The Descendants of Enslaved Africans

Gloria Gordon, PhD, London South Bank University

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Abstract
This paper discusses the implications for British culture of superimposing on enslaved Africans and Europeans black and white cultures as a means of establishing power differentials between members of the two groups from the 16th century onwards. The personal and collaborative experiential action research and inquiry research methods used to surface the data are shared. The black-white duality is defined and discussed in terms of how it works to hold blacks and whites in a dysfunctional symbiotic oppositional relationship to one another. The social distance strategies embedded in British culture to maintain and perpetuate these power differentials are crystallised as are the key characteristics of the institution of slavery transcending the passage of time. The reasons why, two hundred years on from the abolition of the British slave trade, slavery and other forms of coerced labour continue to blight millions of lives, becomes evident. The descendants of enslaved Africans (DoEAs) in particular are shown to have unfinished business in furthering humanity where slavery is concerned.

Introduction
… if the future replays the past, so too must the past anticipate the future. (Strauss and Howe, 1995)

There is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation has a rendezvous with destiny. (Roosevelt, 1936)

My purpose here is not only to share facts as I have unearthed them from research but to also reflect on what these facts mean for us today as part of a greater unfolding story – and to suggest that we too have a rendezvous with destiny. The theme of this
conference *Slavery: Unfinished Business* has immense relevance to the life experiences of the descendants of enslaved African (DoEAs). Slavery has left DoEAs, as a group, without a sense of purpose and therefore destiny. Instead many of us are still reeling in the aftermath of slavery largely unaware of how it is continuing to impact on our lives to the extent that it is. Engaging with my own life on a daily basis in order to bring about transformational change in the black experience allowed me to gain important insights into how the dysfunctional black British personality is formed, the role British culture plays in this process and therefore what some of the critical issues are for the DoEAs.

This research has developed out of the academic discipline of organisational behaviour/analysis. I adopted a systems approach to the black experience beginning with the individual – using my own life-world – so as to gain insight into the wider dynamics of the group, nation and world. By this means the silent relationship that exists between blacks and whites within British society was surfaced. Inquiring into what it means to be black revealed the existence of the race taboo (Frankenberg, 1993; Thomas, 1989) as well as the fear that surrounds the life experience of DoEAs in British society. Details of this research can be found in my forthcoming book: *Towards Conscious Bicultural Competence: Beyond Black and White* (Gordon, June 2007). In this paper I focus on the black-white duality identified as the means by which slavery has transcended the passage of time to become a growing phenomenon in the 21st century.

**Research Methodology**

A cultural studies approach whereby the meaning and practices of everyday life were studied was adopted. I used personal and collaborative experiential action research and inquiry to improve my practice and achieve wholeness and unity for myself in the higher education institution where I worked. Identity confusion had been the main catalyst demanding change in my life. As with all action research projects, the process of this research involved me entering into the chaos and uncertainty of the unknown as I followed the clues which revealed themselves on route.

Longitudinal human inquiry with the aim of developing autobiographical awareness-in-action (Torbert and Fisher, 1989) has been used. Action research (Zuber-Skerrit &
Perry, 1992), Action Inquiry (Torbert, 2001), first- second- and third-person action research (Reason, 2001) and other forms of personal and collaborative experiential research methods unravelled the source of the crisis in which I found myself. As I have graduated from the initial phases I have engaged with more inclusive and expansive research approaches the two most significant being Academically-Based Community Service (Harkavy, 1999) and the Action Turn (Reason & Torbert, 2001). The process facilitated my evolvement as an ‘organic academic/intellectual’ (Feagin, 2000) as I sought to make sense of what it means to be black in Britain through the ‘conscentization’ process (Freire, 1970). I came to understand C Wright Mills (1959) view of a sociological imagination that allows people “to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society.”

Action research after the action turn requires the researcher to work ‘on-line’ with the issues engaging in praxis as iterative movement is made between theory and practice. The aim was to become proficient at informed action-taking. The process, in its various forms, results ultimately in the development of cultural literacy (Twine, 2004), conscious bicultural competence (Gordon, 2006) and/or autobiographical awareness (Torbert & Fisher, 1989). This is even moreso when done in conjunction with a study of the institutional biography with the aim of developing autobiographical awareness-in-action (Torbert & Fisher, 1989). The early stages of my research crystallised the existence of a silence (Thomas, 1989) around the issues of race and skin-colour that impacted on my life experiences. Consequently, the years of research have been spent engaging with this silence, a silence I had also internalised as a member of the society. The outcome of using this research approach is important insights into how race is structured in British society. As issue after issue was surfaced and I engaged with them experientially I was able to put together a jigsaw of the most important variables impacting on my life as a black woman in British society. Several of these variables are shared in this paper.

What is the black-white duality?
The black-white duality is a significant social force underpinning black and white relationships in contemporary society. It is defined as the oppositional internalised symbiotic inferior/superior dynamic relationship that exists between the descendants
of enslaved Africans (DoEAs) and the descendants of slave-owners (DoSOs). The dynamic was put in place during slavery and has been historically institutionalised within British culture (with its black and white sub-cultures) and via the institution of social interaction as the means by which the fixed power differentials between the two groups are maintained over time.

The black-white duality is recognisable as the oppositional social force carried in the consciousness of those socialised ‘black’ and ‘white’ with the most potent sources of this force being between DoEAs and descendants of slave owners (DoSOs) (refer to figure 6). The black-white duality is the offspring of the black and white cultures put in place during slavery to embed power differentials between enslaved Africans and Caucasians. The injustice of a situation whereby enslaved Africans had no rights whereas Caucasians, no matter how low their status amongst their own group membership, were granted a higher status and privileges over enslaved Africans bred antagonistic feelings still to be resolved. Still today the Office of the National Statistician identifies a defining feature of the English as being ‘white’ (ONS, 2003). It continues to be necessary to ensure the privilege of whiteness over the lack of entitlement of black minorities who now live on English shores.

Feagin (2002) claims a system of anti-black discrimination was built into British culture and include:

1. the motivations, such as stereotyping and prejudice,
2. the discriminatory actions,
3. the costs and benefits of discrimination,
4. the immediate social-institutional context, and
5. the surrounding community, societal, and global contexts

The critical insight for us to hold onto is that the creation of these imposter black and white cultures during slavery led to English culture becoming secondary to British culture. The lens of British culture was structured to seeing the world in terms of inferior blacks and superior whites. Culture as process meant that all members of the empire would now see the world in this way: divided into blacks and whites.
Enslaved Africans and Caucasians had been apportioned their place within the culture of the empire. Diagrammatically, it looks like this:

**Figure 1: Relationship between Black and White Cultures within British Culture**

![Diagram of Black and White Cultures](image)

Enslaved Africans ripped from their culture of origin were thus structurally incorporated into British culture relative to whites at its periphery. The relationship that results from this structuring is seen in figure two where whites and blacks develop a different perspective on each other based on their differential black and white socialisation. Whites are seen to view blacks as marginal and insignificant whereas blacks view whites as significant and central to their success in life.
We gain a glimpse of why DoEAs in Britain describe themselves as invisible, marginalised and peripheral to the society. Modood (2002) also describe African-Caribbeans as being the most integrated of the minority groups in Britain because of the long and complex history they have had with the ethnic majority. The SCMH (2004) report on the circle of fear existing between blacks and whites in Britain also comment on the fact that African-Caribbeans are the one group for whom government is responsible in ways that is not the case for other minority groups. This is because blacks and whites are members of the one British culture. Other minority groups in Britain are ‘ethnic minority groups’ in that they are biculturally socialised (DeAnda, 1984) into a culture of origin as well as their culture of residence. The implications here are that the black and white cultures put in place during slavery successfully and effectively developed an infrastructure within the invisible institution of culture which has bound enslaved Africans and enslaving Europeans into a superior/subordinate relationship as if it is a fact of nature.

The ‘black’ experience

To date the specificities of the black experience as it relates to the experience of the DoEAs is hidden behind the widespread use of the term black. Black is used both as a political term for any minority group experiencing oppression as well as the umbrella term for ethnic minorities in Britain coming from Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. The experience of DoEAs is further hidden by references to them as the ‘black community’. This infers they are an autonomous group who associate together
to protect group interests as is the case for ethnic minority groups. This is not the case, as seen in figure 1, where DoEAs are scattered at the periphery of white society where they exist as a social category (Banton, 1997). The positioning of the DoEAs relative to the ethnic majority and other ethnic minority group can be seen in figure 3:

**Figure 3: How Britain Manages its Diversity**

With this ongoing relationship in place DoSOs are left free to continue the relationship developed during slavery with DoEAs because of the inbuilt value in British culture of white superiority and black inferiority and into which blacks have also been socialised to protect the status quo.

Studying these diagrams we are able to see the politics of positionality which has been created between blacks and whites. Despite Ogbu’s deep and often insightful analysis of the educational experience of black children he missed this point when he noted how blacks differed from ethnic minority groups. He noted that blacks compared themselves with whites whereas ethnic minority group members compared themselves against members of their own group (Ogbu, 1997). Black comparison with whites is a consequence of the black-white duality.

Studying the institution of social interaction reveals how the normalisation of the black-white dynamic is maintained today. Goffman (1957) describes the institution of
social interaction as culture in process. Studying this institution unearthed the social distance mechanisms (Smith, 1991) operating as the hidden controls of culture (Hall, 1976) in figure 4 achieved through talk and adherence to the hidden cultural censors.

**Figure 4: Social Distancing Strategies Maintaining Black-White Boundaries**

(Gordon, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Race Taboo</th>
<th>Racialised Emotions</th>
<th>White Silence</th>
<th>Black Complicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Loyalties</td>
<td>Rhetorical Ethic</td>
<td>Political Correctness</td>
<td>Government Policy of Containment</td>
<td>Black Socialisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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These social distance strategies are discussed in more depth my book *Towards Bicultural Competence: Beyond Black and White*. In addition, the defining characteristics of the institution of slavery that have made it such a successful project for the British empire are detailed in figure five. These characteristics have been derived from studying the work of authors like Elkins (1968), Patterson (1973) and Hiro (1971).

**Figure 5 Characteristic Features of the Institution of Slavery**

- A closed system
- Accommodationist behaviours
- Culture of passivity
- Divided/fragmented group dynamics
- White absenteeism

These combine to produce an enforcement coalition (Feagin, 2000) strengthening the power of the black-white duality. These features when applied to the black experience in Britain suggest the institution of slavery is still intact as the knowledge contribution DoEAs could be making to the world, in terms of ending slavery, is effectively repressed and denied.
**Racialised Emotions**

The fuel that energises the black-white duality, making it into such a powerful social force, is the invisible but powerful racialised emotional energies of blacks and whites trapped within the invisible boundaries of the black-white duality. The emotional brew of anger, resentment, contempt, distrust, fear, blame, shame, guilt and all the other emotions arising from black and white responses to one another based on the superior/inferior relationship put in place during slavery keeps the black-white duality alive as a powerful social force. It is the outcome of the *internalised* and silenced oppositional energies, developed into a powerful force, between the two groups of people known as blacks and whites. Today blacks and whites continue to live in opposition to one another and this oppositional relationship is transmitted generationally in black and white collective consciousnesses. After five hundred years of this relationship the black-white duality now operates as an archetype (Jung, 1938) in British culture shaping the behaviours of the DoEAs and the DoSOS according to this constructed relationship.

**Duality and wholeness**

Ouzounian (2005) understands duality as universal law and says that without duality, resulting in a split between polar opposites such as black and white, we would not yearn and strive for wholeness and unity. Duality, therefore, makes us conscious beings, as it connects the concrete physical experience to the abstract parts of our thought processes and intuition or consciousness. Through duality we learn to harmonize our consciousness with our physical body and in this way realise that both need each other. On an individual level of consciousness, our physical body is the point that receives and manifests consciousness and through their blending and harmonization duality is dissolved into unity and wholeness. Thus duality is seen to govern creation and nature, since it is only through its action and workings that we are led to higher and higher levels of consciousness/awareness. For enslaved Africans and their descendants it seems, therefore, that slavery effectively achieved a split between the concrete and the abstract. The focus of enslaved Africans was placed and maintained on physical survival (the concrete) with whiteness unwittingly internalised as their highest aspiration instead of the guidance of their own self-consciousness. My own research has shown that it is with wholeness and unity through bicultural socialisation/competence that DoEAs now have unfinished business.
Unfinished business for the descendants of enslaved Africans

Great riches lie within every life experience. Our challenge is to recognize them and get the most out of them (Seale, 2003)

The silenced experience of DoEAs having been positioned as black and inferior relative to those who are white and positioned as superior within British culture hides the unique perspective we have on life, British culture and society. Though just a small number in British society, not unlike the small amount of yeast it takes to leaven a whole sack of flour, DoEAs have the potential to transform British culture through re-humanising ourselves. We have within us the knowledge and the responsibility to work through the slavery experience because the world is in need of it now. Even at the superficial level of Britain’s cultural life tremors, suggesting something is deeply wrong, are currently evident in the life experience of DoEAs living in Britain. Kotre (1983) says that the utility of any culture is seen in the thriving of its young. The young of the DoEAs are not thriving in British culture suggesting that the culture is non-generative for them. Instead their anger and frustration with the life experience described here is being internalised and turned against themselves.

British culture, which has been transmitted across the world, with the black-white duality embedded at its core, is recognisable as the means by which slavery transcends the passage of time and within which the consciousness of the DoEAs has been frozen. Ani’s (1994) definition of culture being tenacious and changing only to maintain itself has some poignancy in the case of British culture. The success of British culture in holding onto the legacies of the Empire has been an inspiration for other ethnic groups. Other ethnic groups also vie for world power today. Kotkin (1993) refer to these groups as the tribes of the 21st century. The knowledge accruing from the historical experiences of DoEAs is now needed to return balance to the world. The challenge DoEAs have as a group is that of surfacing this knowledge so that they can liberate themselves from the psychological slavery in which they have remained trapped as a group even after the physical chains have been removed. DoEAs have a particular imperative here since this is the primary way to protect our young people who are crying out for protection even from themselves. The gun crimes and murders are the outcome of the unmet needs of their inner life which, the
black-white duality of British culture internalised as inner experience, continues to disintegrate and leave in a chaotic state without any integrity of its own.

The recovery work is not just something that is needed for DoEAs but also for DoSOs. It is the ongoing invisible dynamics between the members of these two groups that keep the black-white duality in place today. It is the unconscious incorporation of blacks into British culture and thus white shaping of the black mind-world that is the culprit and with which DoEAs must now work. It is also the unsuccessful challenge to this historical act that allows new slavery to be a growth industry. British culture has not been effectively challenged to date.

As DoEAs move into the future our agenda is one of re-humanisation working through the visible and invisible legacies of slavery. This is the choiceless choice members of this group must now make. At the top of figure 6 the consequences for both the descendants of enslaved Africans and the descendants of slave owners who have not engaged in the recovery work necessary to come out the other end of the institution of slavery is shown: a wall of silence, resentment, anger, fear, blame, hate and other destructive emotions separates members of the two groups. The wall is further protected and maintained through ignorance and the unequal power relations existing between members of the two groups. Relationships between blacks and whites have settled into the normalised state seen in the central circles. DoEAs have the power to disturb the present status quo by rehumanising themselves as seen the latter half of the diagram.
**Conclusions**

The perspective transformation achieved from engaging in this research resulted in the development of conscious bicultural competence. This was the result of re-socialisation into a culture of origin as well as British culture. Developing conscious bicultural competence involves an integration of the divided self achieved by unconscious socialisation into British culture with its black and white subcultures. Conscious bicultural competence is offered as a goal for both descendants of enslaved Africans and the descendants of slave owners. Achieving conscious bicultural competence is particularly important for DoEAs who can no longer remain passively in the position that has been carved out for them by the ethnic majority leaving the majority of the members of this group unexpressed. The forces of the young of this
group, unchecked, and crying out for self-expression are being turned against themselves because of the imprisoning boundaries of black culture that give them no scope to spread their wings and fly. The DoEAs purpose of re-humanisation is one that is needed by the world – but we have to undergo the process ourselves first. This is the unfinished business of slavery for the DoEAs.

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