**Episode 1: Unmasking racism podcast transcript**

Thank you for taking the time to listen to this series of podcasts exploring the topics of race, racism and anti-racism through the themes of unmasking, repairing and prevention.

Thank you for listening to these podcasts exploring the topics of race, racism and anti-racism in the context of counselling and social work. Over the course of six episodes, professionals from our fields will have open discussions and ask how we can unmask, repair and prevent the harm and trauma that racism perpetuates. This series is a collaboration between staff and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, known as BACP, and Hackney Borough Council, and it follows on from the Anti-Racist Practice conference hosted by Hackney Council's Children and Families service in May 2022. Report from the conference and links to any other documents or resources we mention, as well as specific trigger and content warnings will be available in the accompanying show notes. Please be aware that some of the discussions may be upsetting or triggering, so please take care of yourself while listening and afterwards. The contributors to these podcasts come from different backgrounds and have different personal and professional experiences of race and racism. While none of us are experts or professionals in this field in an academic sense, many of the participants have expertise based on their lived experience of racism. These experiences have shaped their lives, make topics very real and very raw. We don't have all the answers to many of the problems and challenges that arise in discussions over the course of the series, but we all share a belief that racism should be discussed as part of our need to better understand its impact on each of us personally in our workplaces and in wider society. Difficult conversations are a necessary foundation of anti-racism. We need to get comfortable in the uncomfortable. We hope that these recordings encourage and inspire your own conversations, and together we can all contribute to a much needed movement of change.

So my name is Jo Holmes. I am the Children, Young People and Families lead at British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, BACP, based within the policy team, and I'm your host for this first podcast. I describe myself as a white British female, and my pronouns are she and her. So I'm really delighted to be joined by Orlene Badu from Hackney Council, and Michael Golding, Deputy Chair of BACP, to explore the issue of unmasking racism. So firstly, over to you, Orlene, to introduce yourself, and then we'll go straight to Michael.

Thank you, Jo, and I think I'd introduce myself first and foremost as a black woman who identifies as female. I think that's really important. My role is often about ensuring racial literacy, to ensure deep and meaningful conversations about race and racism, and to be able to challenge systemic inequalities, and I have these discussions in the hope of action and change.

Yes, hi there, I'm Michael Golding. I identify as a white British male, pronouns he, him. I am a counsellor working in private practice in a community service in Essex, and I'm also on the board of governors at BACP.

Thank you. Thank you both for joining. So for anyone listening, can you tell us a little bit about yourselves and your experience of anti-racism in the workplace? Michael, we'll start with you.

When I was asked to come along today, my first response was, 'Why would they ask me? I feel like the least qualified person to engage in a conversation like this.' Then when I reflected on that, I thought, well, actually, that's something I could bring to the table, because there will be lots of people listening to this podcast who will be interested to find out more from a position of not knowing very much, which is where I feel I am. I think it is important to acknowledge from the outset that for all of us this is a journey, and we are all on different stages of that journey, and some will be further along than others, and then we need to show some patience and cut each other slack about recognising that people are on different parts of the journey.

Absolutely. We're all at different stages, and the destination is always just a little bit further away. No matter how much we learn, it's an ongoing process. Orlene.

Yes, it's really interesting, because I think that we have to make a distinction about what we mean about anti-racism, because I think we can often think that being non-racist is a stance, and being non-racist, we now know with reflection, it's a very passive role. It's a role of observing inequality and not disrupting. It's almost the safety of saying, I'm non-racist without action, and obviously, if there is no action and we're observing systemic inequality and racism, then we become a passive participant and we are upholding that system. I think when we talk about anti-racism, it's a different role. It's not about observing, it's an active role. It's about challenging inequality where we see it. It's about challenging inequality in groups that look like us. In spaces, not being fearful of having those open discussions, and seeking to disrupt inequality, looking for change, and I think many of us, it's a difficult path to move from, the non-racist passive role to the anti-racist active role.

Yes, I would agree with that. Anti-racism, for me, is a very proactive position to be in. It is one of action, it is one of looking for opportunities for action. I think as leaders, that's very much an important part of our role in whatever organisation, whatever size of the organisation, that we are constantly exploring and examining to find the racism that is almost certainly there, and then try to surface it, deal with it, manage it as best we can.

Going back to what you said right at the beginning, Orlene, when you talked about being racially literate, could you expand on that a little bit more?

Yes, I can, definitely. To be racially literate is about ensuring that you have a solid and secure understanding of race and racism in the UK. It's about understanding how it is infused and enthused throughout our society through the fabric of all that we do, and it is only from that learning point and from that stance that we can begin to create the actions to challenge it. If we are not racially literate, what we then do is, we carry out actions that are not going to unpick and are not going to challenge that systemic inequality that exists throughout our system. So actually, for me, being racially literate is having the language, having the knowledge to be able to then move forwards with actions that will create change. Not actions that can appear tokenistic and have no impact, but actions that will create real change.

Do you see racial literacy as being the starting point or the foundation from which you can...

I definitely think it's a foundation. I definitely think our work is limited if everyone within an organisation doesn't have a secure understanding of race and racism.

I was going to go back to the Praxis conference when these conversations began happening with our president, David Weaver, and the fantastic event you put on in May this year where we were beginning to have these conversations. I was struck very much by some of the language used on the day, which was new to me, talking about global majority, and I wonder if you could expand on that a little bit more for our listeners, because that was a new term for me as part of my journey, I guess, and one that really struck home.

Yes, and it was powerful for a number of reasons, and I think for me, who lives as a black woman in the UK, there was finally a space where my existence was articulated in a way that was meaningful and reflected my experiences, and I'd never had that in the workplace. I think to be in a space where Rosemary Campbell-Stephens tells you you are not a minoritised community, you're not an ethnic anything; you are actually part of the global majority. To be told that, I felt really empowered by that, and that was the first time that I'd felt like that in my 45 years of existence, that actually I was part of a global community, and we make up 85 per cent of the world. Now, what that does for me is, it ensures that I am seen and valued as part of a whole group, and that we aren't a small group, we aren't a tiny group, we aren't an ethnic, and I'm talking about language that in the past has been used as probably a bit of a deficit model. I felt empowered, and I felt like I was part of a whole, and that I was seen and valued, and that global majority umbrella really encompasses a plethora of cultures and understandings and beliefs and faiths, non-faiths, but actually, it's an optimistic term that makes me feel hopeful.

I read an article today that was talking about BAME communities, and it just really, again, struck home!

I mean, the BAME acronym, it is very challenging for a number of reasons, but I think the idea of trying to conflate so many cultures and traditions into an acronym really undermines all that difference, all that cultural heritage, all that learning and understanding. Even though 'global majority' is a term, it changes the stance of that term; it becomes a positive term. So for me, BAME has always been levelled as a reason why you are not excelling, not progressing, not making the strides that you should. 'Global majority' as a term feels very different to me.

Michael, anything to add there around language?

I think there's a couple of things go through my mind: one is about the paradigm shift that's necessary in order for things to take that leap forward. I think part of the problem that we've all experienced is that trying to make change within an existing structure which has in-built discrimination, as inevitably it will have, means that there is a limit to what you can do. There's something about the paradigm shift, and part of that paradigm shift comes with a change in mindset, and that global majority is a massive change in mindset for us all, because we see our world as being our family and our community. Actually, when you start looking at the world as our world, it feels very, very different. I think that's a really useful step towards that change in mindset, because you were talking about racial literacy, and I was wondering how we can bring that about for all of us, bearing in mind we're all on different places within the spectrum, we have different lived experiences, we have different reference points. I think all too often, and this is something that comes up a lot through the feedback from students, is that certain individuals on a course are almost targeted as being the educators for those who aren't from that ethnic group, and that is a huge pressure. It's unreasonable to expect, and it also means that that person has stepped out from the class and is now in front of the class, which is not where they ought to be and where they want to be. So there's something for me about how do we raise that level of racial literacy if that is the bedrock?

That's really interesting, because I've always been the person that's been given the responsibility of educating others on racism, and actually, I find that quite traumatic because, actually, what you're asking me to do is be retraumatised repeatedly as I explain what it means, what it feels like, what it looks like. Especially if that's been put upon me without previous discussion, which I've often been put in those situations, which is why I mentioned with allyship. An ally is somebody who talks to people of their own ethnicity, so I don't need to be the one to educate everybody else about race and racism; everyone has to have responsibility to do that for themselves and within their own groups, within their own families, within their own teams. It is traumatising for me, but also, it's not my role. I'm not here to teach on racism, and partly because I don't need educating on racism; I live it and experience it. I don't need any work on understanding what that looks and feels like, but I think there has to be some personal responsibility. However, I do think that we are in a time now where there should be some organisational responsibility that should be embedded within our systems and structures, that there is an expectation that people educate themselves on race and racism. I think there are many things that we can think about doing going forward that mean that staff come to our organisation knowing that that's part of our expectation.

So to be an anti-racist organisation all round, not just tokenistically?

Absolutely.

I suppose what I take from that is that being proactively anti-racist is part of that racial literacy. It raises the racial literacy within the organisation, and each time you challenge it, it maybe takes it up another notch.

Absolutely. It's all about those discussions, isn't it? You have to have an environment within which everybody has a certain amount of basic knowledge. We have to make sure that our staff have the language to be able to have those conversations, have access to stories, podcasts, books, that are going to allow us to be able to start having those conversations. Without that, it's very difficult to have those open and honest conversations, and it's a much harder space to begin from.

I think it's about valuing that time and space, and operating through a lens of curiosity as well, and your own journey is such an important part of that. There's the training that you can have within an organisation, but at the same time there is that additional reading that people need to do, that we need to do, and to sit in our discomfort. I'm really interested in that term, as somebody who did come from a counselling background originally. What does that really mean, sitting in our discomfort? Shall I go over to you, Michael?

One of the things that always makes me smile is, as counsellors and psychotherapists, we are used to having very difficult conversations, but as organisations we shy away from having difficult conversations, and for me, I don't see why it should be any different. If you can have a difficult conversation, then you can have that anywhere, and so I suppose what goes through my mind is, what is different about being part of an organisation from sitting in a room with someone having a difficult conversation? I suppose it is something about context, there's something about visibility, maybe, being seen to be something like that, which can be quite threatening. There's something about lack of safety, because as therapists, we are responsible for the safety in the room. Within an organisation, even as a leader within an organisation, how much can you guarantee the safety of the individuals to have those conversations, and they can be very risky, both personally and professionally, so I think there's an interesting tension between those for me.

I struggle with the term 'discomfort', and I'm going to say that the reason that I struggle with it is because, actually, the lived experience of black and global majority people in the UK can be harrowing. So to sit in discomfort is quite small an ask in comparison to the harrowing lives that many in our community are facing. I understand the struggle in terms of, as you said before, Michael, it's a paradigm shift, we're thinking in new ways. We're being forced to confront and unmask, but often I find, as a result of others' discomfort in these conversations, what I often get is, I can feel traumatised by them because I feel their discomfort. I'm then in a space of, well, nothing's going to change, and we're responding to discomfort rather than focussing on the racism that exists in society. I think I can often feel there's an element of gaslighting, so when people feel discomfort, they will often say, 'It's not racism,' or, 'You've got it wrong,' or negate my experience. So for me, it's about recognising that discomfort is a small price to pay in comparison to others, but it's work that we need to do. I think we shy away from facing the harrowing experiences that many in our society face because it's too uncomfortable. It rocks our discomfort, but I think we're in the space where we need to have those conversations, and we need to be aware of what may be discomfort for you is actually trauma for me.

Yes, and I think that was the main emphasis of the conference that we referred back to. It was really looking at and diving deep into racial trauma, and acknowledging that as real. So yes, white people, we can sit in a little bit of discomfort, but if we can move on and learn and change things within organisations and work with - then it's in the right direction.

What was going through my mind is that word 'discomfort'. I don't think I used that word. I think I used the word 'difficult', as in difficult for me [chuckles], not necessarily difficult for anybody else. When we talk about something like discomfort, or it's a bit awkward or whatever, it almost feels like we have a choice to feel comfortable or to not feel comfortable. Whereas, as you're saying, Orlene, your experience, you don't have a choice, you are in that situation 24/7, and to feel discomfort probably would be quite good some of the time, compared with how it feels at other times. There's something for me about this paradigm shift being an imperative. So anti-racism is not like a good idea or something like that, it's an imperative for organisations. I think that's where we would like this to be going so that 'comfortable', 'uncomfortable', those words are irrelevant because those conversations have to take place, and those institutions have to go through regular cycles of scrutiny. Whenever anybody has a question around any particular process, or attitude, or document, or comment on a website that starts to move in a direction that they don't feel is appropriate, then that's challenge, challenge, challenge. We need to get into a place where challenge becomes an everyday event, and we recognise that that is our responsibility to hear those challenges, accept those challenges and to move beyond them, and that this is going to continue, that this isn't something that just gets fixed because, again, that's the paradigm shift. There is no place where it was great that we're trying to get back to. I was struck when you talked about hope for the future. I did want to ask you, what is that future that you are hoping for? I don't want to put you on the spot there, but...

That's okay. That's a difficult question because, actually, as a black woman, I don't necessarily always expect hope. I don't expect change and I think, again, we could touch on racial trauma again there, but actually there are so many discussions, actions, things in our history where people have tried to challenge and disrupt racism, and they haven't worked. There's almost that bit in me that's just like, is this just another attempt that's not going to materialise? Am I bearing my trauma to no end? Is it going to make any difference, or is it just going to be another ongoing continuing conversation? So in many ways, for myself, I can speak for myself, and that might be the experiences of others, but black is not a monolith. I can't speak for everybody, but in my experience, hope is not a safe space to be, because I have to protect myself from the trauma of continually having these conversations, continually seeing actions and strategies and nothing changing. For me, the question is, how do we unmask in a way that means that this is systemic change that will have impact and will allow for open hope of better?

I was just thinking about the unmasking. It's all too easy to take off the mask and find there's another one underneath, and how many masks are there, and how many masks do you have to unmask before you actually get to some kind of truth? I can see the link between hope and disappointment. Why go through that cycle again and again and again? That is a lot to ask of anybody.

So what approaches can we take to dismantle racism? What's the answer? Do we have this? This is what, perhaps, the whole series of podcasts is about and we'll scratch the surface on... We might not make any huge change. The hope is that we do get people to have conversations, but there's that whole thing about, you know, we're talking about unmasking racism, we're saying it's traumatic for those that continue to experience this, so where's our action for change?

That's a really good question, and it's quite hard to quantify, because I don't think we've actually ever achieved it. You're asking me about something that we haven't seen in our lifetimes, or previous to that, but for me, if I'm talking on a personal level, I want to see action. I don't want to see any more talking shops, because that's traumatic to be in these talking shops and continually going over the racism experience, the trauma experience. As a black woman, it's only recently that I've been able to confront the trauma that I've experienced as a result of racism. For many, many years I haven't confronted it, because to confront it, where do you go with that? This is causing me harm, what do I do with that? Where do I go, and how do I get support from, not only my community, but those that are in leadership? Having a race report released recently that says that there is no systemic racism in the UK, another way of negating my experience. So for me, personally, it's about seeing action, but I think structurally, it's about action also. It's about, what are the actions that we can take? Not the tokenistic ones, the ones that are going to impact change, articulating what those actions are, having a plan to achieve those actions, and having authentic and deep conversations to realise where we are on that journey. I think the horrific case of Child Q has allowed us to really reflect on what we think we are as a society, where we are, and recognise that we're nowhere near where we need to be. So I want honest conversations that realise that there is a huge amount of work to do. It's frightening to think about how much work there is to do if we're going to realise the breaking of those systemic inequalities, the destruction of those pillars within our society. I want to see changes for children. I want to see changes for my children. I want to see changes for me. I want to know that my intersectionality as a black female who was of working class background, I have equal access. I can go and be without fear of microaggressions, without fear of being surveilled, without fear of being stopped and searched by the police, and yes, as a female, I do experience that. It's a traumatic journey, and I think to work in an organisation that recognises that trauma, and doesn't do things for the sake of the public profile, but does things because it truly wants to challenge those traumatic experiences. It's traumatic for everyone in the room for different reasons, but I do think that to work within an organisation that sees the pain that's experienced by their staff members, has systems and structures to support anti-racism, for me, it's policy and practice. Lots of people get het up on, you know, we've had policies before and it doesn't make any change, but for me, we have to articulate what we hope to see.

Michael?

I totally get that the bridge from language to action is always a tricky one. Conversations, no matter how difficult or uncomfortable they may be, are a lot easier than actually doing anything about it, and yes, the challenge will always be to find out what that bridge is, and then to boldly move across it and take as many people with you as you can. One of the things that's really important for me is the will, an organisation, the individuals within the organisation having a genuine will to change, to start to cross that bridge. I think there's always a risk with policy documents, reports, audits, I mean, the internet is absolutely full of evidence that things are not right, and yet, how often do they actually turn into actions. I think part of that is the will, the lack of will, because it doesn't benefit the people in power, necessarily, to make those changes, and so why would they make those changes? Well, I think BACP as an organisation needs to find that will. I think it is there, but I don't think it's been fully mobilised yet, and I think our engagement with this podcast is a key part of mobilising that. So I think with a genuine will to make a change, all the other things, they start to melt away, in a way. The obstacles are not the uncomfortable, difficult - whatever the words are don't matter as much if you've got the will to keep pushing through that, because they get easier conversations to have. They become less fearful. I think fear is more than discomfort, isn't it? I think for me, it certainly is fear. Those conversations become less fearful, and once the fear leaves the room, other things can step in and take its place, and for me, I suppose that is one of the most important steps, is to overcome that fear, because that fear is a barrier to action for me.

Thanks, Michael, and thanks Orlene, and I think it's about having the will and the hope and the energy and the drive. Thank you both for being such fantastic guests today.

This has been the anti-racist Praxis podcast. Guest biographies, links and resources can be found in the show notes. BACP and Hackney Council would like to thank all of our guests for making the time to be involved and speaking so openly and honestly about their experiences, and to all of you for listening. We hope these podcasts spark conversations in your day-to-day.