

Blackness, Psychology and Me

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When the Black Lives Matter protests started, I was confused. To me, my life always mattered, although I knew others didn't feel this way. Growing up in a mainly white area, I never felt "othered" or "lesser than", although my youthful ignorance may have protected me from awareness of the racism around me. I was afforded opportunities I know others like me never had. I am grateful for this.

I studied Psychology at University with the intention to go on to become a Clinical Psychologist, although I didn't really know what that meant. I had always believed in myself, until I started working. When I worked as a Healthcare Assistant within the NHS, I started to understand what being "othered" meant. I saw my capabilities, but others didn't. There was racism, microaggression and judgment.

Growing up in a white area, I realised I had "whitewashed" myself to fit in. I was once referred to as an "oreo" and a "coconut" by two black colleagues. I didn't truly understand these terms until I started educating myself and this is when I started to question who I was. I had, unconsciously I think, emanated an "acceptable" version of a black person. This had helped me progress in life. I didn't want to be a stereotype, so I didn't get angry or talk too loudly in fear of being seen as "the angry black woman". I always smiled at people so they would see me as less threatening. Essentially, I made myself smaller so I would fit in and not be judged. I ignored the racism and continued with my life because it had served me well so far.

When the Black Lives Matter protests started and I saw the rage, I felt enlightened but also ashamed. I felt ashamed of who I had become and what I had come to stand for. It was during this time I got my first Assistant Psychologist job and my world shattered. I worked in a team that was kind, caring and compassionate. These were all traits I had never shown myself and I was supposed to readily adopt myself. I remember this word "reflection" and not knowing what it meant. I remember being encouraged to reflect on my feelings, but this felt alien to me because it meant having to feel all the racism.

In supervision, it was hard for me to do this, especially with a white supervisor who I didn't know whether I could trust with my feelings. As Black people, we have to continue on in spite of the prejudice we experience, because if we didn't, what would become of us? I remember thinking that not only had I never seen a Black Psychologist, but there was not one other person that looked like me on the floor I worked. "Reflecting" I knew I didn't belong here.

It wasn't until my manager asked me "have you ever experienced racism?" that I felt safe. He was a white man, in a position of power, and seemed interested in my experiences. It was uncomfortable for me to talk about, but I pushed myself and I did. Because of this, I learned that this was a safe space to discuss my experiences. I also learned that my supervisor was interested in social justice and so I started to open up to her too. I knew she

felt uncomfortable with these conversations, as white people often do, in fear of saying the wrong thing. But together, we learned how to navigate these difficult conversations.

My team showed me kindness like nobody else has in my life and I trusted them. But it opened up a whole chasm of trauma that I had never dealt with. This exhausted, confused and overwhelmed me. The part of me that had kept me safe was in threat mode. I didn't know how far these conversations would go until I became "the Black person always talking about race". Until those around me got bored of the conversations and started to deny my experiences and attribute them to something else. I still find it difficult now, watching my words or dampening my experiences, in fear of making others uncomfortable.

My supervisor was invited to an "anti-racism" in Clinical Psychology event run by some Universities I knew I may later apply to. We, as a team, were excited and I felt joy that events like this were happening. My colleague of Asian heritage also joined the event. However, despite good intentions, it was disappointing and tokenistic at best. For an event about anti-racism, it felt like the experiences of those who it had been designed for, didn't matter. The Universities had boxes to tick, and the representation of power and privilege was evident.

I had never been to a "professional" event before and had no expectations. But my colleagues felt the same way. We fed back our reservations to the organisers of the event and this has driven my desire for change within Clinical Psychology. I created a website "Let's Face Change" to create a dialogue with the Universities about what we felt had been missing from the event.

When I chose the path into Clinical Psychology, I did not think about the challenges I would face. Even after being told by a Black colleague "careers like that aren't for people like us", I continued on, ignoring his warning. Clinical Psychology is a competitive field to enter, with only 15% of applicants being successful. But it was not until I started contributing to consultation events, that I truly saw, not only the lack of diversity and representation in the field, but heard the stories of many who struggled to make it. I soon realised I was going to face more barriers than my white middle-class counterparts.

My colleague and I were invited to take part in the development of a mentoring scheme for minoritised groups in Clinical Psychology. Initially, it felt meaningful to be part of something so important, and to raise our status and development. I worked hard at liaising and connecting with others who had started mentoring schemes in different parts of the country, gathering data in the hopes of sharing these with the three training courses in the north-west of England.

At first, the meetings were productive and like-minded ideas were shared. But we were soon hit with the difficulties of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) work. More people were invited to the meetings, with intentions of creating greater representation and diversity. However, contrasting opinions and tensions formed, and the work became less about making change, but rather a lesson in how to navigate professional environments where the fight for power was noticeable.

I started to reflect on these meetings, internalising my difficulties, thinking maybe I had been reading too much about race, or maybe my activism part was too strong for my ideas to be listened to. I felt my ideas were overpowering, and it wasn't until I stepped away from the process that I realised I had become disillusioned with EDI work. I started to wonder if people truly cared about these issues or whether it was more important for them to look as if they were making change.

I thought about what it meant for me to hold onto my values, despite being in a position that would greatly help my professional development. Clinical Psychology is institutionally racist; this I have learned throughout the years. For a field that works within the mental health system (that sees overrepresentation from minoritised groups), it felt as if Clinical Psychology was being wilfully ignorant in order to keep its high-ranking elitist status in the clinical world.

To become more diverse, the field would have to see greater changes within its practice, and this would threaten many of those already in it, whilst benefiting people like me who aspire to enter it. The barriers I face trying to enter a professional career that was not intended for people like me, is something I will continuously have to deliberate on. To feel like an imposter, which I currently truly am. To hold the pressure of always having to be my best. To avoid judgement and being seen as inadequate. To achieve, whilst being an immigrant whose parents left their home to create a better life for. To change the way I speak in order to be accepted into the professional world.

I sometimes wonder if I am contributing to the problem, perpetuating a current way of being that is viewed as "the right way". Because if I change who I am in order to try to fit into a system that will always see me as "less than", am I truly making change, or am I confirming the biases people hold?

Annie Phiri is currently an Assistant Psychologist working on an in-patient mental health ward. She created a website: www.letsfacechange.com to try and give people a voice to share their stories.