

Discussions around racism, power and privilege in psychology

The British Psychological Society is striving, through the work of the diversity and inclusion taskforce and other initiatives, to build the BPS into an anti-racist and “inclusionist” organisation at every level. This is needed now more than ever.

We are not there yet and we gratefully accept all the support that those in marginalised and oppressed groups are able to provide, whilst recognising that these problems are not of their making nor their responsibility to solve.

The BPS stands in solidarity with all those who are feeling pain and expressing righteous anger about racial injustice and recommit to valuing diversity and fighting inequity.

You can read the [BPS](#) and [DCP statements](#) supporting Black Lives Matter which focus on the positive contribution that psychology can make towards challenging issues around racism, power and privilege.

Earlier this year, a group of trainee clinical psychologists met with the BPS to discuss racism, power and privilege within clinical psychology. We are releasing a joint summary of this meeting to share our discussions and proposed future actions with the clinical psychology community.

Reflections from a group of trainee clinical psychologists

Rachel Ransley, Dr Samantha Rennalls, Louise Chapman, Claire Hickford, Dr Lizzie Woodward, Puffin O'Hanlon, Anna Batho, Nancy Neath, Dr Georgina Aisbitt, Vall Khurana, Jemma Ambrose and all fellow trainees who contributed to this

feedback. Meeting held: 4 February 2020. Trainee statements released to the BPS: 21 February 2020.

How the meeting and survey were setup

One UCL trainee clinical psychologist did not feel comfortable remaining a member of the BPS following their response to the racism that unfolded at the GTiCP conference. She contacted the BPS to withdraw her membership, in response to which a member of the executive team reached out to her to better understand her perspective.

From this conversation, she explained that many trainee clinical psychologists that she knew were impacted by the racism within clinical psychology, and invited the executive team to hear from them directly in a physical meeting. She reached out to her fellow trainees in her cohort and across the year groups to meet with the executive team, but also wanted to extend the opportunity to feedback experiences of how racism, power and privilege are/are not acknowledged and discussed in clinical psychology training beyond UCL, to include the perspectives of trainees nationally.

Recognising that it would not be feasible for all to attend a meeting in London, she organised a working group within her training cohort to develop a survey that could be circulated to trainees around the UK and fed back to the BPS executive team in the meeting. The survey was circulated via Whatsapp groups, personal networks and DClinPsy course admin teams. Only one university DClinPsy team refused to circulate the survey.

A total of 352 trainees from 25 universities took part in the survey, of which 83 identified as belonging to a minoritised ethnic group. We shared the findings of this survey with the BPS.

Summary of the survey findings

This survey highlighted that trainees had felt distressed by the racist events at the GTiCP conference and that they felt the BPS could have responded better; by

acknowledging and apologising quicker in a way that did not place responsibility on those who experienced the distress, as well as showing how the BPS had learnt from the events that occurred.

The survey highlighted that a majority of the trainee clinical psychologists were not members of the BPS. Of those who were members, many did not feel like they currently get value from their BPS membership, and this has further been impacted by the events at the GTiCP conference.

Trainees noted the need for the BPS to support trainees, particularly in relation to ensuring trainees who hold intersectional identities are heard and offered space and support, especially around experiences of racism. The survey also brought to light that trainees across a range of courses felt their course had not acknowledged the impact of the events at GTiCP conference and had not offered appropriate and timely support.

Finally, many trainees felt that, power and privilege, specifically race and ethnicity are not discussed in lectures in a meaningful way, with 76% of trainees feeling that their course does not do enough to facilitate conversations and reflections around power and privilege across all Social GRRRAACCEEESSS, particularly race and ethnicity.

Qualitative feedback from UCL trainees across all three cohorts

In addition to this survey, we also shared qualitative feedback and reflections from UCL trainees about the racist event at the GTiCP conference and future actions.

The main themes across responses from 30 trainees are summarised below:

- Many trainees described the events at the GTiCP conference as a reflection of the broader endemic of systemic racism which exists within the profession.
- Many trainees felt the BPS response was insincere, detached and focused on rationalising intention, rather than acknowledging the impact caused. Noting that by apologising for the 'hurt caused', the responsibility was left

with those who had been affected, rather than with the BPS. Trainees also felt that the statement did not show the BPS had learned from the events that occurred.

- Many trainees were unsurprised by the response, due to previous experiences of racism in the profession being unacknowledged.
- Institutional racism was not named, and the BPS did not acknowledge their own role and complicity.
- The responsibility was left with aspiring, training and qualified psychologists from Black, Asian and other minoritised ethnic groups, at the event and afterwards, to share experiences and name institutional racism.
- Some trainees wanted to acknowledge the BPS had good intentions.

Actions requested by trainee clinical psychologists from qualitative feedback

- The BPS must acknowledge that currently clinical psychology training and the psychology profession perpetuates institutional racism. The BPS should set an example by not shying away from naming and proactively challenging racism.
- The BPS must take proactive, rather than reaction, steps to address racism, power and privilege and to embed anti-racist practice in psychology. For example, by organising a UK-wide survey to hear the views of trainees and qualified psychologists across the country about racism in the profession.
- Diversification of leadership in the BPS, employment of experts for training and consultation, and setting up reflective practice focused on racism, power and privilege.
- Support for aspiring, training, and qualified psychologists from Black, Asian and other minoritised ethnic groups in order to improve the safety of the profession and reduce barriers to entry and career progression.
- A clear plan for how they will work with training courses to ensure change is going to be pursued at structural level. For example; improving the curriculum, by promoting decolonisation of topics taught and ensuring there are clear guidelines for and/or mandatory teaching and reflective practice on racism, power, privilege and Social GRRRAACCEEESSS, at undergraduate level and mandatory/key competency for all clinical training

courses. We referred to the Athena SWAN charter as an example of how this could be implemented.

- CPD for all BPS members to ensure everyone in the profession starts working to understand their own privilege/power/racism.

Following sharing our experiences and the feedback from fellow trainees across the UK, we took time to reflect and discuss the emotional impact of racism. We noticed the tendency for many of us to want to avoid sitting with the distress, and to move straight to thinking about actions. However, we acknowledged that being able to sit with the distress is an important part of ensuring that any actions taken truly take into account the depths of the pain caused by racism.

We were grateful for the BPS being open to listening to our concerns and experiences. We hope that the discussions had at this meeting will continue to be explored and for conversations to be opened up at all levels within psychology to help ensure meaningful change occurs.

Reflections on the event from the BPS

We want to take this opportunity to repeat our apology to trainees and anyone else affected by the events at the GTiCP conference and to acknowledge the deep hurt experienced by people both at the event and those who heard about it subsequently. We got it wrong and we understand that by trying to initially explain our intentions, we compounded the hurt and distress.

We were pleased to host the meeting with a group of clinical psychology trainees to talk about racism, power and privilege and were deeply grateful for the opportunity to listen to the experiences and feelings of trainees and to hear from them first-hand about their distress. The level of concern amongst the trainee population is clearly very significant as evidenced by both the views expressed in the meeting and the results of the survey that were shared with us.

The concerns and fears described by the trainees in the meeting are very worrying to us. A number described how concerned they were about the power imbalances in the room and in their training where hierarchical abuses of power are clearly taking place. We heard powerful accounts of trainees' fears about the risks attached to speaking out.

While we were very grateful that so many trainees felt able to attend, we are also mindful of those who didn't feel able – of those who felt too worn down, too upset, or too angry to be able to be in the room. It is our responsibility to make sure we reach out proactively to all trainees and to make sure we do so in a way that is supportive and is understanding of the courage it takes to share often distressing experiences. Several trainees spoke of their pessimism about change and also the fear of allowing themselves to feel optimism.

A strong message was given about the need for those who have power to actually use it to make change happen. This is a message we heard clearly. You have our commitment that we will do everything in our power to start to address the issues raised.

It is clear that the trainee population represented both at the meeting and through the survey have an impressive understanding of the issues at play and a commitment to action to begin to remedy them. This includes the recognition that it is systems and structures that need to change. The survey that was shared with us illuminated significant concerns about what was happening or most importantly, perhaps, not happening on the training courses. This powerful evidence needs to be shared more widely and particularly with the Course Directors review process that is just beginning.

Whilst trainees feel less powerful and need more senior people and organisations like the BPS to step up, we were struck again by how the trainee population seem much further along this path than many of the profession seem to be. The challenge for us is to do everything in our power to help this generation of trainees play a leading role in the process of change without laying the emotional and practical burden on them. We believe that the best way forward is to work in

partnership but without placing the onus on already marginalised groups to educate others or provide all the solutions. We completely accept that it is for those with the power, like the BPS and the courses themselves, to take responsibility for leading change.

Suggested actions

We are mindful that it is important to continue to hear from trainees about their experiences in ways that feel safe and supportive to them. We also understand and accept that it is our responsibility as the BPS to be proactive in being more visible and accessible to trainees across the UK.

With this in mind, and bearing in mind current restrictions in place in relation to Covid-19, we will visit as many universities as possible over the coming year to speak to trainees. We will also organise another listening event, similar to the one held in February in London, in the north of England in the next couple of months and publicise this widely.

We would also like to build on the impressive work undertaken by the trainees at UCL and commission a UK-wide survey of trainees to better understand their experiences of racism and marginalisation. A similar recent investigation was undertaken by the [British Medical Association](#) into the experiences of trainee doctors.

Our Presidential Taskforce on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is also central to the BPS's continuing work in this area. The taskforce held its first meeting in March with representation from across the profession, including students and trainees.