

Unravelling the coloniser's grip

Dwight Turner helps a trainee recognise the psychologically wounding impact of colonisation

Lilian* was a 35-year-old woman, one of three children who had been raised in London by parents originally from West Africa. She was a trainee counsellor on a university course and she needed to be in therapy as part of the course requirements. She had previously worked as a social worker for several years, and while she was keen to become a counsellor she was fairly ambivalent about having her own therapy, feeling this was something that, in her words, 'white people did'. Our first few sessions therefore involved discussing why she wanted to be a counsellor, especially given her views about the profession.

The next segment of our work together involved us exploring how difficult she was finding the course – not necessarily from an academic perspective, more so regarding the lack of any inclusivity in her training with her lecturers. To her mind they were simply white British men who would often marginalise or pathologise any discussion around difference and diversity, thereby simultaneously leaving her unseen and unheard.

There was one particular point in the course which exacerbated this problem. At the end of her first year of training Lilian had to submit an essay about early life attachment patterns. While Lilian had found the lectures preceding this essay at points interesting, what she felt was most lacking from them was a more Afrocentric perspective on attachment, especially given her own cultural background. She was afraid however that submitting the essay she wanted to write,

incorporating cultural difference into the narrative, would lead to her being again labelled as, in her words, the 'angry black student'. Yet to comply with what she saw as the structure of the course and write what she felt she was supposed to would mean she would be inauthentic, and she would hate herself in turn.

Internalisation

Lilian's inner conflict brings to life the term 'decolonisation', a term most often used within political parlance to denote the idea that there needs to be systemic restructuring of how we approach historical narratives. Sadly the process of decolonisation is often reduced to tokenism by, for example, bringing in more contemporary literature to balance out the voices of older white men on university courses, or running singular diversity workshops as part of course curriculars. What is needed is a more phenomenological exploration of the depths to which we may well be

colonised, as we as practitioners bring our undoubted skills to bear in exploring and unravelling the internalised coloniser's grip around our hearts.

Any attempt at decolonisation within counselling and psychotherapy flounders on the fields of the internalisations of colonialism that we all have endured. The coloniser within us, imbibed from our families, our cultures, our genders, has moulded us into who we are, often leaving us split from who we might be, from our potential.

Lilian internalised certain narratives from parents who sought out the superior comforts of life in the Global North, with her parents often speaking of having high hopes for their children. In her reality, for Lilian this also meant her parents denigrated much of their own cultural history and family back in West Africa. They would tell comedic stories that



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both sides of the divide, whether they wanted said experience or not.

Rooting her work within her own lived experience, poet and activist bell hooks recognised the deep psychologically wounding impact of colonisation, speaking of her own grandmother's internalised colourism, her hatred of her own granddaughter's blackness being, in hooks' experience, symptomatic of the deeper wounding that colonisation causes.⁴

Yet most people in their consideration of colonisation and colonial ideas fail to recognise just how unconsciously embedded they still are within our society. Colonialism drives how we speak, how we walk, the books we read, the music we listen to, the places we live. It tells us that we are seen as or labelled as too common, too threatening, too ignorant, too aggressive to be a part of civilised society when we use slang, when we skank or slouch as we walk, when we read comics or another unacceptable genre of literature, or if we listen to grime or hip-hop.

How we have come to our current understanding of dress and clothing is another aspect of colonialism that I myself have explored, my perspective being that to be seen as civilised you had to present in a certain fashion, to dress in a certain more formalised way.⁵ Colonial narratives of being have shaped so many of us that it is a surprise when they are pointed out to us, a shock to the psychological system that so many of us struggle against while unconsciously and simultaneously play a part in protecting. Experiences of colonisation have in their roots the core elements of inauthenticity. The way we all act in order to be seen as acceptable within the structures of the Global North hampers all of our abilities to be authentic.

Lilian often had to hear, about how people acted, spoke and dressed, and the jobs they did, stories that regularly held nuggets of cultural comparisons and put-downs. This often left Lilian feeling uncomfortable as she heard them, and meant she would repress much of her own culture in a form of unconscious compliance or self-othering.¹

Existential

The drive by coloniser nations of the Global North to civilise the other nations of the world was not just driven by economics. As Fanon says, colonisation also involved the standardisation of ideas, the belief being that Western ways of thinking were the right ways, and that any other perspectives on knowledge were inferior in comparison.² In his little known

but no less important work, Memmi perhaps inadvertently explored the deeper lengths the internalisation of this experience would have had on those who were on the receiving end of colonisation.³

Memmi's work, which is very much existential in its approach and includes a foreword by Sartre, separated the experience of the coloniser and the colonised into a number of categories, recognising that colonisation was something that impacted all persons on

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For the colonised other, anything that sits outside the colonised ideas of truth, worth and ability is therefore negated, hidden or silenced, meaning that in any attempt to decolonise, there has to be not only an initial recognition of just how much knowledge has been lost or rejected by the coloniser narratives but also just how much the voices and positionality of the other(s) have been suppressed.

Cultural splits

My work with Lilian involved us looking at the cultural splits that resided within her, from those experienced by her parents and then internalised by Lilian and her siblings to the overt and covert often racist and sexist messages she would have received about her colonial background and its subservient position in the UK.

Feeling the anger generated by our explorations, Lilian then decided to write the essay she wanted, with an Afrocentric angle to the issues of early life attachment. In the following weeks she endured enormous tension between questioning if she had done the right thing in writing such an essay or if she had risked her career. When she received her grade she was surprised and emotional that her essay was well received, and that she had passed with a distinction.

Our work then became about looking at these many internalised messages. Predominantly we considered the internalised script that spoke to her about having to conform to a way of being on her course. This was a message that Lilian now realised, having understood the anger and frustration of her inauthenticity, that she often projected onto others – the course, counselling and even myself. Further exploration then gave Lilian the tools and the right to have her own voice,

perhaps, as she realised, for the first time in her life.

Self-othering

None of this process can be held without us as therapists looking at how some of our own ideas or ways of being have been formed out of the oppressive and self-othering structures of colonialism. Growing up with the colonial ideas of my own parents who wanted me to present as a good 'Englishman' from an early age meant that my own teenage years were filled with depression and a sense that life was not worth living. My blackness being denied and my intersectional authenticity hidden meant that the subsequent years of therapy have for me been embedded within and enriched by stretches where I have (re)discovered aspects of my identities I thought I had lost forever.

Too often students of difference on our courses feel retraumatised by the structural requirement to comply with ways of being not only alien to their identities but also colonial in their grounding. Creating spaces where students of cultural differences can explore their colonised identities in safe held spaces therefore has the potential to open the psychological doorway towards greater authenticity for them, and as a consequence increase cultural engagement from the minority groups our profession serves.

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For Lilian there was also the recognition that what she was fighting against on her course was as much a part of her as it was a part of her course reality. While her tutors were white and male, in seeing them simply as this she had – as she later found out – ignored their other intersecting identities (that one was from a working-class background and had a hidden disability, for example). Recognising the humanity in the teaching staff therefore began this process of returning the power Lilian had divested herself from in her early colonised life. ●

** Client permission to share this case study given; name and identifiable details changed.*

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