

# Behind closed doors – the unspoken truth: diversity in the workplace

‘What does it really mean?’ asks **Michael Lilley**

An employer has to have policies that show it abides by the law and there are quality standards that measure whether it is a real investor in people, offering equal opportunities and fair representation. The workplace counsellor has the privilege to listen to the stories of individuals who face the reality of equal opportunity policies and who often reveal a very different perspective. Workplace counsellors often deal with clients who are enacting grievance procedures, going to employment tribunals and having to come to terms with the fact that an employer may have policies but this does not change deep-rooted prejudice and the complexity of diversity. What can we learn from behind closed doors that could be used to make effective change in the workplace?

## Workplace diversity in context

Muslim Metropolitan police staff have declared their intention to take their employer to employment tribunals alleging bullying in the workplace and racial discrimination. On 11 September *The Guardian* ran an article entitled ‘Muslim woman to lodge race case against the Met’, which built on previous articles about the grievances already publicly lodged by another Metropolitan police employee, the UK’s most senior Asian police officer, an assistant commissioner. The irony is that this woman was the director of partnerships and diversity. I start with this story in order to put the ‘personal perspective’ of the reality of many organisations and their policies of diversity and equal opportunities. Large institutions, by law, have to have policies and staff handbooks, induction procedures, monitoring and evaluations. But through all this haze of a paper smoke screen is the reality of ‘behind closed doors’ disclosure of what it really feels like to be black, UK Asian, a refugee, an immigrant, a person with a ‘foreign accent’, a name that clearly identifies origin or heritage, an identifiable faith, and a faith linked to worldwide media portrayal of world conflict. Executive employees earning high incomes have the disadvantage and advantage of

being publicly identified and access to high-profile lawyers but the majority ‘behind closed doors’ have the added anxiety of little or no personal resources to fight complex grievances that are often very difficult to prove. There are real fears of recrimination, closure of job opportunities and loss of status and income. There is often confusion about ethnicity, faith and cultural description. Jews and Sikhs have the honour of being two specific religious groups that have an ethnic and religious identity combined. Other ethnicity is often described separately although being Muslim is often now used as a description of race and ethnicity. A Muslim police officer is so described, whereas a Christian police officer would not be described in this way. There is confusion about the terminology. A Muslim can originate from any country in the world and within the UK there are more than 20 specific cultural origins that have a majority of Muslims within them, but for instance the UK Iranian community also has a strong Christian and Baha’i community. Also, religions have different strands: being a Bosnian Muslim is different from a Pakistani Muslim, similar to the many flavours of Christianity. Origin, culture, identity and faith are not all the same, they are aspects of all human beings. Stereotyping causes isolation and despair, and assumptions and misunderstandings that a person has to cope with.

## Culturally and faith-sensitive counselling

My Time Community Interest Company is a well-established counselling practice based in Birmingham that provides counselling services in a culturally, faith-sensitive, diverse, integrative and socially inclusive model that attempts to reflect the make-up of the population it serves and create an intercultural dialogue. The Heart of Birmingham, My Time’s location, is an area where the BME (black and minority ethnic) community is 70 per cent of the population. In fact 40 per cent of the 30 per cent of white population is of Irish origin. By 2020, Birmingham will be one of the first European cities

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with a majority population that is not indigenous – it will be truly intercultural in the real meaning of the word. My Time principally provides counselling and confidence-building services to employers, GPs, and children's centres. It has an ethnically representative team and can deliver in mother tongue more than 15 languages alongside encouraging the learning of English. My Time is an employer that specialises in cultural and faith-sensitive counselling and therefore by its very nature requires a diverse workforce. There are no minorities or majorities. Faith does not necessarily fit into stereotype. There is a UK Chinese member of the team who is Christian and a UK English member who is Buddhist.

Many of its clients, although fluent in English, have another first language (the one spoken 'behind closed doors' at home) and often find it difficult to express their emotions in the official UK language. It is important to mention that many BME clients welcome the availability of a truly social and cultural practice but often opt for a counsellor that understands their culture but does not originate from it. They have the added fear of not wanting their own community to know their difficulties. Some clients spend considerable time in first sessions questioning confidentiality and what information is passed on and to whom. Often clients live in small, culturally specific communities where the local GP is a distant relative. However much you talk about professional conduct, ethics, professional bodies, accountability, protocol and confidentiality procedures, the client is still nervous, anxious and suspicious.

My Time has developed a client base that covers a wide range of occupations, professions and ethnicity and spans police officers to care assistants, and train drivers to refugees. The clinical services are supported by an evidence-based research side that undertakes relevant research into the needs of clients. During 2007/8 My Time worked in partnership with the Department of Health, the Care Services Improvement Partnership (CSIP), and the University of Lancashire on a study of the mental health needs of asylum seekers and refugees. More than 130 people were interviewed (including refugee/migrant groups that have moved to the UK in the last 10 years ranging from Bosnian to Kurdish) and more than 80 per cent spoke of stigmatisation, racism, not being accepted, and shock that their perspective of the UK being a safe, tolerant and racially accepting place was destroyed. Many spoke of how they chose the UK to come to find work but also to live safely as they were often escaping



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from political unrest and war-torn countries. They had often become disillusioned and feared for their future here although going back to their country of origin was not an option. Many also spoke of prejudice across cultures and how differences and resentments travelled from countries of origin. Over a four-year period, My Time counsellors have observed that 85 per cent of the first group have experienced post-traumatic stress and 55 per cent of the second group have experienced workplace bullying that has had similar symptoms. All BME workplace clients reported some forms of bullying that indicated prejudice, racism and discrimination.

My Time counsellors have experienced many clients in the workplace who had grievances with work colleagues that had an origin in past family history. For example, a UK African/Asian man feeling aggrieved historically about how his family was treated when they were expelled from their home, now working with a UK African manager originating from the same country. Another example is the UK Asian supervisor who was wrongly accused of inappropriate behaviour by a UK African employee due to her wanting to seek revenge for injustice to her ancestors. Again, this might be disclosed

behind closed doors but never said outside. Words often said include 'you can never trust someone from that community/country'. As a child living in a small village, I heard my own parents speak of not trusting people living in a certain part of the district. Prejudice, although not acceptable, is part of human nature and often there is some history that supports the suspicions and fears. Clients have also included very stressed UK white managers/employees who are petrified of being accused of racism if they tried to intervene but who are sandwiched between UK BME colleagues in prejudicial disagreement. Racism is viewed as a white on black act, while between black and black it is viewed as prejudice.

### Relevance and a changing world

Although Birmingham is clearly a place where culture, diversity and faith sensitive practice are relevant, does the rest of the UK fit within this context? It is important to reflect the reality of diversity but also to be aware of constant flux in a changing world. The 2001 statistics<sup>1</sup> do not reveal that by 2008 there was a major change due to European Union expansion (see figure 1).

In 2001, the majority of the UK population were white (92 per cent). The remaining 4.6 million people (7.9 per cent) belonged to other ethnic groups. Indians were the largest of these groups, followed by Pakistanis, those of mixed heritage, black Caribbean, black African and Bangladeshi. The remaining minority ethnic groups each accounted for less than 0.5 per cent of the UK population and together accounted for 1.4 per cent. Around half of the non-white population were Asians of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or other Asian origin. A further quarter were black, that is black Caribbean, black African or other black. Fifteen per cent of the non-white population were mixed heritage. About a third of this group were from white and black Caribbean backgrounds. There were almost 691,000 white Irish people in Great Britain accounting for one per cent of the GB population. In 2006, the entry into the EU of new member states such as Poland, Slovenia, Lithuania etc, opened up a huge migration. Taking 2005 and 2006 together, Poland overtook India to become the second most common citizenship of immigrants after Britain with 124,000 Polish citizens arriving in the UK for at least a year during

	Total population		Non-white population
	(numbers)	(percentages)	(percentages)
White	54,153,898	92.1	—
Mixed	677,117	1.2	14.6
Indian	1,053,411	1.8	22.7
Pakistani	747,285	1.3	16.1
Bangladeshi	283,063	0.5	6.1
Other Asian	247,664	0.4	5.3
<b>All Asian or Asian British</b>	<b>2,331,423</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>50.3</b>
Black Caribbean	565,876	1.0	12.2
Black African	485,277	0.8	10.5
Black other	97,585	0.2	2.1
<b>All Black or Black British</b>	<b>1,148,738</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>24.8</b>
Chinese	247,403	0.4	5.3
Other ethnic groups	230,615	0.4	5.0
<b>All minority ethnic population</b>	<b>4,635,296</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>All population</b>	<b>58,789,194</b>	<b>100</b>	

Figure 1. Population of the UK by ethnic group, April 2001<sup>1</sup>

that period. The 2008 estimate of Polish migrants living and working in the UK peaked at more than 1.2 million<sup>2</sup>. This made the Polish community the largest migrant community in the UK. All large and medium employers were experiencing diverse workforces and in some cases the majority of these workforces were migrants, particularly in sectors such as leisure, clothing, food production and agriculture. Certain sectors have a long history of employing diverse workforces with the NHS being the largest. I present the above statistics in order to demonstrate the richness of our heritage within our country and that diversity should be celebrated, embraced and be seen as a way of enriching lives.

### Who do you think you are? A personal reflection

The above is taken from the title of a BBC programme that enables celebrities to explore their roots and many British celebs go all over the world. Stephen Fry discovered his eastern European roots and Ainsley Harriot went to Jamaica and Scotland. Everyone seemed to have a mixed heritage. My Time is a reflective practice where the diverse team meets within group supervision to discuss our own diversity and learn from each other. Diversity is a wonderful spider's web of history and family journey but often misunderstood and derided as just a colour/ethnicity issue. Assumptions are made that often hide the reality of origin. A white migrant can be assimilated into the host UK population in one generation. As a white man descended from Jewish migrants two generations ago, I see myself as English and no one questions that because I am white in colour. However, a third or fourth generation English resident living in Staffordshire from Asian descendents would still be seen as a migrant by many. Being identified as Muslim would also be seen as evidence of being an alien. I am a Jewish convert to Christianity – where does that leave me? Although as a white man, I have never been given a faith prefix. Birmingham has a long history of facing the reality of prejudice and has had communities labelled as terrorist. During the IRA Birmingham pub bombings in the 1970s, the Irish Catholic community experienced as much derision and prejudice as the Muslim Pakistani community at the beginning of the 21st century. Two years ago I went to a local community meeting where the established Irish community was objecting to the planning application for a Muslim community centre, when an elderly local Irish-origin resident made the connection to the prejudice she had faced 20

years earlier because of actions of a group that only had very removed associations. Do I associate all Germans with atrocities against my ancestors just because of Hitler or do I put it in context? Diversity is not a subject that can be quoted from policy or learned from a book, it has to be a personal journey of reflection and discussions with fellow travellers. It is deep rooted and has to evolve within us so that we can 'behind closed doors' share the pain of the client who is trying to come to terms with their reality, identity, their own and others' prejudices; and the 21st-century realism of a United Kingdom faced with generations in between cultures and has the painful journey of trying to be their own person within it.

### Workplace counselling

How can a counsellor bridge cultures and bring an understanding 'behind closed doors' of diversity into the therapeutic practice? All therapeutic relationships in reality are made in the first session, and are 'make or break'. I believe counsellors should be able to concentrate on being human and on the similarities not the differences. We all have some form of culture, we have the same biology as humans, we have beliefs and values. The core skills of empathy, congruence and being non-judgmental need to be the cornerstone, mixed with the concept of the expert client being able to be the expert of their identity. As aware counsellors we should know our communities, be aware of changes, and make it part of our continuing professional development to learn about others' faith, culture and history, with a sense of wanting to know for our love of the world as opposed to doing it out of duty in order to tick boxes. I believe a counsellor needs to read the news and have a range of books in their library about diversity, faith and culture alongside books on approach. These should include African-based therapy, Islamic and Buddhist psychology, and Morita therapy. Explore integrating other approaches within your practice. Put diversity into action. Culture should not be an option, it should be integral to your practice. 2008 is the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue ([www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu](http://www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu)) and as counsellors we should use this as an opportunity for human resource teams to start celebrating everyone's mixed heritage. ■

#### References

- 1 National Statistics. Population of UK by ethnic group; 2008. [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)
- 2 National Statistics. Polish migration; 2008. [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)