

**Generationally Transmitted Trauma in
African Descended Communities**
Lennox K Thomas
Association of Family Therapists 17.9.16

Introduction

The use of the word trauma has become so much part of everyday vocabulary that it has lost some of its meaning. I will be using it to describe an event or series of events that have life changing effects on those involved. The capture and enslavement of Africans for over three hundred years in the Americas and the struggle for civil rights is such an event. Members of these communities have adapted a survival mode for some years and found themselves more likely to go to prison than to college, between six and twelve times as likely to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital. In the Caribbean and American experience early pregnancies and secret fatherhood is an issue, Boyd Franklyn (1989). Family separation appears as a repeated motif and this has an impact on the development of relationships. Sixty percent of children are born to single headed households which is an early indicator of future family poverty. Dr Kwame McKenzie (2006) posits that the day-to-day grind of racism, abuse and self-medication with drugs and drink contributes to the stressors that push Caribbean people to the door of the acute psychiatric services. I have always seen this as a form of combat fatigue.

The few publications on generationally transmitted trauma come from the United States written by Joy DeGruy-Leary (2005) and Reid Mimms Higginbottom (2005).

They specifically refer to this as Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome or Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder. American Psychologists and clinical social workers have worked in mostly black or Hispanic communities and have noted the issues and behaviours that they considered adaptive plantation behaviour as if little has changed. Lago and Charura on this side of the Atlantic (2015) highlighted trans generational trauma giving useful technique for working.

“The role of therapy is to unpack the problem story and its cultural underpinnings, explore the shift in the individuals’ concept of self as a result of the experience and make visible information or perspectives that would have been neglected through the silencing of the trauma narrative.” Colin Lago & Divine Charura

Barbara Fletchman–Smith also British wrote two books about slavery and its psychological sequelae. She believes that slavery had a major negative impact on relationships, attachment patterns, family patterning and behaviour. It is my view that working with generational transmission lends itself well to family and systemic therapy for this very reason. After some genogram work with a Black family and working long term with the son of a Jewish holocaust survivor I became interested in the generational transmission of trauma. Caribbean people are only just beginning to come to terms with their brutalised histories and internal colonisation.

An interest in my father’s Pan African politics led me to collecting notes on my family history from elderly relatives...long before ‘Roots’. I would not come across clinical descriptions of Black families until reading the work of Charles O’Brian (1990) and Nancy and AJ Franklin (1999). I had been well served with novels and

plays by Black writers, E. R. Braithwaite, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Maya Angelou, Roy Heath, Andrea Levy and others. Clinically, African Caribbean people have been all but ignored so that their concerns have not been those of the professions.

What Slavery Left Behind

African American therapists have long made the link between present day problems in Black families and the dysfunctional position that they were in for over three hundred years. How family functioning and psychological development has been affected is something we are yet to uncover in the UK. That, we as professionals might have an interest in more than the presenting issues of family conflict, truancy, eating disorders, child abuse, delinquency the red flags of family problems, seems too much. In many cases we have not begun to understand the issues in British/Caribbean families and therefore are not able to pose the questions. Not knowing the subtleties of self-hatred, internalised racism, shadeism and family construction prevents the therapist from picking up the threads of traumatic transmission. It is most important that professionals are able to understand the historical context of their client's families and communities and moreover what implications there might be for themselves as practitioners. As much as Black people have been harmed by slavery, harm has also been done to White people, more than anything else is the blindness to the damage, the fear of disturbing a hornet's nest and the paralysing fear of being accused as a racist. What has remained has been the

vestiges of psychological superiority, white psychological capital and the inflated sense of European worth. Therapy has yet to find a way to talk about what slavery has left in its wake for us all Black and white, inside and outside our consulting rooms. Our separated social positions have led to stereotyping projections and false beliefs. These beliefs and attitudes get passed down the generations 'like Great Grandma's recipe for apple pie.... nobody could quite remember great grandma.... but they all knew the recipe.

The transmission of Behaviour and Attitude

Raising non-biological children was not unusual for most families because of the fragmentation of families that slavery created. In slavery families were usually headed by older women caring for a daughter figure and young children. This pattern continued for many years in the Caribbean and still exists in some form. Black women had strong bonds with networks of women, men had a difficult time getting off the margins and having roles and status in their families. They had grown to trust and rely on each other, never sure of their women's love or loyalty. Black women seemed to be caught in a circular trap with men, Fletchman –Smith (2011) p2, bemoaning an uninvolved father, and finding themselves choosing an unsuitable partner. Not respecting or trusting men she sees his father in her teenage son, and the pattern continues. Like the White master before him having more than one woman became a familiar pattern for some Caribbean men, and manliness was measured by the number of children fathered with multiple women. Dis-empowered

and marginalised for many generations, physical prowess and sexual potency became the signifier of Black masculinity. This and misogyny, are still part of a cardboard cut-out of Black male heterosexuality in some communities. The slave master's objective to break the African and have them at each other's throats has continued to be a problem. It is clear to see this played out on the streets by young black boys killing other black boys who live just a few streets away. This renewed plantation hostility is a form of Black self-hatred which has long been a hidden theme among Black people. This lack of self-love was evidenced by black psychologists in America after the doll studies Clarke & Clarke (1939). Frantz Fanon (2008, p112) said that the black person finds themselves living out what is projected onto them, their African identity squeezed out after centuries of oppression. He added that in the land of the coloniser the colonised will always suffer from a certain malady.

'Black males, for their part, accustomed as almost half of them are to losing the father's presence in early childhood, and looking to their mothers for maternal and paternal sustenance, too frequently reach maturity with deep and unresolved maternal conflicts.' N. Hare & J. Hare 1993 pp153

Caribbean men and women travelled to other islands and the Americas to find work. They were the main source of labour employed in the construction of the Panama Canal, Claypole & Robottom (1985) and the pattern of absentee fathers became something that was repeated through the generations with many families not having

men around. The call to defend the United Kingdom in the two World Wars and to help repair the devastation led to further separations. Children born in the Caribbean were coming to join parents who were now strangers to them and in doing so experienced another separation from grandparents. Elaine Arnold (1997) identified the emotional difficulties experienced by these children whilst working in British child guidance clinics in the early 1960s. There was controversy with education departments and Black professionals. Bernard Coard's '*How the West Indian Child is made Educationally sub-normal in the British Education System*' (1967) led to an examination of this policy. The cumulative effect of separation, losses, and being in survival mode had a detrimental effect on children's development and their ability to learn. That and racism apart, there was a problem of the standardised Educational Psychology tests.

How we see the effects of generational trauma?

The unease around White people and the pressure of never being quite open with them is learnt in some families. People in the Caribbean had lost children and other family members who were sold on to different plantations. Secrecy was important as seen in the film 'Twelve years a slave' where learning to read and write was a flogging offence. Boyd-Franklyn (1989) makes reference to the issue of mistrust and resistance to therapy in some families. She attributes this to the fear of being labelled crazy and the shame of exposing personal information to a stranger. White therapists have talked about the difficulty engaging with some Black families but this has been

also said by Black therapists. Some people have a sense of shame having being looked down on and judged for generations. A connection has to be made with slavery some five generations ago, and contemporary problems in some Black families of *'not telling people mi biznis'*.

Caribbean children interpret the silence about great-grandparental enslavement as shameful and maintain the silence. They soon learn that it is an awkward and embarrassing conversation and so protect parents by not mentioning it, yet suffer the stupefying effects of the big secrets that have accrued in families as a result of this. As a six-year-old in a market in the Caribbean I remember a woman telling my mother, *"Me free paper burn.... I'm going back to take labour on Monday"* fast forward thirty years, a young British/Caribbean social worker told me, *"Me free paper burn"* I knew that I had heard this before, she had just got back from annual leave. I became interested in how children incubate traumatic events. Our childhood psyche protects us from being overwhelmed by terror and in some fortunate cases help us to dissociate and survive until the memory of the incident returns when better able to cope with it.

I remember a frightening incident as a little boy when I was told by a teenage cousin to *"keep away from the silk cotton trees when it was becoming dark because I would hear the cries and moans of the slaves who were hanged from them."*

Families can transmit the damage of slavery trauma through several generations and in many ways by the learned behaviour of the generation before them. Selma Fraiberg, in her paper *'Ghosts in the Nursery'* (1975) discusses the ghosts of people's

past family experiences that unwittingly influence and get in the way of how their children are raised. The transmission of attitude, a sense of inferiority, dysfunctional family culture, family norms and emotionally dysregulated behaviours become embedded in family life. Commonly the emotional distance learned during slavery was partly caused by mothers knowing that their children would be taken away and sold. A practice of over three hundred years is passed on through generations of babies born into families preparing them for a forced separation. Being repeatedly played out through the generations it is not surprising that a frequent complaint from Caribbean parents and children is about the difficulty of being openly affectionate. Professionals who are familiar with Gregory Bateson's double bind theory will be aware of how modes of communication in families gets passed on. A positive effort has to be made by a family member to disentangle themselves from the confusing communications in order to break the pattern. The use of the genogram helps to understand the roles, relationships and parenting styles that helps and changes transmission. The effects of historical trauma are far reaching, some are in living history others forgotten and commemoration around them like the Seder, the Passover meal, ensures the need to remember. Transatlantic slavery, the decimation of Native Americans, colonization, the partition of India, the Irish and Jewish Holocaust are all markers of trauma that have a profound effect on families. While they might begin with a single event like slavery in the colonies, this sets off patterns of behaviours that persist today and are transformed into multiple contemporary issues affecting families and communities. Continental Africans who

were not enslaved appear to have been much less affected by colonisation. They perform better in the education system and in the workplace. Like people of the Indian sub-continent, for the most part, they were able to hold on to their names, language, values and culture.

A report commissioned in 1965 by the US department of labour stated: -

“That the Negro American has survived at all is extraordinary – a lesser people might simply have died out as others have” Thomas & Sillen 1991, 89

The Wells family

Maureen Wells a Black NHS administrator referred herself to therapy after a couple of years of grief, anger and depression following the death of her mother. After a few sessions she was accompanied by her sister Annie and two brothers Peter and Wayne. They talked about the beatings ***Murderations***, they received from their mother when they were younger and the rages she would be in. Annie and Peter were keen but Wayne was suspicious and ***did not want to stir things up***. Annie said that their mother kept secrets and did not like her asking questions, even about her father Connor who she never met. Maureen said that she feared ending up in a psychiatric hospital like Peter. She added that their mother, although difficult, was the glue that held them together and now that she has gone they all seemed lost and confused. They also said that their mother was a critical argumentative person. Maureen gave an example of bringing home the shopping just weeks before her mother’s death and being confronted with her disapproval. Surveying the table with shopping she said

“so you bought chicken thighs and not the legs then” Maureen said that she knew exactly what her mother was saying to her, so she just left the kitchen unable to reply.

Looking back, she was angry with her mother for her self-centredness.

Stanford, their dad was in residential care because it was difficult to take care of both of them at home. After his wife died he became withdrawn and forgetful and would wander the streets around the care home. Wayne said that his family was complicated and odd and he got away as soon as he could so that he did not regret what he might have said to his mother. He added that there were secrets and half-truths around their mother and little was known about her family in Jamaica. There were things that could not be spoken about, like the two girls from her first marriage and the mystery of Annie’s Irish father. Any curiosity about their family history was shut down with the reply, ***“don’t ask me no question”*** They felt that their mother’s death opened up more questions that even their father was now able to answer with his failing memory.

Maureen said that during her childhood her mother always visited Annie and the foster family but she did not know that she had a half-sister until she was ten. At Stanford’s insistence Annie was introduced to the family and is now very connected to them. They all agreed that their mother was unaffectionate and bad tempered like her own father. Peter said that when they were young their mother would beat them when their father was not at home and that he got the worst of it. They were so afraid that they would freeze and he would wet himself when she was cross.

Maureen said that she wanted to leave home at 18, but found herself becoming the new mother as Leonie became mentally and physically unwell. She resents never

leaving so that she could have a life of her own. She lives in the family home with Peter, Wayne lives in the same town, married with children who barely knew their grandparents. Fostered by a White couple as a baby Annie seems to have had a happy upbringing and continues to live with her elderly foster father who she looks after. The sisters in Jamaica raised by their maternal grandparents have had little contact with the family in the UK and there seems to have been little warmth between them. Doing a genogram helped them to speak, each revealing something that the other had not known about their family. They all believed that their mother was selective, giving different bits of information to different people, she could not be open about her life.

Leonie was the second of five born to the Gordons, a teacher mother and senior civil servant father in Jamaica. She attended a good private school like her sibs and later a secretarial college qualifying as a bilingual secretary. She married at 18 to a 20 year old childhood sweetheart and had two girls quickly. The marriage fell apart and Leonie returned to her parents. In 1943 The British War Office advertised munitions work for Caribbean women, and her parents encouraged her to go, offering to look after the girls. In a Midlands city she fell in love with Connor an Irishman, immigrant like herself and was soon pregnant. He backed out of a commitment and she was advised by the authorities to give up baby Annie, named after her Irish grandmother. Annie was fostered so that Leonie could continue her war work. In 1951 she obtained a divorce and married Stanford Wells, who also left the Caribbean to work maintaining train tracks. They were housed by the railway authorities and

had three children, Peter Wayne and Maureen. When Maureen was ten their Sister Annie was introduced to the family and the girls have been very close since. Annie said that she was happy to have brothers and a sister because she was raised as an only child.

Stan's father was a Methodist minister and his only sibling, his sister married a minister and moved to Canada. Stan had good friends who continue to visit him at the care home. He adored his wife who could do no wrong and Wayne felt that his father never stood up to her. They had a maternal aunt and uncle in the US who once visited the UK, and an uncle in Jamaica who did not travel abroad, on account of his bad nerves. There was no contact with the paternal aunt in Canada.

Maureen left a session determined to speak to her mother's older sister Minnie in the US. She learnt that her grandparents were not all that they were given to believe. Minnie said that they were strict and undermined their children particularly Leonie. They forced her into an unhappy marriage to a womaniser to remove shame from their face because of her pregnancy. Minnie left for the USA to study in the 50's and encouraged her youngest brother Clarence to do the same. Her brother Jackie remained at home and was emotionally beaten down, never confident enough to leave. Minnie said that her grandfather Gordon was a violent brute who seemed to blame his children for his lot as a poor subsistence farmer. He had inherited the small plot from his parents who had been enslaved and later indentured on the neighbouring estate. He never managed to get far away from the site of his parent's enslavement and he told his children stories of the floggings and suicide in his family

that had been told to him. Min's father stood up to her grandfather and was thrown out of the home. He always said that this was the making of him because from the age of fifteen he made his own way in the world and was glad to get away. He moved to Kingston and found work as a shop assistant whilst attending night school. He achieved his Senior Cambridge and got work in the civil service which changed his life.

Learning from the tree

Working with genograms with people from diverse backgrounds used to be a challenge to Family therapists as it was for many therapists working with difference. A number of Family therapists in the US, Hardy and Laszloffy and Falicov sought to put this right. I know that this was being addressed in the UK at the Marlborough and IFT in the late 1980's and trainees had the experience of learning from their own genogram.

The family tree was useful in helping the family members to understand their history and how relevant it was to their lives. Unsurprisingly little was spoken about the past in the family because it was a place of pain regret and longing. Charting the tree would not have been possible without the help of aunt Min in America and they seemed to have made a connection that they vowed to maintain. Maureen observed that the women in her family did not seem to marry or have children apart from her mother who did both. She wondered if her mother had been a challenge to the morality of her Jamaican middle class family and at the same time a cautionary tale to the other young women in the family. Annie observed that three of the girls were

raised by other people two by grandparents and herself by foster parents, Maureen being the only one raised by her mother. She wondered if there was a pattern of this in the family history because their mother had to walk away from her children twice. Wayne like aunt Min and uncle Clarence got away and he was able to form a loving relationship. Peter and Maureen like Jacky were not able to get away, have difficulty with relationships and issues with their mental health. They were clear that the domination and rage that was passed down the family was not passed down to them. Stanford was a peacemaker and he always had a way of calming his enraged wife, they were said to be like *chilli pepper and cucumber*. Peter felt that Annie and Wayne had these calming qualities and that Maureen and himself were the carers in the family.

They were pleased that they could get together to talk about the family and thought Maureen was brave to organise it. Peter said that he could not help but admire his mother for surviving a teenage marriage, leaving two little girls behind, helping the war effort in a strange land and coping with being pregnant on her own during the war. He said that she had to make difficult choices from an early age much more than any of them had to, no wonder she was bitter. His hard choice was breaking up from his partner but he had good contact with his children.

What was helpful to the Wells was being able to talk to each other and recognise patterns that had been repeated in their family. From the time Maureen decided to bring her family to therapy, much of the work was done because they were not in conflict. It is good to provide opportunities for family members to tell their stories,

re-process and re-interpret what happened to them. For the Wells it was against the backdrop of generations of hardship and discontent that they did not know about. They could have each claimed victimhood but they did not. They saw their family life from a perspective that gave them an understanding of their ancestors and their struggle to rise in the face of adversity. They were able to see how things came about in the family and how trauma had run through the generations and shaped behaviour. The Wells family felt some form of cumulative trauma had left them emotionally damaged. They recognised that their mother grandfather and great grandfather had family trauma that was passed down to them. It was important for them to talk about how they felt and what they could do to regulate their emotions when at risk of feeling overwhelmed. In order to make successful intervention with families they should be able to understand how behaviours are triggered, experience the process of changing and understand what needs to happen to maintain the change. Referring back to Lago and Charura, are we complicit in the silencing of the trauma narrative.

Thinking about change

It could be said that I have painted a grim picture of people of Caribbean antecedents. but it would only be grim if there were no clues to solutions. A resilient people who survived the damage of enslavement and discrimination will, like the Wells family be able to face up to the problems they inherited and make changes. Generational transmission is not easy to identify if we only think about single family units. It is

from the experience of seeing it repeated in several families over a couple of generations that we and the family will be able to recognise it.

From John Byng-Hall's *Scripts and Legends* paper 1988, we learn that

'Each member of the family has a mental representation of family relationships-in the same way that each member of the cast of a play has a copy of the script'.

Maureen Wells was afraid that she would become her mother and this among other things brought her to therapy. She had the good fortune to find her aunt Min as a different loving version of a mother. The Wells had the opportunity to re-examine the script and had the emotional freedom to make some improvisations. Many factors combine to hide trauma transmission, family patterns of silence, *mi bisnis*, not paying sufficient attention to the statistical information on the social performance of African Caribbean people and blaming them for things that go wrong. One popular view is that we *should forget all of that stuff about racism by now* because we are in a post racist society. Meeting Canadian, Caribbean, American and South American Family therapists and educators at an international UNESCO conference on the social and psychological consequences of the transatlantic slave trade had a big impact on me. Why are we not curious about black people's histories and experiences? Where is the curiosity we claim to have as a profession, but can't ask about the families' experience of discrimination or racism?

Conclusion

The uncle of my Jewish patient whispered to his great nephews and nieces that they needed *'to always have a bag packed ready because you never know when they will come'*. This provoked anger and fear in his nephew my patient who felt that his uncle was scaring his children, but could not deal with the fear that was evoked in him. The reality of persecution had moved into the fourth generation and the fear for the old man, my patient and his children seemed as fresh as 1938. My patient realised that his fear was just beneath the surface and that the ageing process had pushed his uncle back to escaping Poland as a young boy and the useful advice he was given. Working with three generations or more of Caribbean families will reveal similar scars of migration loss adjustment and prejudice. Together the family will have the patterns available to them by looking at family history and how events were shaped probably for the first time. Those patterns that are passed down and the roles that get played out can be examined and members will have the legitimacy to be curious, not shut down or frightened. Their current emotional and social functioning might have been affected by their collective past. Employing their skill to help Caribbean families with transgenerational trauma is an urgent task of the competent therapist or mental health worker. Helping them to identify and break generational patterns of behaviour is part of the therapeutic task. Unless this can be skilfully done the therapist will not be able to make useful or effective interventions. Failing to engage with this difficult work will only result in no change and therapeutic failure. what emerges from the patient whether this is anger, pain or shame? The work of the

therapist is not done unless they have made a connection with the nature of social and psychological adjustment that might have taken place over the generations.

References

- Akbar, N. (1984) *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery*, New Mind Productions, Jersey City, NJ. USA.
- Akbar, N. (1992) *Visions for Black Men*, Winston-Derek Publishers, Inc. Nashville, TN, USA.
- Apprey, M. (1999) Reinventing the self in the face of received transgenerational hatred in the African American community. *Journal of applied psychoanalytic studies*, 1,131-143.
- Arnold, E. (1997) Issues of reunification of migrant West Indian children in the United Kingdom, In J. L. Roopnarine & J Brown eds. *Caribbean families: Diversity among ethnic groups*. Greenwich C T: Ablex.
- Arnold, E. (2012) *Working with Families of African Caribbean Origin*, Jessica Kingsley, London.
- Boyd-Franklin, N. (1989) *Black Families in Therapy*, The Guilford Press, New York, London.
- Byng-Hall, J. (1988) Scripts and Legends in Families and Family Therapy, *Family Process*, Vol 27, US. June.
- Coyle, S. (2014) Intergenerational Trauma — Legacies of Loss *Social Work Today*, (USA) Vol. 14 No. 3 P. 18
- DeGruy-Leary (2005) *Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome*, Upton Press USA.
- Fanon, F. (2008) *Black Skin, White Masks*, London, Pluto Press.
- Fletchman-Smith, B. ((2003) *Mental Slavery-Psychoanalytic Studies of Caribbean People*, Karnac, London.
- Fletchman-Smith (2011) *Transcending the legacies of slavery*, Karnac, London.
- Fraiberg, S. & Shapero, V. (1975) Ghosts in the nursery, psychoanalytic approach to the problems of the infant / mother relationships. *Journal of the American Academy of child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 14: 3,387-421.
- Hardy, K. & Laszloffy, T. (1995) The Cultural Genogram: Key to training culturally competent family therapists. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, Vol 21, No 3. 227-237.
- Hare, N. & Hare, J. (1993) *The Endangered Black Family*, Black Think Tank, San Francisco, CA. USA.
- Kunjufu, J. (2002) *Restoring the Village, Solutions for the Black Family*, African American Images, Chicago, Ill, USA.
- Lago, C. Charura, D. (2015) *Working with transgenerational/Intergenerational Trauma*. *The Psychotherapist*, Spring, 23-25, UKCP, London.

- Madhubuti, H. R. (1990) *Black Men; Obsolete Single, Dangerous*, Third World Press, Chicago, USA.
- McKenzie, K. (2006) Mind Your Head, *Improving the Mental Wellbeing of Men and Boys*, Wembley Conference presentation UK.
- O'Brian. C. (1990) Family Therapy with Black Families, *Journal of Family Therapy*, 12: 3-16
- Reid, O. G., Mims, S., Higginbottom, L. (2005) *Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder*, Conquering Books, Charlotte N C.
- Scott, K.M. (2000) *A perennial mourning: Identity conflict and the transgenerational transmission of trauma within the African American community*. *Mind and human interaction*, 11,11-26.
- Thomas. L.K. (2007) The Therapeutic Needs of Those Fleeing Persecution and violence, now and in the future. In *Resilience, suffering, and creativity*, Ed. Alayarian, A. Karnac, London.
- Thomas, L. K. (2008) Reflecting on Internalising the Historical Past: A Caribbean Experience. In *Internalising the Historical Past, Issues for Separating and Moving On*. Eds. Elaine Arnold and Bernadette Hawkes. Cambridge Scholars Publishing,
- Thomas L.K. (2013) Parenting roles and the African Caribbean man in post Slavery Society Ch. 13. In *The Transatlantic Slave Trade and Slavery*. Eds. Lovejoy P. and Bowser B. UNESCO. Africa World Press, New Jersey, USA.
- Thomas, L.K. ((2014) Attachment in African Caribbean Families, in *Attachment Theory in Adult Mental Health*, Eds. Danquah, A. & Berry, K. Routledge, London.
- Weingarten, K. (2004) Witnessing the effect of political violence in families; Mechanisms of intergenerational transmission. *Journal of marital and family therapy*. Vol 30, No 1, 45-59.

