
NOTE FROM THE FRONT LINE

A conversation with Eugene Ellis and David Weaver

Eugene Ellis ^{1*}  and David Weaver

¹Director and Founder of BAATN; Honorary Fellow, United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy; Editorial Board Member, *Psychotherapy and Politics International*

ABSTRACT

Eugene Ellis, founder and director of The Black African and Asian Therapy Network, talks with David Weaver, activist and community developer, about his time as President of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and his role in visioning the significantly funded bursary scheme and mentoring project to support racialised communities.

KEYWORDS: race; counselling; psychology; bursaries; mentoring

Eugene Ellis: I want to start off by reflecting on when we first met a number of years back. I think you had just started your role as president of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

David Weaver: Yes, we were at a conference, and we were introduced to each other. I remember feeling—and this is actually quite germane—if I don't forge proper relationships with you and people like you, it's just going to be a ceremonial piece of nonsense. You spoke as well, and I remembered feeling, actually, what have I taken on here? Because there's a whole history that came before me, and I wasn't navigating the level of detail and insight that I saw presented at that meeting from a range of people, including yourself, because of the organisation that you represented.

*Contact details: eugeneellis@baatn.org.uk

It is really important for me just to work in alignment with what I see as my noble cause. I talk about this a lot. My noble cause being really trying to make a contribution, in whatever I do, to making a difference around the life chances of black people, all people really, but in particular, giving some specificity to black people.

Within the counselling profession, I saw a unique opportunity to do something. I didn't know what it was, but I remember feeling that I've really got to get involved in this, and I've got to be relational in the approach that I have some insight into, but not the deep dive insight that many others have. Also, feeling that whilst not having that deep dive experience brought some disadvantages, it also brought some advantages because counselling, and I say this all the time, is too important just to be left to counsellors. It's got to be part of a whole collaboration with people, ordinary people, who can inform the excellence, but can also inform people in communities as well and in particular, on the issue of race.

Eugene: In those early days when you were at the BACP, I was wondering; how he's going to fare. It can be an intense experience for anyone, especially a black man. You said you felt there was a cause which was driving you, but what brought you to this particular role?

David: I've always been, from a young age, involved in activism and community organisation. I'm originally from Nottingham, moved to London in the mid-to-late 80s and immediately got involved in some quite significant race equality movements. I was part of setting up an organisation called the National Black Caucus, which was the coming together of African, Caribbean, and Nation people, really looking at how we need to force change from the outside. We set up in the early 90s an organisation called the 1990 Trust, which I became chair of. Out of that came core co-founders of Operation Black Vote. I'm currently their vice chair. I started as a social worker, trained in Los Angeles as a social worker and became, at quite a young age, quite senior within local government. I became director of policy at the age of about 24 and 25. There was something at that time for me about the importance of leadership around making a difference.

I was also, at the same time, just becoming aware of the real impact of emotional mental health and the disproportionalities of that in relation to black people. I was involved in lots of campaigns where we were either going to be restrained or detained. I just got involved in conversations and joint activity with people who were black therapists and putting that into activism words. Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow Push was happening at that time. We were getting people not just talking about big politics but also recognising the importance of therapeutic support that changed people's lives, and that had to be particularised to the black experience. I went into consultancy after a spot as a political advisor and, as a result of that role, was invited to a conference that BACP were hosting about counselling in the workplace.

I was in a particularly bad mood that day, I remember because I was a keynote speaker, and I was hearing all this stuff, and no one was mentioning the issues around race. In my talk, I really piled it in, and there was sort of muted applause, light applause. And then, I was really

shocked to get a call from the then chief executive of the BACP and one of the vice presidents who wanted to have a conversation. Basically, they were asking whether I wanted to get involved with what BACP were doing, and I said as long as we could involve some of the community organisations that are doing therapeutic interventions within communities as well.

Anyway, I agreed and then became the vice president (VP). I don't like having a title unless I do something with it, so I was quite an active VP. I was getting to know more and more people within the membership across the board, not just black therapists, and then went onto the board. I was on the board for a few years, I don't know why, but I think I was having some impact because of the work I was doing. Then the role of president came up, and that's how it happened.

Eugene: I imagine people will be wondering about the title of president itself and the role of president versus chair, for instance. What was your understanding of that role?

David: With respect to my predecessors, who did some good work as well, I took it into a realm which was much more visible and active than many of the presidents before me. President is one of those roles. It's like an elected politician or local politician. It doesn't have a job description, really. What was clear was that it was much more external facing than internal facing. I suppose for me, I articulated it as something around externalising the relevance of counselling and psychotherapy to the outside world. That could mean the media, it could mean building on the BACP strategy and its meaningfulness within the membership, but also within society at large. So, it's something about making that relevant to ordinary people. Within that, for me, and for previous presidents, is bringing to bear something which has an alignment with what BACP is all about and to utilise the role of president to do so.

Mine was very much around social justice. So, there's something about the counsellor and the client in the room, which is really important, and doing your best through the role of president to highlight issues that have concerns there. But more so for me, it was about how do you really demonstrate that counselling saves lives? And for me, within the social change capacity, what difference can I make to those people, where there are stigmas, where there's that dissonance, as I always say, between what the profession is doing and what ordinary people and black and Asian and global majority communities need?

What can I do to be able to address that? The president is very much a convening role. So, you've got the power to actually convene and get people around the table making the decisions—often having conversations, the ingredients to which I sometimes don't understand, but learning how to ask those powerful questions for them to arrive at outcomes that can really help move things forward. So, for me, it was really about the ability to convene the people around the table, around issues that were of importance and to use the influence of the role of president, whereas the role of chair is very much, I suppose, around more direct accountability to the membership and ensuring that the strategic framework for the

organisation is formed by the membership as a professional body and ensuring proper governance. Chairs also have fiduciary responsibilities and legal responsibilities, and so forth. So, it's about the personality of the chair and the personality of the people on the board and what they see as important or not. Does that make sense? Yeah.

Eugene: The reason I ask the question is because, certainly, in communities that I'm involved with, you're quite a prominent person, and your connection with BACP is quite strong. Also, many of our BAATN (Black African and Asian Therapy Network) members are BACP members, so you represent something quite strong for them and perhaps might be something of a role model. There's something about you going in there and something happening, which is not their normal experience. Normally, there's a sense that stuff might be going on, and there might well be change happening within the organisation, but they're not aware of it.

I'm aware of you bringing various stakeholders together, including myself. There's been a range of people at these meetings with particular expertise, so you clearly are very connected with various organisations. Not all are therapists. They're not necessarily even concerned with therapy necessarily as a thing. They come with very different hats on, and that keeps things fresh. Your initial comment about therapy being too important just to be left to therapist feels very strong when I'm in those meetings, and what you've achieved has been quite strong as well.

The work itself is, of course, important, but there's also something about the visibility of what you've done. For some people, they might say, oh, okay, I could do that. I could go in there and do something as well. The role of president feels very much like a coordinator role with, obviously, the power to shape things and bring people together around a vision.

David: Yeah, I think that's it. I'm a reluctant leader in that sense and lead from the front when I have to. I just feel there is something around collaborative leadership but with a strong vision. And I have to say that a lot of the things I was saying beforehand around social justice and race equality and so forth began to really land after the murder of George Floyd. Like a lot of organisations, BACP sort of rang their necks saying this should never happen again, and lessons need to be learned and all that kind of stuff. I had a frank conversation with the organisation, and I said it is better that you say nothing at all than you give all of these promises and don't deliver. I'm not going to be part of that. So be very careful in the conversations that we're having and about what you're saying at this moment in time. Because the lessons of history are that when you have a seminal moment like George Floyd and Stephen Lawrence and Roland Adams, all those kinds of people who have been murdered by the state or die in custody or whatever, organisations say all this stuff. But the further you move away from that seminal moment, the more they revert to type. And so I just said, there's something around ethical leadership, so if we say something that we're going to do, I will externalise it, and if it becomes difficult, then it's an ethical issue for you. That was the deal that we had. As we say up north, you need to say what you mean and do what you say. So

that was it. The relational thing is really important to me because actually, I have experience, as you say, that is useful. There's stuff that I've done and so forth, but actually, what's really germane to counselling and psychotherapy comes from people like yourself, and there are white allies within there as well, and other people. It's convening and getting that together and ensuring that BACP holds to its promise. I think, yes, I did play a key role in holding the organisation to account, but actually, the power didn't come from me; it actually came from people who turned up around the table and allowing things to be minuted. So, when we go into finance meetings, and we're talking about how difficult it was, we said, no, we need to prioritise based on what we think is important and assign these issues as business critical, which means that if we don't do it, it's a critical risk to the business. I think that's what did it. But it was really around collaborating with people. I really appreciate the acknowledgements, but it was a real collaborative effort if I'm honest with you. Yeah.

Eugene: Yeah, I kind of have a sense of what you mean. In training organisations I might be involved with, I might come in and do a workshop or maybe a talk or have ongoing conversations with some of the students of colour. What I'm aware of more than anything is that actually, it's the students themselves who go into the manager's office and say, this needs to happen or that needs to happen. It's the students chipping away, writing letters. I am the catalyst, perhaps, but the students are the stakeholders. This creates something slightly different from an expert coming in, telling the organisation what to do. For the organisation, it becomes more mission critical, as you say and pressing that there needs to be change.

Organisations often talk about bursaries, but somehow it doesn't really happen at scale. You talked about making sure things were minuted and going into finance meetings and talking about these issues being mission critical. How did this very important bursary scheme at the BACP happen?

David: Yeah. Year, after year, after year, after year, you have this whole thing about the statistics in terms of the numbers of black, Asian, minority ethnic people within the profession. Then you get different levels of quality of the stats and so forth, but it doesn't matter. We know there's significant underrepresentation of our people in the profession, and then when we look outside, at what's happening out there and people that really do need therapy, they're not accessing it. And when they do access it, it's not culturally appropriate. And for those black people not in the profession, there are issues about going to training and disproportionate numbers of black people that leave the profession or don't pass the training and so forth. So, these things have been going on for years. I spoke about this as a VP on the board. I spoke about how other professions have actually structured mechanisms, such as bursaries, for really getting that entry in. And they're doing it not because it's a benevolent thing to do; they're doing it because actually, the profession needs it in terms of that lived expertise that we have and shaping the nature of frameworks around therapy, as well as the

numbers and so forth. When George Floyd died, these issues were not only moral but also a business issue as well.

So, it started from there. The chair and the chief executive at the time really worked at it and pushed it forward. I was able to, and I think this is what really worked, capitalise on the proliferation of funding bodies that wanted to fund these initiatives just after George Floyd.

I was also involved as a co-founder of another entity called the Baobab Foundation, where we made £18 million in 16/17 months and thought, well, actually, why don't we have those conversations with some of those funders for BACP?

It was a bit difficult for me as well because I just thought, well, I'd rather give this to a black organisation; we could do that. But there was just something around the legitimacy of BACP or one of the other professional bodies doing this. And that's what I think raised people's attention to this. This is something that we're supposed to do. There's no excuse now about the potential to resource it. You say this is a strategic aim, and then it's people like yourselves coming round the table and feeding in. So, the issue then was about the level of ambition that BACP has.

Between you and I, I don't think the ambition was high enough, it wasn't high enough. The level of risk aversion that BACP has sometimes works for it, but actually, sometimes it doesn't. So, if you need system change and you've got the ability to do it, of less concern should be the administration of it because you can resource the administration of it if you think differently.

The reason why I'm in there now is to just push it along the line and then to continue those conversations which need to be had about how big can we make this, given the level of interest. There are these other bodies, corporate bodies and philanthropists and so forth around issues of mental health, but black mental health in particular and the role that counselling and psychotherapy could play. So that's how it came about.

There's a mentoring programme as well, which came off the back of that debate as well. Using the role of the president, we were able to get that over the line. We started it, which means we can build on it, and we can build on it in a big way. If the profession has a high ambition, and if black counsellors and psychotherapists lean into it, really push for it, it will happen because it requires that. There have been individuals like yourselves and so forth that have turned up, but it's the same individuals, and I think there almost needs to be a kind of movement which BAATN could represent that really pushed on issues like this.

Eugene: Yeah, I think the zeitgeist in the wake of George Floyd's death has created this environment where people are more willing to have these conversations, and the energy that comes from that is a really important part of this, as you say.

David: But would you agree with me, Eugene, that the further we move away from that moment, there is a reverting to type? People are now saying, well, it's not just about race.

That's why it's a dangerous time as well. With everything else that's going on politically. For instance, with this whole thing about wokeism, where there's no such thing as facts. We really can't ignore what's going on in the wider political world.

Eugene: Yeah. You're talking about leaning into the world as it is and how political structures themselves create mental distress. It feels obvious, but it's not something that the profession really acknowledges or wants to say anything about. There is that ever-present mantra that says we don't do politics, but our whole existence is based on politics.

David: My contention is that the profession will be irrelevant unless it gets involved in the politics of it and with the whole mental health pandemic as it is. We're going into another round of austerity, and we know that increasing austerity is linked to increasing racism. Even within our communities, we turn in on each other; there's a whole host of things, psychological things, that counselling and psychotherapy need to lean into. Unless we have that debate on a systemic level or even owning up to the need to do that on a professional level, then it's not going to happen. I've been to so many conferences where people still say it's not our job to get involved in there. It's just about what happens between me and the client in the room, not even thinking about the circumstances that inform what they're seeing in the room. And there's still far too much of that defensiveness or that view that we've got to stick to a pure form of what we're about.

Eugene: To me, it's almost as if there is a sense that the outside world is going to come in and kind of infect this pure thing that's going on in the counselling room.

David: I often say that policing is too important to be left to the police. Even the police understand that because actually, we need policing by consent. I find within this profession, however, it's a case of, oh, you're attacking counsellors. No, we're not. What we're saying is society actually needs counselling, so how do we work with the wider society and communities and other organisations, the third sector, other agencies, more effectively because you're important to them? So, there's far too much defensiveness, I think, within the profession, and it pervades some of our people as well.

Eugene: Well, that's quite a strong argument and one I've heard you articulate in different ways, and it sounds like it's making an impact, at least at some level within the BACP.

David: I think this whole psychological knee-jerk reaction that comes from the profession is worrying, and it's an impediment to the progress that could be made if we aligned it differently. Also, the quality of the training and the theoretical framings and so forth, I think, are hindered by that. It's not taking away from the expertise that therapists have. The community needs therapists as well as the other way around. But I think it impedes the progress that could be made and also around the issue of race within that context. Does that make sense?

Eugene: Oh yeah, no, absolutely. I think the way you articulate it certainly, from a global majority therapist point of view, you're not saying that therapy is rubbish and that what you need is something else. You're saying, actually, therapists are very important. And that relationship with the community is a really important one. That particular take on things brings a level of respect, I think, to people. People feel like, oh yeah, they're being respected at the very least. Certainly, for black communities, respect is everything.

David: That's the fifth word that my son learned.

Eugene: You disrespecting me. Yeah, exactly. It's such a powerful thing. I mean, it is for everyone.

David: But also, Eugene, there's a lot of bad therapy taking place from people that aren't qualified therapists in our community. Because we're needing to support each other because we don't have the structural infrastructure to do that, for example, through the pandemic. A lot of good stuff is taking place, but there's a lot of stuff that is not so good taking place. And actually, that's why there needs to be that collaboration.

Eugene: So, in terms of the mentoring project and the bursaries, what's the scope of these projects now, and what hope do you have for their future?

David: Yeah, I had BACP (Suki) contact me earlier. They've reaffirmed their commitment to continuing with both the bursary and the mentoring project. The mentoring project has started. I can't remember how many people they've got, but it's actually started now. I think they've probably got 40 people. The mentors and mentees and the bursary will start in September of this year. What we're doing now is getting together the infrastructure, the right partners, and getting it going. There are strategic commitments that are actually happening, and people will hear more of these in the coming months.

Eugene: So, the bursaries haven't happened yet as such.

David: No, they haven't happened yet, but they're about to. So, you'll be contacted because they're looking for partners to help support it in different ways; for instance, getting the criteria right. There's a lot of detail within this piece. I'm hedging a little bit only because we're just about to go into that stage. There's some good feedback that's coming back from the mentoring project as well.

I think what BACP needs to do is to communicate more clearly because I still think it's apologetic in saying who these programmes are designed for. There's a level of—we'll be really clear about it with the right audiences where those people are there that have an interest in it are present—but when it's communicated out more generally... There's still a level of cautiousness and being apologetic in saying for whom this project is intended. Over the next year, you'll see it, it'll be out there.

Eugene: Whilst you were there, you brought a certain level of business acumen and many other qualities to the table. Maybe this is the wrong question to ask you at this point, but how hopeful are you about the future of these projects without your energy being there?

David: Yeah, I think for me, it's about institutionalising it because it can't be as good as the people that are in the room; it's got to carry on. So, part of making sure it goes across the line is around the ongoing conversations with the board and the chair, making sure that these things are laid out in the strategic priorities, in the priorities that the various governance committees around this are placing on their documents and the monies that follow it and the financial commitments that follow it as well. There's very much that business thing which is about institutionalising it. But then the other side of this is about just getting the right people around the table who are talking, who just constantly reminding people about why we're doing this, and also partnering with people.

How confident am I, quote unquote? To be honest with you, I think once you put it out there, it's hard to reverse it, so I think there's something about really banging on about it, and that's what I did when I was there, having these conversations do you know what I mean? I think it's just bringing it, so I think it just needs people that are doing that and then obviously, like all the vagaries of BACP and other professional bodies, you've got elections, different people coming on, are they going to be committed to it, and so forth. So, I'm confident in the sense that up until last week, when I spoke to BACP, they'd done more to confirm institutionally that it's going to happen, but I'm not there, I can't account for that, and that's where I think the membership need to ensure that they're holding them to account. I can't do that anymore in the same way.

Eugene: Yeah. As you say, the reason why we're doing this, the urgency of this, all that can fade as time goes on, so members need to say, 'What's going on?'. Why aren't you following through with this? It needs to come back again and then again and again and again.

Regardless, what you have done is still quite significant, really, isn't it? That vision of the outside world impacting therapy and therapy addressing social conditioning and then backing that up with cash. It's a massive effort. There are seeds of real hope there, but there is, as always, a cautionary helping of scepticism.

David: I'd go to these meetings, just after a haircut and a shave and feeling all bright and everything, and then minutes into the conversation, I'm just looking at them thinking, 'he'll learn'. We have to have the hope thing. Yeah, but we've got to also hold BACP to account. If you have an election and the next executive board are people that, at best, think that it's not just about race, it's about other things and other things. As important as that is, if that's the best you're going to get, then it's going to be difficult. If worse still, it's about having to lock down and focus on issues around regulation and so forth and don't bring these things into it, then we've lost it. But it goes on to the other thing as well, because I think as president I was able to sort of forge quite meaningful relationships with quite a lot of therapists in the

membership, black and white. And I think with all of the black members, once you reach that point where you'll know this because of the work you do, where people will talk to you, you find quite a lot of uncertainty, impostor syndrome, experiencing racism from the profession itself. There's a lot going on there that I think can't be ignored. We can't just talk about this as what you need to do as black therapists in terms of the politics of it; there's something about the support that they should receive and need to receive because they do experience racism, direct or indirect or otherwise, within the profession itself.

Eugene: Yeah. We certainly do need to be very mindful of that swing between hope and despair that is the hallmark of this type of work.

David, thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences around your time as president of the BACP. That sense of vision, leadership, and expertise that you brought to the table, I'm sure, is going to be missed, but as you say, it's now time for others to continue to push these very important projects through because, as you say very poignantly, it will save lives.

David: Thank you.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Eugene Ellis is a psychotherapist, writer, and public speaker on issues of race, difference, and intersectionality. He is also an honorary fellow of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy. For the past 20 years, Eugene has been the director and founder of the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network, the UK's largest independent organisation to specialise in working therapeutically with Black, African, Caribbean, and South Asian people. His book, *The Race Conversation: An Essential Guide to Creating Life-Changing Dialogue* (Confer/Karnac, 2021), explores the race construct both through its cognitive and historical development and also, more crucially, on the intergenerational, non-verbal communication of race, both as a means of social control and as an essential part of navigating oppressive patterns.



David Weaver is past president of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2017 to 2022). Prior to that, he served as a governor/trustee (2012 to 2016) and vice president (2004 to 2009). A former social worker, university lecturer, local authority senior manager, and political advisor, David leads a leadership change organisation that works with individuals, organisations, and communities to help them achieve their full potential. He offers significant expertise as a coach and mediator and is utilised for his expertise in the area of

strategic leadership in the UK and abroad. Most of David's work is focused on leadership. A significant aspect of this is his work with the NHS, local government, and several professional bodies on strategies for embedding and ensuring that equality, diversity, and inclusion are viewed as business-critical and a central feature of their leadership and change agenda. This was a much-recognised and important part of David's work as president of BACP and his ongoing leadership role within the counselling and mental health field. A former political advisor to home office ministers, including the deputy home secretary and home secretary in the late 1990s, David represented the UK government on a council of a European body (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia) based in Vienna. He is passionate about social justice, human rights, and anti-racism and is regularly featured in the media.