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The Myth of the 'Good White Counsellor'

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THE MYTH OF THE GOOD WHITE COUNSELLOR

Believing that you 'don't see colour' doesn't exclude you from racism, says **Dr Ruth Smith**

In recent times, the reality of racial inequality has been brought to our attention in a way that it has arguably not been since the Civil Rights era. The murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests have brought the issues of race and racism into mainstream consciousness and provided an opportunity for white people to not only learn about race but become anti-racist. In a white-dominated profession such as counselling, this moment of history is a chance for the racial status quo to be challenged. But it is my personal and professional experience that not only do counsellors resist talking about race because, they say, they 'don't see colour', they also believe that their innate 'goodness' as a counsellor precludes them from being racist. I have called this the phenomenon of the 'good white counsellor'. In this article, I will present its characteristics and ask readers to read with an open mind and question whether they may consider themselves to be a 'good white counsellor'.

First, it is important to state that I am a white woman and a qualified counsellor who has been engaged with understanding whiteness since 2015 when I started working with refugees and asylum seekers. My masters research in counselling and psychotherapy practice considered the experiences of counsellors engaged in cross-racial counselling. I then completed a PhD, which explored how white trainee counsellors in South Wales understand race, racism and whiteness, using the theoretical lens of critical whiteness studies. This doctoral research was inspired by my own experience as a white counsellor working with

refugees and asylum seekers during the refugee crisis in 2015, the rise to political prominence and then power of Donald Trump in the US and the Brexit referendum here in the UK. On both sides of the Atlantic, the political rhetoric became more nationalistic. I was working with clients who were experiencing verbal abuse and a pervasive sense of not being wanted on a daily basis, and bringing it to their sessions.

As a white counsellor who had spent most of my life with a de-racialised identity, and a belief that 'not seeing colour' - a colour-blind racial attitude - was the correct way to approach race, I began for the first time to question what my whiteness might represent to the clients I was working with, and how I could support them with the racism they were experiencing in a way that was not harmful. Thus began my personal and academic engagement with race. However, I found that I was met with silence from colleagues and peers who did not want or know how to talk with me about race and whiteness. Moreover, it felt like I was being 'bad' for openly engaging with whiteness and race. I was curious to explore this silence and resistance, so my

'I was met with silence from colleagues and peers who did not want or know how to talk with me about race'

doctoral research focused on white trainee counsellors' understanding of race, racism and whiteness.

To do this, I undertook ethnographic research, becoming a participant-observer on a counselling course with 16 white trainees in South Wales. I also held semi-structured interviews and did a document analysis of training materials. What links my personal experiences of training and practising as a counsellor with my research findings is the existence of pervasive colour-blind attitudes toward race within the counselling professions.

What race means

Before I address my claim about blindness to colour in counselling, it is important to be clear what is meant by race, as my research found that there was a lack of clarity around the word for my research participants. I believe that a lack of understanding about what race means is the cornerstone of being a 'good white counsellor'. Race is often misunderstood as a genetic or biological factor, something that separates people into distinct groups that we can identify through physical characteristics such as skin colour. In reality, race is a socially constructed idea that can be traced back to the 18th century, during the Enlightenment period, when there was an emerging interest in trying to understand the world through a scientific perspective, rather than a religious one. Of the many white, male, Enlightenment scientists who put forward their theories of race, one of the earliest and most influential was a botanist called Carl Linnaeus, who created a hierarchy of human beings based on skin colour. Linnaeus put the white 'Europeus' at the top of his hierarchy and the black 'Afer' at the bottom, and gave



to the European positive characteristics, such as being well mannered and sanguine, and to the Afer, negative attributes such as being crafty and lazy. The false concept that white people are intellectually, morally and aesthetically superior to other races provided the perpetrators with justification for the slave trade, colonialism, the Eugenics movement and the Holocaust.

The historical legacy of the social construction of race is the belief by white people that they are 'normal' and that race belongs to 'other' groups of people. Therefore, although 'race' is not scientifically real, the notion of it has real consequences. As Jensen states: 'Race is fiction we must never accept. Race is a fact we must never forget'.¹

The post-racial myth

The second characteristic of the 'good white counsellor' is a belief that race does not matter. Since the post-Civil Rights era, many white people have believed we are living in a post-racial world, where race is inconsequential to getting on in life, and that character takes precedence over skin colour. Moreover, the notion that for white people to see or speak about race is to be racist is a misconception that many white people hold.

This is known as colour-blind racism, a form of discrimination about which the scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has written extensively.² He argues that colour-blind racism contains four central frames. The first, 'abstract liberalism', is a belief that everyone has the same opportunities if they work hard enough – a 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' attitude. This ignores the fact that racial discrimination means that people of colour are treated unequally through all strata of society including education, healthcare (including mental healthcare) and criminal justice systems. The second, 'cultural racism', blames the lack of progress on stereotypical generalisations of people of colour. The third frame is 'minimisation', where understanding of racism is reduced to include only obvious forms, such as physical violence; covert forms, such as microaggressions and institutional racism, are not acknowledged or accepted.

'Participants were unsure what racism meant but certain that to "see" race was not acceptable and potentially racist'

Finally, 'naturalisation' echoes Enlightenment thinking with a false belief that it is natural for groups of people to 'stick with their own kind'.

Bonilla-Silva calls this colour-blind racism 'racism without racists', as those who hold this view do not think of themselves as racist. US scholar Shannon Sullivan has written about colour-blind racism and how it is enacted by 'good white people'.³ This refers to white people who perceive themselves as being educated and liberal and show their empathy towards people of colour by not discussing race. 'Good white people' believe that racism is something that *bad* white people do: the uneducated, overtly racist and violent. I admit that I once believed that to see race was to be racist and for most of my life I would have been in the category of 'good white person'.

Being blind to colour

The foundations of being a 'good white person' and a 'good white counsellor' are built on a moralistic belief that the colour-blind approach is a correct way to understand race. This was reflected in my participants, who were confused and hesitant in racial discourse but unanimously expressed colour-blind statements. They confused racism with other forms of discrimination, such as xenophobia and homophobia. This semantic confusion caused feelings of self-consciousness in the participants when trying to engage in racial discourse in the interviews. However, where the participants felt more confident was in their colour-blind statements, such as 'I don't really think about race. I make my

judgment on the person, not on their colour'. It seemed as though the participants were unsure what race and racism meant but were certain that to 'see' race was not acceptable and was even potentially racist.

This was reinforced by race being avoided in the classroom during my participant observations. It only came up twice – once when a student mentioned they would not want to work with a racist or homophobe, and again when the students watched a YouTube video of a session between a black client and a white counsellor for the purposes of seeing how to contract a session. When asked to discuss the video, the racial difference between the client and counsellor was not mentioned and the comment about not wanting to work with a racist client was met with a brief discussion that quickly fizzled out.

However, this is not to say that the participants are unique in taking a colour-blind approach. One of the earliest contributions to the topic of counselling and race can be found in two recorded counselling sessions between the person-centred counsellor Carl Rogers and a young, unnamed African-American man in 1977. The client was in remission from leukaemia but his primary concern was the race conflict he felt existed in American society and his perception of himself as a victim within that conflict. Lee states, 'It is obvious that his Blackness and his experience of it is at the root of the issue,' which Rogers repeatedly overlooks and fails to explore with the client.⁴ It could be argued that Carl Rogers did not 'see' his client's race or recognise his socio-political context. More contemporarily, BACP's own *Ethical Framework*⁵ and course accreditation guidelines⁶ do not currently mention the words 'race' or 'racism' (although the latter is currently under review by the BACP's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Task and Finish Group), using instead umbrella terms such as 'diversity' and 'culture'. This means that race risks being unseen and therefore not spoken about in training and practice. Indeed, white people (and arguably organisations) may avoid using the word 'race' due to their own discomfort and replace it with

words such as 'culture'.⁷

The benevolent myth

When I asked the participants how they would describe a counsellor, they used descriptors such as 'kind', 'sweet-natured' and 'warm, welcoming, safe'. One said that counsellors have got an 'openness about them and a softness'. That this cohort assigned benevolent characteristics to counsellors is not surprising, given they were in training and this perception of goodness may have influenced their decision to train as a counsellor. It was encountering this assumption that all counsellors are good people, combined with the pervasive colour-blind attitudes I identified in my research (from individuals to organisations) that sparked the development of the theory of the 'good white counsellor' narrative that I have presented in this article.

Effective racial discourse among colleagues, trainees and with clients will not take place in a profession made up of white people who are mostly 'good white counsellors'. This may explain why counselling training can result in the exclusion of black trainees' experiences, suppression of their learning needs, and exposure to expectations from white trainees to provide expertise around race.⁸ This silence around race can lead to feelings of isolation, shame and self-censorship in counsellors of colour.⁹

Challenging the narrative

One way to confront this 'good white counsellor' professional narrative can be found in challenging the good/bad dichotomy of racism, whereby only 'bad' people are racist and 'good' people are

not. Trepagnier suggests we should see racism as existing on a continuum of 'more' or 'less' racist, rather racist or non-racist.¹⁰ By inference, it allows you to not be wholly 'good' or 'bad' and allows colour-blind attitudes to be challenged by accepting that learning about race is a lifelong commitment.

I see my own experience of developing white awareness and anti-racist allyship as an one of continual learning and self-reflection and balancing the need to speak out as a white person without centring myself in racial discourse. Here, counsellors are at an advantage with their skills of listening and reflexivity. Self-exploration of the more uncomfortable aspects of your personality is a natural and necessary process for counsellors, and I argue that this can be extended to developing racial awareness. However, from my own experience, developing racial awareness can often be met with resistance and suspicion from other white people, as you are positioned as a 'bad' white person for 'seeing' race.

For this to change, there needs to be more clarity among white counsellors (trainees, tutors, practitioners and supervisors) about what race and racism mean, along with an understanding that to be blind to someone's colour is not an expression of kindness toward people of colour but a denial of their lived experiences, stifling racial discourse and delaying progress toward racial equality. However, to challenge this blindness to colour among white individual counsellors effectively, I believe it also needs to be challenged organisationally. This would require race and racism to be incorporated in official training and practice guidelines and for white counselling tutors/lecturers to become racially cognisant and equipped to teach about race, racism and whiteness in the classroom. Consequently, white counsellors would *really* be able to see and listen to counsellors and clients of colour, for whom racial inequality and injustice have been overlooked for too long by 'good white counsellors'.

I'd like to end this article with a question for white readers - are you a 'good white counsellor' and are you willing to do the work to challenge this in yourself, in others and in counselling? ■



About the author

Dr Ruth Smith lives in South Wales and was awarded her PhD in social justice from the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David in 2021. Ruth's research interests are critical whiteness studies, epistemologies of ignorance, socio-politics and social justice. She is happy to receive further enquiries about her research.

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'To be blind to someone's colour is not a kindness but a denial of their lived experiences, stifling racial discourse'