

Updating psychotherapy training: equality and diversity issues in psychotherapy training

The profession must be much more sensitive to those from ethnic minorities who commit to psychotherapy training, says Eugene Ellis. Our business is the human condition. We have the tools.

Psychotherapy is rooted in an ethos and devotion to the common good. It asks us to examine the processes of self-deception that perpetuate individual unhappiness and social structures that are inequitable and oppressive. Yet psychotherapy has for the most part been a white, privileged profession, hence training and treatment has focused on this population.

Inequality and insensitivity

The most obvious area where this dilemma is seen is in relation to race and ethnicity. Inequality of access for black and minority ethnic (BME) communities is a well-recognised reality for many psychological therapy services (Edridge, 2004¹). The insensitivity of UK mental health services to ethnic diversity is also an enduring problem (Bowl, 2007²). There is little research with regard to the BME training experience but, anecdotally, BME students are more likely to drop out of courses, change their training provider more often and take longer to qualify as psychotherapists.

It is my belief that psychotherapy and psychotherapy training institutions have the potential and capacity to bring to fruition the good intentions that underlie

the common good ethos inherent in psychotherapy theory and ideals. There is uncertainty about how the profession can bring this about, but it must start with the initial training of therapists and the networks that support continued professional development.

At the heart of these issues is the question of whether or not there needs to be conversation about race in training. It is often imagined that there is no need. We take our avoidance of the conversation as a measure of our progress and enlightenment, which is telling in itself. It does nothing however to increase sensitivity to ethnic diversity.

Self-exposure and self-examination

Training in the psychotherapy and counselling profession requires self-exposure and self-examination in order to establish an inner robustness and confidence to hold similar processes in our clients. In a training environment, a BME person's reflection on the impact that racial bias has on their inner lives and how this has organised their identity can lead to others on the training confronting these issues for the first time. This can result in silence owing to uncomfortable

feelings and/or a lack of confidence in facilitating a continuing conversation. It's like a huge hole has opened up in the floor and somehow it becomes the BME student's fault. They can then choose either to say nothing more because it's too painful, and focus on just getting their qualification, or to insist their voice is heard, get labelled as the troublemaker, and risk not making it to the end of the course because they are worn out by the fighting.

I responded to the needs of these students by offering student support groups,³ which have been running in north London since 2009. Their aim is to support students in navigating their course as a black or Asian person without feeling that there is no place for their particular inner turmoil in the field of psychotherapy and counselling. The group connects students with the parts of the psychotherapy and counselling profession that can, and do, respond to their and their clients' issues of internal distress. Some of the students who attended have given their narratives on video.⁴ Here are some excerpts:

Jitesh: "There were some frustrations on the course and I needed to take it somewhere else. The questions had always been there. You go there with a lot of hope that perhaps this place will be different but there is the realisation that it reflects all the other institutions and that was a disappointment."

Nicole: "The college felt like a microcosm of what was going on in the outside world. You have hope, but your issue of race and culture is sidelined."

Rena: "I have always found it difficult to find my voice and I was finding it increasingly



Eugene Ellis is an integrative arts psychotherapist and founder of the Black and Asian Therapist Network (BAATN), the UK's largest independent organisation to specialise in working with black and Asian clients. BAATN actively supports new BME therapists into the profession and develops partnerships with institutions and individuals who want to develop their skills with this client group in therapy, supervision and training. Email eugene@baatn.org.uk or visit www.baatn.org.uk or @baatnman

difficult on the course. I thought that going somewhere outside the institution might help, particularly as my own internal racism was contributing to that.”

Melanie: “We were fortunate in that there were a lot of BME students [on my course] and the tutors had the foundation, so we did cover quite a bit. A lot of my stuff is around race ... We are trained to see white clients. I’ve had one black client and most of my clients are middle-class white people. My training is suited to them ... [referring to the support groups] There is often a lot of emotion in the room and a lot of hurt. Some students have had very negative experiences, which I’m not sure I would have stuck out. For me, the groups calmed me down. The group for some students allowed the pain to come through, where they cannot express that on their course. I felt very fortunate not to have had the experiences that some students had.”

Patsy [referring to the support groups]: “The space was constructive for me in terms of learning, in terms of experience and in terms of having a voice. There were lots of things packed into one day on my course and things would pass me by ... Most of my supervisors were white and they have a different perspective. Not that their view was not valid. I just really wanted to know what someone like me might think about the same situation. The group was always useful to my self-development.”

Overall, the themes that emerged from the student support groups were around:

- The student’s disappointment in the world of psychotherapy, which they imagined would be different from other institutions
- The possibility for their hurt to be attended to in a psychotherapy and counselling framework
- Experiencing being heard as a transformative experience in itself
- Raised awareness of how impactful race is for BME people
- The group being a place to develop their voice around their own experience and the experiences of others like them
- The knowledge that there is theory that speaks to their experience in a powerful way and the safety that comes from this.

Nikki Cooper,⁵ a white tutor and programme leader for professional qualifications,

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offered this powerful self-reflection in a recent journal article:

“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 ... 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-Mavinga⁶ 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.”

As a profession, I believe that we have a unique role to play in contributing to the alleviation of suffering that is inherent in the experience of being a minority within society. There are many psychotherapy organisations that share this vision and want to be more effective in this area but then get stuck there.

Trainers forums

To move forward with this belief, I decided to create a space called a trainers forum⁷ for black and white trainers of all backgrounds, with the aim of making therapy training more accessible and more able to meet the therapeutic needs of students from BME

backgrounds. It was evident by the number of people who attend these forums that there were others who also wanted to make progress on this.

At a recent forum, the group was given the task of trying to distil the process of change and development in this area for training organisations and translate that into a guide. There was a lot of consensus in the room about what this document might contain.

The central issue was how you talk about race without people feeling they are intrinsically bad or overly deskilled. How can organisations create the safety to allow free conversation to happen? The group focused on the process of the individual facilitator’s and trainer’s development, as well as the process of change relating to the wider organisation.

Confidence and comfort

With regard to the process around individuals, it was felt there was a need to anticipate that when there are conversations around race there will be an atmosphere, there will be discomfort, and people won’t necessarily feel at ease. Discomfort is not the aim, but at the point where there is that tension, the possibility exists for something new or for some discovery to be made. The facilitator needs to have visited this area before in reasonable depth to feel confident in enabling the process to unfold, minimise the activation of individual defences and for learning to take place.

A guide for organisations would point out the inevitable dynamics that happen within the race conversation and provide practice examples that have been found to be helpful to facilitate the process. For instance, the uncomfortable sense of unease that comes with the race conversation can be named and explained as ‘recognition trauma’ and that this is a normal part of the process of sensitisation to issues of ethnic diversity. Another practice example might be naming the tendency in all of us to see ourselves either as good or bad, racist or not racist, and how this view stops the conversation. Although it was acknowledged that the readers would be

searching for guidance on what to do, the group wanted to emphasise the importance of attitude and perspective. It's about a way of being that will allow an unfolding rather than a closing. The journey of moving through a process and making a paradigm shift would need to be emphasised rather than what to say or not to say.

Organisational change

With regard to the process of change that relates to the organisation, the group thought that staffing, recruitment, course content and delivery, support for students and staff, supervision and personal/professional development would need to be addressed systematically. It was also seen as important that organisations involve all the organisational staff in the process rather than leave it to be managed by a few individuals.

There is a lot that could be said about the political landscape around these issues and that perhaps change needs to come about through more stringent training standards. However, since our profession specialises in working with the human condition, it would seem to me that we already possess the tools for change. The question we really need to face is: are we willing to go through the painful but ultimately rewarding process towards ethnic sensitivity for ethnic minorities who take on the endeavour of psychotherapy?

References

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- 2 Bowl R (2007). 'Responding to ethnic diversity: black service users' views of mental health services in the UK'. *Diversity in Health and Social Care* 2007, 4(3): 201-210.
- 3 Student Support Groups: www.baatn.org.uk/students.html
- 4 Student Support Group video: www.baatn.org.uk/member-videos
- 5 Niki Cooper is programme leader for professional qualifications and tutor at Place2Be, a charity providing school-based emotional and mental health support services. niki.cooper@place2be.org.uk or visit www.place2be.org.uk
- 6 McKenzie-Mavinga I (2009). *Black issues in the therapeutic process*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 7 Trainers forums: www.baatn.org.uk/Trainer-and-Therapist-Forums

Breaking free from the shadow(s)

Dwight Turner's PhD thesis is a creative exploration of the conscious and unconscious experience of being the Other.

I am a black, male, transpersonal psychotherapist. I am currently a PhD student; formerly I was a serviceman. It is these types of characteristics that supposedly make me different, with these differences marking me as 'separate' and Other on a daily basis.

In the Global North philosophers have often either seen the Other as a hindrance or a burden on resources, whether they are from a different culture, gender or religion. Yet, from within psychotherapy itself, von Franz (1980), amongst many, recognised that the Other was often prone to holding the unwanted projections placed upon it by the majority, while from the African philosophy of Ubuntu, Desmond Tutu's assertion that 'my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours' (Hailey, 2008: 2) speaks of the delicate interpersonal connection between subject and Other. Yet, for the Other, what is it like to live as the shadow for the majority? And how does one emerge from the isolation of being the Other, particularly as a PhD student? It was these types of questions, as part of my wider PhD study on what it was to be the Other, which led to my using my own experience as Other in a heuristic exploration of the subject. An exploration designed to understand not just the conscious experience, but also the unconscious experience of being the Other.

Black dogs and cockroaches

I decided to study my own experience as Other using creative means, echoing Kalff (1991), who saw creativity as a route towards symbolically uniting our external and internal experiences of being Other. Alongside sand play work, visualisations, diary entries, drawings and working with dreams were all employed over six months to ascertain my unconscious experience of being the Other, my design following Lacan's (2003) idea that there is a conscious and unconscious relationship between signifier and signified, while also highlighting the experience of my PhD self as the signified.

As a student, some of my early diary entries spoke of feeling like the outsider at a meeting of fellow PhD students at the university. Although interested in the topics being presented, feelings of inadequacy prevented me from speaking up, reminding me of how it can sometimes be as the Other; that the Other, be it based on a projection or a reality, feels it is denied its own voice. At the same point, shadow dreams assailed me like the simple example below where:

I'm in a room on my own and I'm being attacked by a pack of black dogs who tear the skin off my back as I try to fend them off. I woke up feeling quite low and depressed. The scene reminded me of Churchill's 'Black Dog' depression.



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