

Beyond the ‘sticking plaster’? Meaningful teaching and learning about race and racism in counselling and psychotherapy training

Gillian Proctor | Liz Smith | Dania Akondo

School of Healthcare, University of Leeds,
Leeds, UK

Correspondence

Gillian Proctor, School of Healthcare,
University of Leeds, Baines Wing, 13 Beech
Terrace, Leeds LS29DA, UK.
Email: g.m.proctor@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

This article is co-written by a counselling and psychotherapy tutor and two students at a university in the North of England. It is both an idea for and a reflection on how the counselling and psychotherapy professions might progress and deepen the way in which race and racism are taught and explored in training. This paper also serves as a follow-up to the article ‘Confronting racism in counselling and therapy training—three experiences of a seminar on racism and whiteness’ in which the authors explore their experiences of delivering and participating in the session and the growth, and learning that came from it. The intention behind trying to do this session differently was to move beyond surface level, cognitive ‘sticking plaster’ approaches to discussing race and racism in society and in the therapy room, and to employ a much more experiential and challenging approach. It was hoped that this would encourage students to reflect on their own identities and their own responses to Black people openly discussing experiences of racism, particularly given it was a majority white cohort. The authors offer their own reflections in the article that was written post-session.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2021 The Authors. Psychotherapy and Politics International published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

KEYWORDS

anti-racism, oppression, racism social justice, training

1 | INTRODUCTION

The authors are Gillian, a white, female psychotherapy and counselling tutor; and Dania and Liz, both female and recently qualified counsellors who trained at the university where Gillian works. Dania is of Ghanaian and Mauritian origin and Liz is white European. The session was devised by Gillian, who offers here her perspective on why she felt a different approach to teaching about race, culture and diversity was needed. Dania and Liz also offer their perspectives on their feelings about the session before it took place and their previous experiences of undergoing such training.

2 | HOW THE SESSION FITS INTO THE MODULE?

Gillian: I lead a module entitled 'Ethical and cultural issues in counselling and psychotherapy' as part of the BACP-accredited MA in Psychotherapy and Counselling programme at a university in the North of England. This is a 15-credit module that comprises 45 h of teaching, including 6 h of assessed student presentations. The module learning outcomes are threefold. First, students are expected to critically reflect from philosophical and cultural perspectives on the ethical frameworks relevant to counselling and psychotherapy and their application to practice. Second, they need to demonstrate self-awareness of their own sociocultural identities and the relevance of these to the therapy relationship. Third, students must demonstrate an in-depth understanding of cultural issues in counselling and psychotherapy. The module handbook introduces the module as follows:

In this module you will be introduced to the philosophical bases of ethical thinking and how these translate into practical ethical guidelines such as the BACP Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy. We will apply this thinking to ethical dilemmas and professional questions arising in your own therapeutic practice. You will also consider how social and cultural contexts impact on counselling and psychotherapy practice and critically explore your own identities in relation to these contexts. The understanding of 'culture' in this module is broad, and is taken to encompass, for example, areas of identity and inequalities and diversity such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and social class, among others. The professional cultural context of counselling and psychotherapy will also be considered (HECS5186M module handbook).

Of the 15 sessions, 8 focus on inequalities, identities and power issues in therapy. We begin with the dynamics of power in therapy, with a focus on the three aspects of power: role, societal and historical (Proctor, 2017). This is followed by a session on anti-discriminatory practice and the issue of class. Next is the session that this paper discusses in more depth, which covers racism and culture, and working with clients whose first language is not English. The subsequent session covers age and disability, followed by a session on gender and another on sexuality. There is a session on spirituality, culture and religion. Finally, there is a session on the marginalisation of the client voice and critical approaches to theory and practice in counselling in the inequalities section. Throughout the module, previous students present on particular topics they chose for their assignments, and current students work in pairs or small groups to present papers and facilitate discussion on particular topics, mainly around identity and inequalities. The module finishes with each student presenting a topic of their choice for 20 min to their cohort and tutors.

3 | AIMS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE SESSION

Gillian: This year was the first time I had covered this subject. I was unhappy with previous teaching material, which seemed to focus either on working with clients in second languages and with interpreters or on the implications for clients who experience racism working with white therapists. It did not seem to engage students to explore their own identities in any meaningful way. I wanted students to think in this session about their own cultural identities and perceived ethnicity, and to problematise whiteness, not minoritised ethnic identities. Racism more than other 'isms' seems to provoke so much defensiveness that it felt to me that this issue required more time to be able to do more than the often bland and inadequate discussions about intercultural working that seem to predominate. Of course, taking this approach meant that issues of race could have been presented in a much less risky way but with very little impact. I wanted it to be powerful; I wanted students to be able to take risks in the session and to push themselves out of their comfort zones.

I (and many others) have had much experience of trying to discuss the dominance of whiteness in counselling contexts and wanting white therapists to take responsibility for thinking about our own heritage and how that impacts on our identities and relationships, rather than relying on (our few) colleagues from minoritised identities to educate us about the impact of racism. In doing so, I have encountered much defensiveness. I was particularly aware that the student cohort was almost exclusively white, with only one student of colour (D) and that there had been other students of colour who had left the course early. While I also encounter defensiveness in counselling contexts to addressing inequalities with respect to gender, I was aware there would be particular issues with a cohort where the dominance of whiteness was so profound. In relation to gender, this cohort was predominantly female, thus bringing a different dynamic. My main aim was to facilitate discussions, provoke thought on this topic and loosen ideas rather than provoke defensiveness, with students to be left with a resounding sense of race and racism being relevant to all of them.

4 | PRE-SESSION REFLECTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Dania: When previously addressing issues of race and ethnicity with white individuals, I had encountered extreme defensiveness, outrage, and hostility. Needless to say, I was not elated at the prospect of potentially facing a similar predicament on my course. I did not relish the thought of having to explain and defend my anger as a black woman and/or being made responsible to educate my peers on racism. Thus, on the day of the session, I was not the usual happy-go-lucky student whom my colleagues had grown accustomed to; rather a black woman with a vengeance fully expecting to be screaming into the void. Even though my preconceptions did not fully materialise, I still felt that my voice (as the last remaining person of colour on the course), had been completely silenced. I agreed to co-write this piece and the subsequent article in the hope that in the future, such an important topic is addressed more efficiently on training courses for psychotherapists and counsellors.

Liz: I wasn't really too sure what to expect. As I mention in the article, my previous experiences of training on similar issues had largely taken place in more ethnically and culturally diverse settings. I 'grew up' as a practitioner working in mental health crisis services in diverse Northern cities where the staff teams reflected the diversity of the area. In one service, I was in the minority as a white staff member. I did not have much experience of discussing issues of race, culture, and racism in majority white settings; and I was perhaps naïve about how this would change the dynamics and especially how that would be for D. I didn't consider it much, in fact. Reading D's apprehension about defensiveness, however, I now realise that the fact that I did not have to consider it means I was profoundly privileged.

I also realised that my own experiences of working in diverse services in which I had learned from my colleagues to 'shut up and listen' when it came to racism were not usual. While I'd learned some useful things from my colleagues, and I am very grateful to them, it also meant I was used to not participating much in the discussions,

which was, in effect, a bit of a cop-out. As white staff, the invisible code was that we simply didn't—and couldn't—do anything other than express empathy for our colleagues who experienced racism. Of course, this is arguably better than invalidating, defending or taking over the space with white guilt, but it is still its own 'sticking plaster' because it swerves the challenge of putting white identity under close scrutiny. It keeps white professionals in our comfort zones where we may use our empathetic expression as comfort not just to others but to ourselves. It allows us to reassure ourselves we are 'nice, empathetic white people' who are not racist. This does not, however, allow white professionals to begin the more difficult and confronting process of deconstructing whiteness and understanding what it means to be actively anti-racist alongside white colleagues.

5 | DESCRIPTION OF THE LEARNING RESOURCES

Gillian: I was initially overwhelmed by the amount of material I wanted students to think about. I am indebted to the discussions I had been part of through the online forum of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR, <http://www.pcsr.org.uk/membership/>) and resources posted by members to this forum. I decided to start with George Yancy's letter to the *New York Times* that I had been moved by when it had been circulated and responded to in the PCSR forum and asked students to post their responses to this letter on an online discussion forum in advance of the session. I was hoping that the letter would enable students to think about the impact of racism on the world and within themselves without blame or the need for defence and to think about Yancy's points in relation to all aspects of privileged identities. I also posted a response to this letter from Andrew Samuels (with his permission) that I thought modelled an open and non-self-blaming response, whilst not wriggling out of responsibility. Both Yancy's and Samuels' letters are reprinted here with the permission of the authors to provide context.

I then split further resources (a mixture of podcasts and articles) into four themes and asked students in advance of this session to choose one of these themes. The four themes were: (1) whiteness and especially being a white therapist; (2) the relevance of racism and the history of enslavement and colonisation for Black therapists and clients; (3) current climate of Islamophobia and Prevent, anti-asylum seekers and Brexit; (4) the challenges of racism and multiculturalism in counselling and therapy, including working with interpreters. In addition, I asked all students to access a few resources to think further about living in a racist society.

I also included further references for students who wanted to explore in more depth. Students chose their theme and were asked to access the associated resources in advance of the session and come prepared to discuss their thoughts with their peers who had also chosen the same theme. During the teaching session, students engaged in group discussions for 30 min, followed by 10 min to present their key points for consideration to the whole student group (16 students) and then 20 min of whole group discussion. This process just fitted into the 3-h teaching slot (which included a 20 min break). The reading resources allocated to each group are outlined below, as well as recommendations for further reading at the end.

5.1 | All: Living in a racist society

Reni Eddo-Lodge—Why I'm No-longer Talking To White People About Race: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/30/why-im-no-longer-talking-to-white-people-about-race>.

Brown Eyes and Blue Eyes Racism experiment: <https://youtu.be/KHxFuO2Nk-0>.

Shadism: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/04/racism-skin-colour-shades-prejudice>.

Witnessing the wound (20 min video): <https://vimeo.com/262194819>.

How I learned to stop worrying and love discussing race (10 min TED talk): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU&app=desktop>.

Read the link to a letter to NY Times from George Yancy: <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/24/dear-white-america/>.

Then read this response from Andrew Samuels and consider what your response to Yancy would be about your own privileged identities, particularly whiteness (if you are white):

April 28th 2018

Dear Professor Yancy,

I apologise for being late in responding to your letter dated 2015. I posted it on a discussion list of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility the other day and my friend and colleague, Rotimi Akinsete, invited (or perhaps challenged) me to reply. Initially, I was pissed off that he did this and I asked what gave him the right to do so. Then I caught up with myself, calmed down, and have attended to this task.

Your letter received considerable praise and support. But it also received a criticism that you may or may not have anticipated—which was, broadly speaking, that therapists and others know already about the omnipresence of their racism and hence your message was nothing new. Was that really your message or your gift? I don't think so.

I think there are some new features in the letter. You help me realize that it is not enough to say that Britain is racist and that this is appalling, disgusting, unacceptable, something must be done, and so on. As if I am not Britain and Britain is not me. Britain is here, where I am, and I am trying to stay on the outside, looking in and commentating. 'Those other people and institutions, they are the problems'. This won't work. Hence those who say people should be judged by their actions not just by their utterances are dead right.

You are right that much of my comfort is built upon the discomfort of people of colour. I grew up in Liverpool and slavery was present everywhere—yet never talked about in white circles. Not even in Jewish circles. The equivalent of the medical epicentre Harley Street in Liverpool was called Rodney Street. I was taken there quite often. Yet it was not until I went to the Liverpool Museum of Slavery sixty years later that I discovered who George Rodney was and his role in the slave trade.

Something that I want to comment on is the flavour of love that one can taste in your letter. That feels real, and a gift, not a trick. You ask me to 'listen with love' but I think you write with love. You are spot on when you say that there is a war within the 'white self'. My white self.

One does not have to consciously experience guilt at one's racism, or feel bad at the benefits accruing because of not being Black, to be fundamentally affected by the racialised inequality of British society. Everyone is affected, no escape, and this is something that white potential allies need to shout out. Just as feeling guilty does not let me off the hook, not feeling guilty is a state of mind with many consequences.

(The therapy profession as a whole does not tremble in guilt at its collective racism, by the way. There is a battle to be waged therein. 'We are all racists' is self-congratulatory twaddle, just as is 'we are all wounded healers'. You only have to sense the racial prejudice on the part of therapists who regard

lone parents as incapable of providing a good-enough environment, or bemoan the absence of the father as being the source of indiscipline and violence. I loved it when Jesse Jackson was caught on an open mic, when President Obama spoke about the failure of Black fathers, and he said 'I'd like to tear his nuts off'.)

As my friend will be reading this reply to you, I will list some highly pertinent aspects of my own racism. Is it a coincidence that all the professionals on whom I have depended over the years are 'not Black'? No Black doctors, lawyers, accountants, analysts, supervisors, co-authors. This has changed in recent years, to be sure, but not all that much. I won't list these changes. But the absence of Black professionals in my life I don't think it is an accident. There is a profound mistrust in the Black professional that I have had to interrogate in myself. When I first raised this in therapy circles, aside from the anxiety and annoyance it caused, I spoke as if I personally was unaffected by the tendency. Wrong!

And another example, one that makes me deeply ashamed, is feeling drawn towards 'positive discrimination' or 'affirmative action' or 'political correctness' as the main explanations for why Black professionals get on and achieve things in their careers. I was shocked to find this tendency in myself. Do I have no trust or respect in the capacity of Black professionals to get on? Recently, when a Black colleague got an appointment, such thoughts came rushing in.

Turning now to the second gift, the mental exercise concerning what if my children were Black. I first of all had a defensive reaction but one worth recording. As a Jewish family with children, we did experience not being with the majority. None of my ancestors was in Britain at all in 1900. I won't go on about the Jewish experience because what you are asking is another thing altogether. But I do remember my sister and I agreeing that we wished we were not Jewish.

I think you are right that the racism is so deeply inscribed that I cannot have a positive reply to the question you are posing. I am glad my children are not Black. I sometimes feel glad my children are not members of sexual minorities. I could say this is a protective response, but it may not be only that. It is a contradiction in and of my political attitudes.

Writing this to you has helped me see that I'm not really a 'good white' and that maybe there aren't any. No matter what their visible track records might be. And being Jewish is also no excuse. There was documented Jewish involvement in slavery as traders and owners (though not in a dominant role, and those who suggest otherwise are anti-Semites, like David Duke who wrote a book on it). But I remember my grandparents snarling at the TV when Black faces appeared - 'Schwartzers' they yelled.

A final note is that I understood deeply why you conveyed your message on the back of confessional about your own sexism. Got it!

Respectfully yours.

Andrew Samuels (Reproduced here with permission of A. Samuels)

5.2 | Group teaching activities

5.2.1 | Group 1: Discussing whiteness

Read and watch the following and discuss and present the impact of having white privilege on being a therapist and client.

Robin DiAngelo discussing white fragility: <http://seattlechannel.org/videos?videoid=x93076>.

Eugene Ellis discussing being white therapists with Bea Miller and Suzanne Keys. <https://www.baatn.org.uk/podcasts/>.

Judy Ryde, Being white in the helping professions: Developing effective intercultural awareness. <http://www.karnacbooks.com/product/being-white-in-the-helping-professions-developing-effective-intercultural-awareness/28326/>.

Peggy McIntosh, How Studying Privilege Systems Can Strengthen Compassion: A TedX Talk. <https://youtu.be/e-BY9UEwHw>.

'Witnessing the wound' (20-min video). <https://vimeo.com/262194819>.

'How I learned to stop worrying and love discussing Race' (10-min TED talk): <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU>.

5.2.2 | Group 2: Recovering from enslavement and colonisation trauma

Discuss the relevance of racism and the history of enslavement and colonisation on Black therapists and clients.

Dr Erica McInnis: <https://youtu.be/yUXgmA85gpY>.

Frantz Fanon, A Guardian Article: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/21/-sp-frantz-fanon-documentary-concerning-violence>.

5.2.3 | Group 3: Current climate of islamophobia and prevent anti-asylum seekers and Brexit

Find out about the government Prevent agenda and its implementation in the NHS and watch the podcast on racism in therapy. Then read the PCU statement about Prevent and think about the implications on counselling. <https://pandunion.ning.com/news/pcu-statement-against-prevent>.

The Challenge of Racism in Therapeutic Practice with Dr Isha McKenzie-Mavinga. <https://www.baatn.org.uk/podcasts/>.

Racism in Britain. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/dec/02/revealed-the-stark-evidence-of-everyday-racial-bias-in-britain>.

5.2.4 | Group 4: Therapy

Read the below and discuss the challenge of racism and multiculturalism in counselling and therapy.

Moodley, R. (2007). (Re)placing multiculturalism in counselling and psychotherapy. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 35(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880601106740>.

Chantler, K. (2005). From disconnection to connection: 'Race', gender and the politics of therapy. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 33(2), 239-256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880500132813>.

Ellis, E., & Akinsete, R. Black Men on the Couch–Project 20:20. <http://www.desr.org.uk/black-men-on-the-couch.html>.

The Association of Black Psychologists. <https://ukabpsi.co.uk>.

Aashna Counselling & Psychotherapy Service. <https://www.aashna.uk>.

5.2.5 | Group 5: Working with interpreters

Read the first two articles and any guidelines you can find and come prepared to discuss the issues involved:

Tribe, R., & Lane, P. (2009). Working with interpreters across language and culture in mental health. *Journal of Mental Health*, 18(3), 233–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638230701879102>.

Costa, B. (2010). Mother tongue or non-native language? Learning from conversations with bilingual/multilingual therapists about working with clients who do not share their native language. *Ethnicity and Inequalities in Health and Social Care*, 3(1), 15–24. <https://doi.org/10.5042/eihsc.2010.0144>.

Boyles, J., & Talbot, N. (2017). *Working with interpreters in psychological therapy: The right to be understood*. Taylor & Francis.

Raval, H., & Tribe, R. (2014). *Working with interpreters in mental health*. Routledge.

FURTHER READINGS

d'Ardenne, P., & Mahtani, A. (1999). *Transcultural counselling in action*. Sage.

d'Ardenne, P. (2012). *Counselling in transcultural settings: Priorities for a restless world*. Sage.

Khurana, I. (2006). Person-centred therapy, culture and racism. In G. Proctor, M. Cooper, P. Sanders & B. Malcolm (Eds.), *Politicising the person-centred approach: An agenda for social change* (pp. 195–197). PCCS Books.

Lago, C. (Ed.). (2011). *The handbook of transcultural counselling and psychotherapy*. McGraw Hill/OUP.

Lago, C., & Haugh, S. (2006). White counsellor racial identity: The unacknowledged, unknown, unaware aspect of self in relationship. In G. Proctor, M. Cooper, P. Sanders & B. Malcolm (Eds.), *Politicising the person-centred approach: An agenda for social change* (pp. 198–214). PCCS Books.

Lowe, F. (2008). Colonial object-relations: Going underground black-white relationships. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 24(1), 20–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0118.2007.00061.x>.

Moodley, R., Lago, C., & Talahite, A. (Eds.). (2004). *Carl Rogers counsels a black client: Race and culture in person-centred counselling*. PCCS Books.

Sembi, R. (2006). The cultural situatedness of language use in person-centred training. In G. Proctor, M. Cooper, P. Sanders & B. Malcolm (Eds.), *Politicising the person-centred approach: An agenda for social change* (pp. 55–59). PCCS Books.

REFERENCE

Proctor, G. (2017). *The dynamics of power in counselling and psychotherapy: Ethics, politics and practice* (2nd ed.). PCCS Books.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



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.



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.



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: 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), e1580. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1580>