

Finding a voice – understanding black issues in the therapeutic process

There is great sensitivity about addressing black issues in therapeutic relationships and the training and supervision of counsellors. Counsellor training programmes and provision in mainstream institutions has been lacking in direction and theory on how to process these issues. This has meant that qualified counsellors as well as trainees have not been facilitated to voice their experience of black issues.

Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga, of London Metropolitan University, discusses

First let me describe what I mean by 'black issues'. I have used the definition 'black issues' to refer to issues pertaining to people of colour of African and Asian heritage who may be subject to minority oppression and racism in Britain – the most visible minority and the least represented in the field of psychotherapy and counselling. I have explained the term 'black' as meaning non-white people of African and Asian heritage. The term 'black' acts as a focus point identifying the above particular group of peoples. I am aware that black peoples are not one homogeneous group and that grouping may increase the potential for stereotyping. However in Britain the term 'black' is often used by these groups in a positive and unifying way due to shared experiences of racism. The term 'black' in psychotherapeutic language has mainly been referred to as a colour or an image linked to the dark, negative, depressive, shadow side of

the psyche. Perpetuation of this concept through the English language has had a negative impact on the collective psyche and become a linchpin for institutional racism. Not knowing how to undermine institutional racism has been a long-term concern for counselling organisations and individual practitioners.

Why 'black issues'?

By linking 'black' to the term 'issues' I am referring to the concerns and experiences of institutions and individuals that require understanding and reflection, so that clients are better facilitated to voice their concerns. These concerns may come to the attention of both black and white counsellors and clients, during the therapeutic process. It is important to note that the definition does not suggest that attention is focused entirely on black peoples or issues of racism. This is why I have used the term 'issues'

rather than 'peoples'. In the quote below, Hall uses the term 'essentialising' to explain this particular type of focus on black people:

It is also necessary to be aware of our own roles in the history, institutions and social processes of the inequalities which frequently confront us in cross-cultural work. Beyond this for our part we must avoid essentialising and totalising our clients as 'black subjects' (Hall 1992) and search for ways in which we may help them discover a range of representations of themselves and in this way encourage a critical dialogue around personal politics. (Krause 1998)¹

When essentialising occurs, the focus is frequently directed on to issues of racism, with little understanding of the impact of social history on the personal development of both black and white counsellors and clients. In this sense the

impact of slavery, colonialism, racism, partition, caste systems and indentured labour are all to be considered in the present climate of cross cultural communication. However historical factors of oppression should not be taken for granted as the main factors.

Research carried out among Asian women in Glasgow (Tyrell, 1998 in Netto et al, 2001)² showed that while respondents identified racism as one of the many contributory factors, family problems, loneliness and bereavement were cited as the main sources of their depression, fear and stress. The impact of these experiences on black peoples has silenced some counsellors. They have been unable to voice their lack of knowledge and experience in these areas. In many situations this has affected their emotional ability to verbalise their understanding of and empathise with African and Asian people's experiences.

Gill Tuckwell (2002)³ sheds light on the white experience. She suggests that:

the search for identity, which is common to both groups and the symbolic representation of blackness and whiteness in the inner world is tightly interwoven with images and memories from colonial past, as well as current social realities. This leads to differences in the intrapsychic development of black and white people as a result of the collective memory and experiences of oppression. The traditional white belief in black inferiority and white superiority has had a particular function for white groups in obscuring the need to look more deeply at unresolved feelings and issues about self and other.

The impact of the collective colonial memory that Tuckwell refers to has been woven through counsellor training and created a certain numbness and lack of voice in varying degrees for both black and white counsellors. This numbness has created a general lack of voice in relation to black issues in counsellor client communication.

African American psychologist Niam Ackbar, a pioneer on the question of

historical impact and lack of voice, aptly summarises this phenomenon:

Although we are five to six generations removed from the actual experience of slavery we still carry the scars of the experience in both our social and mental lives. Psychologists and sociologists have failed to attend to the persistence of problems in our mental and social lives, which clearly have roots in slavery. Only the historian has given proper attention to the shattering

realities of slavery, and has dealt with it only as descriptive of past events. (1996)⁴

Often the voice of slavery and oppression puts people's backs up when discussed in psychological forums. It intrudes on the white therapist's persona with a legacy of guilt and black therapists may be reminded of the fear and loss associated with the pain and degradation of white supremacy. Perhaps that is why, as Ackbar suggests, it has not been

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sufficiently attended to in the history of psychotherapy and counselling training. There has also been a lack of theoretical models through which to study this subject.

Institutional racism

In circumstances where I have been the only black voice challenging the lack of models in training provision, I have felt as though I was carrying the burden of change on my own back. This is where the history of institutional racism becomes an important issue to consider. Whether with colleagues, in the consulting room or within training sessions, I believe that African-centered approaches would advocate that the effects of slavery and colonisation should be recognised as a key element in the process of what I call ‘black issues’. Asian-centered approaches advocate the importance of more present time concerns such as language, spirituality and confidentiality within their communities.

Finding a voice

As a trainer and university counsellor I am aware that the voices of counsellors trying to understand black issues in their client work must be heard. Firstly for many counsellors opportunities for exploring black issues were not present during their training. Secondly how are we to understand what we are doing with these issues if we do not express, dialogue and find a voice for our shared concerns? Recent discussions with my colleagues about the needs of trainees have led to our counselling team using the theme of ‘black issues’ to explore our own work with clients. Discussions with white colleagues have made it clear that the concerns of experienced counsellors are really no different to the concerns of trainees.

Below are some examples of trainee

counsellors’ concerns about working with black issues.

- What if a client rejects me because of my African Caribbean heritage?
- Most of the theory and models are from non-black backgrounds; this does not fit into the way we think. How can we work with this?
- Do I have to have had personal experience of oppression to be an effective counsellor to a black person?
- Why do I experience difficulties asking my black and Asian clients about their experience of being black?

The above concerns are a small sample of issues expressed by students about their work with clients. In enabling the trainee counsellors a voice on black issues our clinical team members have found their own voices and we have begun to grapple with ways of understanding ourselves and our own identities in relation to black issues work that we do with clients in the university.

While running a workshop on black issues with trainee counsellors I encouraged them to voice their concerns and collected these questions. At first there was a mixture of responses, including willingness, compliance, resistance, curiosity, fear, denial and anger. It took a few workshop sessions to assist trainees to work with the complexities of unfamiliar territory, with permission to explore their concerns. The benefits have been twofold. Firstly, they seem to have gained a heightened awareness of their own personal identities and cultural oppressions. Secondly, they are overcoming their fears of having a dialogue about black issues with both black and white peers and their clients. These challenges have heightened opportunities for working with the cultural and racial elements in their practice. While supporting trainees to

find their therapeutic voice on black issues, it is important to remember their different needs, which may vary according to the trainee’s own cultural and racial experience.

I have used this paper to voice my understanding of the needs expressed by both experienced and trainee counsellors to find and listen to their own voices and fill the gap in their clinical development. Rather than placing the emphasis of black issues on case material about black clients, they may be more self reflective and able to transfer their personal and social knowledge of black issues into practice. ●

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