

# Between black and white

**Yvon Guest** explores the unique challenges faced by people of mixed race in our highly polarised society



**W**hen we talk about race in the counselling room, we often reduce complex interactions to simplified categories of black and white. Using my own lived experience of being a mixed-race woman and the history and politics of racism, I want to show how, in reality, there is a whole world that lies between black and white - a world where identities and interactions between and within racial groups are more nuanced.

I was born in 1962 to a white mother of English/Irish heritage and a Jamaican father. They were not married. Benson examines the racial climate of that period.<sup>1</sup> Miscegenation (reproduction between the races) was a social taboo - felt to be such a threat that it was discussed in parliament. Racists warned it could undermine British culture; liberals regarded it as the key to racial harmony. Both the black and white communities in Britain were culturally hostile to interracial marriage.

Having a child outside marriage was also taboo. The options for unmarried mothers were limited.<sup>2</sup> There was abortion, which was dangerous and illegal. Another option, for some, was to have the child and hide it within your extended family by pretending a sibling or its grandmother was the mother. This was not an option for the mother of a mixed-race child, of course. There was private fostering, which was expensive, or you could put the child into care. My parent's relationship did not survive, and I was one of those children who ended up in the care system.<sup>3</sup>

I encountered many incidents of racism from white people when I was growing up. There were also many acts of kindness and acceptance. The white foster parents I lived with for 13 years saved me from an early childhood in institutions. But they also thought they were doing the right thing by ignoring my Caribbean heritage. Ince found that, when mixed-race and black children grow up in the predominantly white care system, they go through a process which she defines as 'identity stripping':<sup>4</sup> they suffer from racial and cultural isolation and are unable to learn the skills to survive in a racist society.

At age 17, I attended a college where everyone was black except for me, three other mixed-race and two white girls. It became a mission for my new friends to teach me about Caribbean culture - the food, the hair, the music, everything, and I loved it. They

also taught me about shadism (also known as tonism or colourism). I discovered that some black people didn't like me because I was light skinned. I was often called coconut (brown on the outside, white inside). I also found out that some black people didn't like other black people because they were too dark skinned. I had no idea where such prejudices came from and, for me, they were just as painful as prejudice from white people.

### Making sense of it all

When I came across the work of Franz Fanon in the late 1980s, I began to understand white racism. Fanon<sup>5</sup> was the first person to explore the psychology of colonialism and how black people's minds became colonised by white people. He argued that, in the context of the existing prejudice that all things black were negative and harmful, the white coloniser could project onto black people all that was considered immoral or shameful. This was then internalised by black people, and thus the black, colonised mind came to accept that all that is white is good, and all that is black is bad.

The discrimination between black people on the basis of the shade of their skin colour is a legacy of colonisation and the transatlantic slave trade. When Europeans enslaved Africans and transported them to the Caribbean, white male plantation owners used female slaves for sex. A classification was established according to the shade of a slave's skin - a kind of caste system in which lighter-skinned slaves were given preferential status. They got the household duties, while those with darker skin toiled in the hot sun in the fields. This system persisted in the Caribbean post-slavery.<sup>6</sup>

Shadism was transported to the UK from the Caribbean and persists here to this day. Shadism is also a global issue, as the perception of white beauty as the norm has been perpetuated by the US film industry, TV companies and social media. In 2018, Peace Anyiam-Osigwe, an African woman

living in the UK, directed the film *No Shade*, which describes the impact of shadism on her and her friends as they grew up and how it manifests in some black women resorting to skin bleaching in a desperate attempt to achieve a lighter skin.

I am now in my mid 50s and still working on my mixed-race identity. When I was a child, the white people around me wanted me to embrace my white side and reject my black. When I came into contact with black people, they wanted me to embrace my black side and reject the white. There has been an intense tug of war going on in my psyche for most of my life. I was stuck in a binary world created by other people and expected to take sides. It has taken me a long time to embrace what I really am, which is both white and black: I am mixed race.

### In the counselling room

I now work as a counsellor in private practice. As I am in private practice, my clients are largely self-referring. Most are female and define themselves as black, mixed race or black and minority ethnic (BME). They come from all corners of the globe, but the majority have grown up here in the UK. I have noticed that I see a lot of women who are very isolated from their black communities, because they have either been brought up separately by their parents or have ended up in a very white world through education, social mobility or career. They are often lonely and vulnerable and are having a really difficult time bridging the gap between their two communities.

I have given much thought to how my mixed-race identity and internal racism may impact in my practice. According to Hook and colleagues, all practitioners, regardless of their racial origin, commit racist microaggressions against BME clients.<sup>7</sup> Microaggressions are conscious and unconscious, direct and indirect insults, slights and discriminatory messages that, accumulated over time, can result in trauma.<sup>8</sup> An example would be if a

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## LOST HERITAGE

Sandra has a Caribbean father and white mother. She grew up in a small town in the UK. Her father is estranged from his family and she had no contact with Caribbean relatives or Caribbean cultural references in her childhood. She experienced being in a diverse cultural and ethnic environment for the first time when she went to university. She joined the university African Caribbean Society and started to learn about Caribbean history and culture. At first, she enjoyed her new discoveries, but then she started to feel really angry and pick fights about race politics with fellow students. When she went home, she rowed with her mother and father, which distressed them all because they had always been close. Her distress about this brought her to me.

I asked her what it was like to learn about her Caribbean side. She said it felt like too much to take sometimes and she didn't know who she was any more. She was angry with her parents for keeping this important part of her identity from her. When I asked her if this felt like a loss and suggested she might be grieving for this loss, it clearly touched a chord for her. We talked about grief and the various stages people can occupy, and how they can oscillate between them.

Sandra decided she would talk to her father and mother about her missing out on the Caribbean side of her identity. She reported back that her parents had explained that they wanted her to grow up in a 'nice' area with good schools so that she would have the best chance in life. Her father told her that he never knew his Caribbean heritage, as he grew up with his Caribbean mother and white stepfather in a white environment. He said he had never been able to overcome the distance between him and his Caribbean heritage and it was still very painful and difficult for him and he didn't want to talk about it.

As our work progressed, Sandra was able to see that she couldn't change the choices her parents had made for her, but she could now make her own choices. For a while she idealised her

black side and was very hostile to white people and felt more confused than ever. She said she felt she should give up her white identity. I gently suggested that she didn't have to do that; she could continue to explore her Caribbean heritage and perhaps start to integrate both sides into a new identity. She was cautiously willing to explore this. We are still working through this process; it won't happen quickly.

### Sibling shadism

Shemila came to counselling because she wanted to talk about the problems between her and her siblings. They all shared the same parents, but she was much lighter skinned. As children, they were close, but she was always her mother's favourite. They all grew up in the black community and went to the same schools.

She now has a professional occupation, but her siblings are in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs. Some of her brothers have been in trouble with the police. Her siblings sometimes say she is a sell-out to the black community. This hurts, because in her childhood she was bullied for her lighter skin by other black children. She sometimes tells her siblings that they aren't trying hard enough and that she has worked hard to achieve all that she has.

Shemila tells me she feels guilty that she is her mother's favourite and that her siblings haven't done as well as her. She misses not being close to them. She hates the fact that their different skin tone is such a big deal. She knows about shadism but doesn't understand it in all its complexity. I suggest some reading and some films she could watch and she begins to understand it as the legacy of colonialism and slavery. She is angry that it still continues to affect her and her family so much. I affirm that she has a right to be angry.

She isn't ready to talk to her family just yet about what she has learned; this will be painful and difficult for all of them. But she has begun a dialogue

with herself about how the shade of your skin brings different issues for everyone.

### Disenfranchised

Jeni, a white woman, comes to see me about several work-related issues. Then, after a few sessions, she tells me that her mother is black. She says that everybody is really surprised when they learn this. I ask her how she feels when they are surprised. She shrugs and says she is used to it. I say that I wonder how someone gets used to something like that. She says she wishes she was darker so that it wouldn't be such a surprise.

I ask her what being darker would mean. She talks about how difficult it is because, when she is with black friends, she feels she can't join in conversations about racism; they say she doesn't know what racism is because she hasn't experienced it first-hand. When they all went to a house party recently, she was allowed in, but her black male friends were barred. She felt angry and ashamed about what happened.

I share that this sounds like a very confusing and upsetting experience for all of them and that it seems to me that she is affected by racism. I suggest we could look at it another way: her black heritage may not be visible but that doesn't mean that part of her can't be wounded by racism. She thinks it makes sense; she has never thought about it like that before.

As we continue our work together, we are able to explore what it means to be seen as white. We talk about survival guilt - the feeling that what you have is at the expense of others. I recommend some reading and films on the legacy of colonialism and shadism. Gradually, at her own pace, Jeni begins to understand that her situation isn't her fault. She realises that she can't change history but she can be proactive in the present. She plans to talk to her peers when she feels more confident, to let them know that, although she doesn't experience racism or shadism to the extent that they do, it still affects her.



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## 'I can't assume I know the ethnicity or cultural experience of the individual in front of me, even if they look and sound like me'

counsellor tells a client they 'don't look black', or says they will never be able to pronounce their 'funny' name. Microaggressions from BME practitioners may be more impactful than if they come from a white practitioner because they are perceived as a greater betrayal: the black client isn't expecting it from a BME practitioner.<sup>7,9</sup>

It is often assumed that BME practitioners have an innate understanding of racism. Such assumptions might be a form of stereotyping in itself.<sup>10</sup> As I explained earlier, I had no understanding of shadism, which is a form of internalised racism, until I was 17 and began to spend time with Caribbean people. Another finding from research is that some BME practitioners may be in denial about racism.<sup>11</sup> An example of this might be a counsellor who has survived by not confronting racism in his or her personal and professional life, and so may not be able to work effectively with a client who wishes to explore issues around racism.

Any practitioner, regardless of their racial origin, first has to recognise their own internal racism. Owen and colleagues hold that people who see themselves as politically liberal are the most likely to hold biased views or use microaggressions to rationalise their beliefs. The antidote is a lifelong attention to examining our own biases, attitudes and beliefs.<sup>9</sup> One way, which should start right from the beginning of training, is reflexivity or 'self-awareness with agency within that self-awareness'.<sup>12</sup> Hook and colleagues found that therapists with a multicultural orientation commit fewer microaggressions and, if they do commit microaggressions, it has a less harmful impact on the therapeutic alliance.<sup>7</sup> Cultural humility is also important. This is the 'ability to maintain an interpersonal stance

that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the client'.<sup>7</sup>

So, how do I manage my internal racism in the counselling room? I use peer supervision: I belong to a group of BME practitioners that provides a space for us to reflect together on issues around race and racism. I also talk to white colleagues to get their thoughts on these issues. In the counselling room, I adopt a culturally humble approach. I can't assume I know the ethnicity or cultural experience of the individual in front of me, even if they look and sound like me. If they present with internal racism, I explore it sensitively, seeking to shed light on the issue rather than cast shame. My intention is to provide the space for the client to take me with them on a journey into their world. This doesn't mean I always get it right. I once asked a client if they thought they would benefit from spending time with people of the same faith. Some weeks later, the client said that people from their minority group were persecuted in this country by others of the same faith. My lack of understanding had not disrupted the therapeutic alliance; that client is still with me. But it taught me that I can't know everything.

Internal racism is present in all practitioners, regardless of their racial origin. Robust reflection and cultural humility are vital resources for recognising and working with racism. The lived experience of racism and shadism is the legacy of colonialism and internal racism from the past - a legacy that affects relationships between and within racial groups. As the fictionalised vignettes (left) illustrate, forming a racial identity can be a challenging and confusing process for those caught in the middle of a binary world. ■

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