

The influence of ‘the internal oppressor’ on personal and collective progress within the black community.

This paper addresses the workings of an internal adversary, which the presenter terms ‘the internal oppressor’, and discusses its implications for healing, resilience and advancement. The subject is approached from the perspective of how black people cope with experiences of modern day societal and institutional racism.

This paper was given by Dr Aileen Alleyne at the Post-adoption Conference held on Saturday 2nd February 2008. e-mail: aileen@kisskadee.com Website: www.aileenalleyne.com

Before I begin my presentation, I would like to clarify my use of certain terminology. Where the term black is concerned, I will be using it in a narrow sense to refer to people with known African heritage who can be discriminated against because of the colour of their skin. Also, as there are many areas of commonality among British minority groups, some of the issues and themes I will be raising may have direct relevance or application to these groups. As a black person addressing black issues, I find it distancing to talk about **them** and **they**, therefore I will refer to **us** and **we** when speaking about the black community or black people as a minority group.

A discussion topic or for that matter, any discourse examining the impact of slavery may illicit exasperated groans with comments such as – ‘God, not

that subject again' 'Isn't it time we or they move on?' – and 'why do we keep harping back to the past, shouldn't we be concentrating on the present and move on'.

Such impatience may well be justified particularly when you consider we are looking back at a major historical event that started over 400 years ago. I can certainly empathize with the groans. However, as a psychotherapist who is interested in the how the past can have influence on the present, and in turn shape the future, my sense-making of such irritation is that it is not so much the subject itself, but what it arouses in us all.

Examining the impact of any wide scale human tragedy is a massive emotional undertaking. It truly touches the soul. African slavery in particular, inevitably reminds us of terrible atrocities that were carried out on a wide industrial scale by mainly enlightened people with high civil values for their own. However, when it came to the African these values had neither place nor relevance.

Until the 19th Century, African slavery was considered an acceptable economic system in Britain and many other countries in Europe. It was

condoned by politicians and businessmen, and even scientists and churches justified the legitimacy of this practice which we now recognize as morally reprehensible.

I believe it is the discomfort that comes from such incongruously different attitudes towards people that makes the process of remembering so painful. The crushing shame, guilt and anger about this past are all unavoidable emotions. For some, it makes for an attachment with such a past an anxious avoidant one. For others, it is an enmeshment that has contributed to a profound trauma that causes historical wounds to be opened up in the present. It is this re-opening of the traumatic imprints that I would like to elaborate on, in addressing the workings of the internal oppressor. The internal oppressor is a term that I use to address the enemy within when it comes to dealing with modern day racism.

Public examination of the legacy and impact of African slavery is still too rare. Slavery remains an isolated issue, considered rather in private by a few people with a special involvement. I believe this lack of attention demeans the dreadful issue in a way that for example, the holocaust is not demeaned. The holocaust – everyone knows – is not just an issue for Jews. It is

something that defines everyone's humanity: you cannot properly be a human being without knowing something about this – probably the most awesome crime ever committed in world history. This is also true of African slavery. But we relate to it differently. Even though it's everyone's shame and everyone's loss, this second terrible crime is allowed to be forgotten, in a way that is, I believe, an added trauma for black people to endure on their own.

I am suggesting that it is this added trauma of carrying something so monumentally significant that makes it difficult to let go of the past. I am also suggesting that it is this added trauma that interferes consciously and unconsciously with black people's self-structure, and ultimately contributes to difficulties in present day functioning.

As we are reflecting today on the legacy of slavery and its impact on a specific area on black people's present day functioning, I feel it is important to remind us of some key events that have contributed to the truth of this living painful subject.

Powerpoint presentation of a list of significant events in African Slavery

Slavery and abolition - Key events

- 1562 First English slaving expedition by Sir John Hawkins.
- 1619 First record of Africans landed in Virginia.
- 1625 First English settlement on Barbados.
- 1626 First boatload of African slaves to St. Kitts.
- 1631 Charles 1 granted monopoly on Guinea trade to a group of London merchants.
- 1655 British capture of Jamaica as part of Cromwell's "Grand Design".
- 1672 Royal Africa Company granted charter to carry Africans to the Americas.
- 1772 The Somerset case held that no slave could be forcibly removed from Britain. The case led to the widespread belief that slavery itself was illegal in England, Wales and Ireland.
- 1778 Slavery declared illegal in Scotland.
- 1781 133 African slaves thrown overboard from the slave ship *Zong*.
- 1783 Committee on the Slave Trade established by the Quakers' Meeting for Sufferings.
- 1787 Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade founded: Granville Sharpe as a president of a mostly Quaker committee.
- 1791 23rd August – St. Dominique (Haiti) slave revolt.
- 1792 Resolution for gradual abolition of the slave trade defeated in House of Lords.
- 1805 Bill for Abolition passed in Commons, rejected in House of Lords.
- 1807 25th March – Slave Trade Abolition Bill passed in the British Parliament.
- 1808 British West African Squadron (Royal Navy) established to suppress slave trading. By 1865, nearly 150,000 people freed by anti-slavery operations.
- 1815 End of Napoleonic wars. At the Congress of Vienna, Britain puts pressure on France, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain to abolish slave trade.
- 1838 1st August – enslaved men, women and children in British Empire finally became free after a period of forced apprenticeship following the passing of the Slave Abolition Act in 1833.
- 1842 Britain and US signed Webster-Ashburton Treaty, banning slave trade on high seas.
- 1848 Emancipation by the French of their slaves.
- 1865 Slavery finally abolished in United States territories.
- 1888 Slavery abolished in Brazil.

Even after slavery was abolished, other terrible crimes against blacks were still a part of its afterlife. For example, 1952 was the first year the town of Tuskegee had no lynching recorded. Segregation and apartheid are current memories of lived experiences for many people. So the presence of these memories is not so distant.

I think the tendency to return to African slavery to understand aspects of black people's modern day functioning is not an indulgence, but a way of giving something important a very special recognition. It **should** be a part of our minds and memories – not to haunt us, not to disable us, but to be known and lived and accepted as one of the greatest facts that has formed all of us. But I think it is harder for black people to do this if we feel the rest of the world is not with us. What an anguish it must be first to carry a cultural burden and then to carry the further burden of not being granted recognition.

I believe it is this pain – this deep psychic pain that most, if not every black person carries knowingly and unknowingly inside them. The world's forgetfulness, its neglect of something so huge, increases the anguish and in turn, keeps something of the old wound alive within the wronged. Being forgotten always creates a sense of not being properly noticed – and leads to

a kind of damaging inward turning, a stubborn dwelling on the old wound so as not to have it forgotten. I believe it is this internalizing which may entangle black people in an uncreative engagement with and acting out of their past.

I chose to dwell on the issues discussed so far, because I feel this background overarches much of what I will be saying about the workings of **the internal oppressor** - the enemy within ourselves.

I do want to acknowledge at this juncture, that although this presentation is intended to highlight limiting and unhealthy aspects of black identity structure, these are not the whole of the black makeup. There are many other facets that must be noted.

Peoples of the black Diaspora are recognized the world over for their innate ability to be resourceful and resilient even in the most dire of circumstances. We have only to think of war torn Africa as an example, to witness how its peoples battle through repeated natural and manmade disasters. Many have mastered the wonderful art of being resilient. Although battle-weary by life's circumstances, black people are still able to work well, play well, love

well and expect well. Many have moved from the position of mere surviving to thriving. And countless others are aware of the fact that **hurt people who hurt others** must seek out opportunities to move away from the position of victims to that of victors. These are not sound bites. It is the reality of the other side of black life that is not celebrated very often.

In discussions like these, a proper perspective must be maintained, otherwise we run the risk of pathologising a people and doing further harm to the discourse on racial diversity.

All that said, I will return to my examination of the role of **the internal oppressor** and its impact on personal and collective progress within the black community.

The concept of the internal oppressor is a term describing the workings on an internal enemy in black functioning. Many years of clinical experience as a psychotherapist, including my research, my own socialization and ongoing social observations, have all indicated that when it comes to race relations and racism, the real battleground is **the personal**. On this battleground, the need to understand the role of **the internal oppressor** is

critical. And I want to emphasize, that in asserting the importance of **the personal**, I am in no way denying the ever-present realities of systemic and institutional racism in all its guises and forms.

An emphasis on **the personal** I believe can help us gain deeper insights into black identity issues and those factors influencing personal values and beliefs systems. Attention to **the personal** can also help in the process of developing reflexivity with regard to issues such as, disempowerment and racial oppression. A reflexive identity is to have sense of one's history which is in continual development for self-awareness. It enables movement within and I believe this movement begins only at the point where unconscious identifications and fixations with aspects of one's history cease. Throwing off the shackles of the past and emerging from the entanglement of historical briars is still, in my view, an important modern day task for black people.

The internal oppressor is a concept that helps us to understand how we still have difficulties in letting go and how we continue to hold on.

George Bach (1985), an acclaimed American writer of self-help books

suggests that, “the inner enemy is as much a formidable foe as the most manipulative [or oppressive] of associates.” This profound statement reminds us that it is equally important to look at what the ‘victim’ might be bringing to the difficult encounter, as well as acknowledge the real effects of their trauma.

I believe black people’s struggles and difficulties are not just concerned with the external effects of racism and marginalization, but also with internal psychic difficulties which have left us with stuff to clear up in our own backyard.

How did I discover this phenomenon?

I observed the workings of the Internal Oppressor during a three-year research project investigating black workers’ experiences in three institutions, namely, the NHS, Social Services and Education. The people who volunteered to be interviewed were mainly women from Caribbean, black British, black African and mixed heritage backgrounds. They were invited to discuss their work experiences and these were recorded. Very close scrutiny was paid to the language used to describe these experiences and these were analysed. The findings showed up recurring themes in their narratives. I called these scripts and these scripts created a distinctive

pattern that highlighted specific experiences and difficulties in black/white encounters.

One set of scripts showed a collective response to black people's experiences in predominantly white settings. [Powerpoint presentation](#)

Cultural 'scripts' - entitlement or impediment?

****Verbatim responses extracted from respondents' stories****

Taken from doctoral research (Alleyne, 2006)

Scripts that include the collective in black archetypal experiences

1. "People will always see your colour first and personality second"
2. "We have to work twice as hard to be noticed"
3. "No matter how much we succeed, people will always try to beat you down"
4. "Black people can't be racist - we haven't got the power"
5. "We can't afford to wash our dirty linen in public – that's like giving white people ammunition - we must stick together"
6. "As black people, we don't seem to come together and sustain anything that's good for any length of time"

Another set of scripts showed a defensive (and protective) mindset in dealing with these experiences. [Powerpoint presentation](#)

Scripts that indicate a defensive (*protective*) mindset and value system

7. "I am not interested in theory – I go by my instincts"
8. "What's the point in trying – you'll only get no for an answer"
9. "I am not interested in promotion – it forces you to conform to the system - I don't want to lose who I am as a black person"
10. "I don't do deference where white people are concerned"
11. "I can never trust white people - I have a healthy disrespect where they are concerned"
12. "You can't afford to show vulnerability - people will walk all over you"
13. "When things get too much, I just walk away"
14. "You take me as you see me - what you see is what you get – like it or lump it"
15. "This is who I am – I say what's on my mind - ain't changing for no one"
16. "I am not putting myself out for no one"
17. "I always leave things to the last minute"
18. "I take everyday as it comes – I'm not into planning"
19. "I never blow my own trumpet"
20. "I don't trust anyone but myself"

Taken from doctoral research (Alleyne, 2006)

The research revealed that many of these familiar cultural scripts that were held as entitlements were impediments to personal and professional progress. The research also confirmed that the kind of resilience developed and maintained to manage difficult work situations were ultimately at a cost. Apart from the obvious cost to health, for example, many women developed and suffered high blood pressure, diabetes, weight gain, chronic fatigue syndromes and low level clinical depression, others suffered costs to their

professional growth - losses that they attributed to a constant fight that wore them down and made them less pro-active in actualizing their full potential.

Some respondents who proudly wore the 'strong black woman' image as a badge of honor, carried their burdens very much alone and showed an inability to share problems with others and receive help. Others perpetuated their isolation by fiercely protecting a tough hard exterior.

I summarized what I saw in the scripts as experiences of **narcissistic wounding** or in ordinary terms, injuries to the self.

Perhaps, I should say something about the use of the word narcissism. When used in layperson's terms, the word can mean puffed up with one's self importance or self-admiration. In other words, synonymous with being egotistical. In the context of black identity wounding, I use narcissism and narcissistic wounding in the strictest clinical sense to mean self-hate which is projected outwards. Sometimes this self hate is directed at ourselves, sometimes at each and other times, the community at large. In this sense, the term is not about self-love, but self-hate and the narcissistic structure is

really a defence against psychic and cultural annihilation. It is potentially very vulnerable to breakdown, as is observed in the case of young black British men, who either sink into deep paranoia, acting out their hurt on each other in the black on black violence as we see today, or withdrawing from society and into mental ill-health. Whichever way self hate is acted out, it ultimately leads to an imprisonment of selfhood.

What is the nature of the Internal Oppressor?

We are probably all aware of the concept of internalised oppression, which is the process of absorbing values and beliefs of the oppressor. This process as we know can lead to self-hate, low self-esteem, the disowning of one's own racial group, and other complex defensive behaviours and attitudes. The internal oppressor however, is distinct from internalised oppression in that it **is** an aspect of the self – it is part of the ego structure that functions as an inhibitor and an internal adversary. It **is** the enemy within.

Two notable American writers Akbar (1979) and Leary (2005) conceptualise the internal holding of the legacy of slavery and its negative impact in terms

of a “post-traumatic slave syndrome”. Their theory suggests that centuries of the painful history of slavery followed by systemic racism and oppression have resulted in multigenerational adaptive behaviours, some of which have been positive and reflective of resilience, and others that are detrimental and destructive. The internal oppressor highlights a major aspect of this detrimental and destructive side of the post-trauma syndrome.

It is however not just concerned with historical baggage. My research also suggest, that alongside this element, are other factors which are to do with the things that shape our personal make-up, influence the choices we make and how we deal with life situations. Some of these include patterns of family upbringing where issues of loss and separation have had a profound impact and where unresolved family difficulties might have negatively shaped our attitude to power and authority. So in essence, this internal adversary – the internal oppressor is shaped by the historical content, psychological and socialisation factors.

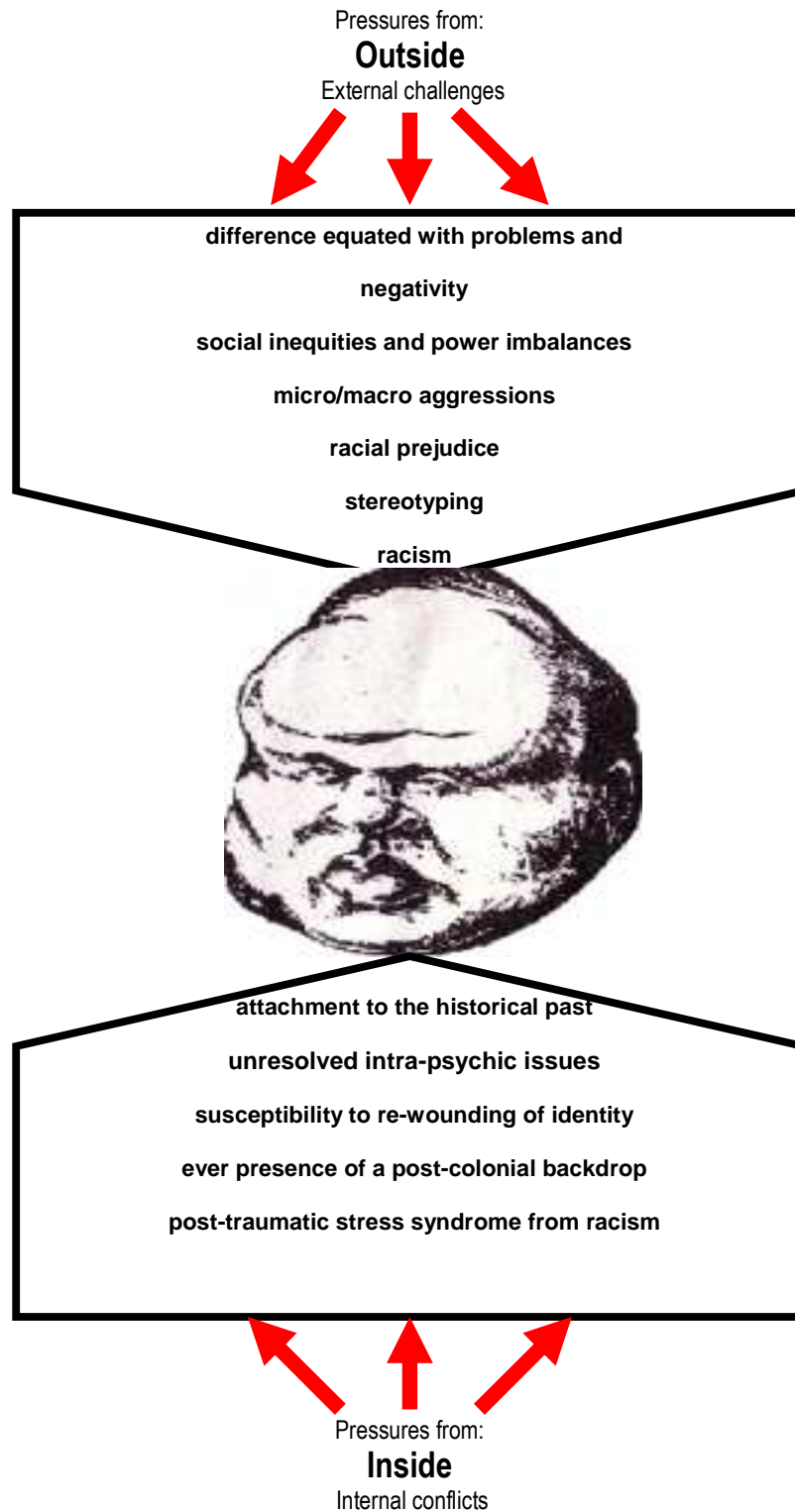
For the most part, the Internal Oppressor appears to lie dormant. However, it can be re-awakened by the experience of present day racism which can be

either real, perceived, or a mixture of both. In these circumstances, old historical wounds are re-opened, compounding the effects of the here and now wounding experience, and thereby re-wounding the sufferer who is now doubly affected by these harmful experiences. The re-opening of historical wounds can explain why perhaps some apparently small hurts can be so deeply felt by black individuals.

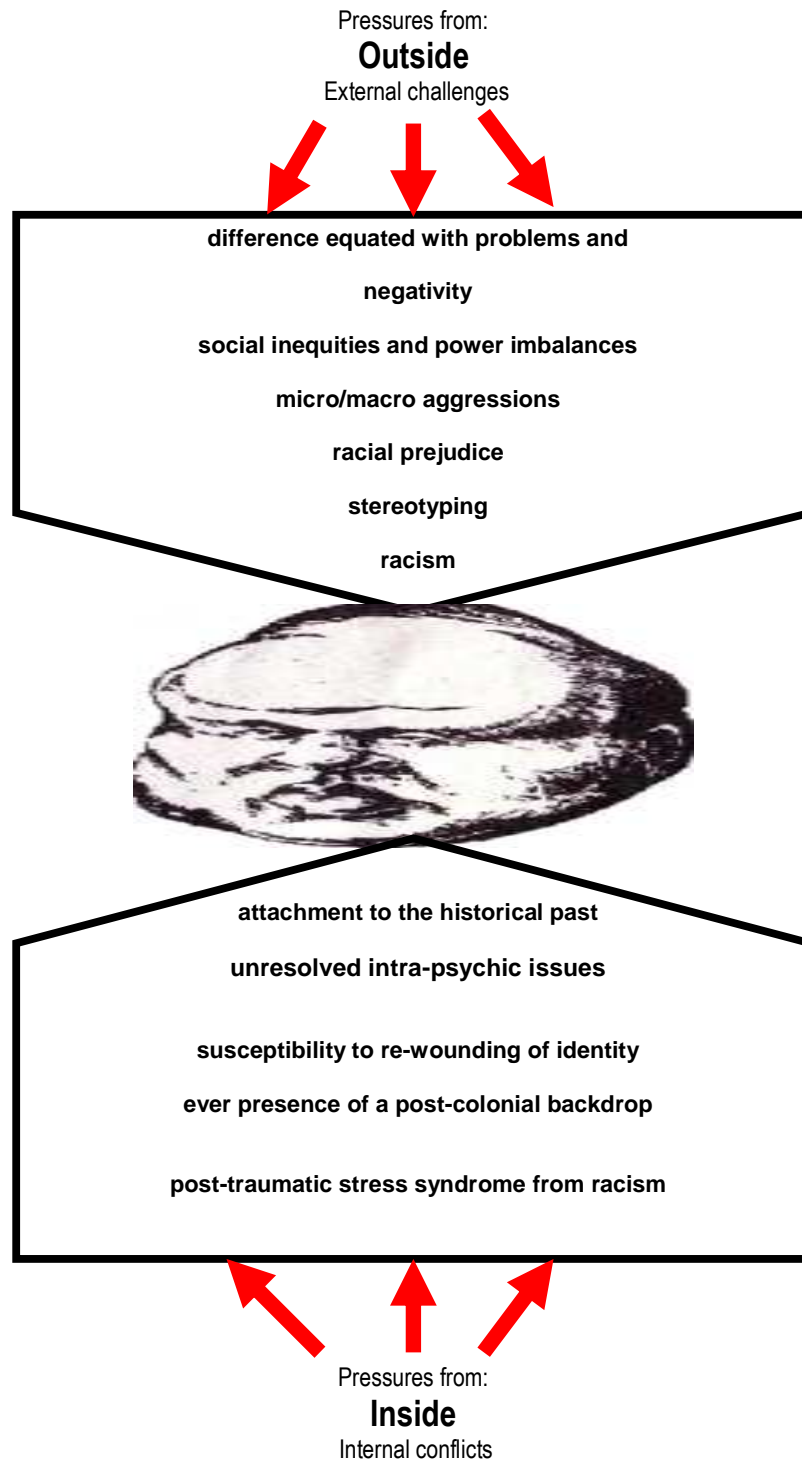
Powerpoint presentation - *“The Grinding Down Experience”*

I’ve included this image to demonstrate how forces from both the outside and inside can impact on the black individual and contribute to feelings of being worn down.

“THE GRINDING DOWN EXPERIENCE”



“THE GRINDING DOWN EXPERIENCE”



The **internal oppressor** appears to do its most damage when people are trapped or have become stuck in this diminished place – the squashed position represented in the second image of the above diagram. Over time, pressures from the outside have the harmful effect of depleting personal energies, alongside pressures from the inside, which compound the sense of being slowly worn and alienated

For issue parenting, the internal oppressor can also have negative influences. No doubt many of these themes will be elaborated by the other speakers here today.

Consequences of the internal oppressor for parenting - **Powerpoint presentation**

We invalidate our children's worth by:-

- **not noticing enough** – their efforts and their aspirations, the friends they make for example and the company they keep
- **fierce criticism and fault-finding** – a throwback to how some parents themselves were parented

- **name calling** – ‘you good-for-nothing, *wutless* (worthless).....’, ‘*you nappy head*’..... i.e. referring to the natural state of black hair, ‘*god, you ugly as sin*’ i.e. referring to a very dark skinned person.
- **inducing shame** by showing dissatisfaction with and hate of our physical features, skin tone, hair texture
- **narrowing our children’s horizons** and hence, black culture itself. e.g. ‘*Why would you want to learn that for – where is that going to get you*’? ‘*We expect you to keep it black in this family*’.
- **having unrealistic expectations** of our children to achieve the things the parent didn’t achieve
- **internalising stereotypes** – believing in the negative ways society sees us, thus re-enforcing the negative public black identity and ultimately the private identity

How do we work with the internal oppressor ?

Facing up to this internal enemy will challenge us to think about and reframe the following:-

- ***getting stuck in fruitless enactments and re-enactments dramas.***
With specific regard to black and white relationships, these patterns usually begin with the anticipation of a negative response from the Other, which in turn invites a reciprocal negative reaction. Before long, both parties are caught up in something unhealthy and unproductive. Examining what we bring to these situations can help

us exercise independence of mind and engage in more proactive ways.

- *being unnecessarily competitive with each other.* We still continue to struggle to work well together and sustain our efforts long term. This is particularly noticeable in the areas of business and collective pursuits. This refers back to the refrain of hurt people hurt others and ultimately themselves.
- *investments in adopting defensive attitudes and postures.* This only breeds negativity and compounds the sense of isolation.
- *acting out anger.* This doesn't allow feelings of hurt and disappointment to be addressed in more constructive and creative ways.
- *tendency to be loud and brash.* What is this about and why is it so? Is it an unconscious wish of the forgotten to be seen and heard? Whichever it is, it most often carries a negative label.
- *tendency to be hard on ourselves* prevents us from entertaining more loving and compassionate feelings.
- *not feeling and owning entitlement.* This allows opportunities to slip us by.
- *expecting to receive 'favors and waivers'.* This is a phenomenon that suggests the world owes us one – but then again, in the light of what

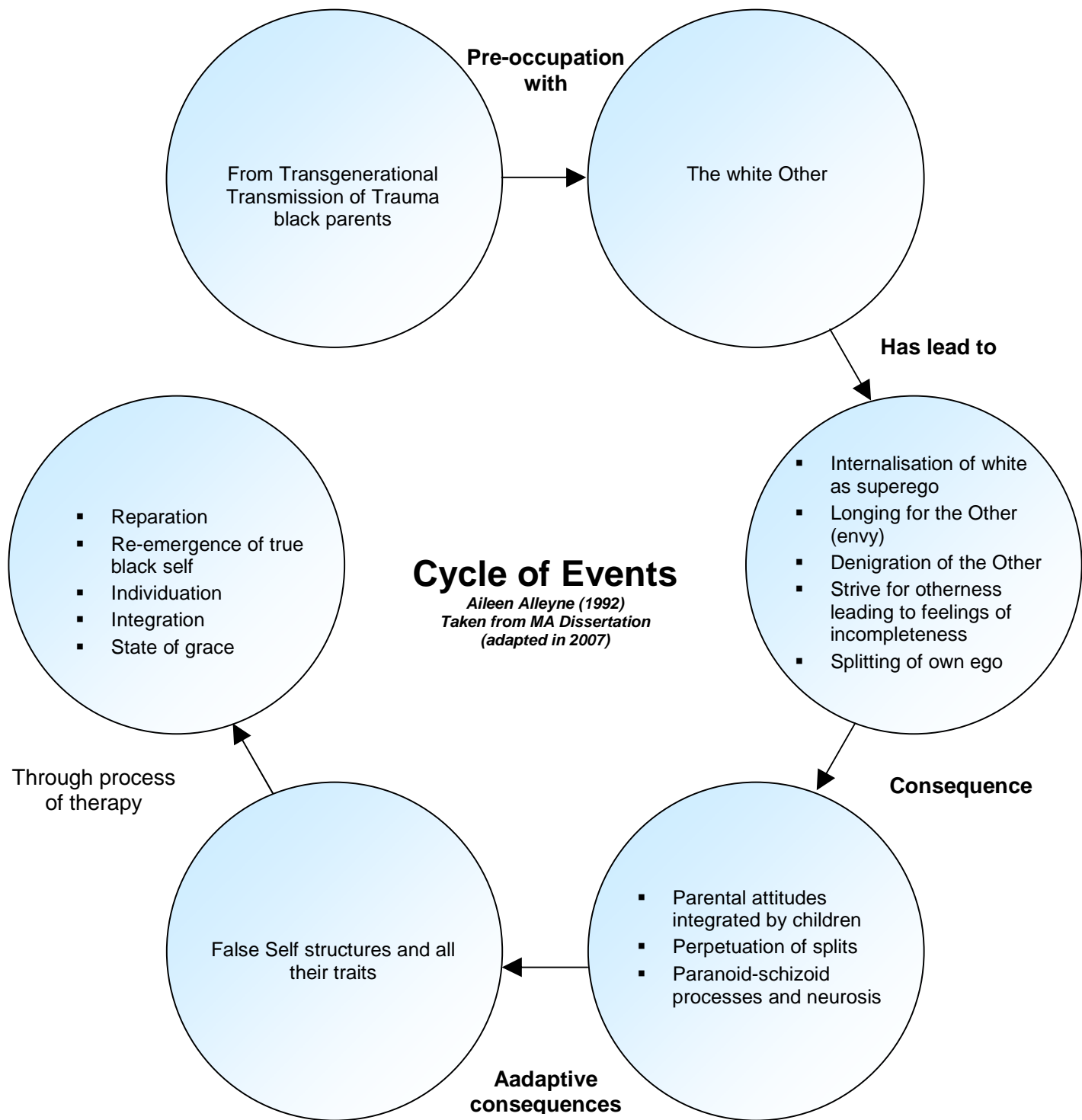
has been addressed in this presentation, perhaps there is a sense that people feel it does, and what we see is the unconscious manifestation of this owed debt.

These are just some of the areas that need constant re-examination in castrating the internal oppressor – areas that need to be reframed in order to adjust mindsets that are stuck in negative patterns and an unhealthy inward looking place. We can facilitate this work where ever therapeutic groups can be created – e.g. in schools, in education, in young people’s support networks, in parenting classes, in counselling and psychotherapy practice and in its training.

To summarize – I have chosen the **Cycle of Events** which, even though I had created this diagram in 1992 for my MA studies, I still feel has relevance today and to the subject we are addressing in this conference. The Cycle highlights the whole picture and the many themes I have addressed in this presentation.

Powerpoint presentation

The Re-Emergence of the True Self... The Black Experience in Relation to the White Other



This diagram illustrates the formation and perpetuation of internalised negative patterns of thinking by black people in relation to the white Other has led to internal conflicts and *false-self* traits. The *false-self* structure is an important construct in understanding black people's struggle for healing and individuation.

The Cycle of Events suggests that the past and present are inextricably linked. History **has** indeed left a legacy of pain by continually keeping the past in the present. I've suggested that there is a need to separate out from this past and heal from the narcissistic wounds. I see this work as an essential modern day (and psychotherapeutic) task. I've further suggested that in all of this work, there is a need to be reflexive. Reflexivity enables movement within and thus progress.

To conclude - I wish to quote Carl Jung (1964) who said, "*if you find the psychic wound in an individual or a people, there you also find their path to consciousness*".

- End -

Biographical details

Dr Aileen Alleyne is a registered psychodynamic psychotherapist, clinical supervisor and researcher. In addition to running her private practice, she is a visiting lecturer at several training institutions and a consultant on issues of race and diversity in workplace settings. Her clinical research, examining black workers' experiences in three institutional settings, makes a significant contribution to the discourse on race. Highlighting the concept of '*the internal oppressor*', it offers ways of deepening understanding of black psychological reactions to the negative impact of racism. Aileen is the author of several book-chapters and articles, exploring themes on black/white dynamics, shame, and black identity wounding. e-mail: aileen@kisskadee.com Website: www.aileenalleyne.com