

## **Authors in dialogue - Why race matters: Then, now and for the future**

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### **A Reflection: LN**

As a white woman, I have often felt immobilised in talking about race. So much of it is the instant shame I feel about my past, growing up in Zimbabwe during colonial rule and remembering things I never asked questions about, like why there were only white children in my school. I feel my shame keeps me silent and my silence causes more shame.

When the recent discussions on Black Lives Matter happened at my university, I wanted to get involved but didn't know if I could or should. This recent event begins with a 'back story'.

A few years ago, I ran workshops on writing a research proposal for students who had a diploma in psychotherapy and wished to gain their MA through undertaking a small research project. The workshops usually ran with a group of between 4 and 7 students, but for one booked series, only 1 student had signed up. I agreed to meet with him and work one on one for the 2 days of the booked sessions. The usual process for the first session was to outline the chosen topic, consider methods of conducting a literature review, and think about what was already known and experienced through the student's clinical work with clients. The second session, usually 4 weeks later, reviewed a draft proposal and discussed ethics and reflexivity.

Leo (a pseudonym), an older mixed race man (who identified as black), arrived for the first session brimming with ideas and immediately engaged in an intense and wide ranging discussion about race, racism, and the use of the psychotherapy process to raise issues of social political exclusion. He wanted to explore if the politics of liberation (as espoused by Freire (1996) and Fanon (2008)) had a place in psychotherapy. He described that the majority of his clients were from Black Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities and he said they would challenge him on his racial awareness. Leo talked openly about coming to terms with his internalised racism and was annoyed at the lack of explicit literature in his undergraduate course that addressed a psychoanalytic understanding of racism. He introduced me to the term 'double consciousness' by Du Bois (2008). In many ways I think we spoke openly with each other because we spoke of our racial differences and my 'South African' accent placed us in unique positions to talk about race. He left saying he was looking forward

to the next session and would send me his draft proposal to read before we met again. No email was received.

Four weeks later, I waited in the same room in which we had met previously, but Leo didn't arrive. I was concerned in case a message had not come through to me so at 10 minutes past the time we should have started I went to the reception area of the university; he was sitting in a chair. I greeted him and asked him to join me. He looked very different, avoiding eye contact and lacking any of the vibrant energy that was so present from the first session. I asked why he had not come directly to the room. He said he was told by the receptionist to wait. He then said that other people had walked directly past her. I asked if he thought white people were let in, but black people were asked to wait. He did not answer me but flashed a look of recognition and irritation. I asked him how the 4 weeks had been, and I was sorry he hadn't sent me his ideas. He looked at me and said he wasn't sure he wanted to do the dissertation at all. He sounded defeated. I asked him what had happened, I said he seemed so sure of his ideas and the description of his personal and clinical experiences were thoughtful and connected. He looked at me and said "*Why should I have to do it, you see, why is that they don't already know?*"

Leo's question has stayed with me all this time. There are echoes in so much of what white people talk about when they talk about race, and I think the issue of white fragility has highlighted how ignorant white people have been about matters of race and that race matters. I am one of those white people and so what can I do, when my shame often immobilises me? This brings me to the next thing, the thing I began with.

A recent call came out for university staff to join a discussion on race, led by the vice chancellor and a woman in the university executive (both white), alongside two senior black academics. We were asked to send comments and questions to this group, and I wrote of my support to one of the black women and asked a question. Her reply was to ask me if I was

aware that when issues of race and discrimination are raised in organisations that they often fall on the shoulders of black women to address and mobilise for action, and that it was exhausting. I thought so much about Leo, and his question to white people, *why didn't we already know?* Why did he 'have' to do it [for us]. I said I wanted to be involved. I wanted to see what I could do, not as a 'white saviour', but as a white person who failed continuously at knowing how to do something that could be useful with matters of race and racism.

I am reading more and listening more, and I am not sure I know what is best to do. But I keep trying to find ways of opening up spaces where black students can talk about their experiences and be heard. Not as a one off 'tick box' exercise, but throughout the curriculum. My friend Dr Nthabi Faku-Jaquala said in a lecture to psychotherapy students, when a white person does nothing in the face of overt racism, it makes it worse.

### **A Reflection: ME**

I too have reflected upon my various identities, positions, and uncertainties recently. I have been thinking of this article, *In the shadow of occupation*, and I remember how important it felt to originally present work that explicitly named racism at the 2018 WFOT Congress in Cape Town, though there was little time to engage in dialogue with the audience. I remember hoping that the ongoing development of our thinking and the publication of these themes might result in some different, critically reflexive conversations – within ourselves, with each other, and within our scholarly communities. Returning to the journey we took then led me to think further about points of similarity and departure I have experienced, as Lindsey has done above.

Prior to the emergence of the global pandemic and as a foreign academic, one of the dominant narratives in the United Kingdom I had noticed was Brexit, the exit of the UK from the European Union. This was not a 'new' story though; the referendum vote was in 2016.

Like many realities of politics, the decision made and the impact felt seemed disparate. Through that time period, where there was much discourse about immigrants, I remember Lindsey and I talking about our arrival in the UK from other countries. We are immigrants. Yet when we reminded others of that fact, locating our identities and ‘labels’ into conversations where references were made about ‘those people,’ we both found ourselves experiencing a similar response. *Oh no, we aren’t talking about you.* The fact that we are white, middle-class, educated, professional, English speaking women from countries with ties to the British Commonwealth positioned us differently within the ‘immigrant classification.’ *Why aren’t you talking about us?*

I find this reality unsettling, as the hostile immigrant environment written about by Fang (2019) was not represented in my experiences. This reality is a daily reminder that despite being an outsider, an immigrant, I have retained my occupational possibilities and privileges; I am white.

Fast forward to 2020, the UK social landscape is far more complex. I believe it always was but somehow the intersectional realities of inequality and marginalisation that previously lived in the shadows have burst forth into the light. Brexit deadlines and agreements have been removed from centre stage. Covid-19 and the resulting epidemiological disparities, Black Lives Matter protests alongside calls for substantive institutional responses and changes, and expectations for decolonised curricula, methodologies, and considerations of history occupy today’s central narrative in news and social discourse.

The stories we shared in our original article revealed the underlying racism within the profession and practices around occupation. Like you, I have been reading more. Two recent additions to my personal library, Kendi’s (2019) *How to be an antiracist* and DiAngelo’s (2018) *White fragility*, both frame their work beyond the individual. Occupational science scholarship is increasingly doing so as well. Naming individuals as racist, in these authors’

opinion, negates the relational and systemic construction and perpetuation of racism.

Individuals must be seen as 'part of' rather than 'reduced to' the systems and structures of racism.

In the last few months, I have applied for residency in this country and had to follow a number of steps in order for such an application to be completed. I had to study for and successfully pass an exam that addressed all aspects of historic and modern life in the UK. It was a curious process, to read a formal government document and retain its contents, in order to demonstrate sufficient competent knowledge to be legally permitted to reside within its borders. I recognise that it is not possible to highlight the complexity of a nation's past, the nuances of its present, and the vision for its future within a single book. Details will be selective, gaps will be revealed, invitations for further exploration will be encouraged. But at the same time as I was studying, stories appeared in the press highlighting that the necessary brevity of this historical overview meant that the British involvement in slavery, slave trading, colonisation, and the immigrant work force were reduced to objective facts and dates. My mind then travelled back to the research I wrote about in our article; visiting a slave castle in West Africa, wondering why the American occupational therapy students did not share their experiences about that event with me. What it meant for me to see, feel, and experience the space of the dehumanised 'other.' In relation to this exam and the study guide as recent examples of profiles of history, if the contexts for racism are briefly mentioned or the stories of confronting this history are not shared, how do we address the perpetuating processes and deep impact of racism? And where do we position ourselves, or acknowledge how our societies position us, when we are reminded that it is *not you* [we are talking about] *but them?*

**ME and LN**

We do not believe that dialogue and reflection that is critical, uncomfortable, respectful, curious and brave will itself ‘fix’ or solve any of these issues. Nevertheless, we hope that with the republication of our earlier work we can create a place to engage in difficult discussions; there are platforms and stages, conversations and challenges, actions and reactions that must be taken up. For all its complexity, occupation involves doing. We all have a responsibility ‘to do.’

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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