

# Ethnic Tapestry: Counselling while Black

by Leroy Ujima



I write this article against the backdrop of another Black man being killed by the police in America. It was when George Floyd was murdered that I became involved with Ethnic Tapestry as I was tired of seeing Black men killed by the police, whose job it is to serve and protect. What is so sad about the latest murder, of Trye Nichols, is that it was carried out by five Black police officers. In discussions with Black friends, we centred on internalised racism. We have for years been fed the narrative that Black people are dangerous, troublesome and a whole manner of negativity. Some of us have internalised this narrative and see other Black men as described.

I have two Black male clients, roughly about the same age as me, who sought out a Black male counsellor. They recognised their need to have a counsellor who was like them, who would understand their background and culture, and possibly some of the issues they have had and are going through, with regards to racism in the workplace and society. They are more fortunate than I was, as when I was looking for a counsellor who looked like me, I was unable to find one. I ended up with a white

male who took no time to get to know me, so did not take my culture into consideration. I left the sessions feeling like I was back at school, I felt unheard, constantly misunderstood, and not valued.

I must say, when I sat down with this white man, lots of things were flooding through my head. Thoughts such as: does he think I am never going to achieve anything in life, just as my schoolteachers said? Does he think I am lazy, just as the media and teachers, and people in places where I had worked, had constantly been saying about me and Black people? Does he think anything good about me? Am I wasting his time? Will he understand me, or does he see me as a threat as I am a Black man? So, I have all of this going on in my

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head whilst trying to talk about the reason I came into counselling. Can I be my authentic self? I am reminded of the statement I read in Dr Isha McKenzie-Mavinga's book, *The Challenge of Racism in Therapeutic Practice*: 'When will I be able to live my life without having to think about being Black?' Sadly, at my age this thought sits with me primarily with regards to my children and grandchildren.

In going into counselling at any level, race, culture or diversity have, thus far, not been on the agenda in any meaningful way. When I did the introduction to counselling, they were not discussed. When I took a level 2/3 Christian counselling course, race, culture or diversity was not discussed throughout the two years, this despite the fact that most of the students were Black and the tutors were white. All the reading material was from a Eurocentric perspective. A secular Level 4 course I undertook in 2017-2019 fared a little better. We had one reading book written by an author who was from the global majority. In the two years of this course, we had two, two-hour sessions set aside for race, one in each year. It was left up to us as Black students

to find materials which related to us.

We had students who thought issues of race can only be raised by Black people. This left me concerned for any Black person who may walk into their practice. I have been fortunate that I found a white, I would call her enlightened, supervisor who wants to learn about me as a Black person and the issues that affect me. With the murder of George Floyd, before we spoke about my client work, she asked how I was feeling. I was also asked about the racism meted out to Ngozi Fulani at the hands of Lady Hussey. The fact that Ngozi had to temporarily close her charity (Sistah Space) due to the abuse she has suffered, this despite the fact she had done nothing wrong, goes to show what we as Black people put up with daily. Ngozi was the one who was racially abused and yet she is the one who is suffering, as well as some of the women her charity supports. Often, as Black people, we are told we have a chip on our shoulder if we challenge the way we are treated. The fact that Lady Hussey felt it was fine for her to touch Ngozi's hair without asking, plus pressing her on where she comes from, not accepting the first answer she was given, is unacceptable. What this

said to me was that we as Black people cannot and do not belong in this country.

I say all that to say this: If we aim to work towards relational depth with our clients, we must seek to understand them. Without that understanding and care for our clients the therapeutic outcome may not be as successful.

There needs to be a change in the way that counselling training is delivered; it must consider the various cultures within society, so we are able to ensure the services we offer are accessible to all people. Our white colleagues must also educate themselves on Black issues, recognise their white privilege, and not be afraid to ask questions or to challenge racism. Neither should they be afraid to instigate discussions on racism. We need more Black tutors on counselling courses, who have an input into the course materials. That also means the people who officiate these courses must change their criteria to consider the various cultures in society.

Some of the books I have come across which I feel would be beneficial are listed on the right.

#### References:

- Dr Isha McKenzie-Mavinga. *The Challenge of Racism in Therapeutic Practice by Black Issues in Therapeutic Process*
- Guilaine Kinouani. *Living While Black*
- Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin White Mask*
- John Barnes. *The Uncomfortable Truth about Racism*
- Robin DiAngelo. *White Fragility*
- Michael Holding. *Why we kneel and how we Rise*
- June Sarpong. *Diversify*
- Alexandra Wilson. *In Black and White*

We ALL have a duty to combat racism as we are ALL one in Christ, as it states in Galatians 3:28.

If you want to learn more about Ethnic Tapestry, we would like to hear from you at: [accent@acc-uk.org](mailto:accent@acc-uk.org)

#### Leroy Ujima

##### About the author

Leroy has been counselling since 2009 as a volunteer and has now opened up a private practice with his wife who is also a counsellor. They work together with couples.

He was a youth worker for about 30 years

He is one of the founding members of ACCENT. ACCENT is a group of global majority people who came together after the murder of George Floyd.

ACCENT can be contacted via email [accent@acc-uk.org](mailto:accent@acc-uk.org)

In his spare time, he is a photographer, and enjoys cycling, walking, reading and Lego.

