

Season Two, Episode 3: Racism in the Personal Injury World: dare to be courageous?

Shabnam 0:05

Welcome to the Psychology of Case Management podcast: the show that helps you use psychological ideas to strengthen your relationship with your catastrophically injured clients and their professional networks, so you can achieve more for your clients and feel more fulfilled in your role.

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“There is no such thing as race. None. There is just a human race – scientifically and anthropologically,” Toni Morrison, author.

Hello, and thank you for tuning in to this episode. It’s the first solo episode of Series Two, and I’m really grateful to you for tuning in, because it’s going to be kind of a hard one. So I hope you are able to keep with me and sit through any discomfort that you might feel with it. There is a *bit* of mild swearing, I have to say, but if you’ve been following me you’ll know that’s kind of expected, half the time. And I hoping that you’ll be able to build on some of the constructs from Series One, particularly episodes on self-reflection and boundaries, because they lend themselves really nicely to this current episode.

Racism: it’s a really big topic. And I believe that you and every single other person who’s tuning in to this episode will have experienced racism: whether directly to yourself, indirectly from things you’ve read or heard, or by behaviours that you have even witnessed. It’s an unescapable issue and, frankly, it’s literally written on our faces. Ain’t nothing you can do about that! It also extends beyond our personal spheres of living and we see it existing from individuals and families to communities, societies, nations, and of course globally. I wrote about racism in the personal injury world, in my July blog following the painfully familiar racism ending the Euro football tournament this year. I’ll put the link to it in the shownotes – <https://www.psychworks.org.uk/blog> – in case you’re interested.

It was a really hard write for me, not because I was confused about what to write, or fearful of backlash, but because typically in the past, whenever I have raised the race topic, it has almost always been met with silence. As if my pain and that of other people in similar positions – whose hurt is literally written on their face – is either not worth responding to, or (probably more likely) that it falls on unlistening or hurt, upset ears.

So this has been quite a hard episode for me to do because it’s such a personal topic and one that is inevitably going to upset or cause discomfort for some people. I of course do not mean to upset anyone and this is not my intention at all, by raising the topic as I now again am, and as I have done before, but I know to expect emotionally complicated reactions in my world when I talk about race, race relations, unconscious biases, and of course racism itself.

After all, we need to have brave conversations to raise awareness, overcome those biases of any kind, and to feel empowered to speak out against covert or subtle biases in our work space. So, I guess my question to you is: are you going to join me? I really hope so, because we’re about to embark on our journey...

3:36

So, a little bit about me first. It gives you a little context into where I’m coming from and some of the points I’m going to be making. So, in case you didn’t know: I am a Pakistani Muslim. I was born and raised in the UK. My Mum and Dad are Pakistani by background, in terms of citizenship, now, but my Mum was actually born and raised in Kenya, because her family emigrated from then India when the Partition was soon to

happen, so obviously pre-1947. She was one of the youngest in a family of 11, and she was expected to do what she's told. After bouts of unexplained illness, despite her absolutely loving school, she was told that she had to stop going to school – so around 14-ish, I would have thought – because she had to look after the working male members of the family. But she was an obedient woman, so she just did what she was told. The family then emigrated to England in the late 60s, when there was civil unrest in Kenya, at that time. And then soon after arriving my Mum was then married off, at age 18. Cue my Dad.

My Dad, by the way, was the one who read the quote at the start of this recording. My Dad was a young lad when Pakistan was divided away from India. So he and his family had to make the harrowing journey to new Pakistan, leaving everything behind. True story, by the way: the estimated 15m people who sought refuge and safety in the displacement of Pakistanis and Indians at this time has been classed the single largest population movement in living history. The violence and trauma caused when the British Raj left India is not really ever spoken about. I guess you need a Dad like mine to make it real.

So, my upbringing has been directly affected by the experiences my parents had: their level of emotional unavailability; their drive to make life better for us, their children; their desire to protect us from harm; their values to work hard and focus on education, keep your head down and ignore what is being said to you... it comes from real life. Real life that my parents endured; real life that I'm going to tell you that I endured as well; the real life my child touches daily.

6:14

Now, I'm not talking about this to simply talk about me and just to share my family background. I want to use my story to highlight that this single story is shared by those 15+ million others who fled, like my parents fled, their respective homelands in search of something better, brighter, safer. And Kenya and Pakistan are not the only examples of this. And I suspect, sadly, there will be many more yet to be heard.

My point is also not to talk about a view on colonization or to induce any sense of responsibility about past British injustices, but it is to offer a context. A very difficult, traumatizing backdrop for people like me and my siblings, and of course my parents. And there are millions of people who can talk equally closely about something similar.

My point is also to remind ourselves that this is just the beginning of what it means to be non-white in a white host country and to walk with you through my own hard experiences with race. And, frankly, I was relatively privileged, as a double-Dr educated child of a professional parent who could pay for private education, and who was encouraged to learn music, dance and horse-riding. So, I know for a fact there are way more harrowing stories than the one I will share with you now.

7:47

Growing up in the 80s and 90s, like many non-white children in the UK, I was called a Paki, Blackie, told "I can't say your name so can I call you Shabby?" With teachers either marvelling at why my English was so good or ignoring me in class because I apparently wasn't as good as the A* peer in my A-level Chemistry class (there were literally 2 of us – the school was tiny). Despite being a painfully quiet and obedient wall-flower of a child, I somehow was always seen. It was terrifying for me. Needless to say, I bombed my A-levels.

Nationally, the mid-90s were also an important time for race relations in Britain. It was emerging that many black people were dying in police custody, and then Stephen Lawrence was murdered in 1993, and his death sparked the Macpherson report of 1999, which cited institutional racism at the heart of police failings. The legitimacy of knowing and feeling this, as a non-white person, was something else. The impact of this finding was HUGE for the hope of multiculturalism, and legitimizing each person with a non-white face. The report resulted in the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 to tackle inequality. In my experience, it changed attitudes and behaviours. Surely we were on the right path. It felt like that for me. Ethnic TV shows came out like *Desmonds*, where non-white people were portrayed as hard-working and ambitious,

and *Goodness Gracious Me* provided role-reversal sketches because it felt safe to do so, finally. Those shows were so brave and inspiring to me. Hilarious, as well. I wonder if you've watched them?

So, at this time, I was entering adulthood, and through the clearing system I seemed to have found some kind of voice at university which – interestingly – was attended by a really large population of South Asian and Black students. People who looked like me! So, me being me, I wanted to blend in... Despite my best efforts, however, my personal and research tutors saw me – I really wondered how, since I was often in a sea of brown faces, and I lay low because they were white and I really didn't want a repeat of what it was like at school. But those two people revolutionized my life, and that is no exaggeration. They did in fact see *me*. They saw a quiet, hardworking young adult who showed a desire to achieve, and had ambition. I could have been yellow with pink spots for all they cared, and they made me feel that it just wouldn't matter. So, with all that positivity, it's unsurprising that I left university with a first class pass, having graduated top of my class, and I was offered a PhD with my research tutor, in fact, to emigrate to New Zealand with her! I did actually decline, but that's another story, for another time.

11:03

I actually did go on, though, to study a PhD on racial bias, would you believe? In what I now recognize could have been some of the contributing research on privilege and unconscious bias of white schoolteachers towards black and brown children. What I found is that it wasn't that the non-white children were overrated for behaviour problems, it was that white children were *underrated*, possibly even excused for their difficult behaviours. I had a really tough time with my PhD, in that I had four different supervisors. At the time, I blamed the changeovers on myself, for not being a good enough student, or not being dedicated to the research field: at the time I was really keen to get into clinical practice (which is what I'm doing now, of course) and I was really open about that, so I wondered if that got in the way. I also thought about whether their departures were in fact added to by discomfort about the very topic that joined us: racism in education! I did actually finish my PhD, miraculously, in three years, and did focus on a career in clinical psychology, and now case management.

I have to remember, though, that I was in the final year of my PhD when the Twin Towers came down. So this was the turn of the century: 2001. The multicultural hope and belief mood seemed to change around this time. Here in the UK, there were riots in Bradford just before 9/11 which targeted Muslim people – who understandably, in my opinion, fought back – because multiculturalism was felt to be a threat to far-right groups. And then there was, of course, 7/7 which put even more pressure on Muslims, to the point where I remember having a conversation with a pregnant family member who said to me in all sincerity – and I remember that moment so vividly in my mind. She said to me: "I hope it's not a boy. Who wants to be a Muslim male in the world today?" I'll let that sink in for a bit.

13:21

As a case manager, I sadly will have to report more on the painful truth about the challenges of being non-white in a professional world, because in our field, our focus is so much on caring and working damn hard to compensate for a wrong that tragically happened to someone. Nonetheless, I have been called a 'black bitch' by clients; colleagues have told me without hesitation that they do nothing when clients want to only employ white carers who speak English without an accent; every referral my team receives is met with an unspoken fear that the colour of my skin or my colleagues' skin might put a client off; I have been shut down by a large Personal Injury-related organization, calling them out on what I felt was a token gesture about a racial topic. All in the last three years, maybe. All of it illegal.

And I remind you again: I am a person with relative privilege, and these are my experiences growing up and working today in the Personal Injury field. I now have to raise my child – while living with my Dad and all the history his 80+ years bring – and attempt to give that little girl a fair and secure view about herself and the world we tried so very hard to bring her into.

What do I do with that? How would you do that? Without shutting down – as one does when one feels psychologically unsafe – to the joys and beauties in life that you see and value, which she too should have all opportunities and allowances to experience. She doesn't deserve the burdens of intergenerational trauma my parents and her mother carry, perpetuated by the challenging few. But I fear that she will. After all, it is perpetuated often in my work, and you hear it all the time in general life.

15:30

So, you will have to excuse me when I write a blog like I did in July, and when I post on social media about the silence in the case management world about racism, and speak up about token gestures and marginalizing the learning that so desperately needs to happen in the Personal Injury world. For the sake of our peers, but also our clients.

My story is commonplace. To any non-white client, they will have their own story. To every non-white peer you work with, they will carry their own narrative. Like me, their story will be trauma-laced and infused. And this will span many generations of descriptions and accounts. Like me, they will carry mistrust. Like me, they can feel stuck and hopeless. Like me, they can appear disengaged and frightened and blamed, at times. Like me, they can seek comfort in Otherness. Like me, they hope you as an individual will stand with them to challenge anything and everything that is wrong and racist. Because every courageous step you make that chips away at destructive hate, based purely on the colour of one's skin, is a step towards the freedom of humankind. It really does take a community.

16:56

So what do 'courageous steps' look like? Here are my top 3 to use today in your PI work:

1. Understand that the stories someone with non-white skin has are at best are traumatic and self-esteem-destroying, and at worst so poor-mental-health inducing that they end up in Care, prison systems, mental health systems, forensic settings, or perhaps even dead. All are almost guaranteed to have feared, or fear, to some degree, violation of their basic human rights.

Accept that trauma, lack of safety and poor systemic support that make engagement hard. And do not treat your non-white peers and clients in the same way as white peers and colleagues. Patience, time and respect for what they carry, every single day, must be built in to your package of support.

2. If racism is part of your client's carer recruitment decision-making, remind your client and their family that not hiring on the basis of skin colour is illegal. And making up excuses to engineer the same outcome is also illegal.

After all, will you be able to stand up in an investigation about the process you followed? Are you happy with the message you are sending the family and all who have witnessed this biased recruitment? However which way you consider it, even the tiniest of ripples is far-reaching. In an extreme example, I would ask you to be prepared to lose your job over the racist recruitment campaign, because someone else in a more disadvantaged position, who won't necessarily be able to pick up another case, like you might be able to, is about to not get a job that they possibly deserve... all under your watch. It's a big responsibility.

3. It is hard to be alone in your pursuit to make any vital change. But it's about having those brave conversations on micro-levels. For example, sharing your disappointment with any experiences – work or otherwise – that exhibited racist undertones, or explicit racism – with peers, friends, family, clients (if relevant). It's about bringing race up in your supervision or your 1:1 sessions with seniors, and having a reflective conversation about how it feels, and what it might mean in the grand scheme of the world, in which you can also talk about the discomfort or where the joy might lie in the interaction, or what you witnessed. Seek and request race-based training as something you do regularly – whatever that means to you; or bring race issues into other training to open up a dialogue and perhaps even destigmatize the topic. Consider how many non-white people you work with: is that something the organization you work with is aware of? Perhaps raising it again with your line manager or senior management, in some way. What race-

related structures are in place at the top of the professional tree, either at your work or externally? Such as: is there a non-white board member? is there a working group on race? What's your equality policy? Do you even have one?

So those would be my three differentially-layered suggestions that you can go away and think about.

20:48

When I had my little girl, I vowed to myself that I would create and provide a life for her in which she can stand tall and proud because of the life she has chosen to live, in the body that God gave her, with a strong sense of community and safety around her. This is the way to inner peace and external peace, and being able to do good – for the greater good. For all, which becomes everyone's responsibilities: because if you are hurting, so am I.

I'll end this episode on this quote from the Queensland Aboriginal activist group, read by my dear old Dad: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

21:48

Thank you for listening this far – I look forward to speaking to you on this topic, and beyond this point too.

If you have been affected by today's episode in any way, and you would like to talk to someone about the response you are feeling, please consider making a respectfully-communicated comment about your reaction on the podcast comments. Reach out to a friend or family member, contact a workplace peer or your supervisor, or consider liaising with your GP. It is important that you are able to have a response to the distress that you might feel. If you are an organization and would like to engage with this topic with your Personal Injury professional team, please contact our office on admin@psychworks.org.uk.

22:46

Before you go: if you enjoyed the episode today, I'd really appreciate it if you could rate it on whatever platform you're listening on, and share and like on your social media profiles. Word of mouth is the best way for us to grow and to be a continuous resource for all. And if there's any topic you wish for us to cover, please drop us a line on our website. Thank you so much for all your support.

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