When Racism Gets Personal: Toward Relational Healing

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About the Author

Maureen Walker, Ph.D., is a psychologist with a practice in psychotherapy and antiracism consultation. Her clinical practice and research projects involve developing links between racial identity development and relational theories to support the growth potential of persons who experience disconnections stemming from marginalization and devaluation within the dominant society. She works at Harvard Business School and is on the faculty of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute.

Abstract

In a culture that stratifies human differences, it is inevitable that anxiety about difference would be the source of much suffering. The power distortions that lie at the root of this suffering are manifest in relationships, from the most tangential to those that are deeply intimate. Moreover, the anxieties endemic to a race-based culture have the potential to thwart our most earnest efforts to make and maintain good connection. To adopt the feminist perspective, that the personal is political, is to acknowledge that no relationship can remain unscathed when power and value are differentially accorded based on racial group membership.

Three examples from clinical practice will be used to illustrate how racial anxiety impedes movement toward authenticity, mutuality, and empowerment in intimate relationships. In these examples, three biracial women who identify as black navigate the racial stratifications that contaminate the inevitable conflicts in their relationships with parents, mentors, and lovers. Because of the multi-layered anxieties stemming from living and loving in a racially stratified culture, conflicts which might otherwise be the source of growth and deeper connection become rigidified and immobilizing. In addition to examining the debilitating impact of racial anxiety, the presentation will highlight the relational processes that facilitate healing, resilience, and mutual empowerment.

Everyday encounters bring us face to face with the complexities of living, working, and loving in a racially diverse world. We encounter this complexity in the changing arenas and shifting alignments of love and work. In most instances, we think of these changes as social progress. However, underlying this apparent progress is a social-historical trauma, the sequel of which can erupt—seemingly unbidden—at any given moment. It was within this context of complexity that about five years ago I came to know a precocious, young woman whom I will call Lauren. Lauren described herself as biracial: the daughter of an African American father who had grown up during the forties and fifties in rural Arkansas and a white Jewish mother who had grown up in suburban Seattle in the sixties. The culture that shaped Lauren’s parents was far different from the social spaces that Lauren inhabited. Unlike her parents, Lauren grew up in a time and place where legal barriers to the corridors of commerce and education had been dissolved for racial minorities. Legislative prohibitions against interracial unions had been repealed for the most part. Lauren’s was a world where the social spaces reflected an ethnic and economic diversity unfamiliar to earlier generations, and the people she called friends and family were multi-colored and multi-cultured. For all of its cultural richness and social privilege, Lauren experienced her world as stifling and constricted. In one of our therapy sessions, she commented: “When my father accuses me of thinking about race too much, but blames my mother for not talking about it at all; when my mother can’t understand the part of me that is black—that’s when racism really gets personal.”

In a culture that stratifies human difference, that systematically rank orders human beings according to their racial group membership, it is inevitable that anxiety about racial difference would be the source of much human suffering. The resulting power
distortions give rise to anxieties that manifest themselves in our relationships—from the most tangential to the most intimate. These are the anxieties endemic to a race-based culture, and they have the potential to thwart our best efforts to make and maintain good connection. In situational relationships—whether in the context of work or a commercial transaction—racial anxiety can trigger unease and generate a stultifying awkwardness. In more intimate relationships—whether among parents and spouses, mentors and lovers, or colleagues and friends—racial anxiety can stifle authenticity and inhibit mutuality. In any relationship, multi-layered anxieties deriving from working and loving in a racially stratified culture can contaminate the everyday conflicts which might otherwise be the source of creative movement and deeper connection.

Poet and activist Audre Lorde once said that it is not our differences that separate us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences; it is rather our refusal to examine the distortions that result from misnaming those differences (1984). The cultural tendency to frame difference in dichotomous and oppositional terms also gives rise to relational distortion. To paraphrase Lorde, this culture offers few models of mutual and authentic engagement across difference. What we experience as racial separation is often caused by our refusal to acknowledge the impact of the distortions upon human behavior and expectation. This refusal to engage the resulting complexity pushes us into chronic disconnection. It plunges us into an immobilizing anxiety that betrays our yearning for connection.

Psychotherapists have a unique opportunity to confront and examine the racial anxieties that perpetuate distortion and disconnection. The Relational-Cultural Model provides a critical standpoint from which to engage three questions. First, how do we understand the genesis and the manifestation of racial anxiety in relationship? Second, how does this anxiety shape behavior and relational expectation? And third, how do we make creative use of racial anxiety to foster resilience and reconnection? In exploring these three questions, I have found it helpful to use a model proposed by psychotherapist and author Robert Gerzon, whose tripartite model of anxiety provides a useful framework for understanding the personalized experience of historical racial trauma. The historical trauma of racism translates into cognitive-emotive experiences that may be described as natural anxiety, toxic anxiety, and sacred anxiety. This three part model of anxiety clarifies that processes of disconnection can thwart the most earnest efforts to engage across racial difference. Because anxiety constricts the range of relational movement and possibility, the cultural trauma of racism may significantly undermine the most personal relationships.

Few people would argue with the philosophers who have asserted over the ages that life is difficult. Natural anxiety is defined as a response of awareness to that difficulty, as recognition of our inevitable limitations (Gerzon, 1999). Natural anxiety is an expression of the uncertainty and ambivalence that checks our expectation for, and our movement in, relationship. With the dissolution of visible and legislated barriers to cross-racial contact, the social cues that guide relationship have become increasingly ambiguous. There appears to be more relational space within which to navigate. However, because of what anthropologist Karen Brodkin (1999) has called the binary system of racial categorization, it is possible, as some have said, for black and white citizens to sit in the same theater, but each see a very different movie. In other words, in spite of the ambiguity, the categories remain intact—though somewhat more mystified. When relational expectation is defined by a racial binary, the enlargement of the socio-cultural arena may lead not to fuller or expanded connection, but to diminished authenticity. As one Latina corporate executive commented, “Being promoted in this organization simply means having to function in more and more spaces where I can’t be myself.” Faced with the racial conundrum of demarcation and ambiguity, natural anxiety is a reasonable response. Natural anxiety is a natural response to navigating through a relational fog.

Lauren’s Dilemma

I can think of no better example of a relational fog and its attendant anxiety than that provided by nineteen-year-old Lauren. Once when talking about her lackluster middle school performance, Lauren recalled a game that was directed by her eighth grade social studies teacher. It was called “The Plantation Game.” The object of the game was to buy and sell slaves and see who could have the most profitable plantation; the teacher’s objective was to demonstrate the economic motivations behind slavery and to prove that racial prejudice was consequent to, but not the