

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Understanding black issues in postgraduate counsellor training

ISHA MCKENZIE-MAVINGA

Brockley, London, UK

Abstract

This paper presents a brief account of a qualitative multicultural study and heuristic exploration of how trainee counsellors understand black issues in their training and in their therapeutic work with clients. This initiative is supported by a previous survey of black clients and therapists who suggest that changes are needed in training. It presents current legislation and need for equalities in Higher Education and counsellor training, by challenging the dominance of Eurocentric approaches. A pluralistic, flexible Action Research methodology will be outlined.

The theory and context of previous studies are presented. Phases of the process are described to show how this study was approached. Phase one describes how interviews with a variety of experienced practitioners confirmed the need for the study. Using examples of trainees' narratives, phase two describes how the phenomenon of black issues was integrated into training and the process of generating data. The paper shows how the explication process reveals elements of fear, history, guilt and racism, present in the dynamic of black issues.

The paper highlights how racism features highly in trainees' concerns and influences their ability to share and understand. A snapshot of emerging concepts such as 'finding a voice' and 'recognition trauma' which are developed to assist the reflexive process is featured. The role of the researcher and black trainees as 'black expert' is discussed. In the context of ethical concerns and working through the researcher's counter transference as a black female tutor researcher, the process of modelling within a participatory role is described. An excerpt from a discussion with colleagues gives an essence of the outcome.

The outcome is summarised in the conclusion: 'A bridge from fear to transformation'. The study enabled both trainees and staff as collaborators to shift from a position of fear and not knowing to engaging in active dialogue about black issues on a personal and professional basis.

Keywords: *Counselling training, black issues, Eurocentricism racism, recognition trauma, transculturalism*

Introduction

First a few words about my definition of black issues: I am using the concept of 'black' to refer to people of colour of African and Asian heritage. It is a political and sociological term, identifying a group of peoples that have been most vulnerable to the oppression of racism. This group are the most visible minority in Britain and the least likely to be represented in the field of psychotherapy and counselling¹ as therapists and clients.

Rationale

There are three main reasons why a study on black issues in counsellor training is important. Firstly, it is widely acknowledged that African heritage peoples are six times more likely to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act than white peoples. Asian peoples are four times more likely to commit suicide than

white peoples (Foundation News November, 2003). Psychotherapy and counselling provision that not only takes into account, but also works with black issues may increase resources for those at risk of the mental health system, thereby reducing the risk of sectioning and suicide among the above-mentioned groups.

Secondly, counsellor training needs to be developed. A survey that I carried out in the early nineties with 21 black counsellors and 21 black clients, asking what it meant to them to be working together therapeutically, concluded that training failed to acknowledge black people's perspectives and experience. The survey also showed that black therapists wanted to see changes in training institutions to include consideration of the quality of learning relevant to the needs of black trainees. Thirdly the survey indicated that black clients were happier engaging in counselling with 'someone like me' and felt they did not have to work so hard to be understood. (Mckenzie-Mavinga, 1991)

Correspondence: Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga, 11 Wallbutton Road, Brockley, London SE4 2NX UK. E-mail: talk2isha@btinternet.com

¹ The term 'black' is a self-ascribed, political term (Patel et al., 2000,) 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 agree, with, or use, any of the commonly used terms referring to ethnic identity.

What does this study explore?

- How trainee counsellors understand black issues in their training and in their therapeutic work with clients

A need for acknowledgement, understanding and change appeared to be key elements in the response to the above mentioned survey. Since they are also key factors in the therapeutic process, they warrant responsive action in the training field. The response of black clients indicated that what was being produced in the literature on black issues was not being transferred into practice. The survey also showed that black counsellors were attending to black issues, but that they experienced training as inadequate.

Enrolment of black trainees on counsellor training courses has increased. About fifty per cent of the trainees enrolling on the course that I taught on last year were of African and Asian heritage. There is a need to find ways of including their experiences and the experiences of African and Asian heritage clients with whom they would be trained to work. In my experience, efforts to meet these needs have been limited.

On a personal level, insights and knowledge about what has been missing in counsellor training on black issues has come from an understanding of my own development and self-knowledge as a black woman. I have grown to understand that opportunities to explore personal experiences integral to my growth and development as a black woman have been limited by eurocentricism, both in my personal and professional life; for example I was raised by white carers who did not know how to do my hair or initiate discussions with me about my African Caribbean identity and history. I had also experienced this lack of attention to black issues in my own education and my training as a counsellor. In my role as a counsellor trainer I have experienced trainees who read about black issues but ask 'How do we address black issues with clients?' The question highlights the gap between knowledge and practice. Taking an active approach, I decided to create a study that brought together research and practice. I presented the missing element of black issues into the training programme as a challenge to its Eurocentric framework. Howitt and Owusu-Bempa (1994) have identified this same challenge:

'Psychology as an organised discipline, as taught and practised, ascribes little value to the experiences of black people. They are important only in so much as they reinforce white people's sense of superiority. Out and out Eurocentricism permeates assumptions, outlook and instruments of psychology. But it is this psychology that has stormed through the world to be adopted even by black nations, uncritically and wholesale' (p. 127)

My third reason for carrying out this study is that the Race Relations Act 1976 (Amended Act, 2000) now gives public authorities and higher education a 'statutory general duty to promote race equality' (CRE, 2002). This duty needs to be more fully reflected in the world of counselling and psychotherapy and statutory authorities on accreditation. The Race Relations Act does not use the term 'black issues' but applies regulations to race issues without which black issues would not exist. The Act suggests that as a community of practitioners 'we' are responsible for change in the educational process. This approach proposes a challenge to institutional racism and therefore a challenge to dominant Eurocentric thinking in learning and practice. This paper presents salient points from a study that enabled and empowered trainees to discover the voice of change within their training experience, whilst at the same time generating data.

Methodology

Various attempts have been made to develop understanding of black issues in terms of race, culture and diversity. Under the umbrella of multiculturalism, studies have shown that progress in understanding the context of black issues and resources for black therapists and clients has been slow. For example Lawrence (in Dupont, 2003) 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. All students felt that the race and culture of their tutor would affect their training experience. Respondents consistently reported that '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). These findings support the importance of discovering ways to fill the gap and develop counsellor training and provision. In order to do this it cannot be assumed that Eurocentric theory may be applied systematically. The reflective stance in this study was designed to challenge this assumption by broadening dialogue and addressing concepts, customs and attitudes to black issues that tend to be based on Eurocentric paradigms.

The term Eurocentric is frequently used in literature about research and Multi-cultural Counselling. Morrow, Rakhsha & Castaneda. (in Ponterrotto et al., 2001) highlight the dominant influence of Eurocentric paradigms.

'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 researchers 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)

In undertaking this study, I wanted rather to consider the sensitive nature of focusing on black issues and support the process of understanding necessary for developing empathy. It was important to find a methodology that could be applied in an integrative and flexible way, which suited the integrative approach to training that I was involved with. I decided to draw on both qualitative and multicultural research. A qualitative approach allowed the study to influence practice. Morrow and Rakhsha (in Ponterrotto et al., 2001), in their analysis of 'multicultural research' suggest that 'ethnic paradigms' must question knowledge gathered by European researchers. They propose that ethnic models of qualitative research should be grounded in a context of the experiences of people of colour.

Whilst multicultural research suggests that researchers may focus on a particular ethnic group or cultural situation, neither qualitative research nor multicultural theories offer a concrete model as to how to apply research skills in a specific context such as black issues, as opposed to a broad spectrum of multiculturalism. This appears to be a parallel to the question of 'How do we work specifically with black issues?' that trainees have been asking. To compensate for this lack, the study was therefore contextualised within counselling theory proposed by Transcultural writers. Transculturalists Eleftheriadou (1994), d'Ardenne and Mahtani (1989) and Tuckwell (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. D'Ardenne and Mahtani (1989) 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 heuristic process of this study also enabled an active and reciprocal approach which drew on a combination of qualitative participatory skills, for example, phenomenology. Responses to the phenomenon of black issues placed into the training programme were tracked and used as data. Elements of a grounded theory approach supported the consideration of emerging themes and concepts and their

implications for the evolving process of the study. The main source of data came from trainees' narratives.

This integrative methodology shaped the study in two ways. First it enabled me to use my role as trainer and researcher, influencing training with a focus on black issues. Secondly I was able to use my skills as a psychotherapist and writer and my experiences as a black woman to facilitate both black and white trainees' experiences.

In addition, the focus of the study shifted when I explored the usefulness of a qualitative, multicultural pluralistic research paradigm, I considered whether the effects of my own education, dominated by Eurocentric thinking, might impact on the ways in which I used research theory or presented data. A study of this nature presents a challenge where the researcher can make the mistake of addressing multicultural research through Eurocentric eyes. Scheurich and Young (cited by Morrow, Rakhsha & Castaneda, in Ponterrotto et al., 2001) referred to this phenomena as 'epistemological racism' An example of this predicament presented itself in the early stages of the study, when white trainees and colleagues struggled with understanding and accepting the concept of black issues as I had presented it, at the same time as I was trying to remain aware of black trainees' needs. Ignoring their needs would perpetuate exclusion of black issues. This experience led to a re-negotiation of the study question. The focus switched to the process of 'understanding' black issues as opposed to teaching about black issues. I found that trainees' responses included the emotions linked to the theme of black issues that needed to be voiced. There had previously not been enough space and appropriate facilitation available for them to share these emotions. The need for space to address these emotions highlighted a parallel with trainees' clinical experience and the therapeutic process.

As a result of this process of developing the methodology, I came to define two main elements in the purpose of the study: I wanted to facilitate a reciprocal process which assisted trainees to voice their concerns and understand their responses to black issues, at the same time developing practice by facilitating trainees' active engagement with the issues. Secondly, I wanted to find out how trainee counsellors understand black issues in their training and in their work with clients.

Procedure and data collection

I set out to enquire about the concerns of experienced practitioners and trainees. Primary data was created by introducing the phenomenon of black issues into the counselling course curriculum through workshops. A space for trainees to share their concerns was offered and confidential verbal evaluation meetings were set up outside of the training course. The purpose of this approach was to involve trainees whilst modelling a process of facilitation throughout their training. Secondary data from a questionnaire

evaluation process revealed information about the usefulness of the method and the impact of black issues on the training process. An analysis of these questions indicated that trainees felt supported with black issues in all areas of their training and personal development, but less supported on their clinical placements.

Phase 1. The principle of Shared Concerns

To validate the need for a black issues input in training, I listened to the experiences of trained counsellors, who were interviewed during the early phase of the study. Below are some excerpts from these interviews with experienced practitioners trained between 1987–2002.

White Jewish female: *"How appropriate and when is it appropriate to ask questions related to race and ethnicity? People were not aware of black issues or areas like disability at the time I trained."*

Asian Hindu Female: *"I don't feel that I learnt a lot of theory regarding black issues when I was training. It was a self-directed course. We did some workshops and I was part of a group that decided to work on equal opportunities."*

Sharing thoughts on the lack of attention to black issues broke the isolation that I and others were experiencing. The concept of shared concerns was developed from this experience. By shared concerns I am referring to the process of finding a voice through sharing similar experiences (McKenzie-Mavinga, 1997).

Phase 2-Placing the phenomenon of black issues into training and collecting data

With the support of my colleagues I integrated workshops on black issues into the counsellor training curriculum. When discussing the skills needed to develop the project, it was clear that none of us had been adequately trained. Being the lone black tutor, my experiences led me into the role of the 'black expert'. This was a role that I had previously resisted, but on this occasion decided to exploit for the purpose of moving the training on. This dynamic was also apparent in the training groups when white trainees wanted black trainees to share their experiences so that they could learn from them. Whilst the sharing may be beneficial to the listeners, black trainees felt empowered to question how their own learning was being supported if they were placed in the role of expert.

I then asked trainee counsellors about their concerns about black issues. This was followed by discussion as a way of encouraging dialogue. The concerns were written down and sorted into clusters. The following six headings evolved from the terminology used to express concerns: Black counsellors; White counsellors; Political; Self-reflective; About clients; Theoretical. We discovered that trainee concerns were similar to staff concerns. Below are some examples of concerns that were put forward.

White female trainee: *"As a white woman how can I be effective in counselling black clients?"*

Black female trainee: *"How can I hold on to my sense of being black in a white counselling world?"*

Results and analysis

Two main concepts emerged from the study process: firstly the concept of 'Finding a Voice', which portrays the 'emancipatory' (Denzin, 1989) process evolving from the silence of not having previously had dialogue about black issues within training programmes. This was expressed in the interviews with experienced practitioners and in which the trainees shared concerns. Analysis of the shared concerns showed that the main issues being expressed appeared to link to experiences of the impact of racism on both black and white trainees in different ways. The process of compiling data from participants' narratives spread over the two year period of their training.

The workshop process and trainees' narratives showed that racism was a key theme that needed to be addressed within the wider context of black issues. As a staff team we recognised that trainees' understanding could be supported by providing a space to contemplate the impact of racism.

The second concept which emerged from the study process, 'Recognition Trauma', has been applied to the fear experienced by both black and white trainees when they become fully conscious of the impact of racism on their lives; for example, in their narratives white trainees expressed feelings of guilt and fear when they listened to black trainees' experiences and feelings about racism; black trainees expressed powerful feelings about being victims of racism and their process of internalising oppression. These recognition traumas appeared to create stuckness and a perceived lack of safety to explore on a deeper level. These responses have far-reaching implications for the development of practice and made it clear that the focus on racism in the study could not be ignored. Some examples are given below:

Black trainees observing white trainees response: *"I'm curious how some people react in a defensive way when black issues are mentioned, Are whites feeling attacked by the guilt of our history?"*

Black trainee: *"How can a black counsellor help some of our lost confused teenagers find their own identity?"*

White trainees sharing feelings such as 'guilt': *"How much will my guilt affect?"*

White trainee *"What if I am racist to a black client?"*

It must be noted that black trainees did not ask questions explicitly about the racism of white peers or clients, they addressed their concerns in terms of the impact of racism on themselves.

Black trainee addressing the role of victim: *"How can the historical view of black person not being suitable to support a white person be addressed?"*

What does this study tell us?

- How racism features highly in trainees' concerns and influences their ability to share and understand
- Concepts of 'finding a voice' and 'recognition trauma' were useful in facilitating developing understanding
- The process enabled both trainees and staff as collaborators to shift from a position of fear and not knowing to engaging in active dialogue about black issues on a personal and professional basis.

Black trainees' concerns veered towards being accepted by white people and dealing with white people's feelings about racism.

I used my personal counselling with a white co-counsellor to self-challenge my counter-transference issues, such as my hurts about the impact of racism. In turn, my white co-counsellor counselled on her guilt, shame and stuckness about racism. Vigilance about my own responses supported my developing ability to facilitate the emotional content of trainees' shared concerns. Moustakas (1990) supports the personal development aspect of this process.

'The entire process of explication requires that researchers attend to their own awareness, feelings thoughts, beliefs and judgements as a prelude to the understanding that has derived from conversations and dialogues with others' (p. 30).

Modelling

Working within the boundaries of my role as tutor, researcher and black woman meant that I had to consider ways to listen to the narrative of trainees without my own judgements and counter-transference issues interfering with their sharing and their assessment process. As a team we needed to create safety to unpack issues about the impact of racism, which seemed to take over at times. An example of this process is given below:

White male trainee: *"My fears are that if I say something that was honest, I feared the reaction that I would get and that reaction would continue outside of this room. I guess I have the fear of being accused of being racist. The only way that I can describe it as I have written about it in my journal. One Saturday after a workshop, I went away feeling as though I had been walking on broken glass. That's how it feels sometimes, like you have to be very guarded. You have to be careful what you say in case something that you say might be interpreted in the wrong way. Sometimes I have wanted to say something just to work through it and try it out, to say I am trying this, I'm not really sure what I want to say, but I haven't always felt able to do that"*.

Researcher: *"What would the safety be like?"*

Trainee: *"The safety would mean just to be free and bounce things out of my head and not fear that I was going to be accused of being racist I guess"*.

Power issues with colleagues were also a concern and required me to challenge them when they were sitting back and leaving me to facilitate alone. This also meant that I needed to harness my eagerness to pitch in before they could intervene and let them at least make a mess of things, which I always encourage trainees to do. You need to get it wrong so you can get it right. However, staying in the present with this dynamic was very challenging to the modelling process.

As the training course progressed I encouraged a reflective process with both trainees and colleagues. Whilst the trainers were honouring their commitment to equal opportunities, trainees had opted in via their enrolment on the course, but were offering narrative feedback as data voluntarily, outside of the training programme. Colleagues were encouraged to reflect on transcripts and the process of the study. It was important that trainees who volunteered their narratives were offered an opportunity to respond to the transcripts, which supported reflexivity and acted as a mirroring process.

Discussion with colleagues about evidencing the phenomenon of black issues in skills development

White female tutor: *"In my recent experience of practice assessments students were not picking up black issues, but they were evidencing the capacity to reflect on why they had not picked it up in the sessions and some of their fears. They were evidencing the capacity to go away and think about it and say what stops them doing something, saying something, but they were not evidencing it at the moment a client may need to have something validated. Something still is not happening relationally at the moment when something crucial may need to happen. Although what is happening is that some of them have much more awareness now"*.

Also some of them are ticking the box of having to jump the criteria of addressing black issues. They are naming something like I am white and they are black and then not taking it any further and as you were saying bolting it on the end. I am constantly challenging this, for some of them this might be a development because they may not have taken the time to recognise this before, so I am not clear what the evidence is".

Researcher: There was a time when trainees and colleagues thought that you address the difference between black and white as soon as you open the counselling session. "I am black and you are white or I am white and you are black and how do you feel about this?" I think our trainees are realising there is more than that, because a lot more information about how it feels to be in this position is being shared.

Discussion

The process of data collection over a two year period whilst being in a participatory role with trainees was challenging and rewarding. Challenging, because of the impact of racism that sat like a layer on top of black issues and raised powerful feelings of fear and anger. Rewarding, because many trainees developed the confidence to voice their concerns and dialogue with each other and their clients about black issues. This has led to a greater awareness of trainees' different cultural groups and their associated oppressions.

An analysis of terminology used to express concerns and share experiences showed that all groups of trainees, particularly those groups in the early stages of their training, were considerably more concerned about racism. Year 2 training group showed greater concern about guilt and history linked to racism and black issues, although trust and safety to discuss black issues was raised as an important element for all trainees.

This situation of 'swamping' (a term used by a participant) was challenging. One of my ethical concerns when planning the study, had been that an over focus on racism might undermine the main intention of a general exploration of black issues. I wanted to create a sense of space to explore the developmental process of black trainees and relationships within and between black groups, and white trainees' relationships with each other that concern black issues. It became clear that a focus on racism, although a primary concern, had prevented these explorations because it created an interracial dynamic between black and white trainees, as opposed to a deepening connection within their respective groups. It must be noted that this dynamic may impact on the client/counsellor relationship. This is perhaps an area for further exploration.

I found that the role of 'black expert' was assigned to the most vocal and willing black trainees. At a later stage, having realised that this created a lack of reciprocation of their own learning, they challenged their white peers to stop investing in them as facilitators. This was an empowering moment born out of the process. Both black and white trainees were challenged to find new ways of listening and learning from each other and their clients.

As a parallel process my colleagues began to develop their awareness of black issues and their own stuckness about racism. As I relinquished the role

of 'black expert', white colleagues developed greater awareness of their capacity to facilitate black issues within training. We have only begun to scratch the surface of this area of counsellor training, but a bridge between fear and transformation has been built.

A synopsis of this study has been published in a trainer's booklet: (McKenzie-Mavinga, 2005) *A Space to Contemplate-Understanding Black Issues in Counsellor Training and the Therapeutic Process*. For copies contact: i.mckenziemavinga@londonmet.ac.uk.

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