**Episode 3: Racial trauma transcript**

M: 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 from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, known as BACP, and Hackney Borough Council, and it follows on from the Anti-Racist Praxis Conference hosted by Hackney Council's children and family service in May 2022. The 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 [unclear word 0:01:00.9] 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 and made 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.

Today we're discussing racial trauma and race-based traumatic stress, and how this impacts individuals and communities. I'm Deborah Barnett, the anti-racist strategic lead for Hackney Council, children and families services. I define myself as a black woman of Afro-Caribbean heritage, and joining me to discuss today's podcast is Orlene Badu and Monica Imbert from Hackney Council, and also Jo Holmes from BACP. Firstly, welcome everyone, and thank you for joining us today. For everyone listening at home, can you just tell us a bit about what you do, and a little bit about yourself. I'd like to start with Monica first of all.

Hello, and thank you for the invite. Not entirely sure what to expect today, but hey, I'm Monica Imbert. I am currently the head of education operations. I sit within the children and education directorate. I will be stepping into the role of director of, let's see if I remember, outcomes, business intelligence, and strategy, in the next month or so. So, we're looking at all of the transformation activity across the children and education directorate. I identify as a black Caribbean female of Jamaican and St Lucian heritage. That's a little bit about me.

Wonderful, thanks for that introduction there, Monica. If I can hand over to Orlene.

Yes, thank you, Deborah, my name is Orlene Badu. I offer extensive training for Hackney Council, to schools and settings in the local authority, on racial literacy, challenging bias in schools, adultification, and much more, and was also responsible for diversifying the curriculum in Hackney Council. I would identify as a black African Caribbean woman, and I'm really thankful to be here today. I identify as she/her.

Lovely, thank you, and Jo, if we can hear from you?

Hi, I'm Jo Holmes, and I'm the children, young people and families lead. I identify as white British from Italian heritage, so very European, and my pronouns are she/her. I'm the children, young people and families lead at BACP, and what that means is I campaign and lobby and try my very best to get commissioned services across the UK for free access to counselling and psychotherapy for children and young people.

So, we're here to talk about or have a conversation around the issue of racial trauma, or some people use the terminology race-based traumatic stress. It's not an easy topic to talk about, and I'm thinking personally as a black woman. It's not an easy topic to talk about, but one I think that we really do need to bring to the forefront of our conversation, especially if we're going to be talking about anti-racism. I'd really love to start from a place of, why is understanding about racial trauma important for both our personal and professional lives, but also I'm recognising that it is quite difficult to bring our truth, often enough in these spaces, but I think it's important that we go there. Why is this understanding so key. I'm happy just to put it out there, and…

I might start, Deborah, if that's okay. So, to talk about the racism experience is a harrowing experience, and it has been for many years. So much so that, I was brought up to not talk about outside of spaces that I felt safe in. To even broach the subject of racial trauma means doing something that I've never ever done and feel quite uncomfortable with doing, because why am I laying it bare, what is going to be the result of laying it bare, and many of us will know that when you talk about the trauma that you experience, you often experience negative consequences as a result. If I was in the workplace and I was saying, I found that quite traumatic, I feel that it was based on my race, I'm used to hearing comments such as, you're not a team player, you've got a chip on your shoulder, being ostracised, not being part of the team, being made to feel that I'm not a team player. I am aware of the fact that to talk about my lived experience in the workplace will very often have negative impact on myself. I learnt that at school as well as a schoolchild.

Societally I know that there are spaces that I have not been able to talk about the trauma experience. I think it's also worthwhile mentioning that at my age of 45, as I've said previously, this is the first time that I've been given the language to talk about that trauma that's been experienced. This is a new space for me, and I do believe that for myself and my family and many people that I know, but I can't talk for everybody, I can only talk to my own experience, but your racial trauma is something that wasn't discussed, that was kept locked away, because to confront it was to mean even more pain. Because where do you go with that trauma? I'm experiencing racial trauma… If I openly confront that with myself, what do I do with that? That's a really harrowing experience to even consider. I think for me on a personal level it's about learning to understand what my racial trauma is and was and continues to be, and being able to articulate that and have the language to explain why things feel wrong, why they are wrong, and my experience.

To do that in a workplace is a very challenging scenario, and I think it's most challenging because again, what backlash will I get for talking about the trauma that I experience where I work? What consequences will I have to experience as a result of doing so? Not everybody wants to hear about my trauma. We're too busy talking about everyone else's discomfort. Not everybody wants to know the trauma that I'm experiencing. Not everybody can deal with it, and if there are no systems and structures to support someone that's experienced that, let's pretend it's not there.

Yes, I would say that everything that Orlene has said absolutely resonates with my experiences, but I wanted to pay particular attention to the point of learning and for the first time having the vocabulary to articulate what it is that I'm experiencing. Because for so long we enter into professional spaces as the only one or two black faces in the room, and when there is obvious microaggressive behaviour within a space you only have to glimpse at the person that looks like you, and it's in that look that you know that they know, they see it, they hear it too. But also to speak to the point of learning, I am not entirely sure that we as black people, or black and global majority people, are always aware, because we aren't given the space or there isn't the time dedicated to supporting us in our experience of our blackness. We aren't always aware that what we are experiencing is trauma, and that because of that we're not aware of the manifestations of our trauma. The reason I say that is because this is very much - I believe myself to be at the start of my journey. So yes, I know that as a black woman my mum had that talk. I always had to be well presented, I should never speak out of turn, I should behave myself when in public spaces.

I wasn't necessarily aware that my mother and family members were advising me in that way because of my blackness. Now as a woman embarking on the first stages of my journey in learning about who I am and the implications of who I am, I am recognising some of the decisions that I made in my life that are manifestations of my trauma. To give you a couple of examples of that, I have a daughter, and for a long time I avoided engaging in any dialogue that could possibly encourage people to think that I like them if they were darker skinned. I avoided engaging with darker males in my younger days, because what I didn't want to do was get into a relationship and potentially bring children into the world that were of a darker hue, because what I didn't want, what I saw was the disproportionality, I saw the negative behaviour aimed towards people with darker skin. Yes, I am a black woman, but I had a level of privilege because I wasn't considered a dark-skinned black woman.

I was aware, not openly aware, but I was I suppose subconsciously aware that I didn't want any child that I brought in this world to be disproportionately impacted upon because they had darker skin. That is a realisation I'm coming to, having been a mother for the last 22 years, and being in my 40s. That is a manifestation of my trauma, that I avoided contact with people that were darker skinned, I'm saying it again so everybody is clear, because I didn't want any children that I brought into the world to be disproportionately impacted upon and negatively treated because they had darker skin. That's massive. There are many people that are not even starting on their journey, they don't recognise that the way in which they behave is a direct result of the trauma that they are experiencing because of their blackness.

That's really interesting, Monica, because it's being aware of the fact that people will try and convince you that it's not racial trauma as well. When you're in circumstances where you say, I've experienced this racist incident, this is how I felt, and then you get the gaslight, no, that's not racist, no, we've all discussed it and it's definitely not racism. Then what that does is it makes you second-guess yourself. Am I right? Was this what I think it was? Is this right that I feel this way? Again, where do you go with that feeling? It's having those honest conversations that allow everybody to have that realisation that we're having now in a safe enough space that you don't have to continually prove that it was an issue, but what you do have is the space to think about the manifestations of that trauma. Therefore by doing that, that's the only way we can find the solutions.

The importance of those spaces, it's an imperative, because like you said, we've never been given the permission to have those conversations. There are many people that will be listening here today that may well have found the strength to step forward and say this is what I'm experiencing, only to be asked for the evidence.

Is work safe enough to talk about your racial trauma?

You only have to experience that once to know it's not safe, therefore I won't mention it again.

I'm trying to find the words to bring together what you've described, Orlene, and what you've described, Monica, and you're speaking about this as adults, you're speaking about this as grown women, and that just brings me back to the children, the children that we serve in our communities, in our roles in Hackney, but also in BACP. I know you're probably going to come at this with a different perspective, Joanne, but you can only do that as a white woman because you wouldn't have the lived experience. I really want to take from you, and I know you believe it to be important, and I know that you believe it to be equally important in terms, not only your personal life, but your professional life and what you do, as you work with I'm sure many black and global majority children in your role within the BACP. Can you just maybe speak to some of what we've discussed, racial trauma?

I think what I'm hearing, and I think will be a massive learning curve for so many white therapists, I'm thinking particularly, I'm not shouting them out, is that when you're working with black and global majority young people they are experiencing racism every day, and that is traumatising, and that is traumatic, and you need to put racism and trauma together, and those two words need to be joined up and understood. We need more literature maybe, yes there'll be research, but we're hearing from lived experience that these two, they marry together, they're very close, and we can't separate them. As therapists, we need to acknowledge that, and we need to work with that. As a white therapist working with a black kid, I need to say, I'm a white therapist, is that going to impact this relationship? Let's talk about that first, let's get that bit out of the way, and acknowledge the difference, and it's about the therapy for that child, and working with that, and I think there's some key messages. As part of any therapist on a journey, it's about, there is CPD opportunities, it is about learning.

We're always learning, but read as much as you can, read, listen, and don't be so defensive, and don't disregard racism and believe that it's sorted, because it's so very not. There's institutional racism all around us, don't pretend that that isn't happening, because in your white comfort it's not affecting your daily life. I just think this is an important message for therapists, for social workers, for anybody working with children and young people.

Yes, that's great. We probably could spend the rest of the year talking about this topic. I think half-an-hour cannot do this any justice at all, it's so deep, it's so painful, and there's much to be said. Again, I'm bringing it back to the children, I'm bringing it back to the families that we serve in our profession, and I think about the children. Next steps. What do we need to be considering here and now?

I think that every child should have access to adults that are well informed, that have a strong racial literacy, and that they don't have to prove the harrowing experiences that they have. I think without that, that relationship's not going to be the relationship that it needs to be to affect change for that young person. If you have to continually prove to someone that you are experiencing trauma, that you're experiencing racism… Lots of young people will say the term, it's not fair, because we haven't as a society given them the language to be able to articulate what's happening for them. I think for all of us in our roles it's about ensuring that we are well equipped and highly skilled enough to be able to support young people who are experiencing racial trauma. Being children, they probably experience it more than we do as adults, because they are vulnerable in terms of their ages. But it's also about recognising… Yes, this is quite difficult. I think it's about recognising that they are to be believed, and they are to be asked.

Too many young people are not receiving the support that they deserve because the adults that they are working with are avoiding uncomfortable conversations, and the adults that they are working with are not able to confront the trauma that this young person is experiencing. I just feel like, where are the systems to ensure that every young person has access to that, that they can… It's this thing of being your authentic self, isn't it. We say be your authentic self, but then on the other hand we say, but not too authentic. I can't cope with just how much you're saying you're experiencing. For me I think there's lots of system-wise changes that need to be made to ensure that we are supporting our young people who may be experiencing racial trauma, and if we don't do that then they will continue to experience that within our systems. Not only are they experiencing racial trauma outside, but how do we ensure they do not experience it when they interact and intersect with us. Because otherwise what we do is we're then just upholding those systemic inequalities. We're just leaving another young person damaged, and harmed, and it's not okay to look away, it's not okay.

I like that, it's not okay to look away, if nothing else we cannot continue to look away. I'd like to invite Monica and Joanne to come in, to close this section of our podcast. Last reflections, last thoughts?

There also has to be ownership. To speak to Orlene's point about our children and young people having access to appropriately, adequately skilled individuals, within the system introducing that accountability. So, making it a prerequisite that that introspection is done, that people engage in their own journey, that there are checkpoints to ensure that people are on that journey, that they are reflecting, that they are speaking to the realisations that have come about as part of that journey. Because it's not, you can't train racism away. People have to reflect and come to their own conclusions about past behaviours and commit to being better in the future, but also knowing that they are perfectly imperfect as human beings, and they will make mistakes, that this is not a journey with a final destination. This is continuous, this is a lifelong journey, because unfortunately, as an individual you'll have that introspection and you'll be making that change, but we are still existing in a systemically racist system. It is something that people are going to have to constantly battle with, realising that this is a commitment, it is a lifelong commitment to being better for the purpose of our black and global majority children.

That's really interesting, because I think we talk a lot about people and their commitment, and for me it's also where you have to ensure that you understand that organisationally there is a commitment. If you want to sit back and find that difficult as an individual, it's about recognising, hang on a minute, I'm working in an organisation where they are taking that journey, so what you don't then get is people that can hide in that system of, I don't have to do anything. We need a system that makes sure it's got absolute clarity about what it expects, and what you'll then find is that the people that cannot commit to that will go, and that's not a bad thing. What you need is, it's that personal commitment, but it's the organisational commitment as well.

Do you want to come in there, Joanne?

Yes, lastly for me, I think it's about cultural educational change on every single level. I think we should look at the curriculum at schools and teach completely different things and have really open conversations and allow and enable young people and children to have those conversations about difference, make the mistakes, ask the questions. I also think in counsellors' training, one day of training on diversity issues, in inverted commas there. I think back to when I trained as a youth worker in the 1990s, we had a module called the roots to black experience. It was only six weeks, it was brilliant, it was absolutely fantastic, and we were told, you are never going to learn all you need to learn in this six weeks, but you will change your mind-set, even if you don't believe your mind-set needs changing, and it was fantastic. Where is all that? For counsellors, we need more training.

More of that I say, more of that. I know this conversation today has cost - it's not easy. Like I said, it's a really difficult narrative to express, but I really appreciate Monica, Orlene, and Joanne taking the time to come out and have this conversation with us today.

I was thinking, I really wanted to say, I love being black, even with our trauma, it's a joy to be black, and I almost want to say to our young people, do not fear. We see you. We value you. We've got you.

For all of our trauma, there is always black joy. Where you see groups of our black and global majority people, and I say people, young, old, there is laughter, there is singing, invariably dancing, so even in the face of all of the adversity, there is always black joy. That is the essence of who we are. Stripped from our countries of origin, treated in the most barbaric of ways, made to basically work, not even given human status, and amongst all of that we hear the songs, we hear the traditions, the gatherings around food. The culinary expertise that occurred because we were given scraps, or we made the best of a bad situation. All of those things that still exist out of that adversity is the essence of who we are, and that is the essence of black joy, regardless of what's going on around us. There was always time for our party.

Absolutely, your trauma does not define you.

Oh, definitely not. You know what we're good at? Finding workarounds.

Amen to that.

M: 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, speaking so openly and honestly about their experiences, and to all of you for listening. We hope these podcasts spark conversation.