



Let's talk about race

An EAP in the Midlands held a CPD event on BAME experiences in the counselling field. **Nicola Banning** talks to **Sharon McCormick**, Director of The Listening Centre, and her team about what they learnt

The cover of September's *Therapy Today* said '...we need to talk about race' and asked its readers, '...what is stopping us?' Sally Brown, the editor, made the point that too often '...the responsibility for raising awareness of racism continues unfairly to fall largely on the shoulders of BAME people'. So, a post this summer on LinkedIn by Sharon McCormick, Director of The Listening Centre, caught my eye, flagging up a CPD event being held on BAME experiences in the counselling field. The post was accompanied by a photo of the panel, which included four BAME practitioners and the team of affiliates, who were invited to ask questions facilitated by Sharon. The Listening Centre is an EAP based in the Midlands that has been delivering counselling, training, mediation and critical incident support for almost 20 years.

If you're wondering why Sharon's post drew my attention, honestly, I suspect it's because it looked out of the ordinary – after all, how often do we see a diverse team of practitioners talking about their experience in the profession? Not nearly enough, given the systemic racism so deeply embedded within UK institutions, including our workplaces in which, too often, clients speak of enduring frequent acts of microaggression and staying silent about discrimination because they don't want 'to rock the boat' and fear reprisals. A recent YouGov poll of BAME respondents found that more than half (52%) have been on the receiving end of

assumptions based on race, 44% have experienced an impact on their career and 27% say their race impeded access to services or funding.²

Talking about race and racism in our society inevitably means confronting some uncomfortable truths, but given the skills that we have as a profession – much has been written of what we could bring to these conversations, to develop understanding, influence decision-making and create change wherever we work. I wanted to find out what Sharon's team had learnt and whether there were lessons that readers of *BACP Workplace* could take back to benefit our work with clients, in-house teams or EAPs.

Starting the conversation

I started by asking Sharon why she chose to run a virtual CPD session on race for affiliates. She explains: 'I attended a diversity symposium last spring delivered by the Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body (CPCAB) and was immediately struck by the demographics of attendees: mostly BAME therapists, teachers and counselling students. I found myself wondering, where are the people that need to attend such a course: my white colleagues?' Reflecting on the prejudice and discrimination that still take place in both counselling training courses and generally within the profession, Sharon was left with a determination to further embed as much diversity



as possible into the different strands of her business. Along with The Listening Centre, she also runs Adept (Central) Ltd, providing training for professional staff development and counselling training for both the public and private sector. She says: 'I was keen to explore the issue of race with my team of affiliates at The Listening Centre, and when we went into lockdown, it was an ideal opportunity to put together a virtual CPD session.'

The session included a panel of four BAME affiliates with a Q&A from other team members, which was facilitated by Sharon. When asked to join the panel, Marcia Chambers, an accredited therapist and supervisor with over 25 years' experience, says she jumped at the chance: 'I'm a black counsellor and this is the first time I've ever been part of a discussion about race in our profession – so it's long overdue.' Marcia explains that it was liberating to be able to speak with honesty about her experiences in the profession: 'When I first started out as a counsellor, I joined an EAP and worked as a telephone counsellor, then I became a clinical manager and then operations manager and I worked my way up – but the further I progressed, the fewer people I met who looked like me. I regularly found myself being the only black face in a room.'

Blind spots at work

A lack of diversity and inclusivity in organisations leads to blind spots, which can always be perilous but particularly when working with clients who are

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experiencing racism, as Marcia recalls: 'In the past, I've had times when I've mentioned that there are repeated cases of racism in the client referrals, and white managers have said, 'No, it's not an issue'. So, I'll go and find the data and the information that clearly show that discrimination is taking place. Of course, it's not just racial discrimination – it's all discrimination, but in our profession it's essential that therapists are aware of how systemic it is, that we recognise it when we see it and that we are able to talk about it.' It's a point that Sharon is adamant about when it comes to the competence of her team of EAP affiliates: 'It's absolutely vital that our affiliates are able to work with and talk about race and that our team members mirror the diversity of our clients. If we can't work with and talk about race, who can?'

Other questions the panel were asked included: Have you been discriminated against in your counselling career? Have you experienced discrimination by individuals, groups or organisations? Have you been able to challenge discrimination? And what changes would you like to see in the counselling profession? Answering these questions is challenging, explains Beverley Lynch, a therapist based in the Midlands who was on the panel; 'I had a huge sense of responsibility, speaking out as a black woman and counsellor and being open about my life experiences because it's so exposing. I've had to develop a thick skin and learn how to deal with these microaggressions. I'm used to being the only black woman in the room.'

Racism at work

The Race Relations Amendment Act is over 50 years old, but the *Racism at Work Survey*³ of 5,000 people, commissioned by the TUC in 2018, found that 70% of ethnic minority workers said that they had experienced racial harassment at work in the last five years, and around 60% said that they had been



Left: Picture shows The Listening Centre online CPD event

subjected to unfair treatment by their employer because of their race. Almost half reported that racism had negatively impacted on their ability to do their job, and almost half had been subject to ‘...verbal abuse and racist jokes’. Being asked, ‘Where are you from?’, simply because of the colour of your skin, is common if you’re not white, with the YouGov poll revealing that 74% of BAME Britons had been asked where they’re ‘really from’.³

Unsurprisingly, such discrimination in the workplace can have serious consequences for mental health, and often brings clients into counselling, as Marcia Chambers explains: ‘I’ve had many black clients over the years tell me about the racism they experience in their work. I can think of mature professionals who have been with their employers for decades but they are still fearful of calling it out and saying, ‘I am experiencing racism at work,’ because they know what will happen if they do. They’ll get labelled as ‘difficult’ or ‘too sensitive’ and end up getting pushed out – those that stay, have to put their heads down and say nothing. It’s appalling; but too often, if you’re BAME, that’s the only way you hold on to your job. I can’t unhear the things that I’ve heard in my career as a counsellor, but I think in our profession we need to be talking about this much more, and we need to be influencing what happens next.’

Will anything change?

Aware of the prominence of conversations about race since the killing of George Floyd, COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests, Beverley Lynch finds herself questioning whether the events of 2020 will actually bring about change: ‘We’ve had this conversation before, we had it 30 years ago and 30 years before that, and I’d hate it if we were still having it 30 years from now, but it wouldn’t surprise me if we were. So, there’s part of me that thinks, what difference do these kinds of talks and events about BAME experiences really make? And then I think again and I reflect on the fact that we have Natalie Bailey as Chair of BACP and David Weaver is the President, and so things are changing.’

She continues: ‘If I have a hope for our profession, it’s that the events of 2020 focusing on race ensure that more white therapists understand about everyday racism and realise what it is to have white privilege – because this is something BAME therapists don’t have. This was made so clear in Natalie Bailey’s email to members about her response to the killing of George Floyd.⁴ When I read that, I could relate to every single word she wrote. I thought, that could be me, one of my family or a friend experiencing that. She just got it.



It’s absolutely vital that our affiliates are able to work with and talk about race and our team needs to reflect the diversity of our clients and the workplaces they come from. If we can’t work with and talk about race, who can?



I thought it was so brave of her to write to members about her experience, and even though I don’t know her, I felt proud of her as a black woman.’

Taking care

Inevitably, opening up about past and present wounds, impacts on clients and therapists alike, and it’s something to consider in the planning of an event on BAME experiences of race and racism at work, which Sharon acknowledges: ‘I would encourage all providers and counselling services to put race on the agenda particularly now, given that there are so many free resources available. That said, it’s essential that whoever takes part feels safe and trusts the setting within which it takes place.’ Beverley highlights the challenge facing us all: ‘Whether you are BAME or white, if we see, hear or feel something is morally wrong, we all have a responsibility to speak out, either as an ally or at best, an anti-racist.’

Further events

A future CPD event is something that Sharon is already planning, and she’s committed to influencing the conversation and taking it further: ‘This is just the beginning as we’re already working on a follow-up session. As a leader, a therapist and a citizen, I’m clearer about why I need to remain vigilant to BAME issues and to make no assumptions about experiences of oppression, discrimination or prejudice. The courage and honesty of our BAME affiliates who shared some of their stories of racism in the UK, as citizens, as trainee counsellors and as clients with a white therapist, have given all of us new insights. The team seem genuinely grateful to have had the opportunity to take part in a forum where they could ask difficult questions and receive answers from colleagues that were sometimes difficult to hear.’

Jacque Karaca, an affiliate with The Listening Centre, agrees: ‘I felt having a panel of colleagues share

their lived experience was a powerful and relevant format. It was emotional listening to the experiences of my colleagues; and the levels of discrimination that they still endure left me both sad and angry, despite all the legislation that exists.' Jacquie has hopes that this model of training could be replicated in other areas of the counselling profession: 'I'm in private practice and I work with several other EAPs and yet this is the first time I've ever had any CPD from an EAP on BAME experiences in the counselling profession. Having listened to my colleagues talk about what they face in their lives because of the colour of their skin, I think I/we all have a responsibility to hear this and to be aware of the extent of it, because this is what our clients who are not white will also be experiencing in their lives and at work.'

After the event was over, Beverley explained that despite Sharon's sensitive facilitation of the discussion, it inevitably had an emotional impact on her: 'I was absolutely exhausted. I felt vulnerable because I'd opened up and talked about experiences that I've learnt to cope with and which I don't normally discuss with white people. When any one of us on the panel spoke about the discrimination we'd faced, or the microaggressions and hurtful comments which are so often passed off as 'banter', the rest of us would just nod as if to say 'ditto, me too'. So I ended up taking it to supervision to process how I felt about speaking up and speaking out about the issue of race with the team, because once you've said it, it's out there and there is still an inner voice that says, "Don't make a fuss or speak out".

'But if you ask me, "Would I do it again?" the answer is "Yes".' ●



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