



Silenced: the Black Student experience

Black and Asian counselling students often complain that their difference and experience is ignored in counselling training. *Eugene Ellis and Niki Cooper* discuss the reasons for this failure to acknowledge cultural diversity *Illustration by Luke Best*

Eugene: I'd like to start off with a general discussion about therapy trainings and the Black student's experience. In my experience and the experience of colleagues, and from what I hear from students, counselling and psychotherapy trainings haven't really begun to address how racism affects the therapeutic dialogue. There is diversity on the curriculum, it's dealt with objectively, as an issue out there, but not subjectively and personally. There is little examination of what's going on in the classroom. For example, group process in therapy trainings can be tough for some Black and Asian students. I have spoken to many who despair at the silence and lack of understanding when they try to voice their experience of the group in the way that white students do. There is no conversation, just silence, which is very distressing. There is a conversation to be had and it hasn't, for the most part, even started.

Niki: The difficulty about having the conversation is paving the way. Unless someone forces people like me, the person who is writing the training programme and delivering the training, to have the conversation, then we won't think we need to. We won't even know that there is a conversation to be had.

My position with regards to students from other races and cultures used to be: 'Well, I'm absolutely committed to your entitlement to everything that I'm entitled to. We are all absolutely equal.' I have always believed that, so it was very puzzling for me to have to take on board the idea that not everybody felt that sense of entitlement. I didn't get why anybody wouldn't, regardless of their colour or race – if they've lived in this culture their whole life and they've been to school here, why wouldn't they feel as entitled as me? And if they'd experienced any racist events in their life then yes, that was terrible and it shouldn't happen, but it was nothing to do with me. To me, there wasn't anything to talk about. At the same time, when faced with any person of colour who was naming the difference between us, I would be overcome with anxiety about saying the wrong thing, about upsetting them or exposing my ignorance. Maybe that explains some of the silence. It's easier to stay quiet than face the embarrassment of messing up.

I think the step that I needed to take was to realise that I was part of the problem as well as the solution. Not that it was my fault, not that I was entirely to blame for all the ills and evils of racism in the world, but that my lack of understanding about my

own culture meant that I was also maintaining a problem. I'm not saying we have to go into a silent, guilty, self-flagellating shameful place – although that was a necessary phase for me as well – what Isha McKenzie Mavinga calls 'recognition trauma'. I'm talking about the process of getting to the other side of that and accepting that we are not all lovely people and there is a conversation to be had.

That recognition came to me when I was delivering Place2Be's postgraduate diploma in child counselling with my colleague Kelli Swain-Cowper, who is Korean-American. We had three particular students of colour on the first cohort who taught us a huge amount. The courses always included a thread on difference and diversity but, despite our best intentions, we realised from these three students that our training was still leaving some people feeling excluded, not understood or not heard.

Eugene: Did they voice that directly to you?

Niki: They did yes, but it took time. It wasn't until the second year really that they were able to articulate that. Up until that point there had been a lot of silence but by the second year they found their confidence and their voices and were able to tell us what it was like for them. I think the reason that it had never been flushed out before is that all of our other courses are quite short.

That was when I came face to face with my own ignorance and incompetence as a white, middle-class woman who'd been brought up in this culture and completely immersed in it my whole life. There were lots of things I didn't know I didn't know. Previously I hadn't felt that; I've been really

committed to equality, committed to antiracism and anti-discriminatory practice to the core of me. I was convinced of it. The experience of these three trainees is what drew me to doing the Black and Asian Therapist Network (BAATN) 'Black Issues in the Therapeutic Process' training.

I wanted to feel confident that our Place2Be courses were not just going to be able to attract a broad diversity of people but also that all participants would have an enjoyable, stimulating and inclusive experience.

Eugene: It's so refreshing to hear you say that. What tends to happen with Black trainees is that they enter into the spirit of enquiry that is encouraged on any counselling or psychotherapy training course, but when they do so in the area of their culture and their race, there is all this silence and it's like you've just opened a huge hole in the floor. Somehow it becomes your fault. You can then choose either to say nothing, because it's too painful, and focus on just getting your qualification, or you insist that your voice is heard, get labelled as the troublemaker, and risk not making it to the end because you're worn out by the fighting.

It's so sad to see this happen and I have heard this from so many Black and Asian students. It all goes on under the surface. Just naming what's going on becomes almost impossible and everyone gets defensive and blaming. It's normally the student of colour who gets the rougher end of things because that's how oppression works. What then happens is that students have to go outside their training to get what they need to develop as therapists within the profession.

When I was training there were precious few avenues to explore these

issues and it was only since setting up BAATN that I truly found my voice as a black therapist. I think there was an assumption that I was already an expert in issues of culture and race. But I also needed training in Black issues – issues pertaining to skin colour. I had to take on new ideas and new ways of looking at things that allowed me to put my experience into words.

Making space for difference

Eugene: Could you talk a bit about your experience with these three students and what happened? Was it just that these students were saying 'Our needs are not being met in this particular area'?

Niki: What was painful was realising that they hadn't been able to say anything. The students had all been invited to work in groups to do a sculpt of their experience of the training. These three women had ended up together, apparently serendipitously, and they made a sculpt of 'Hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil'. I don't know how to describe it... even thinking about it now gives me goose pimples. The whole room completely froze. Kelli, my co-tutor, as another woman of colour, was the only person who was able to name what had happened. She reflected the painfulness of the image and the importance of the moment for those students. She was the person who, in that instant, enabled the students to feel heard and understood. I was, very uncharacteristically, struck dumb. It was a real turning point for the group and for us as tutors. It also led to some important, honest and necessary conversations between Kelli and I about our own cultural differences that, up to that point, we had not made the space for. I saw Kelli as the same as me, with the same values, beliefs and experiences.

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It was she who pointed out, very kindly: 'Niki, I am neither white, nor middle class.' The conversation went from there.

Up until that point I felt the participants were choosing not to speak. With their sculpt the students had articulated that their silence wasn't something they had chosen necessarily. It swivelled the lens round to point at us, and made me think 'Maybe there is something about this course that is silencing and having a silencing impact', and that was very troubling; that was horrible and shocking but it also represented a turning point for me personally because I could have those conversations and they were probably not as difficult as before.

It was one of these three women who introduced us to Val Watson's work² and Colin Lago's books on transcultural counselling.^{3,4} There was a particular chapter that resonated a lot with me, which was about our majority culture's ignorance and how absolutely everything is loaded with messages, beliefs and assumptions. For example, my family comes from Bristol. Bristol has got its own particular history and culture around slavery and my father's family have been there for a couple of generations. So I'm quite steeped in that mixture of guilt, denial, defensiveness and division.

Eugene: That's the recognition trauma that you talked about before, which is so important here; it's that moment when everything freezes. It's like so many other kinds of trauma where people become triggered, frozen and then preoccupied by their side of the story. What you're saying is that you had become preoccupied with the perpetrator side of racism. To distance yourself from being this kind of person,

especially given your morals and ethics, you had to deny your part in racism and find some other explanation for the guilt and shame you felt.

On my side of the fence, we become preoccupied by the victim side of the racism story, which is often backed up by personal experience, even if it's on a micro scale over many years. When a white British person says all the right things and clearly thinks s/he believes them but has not recognised or seen their part in what's happening, you are left with the option of either colluding with that denial, which is a painful act in itself, or challenging the denial and risking being more of a victim than you already feel. It's not a great place to be, to feel silenced by that denial and also silenced by the denial inside yourself. I couldn't put it into words until I came into contact with new concepts to organise it for me and make sense of it.

Niki: What you describe sounds like a rock and a hard place. Was there a particular moment or relationship for you that enabled you to make sense of that and wriggle free?

Eugene: I'm still wriggling and I can't see an end to that for the time being but I am wriggling less. It has been more of a gradual process over time. As I think about it, the moment that I was no longer a student felt very significant. I felt freer and less constrained by the course requirements to pursue theory that wasn't Euro-American centred, especially as I had the safety of a qualification, which meant that I could legitimately work as a therapist and earn a living. Also my relationship with Isha McKenzie-Mavinga, her work on 'Black Issues in the Therapeutic Process' had a big impact on me. It looks at the hurt

of racism on both sides of the fence, which resonates with my own sensibilities and style of relating and has given me more of a feeling of confidence in this area.

Niki: If you had had your voice when you were a trainee, with the wisdom you have now, what would you have said?

Eugene: That's an interesting question. I tend to see these situations as a therapist/client situation. If I just give information it rarely moves things on unless others are really motivated and committed. If I go with the process of how these things usually unfold, at my own and everyone else's pace, we can take small steps together. For me it's about what we can all tolerate in that moment so what I would say would very much depend on the situation.

Having said all that, though, it is a very familiar feeling, one that many Black people might recognise, when issues of culture and race are ignored. It can be very overwhelming and very consuming in the moment, especially when there are no allies around. I'm thrown back to that rock and a hard place dilemma of 'No one acknowledges that what I am saying is relevant'. It's like gender oppression or class oppression; no amount of integration of the issues matters when you are facing a brick wall. The relief when you are given an invitational space, even if you don't use it, can be immense.

Permission to get it wrong

Eugene: I was interested that Colin Lago's books seemed to help you shape the experience you were having. Was it after this that you decided to go on the 'Black Issues' workshops?

Niki: It was after reading your 'How I became a therapist' article in *Therapy*

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Training

*Today.*⁵ I thought, 'At least at this event I won't be in any danger of silencing anybody'. Your article sounded welcoming and what I'd been going through for the previous two years in confronting this as a tutor had been so difficult; I couldn't imagine that anything could be more difficult and more gut-churning. I felt I could come and listen and understand. I wanted to learn more about good and not-so-good practice in training especially. I wanted to gain a greater understanding about my own implicit attitudes and how they could feed into exclusivity in training. I was aware that I would be stumbling around in the dark and not getting it right but I was resolved not to be silenced myself by that anxiety.

Eugene: Certainly in your training, and I know that this is the experience of other people on trainings as well, it sounds like the silence means people don't feel safe, and if they don't feel safe they are not going to explore.

Niki: What was good was that the potential for feeling silenced was named quite early on. I think you said to me when we were in a small group together: 'I'm really aware of feeling anxious about you', or that you were 'feeling like I need to protect you' or 'to be careful about what I say'. You named the potential for you to be silenced by me being there and I was able to acknowledge that I was probably feeling the same. It gave us permission to stumble around and get it wrong. I came away really buzzy – a real sort of 'Yeah, we can do this. Nobody died during the conversation'.

Eugene: I'm so glad that you felt that way because that was what we wanted to engender. There were a lot of areas

covered during the 'Black Issues' training. Was there one thing in particular that you took away with you from the training?

Niki: One of my students happened to be on the same course as me – this was very early on in her training and I'd recommended it to everyone on the course. By coincidence we attended the same day and we fed back to the group together. That had a massive impact on that group in that they were willing, right from the beginning, to tie into their thinking an understanding that counselling and psychotherapy theory, in itself, is very Euro-American and white and that we can't assume that it applies equally to everyone. So from the start this student, who was from Ghana, had the confidence to say when something didn't make any sense to her, and she was heard by the group. This had a big impact on that group and on the training generally, which had a big ripple effect through all the trainings.

At Place2Be we have a complete professional qualifications pathway as well as CPD training for all our staff and volunteers. All of the courses and workshops have been revisited with an eye to acknowledging difference. We still have workshops and modules that focus on difference and diversity but I hope now an acknowledgement of different cultural and social experiences is threaded through all the courses, enabling Black and minority ethnic students to have the space to name their unique responses and be heard.

Something I came away with that really stuck was the trainer, Isha McKenzie-Mavinga's concept of 'ancestral baggage'. Rather than demonising everybody as deeply evil because they have these racist attitudes,

it's saying we all carry around our histories, in our bone marrow and in our blood and in our skin and in everything. That seems critical to me, in my role as teacher: that the way to facilitate dialogue is to accept and normalise wherever you are on the journey. Rather than beating myself up and saying 'I feel so ashamed, and so disgusting, and so terrible' I'm instead saying, 'OK, there is a perfectly good reason why I'm thinking that way. Now what? What do I do with that? How can I change that? What conversation do I need to have with somebody else or with myself or with my therapist?'

Eugene: There's so much stuff there, and it's on both sides of the Black-white divide. It's the same for Black people too. You want to be a good person – who doesn't? – and people genuinely come with that, and yet there are these thoughts and feelings that sort of just appear in your mind, seemingly out of nowhere, horrifying stuff. Things like strong feelings of ill will towards white people, never trusting them to understand you and also that they are inherently evil; all those types of historical defence passed down from colonialism and slavery. How do you reconcile your perception of yourself as a good person while also having these types of thoughts? I guess the idea of ancestral baggage makes some sense of that.

Colour blind theories

Niki: For me psychotherapeutic concepts like transference and projection help me to make sense of and humanise relationships with others. I'm wondering what (if any) particular aspects of traditional person-centred or psychodynamic theory were helpful to you on your professional journey?

'It made me think maybe there is something about this course that is silencing and having a silencing impact, and that was horrible and shocking but it also represented a turning point for me personally' (Niki)

Eugene: I trained as an integrative arts psychotherapist. I have found both person-centred and psychodynamic theories invaluable when working therapeutically but all the theories, as they were presented on my course, seemed devoid of the race, colour and culture aspects of experience. They certainly contain valid dynamics about what it means to be human but if you do not see there is a conversation to be had then no theory will be effective in these areas. Most Euro-American theories, as they are presented, fall into this trap. I'm not discounting them as relevant but they are all colour blind, to coin a phrase.

The lens I use is trauma theory: I see everything that we have been talking about as trauma symptoms – the preoccupation with the self, the over-activation of emotional response to triggers, the activation of the fight-flight response, the inability to think rationally. In trauma theory the alleviation of these symptoms is through psycho-education. It conceptualises the symptoms in such a way that it distances you from the blame and shame narrative and turns the attention towards the physical sensations of the experience rather than the negative narrative. I see recognition trauma in the same way, with the trauma triggers being the generational impact of racism on us all.

Niki: We're in an evolving profession. It's not even 100 years old. At Place2Be we work with children, which is an even younger discipline in counselling and psychotherapy. If we are committed to further evolving something that works, there's so much to be gained, so it's really exciting to learn about and think about other models and talk about them. Of course there needs to be a willingness and the desire.

With BAATN you have made an enormous contribution to the profession. What is your vision for the future? And what do you think are the barriers in the way?

Eugene: My vision for the future is that there is no longer a need for an organisation like BAATN and that there is what I metaphorically call a rainbow coloured therapeutic community.

My experience is that there is a willingness and desire among many people to change things. But I think you're right, most people aren't aware that there is a conversation to be had, that actually there is something to be spoken about here and it is quite often a painful journey. My hope is that the mental health community in the UK truly addresses the needs of BME people. To do this I think it is essential for the therapy profession as a whole to have language and concepts that describe the experience of both sides of the colour divide. It will probably start with individual trainers seeking this out for themselves.

Also, the profession needs to create safe spaces where people can work through racism on a personal level and take on new ways of thinking that relieve us of our need to defend ourselves. This again will probably start with individuals becoming more confident and able to find their voice and creating these types of spaces in training courses. To get to where we need to be will probably take a mixture of some kind of legislation through government or the governing bodies, individuals taking it on themselves to top up their skills and process their own defences around race, and telling new stories to the profession that say it is possible for people to work in this

area if they are willing and committed – like we are now. So thank you for giving us a glimpse into the journey that you've made with your students and thank you for your honesty and courage.

Niki: It's my pleasure and thank you for inviting me to this discussion and for all the support and inspiration that BAATN has offered my students. ■

Eugene Ellis is an integrative arts psychotherapist and the founder of the Black and Asian Therapists Network, a network of therapists who are committed, passionate and actively engaged in addressing the psychological needs of Black and Asian people in the UK. BAATN runs support groups for BME students and therapists as well as training in Black issues for the profession as a whole. Email eugene@baatn.org.uk or visit www.baatn.org.uk

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