

# Forever in My Life: An Afro-Caribbean perspective on intimacy

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This article discusses some of the reasons for problems with intimacy in the Afro-Caribbean community, how the author sees and works with these issues, and looks at some of the more personal challenges for a man within this community.

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In my work as a psychotherapist of Afro-Caribbean origin, I seem to be encountering an increasing number of clients from a similar background who find relationships of all kinds a challenge. For many women and men the knowledge of how to relate to each other, and to their peers, is a puzzle. Women feel there are not enough 'good black men' out there for them to have a lasting relationship with, and 'good men' feel that they are not considered manly enough by black women.

Although problems with intimacy are common themes in psychotherapy and counselling, permeating most of the cultures that I've worked with during my time as a practitioner, it seems there is little written from an Afro-Caribbean perspective about this subject.

## **Intimacy from an Afro-Caribbean perspective**

Many of the learned ways of relating from a distance stem from the childhood experiences of Afro-Caribbeans. I believe the intimate ties that bind are not as they should be in most Afro-Caribbean relationships, and this will also include those between parent and child.

If the emotional bond between a parent and child is not as it should be then the child often grows up living a life external from the real world. Firestone and Catlett (1999) talk about this in a different manner when they state 'the infant or child compensates for emotional deprivation by forming the primary defence which I refer to as the Fantasy Bond' (p.35). They also state that 'the primary defence occurs at a time when the child would be in great danger if he were abandoned by the parent. That is why a person is afraid to take a chance again. If he takes a chance on another person, he fears that he will be exposed

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to the anxiety and the pain that he went through at the time when he was helpless and dependent' (p.36).

But occasionally the child may attempt to repair that bond with the parent. As Meares (2000) says, 'The child behaves in a way which it believes is required in order to regain contact with the mother. This involves a sacrifice. The child in complying to what seems to be demanded, will jettison the emotional responses which threaten the link to the caregiver' (p.113). This sometimes leads to the child playing a part, or performing, for his parents. The child becomes what the parent needs, like the son becoming the man of the house for the Mother, or the compliant daughter who stays a girl to please her mother, but there is a cost to living life in a fantasy. As Laing (1965) points out, 'being like everyone else, being someone other than oneself, playing a part, being incognito, anonymous, being nobody (psychologically, pretending to have no body) are defences that are carried through with great thoroughness in certain schizoid and schizophrenic conditions' (p.111). And because of the undefeated dread of taking another chance with the parent, or anyone else, post the Primary Defence, this can often lead to the posturing and posing that we see in much of Afro-Caribbean society today, as both men and women act like they don't need their peers or each other out of fear and distrust.

### **Intimacy as Adults**

Boyd-Franklin (2003) states that, 'The African American women whom I treated, who have had this type of experience report that they do not know how to have a positive relationship with a man' (p.91). Although this viewpoint comes from the USA, I believe that it is echoed here in the United Kingdom as well, as a high number of my female clients from an Afro-Caribbean background reported difficulties in their relationships to men, be they romantic relationships, sibling relationships, or just friendships.

Part of the reason for problems in relating to men may have been passed along the generations as well. Waithe (1993) speaks of the result these challenges had indirectly on the relationship between mother and daughter when he directs us that, 'It seems that women who have had a difficult time with men are even more "hard" and restrictive with their growing daughters, for the simple reason that they do not want what has befallen them to be their daughters' lot' (p.35).

Moving to how men may deal with intimacy in their adult lives, the role of the mother is also important, but because of the lack of a male role model might lead to something Waite (1993) talks of as a 'dependence upon the mother which is cultivated as a compensatory allowance for the absence of the father in the life of a young boy' (p.45). The only part of this that isn't mentioned is that this 'relationship' also serves to create a non-sexual, idealised relationship between the mother and son and might stifle intimacy.

The distance between the son and the father, which it should be noted doesn't have to be physical but can also be emotional, also prevents men from knowing men and masculinity internally and externally. McCloughry mentions

this as he states 'they have become so isolated from one another and so constrained by the lack of intimacy between men that they find it difficult to form relationships with one another' (p. 7). This distance might also be the reasoning behind the stifling of other types of relationships between men and women, and also between men and themselves, where depth is valued, instead settling for more stereotypical ways of relating. If the lessons have not been learnt then it may be difficult to trust in intimate relationships of any type.

### **Conclusion**

None of this means that the Afro-Caribbean men and women I have worked with don't form relationships. It seems that they find a way of being together, whilst not being together at the same time, selecting from the stereotypical types presented as friends and partners be they from within their cultural group or outside of it. The women go on to unconsciously choose men who look good, are unreliable, and have proven their fertility, and at the same time, the men choose women who are attractive and are either readily sexually available, or appear capable of bearing children. Both ignore the more regular and reliable types of men and women, types who would provide that person with a committed connected relationship, as this would provide a challenge in trusting again, or feeling a vulnerability or even desire for a person, something which might stimulate some fear. What happens, as Meares (2000) puts it, is that for Afro-Caribbean men and women, 'the relationship is one of non-intimate attachment' (p114). They repeat the pattern laid out for them by their parents and peers, by creating what I call: 'Relationships of Distance'.

### **What happened to intimacy within the Afro-Caribbean community?**

To understand just how this breakdown of the family unit has occurred it is wise, I feel, to look back briefly at the major event in Afro-Caribbean history that is probably at the root of its cause; and that is slavery.

Looking at the period of slavery itself, and the ability or not of men and women to build and maintain relationships, much of my research seemed to encounter more of that 'Relationship of Distance' I discussed in the previous section. As Waithe (1993) states, 'Male slaves would look with suspicion and insecurity at relationships formed with slave women, for there was no telling when the masters would put an end to the relationship if they fancied a particular female slave' (p.23). So it could be assumed that the pain of losing their mate would prevent many of these couples from allowing themselves to truly come together in union.

The same could also be added with regard to the connection mothers and fathers had to their children, who were consistently moved away from their parents at short notice, actions which mitigated against the parents forming too close an emotional bond to their offspring. Akbar (1989) confirms this when he says, 'the child was doomed to continue in the very conditions which had bred him/her. Many women either became abusive to their children or over-

protective of them in response to such inhuman conditions' (p.22). It seems that the distances put in place to protect man from woman, woman from man, and parent from child persist to this present day. During the 1960s, the Windrush Generation saw the movement of men and women from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom on an unprecedented scale, many moving to the Motherland for economic reasons. But what is often not mentioned is that often these families already had children; children who were subsequently left behind with grandparents or aunts and uncles in the West Indies, adding further to the sense of loss possibly already experienced by this younger generation. Further siblings were born here in the UK, and in many cases there was another added sense of distance in that they had brothers and sisters in the Caribbean who they knew of, but who they had never actually met.

My suggestion here is that that the repeated trauma of early attachment and loss may have become so culturally ingrained over a number of generations that for many Afro-Caribbean men and women, to actually take a chance and form a secure attachment may feel too risky, or too frightening, because there are few examples from within the culture that may suggest this course as a real possibility.

Neal (1998) in some ways confirms this as he talk about a 'national trauma', defining it as 'the enduring effects of related events which cannot be easily dismissed, which will be played over again and again in individual consciousness, becoming ingrained in the collective memory' (p.2).

### **Working in the therapy room with Afro-Caribbean clients**

During the past five years I have had the pleasure of working with a good number of clients from the black community, both as a Psychotherapist in private practice and while I was employed as a Counsellor working for a community project in South East London. A poll of the clients seen in my private practice during one year elicited the following:

- 27% came from an Afro-Caribbean background;
- Of these 75% were female, the rest were male;
- The drop-out rate of clients from a White European background was 20% whilst from within the Afro-Caribbean community this rose to 37%; and
- 80% of the Afro-Caribbean clients seen during this time gave problems with intimacy as one of their presenting difficulties.

For these clients working with a black therapist regularly generated transferences and projections with a cultural leaning. With clients that have been to see a counsellor or therapist previously, be they European or from elsewhere, and have specially chosen to see an Afro-Caribbean practitioner these cultural areas of mistrust are less prevalent but still appear. The fear of being in therapy, or of myself as a therapist, occasionally unconsciously acts itself out

with clients arriving late for sessions, arguing about the already set fee, dictating when they should be able to come for therapy, intellectualisation during sessions and numerous other means have often been used by male and female Afro-Caribbean clients as a means of avoiding coming into the room and relating to me, their therapist; it is the relationship that Afro-Caribbean clients often desire, and sometimes there is a need within them to believe that I am not going to just sit back and reinforce the distance that they know in relationships, but that I am as committed to them as they may want to be to me.

My role as I see it is to just be there, to sit with that deeper, unconscious, part of clients which has brought them into my room and already trusts me, waiting for the more conscious part of that person to believe in me as well. My job at least in the initial stages, is to provide a stable, non-threatening attachment figure, to become someone they can trust, and that won't pull away from them in response to their attempts to put a distance between us.

As Bowlby (1973) states: 'whenever an individual is confident that an attachment figure will be available to him when he desires it, that person will be much less prone to either intense or chronic fear than will an individual who for any reason has no such confidence' (p.406), so my actions in becoming that figure help to alleviate the fear of attachment that has prevented many men and women from allowing themselves the comfort of a close relationship of any kind in the past.

Inevitably there will be projections upon myself during the therapy from both male and female Afro-Caribbean clients, mainly in my role as an authority figure. As a man, it is therefore important to be able to hold the Counter-Transference, to acknowledge and sit with it, be it negative or positive. For me to act on the negative transference, for example becoming angry with a male client much like his father did, may reactivate the fear or anger that was initially projected towards me. Likewise, for female clients it is important to feel safe with me as a man when she comes to care for me. My job therefore is to represent a positive and connected masculine experience, one that allows my male clients the chance to learn what it is to be a man, and to feel valued by a man, and my female clients the chance to experience an engaged and non-threatening version of masculinity they may not have come across before. In both cases I am broadening their experience of the masculine.

In theory, this helps because, as Hellinger, Weber and Beaumont (1998) suggest, 'a son who is connected to his father has more respect and appreciation for his mother than does a son who remains tied to her. Likewise a daughter develops respect and appreciation for him' (p.37).

Ideally, my work centres around bringing the masculine and feminine closer together within the Afro-Caribbean community, as at the moment fear and mistrust reign.

For children who have had a father who was either distant or a overly strict disciplinarian there is an avoidance of the masculine for women, together with anger at the masculine for men, which work to keep this aspect of themselves at

bay (Table 1). But these reactions are tempered by an unconscious desire, a need to know and connect with the masculine, so for women this may be played out by connecting with that same version of the masculine both externally and internally, thereby repeating the pattern of pain or fear already known. And for men their wish to grow into the masculine may create another unconscious carbon copy of the masculine, similar to that which they knew and grew up with.

The move to understanding a more engaged and compassionate position brings with it less fear and a greater understanding of the masculine for both sexes, and also the opportunity for intimacy with the masculine that had been previously denied.

The role of the Distant/Disciplining Father has led to much of the anger at, and fear of, the masculine in both men and women; the Engaged/Compassionate Father (a role that might be played by a therapist of either sex) could help in changing this perception, adding knowledge and a sense of comfort with the masculine.

**Table 1: Reintegrating the Masculine into Afro-Caribbean Culture**

<b>Distant/Disciplining Father</b>				
	<b>Distance</b>		<b>Desire</b>	
For Women	Avoidance of the masculine both internally and externally	Vs	Curiosity about and need to connect with the (disciplining /distant) masculine	Creates Distance and Lowers Chance of
For Men	Anger at the masculine and struggle to be other than father	Vs	Wish to be the masculine in some format other than father (but inevitably similar)	Intimacy Between Black Men and Women
<b>Engaged/Compassionate Father</b>				
	<b>Comfort</b>		<b>Desire</b>	
For Women	Ease around the masculine, and knowledge of how to reach out to it	&	Wish to embrace the masculine (both internally and externally)	Lessens Distance and Increases the Chance of
For Men	Lower fear of the masculine in its more nurturing form	&	Wish to be, and knowledge of how to be, the masculine	Intimacy Between Black Men and Women

Table 2 below, suggests something similar with the feminine. It is my suggestion that a number of my clients have been exposed to a vision of the feminine which is both controlling and fearful, leading to women who adopt a more persona-like expression of their femininity, very strong and independent or overly sexual. For men who as adults perhaps overly idolise their mothers, there is the sacrifice of their own masculinity in order to maintain this parental bond, often only expressing their aggression at women in other relationships, or even seeking

out partners who may mother them in turn.

The movement therefore is to hopefully encourage a vision of the feminine whereby its integrated and nurturing form offers a broader perspective, allowing a women greater intimacy with this side of herself, including the recovery of her sexuality, and men the chance to own their aggressive impulses whilst having a more equal and normal relationship with the feminine.

Ultimately, my sense is that there needs to be a shift from the Controlling/Fearful Mother who stunts the growth of both her son by clinging to him, and her daughter by repressing her femininity, to an experience with an Integrated/Nurturing Mother who allows the boy to grow and respect women from a suitable distance, and guides the girl through to her womanhood. Again, this balanced role can be played by suitable therapists of either sex.

**Table 2: Reintegrating the Feminine into Afro-Caribbean Culture**

<b>Controlling/Fearful Mother</b>				
	<b>Compliant</b>		<b>Rebellious</b>	
For Women	Follows mother's narrow path to femininity. Adopts the 'Strong Woman' stereotype but fears intimacy	Vs	Curious about intimacy but lacks female role model so adopts stereotypical route (i.e. becomes overly sexual).	Helps create the repeat dynamic of the macho man and strong or sexualised woman
For Men	Idolises mother often sacrificing his own masculinity in the process	Vs	Hides his aggressive side and hatred of women. Expresses his anger away from the home	
<b>Integrated &amp; Nurturing Mother</b>				
	<b>Comfort</b>		<b>Self-Respect</b>	
For Women	Offers wider choice in how to be a woman. Allows strength <i>and</i> vulnerability	&	Shows daughter how to be intimate and respect herself at the same time.	Lessens Distance and Increases the Chance of Intimacy Between
For Men	Separate from mother, yet comfortable with, and more respectful of women	&	Allowed his own strength, feels worth, and has chance to become all he wants.	Black Men and Women

Working with clients from the Afro-Caribbean community is not an easy task. It takes a lot of time and commitment, and there will often be clients who will leave therapy early as they maybe prefer their way of being before they entered my office. Often they realise it is not their time as yet and may come back, or their partners have even encouraged them not to change as it will alter the dynamic of their whole relationship. The wounds within the Afro-Caribbean

community have been in place for a good number of years, and it is only now that we have started to understand just why these cracks were there in the first place.

Through my work as a psychotherapist and counsellor I am finding that both Afro-Caribbean men and women are beginning to understand a wider personal experience of masculinity and femininity. They are hopefully to actually feel an attraction previously not experienced towards their peers as well as their opposites, giving them a wider choice than just the stereotypes of macho men and either strong or sexualised women. They are now wanting to relate and are taking risks, and as their relationships develop and grow will learn from this, will keep risking, and their unions will hopefully grow.

As Hellinger, Weber and Beaumont (1998) suggest 'we are especially vulnerable when we desire, a partner shouldn't have to risk humiliating rejection when he or she feels and expresses desire. If couples honour this they can risk desiring again, and their relationship can achieve depth and intimacy' (p. 35). This is a path of movement away from the days of childhood previously discussed, where to trust someone (be it a parent or otherwise) meant risking ones very existence.

Therapy has an important role to play therefore in changing the future of Afro-Caribbean men and women who feel they want more from their lives than they already have; be it more intimacy with others, or just a better, deeper relationship with themselves. But as Appolis (1996) says when adding a cautionary note to the success of any change that therapy might bring, 'If family life is so fragmented due to external intrusions and disruption, will any therapy every suffice?' (p.162).

### **Afro-Caribbean clients and practitioners of other cultures**

I'm often asked by counsellors and therapists from other cultures if, given the particular issues prevalent, they would be able to assist clients from the Afro-Caribbean community. My initial feeling is that yes they can help these clients but would need to understand the cultural differences at least much like a straight therapist would need to recognise these while working with a gay or lesbian client.

Alongside that same feeling of being misunderstood that can occur when working with anyone, yet might be magnified by the cultural difference, the other area that might cause concern has to do with the power difference in the client-therapist alliance, an area that perhaps needs to be explored further, particularly with regard to any perceived racial imbalance and how this might then play in the therapy room. My feeling is that this might be challenging for clients, but could also prove empowering for them as well given time, but it would take some sensitivity to work with this area.

It might be interesting though for practitioners from other cultures to look at their client base and see if the percentage from an Afro-Caribbean background is as low or high. Having said this, I should add though that Afro-Caribbean

clients don't always feel more comfortable working with an Afro-Caribbean therapist. At the beginning of this section I mentioned the drop-off rate of 37%, which is higher than with clients from other backgrounds. This may be an interesting area for future exploration, and although I have little understanding of why this might be I would suggest that alongside some of the more traditional reasons in psychotherapy for the drop-off rate one of the issues involved could be the unconscious fear that the close cultural proximity might quickly bring up the very feelings that have been so successfully suppressed until then.

### **A more personal battle with intimacy**

As a one of a small but increasing group of black male Psychotherapists around I feel I have a unique understanding on the issues surrounding Afro-Caribbean clients, but this doesn't mean I have in any way dealt with all my difficulties around relationships of all kinds.

Ten years ago, before I started my own therapy, I had probably engaged in every type of relationship one could think of. I was an expert at dating multiple partners, and would regularly engage in distance relationships, whereby my partners often lived miles away from me so I could have them in my life, but not too close! There were also regular relationships where my needy side came through, usually frightening the other person away, and recreating the upset and sense of loss that I have talked about in this article. And occasionally there would also be totally inappropriate or dramatic relationships of a self-destructive type that with a clearer head and more self-awareness maybe would never have occurred.

So by the time I finally entered therapy I was probably ready for the experience of relearning how to have an intimate relationship with a person, but this still didn't stop that child within me from occasionally acting out with my therapist, and my period of initial ambivalence and mistrust about therapy probably lasted a good couple of years. It was only when my need to try to 'fix' things with my family brought about a kind of personal crisis that I realised I was never going to be able to create that which I craved in my relationships with partners or friends, and that I felt finally able to grieve, feel, and start to let this need go. And with my therapist's support I was then able to grow, support myself, and start to learn to relate to and trust both myself and others but as an adult, not by using my insecure inner child.

All that energy I used to put towards forcing an ideal relationship into being now has the chance to go in different directions, for example my career. Relating to myself within the intimate environment of the therapy room has in many ways enhanced my knowledge of myself and allows me to trust and gain succour from within, not without.

The route to freedom from the cultural trauma previously suggested is a difficult one and I am in no way suggesting that I have completed my own personal journey, to the contrary in fact as I'm sure I make mistakes regularly and perhaps always will. What is important to realise is the current position

many Afro-Caribbean clients, and even colleagues, find themselves in and its roots. Without this knowledge being made conscious, the struggle that many of us have in relating to each other will just continue unabated.

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