

Book Review

THE CHALLENGES OF WHITENESS

Being White in the Helping Professions: Developing Effective Intercultural Awareness. By Judy Ryde. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2009; 219 pp, £19.99 pb.

Judy Ryde's book is a vital addition to writings on race and being white. It is in rare company. The book is aimed at those working in the helping professions and is, I think, essential reading for counsellors or psychotherapists interested in this area. I agree with Ryde that discussions about race can become diluted, rather than strengthened, by the inclusion of issues such as gender or class; undoubtedly there is a connection between these but there is good reason to look, at least some of the time, at this issue in isolation.

Ryde's book explores the challenges of whiteness from both a personal perspective and from within a group with other white helping professionals. Both offer important insights into the difficulties experienced by many white people attempting to understand what being white means in a racialized society and how much resistance there can be to doing this. The book highlights feelings such as guilt and shame and other unconscious processes as they relate to whiteness and looks at how these operate at an institutional level by looking at organizational and training issues. This is a strength of the book.

For me one of the most powerful aspects of this book is the clear inclusion of societal and political perspectives, particularly in a book to be read by counsellors and psychotherapists; this is uncommon. A key point is the acknowledgement that racism is rooted in our society, in our organizing principle, and that white people too must be affected by this. Yet it is unusual for white people to think about having race. Ryde argues that whiteness as 'normal' is powerful, and that while race and culture are attributed to the 'other', this helps keep white privilege in place. The book describes how from this powerful place of 'normal' all other things are judged and named. A final crucial point is the fundamental positioning of the individual – black and white – in an historical context, where our past and present experiences give our environment its shape and meaning.

The impact of the above on our work as counsellors and psychotherapists is thoughtfully explored. I agree that in working with these issues it is important to create an open and 'interested' environment. There must be space to notice racist thoughts and to allow and to think about shame and guilt, for example. *Being White* includes practical suggestions for how to work with these themes. One that I found particularly useful was the triangle of power, which looks at the relationship between role power, cultural power and individual power. This model shares similarities with other models such as process-oriented psychology, which looks at different levels of power held by individuals and groups. It captures both the immutable and the fluid aspects of power – societal and personal.

I found the book easy to read and felt that it was a useful introduction to the issues explored, without being simplistic. Ryde positively includes the complexities present by combining the psychological the political and the social. It is a book relevant to readers who have not thought about these issues and to those who have a broader understanding and an interest in these issues. Chapters on whiteness in supervision and practising white awareness as professionals bring whiteness to life in the work that helping professionals do and I thought this grounded the book in its context well. I found it a well referenced book, which I think would be useful to anyone wanting to develop a depth of understanding on these issues.

I appreciate how honestly Judy describes her personal journey and her struggles with being white. The book deserves to be widely read, I hope it will be.

Havva Mustafa

Email: havva.mustafa@ntlworld.com