

The following study was submitted in April 2016 as part of a thesis entitled
Colonialism and Identity – a psychosynthesis view

Study on Trans-cultural identity – a psychosynthesis perspective

Interviews on Trans-Cultural Identity with British men and women

Subjects (four are currently UK-based and two overseas)

MAO Black African Male aged 50-60

FAF Mixed Race African Female aged 20-30

MMA Mixed Race Asian Male Aged 40-50

CF Mixed Race Caribbean Female aged 20-30

MAY Black African Male aged 30-40

MAS Asian Male aged 30-40

Objective of Study

1. To explore the phenomenology of trans-cultural identity through the lens of a psychosynthesis coaching modality.
2. To prepare the ground for further research in this area.
3. To introduce the modality and methodology of psychosynthesis coaching for trans-cultural clients interested in exploring issues around identity, while seeking a more integrated sense of self.

Questions asked

When did you first become conscious of your identity?

How does consciousness of your difference manifest in your life on a daily basis?

Which parts of your identity are you able to express freely?

And which parts are you aware of sometimes becoming hidden or getting lost?

What happens to you in a situation where you are experiencing racial abuse?

What are you aware of that might be internalised from your history?

What are your feelings around belonging?

On experiencing and locating identity

Of our 6 subjects 2 see identity located 'in the heart' (CF and MMA) and 2 in knowledge: 'knowledge of culture' (MAS) and 'knowledge of history' (MAO). CF says further that for her it is 'not in the land or the skin.' For FAF integrating her identity is 'my life's work'. For MMA identity is 'undefined' ('I thought I could be all things to all people'), 'mutable' (depending on whether his identity was 'construed positively or negatively') but also developmental, 'conditioned and conditioning'. He remembers registering grief at the arrival in puberty of a hairy, masculine identity but later in life found sanctuary in a transpersonal identity, by which he means one not circumscribed by cultural definitions. Two of the mixed race subjects experience identity as complex. MMA began to see his emergent identity as 'potentially massively complicated and edgy' and noticed a shift at university where the primary marker of his identity changed from 'racial to gendered'; class was also appearing by then as a category of difference. FAF has even 'declared war on authenticity' in response to the perceived 'bind' to co-ordinate a seamless version of herself (which she has now let go of). She notes that 'in the UK we talk about class; we don't talk about race.' For CF it is great to be seen and

appreciated in different ways by different people; she described a moment where she prepares for the night out in the knowledge that, depending on which group of friends she is with, certain aspects of her identity will be brought to life. MAY is in a trans-cultural relationship himself with a Black woman. 'I look around, read history, ask questions. I meet others, notice difference.'

In the view of MAO, 'it's a question of how knowledge of history is created, accessed and re-internalised'. Africans, he says, need to respond to the 'wiping out' of their history by 'making it available and readable' to counter the 'confusion that there was never anything that we did that we could be proud of except in sports'. Making one's own curriculum is vital but he notes many African would-be academics have to live abroad to get tenure and contribute. This perhaps explains the rising status of griots¹, the 'living custodians of our history' who 'are unafraid, have no inferiority complexes and no qualms over identity...they have acquired wealth and they know where they come from.' For MAS identity involves a pro-active ongoing enquiry into knowledge of the culture and of the land of one's origin. If you don't make the effort to engage with this material your identity can weaken. His father has been very helpful in giving MAS a strong foundation for his identity within the family but he recognises that, with time and distance and loss of the ability to read or write the language of origin, 'things start to fade away'. He credits the Hindu oral tradition for preserving the kernel of the culture (disseminated widely through mantras).

Experience of identity across the generations

A key aspect of trans-cultural identity is the shifts in experience between generations, which in the modern world seem to be becoming more marked. Parents who are not mixed will almost certainly have a very different consciousness of their identity from their mixed race children. MMA felt he 'needed external non-family models to integrate' parts of himself. FC enjoyed the 'silent understanding' amongst other mixed race people – the fact that they could identify each other (even if, as in her case, her mixed heritage may not be perceptible to a less culturally attuned eye). The shifts between generations are also witnessed by MAO who says that those of his generation who emigrated to study or work abroad found themselves becoming far more proficient in the languages of the colonisers than in their indigenous language. There is thus an alienation (from a sense of fully belonging to the culture of origin) which may be experienced anew when the émigrés return 'home' to the less than warm embrace of those who never left. There is also a sense that the identities of older generations were more fixed while those of the present generation are less rooted and so more fluid. MAO is not sure how 'secure' these new identities really are. MMA noted that his mother's identity was 'very much bound up with Islam' but because his father only reluctantly identified with his native land 'she never really arrived'. He also once witnessed his younger brother racially taunting her, 'so I punched him'. MAY said that, when he arrived in the UK, his parents were trusting in his 'friendliness' to get him to 'push through barriers'. Their vote of confidence in him may have been proved right but the divergent experience of the child and the adult in such situations is worth researching. MAY knows, for example, that some of the racist experiences his parents went through they decided not to share with their children.

Claiming or finding identity

In terms of claiming one's identity, MAY's inherited belief is 'nothing is given to you' (which in psychosynthesis terms sounds like a call to the will) although he himself is 'laid back'. FAF, on moving from Europe to the UK and struggling with the language, remembers the frustration that 'I could not claim my identity'. However, in a 'thrilling and...defining experience' at Sixth Form College abroad, she established a 'community identity...which grounded me'. It taught her that she is 'not alone in straddling identities', while she also witnessed other trans-cultural pairings that seemed more challenging than her own. CF, who has lived all her life in the UK, has had 'no struggle' in this respect. She has had the advantage of finding in her mother a 'strong, successful [Black] female role

¹ See note 197

model'. She does not feel she suppresses any part of herself but remembers vividly 'finding my identity' in her late teens through exposure to Black music and a (partly racially) different group of friends that she was drawn to. This gave her an 'expanded' sense of identity. MMA also found music a big draw but his foray into Heavy Metal² ended when a can of beer was thrown at him at a rock concert and he realised that this music was not tribally aligned with his identity. Then, wilfully search for a more resonant container for his identity, he embraced Public Enemy³ as a 'bridge for the disenfranchised'. Music from his country of origin has played a huge part in the life of MAO and is also valued by FAF as one means whereby she can show 'all her parts'. Music's transpersonal role in 'holding' identity, which has been mentioned as a key source of psychological sustenance in the age of enslavement (Chapter 4), seems just as important today.

Culture and identity – gains and losses

There was widespread agreement that trans-cultural identity confers a sense of 'more than'. CF enjoys the celebration of food and culture, which comes with her identity. MAS says that culture means that 'you get to shine' and celebrate it. He contrasts that with 'externalised Western culture' where people get 'lost'. Westerners are 'losing their religion and losing their guidance'. Nowadays he sees Indians adopting Western consumer identities in their big cities 'outdoing the Westerners' at their own game. But he says some of the 'smaller cities manage to preserve their identity'. He and his partner see a 'fundamental difference' where identity is held by community rather than individually centred. He remembers his Dad refusing to pay his younger son to wash the family car: 'Is it not yours? Do you not get a benefit from it?' At the same time he appreciates the fact that he has internalised in his identity 'being free to think and express myself' which other Indians around him in Singapore do not have. 'They lack solutions.'

On racism

When it comes to racism there is a wide range of responses. Everyone has experienced it, MAO more than most (mainly perhaps because of his age). Recently, he was mocked by customs officials (of French Caribbean extraction) on the presumed grounds of his inferior African status and the sound of his name. The hyper-visibility of his Blackness in very white environments can evoke 'being made to feel like a chimp all one's life'. Then there are the presumptions when in certain countries, thankfully less frequent nowadays, 'that one must be uneducated'. He describes the resistance he repeatedly met with when trying in London to arrange a business meeting using his real name; eventually he dialled the same person using a made-up Anglophone name and was put through straightaway. MAY, on arriving in the UK aged 11, used his sociability ('I don't judge people') and resilience to 'push through barriers' but found some of the racism 'malicious but mostly people were just oblivious'. Now, 20 years on, when his white friends get angered by racism directed towards him, he registers 'relief' at seeing things going 'full circle'. MAY's philosophy is to 'keep things moving' which may owe a lot to his (also not necessarily visible) mixed race heritage. For him racism is there but is 'illogical'. What seems to dismay him is that relations between Blacks and Asians are 'not as good as they should be', hardly helped by recent geopolitical tension. 'We are staying in our own circles' and whites on the whole are 'not engaged'. And the efforts of anti-racism, in football, for example, have not come to much, he feels. CF, being quite 'pale', was not really conscious of her racial identity until a sixth form school-friend who had come to her house 'horribly' abused her at Assembly the next morning, using the words 'fat and ugly'. FAF has 'no patience' for those in the white majority who do not see her or appreciate her. 'The tide of history is going my way,' she says. 'There are only going to be more of us!' But in her working life she does feel that she has to 'fight for respect'. She is particularly angered by talk of 'British values', institutional racism and its predilection for the Poster Child⁴ approach to defending its image. For MMA, having had mud thrown at his

² An aggressive, masculine, yang genre of Anglo-American rock music with heavy, often distorted sound.

³ Critically acclaimed 1980s US hip-hop band with strong focus on African American concerns

⁴ A poster child originally was the face of a child on a charity advertisement, used to attract sympathy and hence donations.

windows by neighbours, being verbally abused and then spat at (all before he was 12) seemed 'perplexing' and 'absurd' rather than painful. But in late teens a nasty act of racial abuse at a rave drove him into hibernation for a couple of years. Nowadays he sees racism as a 'socio-genetically inherited' condition. CF 'can't fathom' it and wishes that a particular white friend of hers could apologise for a recent slight; her own strategy of patience and understanding ('I had to be – I chose to be') does not always get a reciprocal response. Of this white friend she says, 'I wish the friendship could be different. She is a very good friend in other ways. I just want something to click.' But she has come to realise that 'people are not always kind and accepting' and, as a result, she is 'less naive'. Then she adds, 'I want an acknowledgment, and an apology and a realisation of the impact'⁵. Meanwhile MAS in Singapore found himself defending a white man on his (mainly white) football team from being told to 'go back to where you come from' by another Asian. MAS says he is so 'adjusted to always being in a minority – nothing's bothering'. He recalls an experience of not being served in a Northern pub some years ago. While in those days his younger self hung around 'seeking attention' these days he would 'walk out, complain and seek redress'.

Let down by one's own side

Bullying or being judged by 'one's own kind' is a separate category and can be confusing and extremely painful. MAY is very conscious of his good fortune in being able to emigrate but also of the envy of some of those left behind who were no less deserving of the opportunity. FAF, aged 5 or 6, didn't enjoy being called names by some of the children of her tribe on account of her lighter colour, and loss of the tribal language through emigration still denies her one way to re-establish this part of her identity. ('I didn't like being treated like a tourist.') CF has had two very painful and confusing experiences of being attacked by African women with whom she had been close friends (perhaps unconsciously re-enacting the drama of interracial politics in slavery referred to in Chapter 2 and 3) and so is 'very wary' of re-establishing friendships with female members of this group. She came to see how beset these young women were with complexes around their hair and heritage and general 'insecurity', even though with regards to one of them she 'had looked up to her and found her beautiful and a great dancer'. She then says: 'She pummelled me. I didn't defend myself. It made me sad for her.' She dated an African man once and heard unkind comments from distant relatives about 'contaminating the gene pool' even though 'my family loved him'. She says that in her experience 'conflict is always there' between these two groups and now she no longer has 'female friends of African descent'. MMA found the Muslim speed-dating sub-culture bewildering and realised he was being excluded from a category ('British Asian') that he had previously regarded as holding his identity. So this is an example of the way one's identity can be denied by the other who one might automatically have considered an ally. MAO says that in terms of our African leaders 'we are our own worst enemies' and the mismanagement of these countries ('plundering their own people') is all down to an 'identity crisis' where 'we look outside for validation. We need to develop our own collective ways of thinking.' He links 'information to knowledge and power'; in that regard he is troubled by fatalism within Islam. Meanwhile the 'intellectual elites,' he says 'are Frenchified...lost souls and not patriotic,' suggesting that their identity has decisively shifted through the colonial experience. A part of him looks sadly around at his fellow citizens and wonders 'how has it come to this?' MAY finds the dating scene quite confusing. While he himself has 'no preference' he says that sometimes 'I feel the eyes' of Black men on him when he's dating white women (his white friends confirm this). CF has also observed this phenomenon and says that Black men are expected to 'tire' of white women which leaves mixed race women as 'more of a threat'. She says 'hatred and negativity over the politics of dating is a big issue'. She is confused: 'who am I supposed to date?' On US campus FAF was taken aback at being presumed to be African American – which was not part of her identity – and thus expected to be expressing her 'solidarity'; when at other times and with other people the 'Britishness' of her identity was winning her attention.

⁵ Realisation of impacts is the second dimension of leadership in 5DL (Evans 2016) and, I believe, a critical one in trans-cultural interaction.

Adaptation

FAF adapts to the tensions engendered by her mixed identity by 'over-compensating' which can take the form of being overly 'self-righteous' in asserting her position or in attempting to manage the way others see her, by feeding them 'tokens' – familiar co-ordinates so they can, as it were, map her. She admits to being 'stuck on' this pattern for now. She has come to appreciate the 'richness' of her identity but at the same time sometimes finds herself 'trading off this currency' in order to 'get access' – which she sees as possibly 'cynical'. At other times she can find herself 'censoring' parts of herself even though she knows 'how to make people comfortable'. MMA adapted into a role of Joker or mimic, finding a way to transmute the hostility of a classroom into mirth. He admits that this may have been a device for deflecting attention from an exposed part of his identity and reproves himself for the 'cowardliness' of this tactic. On one occasion, having been thrown in a skip full of garbage by six bullies, he still emerged with a smile for his tormentors which earned their 'grudging respect'. However, even now he feels he 'could have been more heroic'. He admits to having to go through a process of working out 'if it was about me or about them.' In MMA's case perhaps a contributory factor is that he always felt that he was somehow being protected from far worse: 'I didn't do too badly. I was never beaten up.' More familiar forms of adaptation are through following the parental command to work harder at school. For MAY and MAS it was continually drummed in to them by their fathers that, from their starting-point, they would need to 'excel' to compete with the white students, although at the first time of hearing this MAY was confused at what his 'disadvantages' were supposed to be. MAY admits to being 'less open' these days compared to where he used to be, acknowledging the everyday psychological need for defences.

The challenge to identity

There is something about being challenged at the level of identity that, in the case of this study sample, has arguably facilitated the emergence of some consciousness and strength which otherwise might have lain hidden. This from FAF: 'I like who I am and how strong it makes me.' Or this from MAO: 'With lack of self-knowledge you cannot build. Know yourself, then you are unshakeable.' MAS also says, thinking of what his family has given him, 'you can't rock my foundation.' CF says that 'belonging means knowing who you are' and 'feeling at home in oneself'. That said, she doesn't want to move away from England and her friends. For FAF there has been the sense back in West Africa that 'I don't fit' which leads her to becoming 'irritated, upset, feeling judged and defensive'. In her circumstances 'language is a key access point' to shared identity. So nowadays she is more assertive in her efforts to 'align' culturally and asks those who tease her why they don't speak English.

A psychosynthesis perspective

This study looks at the experience of trans-cultural identity in which the common denominator is a British identity. The deeper context which informs the study is the thesis topic which looks at enduring impacts in modern Britain that arise from the experience of (mainly) British colonialism. Such impacts include unconsciously internalised beliefs and projections, a struggle to be seen and accepted for who one truly is, a tendency (both conscious and unconscious) in the majority culture to separate and divide and a perpetuation of the evaluation and diminution of the other based on skin colour, facial features or the sound of one's name. It is possible to see all of these phenomena reflected among the first-hand accounts submitted above. The psychosynthesis lens adds further context to the study through its conception of the stable transpersonal Self as a unifying holder of personal identity, which seeks expression through the personality in a multiplicity of ways. The concept of the 'adaptive self'⁶ is well-established in psychosynthesis, as is the journey or struggle

⁶ The adaptive self is a term used to describe the part of the personality that, in a bid to ensure survival, deviates from its authentic trajectory. If the adaptive parts become dominant within the personality then a misalignment emerges between the 'I' and the 'Self' which will trigger some kind of crisis.

towards self-realisation and the experience of authentic being. Because a psychosynthesis methodology holds the context of multiplicity within unity in relation to the identity of the client, the coaching approach operates on a number of levels: acknowledging the struggles the client faces in relation to identity; facilitating dis-identification⁷ from these; attuning to sub-personalities and emergent qualities representing different parts of the whole and working with the will in order to help build an authentic, new synthesis of identity.

Conclusions

This study looks at the experience of trans-cultural identity in which the common denominator is a British identity. The deeper context which informs the study is the thesis topic which looks at enduring impacts in modern Britain that arise from the experience of (mainly) British colonialism. Such impacts include unconsciously internalised beliefs and projections, a struggle to be seen and accepted for who one truly is, a tendency (both conscious and unconscious) in the majority culture to separate and divide and a perpetuation of the evaluation and diminution of the other based on skin colour, facial features or the sound of one's name. It is possible to see all of these phenomena reflected among the first-hand accounts submitted above. The psychosynthesis lens adds further context to the study through its conception of the stable transpersonal Self as a unifying container of personal identity, which seeks expression through the personality in a multiplicity of ways. The concept of the 'adaptive self'⁸ is well-established in psychosynthesis, as is the journey or struggle towards self-realisation and the experience of authentic being. Because a psychosynthesis methodology holds the context of multiplicity within unity in relation to the identity of the client the coaching approach operates on a number of levels: acknowledging the struggles the client faces in relation to identity; facilitating dis-identification⁹ from these; attuning to sub-personalities and emergent qualities representing different parts of the whole and working with the will in order to help build an authentic, new synthesis of identity.

So as a psychosynthesis coach, I am looking at the relationship between identity and will as well as the developmental pathways described in Joan Evans's Triphasic Model¹⁰. In this study two key elements of identity are widely referred to – the collective and the individual: that which is inherited and consists of cultural and historical factors; and that which is unique to you to express in your own way. While the majority culture reproduces itself effortlessly through publicly funded channels it may, as we have seen, require an act of will and inner resources to resuscitate and regenerate a culture that has been all but erased or to perpetuate one which sits within the narrative of the host majority. Such repeat acts of will, I believe, create consciousness and further hold identity. Moreover there is something about the mixed race experience in particular that is indicative to my mind of *more identity* – and therefore more possibilities for being and for expressing, more points of connection to the whole. This seems to me extraordinarily healthy from an ecological i.e. systemic point of view, even if the integration of all parts may be demanding. And from a psychosynthesis perspective this in practice means the Personal Centre of Identity¹¹ is free to choose from a broader array of possible identifications. This surely predisposes the individual to gravitate away from

⁷ Dis-identification needs to be differentiated from dissociation or denial; in the former one becomes aware of the contents of one's consciousness in order to let go of the identification whereas in the latter one does not acknowledge the degree to which one's consciousness may be caught by such unconscious identifications.

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¹⁰ See Chapter 6

¹¹ This is Assagioli's 'I', which is a reflection of the Higher Self. See page 8

dualistic thinking, which is seen as the cause of much of our modern crisis of civilization (Hutchins¹² 2014). It could be further argued that – also from an evolutionary point of view – the increase in genetic variability¹³ for a population with rising numbers of mixed race people creates positive *psychological* variability.

I would hypothesise that mixed race and trans-cultural people, if content and congruent within their identities, are likely to be able to hold greater complexity which, as I have suggested, is likely to become an evolutionary quality in high demand. All the subjects in this small study are habituated, if not inured, to the phenomenon of racism such that their consciousness expands to compensate for the limitations of the abuser. This is not a solution to racism, of course, but being able to do thinking for the other is a sophisticated act of consciousness and, as such, is an interpersonal skill that can meet an emergent need in multi-cultural society and organisations. Additionally those whom life has educated to be conscious around identity are likely to be more oriented to collaboration and unity (what MAY above calls ‘world ethics’) rather than separation and silos. Implicitly this study locates trans-cultural people as potential bridging points between groups that self-identify very differently. This universalist consciousness and attunement to the subtleties of interpersonal communication, not to mention linguistic ability, are qualities that are very valuable. Further research in the above areas would, I feel, be very worthwhile.

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¹² The Illusion of Separation by Giles Hutchins

¹³ Genetic variability is a measure of the tendency of individual genotypes in a population to vary from one another. In a population it is important for biodiversity because without variability it becomes difficult for a population to adapt to environmental changes and therefore makes it more prone to extinction. Source Wikipedia