

What's whiteness got to do with it?

Frances Basset

Frances Basset is a transpersonal psychotherapist and supervisor with a private practice on the south coast of England. She is a survivor of trauma. Currently she is undertaking a doctorate and researching white privilege and white fragility in relation to psychotherapy. Email: frances@bassetconsultancy.co.uk

ABSTRACT: An exploration of how owning and accepting white privilege could move psychotherapy and counselling into an era whereby truly anti-racist practices might begin to flourish.

KEY WORDS: Privilege, racism, decolonizing.

If we are going to get anywhere I believe we have to start with ourselves and our individual cultural background. I was born in 1962 and grew up in a remote Yorkshire village. Throughout my childhood I was immersed in whiteness. My parents were white and British. My father never left the village throughout his life. He had a disability through a childhood illness (Tuberculosis) that caused him to leave school at age 9 and have a long stay in hospital. My mother was from Leeds originally but soon became accustomed to the rural life. My father worked as the village cobbler and then as a ward orderly at a local psychiatric hospital. My mother worked as a home help and also cleaned the houses of many of the wealthy inhabitants of the village.

My maiden name was 'Whetzel' and this was the source of much shaming at school. It was clearly not an English name and the word 'wet' was often used to taunt me. My father was born in 1914 and so lived through two World Wars. Little was said in the family about our heritage. Over time, and mostly as an adult, I came to discover that my Great Grandfather was a German Jew. He had run the village newsagent shop and I was told stories of him getting bricks thrown through his shop window for being German or Jewish or both. But these stories came out over a long time and it was not really until my father had died in 2001 that my mother talked more openly about a German and Jewish heritage that had not been a part of my childhood. Hence I experienced no antisemitism

as a child but antisemitism led quite profoundly to my Jewish heritage being effectively hidden from me and only truly revealed to me when I was in my forties.

Although I was aware that our family was poor and working-class in an area of Yorkshire where everybody else seemed better off, my experience of the world around me was through a white lens. At home we watched 'The Black and White Minstrel Show'; it was just Saturday night TV as usual. There was one black television comedian, Charlie Williams, whom my father was very fond of because he liked his Yorkshire accent. I had an uncle who lived in South Africa and, although we rarely saw him, he would use racist language in the airmails sent to my mother. He also supported Apartheid which despite my young age, I knew was wrong.

At school one of my first books was *Little Black Sambo*. At the age of ten I remember first coming into contact with Mina, who was a Pakistani, and was the only non-white child at my school. She became a friend but I don't think I had any idea of how she experienced the world around her. My schooling was entirely white ethnocentric; history lessons were centred around the agricultural and industrial revolutions; standard 'O' level material. I have thankfully read much more widely since then, not least from watching and taking in the work of historian, Olusoga (2017). My secondary education continued in a similar vein in the town of Ilkley, also white, middle class, and on the edge of the Yorkshire moors.

In writing these few brief notes about my life I realise that when I trained to become a psychotherapist 16 years ago, there was no focus at all on my culture and ethnic background. I guess I was just seen as another female who wanted to do some good in the world by becoming a therapist. White skin was, and still is, invisible; this invisibility allows white privilege to go unnoticed; especially by white people. My hope now is that white trainers will focus on individual culture and ethnicity from the very start of the therapy trainees' journey; for white as well as black and brown students.

Teaching anti-discriminatory practice

Before I became a psychotherapist, I spent some years as a Senior Lecturer teaching Anti-Discriminatory Practice to nurses and health care professionals at the University of Brighton. I found this a challenging area to teach but it felt important; sometimes white nurses would be defensive and tell me that the module was irrelevant to their work. They did not really see the point of it. I did my best to reinforce the importance of the approach. During this time, my partner and I took a trip to Krakow and embarked on an Auschwitz visit. The shock of this visit, on a biting cold day, with us all wrapped up in many layers of clothes, changed me and strengthened my passion for equality. It subsequently seemed much easier to rebuff the criticisms of the nurses who could not quite grasp the point of it.

Throughout those years of teaching (1996-2010), I always considered myself a non-racist, in fact not just a non-racist, but an anti-racist. However, I had never really explored my own white privilege. At that time most of the definitions of racism seemed

to centre around the negative effects of racism on the oppressed group, thus rendering the dominant group, the group that benefits from racism, irrelevant (Paradies 2006). It is no surprise then, that attempts at solving inequality fail to deliver when 'solutions' reinforce 'othering', (Turner, 2021). This essentialist approach whereby characteristics are ascribed to groups, reinforces stereotypes and tokenism (Saad, 2020).

Stepping back to read and learn

So, in 2020, I took a 'lockdown' decision to start a doctorate in psychotherapy. I was able to step back just a little from my work with clients and supervisees to actually study and read. I re-found my love of reading and was surprised at how much had been written and published.

Reading McIntosh's (2003) classic, '*Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*' was a turning point; her list of fifty unseen white privileges really hit home. For example, 'I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group' and 'I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group' and, 'I can be sure I have not been pulled over because of my race when driving', to name just a few that resonated. The paper asked how it would be to give some of these privileges up, which would I be prepared to let go of? This felt like an extremely uncomfortable proposition.

Reading many of the studies on whiteness (Fine, Stewart and Zucker, 2000), I wondered why I'd never utilised them in the past? The evidence was not new. Helms (1995) provided white therapists with a framework for understanding their various stages of racial awareness and Blitz (2006) stressed how disowning whiteness; distancing oneself from the experience and responsibility of white racial identity, has perpetuated unintentional racism. Looking back, I can begin to see how, 'out of sight, out of mind' applied to me. Since then, writers such as Diangelo, (2018), Saad, (2020), Cousins, (2019) and Turner, (2021) have really inspired my thinking as I begin to come to terms with my own unconscious biases and potential for micro-aggressions (Eddo-Lodge, 2018). Whilst I always balked at the 'colour blindness' idea, I have met many white nurses and psychotherapists who hold steadfastly on to the view that they, 'just don't see skin colour'. This is despite the evidence that judging visually happens in micro-seconds and is unconscious, (Kaschak, 2015).

One learning resource that I can highly recommend to white therapists is the long established, Black African and Asian Therapist's Network (BAATN) whose founder Eugene Ellis, has recently launched, 'The Race Conversation', with its bright cover title laid out as, the 'Race Con' (2021); this has certainly struck a chord. Another great motivator to writing this article was the special 'Racisms and Psy' edition of this journal (JCPCP 2020). Sanah Ahsan's Deconstructing Whiteness Study (Ahsan, 2020) particularly resonated and has spurred me on to begin exploring whiteness within Psychotherapy. Ahsan's Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed just how much work white therapists and psychologists need to do if we are serious about opposing racism within mental health.

So, 2020 was quite a year for me. I started a doctorate at the Metanoia Institute and Middlesex University to explore anti-racist practice and have been propelled into my own whiteness. This has been both revelatory and at times, deeply uncomfortable. However, as time goes by, I am beginning to accept and recognise that staying open, sitting with shame and guilt are all possible in relation to whiteness; after all, this is what our psychotherapy education instills in us; the ability to sit and give space to difficult feelings.

Taking action

My acknowledgment that racism is complex and operates at intra-psychic, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic levels (Kendi, 2019) has helped me to accept that I can't become anti-racist overnight; as a white person it is sedimented into my body and is the culture I have been born into (Cushman, 2019). Putting the emphasis on the individual without understanding the policy and systemic context is not helpful either (Feagin, 2006). The key is to not deny it because that takes the pressure off and I can stay in contact for longer, making the possibility of dialogue a reality. If we are to begin to educate ourselves in matters of race, we must create safety in groups. I recently attended an excellent white racial awareness training day run by the Antiracist Practice Group of 'Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility' (PCSR). In setting ground rules and each considering our cultural backgrounds at the outset, white participants began to allow themselves the permission to make mistakes, to get it wrong. White shame and fragility are much less likely to logjam our thinking when held with kindness.

Action is of course also important and I have involved myself in a small way in the Black Lives Matter movement. There was a large demonstration locally and my partner and I put up a poster in our front window. It was mainly in memory of David 'Rocky' Bennett who was killed whilst in a psychiatric unit in 1998. The poster drew some interesting comments from neighbours - many were very supportive but one or two were clearly a bit ruffled by it. I live on the south coast and generally I would describe my neighbourhood as progressive but there is still a discomfort when discussing issues of race and racism.

I have found that progressive and often left-leaning white people have a tendency to feel that because of their views and actions over many years, they cannot possibly enjoy white privilege. A recent example for me was when a white academic was railing against the status quo, stating that he was frustrated with all the ex-Eton scholars running the country. He had a point of course, but his own white maleness was clearly off the agenda for discussion. This is a difficult area to pin down and I have begun to name it 'I'm a socialist - get me out of here!'

Decolonising the curriculum

Amongst the many initiatives that have recently taken root in The UK, there has been the need to look closely at curricula and at the University of Brighton they have produced a

series of booklets on teaching and learning about race equality. Academics across a variety of schools and faculties have come together to get to grips with what is a massive task. They challenge the Eurocentric curriculum, explaining that this privilege has become the default position setting for many in society and as such, is often rendered almost invisible. Amongst the articles in the July 2020 Booklet (University of Brighton, 2020), there is a poem by a PhD student, Annie Whilby, titled 'Decolonised Rhymes'. Here is an inspiring extract:

And I think it's a travesty,
That students can reach the third year of their degrees
Without confronting or being told to read
The likes of Fanon, Hill, Collins, Davis, Morrison and hooks
Yet in all these reading lists and books
Is dead white man, after dead white man,
After dead white man, after dead white man.
And I won't go on.... coz you know I can.

So if they say education
Is the key to liberation,
And if you're keeping it colonial
You've got an obligation
To explain to your students,
Researchers and scholar-activists
Why you're keeping it white
And you ain't bothering to challenge shit.

So Stay down if you're down with the white institution,
We're black and we're brown and we are the revolution.

Personal survival

So, how did I come to this? Why have I chosen this focus? My sense is that it has come from my personal experiences of othering, of being objectified and silenced. Experiences of being met as, 'I-It' as opposed to, 'I-Thou', (Buber, 1958). I know the experience of powerlessness and fear and oppression. Over time though, I have discovered the power of narrative and with that, comes the hope that this may encourage others.

This in a way, is my starting point for looking at race and racism and as a researcher of whiteness, I know that reflexivity is key. So, I am tracking these feelings, journaling as I go and slowly becoming more race-literate and more able to be open to difficult discussions around race in the classroom and more able to develop a robustness to stay in

contact (Ababio and Littlewood 2019) by not letting myself lapse into white fragility.

In 1986, at the age of 23, I survived a terrifying rape in which I feared for my life. I have written about this elsewhere (Basset and Lee, 2017; 2018) and with the speaking out, has come a strengthening of my sense of survival. But speaking out can be a risky endeavour and I found that when I did so in my psychotherapy training, this led to me being shamed and silenced. However, my more recent disclosures were met with considerable support from colleagues, for which I am most encouraged. As a trauma survivor, I felt able to advise my colleagues:

‘... to be very cautious about intervening when working with trauma survivors. They have experienced an ultimate powerlessness.....To have all one’s power taken away is devastating. I remember this feeling clearly, despite decades having passed. To have one’s boundaries invaded in such a terrifying manner is deeply wounding and it takes a long time to heal’ (Basset and Lee, 2018).

Using these experiences to affirm other rape survivors seems to be a natural step for me as I fundamentally believe it is not what happens to us that is important, but much more, it is about how we choose to respond to it.

As a trauma survivor who has often felt silenced, I feel some empathy for Black and Asian students who have felt silenced during their training (Ellis & Cooper, 2013). Another important link for me is the way people are treated in the mental health system. I guess this could be called an intersection - the mental health system has been criticised for othering and objectifying the users of its services. And part of that is the significant over-representation of black people in the mental health system (Hicks and Butler, 2020).

What next?

The events of 2020 have led to an awakening across the psychotherapy profession. The agenda to create a more culturally diverse, inclusive profession that actively challenges inequality and racism is important and timely and it is encouraging that both the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy are aiming to rise to this challenge. Locally, The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is very active and has impacted many white psychotherapists and I am hopeful that we can sustain this energy by speaking out as allies.

Training organisations are aware of the challenge. I think a good start would be to include, from the beginning of every psychotherapist’s training, an in-depth personal and cultural exploration. My belief is that we have been viewing inequality through an inadequate lens; unless we include the other half of the equation, the white privileged, we will continue to render whiteness invisible.

To finish on a more personal level, I pay tribute to one of my clients whose

involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement has been a personal inspiration to me. I cannot name them but they know who they are.

References

1. Ababio, B. & Littlewood, R. (Eds) (2019). *Intercultural Therapy - Challenges, Insights and Developments*. Routledge, London and New York.
2. Ahsan, S. (2020). Holding Up the Mirror: Deconstructing Whiteness in Clinical Psychology. *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 20(3), pp.45-55.
3. Basset, F. & Lee, D. (2017). Unbroken: One Woman's journey to rebuild a life shattered by violence. A true story of survival and hope by Madeleine Black. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 15(3). <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1427>
4. Basset, F. and Lee, D. (2018). Let's Talk about Rape. *Therapy Today*, 29(7), pp.20-23.
5. Blitz, L.V. (2006). 'Owning Whiteness: The Reinvention of Self and Practice', *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 6(2/3), pp.241-263. Available at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J135v06n02_15
6. Brown, M. (1993). *Growing Whole-Self Realization on an Endangered Planet*. A Hazleden Book.
7. Buber, M. (1958). *I and Thou*. Translated by R.G. Smith. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
8. Cousins, S. (2019). *Overcoming Everyday Racism - building resilience and wellbeing in the face of discrimination and micro-aggressions*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
9. Cushman, P. (2019). *Travels with the Self - Interpreting Psychology As Cultural History*. Routledge.
10. Dekel, R. & Goldblatt, H. (2008). Is there intergenerational transmission of trauma? The case of combat veterans' children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 78(3), pp.281-289. <http://doi.org/10.1037/a0013955>
11. Diangelo, R. (2018). *White Fragility - why It's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press Boston.
12. Eddo-Lodge, R. (2018). *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, Bloomsbury Publishing.
13. Ellis, E. (2021). *The Race Conversation: An Essential Guide to Creating Life-Changing Dialogue*. Confer Books.
14. Ellis, E. & Cooper, N. (2013). Silenced: The Black Student Experience, *Therapy Today*, 24(10).
15. Feagin, J. R. (2006). *Systemic Racism - A Theory of Oppression*. Routledge, New York, London.
16. Fine, M., Stewart, A. J, & Zucker, A. N. (2000). 'White girls and women in the contemporary United States: supporting or subverting race and gender domination?', in Squire, C. (Ed.) *Culture in Psychology*, pp.59-72, Routledge, New York, .
17. Fisher, J. (2017). *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors - Overcoming Self Alienation*. Routledge.
18. Helms, J. E. (1995). An Update Of Helms' White and people of color racial identity models. In J, G. Ponteroto, Casas, J. M. Suzuki, L. A. and Alexander, C. M. (Eds), *Handbook of Multicultural Counselling*, pp.181-198, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
19. Hicks, S and Butler, C (2020) A Framework for Clinical Psychologists to Understand and Talk about Race, *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 20(3), pp.72-84.
20. Kaschak, E. (2015). *Sight Unseen: Gender and Race through Blind Eyes*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
21. Kendi, I, X. (2019). *How to Be an Antiracist*. Penguin Random House, UK
22. McIntosh, P. (2003). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. In S. Plous (Ed.), *Understanding prejudice and discrimination*, pp. 191–196, McGraw-Hill.
23. Olusoga, D. (2017). *Black and British - A Forgotten History*. Macmillan.
24. Paradies, Y. C. (2006). Defining, conceptualizing and characterizing racism in health research. *Critical*

- Public Health*, 16(2), pp.143-157.
25. Ryde, J. (2011). Issues for White Therapists, in Lago, C. (Ed). *The Handbook of Transcultural Counselling and Psychotherapy*, pp.96-104, Mc Graw Hill, Open University Press.
 26. Saad, L. (2020). *Me and White Supremacy: How to Recognise your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World*. Quercus Editions Limited.
 27. Turner, D. (2016). Being the Other: A creative exploration of the Identity of the Other. *British Journal of Play Therapy*, 12, pp.22-34.
 28. Turner, D. (2021). *Intersections of Privilege and Otherness in Counselling and Psychotherapy*, Mockingbird. Routledge.
 29. University of Brighton. (2020). *Decolonising the Curriculum – Teaching and Learning about Race Equality*, Issue 3: July.
 30. Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2009). *The Spirit Level -Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. Penguin Books.