Isolation
in the workplace

Taking a personal perspective, **Susan Cousins** explores how it feels to be a lone black worker

Recently I attended the Black and Asian Therapist Network's (BAATN) fourth annual conference and experienced for the first time in a 16-year counselling career the surprise of being among a group of black counsellors. The conference generated a sense of belonging that felt at odds to the normal conference experience. An overall expression of warmth and confidence permeated it and, as one of the few black counsellors working in Wales, I was welcomed enthusiastically.

Many of the ideas, themes and thoughts of the delegates closely mirrored my own, relating closely to my own work experiences. The speakers were dignified in their presentations: not shouting from the rooftops, merely taking us with them on their journeys – paths that sounded familiar, with similar hurdles and obstacles. I can't speak for the other delegates, but I suspect the majority felt a welcome sense of belonging, which probably helped to heal the sense of isolation many of us feel – a familiar feeling experienced by lone black workers employed in large institutions.

This sense of belonging is a vital component in creating a happy and fulfilling working life, but for lone black workers, it is by no means automatic.

Many black employees encounter working environments that contribute to a sense of isolation, simply because their colleagues are predominately white. This isolation/lack of belonging can result in individuals modifying aspects of their behaviour/ personality/experience in an attempt to 'fit in' or comply with their idea of the norm. Clearly this can easily lead to a loss of self within the workplace.

'Social psychologists have identified that many people may prefer to believe relations between different cultures and races are largely determined by the groups to which they belong, and membership influences the nature and quality of the relationships between the groups in question.'[1]

Lone black employees may never experience a sense of belonging or of social relatedness in the workplace since they are in the minority. This sense of 'otherness' may be experienced consciously or unconsciously, and is often felt but is unacknowledged, unsupported and unspoken. However liberal a workplace may perceive itself, it is highly likely a black worker will experience loneliness within that establishment. Their cultural, social and political lives may be outside the experience of most of their colleagues, to such an extent they feel unable to share histories. Furthermore, many black workers tend to keep these experiences to themselves for fear of being judged and labelled.

Equalities legislation considers these experiences in an extremely superficial manner and current discourse does not allow consideration of these reflections. The isolation a black worker experiences within society at large will not magically disappear in the workplace. Since the workplace is a microcosm of the wider world the negativity projected toward a black person in society is highly likely to be reproduced within the workplace. Racism may not manifest itself overtly but can do so in a covert manner making it difficult to challenge since it is supported by the status quo. Additionally clinical, competitive and technological management systems often allow little real dialogue.

In common with many lone black workers I have often experienced a sense of sadness and slight disconnection while walking into a room of colleagues and discovering I am the only black face. Like many, I find it almost impossible to express these feelings openly for fear of them being misconstrued, perceived as a weakness or as a lack of resilience. Since large institutional departments are predominately manned by white staff, for many black people these feelings are a part of their everyday experience.

Many white people consider themselves to be tolerant, understanding and accepting; hence,

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they find it difficult to recognise the situation might differ in the workplace. Both black and white employees might be in denial about isolation and its effects on black workers in a predominately white environment. Many prefer to believe equality has arrived rather than tackle the unpleasant reality that racism is a part of our everyday culture.

It should be stressed that racism in the workplace – outright anger, abuse and hostility – has, in most cases vanished underground. Legislation has played a part in securing a less openly pugnacious working environment for black workers. Nonetheless, it has failed to eradicate inherent prejudice. Subtle undertones of discrimination are difficult to identify and quantify. Such discrimination is often expressed in less obvious ways, hence it is more difficult to identify and address.

As someone who has experience of delivering 'cultural awareness training' sessions, I have often identified the undertones of unconscious racism. Typically, people who on the surface appear to be open and liberal often express these undertones. For example, focusing on other equality issues in order to deflect attention from the subject of racism.

Lone black employees often experience extra anxieties upon a new appointment, anxieties beyond the consideration of their white counterparts. These anxieties can be briefly summarised as:

■ Will I be able to mix socially with white colleagues?
■ Will my colleagues suspect I secured my position because I am black?
■ Will I have to hide my black self?
■ Will my supervisors/managers/mentors be white with different life experiences?
■ Will I be stereotyped?
■ What are my career prospects – are there other black employees in higher managerial posts?

Before their first working day begins, these concerns manifest themselves in the minds of black employees, affecting their sense of belonging. Hence, levels of anxiety increase before they begin. Consequently, black employees possibly feel vulnerable in the workplace from the moment they accept a job offer.

In situations of isolation black employees may react in different and complex ways. In accepting environments, individuals can function and enjoy their working life. Conversely in unaccepting environments, the capacity for positive functioning and enjoyment is significantly diminished. Hence it is fundamental that organisations include diversity programmes to help employees to feel they 'belong', both inside and outside work.

It is well known that employees thrive in workplaces containing good informal social relations with networks of informal ties. Nonetheless this

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basic need is often unheeded and buried under a cloak of targets, achievements and the abhorrent notion that everything we do must be evaluated in order to make it of value. This often demoralises and disconnects workers from a sense of community within the organisation. So how can organisations foster this sense of belonging for lone black employees? Many argue large organisations are trying to deal with the issue of cultural diversity; however, this is a recent interest and primarily motivated by political and legislative concerns. While many diversity initiatives are in operation throughout the UK, not all are successful. Some programmes are an exercise in tokenism and are doomed to failure unless managed by staff with insight and understanding, with sufficient time and money allocated.

I believe organisations have a duty of care to create opportunities in the workplace for all employees to interact and develop a group 'sense of belonging' regardless of ethnicity. By encouraging fairness, inclusion and acceptance, working environments become comfortable, enjoyable and proactive, and consequently morale and efficiency increase. I am fortunate to hold the position of Joint Chair of the Black and Minority Ethnic Staff Network of Cardiff University. This is supported in resource terms by John Cowley (Head of Counselling) and Professor Terry Threadgold (Pro Vice Chancellor, Staff and Diversity). They have encouraged the BME staff network, are committed to this kind of culture change, understand the need for mutually supportive and understood environments and agree with the recommendations I have listed below.

Every organisation should consider appointing black employee networks/support groups to improve social relations for black employees. These exist in many of our institutions. However, whilst some flourish, others flounder and others are little more than a paper exercise. Since our world is increasingly competitive and every organisation needs to maximise its talent pool, such networks/groups should not be disbanded. Indeed, it should be considered a priority for black employees to receive opportunities to communicate their feelings and experiences of engagement within the workplace in a safe and non-judgmental forum. Using these forums, black employees can:
■ care for and manage the hurtful effects of discrimination and disadvantage

- discuss their experiences and perspectives
- share information and knowledge
- reflect on both positive and negative aspects of their experience
- challenge negative or stereotypical images of black people
- influence policy and decision-making
- inform and advise senior level management
- offer a forum for new ideas and development
- provide peer group support
- celebrate and promote successes within the black community
- become black role models
- raise awareness and understanding of other cultures within the workplace
- highlight the professionalism of black workers
- identify the development needs of black workers
- reduce inequality in employment and service delivery
- reflect and engage the wider community in terms of recruitment and retention
- contribute to institutions fostering good public relations in a local and wider world context
- encourage links with other black networks/groups
- help to foster a modern institution with modern employment opportunities.

is only these who can install structures supporting lone black employees. If individuals feel isolated it will influence their behaviour and their response to co-workers. Clearly it is hard to behave in a warm, natural confident manner while feeling alienated within a given environment.

The BAATN conference provided black workers with an empowering experience by supplying a supportive and mutually understood environment. This sense of belonging to a wider community is essential if black workers are to feel fulfilled in their working lives, and achieve their full potential. Attending the conference filled a void and provided a counterbalance to my usual everyday experience. The importance of providing a supportive and mutually understanding environment cannot be underestimated. For black workers to feel fulfilled in their working lives, and to maximise their potential, a sense of belonging to a wider community is essential.

Where work environments are unbalanced, it is critical for the majority to raise awareness of the issues of being part of a minority so a nurturing environment can be provided for all. We need to feel creative, energetic and alive in the workplace: none of us should have to shunt parts of ourselves away in order to get by in a 21st century workplace. ∎

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One of the most basic and fundamental steps to good communication is 'being listened to'. Clearly there are difficulties and emotional costs involved in open discussion, particularly around the sensitive and complex area of discrimination and disadvantage. Nonetheless, through these forums lone black employees can enjoy a safe space to explore their experiences and emotional life in the workplace. Emotional expression is recognised as beneficial and it is, after all, the cornerstone of our work. Black employees should not be expected to edit their experiences and self-expression in order to 'fit in'. Ultimately, being unable to express oneself freely results in unhappiness, a lack of wellbeing, mental and/or physical ill-health, and, consequently, increased periods of sick leave.

When we are able to be candid and speak honestly, we extend our experience of self, and then have the choice to act on our emotions rather than pushing ourselves underground and piling 'hurt on hurt'. The culture of an organisation derives directly from those who create, lead and manage it, and it

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