

## FEATURE/EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

**Reference:** Agyemang K. and Ahmed-Landeryou, M. (2020), Let's talk race about, OTNews, July, p:16-17

(title) Let's talk about race

(standfirst) Kwaku Agyemang and Musharrat J Ahmed-Landeryou look at the global impact of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and asks: how are your Black occupational therapy colleagues doing?

The whole world felt the injustice and pain of the public murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020; 8 minutes and 46 seconds of a man publicly dying on the streets, despite pleas from onlookers.

It was not only shocking to see a Black man treated as less than human, but it also brought back the fear and horror of public lynchings, which we thought of as being in the past.

While there could be no excuse for this very public murder, the reality is that it has been going on since the 16th century days of slavery.

However, the global protests in support of the #BlackLivesMatters (BLM) movement has inspired hope. Black people were not feeling their pain on their own in isolation, they had allies, lots of them, marching in solidarity.

This is different from the civil rights movement of Martin Luther King, when the predominantly black protests and marches had very limited allies from the white communities.

For many Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people who live with the daily consequences of structural racism, this murder was tormenting, and excruciating emotions and memories of past injustices surfaced.

BAME people feel injustices, inequalities, discrimination, prejudices and micro-aggressions every day of their lives. Sometimes BAME people have become desensitised to this as a survival technique.

I started to think how this exposure to trauma could be impacting on the emotional wellbeing and personal experiences of my fellow BAME occupational therapists.

I was feeling so many different emotions myself and was at a loss as to how I could express this. I was also torn on how I could support the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Having created the 'OT and Chill' podcast to discuss 'all things occupational therapy', I decided that this would be the best platform to show support to the movement on a micro level.

Our profession strives to advocate for occupational and social justice for the people we work with; principles of diversity and equality at the core of our profession. It is therefore also very important to advocate for justice and equality among our own staffing group.

Putting together an episode titled L.O.V.E – Let's talk about race #BlackLivesMatter (@ot\_chill 2020) to explore BAME occupational therapists' experiences within the profession in general felt to me like a positive platform to assist in achieving this (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/4sPh0qghwAiozaXLSM0re2>).

As a consequence of this episode, there was an explosion and outpouring of feelings. It was emotional and humbling to hear so many voices. There was also a desire to connect and discuss the pain BAME students, occupational therapists and educators were experiencing, as well as a need to share their experiences of the past and present.

Again, I felt humbled and privileged that they were willing to share, as they are mostly strangers to me and each other.

Prior to this episode RCOT had not released a statement in support of its BAME occupational therapist colleagues, and I felt a responsibility to start up a vital conversation with fellow BAME occupational therapists, educators and students, who wanted to share their experiences and were in need of support.

Our first BAME OT network gathering saw 58 people come together, and some clear themes emerged from the conversations:

BAME students, occupational therapists and educators want their colleagues to notice the pain this situation is causing them and their communities; it is okay for colleagues to talk to them about BLM and not feel threatened by having the conversation. It is okay to feel uncomfortable, because it is.

The people who took part felt hurt, perceiving that the Royal College did not care about BLM and did not care about their BAME membership. They felt that the statement from RCOT in support of BLM was not timely, and once it came out, the statement raised more questions about RCOT's commitment to BAME members and the BAME population served by occupational therapists.

They felt that the university experience can sometimes exacerbate segregation, especially in the classroom. Reasons given were feelings of being 'othered', feelings that their majority white peers did not give them space or time to be included, so they decide to be invisible in the class, and feelings that the university did not have the infrastructure to change this dynamic.

They also felt that universities sometimes appear not to be geared up to support the BAME students regarding academic skills and during clinical placement

People said that in their workplaces, they experience daily micro-aggressions and unconscious bias, for example constantly commenting on hair style or make up, touching hair, and misrepresenting passion or enthusiasm as anger - many have been referred to as coming across as 'an angry black woman'.

Some students said they have had similar experiences on placement, with university staff feeling unable to deal with the issue because of lack of clear procedures in

place. This is mirrored in a study of experiences of BAME physiotherapy students (Hammond et al 2019).

Finally, participants said that they see a lack of representation from grade seven upwards, in leadership roles and not enough training or opportunity for mentoring.

This was highlighted in the 2017 MacGregor-Smith review 'Race in the workplace'. A one-year follow up review in 2018 found that 'over half of BAME employees feeling like they need to leave their jobs in order to progress is unacceptable and we must ensure society and business retains this rich source of skills and talent'. Structural racism is real.

#### References

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