'I needed therapy to feel like I had a place in academia'

We need to do more to help black students overcome imposter syndrome and navigate white spaces, says **Mark Williams**

My new therapist is a person of colour but she's not British African Caribbean and - obviously - not male, as I am. I know nothing of her background and at this point, I'm not entirely sure that it matters. Nonetheless, I am anxious that she should understand my experiences of being a black man in the UK, and how important it is for me to have a sense of control in my life. I don't recall all of our initial conversations but one of my responses sticks in my mind: 'It's taken me more than 40 years to build up my walls of defence and protection, and I'll be damned if I should let them be broken down.' I was very immediately asking my therapist to take care of me, to be careful with me, to know just how fragile I was.

I was seeking therapy as a part of my psychotherapy training, which I undertook several years after qualifying as a social worker and working as a lecturer. So therapy was a means to an end - or was it? Much of the work seemed to centre around my relationship to being an academic and the continual conflict I had with what that should look like. I would often struggle to bring together the persona of the professional academic with other parts of my identity. I rarely felt that I belonged within that academic space and, more than that, I felt that others would see and agree that I had no place as a senior lecturer. My imposter syndrome was a complex mix of perceived ideations and reality.

Racial context

But what I found frustrating was that neither my therapist nor I seemed to openly acknowledge that my experiences occur within a specific racial context and should be understood as such. Perhaps we, I, assumed that, as I was voicing my concerns from my own perspective, the context of culture and race was implicitly held within them. However, the reality was that there were occasions when race and culture clearly informed my experiences as an academic. I remember a conversation with a colleague who I had worked with for a number of years, during a time when global majority* students were expressing their views in a campaign called 'My Racist Campus'. 'How can the university be considered racist? It's inclusive,' they said. 'That's why people like you are able to work here.' I was paralysed by the thought that I had somehow been allowed into a white space where normally I had no place.

Foregoing discussions of white privilege and inherent racist attitudes, what was significant in responding to this experience was my ability to apply the learning from therapy in exploring different narratives that contradict my normal negative internalisations to responses that offer validation. As much as therapy has helped me to move towards forgiveness and acceptance, it is the better understanding of the relational dynamics between individuals that has been most beneficial. I continue to work on understanding the differing narratives that can help me to understand the motivation and intentions of others, and therefore what responses I can make that are most appropriate in a given situation. It has become a practice for me to find empathic understanding of what others experience - good, bad or indifferent.

Role models

I was recently involved in conducting a research project that investigated concerns around the attainment gap in global majority students in practice learning environments. The accounts students gave of their experiences of navigating white spaces in both higher education and in practice placements contextually mirror not just my own experiences but the racialised experiences of similar groups across a range of disciplines in the helping professions.

The research highlighted how a fear of failure is compounded by a sense of not fitting in or belonging, of feeling like an imposter. Students cite concerns about the lack of role models from whom they are able to seek support, guidance and mentorship. They find that, where possible, they rely on other students from similar backgrounds for allyship. I recognise my own experiences of training in these accounts - it seems little has changed in the decades in between.

Comfortable conversations

Over the 18 years of my academic work, I have supported global majority students, often through individual mentorship and coaching, or simply through engagement in the classroom. We need to give global majority students permission to have conversations about race and racialised experiences. Since George Floyd's murder and the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been a real opportunity, a willingness and openness to having what have been historically difficult conversations. Engaging students in discussions and debates about contemporary issues of diversity, difference and inclusion that include specific dialogues about the impact of racism in today's society is key to change.

I run yearly diversity workshops to give students opportunities to explore issues of prejudice and discrimination in a safe space. I have found it is critical for the facilitator/trainer to be comfortable and confident in introducing themes of race and racism, and to be able to manage the experience in the room. Having some contextual experiences to reference and draw on is immensely important in engaging students in this thinking, as what we experience in the 'real world' occurs in the classroom. Students can be fearful about sharing their experiences or their thinking. Global majority students may worry about

coming across as accusing, while white students may feel accused of being racist or responsible, or that they lack a level of insight to contribute to discussions. Some experiences that individuals may bring to the forum may be highly emotive or sensitive and that requires management and support.

Focus on intersectional identities is also an important awareness-raising subject area. We need to understand how a mother of four children who is estranged from her husband and has only been in the country for a few years with no real support network will engage in the study environment governed by the cultural beliefs and expectations that shape understanding, motivation and behaviour. In order to gain these insights, we must be prepared to ask the necessary questions and have difficult conversations, and perhaps even to recognise the importance of giving permission for these conversations to take place as a contributing aspect of the student's academic and practical progress.

Good enough

I often reflect on my journey into academia and my interpretations of experiences that were perhaps at the very least distorted at times. A university colleague encouraged me to apply for a recently vacant lecturing post. After some deliberation, I applied and heard nothing back. At the time, I was almost relieved. Let's be real, I thought - I am not good enough.

When a colleague later checked up on why I had 'changed my mind' about applying because my application had not been received, I was suddenly faced with the idea that there was another narrative in play that I had not considered - and never thought to check out.

I find that students often make conclusions about what is happening or will happen based on historical internalised experiences and narratives of race that become the lens through which subsequent experiences are filtered. Using learning from therapy to help students to reflect on experience and identify alternative narratives through appropriate challenge can make a difference in their outcomes.

Quite often students fail to make disclosures about their concerns because of the conclusions they have drawn and their resignation about the potential outcomes of a particular situation. In some situations, this has meant a self-fulfilling prophecy for students who otherwise might have had the opportunity to address the barriers to their learning and find solutions to support progression. Instead, students become disillusioned, lose confidence in their abilities, disengage from their peers, become emotionally and psychologically distressed or experience physical illness.

My development is still a work in progress, but through therapy, I have gained great confidence in the work I do, how I engage with my colleagues and students, and its meaning to me on an existential level. I now accept that I have something to say and, equally important, that people will listen. I can acknowledge success in my career, that I am in a position where my experience in work and in life can be of use to others and that I am seen as a successful black man in my community - and that's OK. ■

* Global majority is a collective term that refers to people who are black, Asian, brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the Global South, and/ or have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities'.

About the author

Mark Williams trained in transcultural psychodynamic psychotherapy with the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and worked with the late Lennox Thomas and colleagues from Nafsiyat Intercultural Therapy Centre to develop culturally sensitive ways of engaging racially minoritised communities. Since 2004, he has been a senior lecturer in social work at Leeds Beckett University, where he also draws on psychodynamic approaches to develop personal and professional development courses for students and staff. He recently contributed to *Black Identities + White Therapies: race, respect + diversity*, edited by Divine Charura and Colin Lago (PCCS Books).

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