

# Confronting racism in counselling and therapy training—Three experiences of a seminar on racism and whiteness

Liz Smith  | Gillian Proctor | Dania Akondo

School of Healthcare, University of Leeds,  
Leeds, UK

## Correspondence

Liz Smith, School of Healthcare, University of  
Leeds, Baines Wing, 13 Beech Terrace, Leeds  
LS29DA, UK.

Email: [ss15es@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:ss15es@leeds.ac.uk)

Gillian Proctor, School of Healthcare,  
University of Leeds, Baines Wing, 13 Beech  
Terrace, Leeds LS29DA, UK.

Email: [g.m.proctor@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:g.m.proctor@leeds.ac.uk)

## Abstract

In this paper, a counselling and psychotherapy tutor and two therapists who have recently completed their training, one student of colour and one white, engage in a reflective, experiential process following a taught session on race and whiteness in the therapy room. The authors explore their own processes within and since the session in a reflexive, conversational format, candidly self-examining and confronting their experiences, including the more difficult ones. Through this process, the authors discuss the political implications and shortcomings of such training, both within this specific training context and the profession as a whole. The authors contend that the counselling and psychotherapy professions and the training provided to enter them are increasingly being challenged in contemporary society to look beyond traditional assumptions about the superiority of white, middle class, and Eurocentric values and norms in the curriculum and teaching. They conclude by offering both context-specific and general recommendations for training courses and practitioners to address the shortcomings in provision.

## KEYWORDS

anti-racism, oppression, racism social justice, training

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we present a particular teaching session for students on a professional training programme in counselling and psychotherapy, which aimed to help students consider racism in society and its relevance to themselves as therapists, their clients and the therapy relationship. We write as the tutor, who prepared and facilitated this session for the first time this year (Gillian), and two students (Dania and Liz) who were part of the student cohort.

The article is written in a conversational style between the three of us about our experiences of the session, including the intersections between our own positionality, the teaching content, the theories we explored and the discussions that followed. The purpose is to reflect on what went well, the impact of this teaching, the limitations and what could be improved, and to make recommendations for how this issue could be covered in similar programmes, especially given the current context of increasing focus on race and issues of inequality, which have arisen from Black Lives Matter. The background to the session, including the teaching content itself, is outlined in our Notes from the Front Line article, 'Beyond the "sticking plaster"', in which Gillian also discusses why she felt changing the nature of teaching about race and racism in counselling, and psychotherapy training was long overdue. Dania and Liz contributed their own reflections on their preconceptions and expectations before the session. We begin here with the pre-session reflections the student cohort posted on the group Padlet board. Padlet is a website and app that functions as a virtual posting board where students can make notes and post them to a group discussion board in real time during teaching sessions or before or after. The initial task, for all students, was to post a reflection in response to the letters by Professor George Yancy and psychotherapist Andrew Samuels (see our Notes from the Front Line article for a full reprint of these letters, printed with the authors' permission).

## 2 | ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gillian is a white woman approaching in her early 50s. She has been a lecturer in counselling education for 5 years, having previously worked in practice in the National Health Service for 22 years. She has a particular interest in issues of ethics, politics and power and is passionate about the importance of the socio-political context of all our lives, in particular the therapy relationship.

Dania is a 29-year-old psychotherapist and counsellor of Ghanaian and Mauritian origin. She runs a private practice in London and has a particular interest in issues of racism and relational patterns in adults who have experienced trauma.

Liz is a white, female, newly qualified counsellor and psychotherapist in her late 30s. She works in voluntary sector and private counselling and therapy settings, specialising in trauma and neurodiversity. Her background is in therapeutic mental health crisis services.

## 3 | A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

We consider 'race' as a socially constructed category. Rather than white or black necessarily representing anything about ethnic origins, we are using these as political categories, to describe how people identify or are perceived by others as part of the dominant group (white) or minoritised group (black/person of colour) with respect to ethnicity.

## 4 | REFLECTIONS POSTED BY STUDENTS BEFORE THE SESSION

Dania: It was evident from the responses on Padlet that the students in my cohort felt some discomfort at accepting their own privilege as well as their own racism. Feelings of guilt and shame and an overwhelming need to apologise were prevalent amongst those who had posted, leading to a sense of helplessness and, in some cases, hopelessness. One student asked 'Is there an option not to be a racist? We have been fed with these ideas since the day we were

born, do you think there is a way to change this fundamental perspective in this stage of life?' This sentiment was paralleled by another student's opinion: 'It feels like the message is, we are all racist, sexist, discriminatory, oppressive and oppressed, victims and perpetrators. And apart from awareness, not much is going to change that?' It seems that the students were reflecting upon their own shortcomings, while having a strong desire to fix things. One student wrote:

I used to say that I did not see colour but obviously this is a lie. I used to believe this but when I look back, I think I convinced myself I didn't as I was so worried someone would think I am racist. I wish I could say sorry on behalf of white people, but I do not feel, even if I could speak for everyone, that it would ever allow me to understand and appreciate fully the extent of white oppression or power.

Yet, this need to rescue was accompanied by a sense of feeling lost, due to the inability to better the situation; as encapsulated by a student who questions the intent of Prof. Yancy's letter:

Perhaps that is all I can do - to acknowledge my privilege and sit in discomfort with it. I think this is maybe what you want us to do - to become more comfortable with discomfort, as you have done through naming your sexism. Maybe you hope that the discomfort will drive us to action?

One thing is certain, Prof Yancy's gentle approach had a great impact on the students, with some even lowering their well-erected defences and recognising their own privilege; a small victory in my eyes!

Liz: I agree Dania that Yancy's (2015) letter, which I remember reading when it was first published, was confronting; it invites white people to 'let go of your white innocence' and face the uncomfortable truth of our inherently racist society. I remember finding this hard and having to sit for a while with my initial response, which was one of wanting to apologise, to rescue, to make it right. I had to accept, however, that this response would be inadequate and above all would centre my (white) feelings. Yancy asserted that white people benefit from this inherent racism, to the point where we actually profit from the pain of people who experience racism within our racist society. Living in such a society, he posited, cannot leave us unaffected, no matter how anti-racist we think we are. He invited us to accept this within ourselves with love; a difficult thing to do for a room full of trainee therapists, in my experience. Like my fellow students, whose responses Dania highlighted, I know that I have a certain amount of investment in the idea that as a therapist, and I am a fundamentally decent human being who wishes to help others and contribute to a better society. How can that possibly sit alongside the notion that I am racist? More to the point, what should I—or can I—even do with this, other than sit in the discomfort? I feel the need even more now than back in 2015 when I read this for the first time to 'do something'. As I acknowledged in my response to the letter at the time, we are facing a frightening rise of the far right, even here in Britain, which might arguably be considered more tolerant than many parts of the United States. I had watched BBC Breakfast the morning before I began writing this article and a sombre-faced reporter delivered the news that the far right is the fastest growing terrorist threat we currently face in the United Kingdom (UK). There is a world of difference between those who might engage with this kind of opinion piece in the New York Times and the kind of far-right neo-fascists that perpetrated the Christchurch terror attack.

As I read, I wondered if white, liberal, middle class New York Times-reading intellectuals are easy targets. Part of me resented this, when we are facing a real and frightening resurgence of a dangerous far right. However, this also rather conveniently lets me off the hook and I realise that as I still sit with the discomfort this brings, I would perhaps rather point the finger at those who are 'worse' than me instead. One of the things I acknowledged in my own response to Yancy before the session was the rise of white supremacy and the fact that despite my opposition to everything they stand for, my white privilege would protect me, at least initially, from being a target. I might not, as Yancy acknowledged, be the kind of person who would ever use the 'N' word, but I still benefit in the most basic of ways from the colour of my skin. Moreover, I rarely even think about this unless confronted with it, as I was by

Yancy's letter. And why would I? I do not need to think about it. I am not in potential danger of being insulted or even attacked, in this white-centric society, every time I open my front door.

An ugly truth, but a truth, nonetheless.

## 5 | DISCUSSIONS DURING TEACHING SESSION

Dania: As our reflections above bear out, race and culture is not an easy topic to cover. Due to the extensive amount of literature available on the subject, and that Gillian had highlighted, the session was well structured. The sub-groups were conducive to our learning, as the reading list was too vast to be addressed by each student individually. However, I have to say to Gillian that having a white tutor facilitating the session felt condescending to me, the only person of colour, in my cohort, who has personally experienced the effects of racism and white privilege. In addition, my presence felt ignored.

Gillian: Dania, I had been aware of your difficult (and likely familiar) position of being the only student of colour and did not want you to feel responsible to be the only voice of those minoritised by racism. Consequently, I did not want to ask you specifically about impacts on you, but I wanted you to choose how much to contribute from your experience and to aim to directly challenge any defensiveness and support you if you were in the position of dealing with defensiveness from others. However, in the event, when the defensiveness did not predominate, and instead a process of realisation of white privilege emerged, I became increasingly uncomfortable about how your voice was invisible in this context. I acknowledge this and wish to handle things differently in future sessions. Despite being extremely clear about the responsibility for white therapists of needing to acknowledge racism and different identities, particularly with clients of colour, I had failed to put this into practice in the teaching session and not taken responsibility to acknowledge the different identities of all of us in there and your minoritised position. I feared I may put you on the spot or make this 'your' issue rather than an issue for us all. I asked for feedback from all students after the session, but none was forthcoming and asked for volunteers to write up the session and further reflect on it. I asked you, in particular, if you would be involved in further discussions, having felt that I had made a mistake in not acknowledging your position within the teaching session and I'm really glad you agreed to be part of these reflections and this paper.

Dania: I did (later) understand that you attempted to avoid putting me in the spotlight and so, inadvertently, causing me to assume the role of spokesperson for every person of colour. But the effect was that my voice was overlooked and perhaps even silenced.

Liz: I'm really aware that the silence around your identity Dania had definitely reinforced that sense of erasure of your voice and input. None of us, including me, were comfortable with pointing out the 'elephant in the room' in relation to your identity as a person of colour. Perhaps with good intentions, as you acknowledge Gillian, in terms of not wanting to single Dania out or corner her into becoming a spokesperson, but the result was that her identity and experiences of racism were overlooked where they could have been (and later were) extremely powerful. This raises particular issues, as Catherine Jackson (2018) acknowledged in her article 'Why we need to talk about race' for students of colour, who often find themselves in a minority in training cohorts. As Ellis (2011) pointed out, students from black, mixed race, and ethnic minority backgrounds often find that their experiences are not acknowledged in their training. As Ellis acknowledged, 'when it comes to helping students to think about how relationships across difference manifest themselves in the area of race ... the profession is more often than not found wanting' 'Race' and whiteness could be said to be particularly problematic in training given that counselling and therapy tends to be 'a white, middle-class profession' (Spalding et al., 2019, p. 75). I think your experiences Dania have shown these authors' assertions to be true, sadly.

I spent a few years working in diverse organisations. I chose a Black clinical supervisor deliberately because I felt this might be an area in which I lacked awareness. Nonetheless, I rarely, if ever, speak about race and whiteness with white friends, even though we often discuss social justice issues, which is telling. As Leonardo (2002)

acknowledged, 'whiteness is characterized by the unwillingness to name the contours of racism' (p. 32). Based on my experiences here, I might take this further. I wonder if whiteness is characterised by the unwillingness to name the contours of whiteness itself, as well as the influence of our own whiteness and our culture of origin on how we operate in the world.

I felt frustrated in and after the session. I was surprised how little many of my colleagues knew. Why did most of them not know what intersectionality was, as trainee therapists? I held my anger during discussions, which inevitably brought out white defensiveness. I held on to this sense of anger firstly because I had a sense that as a white person, perhaps it was not rightfully mine, but also because I was aware that Dania, as a person of colour, had the first and foremost right to challenge and foreground her experience. I was in uncharted territory, I realised, because I was a white person in a group of white people wanting to challenge problematic manifestations of whiteness (e.g., claims of 'reverse racism'). I felt frozen in the session, because as I mentioned in our 'Notes from the Front Line' article, in work, I was more used to being in a culturally diverse group where I am often in the minority as a white person and as such have to be mindful of that positionality and do more listening and learning than speaking. As a result of the experiences in this session, and the learning and development since, I think I would be more comfortable speaking up in a white-dominated group. I did feel somewhat ashamed at the time that I didn't, but this has turned into a drive to change my own responses and challenge my fears, which feels particularly important in the current climate and given the events of 2020 in relation to Black Lives Matter.

Dania: Liz, you refer to the lack of diversity on the course (presumably due to structural discrimination and racism in society), which evoked in me familiar feelings of isolation and injustice. Living in the UK as a woman of colour has only reinforced my sense of belonging to a minority, inevitable to combat when I am surrounded by white students, white colleagues, white teachers etc. I am the other in this country, and white is the norm. As Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017) famously proclaimed, 'neutral is white [,] [t]he default is white' (p. 85). Thus, prior to the session, I had fully expected to become enraged at the possibility of facing ignorance or being subjected to distorted views of racial bias. Angry, and with my 'fighting gloves' in hand, I was willing to contest the usual 'I don't see colour', 'I'm not a racist', 'racism is not my problem' or—a personal favourite of my mine—'white people can also be victims of racism'. However, oddly enough the response from the group differed to the unimpressed one I had anticipated. I witnessed a sense of shame and guilt amongst my colleagues, as you said Liz for failing to recognise their own privilege and its impact on non-white individuals in addition to becoming aware of their own defensiveness or, in other words, their 'white fragility' (DiAngelo, 2011). The latter is underpinned by the message they have internalised 'that goes it's rude to point out somebody else's race and it's dangerous territory because you might inadvertently be racist' (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 112). I can see how both yours Liz, and Gillian's hesitancy to name my racial difference in the group might come from this. As a collective, the group understood the significance of acknowledging, in the therapeutic room as well as outside, the impact of race and their lack of knowledge in some cultures. Despite some favourable responses from my colleagues, however, my anger had not subsided. While listening to several individuals, I had a very strong urge to utter the words 'are you kidding me?' I couldn't comprehend how they had failed to accept their own privilege or recognise that racism is so deeply inscribed until then. Upon reflection, I am now aware that some of the anger was directed towards my colleagues due to the colour of their skin, which served as a reminder of all the racial abuse that I have been subjected to. Nonetheless, the majority of my frustration stemmed from my own impatience with white people—why is it taking so long for some of you to recognise your own privilege and, perhaps, racism? Don't you understand that by failing to do so you are declaring to people of colour that you do not accept or validate their experiences? It's time to wake up.

Liz: Dania, you're right in that I have definitely unconsciously internalised this notion that it's impolite to refer to somebody's race. Until you said it, I would have said I was fairly comfortable discussing race, due to my experiences in multicultural and diverse services; but I realise now that there are more layers to what 'being comfortable talking about race' means. In talking about race, we also have to talk about being white, whiteness, what that means, and that's also difficult to unpack. I was part of a group in Gillian's session that discussed the notion of 'whiteness' itself. It felt like what I would call a very 'sticky' therapy session, where we talk around the difficult

issues somewhat defensively and intellectually but never really get to the source of the pain. I also suspect that for a group of white students, for various reasons, challenging each other about whiteness is difficult because there is something of a 'code of silence' around it—complicity, perhaps—but also a genuine belief that we are 'good white people' who do not participate in racism.

Members of the group were also keen, perhaps more so than normal, to assert that they too had been victims of prejudice of various kinds. These defences protected us from examining the problematic parts of our whiteness. The result, of course, is that we remain stuck. Dania saw that in our stuckness, we failed to accept or validate the experiences of people of colour, including perhaps those we might even care deeply about. This might reflect a finding by Glockshuber (2005). She found that although counsellors were articulate about diversity and attitudes towards different cultures, it was difficult for them to outline how their own culture of origin affected their counselling work. The counsellors found it hard to 'recognize existing influences of normative and desirable behaviour patterns' (Glockshuber, 2005, p. 299). I believe this might have influenced me in the session also, since I felt I did not know how to speak about these issues, or indeed whether I should or was permitted to. I might consider myself well-versed in the language of intersectionality, but I had no idea how to openly challenge manifestations of whiteness as a white person in a group of mostly white students. As Leonardo (2002) suggested, whiteness is also characterized by 'avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or group' (p. 32). After all, as white people—even for someone like me who supposedly identifies as intersectional and liberal—we are not faced every day with our 'otherness'. The idea of owning a white identity in the face of considerable evidence of racism and white privilege seemed to provoke feelings of shame and helplessness in the group, which gave rise to the defensiveness we all named at the beginning. Leonardo suggested that 'teachers and students work together to name, reflect on, and dismantle discourses of whiteness' (p. 31). This is a difficult task in a group that largely had never reflected on the fact that whiteness might in any way be problematic or even had the need to define it before the pre-reading. I would suggest to Gillian perhaps that this might need to be part of any future discussions; we are all racialised, even white people, and even when we don't think we are and don't discuss it.

Gillian: Dania, you mentioned that the familiar defensiveness often promoted by asking white people to think about our privilege did not seem to be dominant. I was pleased that this did not feature and instead, there seemed to be a real climate of students realising, often for the first time, the privileges they had not previously been aware of and the implications for others on the receiving end of racism who did not benefit from these privileges. Expressions of hopelessness rather than guilt or blame predominated, although ideas for what could be important in practice (awareness and acknowledgement) helped students to move away from feeling there was nothing they could do in the face of such an all-pervasive history and current context of institutionalised racism. Liz, you suggested that we might need to think more about how whiteness is conceptualised, and I think there is more work to do here in so many ways. Although I felt hopeful that students would go away and think and discuss these issues with more awareness and openness in their relationships and counselling work, I was also frustrated with how much further these discussions needed to go.

## 6 | REFLECTIONS AFTER THE TEACHING SESSION

Dania: The session itself highlighted a clear need for my white colleagues to acknowledge racism and white privilege in the therapeutic room. Moreover, it enticed me to research and discuss institutional racism in more depth. Why was I the only person of colour remaining on an already extremely white course? Is it due to a lack of access to psychological services as well as to prestigious university courses by minoritised individuals? After being made redundant from my job, I experienced financial hardship, which led me to seek for help from the university and apply for a hardship fund. This was rejected, leaving me to fend for myself. If it hadn't been for my resilience and determination, as well as temp agencies across London, the course would have catered exclusively to the needs of aspiring white therapists.

Liz: I suppose I fit into that group of aspiring white therapists you mention Dania. It's something I've noticed a lot since I started working as a counsellor post qualifying, that far too many people I work with are similar to me. It would be easy to mention here that I too found the course financially challenging and to focus on that, but as a white, middle class woman, it has been much easier for me to assimilate into the counselling and therapy world and to access the kind of jobs in mental health services that helped me gain the experience I needed to do so. The issues you've raised brings concerns for me that we just aren't meeting the needs of so many people who need support and this feels ... wrong. It feels wrong too Dania that your needs while studying weren't met either, I can see that this is representative of so many ways in which systems and institutions are failing people.

Dania: There are definitely unmet needs and our profession needs to think more about what's going on here. Perhaps 'the continued fear of Black People towards mental health services' (Wood & Patel, 2017, p. 2) should also be considered when addressing institutional racism. This fear may have been in part fuelled by disproportionate numbers of Black men in the UK being admitted to psychiatric wards and being under compulsory care over the course of several decades (Wood & Patel, 2017). Furthermore, minority ethnic communities in the UK have often condemned therapeutic services for being too Eurocentric, deeming it as 'White psychology for White folks' (Wood & Patel, 2017). Thus, why would anyone with a clear disdain for mental health services apply to be on a course with the prospect of working in this field? Why would anyone want to work in professions in which they don't see themselves equally represented? There are clearly different factors contributing to a lack of diversity within the mental health services; however, institutional racism seems to be one crucial missing piece of the puzzle which is so often overlooked.

## 7 | IMPACT OF THE SESSION

Liz: The process I went through after the session was, if anything, more interesting than the session itself and I wish that we had an opportunity to revisit the discussions from the session and our reflections at a later date, because I do wonder if they [fellow students] might have changed or grown, as I felt I did, from the discussions that followed in our Personal Development (PD) group (of which Dania was also part) and undoubtedly other impromptu reflective moments and discussions that have taken place since. I'm conscious though that some of these growth moments might have come about because of the visible impact on you Dania.

Dania: The impact has been mixed. Some of it has been hopeful, so a couple of students expressed their enthusiasm to me via text and said they had found the session useful and conducive to their practice as well as their own personal development. One student reported that she 'came away feeling much more able to look at race in the therapy room', in addition to becoming aware of the fact that she 'has to be really open to the experience of others'. Some experiences were more difficult though. One student did initially protest against the notion of white privilege. During the morning session, they openly communicated to me that they rebuked the idea of being financially superior to most people of colour. Initially, I became extremely defensive and, blinded by my anger, I refused to hear their views and immediately labelled them as 'another ignorant white person'. Later that day, during PD group, I apologised for my behaviour and conveyed my desire to comprehend their point of view. They calmly explained to me that the word 'privilege' to them had connotations of financial superiority. Some of my colleagues and I proceeded to explain to them that white privilege refers to the advantages possessed by a white person based on the fact that they are white, in a society characterised by racism. The student was grateful for the clarification and having had the opportunity to discuss this topic further.

Liz: I remember the discussion we had about that. It struck me in the PD group session afterwards how much you had been affected and that you hadn't felt fully able in the session to articulate this, even though you say you did get angry at one student who challenged the idea of white privilege (and justifiably so I think), I wondered if it might have been useful if we had a discussion prior to the session (or even perhaps at the start of the module) about our various identities and positionalities and how those might impact on us throughout the module and particularly

in this session, given the majority of the cohort was white. It might have been useful to think about what those discussions might be like and to question our initial assumptions about what we might find challenging and why. I wonder if it might have been helpful to have had the discussion framed a bit better.

## 8 | RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THIS SESSION

Dania: It is worth considering that perhaps a person of colour would be better suited to facilitating the session, as non-white individuals are those who have been suffocated, oppressed and abused by white privilege. A white person is able to comprehend the notion of racism; however, they have not been directly affected by it. As a person of colour, I found it uncomfortable listening to a white tutor who has benefited from their own whiteness and whose privilege has inflicted harm to minorities. In addition, any students of colour should be presented with the opportunity to share their experiences in class, perhaps by contacting them prior to the session. It must be communicated clearly that they are not expected to disclose anything and that they are not considered to be the sole ambassador for all people of colour.

Gillian: I had considered whether I should ask a person of colour to facilitate this session but decided against this as I didn't want white students to think it was an issue that wasn't about them. However, after this experience, I think in the future it would be ideal for me to facilitate this session with another tutor of colour so we can work together to promote the idea that this is an issue for everyone, particularly if there is only one student of colour so they are not completely alone in this experience. I think in future years, I will make sure time is allocated for the cohort to explicitly discuss who they are with respect to ethnicity and experiences of racism and to address identities (including mine) within the group, as Liz suggested framing the discussion before the session. I also take on board your point Dania regarding students of colour being able to choose whether they disclose their experiences in class or not.

It is an obvious point to make that these inequalities should not be specific topics but be embedded within the curriculum and group experiences as a whole. This session made this point even clearer as issues of differences and inequalities had been experienced within this cohort since the start of their training, with several students dropping out from minoritised groups, as Dania referred to previously. As a result, we have already scheduled many more experiential group sessions throughout the programme focusing explicitly on inequalities, differences within the group and group dynamics, so delivering such a session again in the context of these issues having been much more explicitly and generally raised previously in the programme might be a different experience. However, I still advocate for teaching devoted explicitly to the particular topic of racism, as this is likely to be an easily avoidable topic even with an increased focus on inequalities in general. It is always frustrating what limited time there is in the curriculum for such crucial issues, but with so many topics that are mandatory to cover (by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, as a BACP-accredited course) and so many other important issues to cover on the theory and practice of relational psychotherapy, sadly many issues that are so essential for the development of self, intersubjective and cultural awareness can only be prompted, and individual students need to be relied upon to continue their development and learning themselves through personal therapy, practice and supervision and other relational and personal endeavours.

## 9 | RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRAINING COURSES AND THE WIDER COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY PROFESSION

Gillian: In addition to addressing inequalities within the training curriculum and in experiential groups including personal development groups, it is necessary to monitor and acknowledge the white and western-centric content of much counselling theory and bring in critiques. For example, the Adult Attachment Interview assumes a western traditional nuclear family context, which is not relevant to students who grew up in communitarian societies, or



perhaps to anyone growing up in a non-nuclear family. Access to training exacerbates many inequalities in society, and it is important to attempt to access any funding schemes which could help minoritised students access training. The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network (BAATN) organises a mentoring scheme to support black students during training which training courses can publicise to students. How the issue of racism is dealt with during training could have a major impact on representation of ethnic minorities and racism within the counselling profession. As more trainers take on this issue as a matter of importance and share resources, experience and ideas, I am hopeful that the consequent increase in awareness of racism in counsellors can benefit the profession, counsellors and clients alike.

Liz: Gillian, I think it does matter that counselling is, overall, an extremely white profession. You and I are I suppose representative of that, which feels important to acknowledge. As you said about the white-centric curriculum, Ellis (2011) argued that the 'traditional ideas' (p. 190) discussed on training courses, continuing professional development, and supervision need expanding to incorporate issues and understandings of race. He argues that we do not yet have sufficient theories to 'describe the process of what happens between individuals from different ethnic groups' (Ellis, 2011, p. 191). Based on my experience working in a staff team that was extremely diverse, but in which, issues of difference based on race and ethnicity were rarely openly discussed among staff of different ethnic groups (although they were between those who shared similar backgrounds); I would agree with this assertion. Although there was never any overt friction or racism, and white staff (as I elaborated on in the 'Notes from the Front line' article) were largely empathic and respectful, we lacked the language and framework for these difficult conversations to take place either (a) between white people or (b) between white people and those from different ethnic backgrounds. As Ellis acknowledged, black and minority ethnic adults are overrepresented in mental health crisis care. Although we had reflective practice sessions, there was little space specifically for discussing issues of diversity and difference in the team. I would agree with Spalding et al.'s (2019) assertion that this should be a priority area for qualified therapists as well as trainees. Since qualifying, I have worked in three different counselling settings in which the staff teams are overwhelmingly white. Our client base, however, does not reflect the cultural homogeneity of the staff teams. I think this is a huge problem and Dania, this goes back to what we talked about in terms of underrepresentation in mental health services, both staff and those who use services.

As Gillian acknowledges, much of the onus is rightly on us as individuals to further our knowledge and development in this area, both during and after training. However, I find that doing this alone is limited. Opportunities to do this in a collective process with others, as we had in this training session, are rare, aside from the odd useful discussion on online forums and social media, but online spaces can have their own problems and can be very polarising. 2020 has brought some interesting developments from the renewed focus on Black Lives Matter; however, I cannot say I have had 'real life' opportunities to do this since training, and this does feel important. BAATN does offer spaces and training days that are open to therapists and students who do not experience racism, but these are overwhelmingly London-centric. I think this is really needed, and more open dialogue with membership bodies also feels necessary. I was really disappointed by BACP's (lack of) response to valid critique of some of what was in the 'Listening to Learn' edition of *Therapy Today*, which was supposed to deal with the issue of institutional racism. One example was a letter from a white, middle class therapist who suggested that we don't need to talk about race at all and even that talking about it will cause 'racial difference and discrimination to grow' and that clients will 'teach me as we go along' about their ethnicity and background. Another article chose to foreground that 'white non-racist people are accused of saying the wrong thing'—yet more focus on white people's feelings about being accused of racism rather than on those who experience it. The BACP have not yet meaningfully engaged with people who have written to and addressed them on social media. It is disappointing that they have not followed the example of the British Psychological Society, who published similar views without critically framing them and then issued an unreserved apology. It sits uncomfortably with me that these views still exist within our profession. We can—and should—do better than this. I have called upon BACP to respond and do so here again. It is not good enough that our profession is still complaining about people who experience racism needing to talk about racism. I completely understand why you would say D that people of colour are being failed and might

shy away from using services when these views are still so mainstream they can uncritically be given a platform in a membership body's flagship publication and presented as just 'alternative viewpoints'.

It is clear that to move forward in our profession and mental health settings in general, where there are particular challenges both for professionals and clients, we need to find a way of bringing these discussions out in the open and challenging entrenched views where they still exist. Recent events emphasise the importance of this not stopping after training, and we must continue to reflexively evaluate the effectiveness of any interventions aimed at developing students' and professionals' awareness and cultural competence. Further, qualitative research is essential to inform both training institutions and organisations employing counsellors and therapists and to contribute to an evidence base for best practice.

Dania: I agree with Gillian that the white-centric curriculum needs to be addressed and, in my opinion, should aim to include experiences of therapists from different ethnic groups, as well as the experiences of clients from minority groups, with whom trainee counsellors might potentially have to work with. It is certainly important to acknowledge issues related to race; however, an active approach must be taken to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice (Mckenzie-Mavinga, 2005). A few of my white colleagues, after reading the material provided by G, were more knowledgeable on black issues yet did not know how to address them in practice. Thus, it is not surprising that individuals from minority groups tend to gravitate towards therapists with similar cultural backgrounds, seeing that some white counsellors may adopt a colour-blind rhetoric or may feel incompetent. Given the financial difficulties I experienced as a trainee therapist, it is clear to me that more funding schemes should be made available to students from ethnic minority backgrounds. These students should not be discouraged from applying to these courses due to the costs involved in training, but rather given opportunities to enter (and perhaps change) this extremely white profession. Moreover, professional bodies, charities, and therapy settings should amplify the voices of therapists of colour. As well as raising funds to provide therapy for free to black individuals, Black Minds Matter have given a platform to black therapists to share our knowledge, skills and expertise with students across the UK and discuss important topics such as racial trauma. I can only hope that seeing successful black therapists may inspire some minoritised students to pursue this career.

I believe there are several factors contributing to the 'whiteness' of this profession, some of which are: institutional racism, the underrepresentation of therapists from minority groups, the extremely white-centric courses, the stigma surrounding mental health in minority communities. Conversations about racism and how to deal with race in the therapeutic room need to take place; however, as L said, further qualitative research must be undertaken. Let us not forget that racism is deep-seated with its roots across all areas of society, and, until this is addressed, numerous courses and professions will proceed to exist for 'whites only'.

## ORCID

Liz Smith  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0805-7047>

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



**Liz Smith** is a counsellor, psychotherapist, writer and editor, living and working in Yorkshire. She currently runs a private practice and works in trauma services. Her therapeutic interests are in working with trauma and neurodivergence. Outside work, she is most often found in the Dales or the Peak District with a dog or a bike.



**Gillian Proctor** is a lecturer in counselling and psychotherapy at the University of Leeds. She is also an independent clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, clinical and research supervisor. Her particular interests and areas for writing and publications are in ethics, politics and power in therapy.



**Dania Akondo** is a psychotherapist and counsellor, who works in private practice in Croydon. Her vision is to empower clients and help them achieve inner peace. She has a particular interest in issues of racism and relational patterns in adults who have experienced trauma. Prior to setting up her own private practice, she completed a placement with the NHS, which gave her the opportunity to hone her counselling skills when dealing with issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, sexual abuse and many more. She was awarded a Diploma in Psychotherapy and Counselling at the University of Leeds, where she is also currently studying for a Master's degree (in the same field).

**How to cite this article:** 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), e1579. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1579>