
PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Self as a teaching tool: Exploring power and anti-oppressive practice with counselling/psychotherapy students

Peter Blundell, * Beverley Burke,  Ann-Marie Wilson,  and Ben Jones  Liverpool John Moores University, UK

ABSTRACT

Counselling and psychotherapy training often incorporates experiential learning to help students understand and explore different aspects of self. Lecturers and tutors, facilitating such courses, can also share aspects of their lived experience, as a form of experiential learning. This article describes a workshop on power and anti-oppressive practice that was delivered to counselling students in a Master of Arts (MA) in Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice. Two lecturers (Beverley and Peter) used their lived experiences of racism and homophobia to stimulate student discussion and debate—effectively, they were using self as a teaching tool. This article details their experiences and reflections whilst in discussion with two students (Ann-Marie and Ben), who attended the workshop.

KEYWORDS: power; anti-oppressive practice; counselling pedagogy; self in teaching

INTRODUCTION

This article reports on the experiences, and ongoing reflections, of students and lecturers who took part in a workshop on the topic of power and anti-oppressive practice (AOP) in counselling and psychotherapy. This session was delivered for students completing a Master of Arts (MA) in Person-Centred/Experiential Counselling and Psychotherapy, during their first year of study and before they had started their counselling placements.

We, the authors of this article, are the lecturers (Beverley and Peter) who prepared and delivered the session, and two students (Ann-Marie and Ben) who took part. The idea for this article came after the session had been delivered. Peter and Beverley put out an open call to all students who attended the session to see who was interested in a collaborative writing project about their experiences, including any reflections since the session—Ben and Ann-Marie were the only respondents. We have taken inspiration for this article from other articles which have attempted to describe and critically examine the teaching of other related subjects (e.g., Proctor et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021).

The central idea behind the workshop sought to use the lecturers' own personal experiences of prejudice, oppression, and discrimination to help students understand the importance of power and AOP in their counselling practice. Ultimately, both lecturers were attempting to use self as a teaching tool. Therefore, we expect this article to be of interest to lecturers and students in a variety of disciplines and settings. For example, educators who want to teach by sharing aspects of themselves or their lived experiences, or students who are engaged with personal development processes within educational settings.

Individuals from marginalised groups can often be pressurised into sharing their lived experiences to educate others about prejudice and discrimination. We wanted to acknowledge this and state that we do not advocate for teachers or educators sharing experiences with students that they aren't comfortable sharing. Beverley and Peter ensured that the delivery of this session minimised the risk to themselves through supportive discussions, and planning and preparation of the session. Students were prepared for the workshop through preparatory reading and had access to their own smaller personal development groups immediately after the session, in addition to opportunities in the session to process what had been shared. However, we acknowledge that any type of teaching that involves sharing lived experiences has an element of risk, for those who are sharing, and for those who are listening.

About the Authors

Beverley is black and female. She worked as a social worker for several years in Liverpool, where she has lived longer than in the city of her birth, Coventry, where she was born 64 years ago to Jamaican parents. In 1990, Beverley, along with two other black female

colleagues, was appointed as a senior lecturer and so became one of the first black women to be employed by the social work department at Liverpool Polytechnic (now Liverpool John Moores University). Beverley's interest in oppression, inequality, and injustice has informed several publications written independently and with others in the areas of anti-oppressive practice, and social work values and ethics.

Ann-Marie is a 47-year-old, white, heterosexual female, and she has worked with people with learning disabilities for over 25 years. She has worked as a support worker and a manager of services, where she has experienced power dynamics from different perspectives. Ann-Marie has witnessed the conscious and unconscious disadvantaged positioning in society of the people she supports.

Ben is a 44-year-old, white, heterosexual, Irish man. He lives in Merseyside, is married with one daughter, and was the first person in his family to go to university. He is a trainee counsellor/psychotherapist following a 20-year career in communications. Ben has a passion for work-related mental health issues and work-life balance after a breakdown in 2015, when in a senior role in a large global organisation. He regularly blogs on mental health issues, drawing on his lived experience (Jones, 2022).

Peter is white and in his early 40s. Peter's pronouns are he/him/his and he is gay. He is a senior lecturer in Counselling/Psychotherapy at Liverpool John Moores University. Recently, he has started to experiment with sharing aspects of his lived experience as part of his teaching. Peter also works as a therapist running a small private practice as well as consulting on various projects as an independent social worker. He has an interest in anti-oppressive practice, as well as the subjects of power and boundaries in professional practice.

Our Process

We have approached this article through a collaborative reflective process which involved a variety of different steps including our own individual musings and our thoughts as a group. Our reflective process was organic and experimental. It evolved intuitively as we moved through different stages of reflection; for example, sharing those reflections with each other and then shaping them into a written text. We have documented our process in the hope that it may inspire others to undertake their own joint student-teacher reflections after undertaking other types of learning exercises.

Initially, we agreed to meet as a group of four individuals via a virtual space. We agreed to write down and share with the other group members our reflections about the teaching session itself. We shared these with each other before the meeting and then used them as the start of our discussion points. We had such a fruitful discussion in our first meeting, and we all made notes on the session. However, afterwards, we regretted that a recording of our meeting was not made, as this meant some of the nuanced reflections hadn't been captured.

Therefore, we agreed to meet again (virtually) and record a further reflective session, between the four of us, as we considered the themes which had come up for us, so far. The following article is split into three parts. Part one, entitled 'Initial Thoughts', details the preliminary reflections we recorded separately before meeting as a group, and we have shared these in chronological order (i.e., our reflections before, during, and after the workshop); however, when it comes to choosing which one of us speaks first in each section, we have chosen to randomise the author order, to value each of our contributions equally. The second section is entitled 'Shared Stories', which details transcript excerpts from our second meeting; these dialogues represent a variety of themes which we found to be important in our reflective process. Finally, we conclude this article with a short summary entitled 'Interpreting Our Story'.

Plans for the Workshop

This workshop required students to access a variety of resources on power and AOP before the session, including articles and podcasts. The session was designed in three parts: (1) a short lecture on the concepts of power and AOP; (2) a presentation of personal experiences of oppression—Peter talked about his experience of homophobia, and Beverley talked about her experiences of racism; and (3) a workshop for students to undertake an exploration of power and oppression in their own lives. This was the second year that this session had been delivered to students. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year it was delivered online rather than in-person.

INITIAL THOUGHTS

Reflections Before the Session

Beverley: This is the second time which Peter, and I, will be delivering this session; the first one was a year ago. So much has happened since that first session. The pandemic, the highs and lows of working and teaching remotely, the global response to the killing of George Floyd.

Thinking back to that first session: My initial reaction when I received Peter's email was 'do you want to do this?'. I read the email a couple of times and decided that yes, I would get involved. I believed that Peter was genuine in wanting to include issues around power and oppression within the counselling teaching curriculum and I was confident in working with Peter because of his commitment to challenging social inequality and oppression in its many forms. I was pleased to have the opportunity to discuss issues of oppression and inequality within a teaching session with a gay man. These are rare teaching opportunities. Yes, I was very nervous as I didn't know the students. However, I was confident working with Peter; I felt instinctively that we would support each other. I trusted Peter.

That first session was deeply emotional but we both felt that something significant had happened between us, and between us and the student group.

Actively using personal experiences within a teaching session is risky and emotionally draining. You are sharing very painful, hurtful, and humiliating experiences with people you do not know and who represent groups who have contributed to your oppression. You must be emotionally available and prepared. I know my story. Well, I think that I do. I have lived it after all. However, I do know that there is the possibility that I may have buried some experiences so deeply that I can no longer access them. So, I am always aware that no matter how much I think that I am in control of the telling of my story, the very act of telling, the reactions of people that I am sharing my story with, means that things may not turn out as expected. I know that as I am telling my story, I am remembering, and managing my emotions which come with remembering. I am also engaged in a process of editing my story in real time as a response to the situation I am in. A lot is going on and I hope that it doesn't show!

The visual cues, verbal responses/feedback—just hearing the words that I am speaking and how they impact on my emotional self can cause me to skip a chapter, return to a particular page of my story again and again, or decide to just shut the book, ending the dialogue mid-flow. I really don't want to not deliver what I have agreed to do.

When Peter shared with me that he was going to prerecord his sharing, I thought 'what a good idea'. It would mean that you could tell your story in your own time, without distractions, but more importantly you would be in control of what was shared. However, I realised quite quickly that prerecording wasn't for me. I felt for some reason that I would, even with all that I have said, be more comfortable sharing 'live'. When I reflect back, I realise that this decision was not about wanting to take risks. I am a risk averse person. However, I do know that the context I am in provides me with the oxygen to help me to tell my story and I need that oxygen.

As the time neared for me to click on the Zoom link, I began to get what I call my teaching nerves. However, I was looking forward to teaching the session.

Ann-Marie: Prior to the lecture we had been sent several articles to read to help us get a sense of the breadth and depth of understanding needed to fully appreciate the issues surrounding anti-oppressive practice and power. These included the role age has on attitudes towards mental health and services, raising awareness of the reality of LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer [or sometimes questioning], and others) members lived experience and that of people of colour, as well as questions raised by members of the counselling and psychotherapy profession who live with Tourette's, and deafness.

I was, to be honest, shocked at my own ignorance and the simplified way in which I sometimes view the world, being someone who generally has a 'live and let live attitude'. I didn't see, or didn't fully appreciate, the harm that can be caused by just trying, in isolation, to be a 'good' person. So many aspects of personhood I had never really considered or

acknowledged as opening a person to discrimination and vulnerability, or rather the daily grind of this reality on so many minority groups, and the impact of this on their sense of self. The lecture came a week after a deadline for our ethics essay, which focused on a trainee counsellor supporting a member of the LGBTQ+ community and questions about power. This combination of information, including the Social Graces experiential exercise (see Nolte, 2017), made me think about the many ways in which minority status is created and perpetuated to justify a particular group's power and introduced me to the concept of intersectionality, which I'd never fully appreciated, as well as making me aware of many of my unconscious biases.

Peter: In delivering this session the previous year, students had given feedback that they had found it both powerful and meaningful. Therefore, I was confident in the content of the session as an opportunity for students to explore these concepts. However, I was very apprehensive about this session because it involved sharing some painful aspects of my own story, including experiences of homophobia and discrimination. During the session in the previous year, I had become upset during the discussion and had to finish my presentation early; students had been supportive, but I was worried about ensuring that I was creating a safe space for students. Beverley and I had reflected on this aspect of sharing our own stories, and I decided I was going to prerecord my story to share with students. However, Beverley decided she was going to still share her experiences verbally.

Ben: Arriving at the lecture I was aware that I was already on something of a journey on this course. I was understanding that being 'open-minded', or a person with progressive or liberal views, brought up being taught to treat others as you wish to be treated and loving thy neighbour, was not enough—not by a long way. My initial passive, 'do no harm' view of my role in being non-discriminatory in society, let alone as a therapist, was not going to cut it when we think about how to be anti-oppressive.

Alongside this, the lecture came at a time when I was building a deeper understanding—partly on the back of a recent ethics essay which looked predominately at identity—of how my own identity and the powers and privileges that I hold could impact on others. As a straight, white, middle-class, middle-aged man, I knew that I had hit the privilege jackpot, but I realised that I saw all this from my own perspective, i.e., that it was important for me to try to see the world as others who don't have these powers and privileges see and experience the world. However, what I had not done was to recognise that my identity alone, and the intersectionality of my identity, could instantly impact on others, before we had ever spoken or interacted. My belief that all would be fine once someone got to know/experience me, regardless of what my identity represented or stood for, was naive.

On a practical level, as I am drawn towards self-disclosure and the power of personal stories, I was excited to hear directly from Peter (who I knew) and Beverley (who I had not met). I find that sort of discussion and experiential session helpful for my learning. I therefore

arrived intrigued, slightly nervous that my emerging understanding of anti-oppressive practice would be found wanting, but ready to learn.

Teaching

Peter: This year the session was delivered online, which meant a very different dynamic from the previous year. I noticed the opportunities (or maybe the desire) for small talk was less. I remember seeing Beverley in a sea of student faces, rather than being by my side at the front of the class. I introduced the topic and passed over to Beverley to discuss key concepts when thinking about AOP. My personal presentation was next and because it was prerecorded my anxiety was much less than the year before. However, as I played the presentation which displayed a PowerPoint and video of me talking about my experiences, I felt a sudden sense of exposure and vulnerability within this virtual space. I had prerecorded my talk that morning, and it was fresh in my mind. I talked about growing up as a young gay man and the time when I came out to friends, friends who shared this information without my permission and left me feeling vulnerable and exposed. A similar feeling to today. I also disclosed about an ex-colleague who had once told me that they believed 'all gay men should be killed' but had since changed their mind, since meeting me. It was strange hearing my own recorded words played back, knowing that others were listening to my experiences. I could not see their faces because of sharing my own presentation. I wondered what they were thinking. As the presentation was coming to an end, I heard myself talking about the day David Cameron announced that he was supporting marriage equality and how emotional that made me every time I heard that clip. I feel a tear well up, but I hold onto it. This is not the time. The presentation ends, and the share screen stops.

I wait to see how everyone will respond. The student responses are heartfelt and empathetic, and I think how silly I was to have been worried. Some of what I have shared has touched on others' experiences, and I am pleased that they feel comfortable enough to share their experiences here but also sadness at their experiences of discrimination.

It is Beverley's turn to share. I am conscious she is speaking her story, no prerecording. Beverley has not met these students before, and I wonder what that feels like to open up and effectively talk to a group of strangers. Beverley describes her personal experiences of racism, and although I have heard her share these before, this does not make them any easier to listen to. The death of George Floyd comes to mind, and I think about how many of the issues that Beverley is talking about seem to be in the national consciousness right now. I wonder if, or how, that changes the meaning for students as they listen to her talk. Beverley comes to the end of her talk and apologises to students as she says she has been angry. I must admit I hadn't noticed this feeling in Beverley; I was focused on the pain she had experienced rather than any anger. Or maybe it's because I can't imagine Beverley being angry, as I have always known her as so quiet and softly spoken. Beverley answers questions and we take a break. We ask the students to complete some exercises around thinking about power in their own

lives. I am not sure how appropriate this is at this stage of the class; I am thinking students may need more time to process what has been shared. Or maybe that is what I need right now.

Beverley: It was good seeing Peter on the screen first—it anchored me. Seeing him made me reflect momentarily if I should have gone down the route of prerecording. I am looking forward to co-facilitating the session. I do want to share and engage. I am very aware of the strangeness of sharing private experiences with strangers, of attempting to develop a rapport via the screen (very unlike being in a teaching room where you experience the physicality of people). As I wait for the session to start, I am thinking about navigating the emotional tightrope which stretches between me and the students. One unhelpful comment, a particular look, a particular feeling that may arise in me, can mean the difference between getting across the precipice with just a wobble or two to falling into an abyss of emotional turmoil. I don't want to embarrass myself. I don't want to get upset. I want to be honest in my sharing. I want the students to understand but more importantly to engage in a dialogue with me.

Peter's story was again emotionally hard to listen to. It was different hearing the recording of Peter whilst also seeing him on screen. I thought that it must have been hard for Peter to cope with his emotions whilst being visible to the students. I heard different things this time around which heightened my awareness of the depth of Peter's oppressive experiences.

Unlike the first session, I found it hard at times to clearly articulate my sentences. I felt more emotional than I thought that I would, and I wondered why that was. I remember feeling angry when telling some parts of my story. I did not want to come across as an angry black woman as that can feed into gender and racial stereotypes. So, I am hoping that I didn't sound angry, but I did feel emotional. I know that I am finding it hard to find the right words to tell my story, so I am desperately hoping that I am being coherent. I am struggling at times to manage myself—I want to convey my oppressive experiences without being dehumanised by them once again—but I know that I am particularly upset at how some of my experiences of racism and sexism have been managed by some men in my place of work.

It is very clear that the students have been moved by the narratives of oppression which Peter and I have shared with them. I can tell from the empathetic comments and questions asked by the group that they want to continue to develop themselves, their understanding of difference, and develop their practice. They are sincere, sensitive, and caring to each other and of me and Peter. I feel the pain of those students who were able to share their experiences of not being heard and valued. Teaching virtually magnifies how difficult it is to comfort someone from a distance and so adds to my feelings of not being able to 'emotionally hold' those who are upset.

I remember one woman asking, 'how she could explore her understanding without burdening the "other"', a question which I thought really validates the importance of

providing a safe space where open and honest discussions can take place about the differences and similarities which we share. Teaching sessions such as this one start the process of not only unburdening but of understanding—a necessary first step in developing self-awareness.

Ann-Marie: I was very moved by the very personal, honest, and open sharing of Beverley and Peter, the pain, hurt, and humiliation they had experienced, and the risk they took in telling us, which was very powerful. During the session, I also found powerful the experiencing of my own sense of shame and guilt over stories I have shared that were not mine to share, and of my ignorance and lack of understanding of what it means to be targeted because of one's colour, gender, sexuality, etc.

Ben: Listening to Peter and Beverley left me moved, angry, and feeling incredibly lucky. I have faced some challenges in my life but none because of the colour of my skin or because of the gender of the person I loved.

In just one example, I was sickened to hear how often the n-word was used to Beverley just as she walked down the street. This was happening in the city of my birth and the place I feel most at home. The juxtaposition of my feelings and experiences and how Beverley was treated on the same streets made me feel sick. It was a stark illustration of the different experiences we can all have just yards from each other.

To also hear two colleagues reflect on their respective experiences as employees of the same organisation was also illuminating and shone a light for me on the complexity of intersectionality—and how often people see just one part of someone's identity, or how one part can obscure other aspects of it if we are not alive to our own personal or organisational biases.

Post Reflections

Ann-Marie: I began to see how, throughout the course, we are being called to look at difference, what it is, where it comes from, what my attitudes are to difference, and how this needs to be named more. The week after, we looked at neurodivergence, and have subsequently explored in lectures and in personal development many aspects of 'othering', difference, and power. I am aware of a fear for loved ones, whose identity means they are more likely to face discrimination and microaggressions. I feel the need to educate myself, face my unconscious bias, accept and name those opinions and viewpoints that I hold that hurt others, and be part of the needed change.

I was reminded by the style of the lecture of the importance of stories. The power of telling mine, hearing yours, but also a recognition that how my story is changes—how I live it, tell it—changes as I grow. However, I also alter my story depending on the context, i.e., to control others and/or to reduce risk of rejection, or to impress. I am thinking about people who have

stories that are too readily scripted by others because of their colour, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. How are these voices heard both in the therapy room and beyond? Hence, this is why I joined PCSR (Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility).

Peter: One of the students reported how anxious they had felt before the session. I reflected on the amount of information given to students before the session, which was minimal, and wondered if this was fair. I make a note to be more explicit around the content and requirements for the session for future students. I remember Beverley referring to other aspects of her identity during her presentation, many of which could be considered aspects of privilege. I consider how we could explore multiple aspects of our identities in future, rather than just one; this may offer a deeper intersectional lens for the students to engage with. The feelings of vulnerability and exposure have left me now. I have found myself disclosing more aspects of myself to students during other classes such as personal development groups—it appears to me to have deepened our relationships although I am wary of making sessions about me rather than the students.

Beverley: I am emotionally drained, but I feel in discussion with Peter that the session has provided the students with lots to think about and that they have been able to contribute. Peter will be seeing the group later and so can hear what the students have to say about their experiences in a little more detail, which feels good as an ending for him and the students.

Peter and I take some time to debrief but I am aware that he has more teaching, must be emotionally tired, and needs a break, so we cannot evaluate the session in too much detail right now.

I cannot remember if I discussed at this time or later with Peter the anger that I felt with the injustice and oppression I have experienced. Reflecting back, I remembered that prior to the session I'd had a discussion with a senior colleague about my workload, and this discussion probably was in the back of my mind and perhaps triggered the feelings of past negative/unprofessional experiences of being managed by a white male. I clearly still feel angry. Yes, I am angry. There is a lot to feel angry about in a world and society which is characterised by differences, but I am also hopeful.

Ben: I felt guilty after the lecture because I enjoyed it. I enjoyed hearing the first-hand stories and examples of how Peter and Beverley's intersectionality had played out in their experiences. The guilt came as I reflected on how much effort I felt it must have taken for both Beverley and Peter to tell us about their experiences—in Beverley's case, to 30 strangers. Talking about the discrimination and the challenges they had to overcome in the face of power and oppression could, I am sure, be emotionally draining and I feared that I had added to their burden by expecting them to 'perform'.

I am committed to challenging myself and educating myself on what it is like to walk in different shoes, but this session reminded me of the importance of not expecting those who

are walking in those shoes—possibly traumatised by their experiences—to be expected to share that for my benefit, for my learning.

I am trying, following the session, to continue the journey I started with the course to be more empathetic and recognise that before I speak or act, that my identity is having an impact on people (including future clients). This is especially the case for me as I represent a series of dominant majorities. I also have reflected after the session that it is not just ok, but totally natural, for others to be sceptical or wary of me as we meet, given what I may represent to them. The session was a powerful reminder of this.

SHARED STORIES

These are edited excerpts from a transcript of our second discussion as a group. We have chosen to record our discussions verbatim (only edited to remove personal disclosures and references to other people) so that others could see the way our discussions unfolded. We have called this section ‘Shared Stories’, a reference to the experiences shared by Peter, Beverley, and students in the workshop but also referring to our shared story as authors of this article, which has developed through our writing process. We have put each discussion under a heading to highlight the different aspects of our process.

How Do We Create This Paper?

Peter: We had such great discussions last time. And then we all thought what did we say? So, we have decided to record this discussion as part of our reflective process.

Ann-Marie: The thing is, when you get into discussions, if I get lost in the conversation, I really can't remember it, because it's very much in the here and now isn't it? So, it isn't a planned thought?

Peter: There might be something about that, Ann-Marie, in terms of being included in this paper, that when you have a discussion, like a reflective discussion about something, then how do people retain it? You know? How do you take it away and do something with it? You know?

Ann-Marie: One of the questions we've written down is—how does a story, or telling stories, how is it a teaching aid? If you're at a lecture sat there studiously, you're consciously trying to think! Whereas if it's a conversation in class, there's so much richness. Also, the whole point, the reason why we are doing this, is about the telling of a story. A story that sinks and then it does float back, and just comes back up! However, sometimes you're not conscious of where it's coming from in the first place. This is different from reading a list of books and articles thinking 'I don't know what these words mean'.

Peter: It's like the experiential element, Ann-Marie, isn't it? Which is what a lot of the course is about. We're trying to do something with that now and turn it into something academic, something that other people can read and maybe understand.

Beverley: I was thinking about that. I think that's quite right. But rather than going down the academic route because you have already started putting our voices together. I thought, well, why don't we write a paper just with our reflections, our deliberations? And so, I know you (Peter) have started trying to put some references in it but perhaps that detracts from what we're saying? I mean, it depends on whether the journal accepts it without many references. But I think that sort of ongoing dialogue, and that sort of the layering of issues and difficulties and how we express things might be, you know, sort of a nice way to write really.

Ann-Marie: I tried to read and understand the Dwight Turner intersectionality book (Turner, 2021). He basically writes a lot of it in a heuristic way. And that sense of how do you use yourself? Use your own experience? And it was, in fact, the bits that I found most powerful were the bits when it wasn't academic, it was him saying how he relates to things. But it just reminded me of what we're trying to do. And how do you have it academic enough for publication, but not so academic that it reaches a broader audience? Because this isn't for me, this isn't just about teaching in this field. This is generally about teaching and teaching in its broadest sense, you know, how do you make cultural change? So, there's all sorts of those layers of this storytelling which could help people shift their thinking about this—it is about what you should or shouldn't do.

Peter: There's something about that, Beverley. I think that's interesting because sometimes with academic journals, almost like you feel like 'oh, I have to', 'I have to put all of that in', in some way to justify what I'm saying, you know? Put it into a context or whatever. But I think there might be something quite nice about throwing all of that away and kind of saying, this is just about our experiences.

[The reviewers of this article raised important points in relation to this sentence. As we viewed this as a continuation of the dialogue on this subject, we decided to include the reviewers' comments and our response. **Reviewer 1:** Except that it isn't! Peter and Beverley have made a conscious decision about sharing yourselves to facilitate learning and that implies a theory of education and facilitation. **Reviewer 2:** I agree they are also questioning the systemic process and oppression in education such as how to be 'academic' and be accepted. **Beverley's reply:** The paper can be read on two levels—the use of self in the teaching environment as well as an exploration of the teaching experiences within a particular class.]

Then other people can contextualise it in their academic work, or whatever. So, it might be something that we could do, and I think it would be good if we did that, we explicitly say that we've chosen not to include anything else. It's just about our experiences. We just wanted to focus on that.

Beverley: Like our stories, really? Yeah. It's not like a novel! I've been reading several novels over the last couple of weeks and you can get quite a lot across. Because it is all based in your personal reality, it's just that you decide to write it in a particular way, you know, for two or three hundred pages, rather than, you know, four thousand words or something.

Ben: I think the point about being explicit is important. I'm taking that head on at the beginning and saying, 'this is not written with many references' for the very reason that it is about experiential learning, it is about, as you say, verbal storytelling. And, you know, there's something without getting too complicated about it. But there's something about one of the themes of the session was about power and making things as inclusive and as open and as welcoming as possible. And there are times when lots of academic references can be a barrier or can bring fear into people. And this is where we've created something a bit more mainstream in that sense, this paper doesn't require significant additional reading or cross-referencing to academic material to open the dialogue and it feels more experiential in nature.

Beverley: I think that's a good point. In the telling of our stories to other people, then it may feel more open for others to then reflect on their experiences and tell similar stories or different stories, without feeling like they're going to be judged, because it's something that's out there. And they can see that it works.

Ben: Totally.

Ann-Marie: And it links into the personal journals we must complete for the course. That notion of reflexivity, and all that sense of coming back to reflect. And 'how do we learn?' because it's one thing to know it, but it's another thing to *know* it? And therefore, I think, again, it was one of your questions, Beverley. How does it change us just hearing another person's story? If we allow ourselves to listen fully to the other, we can be changed in how we see and relate to the other and to ourselves as we further explore our experiences and their meanings. In my experience of the course, it came up in our personal development groups, at least in our group, it was a very rich discussion, it just kept coming up because somebody kept, needing, wanting, to come back to it. I thought about that and wanted to inform or add to a previous conversation. I am still buzzing thinking about some of those conversations.

Thinking About the Impact on Practice

Ben: The bit of this paper that I think is important is any recommendations for changes to practice. I think there's something there for me, which is, and this is obviously my own personal reflection, but for me the strength of the session and that it could be relevant to others. As a receiver, as a student, it's for me, more memorable. For me, there's something about the experiences that all of you shared, it's just so much easier to recall them and what

they mean. I can see both of your faces in my mind's eye. I can remember, you know, how you said that bit of the story and what you said. That's why I think it helps to change practice because it is so much easier to recall. It's not, I go back to my notebook and find the date, who said that? What page is it on? It's Beverley's face, it's their face, I can see them talking to me! It's so much easier to remember and harder to ignore. There might be some people for whom they thought 'well this is a load of rubbish' or 'I'm not really interested in this' or 'I don't accept that'. It is harder to ignore it when they've got your face there and the recollection of it, it's easy to dismiss an article rather than someone standing there and telling you their own experience.

Peter: And there's something important about that—we were sharing our stories in there for the purposes of teaching. Then, the four of us sharing our stories so that other people can see and possibly learn from those experiences as well.

Safety and the Ethics of Sharing Our Stories

Ann-Marie: I think we've all commented on how safe this process feels. I'm just aware that not everybody does have such a safe space. Sorry, I feel a bit emotional, but there just aren't those safe spaces. And, therefore telling our stories, finding this way, this way to encourage people to create a safe space is important because it doesn't come by osmosis.

Peter: There is something there for me as well. I think Ben and Ann-Marie should think about this as well, in terms of that other article we read, those therapists are, were qualified. So, they'd gone through, and they'd qualified as therapists; you are in the middle of your training, and have not yet gone onto placement yet. So, I think about that safety Ann-Marie, when you were saying, 'ooh it feels a bit exposing'. It can feel very vulnerable when writing. And yes, we can challenge ourselves. But I think there's some reflection for you both to do about what you both feel comfortable sharing, and Beverley and I too. Thinking, 'are you going to be happy with that in 12 months, two years, five years' time?', when you're working as a therapist. Do you know what I mean? I think there needs to be some reflections about that, that you don't feel forced to share anything, even if you've written it down already. If you then say 'I'm not sure I do want that' or for it to be out there, then that's okay. You've got to be comfortable with that. I know Ben, you're a blogger anyway, and you kind of put stuff out there anyway about your own experience and process and stuff. But either way, it's just something to be mindful of, I think.

Ben: It's a good point. And I think again that there's something again there about that reflection—we present what we are presenting, in any space, in any conversation and interaction. And there was something about the tone that you, Peter, and Beverley, both set by being so open and vulnerable, and exposing yourself and you expose some quite raw emotions. I think that helped create a space. I am very struck, I think Beverley, it was in one of your reflections that we've all agreed quite a lot with each other. And I think that is a

brilliant point, that we do need to acknowledge in some ways, don't we? That Ann-Marie and I might be the only two students who had a positive experience? I'm 99% sure we weren't because we've had further conversations with other students. But there is something about us acknowledging that this is our experience and doesn't necessarily reflect everybody's.

Beverley: Yes, because it was interesting, there were a couple of people in the session, who did sort of share some of their experiences and obviously, others didn't share, so it's about those different levels of readiness, I suppose. And I think about you know, confidentiality and it is hard once you put something down on paper because, Peter you know that, and I know from writing that you might not agree with the things you've put down, but I think that's about growth and development. I don't think anything is set in stone. So, it's about how we introduce it, and how we sort of protect our space but it's also being mindful that it's an ongoing story, it will change in different ways as we develop and get exposed to other experiences.

Ann-Marie: And I'm just sort of thinking, as you're saying that, this part of me is going, 'oh yeah, do I need to, or do I censor it?', but there is a part of me going, 'actually what does that mean for the client?'. Thinking about the counselling context, if I'm censoring that journey, then what does that say about what the client can bring into the space? Because to some extent, you know, part of my growing has been when I've, excuse my language, but fucked up, I've said the wrong thing in the wrong place. But enough people have given me the opportunity to grow. And that's why I can take the next risk. And, if we don't, we don't always know where the safe space is. We don't know where the risk is. And we kind of have some idea, but there's something about saying, would I want to change it? I'm not sure. But I'd hope I have enough courage to say, 'actually, I need to be honest, I was very ignorant, I'm still ignorant, but this is a journey'. And hopefully, by the end of the article I will be able to say, 'this is where I'm at, and this is the starting point, for a whole new way of looking at the world and being in it', which is essentially, one of the main reasons why I'm on the course, is because the decisions I've made about wanting to see the world differently, to be in it differently, in a more loving, caring, honest way. So, it's part of that journey. But yeah, you know, the editing, maybe there's a need to protect, but I am thinking, 'who am I protecting?' and 'for what purpose?'

Ben: There's something about, by definition, Ann-Marie and I are students on a course being prepared for practice. And I think as a piece of learning to help prepare us for practice, there's a bunch of stuff that we've already talked about around issues and themes and stuff, which is interesting. But there is just so much richness around being aware of people telling stories, you both told a story.

Peter: But I love that phrase you use in terms of 'preparation for practice'. I always say this, you know, as soon as a student has seen their first client, they *are* a therapist, they might not be qualified, but that work is no different to when I see a client for the first time, you know?

You are there. And so, you know, you are in that process of becoming a becoming a qualified therapist, and it's all part of that process, isn't it? It's not an individual distinct thing that's happening.

Teaching Versus Counselling Practice

Beverley: I think in that session we're engaged in storytelling, telling our narratives. But I suppose that is some of the things we're talking about, there's a lot of information that's in there, in terms of our thinking through and filtering and what things we should share and what we shouldn't, because we're still in that teaching mode, and we want to be able to make certain points very clear. So, you know, although we might not have referred to theory or ideas or whatever, they were all there, you know, that's all part of the sub context, the subterranean, the lens, sort of level of the storytelling. So, it's going back to Ann-Marie's points, we are conscious of telling a story, but we're also conscious of being teachers and having the responsibility to enable you to progress in terms of your learning, and on your journey to be counsellors, social workers, or whatever.

Ann-Marie: So therefore, the choosing of the stories that you shared was based on 'this is the theme I want to explore'. And based on that, these are the examples, the experiences and examples that I can share, which hopefully you then get across that message, you know, alongside the theory, in that sense, and then it goes back to—will the student pick up the messages? You don't know what the student is going to pick up, all you can hope is that they've been able to make the connection between the theory, which was what we started with. Although, I realise that I had forgotten about that bit, I just remember the stories. But there was input explaining terminology, and then the stories, but it was the stories that I remember in a sense, maybe we wouldn't have understood fully if we hadn't had the terminology at the beginning of the session, like the glossary at the end of a book to go back to. But that was like a foundation. But it was the stories that were the bricks and mortar. So, you kind of had that balance, so that we could come back to it. And then, there is the point that you need to go onto to further reading.

Beverley: And this, for me, is an interesting experience. Because often, you know, you hold classes, and you don't get that follow up. I mean, this is a valuable learning experience because in the social work department, although we're supposed to be reflective practitioners, I don't think we've put as much weight on reflecting and writing down things as much as the counselling students. So, in terms of taking something back from this, helping student social workers to reflect on certain teaching sessions that they're exposed to, to get them that depth of learning, because it's, you know, it's very different. But very similar, I think experiences of developing yourself thinking about impact of self on other individuals, but also looking at how do I demonstrate empathy, care, concern, love in my practice, because it's not easy to do. But you do need to know how to do that.

Ann-Marie: And it relates to the last bit of the section of what Peter put together changes in practice, in a sense, it feels like we're, we're almost having a discussion around teaching rather than specifically counselling practice, in terms of how do we teach? How do we educate? How do we learn? You are working with people and need to be able to step away and go, 'okay, so what did they hear? How did they hear it? How was my reaction? What's this bringing up in me?', to then look at it and hopefully move forward.

Peter: For me, that idea of sharing personal stories or using self as a teaching tool, I think a lot of teachers will shy away from that, because it's such a vulnerable place to put yourself in. Well, I would like to show that it can be done in a way that is supportive and that is also safe, although not without risk. And one of the other things that Beverley had mentioned, when you were talking in the original talk Beverley, and you kind of mentioned very briefly that whilst you have experienced oppression, but, you know, you're also a middle-class woman, and that has its privileges and things like that. And I wondered whether in the future, whether we might include different aspects of ourselves. So that yes, we're explaining these areas where there's been prejudice and things like that, but maybe other areas where we benefit from privilege, you know, for whatever reason, to kind of give that impression for students to see it's not just one thing or the other but it's multi layered.

Reflections, Upon Reflections, Upon Reflections!

Ben: I think there's also something about Beverley's points around reflection. And so, we had the opportunity that day to reflect, and we wanted to in personal development, we had the opportunity to reflect in our reflective journals, which we're strongly encouraged, you know, told, that it is a crucial part of the programme. There is an important role to play there around reflection, but I think having that as an outlet, you can obviously choose to reflect outside of all those structures and stuff. But it was important to have this opportunity, which obviously, you know, created by Beverley and Peter. Ann-Marie and I volunteered to be involved and it gave us a chance to reflect again; this reflection can be as big or small as you want it to be. We've had such an opportunity to make that quite a big period of reflection which has added to the experience. And the paper hopefully will add to the experience for others as well. And that's what I guess that's one of the key things—go and listen to these stories, but also *think* about them. You know, it's not an entertainment product.

Beverley: Yeah.

Ben: It's a lot to ask someone to tell their story, it can be traumatic. It's not to entertain. It's there, it's a powerful vehicle if you want to take it but it's down to you then to run with that. It's not Beverley's job to educate me on racism, it's not Peter's job to educate me on homophobia, even though the effect of sharing their stories did offer insights and education. It's for me to then think about that. That's one of the things that's good to try and get across

for me, it is the chance for us to reflect on the session that's been so powerful and ask questions about our own assumptions and possible prejudices.

Ann-Marie: I think we both said in our own early reflections, we both thought we were alright, because we were trying to be good enough people, right? It's not in isolation. It's not enough to be nice to your neighbour! It's about being aware of this broader picture and all the things I was blissfully unaware of or were there on the edges of awareness, but I just didn't appreciate what it meant! What it means for both of you, Peter, and Beverley, to be aware of what things may or may not be said or how things are said. And, and that's about it again, am I open to that? Am I open to looking at where I've been part of that, and I was reading yours again, Beverley, when I was really struck by when you said, 'you're coming into a group that you don't know', which was a disadvantage. Also, I'm a white person, you know, part of that group that is part of oppressive practice and oppressive ways of being. There's something about saying that, and you can't control how it's heard; but there's still something about saying that, isn't there? And leaving it there? You've got to leave it open? And you can't start being prescriptive about what happens afterwards?

Beverley: Yeah. And that is quite a challenging thing to say, because many people that I know, *are* white. And so, there is that sort of issue of isolation, of who you trust and so on. But also, it's also for those people who are my sort of support networks to understand that it's not about saying every white person is racist. But that's something I must put into the equation, like a risk assessment, like, who do I relate to? How do I relate to? Will they in the future, say something that's, you know, racist, or sexist, or homophobic, or whatever, then, you know, then your relationships get challenged? And then it is a question of how do you challenge that person?

What Now?

Peter: I go back to Ben's point before, I don't know, Beverley, in terms of how you feel about this? But when Ben was talking about how the learning has kind of continued through this process. It's interesting for me, because we collaborate on that yearly lecture and meet before we do it and chat about it, then do it and have a short debrief kind of afterwards. And, you know, we kind of see each other generally, but this is kind of extended it for me as well, in terms of, you know, this regular kind of discussion about this one class that we had, which is going to probably be done next year, as well, it adds further elements of reflection to my own teaching through the year, which is interesting.

Beverley: Yeah. It is, it's valuable, isn't it? The sort of things you think when you go into teaching that you're going to have all these types of sessions!

Peter: All the time?!

Beverley: All the time? [Peter and Beverley laughing]. So, it's about the time, isn't it? That we should make time when we can. You've organised these spaces for us. And that's been good. But yes, that should be what teaching is about really, but we don't get that opportunity because of numbers, workloads, and all those other external factors that make it just like a one-off event.

Peter: Yeah. And we've done this because we're collaborating towards a specific output, not necessarily, because we just decided we were going to spend some time reflecting.

Beverley: Yeah, so we've justified why we're doing it. I think Ben was also saying about the conclusions. And I think that was quite useful. We started talking about what things we want to put in it. But you were saying perhaps we can open it up and say, this might be relevant for social work students or other students working with people, or human services? Because I do think, you know, there is a thread throughout this, because we're all working with people, deeply vulnerable people. People are telling us about their stories in different ways. I think it'd be useful, even nursing students, I think, need an understanding of what we're going through as part of this teaching process.

INTERPRETING OUR STORY

There are many themes which have come up for us during this process. However, we feel, in many ways, that we have created more questions about the use of self as a teaching tool than we have delivered answers. Sending this article to colleagues, for feedback and review, resulted in lots of different questions about the impact of our approach on all the students in attendance, their learning process, and their counselling practice. Whilst we acknowledge these questions as pertinent, we feel we cannot satisfactorily answer most of them without further detailed research into these processes.

Earlier in the article we reported on our own immediate responses to the teaching experience. In that section, Beverley comments on her concern about appearing angry in front of students and Peter responds by reflecting on his overall experience of Beverley. Whilst we are aware of how anger can often be projected onto black women, we realised that this awareness had not been conveyed within those responses. We thought it was important to acknowledge that somewhere within this article.

We hope that this article will stimulate further research and discussion into the use of self as a teaching tool and how it can impact on the dynamics of power within educational spaces. We (Peter and Beverley) have tried to consider and reflect on *how* we have brought ourselves into our teaching. Whereas all of us have felt, in some ways, that our process has followed a similar path to a client and a therapist meeting each other for the first time. We came with our own understanding of ourselves, as students and teachers, and we presented ourselves to each other. We then moved to a shared understanding—a restorative alliance, a supportive

and trusting relationship. We acknowledge the imperfect nature of our teaching, writing, and reflective processes. It is through making mistakes, and sharing these with each other, that we have found opportunities for change, both personally and professionally. Whilst we have worked towards creating safe spaces for both students and teachers, we acknowledge that we have not necessarily always achieved this for everyone. However, we understand that exposing different aspects of ourselves through sharing our stories always carries an element of risk. We believe these risks were worth it and have made meaningful changes to students' understanding of power and oppression, and hopefully their counselling practice. Finally, we ended our collaboration, and we each took away something different, as teachers, as students, and as people.

REFERENCES

- Jones, B. (2022). *AMJ Blog*. AMJ Counselling. <https://www.amjcounselling.com/amj-blog>
- Nolte, L. (2017). (Dis)gracefully navigating the challenges of diversity learning and teaching—Reflections on the Social Graces as a diversity training tool, *Context*, 151, 4–6.
- Proctor, G., Smith, L., & Akondo, D. (2021). Beyond the 'sticking plaster'? Meaningful teaching and learning about race and racism in counselling and psychotherapy training. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 19(2), 1–9.
- Smith, L., Proctor, G., & Akondo, D. (2021). Confronting racism in counselling and therapy training—Three experiences of a seminar on racism and whiteness. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 19(2), 1–11.
- Turner, D. (2021). *Intersections of privilege and otherness in counselling and psychotherapy*. Routledge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the time and effort that was offered by colleagues to review this paper before submission to the journal.

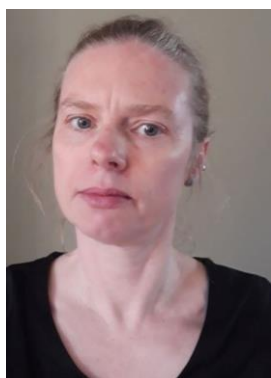
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Dr Peter Blundell is senior lecturer in Counselling/Psychotherapy at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. Peter is a social worker and a person-centred/experiential counsellor/psychotherapist. Peter's research and teaching interests include boundaries in professional practice, harm in therapy, power, and anti-oppressive practice. He is often found on Twitter discussing all these topics. @drpeterblundell



Beverley Burke is a senior lecturer in social work at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. She worked as an unqualified youth and community worker before qualifying as a social worker in 1981. Beverley is a member of an Adoption Panel and is a trustee and the current chair of the Social Work Educational Trust, which allocates educational grants to qualified social workers. She is a board member of the international peer-reviewed academic journal *Ethics and Social Welfare* and was joint editor of the Practice Section of this journal for 13 years. In this role, she supported and facilitated service users, carers, practitioners, students, and academics to write about the ethical dimension of their personal and practice experiences. Beverley's interest in oppression, inequality, and injustice has informed several publications written independently and with others in the areas of anti-oppressive practice, values, and ethics.



Ann-Marie Wilson is soon to qualify as a person-centred and experiential counsellor and psychotherapist, having completed her placement in August 2022 and begins the third year of the MA at Liverpool John Moores University in September 2022. She has worked with people with learning disabilities for over 25 years as a support worker and a manager of services, where she has experienced power dynamics from different perspectives. Ann-Marie has witnessed the conscious and unconscious disadvantaged positioning in society of the people she supports, including the inadequate provision of mental health services and support, which will be the focus of ongoing research, and she is keen to be part of an ongoing dialogue about making change.



Ben Jones is a qualified person-centred psychotherapist/counsellor. He is a final year student in the Counselling/Psychotherapy MA at Liverpool John Moores University. In 2014/15, he had a breakdown which prompted a rethink of his work, work–life balance, and plans for the future, following a 15-year career working in corporate communications in the public, private, third, and academic sectors. This breakdown led to his change of career to become a therapist, setting up amjcounselling.com in 2022. He is an active blogger and user of social media, including on Twitter. [@benjamin_jjones](https://twitter.com/benjamin_jjones)