

Different Shades of Self: On Culture's Undeniable Impact

By Kavita Avula, Psy.D.

It was the end of the day and I was relaxing at an African bush camp having enjoyed my first safari. I found myself “chatting” with a one-year-old Kenyan girl. The dialogue was quite entertaining given that I don’t speak Swahili and she didn’t speak any English. We had a good rapport, nonetheless, evidenced by the smiles and coos that characterized the chat. At one point, she pointed at me and declared to her father, “Muxungu”. He laughed and averted his eyes, amused and not quite sure what to do with it.

Having had my share of cross-cultural encounters as an international psychologist, I was certain I knew what she had said. I asked her father what “Muxungu” means and he confirmed my hypothesis: “it means...White Person”. He was surprised at my response: “I thought so.”

This was different from my initial response to a similar interaction fifteen years ago. I almost fell over when a group of three-year-old girls at an all African-American Head Start center asked me what it felt like to be “White” after running their fingers through my hair. I checked my skin and was stunned with their response to my question, “Who’s White?”

“You are.”

The very early age at which socialization occurs, and with it the internalization of socio-historical-political constructs of privilege and power, still astounds me. Whether the most accurate terms are used or not, difference is clearly registered for those groups of people who have been routinely marginalized, colonized, and demeaned by the world’s societies. I am reminded of Janice Gump’s, PhD discussion of the automaticity of race-based stereotyping in her article *Reality Matters: The Shadow of Trauma on African American Subjectivity*¹. The research that sought to assess the effect of Afrocentric features on assignment of descriptions found that it was not just race, but physical features associated with marginalized groups that yielded a higher likelihood of stereotypes with a negative valence. The broader the nose and the fuller the lips, the

¹ Gump, J. P. (2010). Reality matters: The shadow of trauma on African American

more likely the probability that the face would be assigned a negative valence, *whether the face was White or Black*.

I'll never forget that those young girls, barely out of diapers, were cognizant on some level of the social meaning attributed to the difference in appearance of our hair texture. They continually commented on how soft and shiny my hair was and how much they wished they could look like me. It's disconcerting just how quickly socially constructed ideas about what is attractive and desirable is communicated to the world's young children. An immigrant from India at the age of two, I vividly recall my budding awareness of the social construction of attractiveness when I entered a mostly white preschool when I was four. Prior to this, I had spent most of my time with the Indian kids of my parent's friends, who had also recently migrated to America.

At my preschool, I can assure you that no one mistook me for a Muxungu. My brown skin, the feature that set me apart from the other kids, and the label "Indian" were most noticed by my peers, not my shiny, soft hair. The kids ridiculed me, called me Pocahontas, and ran around me making the rhythmic sound, hands clapping over their mouths, so stereotypically associated with Native Americans. They jeered that my family lived in a teepee and swung from trees.

Like the African-American girls, I also wanted to be "not-me." One day of my four-year-old existence, to my poor mother's shock, I sauntered into the kitchen with stark white talcum powder slathered all over my face, apparently convinced this had done the trick. My mother almost fell over, as she tried to understand the Muxungu-wannabe in front of her. My mother didn't need a diploma in psychology to see that her preschooler already knew something about race and discrimination. Like Zora Neale Hurston, the American Folklorist and Anthropologist who recalls the very day that she became "colored", I remember the day that I became "Indian." How sad that the realization of my cultural self was immediately followed by an attempt to white it out. I quickly came to believe that belonging to the dominant race was better. Being white meant to be liked, to fit in, to be envied, to have someone to play with, to be normal, to be happy.

These examples illustrate just how context-dependent the self is. At an African bush camp, I can be considered white even though I'm brown and in nursery school, I'm considered Native American even though I'm Indian. Today, when I go to India, I'm told I'm not Indian I'm American, because of the way I look. Meanwhile, in the US, an Indian woman who looks like me is crowned Miss America, and the social media becomes flooded with outraged messages that she is not American enough solely because of the

color of her skin.

As mental health professionals, it's not enough to know that a person is from a particular culture. We must take the time to find out what it means to that individual. Based on the characteristics that different societies have attributed to Indians, I'm treated differently everywhere I go depending upon how "being Indian" is constructed in that locale. I think my favorite locally defined self occurred in Spain where many of the Spaniards I met associate being Indian with being spiritual or mystical and were therefore intrigued by me. Talk to my sister who is a few shades darker than me and she'll tell you a very different story. She was pushed around in the Madrid metro and called *sucia negra*, which means, "dirty black girl". Skin color and race, combined with culturally embedded stereotypes and fears, produces myriad reactions, from micro-aggressions to far more insidious and aggressive reactions.

A lighter shade of brown, I have been afforded a level of privilege that my own sister wasn't. What we look like matters. With each darkened shade of brown skin, life is that much harder. Considering this, how is it possible for most psychoanalytic theories to omit social and political reality in their approaches? I would agree with Janice Gump: "Reality Matters."

Gump makes the invaluable observation that institutional slavery in the United States, which lasted for centuries, has been denied to the extent that it's affective and traumatic aspects remain widely un-discussed and unknown to many. To overcome trauma we must identify its source and define its impact, and communicate this understanding to avoid acting it out and turning victims into victimizers.

Gump says trauma "leaves a void that can be filled only by the revisiting of it". Her description of the silence regarding slavery and its impact reminds me of the silencing I experienced in a visit to the West Bank. I witnessed the subjugation of a group of people systematically deprived of resources and stripped of power. My inability to talk about what I saw there risks perpetuating that subjugation. Many who have visited, President Carter, Nelson Mandela, and Noam Chomsky, have likened it to apartheid in South Africa. When I attempt to talk about the blatant degradation of the people, there is something that obstructs free dialogue. It's as if talking about the oppression of the Palestinians suggests a form of anti-Semitism. For me, if supporting one group of people precludes taking issue with the inhumane treatment of another group, then we become complicit in perpetuating this injustice.

The words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu capture the way I felt after my visit. He said, “I have visited the Palestinian occupied territories and have witnessed the humiliation of Palestinians at military checkpoints, and the inhumanity that won’t let ambulances reach the injured, farmers tend their land, or children attend their schools. It reminds me of the many black South Africans who were corralled and harassed by the security forces of their apartheid government. I hope for a future where one people need not rule over another engendering suffering, humiliation and retaliation.”

It seems important to examine the ideas that we unconsciously internalize both on the individual and group levels from the earliest years of our lives. In a recent conference on large groups entitled “Context and Multiculturalism: Power and Privilege in Groups and Organizations Explorations through the Large Group Experience,” or as I like to think of it, in this conference on society, we had the opportunity to hear, expose, and explore unmetabolized parts or unconscious issues being held in individuals and in subgroups. While there were moments that were chaotic and uncomfortable, there were also moments of finding meaning and purpose; each large group was an opportunity for understanding powerful social constraints relating to authority, organizational dynamics, culture, race, and personal responsibility. The large group consultants reminded us that while the large group was an opportunity to study society’s dynamics, it was also an opportunity for true dialogue.

As mental health professionals, we must continue to create more culturally informed approaches that do not involve categorizing individuals into groups. I believe the path to doing this is via depthful individual and group exploration. The large group, if lead skillfully, can be an excellent forum for beginning this journey on the community level. True cultural awareness does not come from a course in multiculturalism; rather, it comes from true dialogue that can only happen when we, as individuals and groups, dare to have the courage to look inside and be honest with ourselves and each other about what we is hidden there and then take the risk to state it out loud. In the moment that we can sit with each other amidst the mired intricacies of stereotyping, judgments about skin color, and the undeniable impact of racism, we have taken an important step toward healing.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field.

I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense.

-Rumi