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Understanding Black Issues in the Therapeutic Process

"In a modern Western country where psychotherapy is a service that is available for people with mental health problems, people from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds have a right to access such therapies in a form that is appropriate for them." Fernando,S.P. in Moodly,R. & Palmer, S.(2006,p.xvii).

Introduction

For some cultural and ethnic groups availability of services depends on how appropriate services are to their needs and well being; for example services for African, Caribbean and Asian communities must take into account their origins and experiences of being black in Britain. Availability in this context would mean the use of appropriate models that contradict institutional racism and the impact of racism and acknowledgement of the personal development processes specific to these groups.

This kind of provision poses a challenge because there is great sensitivity about addressing black issues in therapeutic relationships, particularly in the training and supervision of counsellors. Counsellor training programmes and provision in mainstream institutions have been lacking in direction and theory on how to process these issues. This has meant that qualified counsellors as well as students have not been facilitated to voice their experience of black issues.

Over the last two decades interest in multicultural dimensions of therapeutic practice has increased, reflecting political and social change, so that approaches to counsellor training are no longer confined to the page. However some responses of black counsellors and clients indicate that what has been, and continues to be produced, in transcultural literature has not sufficiently transferred into practice. The following research question was discovered at the heart of this gap. How do trainee counsellors in Britain understand

concerns about black issues-raised by themselves during their training or about clients during the therapeutic process? Mckenzie-Mavinga, I. (Study, 2005)

Definition of black issues

The concept of 'black' [1]used in the study refers to people of colour of African and Asian heritage. In Britain the term 'black' when used by black peoples is mainly used to affirm African heritage peoples and more generally used in an affirming and unifying way to refer to people of colour. However the term 'people of colour' is more familiar used in the United States. To contradict a colour blind approach, the term black has been used, with awareness that black people, just as white people are not one homogeneous group hence my reason for the use of the plural 'peoples'. Grouping can also increase the potential for stereotyping.

History over time has situated the term black, at first in its negative form and more recently as an element of emancipation? The term 'black' is a political and sociological term, identifying a group that have been most vulnerable to the oppression of racism in the west. This group have been least likely to be represented in the field of psychotherapy and counselling and more likely to be represented in the mental health system than white people. African heritage peoples are six times more likely to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act than white peoples. Asian peoples are four times more likely to commit suicide than white peoples. Foundation News, November (2003). These are important factors that must not be ignored. Psychotherapy and counselling provision that not only take into account, but also work with black issues may increase resources for those at risk of the mental health system. The risk of sectioning and suicide among the above- mentioned groups may therefore be reduced.

Linking 'issues' to the above context of 'black' is a way of referring to the concerns and experiences of institutions and individuals. These concerns may come to the attention of both black and white counsellors and clients, during the training, supervision and therapeutic process. It is important to note that the definition does not suggest that attention is focused entirely on black peoples or issues of racism. For this reason I have used the term 'issues' rather than 'peoples'. In the quote below reference to 'essentialising' is made when explaining this particular type of focus on black people.

It is also necessary to be aware of our own roles in the history, institutions and social processes of

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[1] The term 'black' is a self-ascribed, political term stating allegiance with those who have experienced oppression because of their skin colour. 'It is important not to assume that trainees from black and minority ethnic backgrounds will be familiar with or agree with, or use, any of the commonly used terms referring to ethnic identity'. Patel, N. et. al., (2000, p.34)

the inequality, which frequently confront us in cross-cultural work. Beyond this for our part we must avoid essentialising and totalising our clients as 'black subjects' (Hall 1992) and search for ways in which we may help them discover a range of representations of themselves and in this way encourage a critical dialogue around personal politics. Krause (1998, p.161).

When essentialising occurs the focus is frequently directed on to experiences of racism, with little understanding of the impact of social history on the personal development of both black and white counsellors and clients. In this sense the impact of slavery, colonialism, partition, caste systems and indentured labour are all to be considered in the present climate of transcultural communication; however historical factors of oppression should not be taken for granted as the main factors.

Research carried out among Asian women in Glasgow, Tyrell 1998 in Netto et al (2001 p3) showed that while respondents identified racism as one of the many contributory factors, family problems, loneliness and bereavement were cited as the main sources of their depression, fear and stress. The impact of these experiences on black peoples has silenced some white counsellors who have felt unable to voice their lack of knowledge and experience in these areas. Some black counsellors have bee silenced due to the confines of Eurocentric theory in their training. In many situations this has affected their emotional ability to verbalise their understanding of and empathise with African and Asian people's experiences.

Tuckwell, G. (2002, p43) sheds light on these experience. She suggests that:

The search for identity, which is common to both groups and the symbolic representation of blackness and whiteness in the inner world is tightly interwoven with images and memories from colonial past, as well as current social realities. This leads to differences in the intrapsychic development of black and white people as a result of the collective memory and experiences of oppression. The traditional white belief in black inferiority and white superiority has had a particular function for white groups in obscuring the need to look more deeply at unresolved feelings and issues about self and other.

The impact of the collective colonial memory that Tuckwell refers to has been woven through counsellor training and has created a certain numbness and lack of voice in varying degrees for both black and white counsellors. This numbness has resulted in a general lack of voice in relation to black issues in counsellor client communication.

African American psychologist Niam Ackbar, a pioneer on the question of historical impact and lack of voice, aptly summarises this phenomenon:

Although we are five to six generations removed from the actual experience of slavery we still carry the scars of the experience in both our social and mental lives. Psychologists and sociologists have failed to attend to the persistence of problems in our mental and social lives, which clearly have roots in slavery. Only the historian has given proper attention to the shattering realities of slavery, and has dealt with it only as descriptive of past events. (1996, p3)
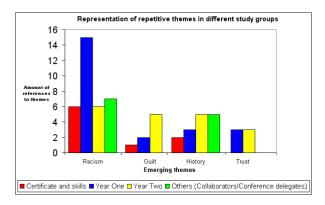
Often the voice of slavery and oppression puts people's backs up when discussed in psychological forums. It intrudes on the white therapist's persona with a legacy of guilt and black therapists may be reminded of the fear and loss associated with the pain and degradation of white supremacy. Ackbar suggests it has not been sufficiently attended to in the history of psychotherapy and counsellor training. There has also been a lack of theoretical models through which to study this subject as it relates to psychology.

In circumstances where I have been the only black voice challenging the lack of models in this area of training provision, I have felt as though I was carrying the burden of change on my own back. This is where the history of institutional racism becomes an important issue for consideration. Whether with colleagues, in the consulting room or within training sessions, I believe that African-Centred approaches would advocate that the effects of slavery and colonisation should be recognised as a key element in the process of what I call 'black issues'. Asian-Centred approaches advocate the importance of more present time concerns such as language, spirituality and confidentiality within their communities.

For many years while teaching counselling students about transcultural awareness and the impact of racism in counselling. I placed a greater emphasis on racism and its link to other oppressions as opposed to exploring how the therapist works with oppressions. I was not sufficiently addressing the process of listening to the experiences of black people in the context of their origins and heritage. Many theoretical books that support training have also focussed on racism, so the other bits of black people's lives and their developmental process is not given much attention. I became curious about why the students themselves were asking, "How do you do it". They needed further insight, personal understanding and experience to make these links. Counselling theory is a tool which provides a framework for understanding the client counsellor

relationship. Theory can incorporate cultural constructs which are generally applied to the counselling relationship. We must also be aware that theory can homogenise individuals and reduce personal stories to cultural stereotypes. This process can perpetuate institutional racism. [2] It became clear during the study that the development of skills to alleviate this dilemma was important. The study also showed that racism was the biggest concern among students.

F i g u r e 1

Representation of repetitive themes in different study groups

Finding a voice

Below are some examples of trainee counsellors' concerns about working with black issues.

☐ What if a client rejects me because of my African Caribbean heritage?

☐ Most of the theory and models are from non-black backgrounds; this does not fit into the way we think. How can we work with this?

☐ Do I have to have had personal experience of oppression to be an effective counsellor to a black person?

☐ Why do I experience difficulties asking my black and Asian clients about their experience of being black?

☐ How can I empathise when I don't know what it is to be black?

☐ What is expected of me as a woman of colour?

☐ How do you help with issues of identity and a sense of being black in Britain?

☐ How can we help with internalised racism?

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[2] Tuckwell, G. (2002) describes institutional racism as consisting of established laws, customs and practices that unfairly restrict the opportunities of defined groups of people, whether or not the individuals maintaining these practices have racist intentions. (p.17).

☐ How can the historical view of a black person not being suitable to support a white person be addressed?

These questions raise facilitation issues for the trainer because it is not enough to just support their expression. As in the process of counselling relationships, these questions require reflective response and elucidation. I am aware that students are concerned about the meaning and understanding of their questions and how or whether the theoretical models they are taught may be configured to support their understanding of black issues. Is it appropriate to interpret these issues using Eurocentric concepts? How do I, as a black trainer having been trained in western Eurocentric ways assist students to feel valued in their learning about these issues?

Rational for linking black issues research to practice.

There are three main reasons why a study on black issues in counsellor training was important. Firstly to curb the over-representation of black people in the mental health system. Second, the development of training. Thirdly, the Race Relations Act 1976 (Amended Act 2000) now gives public authorities and higher education a 'statutory general duty to promote race equality'. (CRE 2002).This duty needs to be more fully reflected in the world of counselling and psychotherapy and statutory authorities on accreditation. The race relations Act does not use the term 'black issues' but applies regulations to race issues without which black issues would not exist. The Act suggests that as a community of practitioners 'we' are responsible for change in the educational process. This approach proposes a challenge to institutional racism and therefore a challenge to dominant Eurocentric thinking in training and practice. This paper presents salient points from a study that enabled and empowered students to discover the voice of change within their training experience.

A survey (Mckenzie-Mavinga, I. 1991) carried out in the early nineties with 21 black counsellors and 21 black clients, asking what it meant to them to be working together therapeutically, concluded that:

☐ Training
Training was lacking an acknowledgement of black people's perspectives and experience.

☐ Therapists
Black therapists wanted to see changes in training institutions that consider the quality of learning relevant to the needs of black students.

☐ Clients
Black clients were happier counselling with 'someone like me' and felt they did not have to work so hard to be understood.

Acknowledgement, understanding and change appeared to be key factors in the response to the above mentioned survey. Since they are also key factors in the therapeutic process, they warrant responsive action in the training field.

The response of black clients indicated that what was being produced in the literature on black issues was not being transferred into general practice. The survey also showed that black counsellors were attending to black issues, but they experienced training as inadequate. Enrolment of black students on counsellor training courses has increased, clearly showing a need to find ways of including their experiences and the experiences of clients they would be trained to work with.

On a personal level, insights and knowledge about what has been missing in counsellor training on black issues has come from an understanding of my own development and self-knowledge as a black woman. I have grown to understand that opportunities to explore personal experiences integral to my growth and development as a black woman have been limited by eurocentricism[3] in both my personal and professional life. For example I was raised by white carers who did not know how to groom my hair or initiate discussions with me about my African Caribbean identity and history. Lack history was also excluded in my own education and training as a counsellor. Working with students who read about black issues, but asked how to address black issues with clients, highlighted a similar gap in knowledge and between knowledge and practice. Taking an active approach, I designed a study that brought together research and practice. The missing element of black issues was then integrated into my work with the training programme as a challenge to its Eurocentric framework. Howitt & Owusu-Bempa (1994) affirm this situation*:*

Psychology as an organised discipline, as taught and practised, ascribes little value to the experiences of black people. They are important only in so much as they reinforce white people's sense of superiority. Out and out Eurocentricism permeates assumptions, outlook and instruments of psychology. But it is this psychology that has

stormed through the world to be adopted even by black nations, uncritically and wholesale' (P.127)

The term Eurocentric is frequently used in literature about research and Multi-cultural Counselling. Morrow, Rakhsha & Castaneda. (In Ponterrotto, et al., 2001) highlight the dominant influence of Eurocentric paradigms.

Although traditional research methods have assembled a wealth of knowledge within the field of counselling, the "compass" used to guide such knowledge has been a Eurocentric paradigm that reflects the perspectives of white middle class males. (Stanfield 1994, Sue, 1999, Sue, Kurasaki & Srinivasan1999) Intuitively, the multicultural researcher questions the effectiveness of such paradigms when applied to marginalized populations. (Padilla & Lindholm1995; Slife, 1998; Sue et al., 1999) How can the worldviews of people of colour be understood when the researchers "compass" is directed by the polarities of a Eurocentric worldview? From the qualitative researchers view the participants in the study are the researcher's "compass". The participants direct the nature and direction of the researcher's journey, and meanings are made of the data from the ground up, that is from the lived experiences of the individuals and cultures under investigation. (P.576)

A study of black issues in counsellor training. Mckenzie-Mavinga 2005

Principle of Shared Concerns (Phase 1. of the study)

During the early phase of the study colleagues were interviewed about experiences of black issues in their training. Below are some excerpts from these interviews. Sharing thoughts on the lack of attention to black issues broke the isolation that we were experiencing. The concept of shared concerns was developed from this experience. By 'shared concerns' I am referring to the process of voicing experiences linked to the same theme. [4] Mckenzie-Mavinga (1997)

Black issues, a missing element : - Excerpts from interviews with experienced practitioners trained between 1987-2002

White Jewish female: "How appropriate and when is it appropriate to ask questions related to

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[3] Some view eurocenticism as the gap between individualism and collectivism. Others view it within its links to colonialism. In the context of training and black issues I am viewing it as the accepted status quo of white middle class domination of the theoretical knowledge base which supports psychological theory.

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[4] This concept evolved from a previous study exploring whether there may be a cathartic process in the experiences of black women shared through poetry.

race and ethnicity? People were not aware of black issues or areas like disability at the time I trained.

Asian Hindu Female: "I don't feel that I learnt a lot of theory regarding black issues when I was training. It was a self-directed course. We did some workshops and I was part of a group that decided to work on equal opportunities.

Placing the phenomenon of black issues into training (Phase 2 of study)

With the support of my colleagues we integrated workshops on black issues into the counsellor training curriculum. When discussing the skills needed to develop the project, it was clear that none of us had been adequately trained. Being the lone black tutor I was shuffled into the role of the 'black expert'. I had previously resisted this role, but on this occasion kept my defences at bay for the purpose of moving the training on. This dynamic was also apparent in the training groups when white students wanted black students to share their experiences so that they could learn from them. Whilst the sharing may be beneficial to sharers and listeners, black students felt empowered to question how their own learning would be supported if they were placed in the role of expert.

I asked the students about their concerns about black issues and we embarked on discussions. We discovered that trainee concerns were similar to staff concerns. Below are some examples of concerns that were put forward.

White female trainee: As a white woman how can I be effective in counselling black clients?

Black female trainee: How can I hold on to my sense of being black in a white counselling world?

As a black counselling trainer I feel compelled to respond to the questions raised by white students, although I am challenged to put aside my feelings about white racism and listen well to their concerns. It is often difficult to separate the cultural impact of racism from general concerns about not knowing. How do I contradict student's Eurocentric expectations of me, the Eurocentric influences on them and yet provide knowledge and emotional development within the Eurocentric framework of my institution?

Emerging Concepts

Two main concepts emerged from the study process of re-evaluating Eurocentric dominance. These were called finding a voice and recognition trauma.

1.   Finding a voice

The concept of' 'Finding a Voice' portrays an emancipatory [5]process evolving from the silence of not having previously had dialogue about black issues within training programmes. This was expressed in the interviews with colleagues and in the students' narratives. Analysis of students' shared concerns showed that the main issues being expressed appeared to link to experiences of the impact of racism on both black and white students in different ways. The process of compiling data from participant's narratives spread over the two year period of their training.

The workshop process and trainee's narratives showed that racism was a key theme that needed to be addressed within the wider context of black issues. (See fig1)As a staff team we recognised that students' understanding could be supported by providing a space to contemplate the impact of racism.

2.   Recognition Trauma

The concept of 'Recognition trauma' has been applied to the process of fear experienced by both black and white students in their process of consciousness about the impact of racism on their lives. For example: In their narrative, white students expressed feelings of guilt and fear when they listened to black trainee's experiences and feelings about racism. Black students expressed powerful feelings about being victims of racism and their process of internalising oppression. These experiences that I have named recognition trauma appeared to create stuckness and a perceived lack of safety to explore them on a deeper level. These responses have far reaching implications for the development of practice and made it clear that the focus on racism in the study could not be ignored. Like Klein's 'depressive phase,' [6]Mitchell, J. (1991) this process can be viewed as a phase to work through during training and the therapeutic process Students' narratives expressing symptoms of recognition trauma are presented below.

Black students observing white students response: "I'm curious how some people react in a defensive way when black issues are mentioned, Are whites feeling attacked by the guilt of our history?"

White students sharing feelings such as 'guilt': "How much will my guilt affect?

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5 Denzin, N. (1989) 'As in the feminist approach, knowledge should be for emancipatory purpose'P.25
6 By the consistent analysis of the negative as well as the positive transference, persecutory anxiety and schizoid mechanisms are diminished and the patient can work through the depressive position'. Klein in Mitchell, J.(Ed)(1991).

White trainee: "What if I am racist to a black client?"

It must be noted that black students did not ask questions explicitly about the racism of white peers or clients, they addressed their concerns in terms of the impact of racism on themselves.

Black trainee addressing the role of victim: "How can the historical view of a black person not being suitable to support a white person be addressed?"

Black students' concerns veered towards being accepted by white people and dealing with white peoples feelings about racism. This stance left little space for concerns about their relationships with other black people.

Working through the content of my own recognition trauma enabled me to develop an ability to facilitate the emotional content of students' shared concerns and recognition trauma.

Modelling

Working within the boundaries of my role as tutor, researcher and black woman meant that I had to consider ways to listen to the narrative of students without my own judgements and counter- transference issues interfering with their sharing and assessment process. As a team of trainers we needed to create safety to unpack issues about the impact of racism, which seemed to take over at times.

Facilitating safety issues

White male trainee: "My fears are that if I say something that was honest, I feared the reaction that I would get and that reaction would continue outside of this room. I guess I have the fear of being accused of being racist. The only way that I can describe it as I have written about it in my journal. One Saturday after a workshop, I went away feeling as though I had been walking on broken glass. That's how it feels sometimes, like you have to be very guarded. You have to be careful what you say in case something that you say might be interpreted in the wrong way. Sometimes I have wanted to say something just to work through it and try it out, to say I am trying this. I'm not really sure what I want to say, but I haven't always felt able to do that".

Researcher: "What would the safety be like?"

"The safety would mean just to be free and bounce things out of my head and not fear that I was going to be accused of being racist I guess".

Giving up the role of black expert

Power issues with colleagues were also a concern and required me to challenge them when they were sitting back and leaving me to facilitate alone. This also meant that I needed to harness my eagerness to pitch in before they could intervene and let them at least make a mess of things, which I always encourage students to do. You need to get it wrong so you can get it right. However staying in the present with this dynamic was very challenging to the modelling process.

As the training course progressed I encouraged a reflective process with both students and colleagues. Whilst the trainers were honouring their commitment to equal opportunities, students had opted in via their enrolment on the course, but were offering narrative feedback as data voluntarily, outside of the training programme.

Discussion about students evidencing their experience of black issues in skills development

White female tutor: "In my recent experience of practise assessments students were not picking up black issues, but they were evidencing the capacity to reflect on why they had not picked it up in the sessions and some of their fears. They were evidencing the capacity to go away and think about it and say what stops them doing something, saying something, but they were not evidencing it at the moment a client may need to have something validated. Something still is not happening relationally at the moment when something crucial may need to happen. Although what is happening is that some of them have much more awareness now".

Also some of them are ticking the box of having to jump the criteria of addressing black issues. They are naming something like I am white and they are black and then not taking it any further and as you were saying bolting it on the end. I am constantly challenging this, for some of them this might be a development because they may not have taken the time to recognise this before, so I am not clear what the evidence is".

Researcher: "There was a time when students and colleagues thought that you address the difference between black and white as soon as you open the counselling session. "I am black and you are white or I am white and you are black and how do you feel about this?" I think our students are realising there is more than that, because a lot more information about how it feels to be in this position is being shared".

Conclusion: A bridge between fear and transformation

The process of data collecting over a two year period whilst being in a participatory role with students was challenging and rewarding. It was challenging, because of the impact of racism that sat like a layer on top of black issues and raised powerful feelings of fear and anger. It was rewarding, because many students developed confidence to voice their concerns and dialogue with each other and their clients about black issues. This has led to a greater awareness of students' different cultural groups and their associated oppressions.

An analysis of terminology used to express concerns and share experiences showed that all groups of students, particularly those groups in the early stages of their training were considerably more concerned about racism. Year two training group showed greater concern about guilt and history linked to racism, although trust and safety to discuss black issues was raised as important for all students.

Workshops on black issues with trainee counsellors encouraged them to voice their concerns. At first there was a mixture of responses, including willingness, compliance, resistance, curiosity, fear, denial and anger. It took a few workshop sessions to assist students to work with the complexities of unfamiliar territory, yet permission to explore their concerns. The benefits have been twofold. Firstly they seem to have gained a heightened awareness of their own personal identities and cultural oppressions. Secondly, they were overcoming their fears of having a dialogue about black issues with both black and white peers and their clients. These challenges have heightened opportunities for working with the cultural and racial elements in their practise. Whilst supporting students to find their therapeutic voice on black issues, it is important to remember their different needs, which may vary according to the trainee's own cultural and racial experience.

The situation of 'swamping' (a term used by a student) was challenging. One of my ethical concerns when planning the study, had been that an over focus on racism might undermine the main intention of a general exploration of black issues and cultural concerns of other minority groups. General in a sense of space to explore the developmental process of black students and relationships within and between black groups and white students' relationships with each other that concern black issues. It became clear that a focus on racism, although a primary concern had prevented these explorations because it created

an interracial dynamic between black and white students, as opposed to a deepening connection within their respective groups. It must be noted that this dynamic may impact on the client/counsellor relationship.

I found that the role of 'black expert' was assigned to the most vocal and willing black students. At a later stage, having realised that this created a lack of reciprocation towards their own learning, they challenged their white peers to stop investing in them as facilitators. White male students who were also in the minority began to speak of their concerns about being called racist and also the powerful impact of listening to the feelings of black women. This was an empowering moment born out of the process. Both black and white students were challenged to find new ways of listening and learning from each other and their clients.

As a parallel process my colleagues began to develop their awareness of black issues and their own stuck ness about racism. As I relinquished the role of 'black expert', white colleagues developed greater awareness of their capacity to facilitate black issues within training. We have only begun to scratch the surface of this topic 'black issues' in counsellor training, but a bridge between fear and transformation has been built.

I have used this paper to voice my understanding of the needs expressed by both experienced and trainee counsellors to find and listen to their own voices and fill the gap in their clinical development. Rather than placing the emphasis of black issues solely on case material about black clients, they may be more self-reflective and able to transfer their personal and social knowledge of black issues into practice.

A synopsis of this study and tips for trainers is available in a booklet: Mckenzie-Mavinga I. (2005) A Space to Contemplate - Understanding black Issues in Counsellor training and The Therapeutic process. For copies contact: i.mckenziemavinga@londonmet.ac.uk

Other Publications

Mckenzie-Mavinga I. *Linking Social History and the Therapeutic Process* in Research and practice on Black Issues. Counselling & Psychotherapy Research. 3(2) June 2003, 103-106, British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy.

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