

## **Finding a voice – Dr Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga 2011**

There is great sensitivity about addressing black issues in therapeutic relationships and the training and supervision of counsellors. Counsellor training programmes and provision in mainstream institutions has been lacking in direction and theory on how to process these issues. This has meant that qualified counsellors as well as trainees have not been facilitated to voice their experience of black issues. This is mainly because of fear about addressing experiences of and the impact of racism.

First let me describe what I mean by ‘black issues’. I have used the definition ‘black issues’ to describe cultural reference points, belief systems and experiences of racism pertaining to people of colour, of African and Asian heritage, subject to minority oppression and racism in Britain. This group are the most visible minority the least represented in the field of psychotherapy and counselling and over-represented in the mental health system. I am also aware that black peoples are not one homogeneous group and that grouping may increase the potential for stereotyping. However in Britain and the US these groups often use the term ‘black’ in a positive and unifying way due to shared experiences of racism.

The term ‘black’ in psychotherapeutic language has mainly been referred to as a colour or an image linked to the dark, negative, depressive, shadow side of the psyche. Perpetuation of this concept through the English language has had a negative impact on the collective psyche and become a linchpin for institutional racism. Not knowing how to undermine institutional racism and how to address the impact of racism on individuals has been a long-term concern for counselling organisations and individual practitioners. An open dialogue about black achievements, the greatness of African and Asian peoples as well as the adversity of racism is an important element in the healing of black psychological development and key to the understanding of both black and white therapists. It is important to note that the definition does not suggest that attention is focused entirely on black peoples or issues of racism. This is why I have used the term ‘issues’ rather than ‘peoples’. Hall uses the term ‘essentialising’ to explain this particular type of focus on black people.

*It is also necessary to be aware of our own roles in the history, institutions and social processes of the inequality, which frequently confront us in cross-cultural work. Beyond this for our part we must avoid essentialising and totalising our clients as ‘black subjects’ (Hall 1992) and search for ways in which we may help them discover a range of representations of themselves and in this way encourage a critical dialogue around personal politics. (in Krause 1998 p161)*

When essentialising occurs the focus is frequently directed on to issues of racism, with little understanding of the impact of social history on the personal development of both black and white counsellors and clients. In this sense the impact of slavery, colonialism, racism, partition, caste systems, indentured labour are all to be considered in the present climate of cross cultural communication. However historical factors of oppression should not be taken for granted as the main factors.

Research carried out among Asian women in Glasgow (Tyrell 1998 in Netto et al 2001 p3) showed that while respondents identified racism as one of the many contributory factors, family problems, loneliness and bereavement were cited as the main sources of their depression, fear and stress. The impact of these experiences on black peoples has silenced some counsellors. They have been unable to voice their lack of knowledge and experience in these areas. In many situations this has affected their emotional ability to verbalise their understanding of and empathise with African and Asian people’s experiences.

Tuckwell (2001) sheds light on the white experience. She suggests that

*The search for identity, which is common to both groups and the symbolic representation of blackness and whiteness in the inner world is tightly interwoven with images and memories from colonial past, as well as current social realities. This leads to differences in the intrapsychic development of black and white people as a result of the collective memory and experiences of oppression. The traditional white belief in black inferiority and white superiority has had a particular function for white groups in obscuring the need to look more deeply at unresolved feelings and issues about self and other”. (p43)*

The impact of the collective colonial memory that Tuckwell refers to has been woven through counsellor training and created a certain numbness and lack of voice in varying degrees for both black and white counsellors. Along with the numbness goes a general lack of voice in relation to black issues in counsellor client communication.

African American psychologist Niam Ackbar, a pioneer on the question of historical impact and lack of voice, aptly summarises this phenomenon:

*Although we are five to six generations removed from the actual experience of slavery we still carry the scars of the experience in both our social and mental lives. Psychologists and sociologists have failed to attend to the persistence of problems in our mental and social lives, which clearly have roots in slavery. Only the historian has given proper attention to the shattering realities of slavery, and has dealt with it only as descriptive of past events. (1996, p3)*

Often the voice of slavery and oppression puts people's backs up when discussed in psychological forums. It intrudes on the white therapist's persona with a legacy of guilt and black therapists may be reminded of the fear and loss associated with the pain and degradation of white supremacy. Perhaps that is why, as Ackbar suggests, it has not been sufficiently attended to in the history of psychotherapy and counselling training. There has also been a lack of theoretical models through which to study this subject.

In circumstances where I have been the only black voice challenging the lack of models in training provision, I have felt as though I was carrying the burden of change on my own back. This is where the history of institutional racism becomes an important issue to consider. It seems clear that African-Centred approaches would advocate that the effects of slavery and colonisation should be recognised as a key element in the processing of what I call 'black issues', whether with colleagues or in the consulting room or within training sessions Asian-Centred approaches advocate the importance of more present time concerns such as language, spirituality and confidentiality within their communities. Both approaches advocate the need to understand caste and colour divisions within these groups.

The voices of therapists trying to understand black issues in their client work must therefore be heard. For many therapists and counsellors opportunities for exploring black issues were not present during their training. This is a shared concern that needs expression and dialogue. I call this finding a voice.

Responses, such as willingness, compliance, resistance, curiosity, fear, denial and anger seem to be expressed when black issues are placed on the agenda. A few discussion sessions to assist openness about the complexities of this unfamiliar and often volatile territory are usually needed. Through these discussions, individuals gain a heightened awareness of their own personal identities and cultural oppressions. They are also encouraged to overcome their fears of having a dialogue about black issues with both black and white peers and opportunities for working with the cultural and racial elements in their practise are heightened.

I have used this paper to voice my understanding of the needs expressed by both experienced and trainee counsellors to find and listen to their own voices and fill this gap in their clinical practice and personal development. Rather than relying solely on case material about black clients, therapists' open dialogue assists greater self-reflection and ability to transfer their personal and sociological knowledge of black issues and the impact of racism into practice.

## **References**

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