

Is Counsellor Training Colour Blind?

Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga

“On my placement, black issues are not really discussed, which I am shocked about. I actually discuss black issues on my placement and the reaction is surprise. The fact that mentioning black I feel should not be mentioned, but I always mention black issues because my clients are black. I have a client from Ghana and one from the West Indies. Obviously although my clients are black, they have different cultural issues”.

In the last issue of HCPJ, Liz Coldridge wrote about the need for partnership between training organisations and the health care service. (HCPJ. 2006)(1) There was particular reference to some of the difficulties faced by trainees when seeking a placement. In this paper I will tell you about a study that revealed another gap that links to training and placement provision. The study (presented in the December issue of CPR, 2005)(2) showed that trainees, many of them working in primary care settings, received less support with black issues on their placements than they received in any other areas of their training. The study was born out of trainees’ concerns about exploring black issues raised during my experience as a counsellor trainer and questions raised by approximately 50 trainee counsellors, from three different counsellor training courses, that participated in the study. (Mckenzie-Mavinga 2005) (3)

The study aimed to:

- ? Facilitate ‘shared concerns’ by finding out what questions practitioners have about exploring black issues.

- ? To facilitate trainees to voice their experiences and training needs when exploring and attempting to understand black issues.

Examples of trainee's voices:

"Why do I feel nervous when I hear the term black issues?"

"How do I raise issues of race and culture and difference with a client who doesn't raise it, but as a counsellor I feel it is an issue?"

Black trainee

"How can the historical view of a black person not being suitable to support a white person be addressed?"

White trainee

"What if I am racist to a black client?"

As a trainer, listening to trainees' voices helped me realise my own contribution to colour blindness. I am aware that many of the theoretical books that support training have focussed on the dynamics and problems of racism. This focus has not allowed the development of skills needed to listen to the other bits of black people's lives, which may not necessarily be about racism. Theories that don't include the wider experiences of black people's can reduce personal stories to cultural stereotypes and homogenise individuals. In addition, this can mean that the training needs of black trainees may be marginalised. This process perpetuates institutional racism.¹ The study showed that the context of developing skills to avert this kind of colour blindness is important.

The gap highlighted above was also apparent in recent experiences of training health care professionals. This training was carried out at one of London's Health Trusts and was based on race, culture and counselling and communication skills for health care professionals working with cancer and sickle cell patients. Participants on the training demonstrated a willingness to engage with the cultural context of patient professional relationships. At the same time concern was expressed about communicating with patients and colleagues about the wider experiences of black peoples or expressed concerns about racism. To support good practice and patient care we invited patients to share some of their experiences. Similarly to the study, the responses and needs of black and white participants were different. This meant that space for sharing and understanding of their respective experiences needed to be provided. These findings presented a parallel to how a colour blind approach can impact on the counsellor/client relationship.

A previous study carried out by Lawrence, (2003) (4), surveyed counselling students about race and cultural issues on their training. The survey highlighted that white students felt more comfortable on their training than their black counterparts. Students felt that the race and culture of their tutor would affect their training experience. Respondents were consistently saying that:

¹ Tuckwell, G. (2002) (5) describes institutional racism as consisting of established laws, customs and practices that unfairly restrict the opportunities of defined groups of people, whether or not the individuals maintaining these practices have racist intentions. (p.17).

“There was a gap in what could be an opportunity to work through the diversity of race and culture within their counselling training”. (P.123)

Could this gap mean that counsellor training is colour blind?

Black trainee

Black issues does not only affect blacks and whites. Black issues is when you think about the Irish being discriminated in the past and slavery

White tutor

There is a value in calling it black issues because it is re-prioritising something. Highlighting the fact that everything taught are white issues, we don't actually say that we just call it theory or practice. We don't actually say everything we are talking about is white, because it is invisible”.

What are black issues?

The concept of ‘black’ used in the study, refers to people of colour of African and Asian heritage. In Britain the term ‘black’ when used by black peoples is mainly used to affirm African heritage peoples and more generally used in an affirming and unifying way to refer to people of colour. However the term ‘people of colour’ is mainly used in the United States. To contradict colour blindness that can occur even as I write this paper, I shall use the term black. I am aware that black people are not one homogeneous group just as white people are not one homogeneous group. Hence my reason for using the plural ‘peoples’. I am also aware that this kind of grouping can increase the potential for stereotyping.

The term ‘black’ is used as a political and sociological reference, identifying a group that have been most vulnerable to the oppression of racism in the west. This group as the most visible minority have been least likely to be represented in the field of psychotherapy and counselling ² and more likely to be represented in the mental

² The term ‘black’ is a self-ascribed, political term stating allegiance with those who have experienced oppression because of their skin colour. It is important not to assume that trainees from black and minority ethnic backgrounds will be familiar with or agree with, or use, any of the commonly used terms referring to ethnic identity. (Pat el, N. (et. al)., 2000, p.34) (6)

health system. HCPJ (January 06) (7) referred to the healthcare Commission report 7.12.05, (p.3) which suggests that black people continue to be overrepresented in the mental health system. These figures indicate that counselling and psychotherapy training must address the specific needs of black clients. I have called these concerns 'black issues'.

More often than not, individuals take for granted that a use of the term 'black' means a focus on the racism, or that 'black' means focussing solely on the experiences of black people. This could also foster a colour blind approach. It is therefore important to be clear that 'issues' in this context refers to any concern, problem, dynamic, feeling or experience raised by or about black people, by themselves or by white people. Whilst this may appear to be a broad definition, it allows for the relationships, personal development and theoretical context of experiences to be discussed in a broader sense.

The Race Relations Act 1976 (Amended Act 2000) (8) now gives public authorities including Higher Education, a '*statutory general duty to promote race equality*'. The Act suggests that 'we' as a community of professionals are responsible for change in the educational process. In view of this responsibility the study that I carried out evidenced the challenges of enabling and empowering trainees to discover the voice of change within their training experience.

Experienced white male counsellor/trainer

"The issues of race did not get addressed in any formal sense. It only came up in the context of our client work. In my Adlerian training course we had one session on race and racism. So across the whole of that there has not really been a focus on black issues".

At the beginning of the study I interviewed counsellors who had trained in a variety of settings over a period of twenty years. They reported that they had not received sufficient input to support the experiences of black people, either in training or counselling settings.

A model of integrating black issues into counsellor training

Embarking on a study that integrates black issues into training and asks a question about black issues was an attempt to breakthrough the colour blind approach. It was also an attempt to understand how both black and white trainees' relationships with and between black peoples are explored in the therapeutic process. This meant that the experiences of black trainees needed to be listened to in the context of their cultural backgrounds as opposed to the dominant white eurocentric framework of many training courses. I needed to check my own colour blindness as a black woman, working within a white middle class framework. Some trainees questioned the

presence of a black tutor being the one to challenge the eurocentric ³paradigms of education. Other trainees viewed the inclusion of black issues as an additional problem for them to solve. As a tutor I needed to develop my compassion towards individuals who expressed negative responses to this input and build on the positive responses.

Experienced black female counsellor

“If we had not brought those issues up as black people, they would not have come up”.

During the study

The black students wanted to share their experiences but challenged the role of being seen as a black expert for their white peers, at the cost of missing time used to support their own learning. It became clear that the counsellor’s feelings about racism can take over the stories of black clients. An emphasis was placed on white people’s feelings of fear about being members of the oppressor group. This situation can overwhelm space for black trainees to share their experiences and have their learning supported. I have also experienced feeling overwhelmed. I am sometimes lost for words and stumble in my attempts to draw on empathic responses to white trainees, whilst at the same time supporting black trainees to share and learn from their experiences. So how do trainers allow space for black family issues without contextualising them in whiteness or reapplying racism?

Findings from the study demonstrated that themes such as fear and safety were features of trainees’ process of exploring and understanding black issues. Three main concepts evolved. I have called them, ‘shared concerns’, ‘finding a voice’ and ‘recognition trauma’. The study showed that sharing concerns assisted trainees to find a voice where previously they felt silenced. Trainees demonstrated that they were keen to find ways of opening a dialogue about black issues, but needed safety to unravel the sticky and often emotional impact of racism. The concept of ‘recognition trauma’ describes the process of emotional themes such as racism, guilt, history and trust that emerged. Concerns about racism featured highly in trainees’ dialogue. The study showed that the exposure of power dynamics was dependant on trainees’ understanding of social history, their levels of familiarity with black issues and facilitation of the dynamics of racism.

The study demonstrated that

³ Morrow, (et al.), (9) Although traditional research methods have assembled a wealth of knowledge within the field of counselling, the “compass” used to guide such knowledge has been a eurocentric paradigm that reflects the perspectives of white middle class males. Stanfield, (1994). Sue, (1999). Sue, Kurasaki & Srinivasan (1999). Intuitively, the multicultural researcher questions the effectiveness of such paradigms when applied to marginalized populations. Padilla & Lindholm (1995); Slife, (1998); Sue et al., (1999) “How can the worldviews of people of colour be understood when the researchers “compass” is directed by the polarities of a eurocentric worldview? From the qualitative researcher’s view the participants in the study are the researcher’s “compass”. The participants direct the nature and direction of the researcher’s journey, and meanings are made of the data from the ground up, that is from the lived experiences of the individuals and cultures under investigation. (P. 576)

- ✍ Space for sharing and exploration in training can model greater confidence in discussions about black issues in client work.
- ✍ The different experiences of black and white trainees must be valued.
- ✍ Understanding can be supported by modelling and facilitating the process of discussion about black issues.
- ✍ To support the emancipatory and transformative process of the training group, the trainer's personal development process must include an understanding of racism and knowledge of black issues.

In a recent survey carried out by the BACP 82% of 1,008 people surveyed believed that terminal illness was an acceptable trigger for seeking therapy and 70% believed the same of bereavement. (Lago, C. 2006, p.12) (10) Given these figures it is important to consider the developing role of counsellors in primary health care. In my involvement with training primary health care professionals, the racism and oppression that they experienced and often find difficult to cope with was highlighted. The patient groups they were working with in sickle cell care are mainly of African/Caribbean heritage and in cancer care, many patients face terminal illness. When learning about counselling skills their responses to communicating about black issues were similar to those of the participants in the counsellor training study. It is important therefore to consider how appropriate training that challenges colour blindness can support their listening skills.

Approaches to diversity in Counselling

Multicultural, intercultural and transcultural psychotherapy and counselling take into account various viewpoints of the way equalities; diversity and oppression in counselling can be approached.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalists, Vanoy Adams, M. (1996) Feltham, C. & Horton, I. (2000) suggest attention should be paid to the many cultural reference points that impact on relationships. Ponterrotto, J. (et. al); (2000) (11) argue that:

Essential elements of multicultural therapy competence are the therapist's awareness of his or her own cultural heritage, world view and the related values, biases and assumptions about human behaviour, and an understanding of the worldview of the culturally different client.(P.25)

The authors discuss the dominance of white Eurocentric approaches to counselling, which go some way to addressing black issues as cultural issues. However black issues can neither be confined to cultural issues nor generalised to concerns about racism. The process of dilution caused by this approach can be linked to the issues of

any minority group. To avoid this form of colour blindness in the study, the emphasis was placed on black issues.

Intercultural approaches

Interculturalists Kareem, J. & Littlewood, R. (1994) and Thompson, J. & Lago, C. (1982) attempt to deal with the specific problem of colour blindness, by suggesting that we should pay attention to relationships between cultures and within cultural groups. Kareem & Littlewood (1994) (12) suggest that:

Psychotherapists who are analytically trained learn to work with and understand the patient's inner world only, and therefore for some there is resistance in dealing with psychological problems that originate in the real (outer) world. However most black people would admit that the most traumatic feature in their personal lives is to be black in a white society. (P.25)

Transcultural approaches

Transculturalists Eleftheriadou, Z. (1994), d'Ardenne, P. & Mahtani, A. (1989), and Tuckwell, G. (2002), suggest that we transcend our own cultural reference points whether they are similar or different and experience ourselves empathically within the culture of another person or group. The following quote shows how d'Ardenne & Mahtani (1989) (13) distinguish the transcultural approach.

We have chosen the term 'trans' as opposed to 'cross' or 'inter' cultural counselling because we want to emphasise the active and reciprocal process that is involved. (P.5)

The above authors base their understanding of 'transcultural' on Leininger's reference to 'transcultural caring' (Leininger, 1985. in d'Ardenne & Mahtani, 1989):

A way of using cultural knowledge and skills creatively to help people live and survive satisfactorily in a 'diverse' and changing world. (P.5)

Leininger's approach places an emphasis on intentional and active processes in the therapeutic relationship.

Examples of active intentional approaches were volunteered at a conference presented by The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy; (22.5.04) New Zealand counsellors expressed the importance of placing counselling in the cultural context of its Maori communities. South African counsellors considered the impact of the apartheid system and the colour bar on counsellors and clients. US counsellors stated that accreditation of professional counsellors requires evidence of their ability to understand and work with diversity, cultural context and racial oppression. What implications do these global experiences infer for counsellor training in Britain?

Lack of attention to the cultural and racial context of people of African and Asian heritage can create colour blindness. In turn this may dismiss both black issues and the context of whiteness, its power dynamics, eurocentricism and institutional racism. It follows then that if training of counsellors and primary health care professionals develops its approach to black issues, then provision for clients will become culturally appropriate, thus affording counsellors and clients of African and Asian heritage a more equal share of the pie. This challenges the problems of colour blindness by providing a space for black counsellors' training needs to be supported and supporting white European counsellors' to significantly develop their understanding of black issues.

A trainer's booklet and synopsis of the study on 'Understanding black issues in Counsellor training' (14) can be obtained from i.mckenziemavinga@londonmet.ac.uk

2613 words

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Dr Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga is a Psychotherapist and Senior lecturer. She specialises in transcultural counselling and has recently studied the importance of understanding black issues in counsellor training and the therapeutic process. She has contributed to several anthologies and journals.