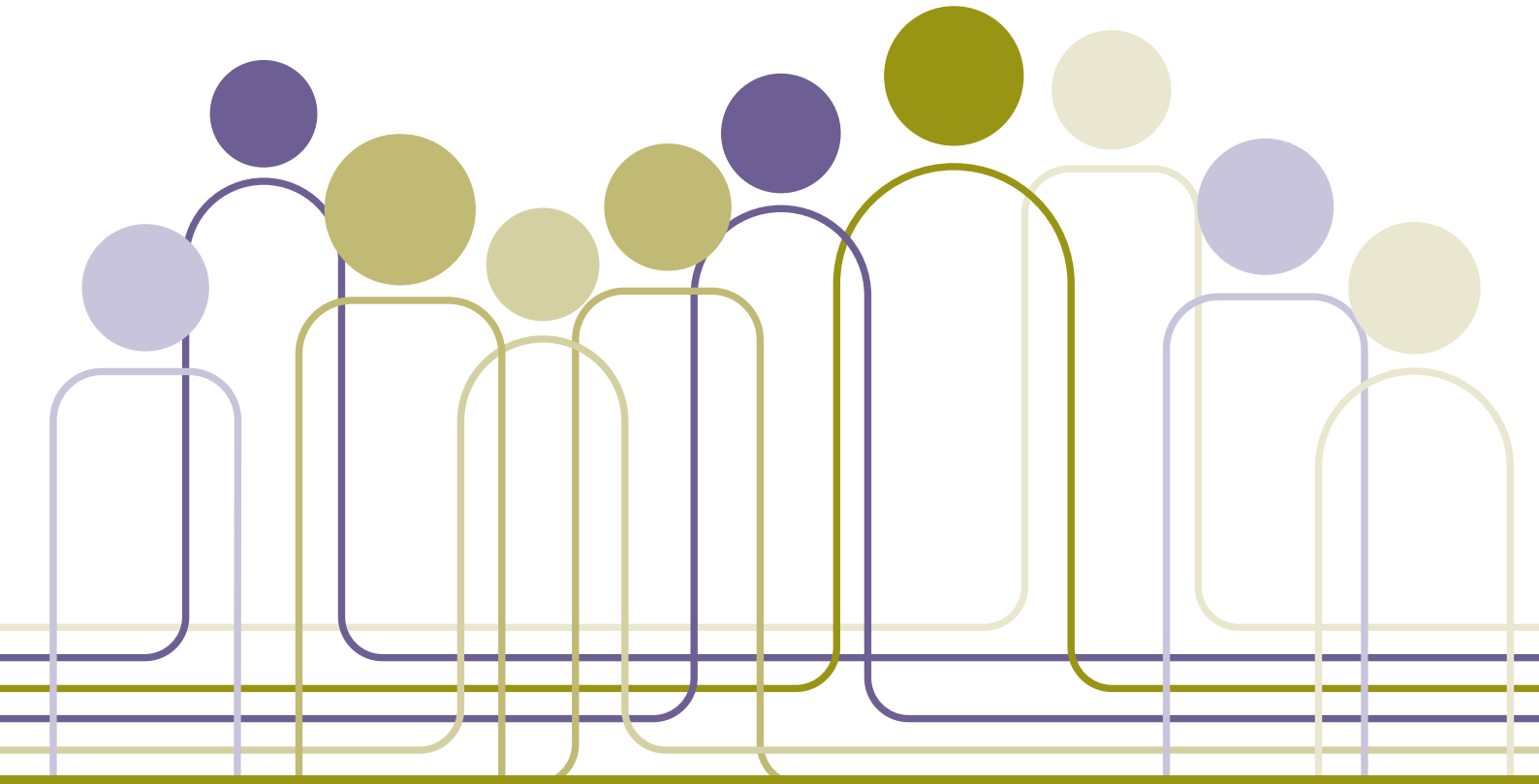
bacp counselling changes lives

005

Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging within the counselling professions



Fact sheet

Ethics in Practice

Ethics In Practice 005
Fact Sheet

Updated March 2026

Ethics in Practice 005 Fact Sheet: *Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging within the counselling professions* is published by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, BACP House, 15 St John's Business Park, Lutterworth, LE17 4HB.

T 01455 883300 **E** bacp@bacp.co.uk **www.bacp.co.uk**

BACP is the largest professional organisation for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK, is a company limited by guarantee 2175320 in England and Wales, and a registered charity, 298361.

Copyright © 2017–2026 British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

BACP and the BACP logo are registered trademarks of BACP.

Permission is granted to reproduce for personal and educational use only. Commercial copying, hiring and lending are prohibited.

Design by Steers McGillan Eves.

Contents

Using Fact Sheets 5

1 Introduction 6

2 What is diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging? 6

3 Why DEIB matters in counselling 7

3.1 Social and systemic context 7

3.2 Intersectionality and professional practice 7

4 Legal framework 8

5 Core responsibilities and principles of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging 8

6 What this means in practice for counselling training providers, organisations, and practitioners 9

7 Application to practice 10

7.1 Case study 1 and application to practice 10

How does it apply to my counselling practice? 11

What are my views on Marcia's experience? 11

Questions for reflection 12

Further questions for reflection 12

7.2 Case study 2 and application to practice **13**

How does it apply to my counselling practice? **14**

What are my views on Richie's experience? **14**

Questions for reflection **15**

Further questions for reflection **15**

Conclusion **16**

About the author **16**

References and further reading **17**

Using Fact Sheets

The membership agreement with BACP establishes a contractual commitment by members to abide by the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*, which includes a responsibility for members to keep the skills and knowledge relevant to their work up to date.

The BACP Ethics in Practice (EiP) resources are solely intended to support good practice by offering general information on specific topics based on legal principles and policy applicable at the time of writing. They are intended for information purposes only and are not a substitute for professional advice. BACP and the author accept no responsibility for and accept no liability as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting on the basis of the EiP resources.

Practice issues and dilemmas are often complex, and may vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the therapeutic interventions provided. We therefore strongly recommend consulting your supervisor, and also, wherever necessary, a suitably qualified practitioner or lawyer. Some professional insurers will provide legal advice as part of their service.

BACP and the author make no representation or warranty as to the completeness or accuracy of the information contained in the EiP resources.

References in this resource were up to date at the time of writing but there may be changes to the law, government departments, government policies and guidance, websites and web addresses.

Organisations and agencies may also change their practice or policies, so please be alert for any changes that may affect your therapy practice.

In this resource, the terms 'practitioner' and 'counselling related services' are used generically in a wider sense, to include the practice of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and pastoral care. The terms 'therapist' or 'counsellor' are used to refer to those trained specifically as psychotherapists and counsellors.

1 Introduction

This resource is intended for practitioners in the counselling professions to develop and maintain inclusive practice in line with BACP *Ethical Framework* guidance on diversity, equality and inclusion.

While some practitioners may encounter equity, diversity and inclusion requirements within organisational policies or training settings, this guidance is relevant to all counselling professionals and trainees, encouraging reflection on values, biases, and practice in order to work safely, ethically, and in a culturally responsive way with clients and colleagues.

2 What is diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging?

Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) mean recognising and valuing individual differences, promoting fair treatment and equal opportunity, and creating inclusive environments where individuals feel seen, respected and able to fully participate. Diversity refers to the presence of people from different backgrounds, identities, and perspectives. Equity focuses on ensuring people have fair access to opportunities and are not disadvantaged or treated unfairly because of personal characteristics or social factors. Inclusion goes beyond representation by considering whether people genuinely feel heard, and able to contribute within a space or environment.

Anti-oppressive practice is a way of being in relationship with others. It asks us to pay attention to who has power, and how it's used; to listen deeply to everyone, no matter who they are; to live with respect and integrity in the spaces we share with others. Anti-oppressive practice is a conscious and intentional approach to these relationships. Practising anti-oppressively means our inner work, our relationships, and our systems become more honest, equal, and humane.

3 Why DEIB matters in counselling

The very essence of counselling and psychotherapy practice means that diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging are essential, as working with vulnerable clients, systemic inequalities, and power dynamics require a strong commitment to trust, doing good (beneficence), and avoiding harm (non-maleficence). Anything less would risk compromising trust, psychological safety, and ethical practice.

3.1 Social and systemic context

- **Social context**: Many clients enter therapy with pre-existing experiences of marginalisation, exclusion, or inequality.
- **The wider system**: It allows practitioners to consider how social, cultural, economic, and political factors contribute to a client's struggles.
- **Systemic barriers**: These intersecting factors shape how a person accesses and experiences services, and how they are perceived by professionals.
- **Power imbalances**: Without reflective awareness, practitioners may unintentionally reinforce societal power dynamics within the therapeutic relationship, especially when said differences are not acknowledged or explored.
- **Psychological safety and therapeutic alliance**: Practitioners need to be culturally responsive to create a safe and respectful space where clients feel understood and valued.

3.2 Intersectionality and professional practice

- **Overlapping identities**: Clients will often have intersecting aspects of identity (such as race, gender, age, disability, and social class) that can overlap and shape their experiences of advantage or disadvantage. It is essential for good practice that practitioners recognise and understand this in their work.
- **Structural Awareness**: Having awareness of the underlying frameworks and rules that are a part of our lives encourages counsellors, trainers, and organisations to consider these wider social and structural factors that affect mental health. This leads to practice that is inclusive, fair, and responsive to people's real-life experiences.

4 Legal framework

The Equality Act 2010 is a UK law that protects individuals from discrimination, harassment, and victimisation in both employment and wider society. It promotes fairness and equal treatment by protecting people on the basis of nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

The core elements of the Equality Act 2010 are:

- **Purpose**: Merges multiple anti-discrimination laws into a single framework to provide clear, consistent legal protections.
- **Scope**: Applies broadly across employment, education, healthcare, housing, and public services.
- **Organisational duties**: Require fair treatment and 'reasonable adjustments', with a specific legal emphasis on supporting people with disabilities.
- **Recognised violations**: Prohibits direct discrimination, indirect discrimination (i.e. neutral policies that create systemic disadvantages), harassment, and victimisation.
- **Institutional impact**: Encourages organisations along with educational, and counselling sectors to eliminate bias, remove social barriers, and maintain inclusive environments.

5 Core responsibilities and principles of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging

The BACP diversity equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) principles and responsibilities are in essence part of, and embedded in the *Ethical Framework*. These include: fairness, respect for individual difference, inclusion, non-discrimination, anti-oppression, and awareness of bias and power dynamics. In practice, this may involve areas such as inclusive leadership, communication and accessibility, representation, cultural competence, and reflective anti-discriminatory practice.

The Framework states that practitioners must respect the dignity and worth of every person, value difference, and make sure their work is free from unfair discrimination. It expects counsellors to work in culturally sensitive ways that are also mindful of power differences. Practitioners are also expected to reflect on their own values, beliefs, and biases, and take responsibility for how these may influence their practice.

The Framework also encourages ongoing self-reflection and professional development to help practitioners recognise unconscious bias and respond appropriately to the diverse experiences of clients and colleagues. This is of the utmost importance in counselling and psychotherapy, where clients often already feel vulnerable, or uncertain about whether their experiences will be heard and understood without judgment.

It also highlights the importance of challenging discriminatory or unfair behaviour in therapy, training, or organisations. Overall, equality, diversity, and inclusion are not optional extras, but core responsibilities for safe and effective practice.

6 What this means in practice for counselling training providers, organisations, and practitioners

- **Inclusive leadership**: Making sure everyone has a voice and is included in decision-making to work collaboratively (EF 2026)

For example, involving marginalised voices in creating content, and not simply into discussion.

- **Reflective and anti-discriminatory practice**: Regularly reflecting on assumptions, bias, and power differences in order to promote fair and inclusive practice keeping in mind the Ethical Principles.

For example, reviewing feedback, teaching approaches, or client interactions to consider whether unconscious bias may be influencing decisions, or interpretations of behaviour.

- **Communication and accessibility**: Sharing information in a clear and easily accessible manner.

For example, creating information in plain, jargon-free language, and in different formats usable for everyone.

- **Representation**: Making sure different groups of people are included and visible in roles and materials.

For example, a practitioner's website includes images and language that reflects a diverse range of clients.

- **Cultural responsiveness**: Continuous professional development to remain up to date with the changing cultural, social, and professional landscape.

For example, regularly adapting training material to reflect current perspectives on identity, and culture.

7 Application to practice

The following section is aimed at translating the theory covered in this resource into practice with a short case study. It also gives you the opportunity to think about your own therapeutic practice by offering questions for you to reflect on.

7.1 Case study 1 and application to practice

Marcia is a 58-year-old Black British woman in her first year of a counselling training course. She joined the profession after a career in mental health nursing, and is one of the oldest students in the group. Out of about 20 students, only one is male, and only three identify as ethnic minorities.

Over time, Marcia begins to feel slightly disconnected from the group, although she is unable to pinpoint exactly why. During skills practice, her feedback is described as 'direct', or 'blunt', whereas the other classmates' ideas are often described as 'reflective' or 'thought-provoking'. Marcia notices this pattern but wonders if she may be overanalysing it.

She notices that students occasionally turn to her during group discussions about race, culture, or socioeconomic inequality. Although these moments are respectful and friendly, she notices that she is often expected to speak from a 'cultural perspective', rather than being seen as an individual in her own right.

At times, Marcia also notices subtle differences in informal interactions. Tutors and younger students often chat socially before class or continue conversations afterwards, but she sometimes experiences these spaces as difficult to enter. She cannot tell whether this is related to age, race, personality, or simply pre-existing friendship groups.

There is a particular incident that stays with her. After a feedback session, a tutor comments that Marcia's approach with clients could sometimes feel 'a little authoritative'.

However, another student later privately tells her that they were surprised by the feedback, because they experience her as warm and grounding in triad work. Marcia reflects on this, and wonders whether her communication style is genuinely different, or whether it may be unconscious bias influencing how she is perceived in class.

By the end of the term, Marcia becomes increasingly guarded in class. She begins contributing less, overthinking her observations, and spending more time monitoring how she is viewed. At the same time she is reluctant to bring her concerns forward because she does not want to be viewed as 'aggressive', overly sensitive, or a troublemaker. She is also aware that by themselves, the interactions don't really justify a complaint.

The course team remain largely unaware that Marcia is experiencing the learning environment differently from some of her peers.

How does it apply to my counselling practice?

From a BACP perspective, Marcia's experience shows that diversity, equity, and inclusion are not just about avoiding obvious discrimination. Small and repeated experiences of feeling different, misunderstood, or excluded can still have a significant impact on someone's confidence and sense of belonging. This case also highlights the importance of practitioners reflecting on how they interpret the lived experiences of marginalised clients, as well as understanding how wider social and systemic factors may affect how those clients are treated in the world around them.

What are my views on Marcia's experience?

- Do I create a safe space for marginalised people?
- How might my own assumptions influence the way I perceive or respond to clients, students, or colleagues?
- How do I reflect on potential unconscious bias in my feedback, assessments, or interactions?
- How do I respond when subtle forms of discomfort emerge in group or individual work?
- How do I ensure I am not unintentionally reinforcing feelings of 'otherness' in my practice?

Questions for reflection

- How might power and dynamics shape belonging in the group?
- Could the same behaviour be labelled differently depending on who is speaking?
- What might be stopping Marcia from raising her concerns?
- How do I distinguish personality from systemic influence?
- How might repeated small interactions contribute to Marcia's sense of feeling different within the group?

In what ways could group norms and shared experiences influence how Marcia interprets her place in the group?

Further questions for reflection

- Are there ways to make my practice more inclusive, safe and reflective?
- How confident am I discussing culture, discrimination, or inequality when relevant?
- Am I adapting my practice to meet the diverse needs and experiences of others?
- How do I ensure I am creating space for reflection on identity, difference, and experience without making assumptions or putting people on the spot?
- How do I continue developing my confidence in addressing difficult or sensitive themes in a way that feels respectful, timely, and appropriate within my role?

7.2 Case study 2 and application to practice

Richie is a 30-year-old student on a foundation counselling course. After leaving school, Richie went straight into work and spent a number of years working in a care home before starting university. He generally enjoys the course, and experiences the group as warm and supportive. Most of the class are women in their late 30s and 40s, and conversations before class or during breaks often revolve around children, family life and travelling.

As the only man in the group, Richie is aware that he stands out a bit within the class. He is often quieter in group conversations and usually listens while discussions turn towards parenting or marriage. Although nobody leaves him out, he sometimes notices that many of the shared experiences within the group are different from his own.

Richie is gay, although he has never formally disclosed this within the group.

Equally, he has not actively hidden it. He rarely speaks about his personal life and generally prefers to keep boundaries between his studies and private relationships, as he has done in his work life. Over time, however, he has become increasingly aware of how conversations within the group sometimes drift towards assumptions about sexuality. Some classmates have jokingly described him as 'one of the girls' or commented that he is 'more emotionally aware than most men'. Others have casually asked whether he has a girlfriend, while a few comments have implied uncertainty about his sexuality before quickly being laughed off.

During one classroom discussion about relationships, another student jokingly asked Richie whether he was 'going to tell everyone eventually', leading to awkward laughter from several people in the group. Richie responded by smiling and moving the conversation on, although afterwards he felt uncomfortable that his private life had become an object of curiosity within the class. What made him most uncomfortable was not the assumption itself, but that people felt entitled to speculate openly about his identity.

The tutor generally appears attentive to group dynamics and often encourages Richie to contribute during discussions, as he is often quiet due to not feeling a commonality between him and the other students. He noticed that many of their world views seemed slightly more conservative than his own, which also made him more aware of differences in background and social class. While he appreciates his tutor's intentions, he sometimes feels this increases his visibility within the room rather than helping him feel more naturally included.

The experience has led Richie to reflect on how inclusion is not only shaped through overt discrimination, but also through humour, assumptions, curiosity, and everyday interactions. He has become increasingly aware that even supportive environments can unintentionally reinforce a sense of difference when certain identities are treated as unusual, discussable, or open to interpretation by others.

How does it apply to my counselling practice?

From a BACP perspective, Richie's experience highlights how diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging extend beyond overt discrimination in practice contexts. Small, repeated experiences of humour, assumptions about sexuality, and subtle differences in how Richie is treated can gradually influence his sense of belonging within the group.

This case also highlights the importance of practitioners reflecting on how group dynamics and assumptions about identity can shape inclusion and visibility, as well as how everyday language and social norms may affect a person's sense of safety and comfort in counselling or training environments.

What are my views on Richie's experience?

- In what ways could humour and 'banter' around sexuality be experienced differently by Richie compared to others?
- How does this case study make me reflect on intersectionality in group learning settings?
- How might assumptions linked to Richie's education and earlier working life in care homes influence how he is perceived by others in the group?
- How do I differentiate between Richie's natural personality (being private or reserved) and the influence of group dynamics?
- How might subtle group interactions shape Richie's sense of belonging without any overt exclusion taking place?
- How do I understand what it's like for someone who doesn't share the same group experiences, even within a generally supportive environment?

Questions for reflection

- Do I create a space where differences in gender, sexuality, age, and social class are acknowledged without becoming over focused or turned into assumptions?
- How might my own assumptions about background, education, or life experience influence the way I perceive or respond to clients or students?
- Do I reflect on potential unconscious bias when interpreting participation or silence?
- How might I make sure humour, group interactions, and informal conversations don't unintentionally make people feel different or left out in a group?
- How do I recognise when inclusion needs active support, and when it is better to step back to avoid making someone feel singled out?

Further questions for reflection

- Are there ways to make my practice more inclusive, safe and reflective?
- How confident am I discussing culture, discrimination, or inequality when relevant?
- Am I adapting my practice to meet the diverse needs and experiences of others?
- How confident am I in naming and exploring issues such as culture, discrimination, sexuality, and social class when they arise in practice?
- Do I notice and respond to subtle forms of difference in everyday practice, rather than only when they are explicit?

Conclusion

Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging all play an important role in creating safe and fair counselling environments. Diversity ensures different people are represented, equity focuses on fair access to opportunities, inclusion ensures people feel heard and valued. How we treat people affects whether they feel a sense of belonging to a group. Equity is important because it recognises that some people may need different levels of support to overcome systemic barriers and achieve fair outcomes.

In practice, this means paying attention not only to clear or overt differences, but also to subtle and everyday ones, including culture, gender, sexuality, age, and social class, and how these shape a person's experience in groups and relationships. It also involves ongoing self-reflection, particularly around assumptions, language, and unconscious bias, and how these can influence professional judgment. Creating inclusive spaces is not just about intention, but about awareness, responsiveness, and adapting practice in real time to the people in front of you. Overall, DEIB provides a foundation for ethical, relational, and reflective counselling practice.

This also requires an ongoing commitment to professional development, supervision, and reflective practice to ensure that inclusive values are consistently translated into everyday work with clients, trainees, and colleagues.

About the author

Temi Towry Coker is a BACP Senior Accredited Psychotherapist and Supervisor. She balances a private practice with teaching on MSc Mental Health programmes. Her work is defined by a commitment to anti-oppressive practice, deep reflexivity, and rigorous professional standards.

References and further reading

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2026) *Ethical framework for the counselling professions*. Lutterworth: BACP. Available at: www.bacp.co.uk/media/23628/ethical-framework-for-the-counselling-professions-2025.pdf (Accessed: 15 May 2026).

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2023) BACP *equality, diversity and inclusion strategy*. Lutterworth: BACP. Available at: www.bacp.co.uk/media/17309/bacp-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-feb-2023.pdf (Accessed: 15 May 2026).

Collins, P.H. and Bilge, S. (2020) *Intersectionality*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1989) '*Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex*', University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), pp. 139–167.

Equality Act 2010 (2010) c.15. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents (Accessed: 15 May 2026).

NHS England (2023) *NHS equality, diversity and inclusion improvement plan*. Leeds: NHS England. Available at: www.england.nhs.uk (Accessed: 15 May 2026).

Ratts, M.J., Singh, A.A., Nassar-McMillan, S., Butler, S.K. and McCullough, J.R. (2016) '*Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies*', Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 44(1), pp. 28–48.

Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C.M. and Torino, G.C. (2007) '*Racial microaggressions in everyday life*', American Psychologist, 62(4), pp. 271–286.

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2014) *Equality Act 2010 technical guidance on the Public Sector Equality Duty: England*. London: EHRC. Available at: www.equalityhumanrights.com (Accessed: 15 May 2026).

British Psychological Society (2019) *Equality, diversity and inclusion framework*. Leicester: BPS.