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Black Psychological Functioning and the Legacy of Slavery

Myths and Realities

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INTRODUCTION

The collective or group trauma model being explored in this volume requires that we first identify a group that has experienced a jolting, unpredictable, and monstrous assault. Second, we must be able to identify an unambiguous period that marks the termination of the trauma, for then, and only then, can we establish a before-and-after frame of reference. More specifically, the experiences of the group following the trauma must be more normative or nontraumatic in nature. When these conditions are met, we document the trauma and its termination, and then try to determine whether attitudes and behaviors originally elicited by the trauma have been passed down to the immediate and extended kin of the original victims, even though the survivors and their progeny live under conditions that are a far cry from the period of trauma. When such transcendence is confirmed across several decades or longer, we speak of the intergenerational legacy of the trauma.

The *trauma–transcendence–legacy model* is not easily applied to the black encounter with American slavery. In the first place, how does one align the notion of a sudden and unpredictable event to an institution that lasted nearly 400 years? Trauma conjures images of victims, pain, and damage; however, slavery was a long-term, multidimensional experience involving black victimization as well as effective black coping. More will be said shortly about the legacy of effective coping. Second, even if we could find a way to depict slavery in grossly traumatic terms, how does one draw a straight line between slavery and, say, contemporary expressions of black "racial" anxiety, without necessarily trivializing the instances of oppression faced by blacks since slavery?

My father, a black Southerner born and raised in segregated Virginia, suffered from a certain racial anxiety, but he never gave evidence that slavery accounted for its origin. Instead, he mentioned the memory of a particularly gruesome lynching in which the stomach of a pregnant,

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black female victim was pierced to reveal the unborn fetus. At other times, he reflected on the tragedy that befell one of his uncles. My Dad's uncle had a marvelous team of work horses, and when he received word of the need for such teams in the building of the New York City subways (circa 1900), he journeyed to New York. He and his horses quickly became part of the tunnel construction crew, but soon thereafter, so the story goes, the white workers poisoned all of his horses. Dad said that, in the aftermath, his uncle went insane, and the family lost touch with him. These stories always lie just below the surface of my father's worldview. Along the same lines, my mother recalled an evening from her youth, when men dressed in white sheets and ghostly hoods surrounded her family's home, because earlier in the day her father had accidentally dropped a brick on the foot of a white coworker. After that evening, Granddad would never again work as a mason. As was the case with my father, my mother's racial anxiety had a very contemporary ring to it.

My own moments of racial uncertainty are traceable to contemporary rather than transcendent anxiety. Upon completing my doctorate at Princeton in 1976, I recall wondering whether the doors to equal opportunity would really be open, or would I be stopped at the receptionist's desk? My concerns were framed by the story of William R. Ming, Jr., the attorney who became the primary legal advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr. He took his law degree from the University of Chicago in the 1940s, and he graduated third in his class. Despite this, he was neither recruited nor interviewed by a single law firm of repute. Ironically, Ming would later provide advice and counsel to former classmates who graduated far below his rank. He would help them with difficult cases, they would pay him a modest sum, and then they would use his strategy to win the case and pocket a fee worth many times the amount paid Ming, even though their cases were argued in accordance with Ming's outline.

Ming's story was relayed to me by my brother-in-law, Robert L. Tucker, who graduated from the Northwestern Law School in 1955. He, too, was given scant attention by law firms, though he placed in the top one-fourth of his class. It was from Robert that I first heard the expression: "The first hurdle is to get past the receptionist." Even more foreboding were the race-tainted legal difficulties Robert encountered during the prime of his career. He was falsely accused but nevertheless convicted of fraud, and he spent several years in prison. For the first 2 years after his release, he was one of the most bitter persons I had ever encountered. In asking the Illinois Supreme Court to reinstate his right to practice law within the State of Illinois, he was finally able to present all of the evidence that should have been admissible at his trial and subsequent appeals. So convinced was the high court that an injustice had been committed, they voted unanimously to reinstate Robert to the Illinois Bar. The details of Robert's case indicated that "race" played a significant role in what had transpired at the original trial. "Race" was also behind the poor medical treatment my brother, Charles Cross, received at the University of Chicago Medical Hospital, the consequences of which left him permanently paralyzed from the waist down. Some years later, Chuck would win his lawsuit against the doctors who "treated" him, but, as in Robert's return to the Illinois State Bar, Chuck's legal victory could not undo the damage already done. These *contemporary* encounters with racism, and not some transcendent racial anxiety from the past, are at the basis of my own racial anxiety.

The point to be made from all of these examples is that the oppressive episodes that followed American slavery, and that continue today (e.g., the Rodney King episode, as a case in point), have trauma potential in their own right. This makes it a scientific nightmare to design a strategy capable of disentangling transcendent racial anxiety from racial anxiety grounded in postslavery or contemporary encounters with discrimination and injustice.

SLAVERY AND BLACK CULTURE

Another shortcoming of the slavery-as-trauma schema is that little consideration is given to the efficacious coping strategies blacks were able to fashion during slavery, and that, had they encountered less resistance, would likely have facilitated their rapid social mobility into the larger social order after slavery. Slavery was evil, but the plantations were not operated like World War II German concentration camps (Thomas, 1993). The objective was not the creation of death factories, but the running of "factories" in the more literal sense (Fogel & Engerman, 1974). Plantation owners were in the business of manipulating the forced labor of black human beings in a manner that would result in the production of greater personal wealth for the white owner's family. In running the plantation, one option was to work a group of workers to death and replace them with another group of imported slaves. However, for much of the history of American slavery, owners had limited access to recent captives and were forced to consider ways whereby the slave population could reproduce itself. As part of this economic need for a predictable labor force, the owners were forced to provide a certain degree of social latitude or "lifespace" to the slaves; that is, the slave owner had to design a system that not only allowed for the exploitation of the slave's labor, but also made possible a level of social affiliation and intimacy between the slaves that would result in the birth, development, and socialization of replacement workers.

The resulting operation juxtaposed three overlapping circles of human activity: (1) the circle defining the world of the plantation owner, his wife, and their children; (2) the daytime world of work, which daily recorded the drudgery, banality, sadism, and general insanity of the forced-labor "enterprise"; and (3) the world of the black community, consisting of a series of hut-like structures set off some distance from the owner's home. It was during the daylight hours that each slave might be brought to his or her breaking point, that family members might be sold or exchanged, that children might be forced prematurely into adult work roles, that calculated or whimsical displays of violence might be heaped on the slaves—men, women, and children alike. The evening held its moments of sexual terror for black women, as it was commonplace for the owner, his sons, or his white employees to sexually savage black women. For the most part, however, the evening provided a buffer during which the slaves retreated into the lifespace so begrudgingly provided by the owner. Recent advances in the historical record reveal that the slaves exploited this lifespace in accordance with their own interests, resulting in a level of humanity and cultural cohesiveness never intended, and seldom appreciated, by the owners. Note that I am not saying that slavery was "nice." Instead, I am marking the systems unintended consequences (Bullock, 1967). In meeting the evil and inhuman objectives of the slave owners, *certain gaps and contradictions were exploited by the slaves themselves, resulting in efficacious, functional, and deeply human marriage, family, cultural, and personal psychology patterns* (Gutman, 1976, 1987).

The slave lifespace made it possible for the slaves to develop a multidimensional mind-set (Webber, 1978). This mind-set allowed one to oppose certain features of the American culture, while engaging and even incorporating into black culture other dynamics. This acculturation, which transformed Africans into African Americans, included mechanisms for protection against racism. In *Deep Like the Rivers,* Thomas Webber demonstrated that slaves evolved a worldview that let them discover and manipulate aspects of the owner's world, while filtering those aspects that were denigrating and dehumanizing. The slaves found ways to defend and protect themselves at the same time that they engaged and selectively embraced the more "race neutral" aspects of European-American culture.

One of the most powerful examples of this process involves the slaves' religious beliefs. We have already noted that slavery lasted almost 400 years, and while the earliest of captive Africans entered slavery with religious orientations very different from Christianity, over time, the majority of slaves grew comfortable with Christian concepts. However, though the slave owners stressed an interpretation of the Bible that validated slavery and the black group's lowly status, the slaves secretly countered that "real" Christians would not own slaves in the first place. More often than not, slaves saw themselves embracing a *superior* interpretation than that they judged the owners to hold. Following slavery, and into the present, the black church has had a long history of assisting in the black struggle against racism (themes of protection). However, the very fact that the overwhelming majority of black Americans express Christian beliefs is confirmation of the cultural fusion that first took place during slavery (acculturation).

Another example of the protection–acculturation mind-set developed by the slaves is revealed by their attitudes toward education. Keeping in mind that the average white Southerner was desperately poor and uneducated, the ex-slaves did not take their cues from this group. Rather, independent even of whites and black elites who would eventually befriend them during Reconstruction, the ex-slaves instantly evidenced social attitudes toward education and social mobility that might be expected of a more socially advanced group. Clearly, the slaves derived their educational stance from their observations of the advantages education accorded the slave owners and their family members. As a result, the slaves exhibited and anticipated the kind of highly charged achievement motivation more typically associated with white immigrant groups entering the United States some 40 years later at the turn of the century. As documented 60 years ago by W. E. B. Du Bois (1935) in *Black Reconstruction,* and more recently by James Anderson (1988) in his wonderful work, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935,* the ex-slaves were at the vanguard of a social movement for public education in the South, between the end of the Civil War and the late 1870s. In this movement, the positive educational attitudes of the majority of uneducated ex-slaves were given greater articulation and direction by a small but critical mass of educated, free blacks, and in short order further assistance was provided by agents of the federal government and progressive whites. Ronald Butchart (1980) has shown that, for the ex-slaves, this movement was founded on themes of protection (education that helps one avoid exploitation and oppose racism), ethnicity and pride (education that explores African and African American history), and acculturation (education that encourages participation in the larger social order).

James Anderson (1988) has documented the legacy of the ex-slaves' high achievement motivation for the generation of blacks living in the Deep South between 1900 and 1935. During this period, poor rural blacks joined forces with black elites to double-tax themselves in support of the "public" education of their children. They paid taxes for which they received little return (this was the historical period during which white society funneled a disproportionate amount of public resources to support "white" education, while radically underfunding the education of black children) and then taxed themselves again in the form of special collections and school-building projects (blacks supplied the labor and materials, and in some cases, even the land). Anderson presents a strong case that the group unity and cultural cohesiveness displayed in the 1930s by both poor and educated blacks can be traced to the behavior, psychology, values, and worldview that their ancestors carried forward out of slavery.

Anderson's analysis ends in 1935. However, the reflections of Kathryn Morgan (1980; *Children of Strangers*), Clifton Taulbert (1989; *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*), Chalmers Archer, J. (1992; *Growing Up Black in Rural Mississippi*), and James Comer (1988; *Maggie's Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family*), to mention a few, give powerful tes-

timony that after slavery and into the late 1950s, normative black culture stressed not only education but also marriage, nuclear family life and strong kinship bonds, linkages to community through leisure, sports, religious and educational activities (in addition to a broad spectrum of nonreligious affiliations), and an aesthetic capable of creating and sustaining gospels, rural blues, dance, drama, literature, poetry, and sophisticated jazz. The fact that this culture was able to evolve continuously from 1865 through the late 1950s, while keeping manageable the levels of social pathologies that are inevitable with oppression, represents one of the most remarkable social histories in the annals of Western civilization.

In summary, the new historical research on slavery indicates that the ex-slaves had the wherewithal to be competitive with the *average* white workers of the day, who, as it turns out, were poor, landless, and uneducated themselves. On certain dimensions, such as education and achievement motivation, the ex-slaves stood *ahead* of the average white worker. Psychologically speaking, the ex-slaves had the same kind of positive mind-set generally associated with the mass of white ethnic immigrants who appeared on our shores some years later. This means that contemporary black problems are just that, problems traceable to contemporary circumstances and not dysfunctional attitudes transported out of slavery and projected into the present as a legacy of the trauma of slavery. In summary:

- Ex-slaves showed high achievement motivation, were quick to support the education of their children, and helped forge the establishment of public education in the South; *those black youth of today who show an estrangement from educational activities are not carrying on a black tradition; they are, in fact, at odds with it.*
- Ex-slaves centered their worldview on the value of the family and the need for close ties with kin, and from the late 1860s to the early 1950s, the overwhelming majority of black children were born to intact black families and highly functional kin networks; *that black birthing and marriage patterns have followed a reverse pattern since the 1950s has practically nothing to do with slavery and everything to do with institutionalized racism, discrimination in the workplace, and diminished employment opportunities.*
- Ex-slaves were cautious about their interactions with whites, but for the most part, their aim was to become a key group in the American economy and culture. The civil rights movement of the 1960s, a hopeful and militantly integrationist movement, was built on the integrationist themes easily traceable to the worldview of the ex-slaves; *the oppositionalism and nihilism to be found among many of today's black youth has little to do with this legacy of hope, struggle, and integration.*

THE ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY BLACK PROBLEMS: IF NOT SLAVERY, WHAT?

If African Americans exited from slavery with cultural patterns that might well have facilitated their successful social mobility over a period of two or three generations, how does one explain the deterioration in black life, especially since the late 1960s? To answer this question, I must turn to the real legacy of slavery, which is not black deficits, but white racism. Looking back through history, one can identify a series of "missed opportunities." Had America responded differently to the needs of its black citizens in the past, the poverty rate for blacks today would likely be greatly diminished. I will mention a few. First, after slavery, there were no reparations, and there was no attempt to redistribute land to any significant number of

blacks, let alone a critical mass. Even worse, as Stephen Steinberg (1992) has pointed out in his book *Ethnic Myths,* federal agencies set up to "help" the former slaves did so by literally forcing them to sign patently unfair "tenant farm contracts" with their former masters! Thus, between 1865 and 1900, the inability of the black community in the South to produce a generation of prosperous farmers had almost nothing to do with motivation, imagination, or ability, and everything to do with a form of tenant farming that current historians correctly call an extension of the former slave system (Jayes, 1986). A second example involves the failure of labor unions to use nonracist recruitment tactics. Robert Allen noted in *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (1969) that between 1880 and 1930, unions closed their doors to black membership, and, more often than not, the only access blacks had to manufacturing jobs and employment in mines was as strike breakers. As significant as the labor movement has been to American life, one cannot help but wonder how much more the union movement could have accomplished had it included black membership. One thing is certain: Given union access, an unknown but likely significant portion of today's poor blacks would have used such membership as a stepping-stone out of poverty, putting middle-class status within reach of their progeny. The union example is replicated in the history of sports, the entertainment industry, higher education, government, and the armed services. Each of these important sectors of American life made employment and participation *entitlements* for white (males) only.

Finally, as a last example, had the South, between 1900 and 1960, not established and maintained a social policy of deliberately underdeveloping its black citizens in terms of housing, and educational and employment opportunities, there would have been fewer undereducated and desperately poor blacks moving to the North over the last 50 years. I say what appears to be the obvious because, in commentaries about the origin of contemporary black urban poverty, one would think that poor blacks who migrated to such cities as New York, Detroit, or Chicago came from the planet Mars rather than the South. Instead, it is important for us to remember that they came from Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, or other *American* states, if you will, states that for nearly 60 years established rather elaborate judicial, educational, and commercial infrastructures whose primary aim, according to James Anderson (1988) in *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935,* was the systematic underdevelopment of its black citizens. We must remember that segregation was not "separate but equal." It was a system that made possible the exaggerated and accelerated development of one group (whites) at the expense of the exaggerated and accelerated underdevelopment of blacks. Given every $100 in school taxes, "separate but equal" called for $50 to be spent on white and black children alike. What actually happened was that $80–90 might be spent on a white child and only $10–20 on a black child. This meant that an exaggerated amount ($80–90) dollars instead of ($50) was spent on each white child, thus, over the years, *accelerating* their educational development, while the fractional amount for black children produced, over time, an aggressively negative growth curve ($10–20 instead of $50). Also, keep in mind that just as was the case in the aftermath of slavery, the South paid no reparations to blacks for the consequences of state-supported segregation and racial underdevelopment. We need to remind ourselves that had Southern history followed a more enlightened track, the level of black poverty might be more manageable today. As it is, Americans have yet to come to grips with the past racial crimes of such states as Mississippi and South Carolina, yet when contemporary commentators discuss the origins of contemporary urban black poverty, they make it appear as though blacks *invented* their own poverty while living in the South.

Historians Dennis Dickerson (1986; *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875–1980*) and Joe William Trotter (1985; *Black Milwaukee: The Making of An Industrial Proletariat, 1915–1945*) have revealed that when Southern blacks eventually did

move north, they experienced fleeting success. From 1945 to the early 1960s, whites left the great urban factories for middle-class jobs, thus opening well-paying factory jobs to blacks. The children of these black factory workers went on to college, became the backbone of the civil rights movement, and started the expansion of today's black middle class, points underscored by Audrey Edwards and Craig Polite in *Children of the Dream: The Psychology of Black Success.* Had America's industrial sector remained healthy, the process of stable, working-class families producing tomorrow's black middle class would still be under way. However, these industrial jobs began to shrink, and most urban black communities have been in the midst of an economic depression since the mid-1960s.

At the onset of the Great Society Programs (circa mid-1960s), which were designed for the *transition* of poor blacks and poor people into the general economy, *entry level jobs in heavy industry that paid a meaningful wage began to dry up or were shifted overseas.* Ironically, the failure in the 1960s and 1970s of private industry to provide meaningful employment opportunities for all who work could has been blamed not on industry but on welfare programs designed to transition workers into these declining industries. The idea that the current malaise of poor people in general, and black people in particular, results from the welfare system and the failure of individuals to take personal responsibility is one of the great intellectual hoaxes of the 20th century (Coontz, 1992).

As it is, we tend to "see" and "explain" poverty differently, according to the race of the group. Rather than discuss poverty in America, we try to differentiate "black" poverty from "white" poverty. When African Americans are the focus, a moralistic measuring rod is often applied to some of the more sensational behavior of poor people who are black, leading to the impression that poor blacks are amoral, bizarre, and undeserving of assistance. These "black deficits" are called "legacies of slavery" or the consequences of IQ inferiority. However, when the unemployed in question are white people, scholars, policymakers, and people in the media often commence their analyses, not with issues of morality, *but with the complex chain of events that followed protracted unemployment.*

In a *systems perspective* that is more likely to be applied to unemployed white workers than blacks, the individual worker's predicament is typically traced to a larger scenario that connects factories, employment, the community tax base, the quality of schools, family functioning, and individual mental health. Following the closing of a factory in Perry, Florida, Andrea Stone wrote a story for *USA Today* (February 28, 1992) that was accompanied by a full-page graph, including personal photographs of 11 recently unemployed workers (10 of whom were white), that traced the economic fallout (ripple effect) of the factory closing to no less than 31 local commercial establishments (bank, hairdresser, jewelry store; cable television company, health spa, ice-cream shop, volume of advertisements for local newspaper, etc.). Along with the accompanying written stories, the reader was given a three-dimensional perspective about the negative consequences of unemployment. As importantly, the humanity and sense of worth of the people caught in this vicious cycle were never called into question. There was no mention that in the face of continued unemployment, such people might become "lazy," "unmotivated," or subject to sinking into a culture of poverty.

Around the same time of the Perry factory closing, the *New York Times* (July 5–10, 1992) was running a series of stories on the need to change the American welfare system. Here, the focus was often on black people. Though the connection between meaningful employment, and community and family functioning did not escape the writer, the emphasis was clearly on the "peculiar" pathologies of black communities, the "undeserving poor," and the "bizarre" behavior of black children. The theme of the *USA Today* article about white workers was the need to create jobs, whereas the *NY Times* series focused on the need to "get people off welfare."

SLAVERY AND BLACK IDENTITY

We have seen that the *legacy-of-slavery* model that emphasizes victimization and pathology can greatly distort the discourse on the evolution of black culture. This is not to suggest that there were no lasting, negative psychological effects caused by slavery, although, even here, framing the issue in positive or negative terms is too simplistic. We can say, with some degree of certitude, that at the beginning of slavery, the captive Africans were, if you will, "African" in their identities and worldview. One African was not a cultural carbon copy of the next, because, though frequently captured from the same geographic region of Africa, the historical record shows that the Africans consisted of a variety of African ethnicities, just as being French, English, Italian, or Spanish represent variability in European ethnicity. Nevertheless, if the Africans, in a plural sense, entered slavery as Africans, they left slavery with frames of reference that were decidedly not African. Taking a sledge-hammer approach, one can conclude that slavery stripped Africans of their true heritage and forced them to become a shallow imitation of white people. From this vantage point, one stresses the fact that the slave owners designed the slavery system to deracinate the Africans and make them pliable. They forced the slaves to see themselves as the slave owner wanted them to be seen: inferior Sambos suffering from self-loathing and a sense of cultural inferiority, divided by a skin-color hierarchy, and driven by an intense desire to find acceptance by the majority group, on terms dictated by the majority group.

This pejorative interpretation has a long history in the discourse on slavery and black identity (Clark, 1955; Frazier, 1939; Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951). It has subsequently fallen out of favor because the evolving historical record does not sustain the notion that the average black slave suffered from self-hatred (Kolchin, 1993). Along the same line, the history of the behaviors, activities, and organizational accomplishments of the slaves immediately after slavery and well into the early part of the 20th century, about which this author has already commented, suggests that to the extent it can be inferred, the ex-slaves seemed to exit slavery with far more psychological strengths and resources than psychological deficits and dysfunctionalities.

The record shows that the ex-slaves did not exit slavery with one type of identity, be it self-hating or self-accepting. Rather, it appears that they evidenced a broad spectrum of identities, none of which resembled the African identities with which their ancestors entered slavery. True, below the surface, residual Africanity was embedded in their language behavior, food preferences, musical aesthetic, naming practices, and family and kin ties. However, at each of these levels and more, one could also detect the presence of Irish, English, Native American, Spanish, and French influences, for slavery had transformed the Africans into a cultural and psychological mosaic.

If not Africanity, their exit-identities reflected various degrees of adjustment, coping, assimilation, and acculturation to what it means to be a "black" person in a predominantly "white-controlled" country. The types of adjustment patterns that Houston Baker, Jr. (1980) linked to literate slaves from the 1700s, and John Blassingame (1972) linked to common field slaves for the same time period are remarkably similar to the identity frames St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton uncovered in their 1945 study of black life in Chicago, which McCord, Howard, Friedberg, and Harwood present in their 1969 text on lifestyles in the black ghetto, and which Gerald Early (1993) captured in a recent book of essays on the meaning of blackness written by 19 contemporary black men and women. Some of the more important identities that seem to continuously appear across black history are assimilationist, ambivalent, militant, self-hating, and internalizing or synthesizing. Persons with the assimilationist frame tend to play down the importance of race in their everyday conception of themselves, and they

stress, instead, their sense of connection to the larger, dominant society. Ambivalent blacks seem openly perplexed about whether to stress their blackness or their Americanness in every-day life. Militants display a blind-faith commitment to all things black and a strong aversions to all things white. The self-hating types experience intense self-loathing, which they trace to being black. The internalizers or synthesizers operate with a multidimensional mind-set about blackness that allows them to be functional, proactive, and productive.

As fascinating as the discovery that certain black-identity categories transcend black his-tory is the discovery that, under certain circumstances, blacks may move from one identity frame to another, resulting in an identity conversion experience. The conversion results in a sense of black-identity *renewal and awakening*. The renewal theme was recorded during slav-ery, as in Nat Turner's identity conversion just before his well-known slave rebellion, and after slavery, as in W. E. B. Du Bois's oceanic awakening to his blackness when he was an under-graduate at Fisk University. This mapping of conversion continues during the early part of the 20th century (Lewis, 1993), when Alain Locke (1925) harked that the "New Negro's" renewal was the psychological infrastructure for the Harlem Renaissance. Moving closer to our times, we find identity renewal was a major theme in the lives of such figures as Malcolm X (1964) and Elaine Brown (1992), and it was a driving force in the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Van Deburg, 1992).

During the renewal process (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995; Milliones, 1973; Thomas, 1971), some of the identity types (assimilative, ambivalent, militant, and internalizing) become mark-ers or "stages" of identity change. The identity to be changed tends to be assimilationist in na-ture (Stage 1). It accords little salience to race, either out of denial and self-hatred, or in a more positive light, because the person has an identity grounded in something *other* than race, as in one's religious orientation; that is, the person may have an intact and functional identity, but one which, in the overall scheme of things, makes being black somewhat insignificant. This is what ultimately makes the person susceptible to change, because something may happen, an *encounter,* if you will, that causes the person to feel she or he has been *miseducated.* From the *encounter* (Stage 2), the person may conclude that an assimilationist identity is clearly *not black enough,* and his or her first response may be a profound sense of confusion (ambivalent identity). The thought of having to change may even lead to a sense of loss and depression.

When the person recovers enough to continue to move forward, he or she enter a stage of militancy (Stage 3). All the fireworks of identity metamorphosis are contained in this mili-tancy stage, for within its boundaries, the old and emerging identity do battle. For the person who undergoes a particularly intense conversion, it is a period of extreme highs and lows, re-flecting the perturbation that comes from first feeling "I think I'm getting this right," to the next moment, when one falls flat on his or her face, mired in confusion. It is a period of high energy, risk taking, racial chauvinism, hatred, joy, and extreme certitude, interspersed with mo-ments of profound self-doubt. This high energy literally compels the person to seek self-expression, leading to poetry, art, or in more vulgar expressions, fantasies about the defeat and destruction on one's enemy (i.e., white people and white society). When the conversion is blan-keted in military themes, the person may feel he or she is a soldier for the people, ready for any show of commitment, including being placed in harm's way.

Given that things progress in a predictable fashion, the person eventually develops greater comfort (synthesis identity), and the new identity becomes internalized (Stage 4). Of course, not everyone moves "forward." People regress, they become "stuck" in transition—consumed by hatred—they become disillusioned, or may spin-off into still another cause and another identity "conversion." Or they become entrapped in the everyday dysfunctionalities and private demons that go with being human. Many therapists have notes on black clients

who came to them with "blackness" issues, only for it later to be revealed that sexual problems, problems of repressed anger, or problems of low self-esteem, all unrelated to race, were at the core of their misery.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A BLACK IDENTITY?

The linking of the different types of identity frames during the renewal process suggests that having a fully developed black identity involves the development of a multidimensional mindset, a point raised earlier in this chapter. In this sense, a fully mature sense of blackness borrows and reticulates aspects from a number of the different identity stances. Across history, blacks have attempted to experiment with a broad range of identities, and the legacy of this trial and error is a contemporary perspective that weaves dimensions from a number of these perspectives. From the assimilationist is borrowed a sense of hope and acceptance; however, from the militant, one notes the need to be careful and skeptical. From the culturally focused person, one heeds the need to know and relish black history and culture, and from the internalizer is discovered a way to feel comfortable with an identity that is complex rather than simplistic. Putting this all together, it becomes possible to approach black identity as a complex mind-set that helps a person better function in a variety of situations (Cross, 1991, 1995; Cross, Paarham, & Helms, 1996).

As part of the legacy of black coping strategies, the fully developed black identity of today serves at least three functions in a person's daily life: (1) to defend the person from the stress that results from having to live in a racist society; (2) to provide a sense of purpose, meaning and affiliation; and (3) to establish mechanisms that make possible productive interactions with people, cultures, and human situations that do not spring from the black experience.

The Defensive Functioning of Black Identity

The defensive function of black identity provides a psychological buffer during racist encounters. It is a translucent psychological filter that protects against the harmful effects of racism while letting the person process nonthreatening (race neutral) information and experiences. The structure of the protective function seems to involve five components: (1) an awareness that racism is a part of the American experience; (2) an anticipatory mind-set that, regardless of one's station in life, one could well be the target of racism; (3) keenly developed ego defenses that the person can employ when confronting racism; (4) a system blame and personal efficacy perspective in which the person is predisposed to find fault in one's circumstance and not one's self; and (5) a religious orientation that prevents the development of a sense of bitterness and the need to stigmatize whites.

The first two components constitute the heart of the protective capacity, for one cannot defend against something the existence of which is denied or minimized. For example, if one sees oneself as a special Negro who is beyond the reach of racism, then one will hardly be in a position to anticipate being the target of a racist assault. For a black person with a well-developed defensive shield, racism is a given, and one understands that he or she may well be the focus of racism. The third factor refers to the behavioral and attitudinal repertoire one can employ in negotiating racist situations (withdrawal, assertion, counteraggression, passivity, avoidance, etc.). The stronger, more mature, and more varied one's ego defenses, the greater one's capacity to handle a variety of racist interactions. Because blacks frequently find themselves living in poor and degrading circumstances, the fourth factor helps one to maintain a sense of perspective and personal worth in the face of racism. In this way, the person is able to

distinguish between what is an extension of one's self-concept (that which one deserves and should be given credit for) versus what is a reflection of the racist and oppressive system against which one must endure, struggle, and survive. Finally, the fifth factor, the spiritual and religious one, helps the person to avoid becoming embittered and filled with hatred toward whites. This is important, because time and again, hatred originally directed at whites will spill over and poison aspects of black-on-black relationships.

The defensive function also helps a person deal with the "hassle" of being black. It operates to minimize the hurt, pain, imposition, and stigma that comes when one is treated with disrespect, rudeness, and insensitivity. Rather than being unduly hurt and caught off guard, the defensive mode allows the person to maintain control and avoid overreacting. Highly motivated blacks apply the shield as they forage through the American experience for race-neutral opportunities, "open doors," and find resources that can improve their personal fortunes and the lives of their family and kin. The content of what a black person must guard against differs by gender. Consequently, while both black women and black men must defend against racist stereotypes, the content and dynamics of these stereotypes differ, as in the "Aunt Jemima" and sexually loose images heaped on black women, and the "lazy Sambo" or drug-crazed criminal images used to stigmatize black males.

It should be noted that the defensive function can become dysfunctional in a variety of ways. In one instance, the person may underplay the importance of racism, in which case the defensive function will be inadequately developed, and the person's identity will provide little protection against racism. The lack of a defensive modality can also result from the person having internalized the racist images of him- or herself (self-hatred) and/or from accepting as true the negative images directed at blacks as a group (group rejection). As is well documented, internalized racism can lead to color phobias, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, anger and rage, and black-on-black crime (Oliver, 1994; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). Finally, defensive dysfunctionality occurs when the person is oversensitive or even paranoiac, "seeing" racism where it does not exist. Instead of engaging the larger society and using one's defensive mode to filter out racist from race-neutral content, the person simply opposes contact or interaction with anything thought to be linked to the "white" experience. This can be disastrous in school-age black youth, who, in defining academic achievement as "white-behavior," disengage from academic pursuits.

The Group Affiliation Function of Black Identity

To function effectively, every human being needs to feel wanted, connected, accepted, and affiliated, although the group or groups from which one may derive a sense of well-being need not be the group to which one is socially or publicly ascribed. For example, many blacks derive their sense of affiliation from groups that have little to do with a black-oriented identity. Instead, some may achieve personal fulfillment, status, and happiness through their religious affiliation, their occupational status, or their sense of American patriotism. Such people cannot be said to have a black identity, because their sense of personal well-being is anchored to something other than their blackness.

Having a black identity means that one's group-affiliation needs are met through one's sense of connection to black people and black culture. The individual's feeling of being valued, accepted, appreciated, and affiliated is deeply rooted in black people, black culture, and the general black condition. One's values, cultural preferences, artistic tastes, leisure activities, cooking styles and food choices, secular and religious musical tastes, church affiliation, organizational memberships, and social network or intimate friends are all influenced by one's perceived connection to black people.

The affiliation functions of black identity can lead to the celebration and study of black accomplishments, the search for ways to solve black problems, and a desire to discover, protect, and disseminate information about black culture and history. When taken too far, as in racial chauvinism, it can result in intense social conformity, polarized "we–they" perceptions, and the stereotyping and demonization of nonblacks.

Bridging or Transcendent Function of Black Identity

When combined, the first two functions form the type of ethnic identity that is fairly typical of people whose lives revolve around a particular culture, religion, or ethnicity. Not only may such persons see the world primarily from the perspective of "their group," they may actually show little interest in learning about or interacting with persons from other groups. As long as a black person operates (work, play, marriage, religion, etc.) in an all-black or predominately black community, the need to have as part of one's identity the functional skills and sensitivities that make one competent in multicultural or multiracial situations may be a low priority. However, the omnipresent paradox of black life is that whether one lives in or out of the black community, it is nearly impossible to avoid intense social and commercial intercourse with ethnic whites, including Jews, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans.

Consequently, a third function that defines the multiple mind-set we call black identity is a *bridging function,* which, when developed, results in varying degrees of multiracial and multicultural competence. Some blacks are chagrined at the necessity for this third function and may take a minimalist attitude toward its development. Others may work hard at being both black and American, in a bicultural sense, while still others may relish a quite expansive bridging capacity that is multicultural in nature. This helps explain why black people who embrace a black identity do not represent one ideological position. Black nationalists may take a minimalist approach to the bridging function, persons who focus on black–white interactions may evidence a biracial salience, and multicultural blacks may be those who bridge to at least three or more cultural dimensions of the American experience.

Transracial and, especially, black–white bridging activities can lead to conflicts within the black community. Black nationalists may interpret bridging other than the Pan-African variety as a waste of limited time and resources, while those involved in transracial connections may counter that black life is inherently bicultural, if not multicultural. Other blacks see any debate about "to bridge or not to bridge" as not grounded in reality, since their workplaces, schools, and community environments are already cultural kaleidoscopes; they see the development of the bridging functions of black identity as a necessity. Black women argue that the sexism of both white and black men makes it necessary to constantly bridge between their gender and blackness orientation. Finally, bridging adds a crucial element of flexibility to black identity that allows one better to assimilate rapid culture and technological innovation. Black Americans, like all Americans, must be able to keep pace with change in American society, and a constricted, provincial, identity structure cannot handle innovation.

CONCLUSION

In 1951, two psychiatrists, Abraham Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, published what at the time was thought to be a state-of-the-art psychological investigation of the mind and personality of the Negro. They concluded that middle-class and poor blacks alike suffered from a "Negro-self-hatred" syndrome that likely had origins in the slavery experience. They called

this slavery legacy the "mark of oppression." With the unfolding of the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s and 1960s, scholars took renewed interest in the study of slavery, and by the late 1970s, the "mark of oppression" legacy had been proven false. It is now understood that over the course of nearly 400 years of slavery, the slaves were able to exploit various gaps and contradictions in the way the slavery system operated to produce a level of humanity and cultural development never intended by the slave owners. Blacks exited from slavery with personality and cultural strengths that allowed them to navigate continued experiences with oppression from 1865 to the late 1950s. Over the last 30 years, this legacy of strength has met its match in black nihilism, stemming from the massive and protracted unemployment of black workers. That black and white observers alike have seen in this nihilism a "legacy of slavery" constitutes a form of intellectual denial of the psychological consequences of economic redundancy in the 1990s. In the past, as long as blacks were able to find linkages to the mainstream economy, they converted their meager earnings into fuel that sustained their culture and their protective psychology. In today's world, the employment links to the larger society have been severed completely for hundreds of thousands of blacks, and the resulting nadir may prove to be as grim a challenge as that faced by blacks after slavery or during the Depression.

Over the course of history, blacks have experimented with different identity frames that might provide relief from their predicament. I discussed the distinctive features of a number of these identity options. Furthermore, during attempts at identity self-renewal, blacks go through an identity conversion experience that requires leaping from one type of identity to another, as in a progression of stages, until a new identity resynthesis has been achieved. I concluded by looking at the way in which a modern conceptualization of black identity reflects a *multi-dimensional mind-set* that protects or shields against racism, provides a sense of group affiliation, and establishes links to the larger, nonblack or multicultural world within which most blacks are located.

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