? Why aren’t

> we looking at all of these instead of using just skin colour as the demarcation line in our discussion? ‘
>
> *December 2002*

At the time my reply on the email included the following:

> I would just like to say that I have never thought that being 'white' as a 'racial' identity has any thing really to do with skin colour any more than 'black' has. They are just signifiers[2].

I explained that the fact that these are signifiers is important as we are able to ‘hook’ our prejudice on to them and I felt it was appropriate to do so. I went on to say that I thought that

> both feelings [of guilt and shame] might alert us to something being amiss. If we rush to make ourselves feel better by asking someone to 'absolve' us we are just using them. It is interesting in my questionnaire how often people said they immediately want to feel better if they feel guilty. (Many also said that if they never felt guilty they would be inhuman or psychopathic.) I think there is a mature response to guilt and an immature one. The thing I think is missing from what you said is that we do live by the benefits of being 'white' and on the whole don't do a lot about it.
>
> *December 2002*

I now feel that something was not fully grasped in this correspondence. Although abuses of power happen in other situations I think those carried out by white over black is of such a large scale and so endemic in society that it deserves special attention. Certainly the cycles of the co-researching process have led me to feel strengthened in my belief that only feeling 'anxiety, disappointment and fear' does not take into account our own

[2] The word 'signifier' is a sign of something other than itself and often holds meaning beyond the obvious. In this case 'black' and 'white' are not really the colour of skin at all, they just signal the meaning given to darker and lighter skin tones and is a short hand for all the complex ideas and feeling that surround the notion of 'race'.

culpability. At the end of the co-operative inquiry process this member of the group did agree with this point (see chapter 4). Psychotherapists often see one feeling as 'avoiding' another (eg we might feel anger to avoid sadness or sadness to avoid anger). In this correspondence a similar substitution was being suggested but were anxiety, disappointment and fear masking shame and guilt or vice versa?

This correspondence led to further discussion in the group. Eleanor described being ‘wracked with guilt’ about her relative good fortune when working with asylum seekers and refugees and this led to a discussion of whether women were more prone to feel guilty than men. Richard said that he did not think it was necessary to feel guilt in order to know that reparation was necessary and that feeling guilt was narcissistic. I said that I thought that guilt alerted you to knowing something was amiss and a reparation was needed. However I did become aware through the continuing dialogue with Richard of a danger in feeling guilty, particularly as guilt can put you at the centre of what has happened and can reveal a sense of omnipotence.

I felt challenged by this dialogue: how much is the feeling of guilt merely narcissistic as it puts ourselves and our feeling at the centre of the frame? Maybe a lot turns on how the guilt is held. If the guilt is seen as an end in itself it could be damaging in that we can expect others to absolve us, feel too debilitated to act or angry about being ‘made’ to feel that way, all of which could be seen in the reactions of respondents to my questionnaire.

As part of another cycle of reflection after the group I came to the conclusion that guilt-shame potentially has a range of negative implications and consequences:

- unconscious (or conscious) resentment to the subject of the guilt (as was mentioned in the questionnaire).
- depression leading to a difficulty in acting.
- making a show of one's guilt as something to be proud of.
- creating a subtle pressure on those about whom one feels guilty to absolve us.
- expecting the subject of our guilt to be interested in and pleased by our guilt.

I accept all of these as genuine difficulties in which guilt is used as an indirect form of communication which white people and, no doubt, myself, frequently engage in. I do not think, however, that these factors invalidate the place shame and guilt play in bringing to us an awareness of our racism and its being a spur to action.

If we have been shamed and made to feel guilty in painful ways as children then it is hard not to be overwhelmed with these feelings when an adult (Mollon 1993:43 - 45). We are then more likely to resent those about whom we feel guilty or fall into a depression. If guilt and shame are hard to bear because we were not as children helped to see how reparation mends and deepens relationships, then it is going to be harder to learn this as adults. Experiencing psychotherapy is one way that adults have of this kind of emotional learning, though the course of life's experiences, particularly of relationships, can bring this kind of learning in its wake as well.

Review of literature regarding guilt in white people concerning racism

To help explore this matter further I turn to various authors who threw light on my inquiry.

Tuckwell (2002) has some very useful thoughts in considering guilt and shame. She points to the importance of white people facing the feelings of guilt in order to relate fully to those who are black. This is a contrary view to

those in my questionnaire who thought that shame and guilt prevented them from relating to black people. Maybe the important point here is 'facing' the guilt rather than just feeling it, however. She talks of the double bind often experienced by white people who have not asked to be born white but nevertheless enjoy the privileges accorded white people in our society.

The subject of the guilt felt by white people about being white is more often explored in American publications. These include an edition of the *Journal of Counseling and Development on Racism, Healing its Effects* (1999) in which seventeen people of different 'races' give their story of finding a way through racism. The white people among them reiterate the guilt they feel at their privilege. One of these says:

> The process of acknowledging what was meant by 'us', of owning my own racial heritage, included owning all the history that goes with being White. During this process, the only part of that history I could see was its shame: slavery and genocide of Africans, American Indians, Asians, and Mexicans. There didn't seem to be any horror that wasn't committed in the name of the 'manifest destiny' and superiority of European Whites. My reaction was to feel an incredible amount of guilt and shame; I didn't want to be White, didn't want to belong to this group, didn't want to be part of this 'us'. (Brandyberry 1999:8)

Brandyberry's story shows succinctly how painful the full realisation of the implications of white privilege is and how it involves feelings of guilt and shame.

As a backdrop for illuminating and exploring white privilege, McIntosh (1988:see appendix 2) writes that she found a list of 46

> 'special terms and conditions I experience that I did not earn but that I have been made to feel are mine by birth, by citizenship, and by virtue of being a

> conscientious law-abiding ‘normal’ person of good will. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location though these other privileging factors are intricately intertwined.'

It is a sobering list of day-to-day circumstances like ‘I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.’ and ‘I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.’ It is interesting that McIntosh does not specifically mention feeling guilty or ashamed of this but it does seem to be implied. The overt message of her paper is not 'you ought to be ashamed of yourself', as it very specifically talks about each circumstance as benefiting herself. The message is nevertheless very challenging to others with white skin as they obviously benefit by the same advantages. It seems to me to point to shame as McIntosh owns her own culpability. For me it brings the accusation closer to home because McIntosh is prepared to take responsibility herself for the situation. She does not say ‘white people are people are privileged in this way’ she says ‘I have noticed that I, as a white person, am privileged in this way’.

These sentiments are echoed by Marilyn Frye in her paper On Being White.

> 'My being on the white side of racism leaves me a different variety of options than are available to a woman of color…….It becomes clearer why no decision I make here can fail to be an exercise of race privilege.' (Frye 1987)

And her question is:

> 'Does being white make it impossible for me to be a good person?'

This clearly implies a sense of shame and guilt.

Jacobs (2000) gives a heartfelt account of feeling guilty in her paper *For Whites Only* in which she says:

> 'Probably better known to most of us than our race-based anxieties is our race-based guilt. Many of us feel guilty about the history of slavery and inequality that is so inherently contradictory to our democratic aspirations. The ugly and self-defeating combination of anxiety, guilt, shame and ignorance makes it all but impossible for even the most minor of cross-race interactions to proceed with the natural grace that is common in white-white interactions. That is partly why this paper, as I write, is so graceless. I am strongly aware that a graceful paper would be a lie, of sorts, a sanitized and careful tiptoe through a highly charged, incredibly complex and tangled emotional landscape. My guilt is part of what fuels my passion to try to set things right.'

Jacobs is here showing that guilt provides her with the motivation to fully understand what is amiss and the energy to make amends.

In the light of my inquiry I ask myself the question, can shame and guilt in any way play a useful role in society? Could guilt and shame, in relation to white people's racism, make a useful contribution in curbing destructive behaviour and attitudes? Maybe an ability to experience guilt and shame can contribute to a sense of group cohesion and group forming.

Hellinger (Hellinger and Hovel 1999) points to this in his notion of 'conscience'. He uses this to signify that which binds group members together. What he calls 'conscience' ensures that we behave well within the boundaries of the groups to which we belong. Those beyond the boundary of our own groups can be seen as 'fair game'. Racism might flourish if, without a 'willingness to assume guilt', we ensure social cohesion in our own group by making others 'bad'. So, in order to see beyond our own group, we have to go beyond conscience. He says:

> 'Each group develops an internal conscience that encourages everything that will serve their group and damage others. The most horrible things are done to members of another group with a perfectly clear conscience.' (Hellinger and Hovel 1999)

He is pointing here to the way in which societal groups form according to specific criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

He emphasises the beneficial role of guilt:

> 'Without a willingness to assume guilt, one is incapable of action. Those who try to remain innocent remain weak, and in their attempts to avoid guilt, they bring additional suffering to others.' (Hellinger and Hovel 1999)

Dalal (2002) comes to similar conclusions and relates these specifically to the therapeutic encounter. As a group analyst who follows Foulkes and Anthony (1957:46), he has an understanding of what is called the 'social unconscious'. He sees the socio-historic as 'embedded at the deepest levels of the unconscious.'(Dalal 2002:217). He writes specifically about the way 'races' are formed as a way of 'colour coding' in-groups and out-groups. He points out that the socio-historic aspects of the relationship between blacks and whites are often unconscious and therefore denied. When it comes to therapy the therapist is often 'avoiding something that is painful and unresolved in them involving countertransference.' He suggests that our reason for avoiding these feelings is because of our sense of guilt. He says:

> 'By virtue of his colour the white, given other things as equal, does have it easier than the black in this society. To face this is to face guilt and the pain of that. If this area has not been addressed in the therapist's own therapy then it lies within – too hot to handle and so will be unconsciously avoided. The white therapist in this scenario is avoiding remembering that he or she does occupy a

more privileged position than the black patient.' (Dalal 2002:218)

This is further confirmed by the white psychotherapist, Robert Altman (2003:105) who says:

'White racial unawareness is a function of white guilt for having oppressed black people through particular actions or through collusion. To the extent that we are unwilling or unable to bear the pain of guilt, we do not want to know about what we have done individually or in the collective as white people. We have a vested interest in being unaware of what we have done, and thus who we are.'

We can see then that guilt (or shame) is useful if it draws our attention to our culpability but not if we are 'unwilling or unable to bear the pain' of that guilt.

Conclusion

As a result of my complex exploration through questionnaires, interviews, group exploration with co-researchers and a literature search, I feel strengthened in my belief that it is fruitful for guilt to be faced or 'remembered' (Bollas 1992:216). My stance at the beginning was very similar to that of Hobson (1985:134): a sense of shame and guilt will bring us back, as it were, to our 'better nature'. I could see that we need to develop a strong and flexible sense of self which can 'take' the narcissistic knock of understanding the harm we have done to others. A strong sense of self enables us to feel this pain of the guilt, gives us the ability to 'stay with' it, reflect on what it means to those harmed and the humility to own our culpability. Where a sense of self is fragile the pain is too much to bear and is likely to result in an attacking response to those who 'make' us feel guilty. Paradoxically, the more basic self-esteem we have, the more able we are to usefully respond to guilt. Without it we may either deny our guilt or be compulsively guilty which can lead to unproductive hand-wringing or a desire to be prematurely absolved.

These aspects of how individuals respond to guilt-shame do not take into account that we all exist within a social and intersubjective context, so shame and guilt have to be seen in this light also. As human beings we tend to split into groups and define ourselves by feeling that those within our boundaries are 'like us' and those without are 'unlike us', or 'me' and 'not me' in Winnicottian terms (1958:215). Because of this Altman regards racism as inevitable and irredeemable (Altman 2000). If his approach is taken fully on board it would suggest that we may 'forgive' ourselves our racist attitudes because they are inevitable but 'use' them within therapy by seeing the therapy relationship as a mirror of society. I agree with Altman that we are inevitably part of our societal context, caught in 'black and white thinking'. We can use the racist attitudes we 'catch' within ourselves to inform our work with non 'whites'. But beyond that, I think it is possible to transcend this dualistic way of thinking and the racist attitudes that result by applying focused awareness to those issues and allowing our feelings of guilt and shame to alert us to the complex dynamics of anger and guilt underlying intercultural encounters. Attempts to transcend dualism contribute to a shift in this epistemology as is suggested by Bohm (Bohm 1996:see chapter 2).

As Hellinger (1999) says, terrible crimes are committed more easily against those outside our own group. In today's world with fast communication and ease of movement around the globe it becomes more and more important that we own our complete humanity and recognise and repair the harm we do. At the same time we cannot expect those whom we have harmed to forgive us, particularly as individuals. In the intersubjectivist's perspective, we are not individuals at all but part of a larger system and inevitably take part in it. In the West institutional racism is endemic and as whites we are inevitably complicit: it seems to me that the forty-six advantages to being

white that McIntosh (McIntosh 1988) found are as true today as they were fifteen years ago.

Working with groups or cultures to make a difference is a difficult undertaking. The question I therefore need to ask here is: can the mobilisation of group shame and guilt be useful in changing consciousness about the dangerous and destructive nature of western power?

An American peace-worker pointed out that widespread feelings of shame following ill treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib have changed American opinion about the war in Iraq and may well influence events (Amidon 2004). Sadly, those in charge try to characterise the situation as a few bad people behaving in an 'un-American' way thus attempting to maintain the split of 'us, good/them, bad'. If the American people (and others) reject this splitting I think there is good reason for optimism as their sense of shame may lead to a preparedness to reflect and eventually to make amends.

My inquiry into guilt and shame has shown me that dialogue across cultures is important but not sufficient if power differences are not taken into account. Dialogue needs not only lead to a sense of 'interest' in the difference, we need also to own the culpability that white people have in assuming a privileged position and how this inflicts harm on black people. However, an empathic engagement, in which the reality of the advantages white people have is faced, is likely to lead to a sense of guilt and shame (or, possibly, guilt-shame) thus sharpening awareness and willingness to change in encounters. This process is hard to stay with and may lead to demoralisation or denial. It can also lead to something much more generative; a sense of acceptance and embodied engagement resulting in reparation and clear-sighted political action.

My inquiry has led me to believe that guilt and shame can play a positive

role in working towards resolving the power imbalance between 'white' and 'black' people in life and within the psychotherapy encounter.

This concludes the section of this thesis in which I have explored what it is to be 'white' within a racialised context. In the next part of this thesis these themes are picked up and explored further in my work as a psychotherapist and within psychotherapy organisations.