


CONFERENCE REVIEW

Black Identities and White Therapies: Working with Race, Ethnicity and Culture in and Outside the Therapy Room Conference (Online, 15–16 July 2022)

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Counselling and psychotherapy are marginalised professions in many countries. In the UK, they have sat on the edges of a medical mindset and model, whilst those modalities better suited to and situated by randomised control trials have had the privilege of being invited closer to the centre. This is particularly true of provisions that are validated by the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK. The profession itself has known and lived with the experience of being undermined, undervalued, and misunderstood, meaning that some of the learning and wisdom therein gets lost or kept within the close confines of our respected modalities. So, it is interesting that the structural positioning of the profession in many countries has a systemic and institutional parallel experience of people that are marginalised in the society it seeks to serve.

This conference, chaired by David Weaver, President of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) was in many ways ground-breaking. Ground-breaking as most of the main speakers, conference workshop facilitators, and participants were Black representatives and authorities in their field. Their presentations and workshops were politically informed from personal and professional lived experience, as well as from the growing academic literature that has been published on the dynamics of race in recent years. For example, Ellis (2021), Eddo-Lodge (2017), Hirsch (2018), Keval (2016), Mackenzie-Mavinga (2016), and Turner (2021), to name a few.

The topic of race, racism, and diversity is not new to the world or this profession. However, the focus has changed. The shift in recent years has been in how the problem is understood. Historically, the conscientious white liberal position has wanted to reach out, to seek understanding of the suffering of others, and show compassion. Whilst this has been helpful in terms of good will and laying some of the foundations for white therapists and therapies understanding the Black experience, it has been limiting in getting to the root of the problem. That being racism itself is a white construct embedded systemically, institutionally, and therefore psychologically in the minds of people. The shift that has happened in the West since the death of George Floyd (in May 2020) is a greater focus on the systemic and institutional oppression of racism. Accompanying that has been a necessity for white practitioners to understand the dynamics of their privilege and the way in which they reinforce systemic, institutional, cultural unconscious racism through their normative frame of reference. This is what the conference addressed—and it did so in powerful ways.

The opening keynote speech by Dwight Turner was political, personal, and impactful, addressing the lived experience in current times and making use of contemporary music that said it all through sound, beat, and poetry. The workshops that followed picked up on racism in clinical, supervision, and teaching settings. The delivery style was fresh and innovative, making the point that if learning was to change, the sources, style, and delivery need to be radical. The mindsets around the context and experience of refugees were another important stream, as was the discussion about the benefits in holding specialist spaces as well as mixed racial groups.

Twenty years ago, when I was editing the race and culture column for the *Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal* (the predecessor of *Therapy Today*), it would have been unimaginable to think that a conference like this could take place. Until fairly recently, writing and education around race within counselling and psychotherapy was largely directed to a white audience and was based on a premise of multi-culturalism and difference as opposed to examining power dynamics of oppression, privilege, and intersectionality. This conference reflected these themes from the start. Turner's dynamic address linking contemporary music, poetry, and theory on intersectional identity was intellectually stimulating as well as emotionally impactful. This was followed through by various discussions and workshops that considered cultural and racial bias, the dynamics of holding authority in oppressive systems, colonial and indenture legacies, racial wounding in supervision, and the institutional and systemic challenges in working with trauma and with refugees.

In the UK, the protests subsequent to the murder of George Floyd opened up more of a collective mindset in a number of professions, including counselling and psychotherapy. As a result, there has been greater recognition of the need for authority to shift to the Black experience and that has been humbling for institutions and people. This online conference organised by Onlinevents and PCCS Books opened up further ground and was exciting in deconstructing the white Eurocentric power base in our profession. It was inspired by the

excellent book edited by Divine Charura and Colin Lago (2021) (which will be reviewed in a subsequent issue of *PPI*) to which many of the workshop presenters had contributed chapters. There is a sense that a new era is dawning with an appetite for more gatherings, conferences, and workshops on these themes. For those interested in further details, contact Onlinevents at help@onlinevents.co.uk.

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