

Visual Art: A Tool for Facilitation of Cultural Competence and Antiracism when Training Helping Professionals

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The concept of cultural competence is widely referred to within the helping professions, alongside issues of social and racial identity and the determinants of life outcomes. This article presents a personal account of the experiences of a Black, British, educational psychologist practitioner. From this vantage point, the concept of cultural competence is described drawing on the sense made within the literature. Visual artworks, grounded within the conceptual art movement, are presented as a tool for cultural competence pedagogy, and a psychological interpretation of the works is presented for reflection on issues of race, racism and racial identity. These novel tools are presented with the aim of contributing to the growing body of knowledge and to support a reconceptualisation of the responsibilities of helping professionals' culturally competent practice. The article concludes with an invitation to colleagues to discuss and collaborate, using the tools presented.

Keywords: cultural competence, professional practice, helping professionals, antiracism, teaching, decolonising, social justice, visual art, curricula (courses of study)

My Background and Reason for this Article

I am an educational psychologist, a career I chose to work toward during my undergraduate degree. Learning that this type of role existed excited me — a chance to support people to benefit from opportunities provided through education. An opportunity I was reminded to feel grateful for, countless times throughout my own schooling experience. At the time, this seemed like the perfect opportunity to realise my aspiration of work that could promote social mobility.

In the initial year of my doctoral training, I remember sitting with my cohort, at a round-table, discussing the meaning of our names. This seemed like a relatively benign question in the series of reflective questioning we were introduced to, to better understand the study of the mind. I listened as my peers described familial and religious origins. Some reflected on etymological descriptions. I shared the meaning I had made about my name. “My dad named me Judith, an anglicised name, because he wanted to ensure I would not be discriminated against when I applied for jobs.” Taking a moment to process the responses of the group, I noted the facial expression of my programme director, which remains vividly within my mind, an expression that seemed to contain some sadness. In this moment, the meaning I had understood took on a new perspective, viewing this action from the lens of a parent, whose goal is to protect their child. I wondered, what could this action tell me about the experiences of my father in Britain: a person categorised as a Black, African, first-generation immigrant.

In this piece, I share some of my own experiences of

training and entry into work within the helping professions. In sharing this personal account, my intention is two-fold; firstly, to provide a narrative that may resonate with my colleagues who may feel a sense of isolation in their experiences. Secondly, my purpose is to offer an additional tool to enhance pedagogical awareness and practice affecting teaching and learning opportunities, with the view of improving disparities in life outcomes linked to racial categorisation (see Williams et al., 2015).

The piece begins with a description of the experience of cultural competence training at doctoral level within a British context. Next, a review of the literature is described using the main service areas highlighted in current legislation. Then a novel tool for supporting the development of the cultural competence is presented, which includes an interpretation from a psychological perspective. Finally, a summary of the article highlights the call for rigorous review of cultural competence pedagogy in the helping professions. The article ends an invitation to collaborate, share and develop tools and techniques to support teaching and learning.

Cultural Competence

Culture is defined as a set of beliefs, practices, rituals and traditions shared by a group of people with at least one point of common identity (such as their ethnicity, race or nationality) (Buchanan, 2018). This section begins with an account of newly qualified cultural competence from the perspective of a newly qualified practitioner psychologist. Next, an outline of the concept of cultural competence is explored drawn from the literature. Finally, a description of the accepted con-

ceptualisation of cultural competence for the current article is stated.

Newly Qualified Cultural Competence

It can be morally draining, completing your training and starting your practice and yet not being able to rely on what you have learned to challenge racial discrimination. When these situations would occur, I drew on the conceptual framework introduced to me that aligned most accurately with what I was experiencing: an “ethical tug”. A feeling in your chest or your stomach that is almost like the feeling we call intuition. This tug, which could leave me wondering about its context from a psychoanalytic perspective, could sit with me throughout the rest of the day. In the past, I would imagine the different ways I could have responded driven by a need for catharsis. Sometimes, I would rehearse a tactful response with a view to enriching the understanding of others. Nonetheless, the inevitable feelings of uncertainty would occur as the day progressed, surrounding decisions that I must make when working in the real world (Fox, 2015), where explicit and implicit racism is directed toward, witnessed by and sometimes acted out by helping professionals.

My inability to respond in the moment predictably began to contribute to my professional identity: the type of educational psychologist I wanted to be (Fox, 2015). It was extremely difficult. Having no evidence base to draw from to support me in disseminating alternative perspectives on social identities and not yet feeling confident enough to follow my intuition. Unwittingly, I colluded through my inaction or drew on learning that was interesting and a novel way of conceiving my visceral response but did not act to challenge racism. During this time, I found myself distorting my own feelings in the face of social discrimination, particularly in situations that felt clearly linked to racial discrimination. A process of distortion set in, largely from a psychoanalytic framework, that negated my own intuition, which historically drove me to train as an educational psychologist.

The socio-historical facts of Britain undeniably set a context in which stereotypes, elicited by race, are embedded. Hirsch (2018) provides an accessible individual account of the psychological and material impact of colonialism from a west African diaspora perspective, and Crash Course (2020) provides a speedy yet comprehensive summary of Europe’s colonial history and decolonisation, which countered the narrative I experienced in my own secondary state schooling.

During my training, I was introduced to the social justice framework (Speight & Vera, 2009). The work offered an essential explanation of interpersonal dynamics, highlighting the inevitably varied schooling experiences of a given cohort of helping professionals and the subsequent effect on perceptions of social identities. These ideas made clear that any real and lasting change required an explicit process of intro-

spection of practitioners’ own racial schemas at an individual level (Speight & Vera, 2009, p. 83).

At a similar time, knowledge of the inevitable psychological remnants of colonisation was being explored, following the implementation of Race Talk (Sue, 2016) in an adjacent clinical psychology programme (Wood & Patel, 2017). Here the concept of cultural competence was understood as the ability to recognise one’s own racial and social identity (Sue, 2016).

During my training, the concept of cultural competence was discussed during seminars. In retrospect, different theoretical frameworks were offered to support our competence in matters of ethnicity, race and culture, although, on reflection, the concept of competence could have been made more explicit. During my initial qualified year, I began attempting to explicitly apply psychological theory to experiences of racial discrimination. The challenge, at this time, was that I did not yet have the language to engage in discussions with colleagues and service users which could allow me to practise social justice work. Over time, it seemed that the responsibility for issues of racial discrimination was attributed to small groups of practitioners, whose social identities are categorised as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), an observation also described by Eddo-Lodge (2017). This attribution is important, given the fact that people with social identities categorised as BAME are statistically provided with relatively fewer resources and consequentially fewer educational opportunities prior to formal professional training than the dominant social identity (Hirsch, 2018, p. 247). My experiences and observations of dismissal, distortion and denigration when social inequality based on social identities was raised in professional contexts rested against the backdrop of historical distributive injustice.

Newly Qualified Tools for Challenging Racism in Professional Practice

Introductions to ways of apprehending reality (or epistemology) during my doctoral training provided a basis for reflection on the accounts of history absorbed through my own schooling. These reflections grew my interest in narrative ideas during my initial qualified year, helping me to cope with experiences of views marked with discrimination within the helping profession. At this time, my experiences continued to cause distress and conflict due to the contradiction with underpinning values of the helping professions.

The next step in my learning led me to the work of Critical Race theorists. This body of work has been invaluable in providing me with the language to initiate and challenge during consultation, to process my own professional experiences of racial discrimination and act intentionally to promote social justice.

At a systems level, Dr Feysia Demie’s body of work

makes use of quantitative research methods to amplify a message of what works for young people who experience discrimination based on their social identity. Demie and McLean (2018) highlighted, for me, the use of the evidence-based stance in applying antiracist action at a macro level. At a systemic level, Dr David Gillborn's work offered a critical analysis of language and subsequent concepts to introduce in consultation. His recent work summarises important ideas for discussing the meaning of correlations between socially constructed identities based on skin colour, and disparities in life outcomes (Gillborn, 2020). These conversations were not met without challenge, but, for me, it is likely that as helping professionals we are unwittingly perpetuating discrimination if we are not actively seeking to challenge it.

I have used Kegan's (1980) developmental framework to explore my own racial biases. Leonardo's (2002) distinction between *Whiteness* and *White people* was an important reconceptualization that enabled me to scrutinise my own perceptions and maintain relationships with colleagues in the helping professions. Here, the distinction between *Whiteness*: a racial discourse that constructs a system centring on the interests of (elite) White people (Gillborn, 2020), and *White People/Person*: defined as a socially generated category of identity based on skin colour, brought conceptual clarity. From this view, these two ideas are not synonymous.

Review of the Literature Defining Cultural Competence

To better understand the application of this concept within the helping professions, I carried out a search for peer-reviewed articles using EBSCO host: Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection. I limited my search to articles published within the last ten years, using combinations of words outlined in the keywords below the abstract of this article. Below, I will provide an overview of the definitions and descriptions of this concept, organised under the three main service areas highlighted within the Children and Families Act (2014).

Education

From the field of education, it is noted that this concept is often conflated with other terms. However, there is a general consensus, in the field, that this cultural competence affords the ability to examine and experience others' realities (Golightly & Nottis, 2017).

In education, this concept is grounded in a framework described by Ladson-Billings (2006) made analogous to the western experience of democracy (Milner, 2011). Here, cultural competence is not explained or told to members of society [practitioners], because the principles are infiltrated throughout the given society [field of study]. This idea suggests that people, or professionals, practise democracy, or cultural competence, because they think and believe in its

fundamental principles and ideals. This, in my view, is problematic as it may present a static view of the concept of cultural competence.

To circumvent this static view, Milner (2011) offers a description of the assimilation of these ideas. Here the concept is described as [practitioner] knowledge of their own cultural ways and systems of knowing society. Milner (2011) suggests that this knowledge development enables the subsequent expansion of thinking, to understand broader cultural systems of knowing. In addition to this, novel pedagogies are reported within the field of education, offering an approach to identifying misconceptions of social identities (Golightly & Nottis, 2017; Poyrazli & Hand, 2011). A three-staged approach to instruction is offered, where students first develop awareness that they have a racial identity, demonstrate knowledge of their own stage in this development and their own portrayals of gendered behaviours and, finally, show understanding of the ways in which social identities relate to their own thoughts and behaviours in practice. These pedagogical approaches draw on concept maps and semi-structured drawing activities to stimulate the development of cultural competence.

Health

In line with the reflections from the field of education, health also recognises a conflation of concepts, highlighting the confusion between culture with racial and ethnic categories (Jenks, 2011).

In the field of health, cultural competency is understood at micro and macro levels, including the ability of a professional to explore issues of culture, power, privilege and social justice in the conceptualisation of this concept (Cushman et al., 2015). At a macro level, cultural competence is described as the capacity of an individual, an organisation or institution to respond to the unique needs of populations whose cultures are different from that which might be referred to as "dominant" (Cultural competency statement, 2011; Edge & Lemetyinen, 2019; Moleiro et al., 2018). Conceptualisations of cultural competence in health accept the role of structural processes and institutional arrangements in the perpetuation of health disparities and other forms of systematic social inequality (Cushman et al., 2015). The literature posits that culturally competent practitioners heed the narratives of people from nondominant intersecting subject positions (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation) and recognise the role of oppression of these narratives to patients ongoing marginalised status (Washington & Henfield, 2019).

At a micro level, the concept of cultural competence in health is described similarly to the field of education. There appear to be distinct phases, organised below as the development of awareness, adaptability and the application of skills.

In terms of awareness, there is agreement on an initial willingness to develop awareness (Jenks, 2011) and insight (Gainsbury, 2017), to engage in critical reflection on one's own worldview and frame of reference in use, in practice (Geerlings et al., 2018; Moleiro et al., 2018). The ability to communicate with openness, demonstrate clarity of practitioners' own cultural and professional identity, and build interpersonal relationships are key elements of cultural competence in the field of health (Jenks, 2011; Lu et al., 2014; Mallinger & Lamberti, 2010). Awareness is also described as the possession of an explorative attitude toward cultural and racial preconceptions (Corral et al., 2017) and a practitioner who makes use of open-ended questions (Jenks, 2011, p. 228). There is acknowledgement that the concept of culture can still be perceived as something "others" have, from a Eurocentric perspective (Knipper, 2013, p. 375), and suggested intervention into this worldview includes developing insight into one's own knowledge of the historical background of [their given] society and the subsequent present implications of this awareness (Jones et al., 2016).

Another distinct feature from the field of health is the ability to adapt. This is explained as the ability to build on knowledge of the characteristics of specific cultural groups to enable recognition of the need to make culture-centred adjustments (including consideration of differences in communication, worldview, relations, and definitions of health) (Bassey & Melluish, 2012). This cultural competency is summarised as the ability to use intersectionality approaches in practice (Moleiro et al., 2018), which enable the open-minded practitioner to recognise and mitigate the role of their own social identity on dynamics of cultural attributions and the often subliminal power of stereotypical thinking (Lu et al., 2014).

In terms of observable actions and skills in practice, cultural competence is defined as the ability to initiate dialogue about cultural differences and the ability of the practitioner to share their own level of cultural knowledge (Edge & Lemetyinen, 2019; Geerlings et al., 2018). The skills described within the literature include the practitioners' own awareness and control of reliance on the use of automatic stereotypes and consistent use of mental strategies to develop thought associations with goals that promote fairness and equality (Stone & Moskowitz, 2011).

Social Care

From the field of social care, cultural competence is described as a continuum of skills, composed of elements starting with the development of interpersonal communication skills, application of these skills to negotiate social identity conflicts, with active thinking about the intersection of practitioners' own individual behaviour and society, and subsequent actions to support social justice (Dessel & Rodenborg, 2017). An element of cultural competence identified

in health, willingness, is described by social care in more detail. Lee (2011) describes willingness as a relationally focused, moment-to-moment review of a professional's ability to tailor their relationship to individual clients. These skills are focused on the practitioner's ability to learn the client's culture, hold respectful acknowledgement of difference and show genuine interest and concern.

Summary

A definition of advanced skills in cultural competency is described as the ability to critically evaluate the literature on cultural and other diversity topics (Corral et al., 2017). One interesting theme arising from this review relates to some deductions made about associations between poor life outcomes and the racial identities of participants. The conclusions made about correlations seem, from my view, to be drawn from the Eurocentric norming perspective. Based on the definitions reviewed above, these types of correlation-based assertions about outcomes may be better investigated (Gillborn, 2020), and perhaps better understood through the relationship between distress and the implicit structural and systemic disadvantage and discrimination experienced by members of particular social identities (see Johnstone & Boyle, 2018, pp. 137–138).

I accept the notion that cultural competence is a continuum of skills (Dessel & Rodenborg, 2017). I also agree with the views across the fields of helping professions that early development of these competencies includes an awareness of one's own cultural and social identity. Although, from this review, it seems that the development of cultural competence may begin with a relationally focused willingness (Lee, 2011). From my experience, willingness precedes the development of a broader awareness of personal and professional, socio-historically constructed identity. From personal reflection on my own acculturation within the UK context, I think that the experience of cultural competence can be conceived of as analogous with the western lived-experience of democracy and therefore would require a societal, or institutional, level of infiltration of principles (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2011).

I accept the shared notion that social and professional identity is grounded within the socio-historically granted position of the practitioner, and I concur with the suggestion that these skills should be developed alongside knowledge of the subliminal power of cultural attributions and stereotypical thinking (Lu et al., 2014; Stone & Moskowitz, 2011). From a psychological perspective, cultural competency pedagogy in the helping professions should more explicitly include knowledge of the psychological impact of persistent normative comparisons made from a Eurocentric cultural perspective (Jones et al., 2016; Knipper, 2013). It is heartening to read that the most recent revision of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual recognises the importance of cultural case for-

mulation and understanding of intersecting facets of a person's identity (Moleiro et al., 2018), and this paper hopes to contribute to the growing knowledge base on the concept of cultural competence.

Although this article may read as a clear narrative of making sense of, coping with and challenging discrimination, it has been a tough process of independent study. What is summarised in this article is certainly a minimum five years of postgraduate reading curated by those who have come before me, learning that it is necessary to ask for help and using visual art practice as a process to make sense of my experiences of racial discrimination in practice. Below I share artworks for use as an additional tool in developing helping professional's cultural competence.

Visual Art as a Tool for Teaching and Learning Cultural Competence

During my newly qualified year, I dealt with experiences of a lack of tools to support me to make a real difference, an experience I have come to understand as professional powerlessness (Kordowicz, 2018).

I have sought space for reflection on my experiences through visual art and used the product of my sense-making as a tool for social action. My art is an important outlet and also allows me to document and frame experiences in psychological theory. Visual art has a long history of socially active roots, which is too broad for the scope of this article. For me, some striking examples that have influenced my own practice include the work of conceptual artists including Carrie Mae Weems, Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, and John Akomfrah's commentary on the psychological construct of migration. These and other conceptual works have shaped my understanding of art as a tool that allows me to follow my own intuition, to interrogate, respond and provide an alternative narrative.

Below I share four of my artworks, a series titled *Coloured People Artworks*, after the widely known poem which can be found through the internet search: "and you call me coloured?". I encountered this poem displayed on a classroom window during my secondary education and, at the time, this poem provided me with an alternative perspective on the development of my own social identity.

The works draw on visual perception, language and referents by pairing overlapping human figures and colour. I share the works in this article with the aim of providing a stimulus for reflection, to facilitate conversations and probe conceptions in our helping community.

How Do You See Me?

How do you see me? (2018), (Figure 1) is the initial artwork in the series *Coloured People*. This artwork came about on reflection of the changes in the ways in which I interacted,

Figure 1

How do you see me?



and was interacted with, moving from one inner-London borough to another. In the receiving borough, I formed a part of the largest racial minority and experienced a shift in the ways I was related to by others, in a way I had not experienced previously. Having studied human behaviour, it was difficult not to note the confusions, hesitations and clarifications of others when I arrived in my professional capacity to settings.

The artwork is composed of overlapping human figures, using ink to guide the viewer to focus on a particular "colour" to make visual sense of a whole human figure. The work is composed in this way to highlight how skin colour may precede other information automatically chosen to make sense of individuals.

How do you see me? (2018) sits within a cognitive-behavioural framework, where scrutiny of my own automatic thoughts linked to racial categories were considered relative to my behavioural responses and practice. Washington and Henfield's (2019) work provides useful further reading from this perspective.

Conversations

Conversations (2019), (Figure 2) was influenced by a discussion of my exhibited artworks. Piper's "Mythic Being" art series describes the recognition of the phenomenon of identities as performative (Bowles, 2011). By this, I understood that a phenomenon must be looked at or acknowledged

Figure 2*Conversations*

in order to be seen or identified; it is the act of looking at what is being put forward that establishes the existence of the phenomenon or its identity.

This artwork utilises overlapping figures to highlight the limited space between the figures. Blocks of colour are dispersed across the image, avoiding the adjacent placement of the same colour. The work reflects the similarity of experiences between a group of visibly different individuals which can be discovered through the act of interaction, acknowledgement and subsequent reification.

Conversations draws on my understanding of social constructivism (see Guba & Lincoln, 1994) where we reshape our own mental representations through interaction. This work developed alongside the growing vocabulary for challenging discrimination in my own practice (see section 2.2.).

Fiction in the Space Between

At the time of exhibition, *Fiction in the space between* (2019), (Figure 3) formed the central argument of *Coloured People* artworks. The tonality of this piece depicts skin, to bring the viewer's consciousness back to established mental representations of race. The colour fills the negative spaces between overlapping human figures, to draw the viewers' attention to this location. The absence of human figures is intentional.

The artwork is described nicely by social constructionism, which is one of a set of ideas about how we might choose to understand reality. This artwork reflects the idea that social identities linked to race are developed over time through a discursive process between individuals. These fictionally constructed shapes reflect the ways we shape the meaning of these identities, agreeing upon them through interaction and

Figure 3*Fiction in the space between*

collective agreement. *Fiction in the space between* recognises that although these fictionally constructed categories have real-world effects for individuals (Leonardo, 2002), our understanding of the meaning of these categories can be constructed and re-constructed between “overlapping” individuals. This work highlights our potential for social change.

Normal Distribution

Normal distribution (2020), (Figure 4) is composed of human figures, of varying sizes, tightly restricted to the bell-shaped curve. With space on either side, some larger figures taking up more space than others, possibly lifting or constricting, possibly frozen into position. The diversity of coloured ink is placed at random, attempting to evenly distribute colour with no structure or strategy.

This piece depicts the help-giver, the largest figure, highlighted in yellow in the foreground of the image. The help-giver's hands are located at each end of the distribution. This

Figure 4*Normal distribution*

piece depicts my own apprehensions and conflicts of the application of realist concepts in social service. On the one hand, promoting distributive justice and, on the other, the potential maintenance of inequity through inaction.

Summary

Initially, I felt apprehensive about both writing this article and sharing my artworks, largely because I grew concerned that these actions themselves might reaffirm the idea of responsibility to affected social identities. The writing process brought about the idea that there may be an unconscious need for permission to discuss discrimination by those not easily identified as personally affected. Despite reservations, the work of Hirsch (2018) reminded me that it is only when presented with an alternative view that we can reflect on aspects of our own internalised narratives and that absence of these alternatives may make it difficult to understand our own accounts of experience and selective historical aspects absorbed from the narratives of other, more dominant, experiences (p. 50).

From what was learned, it appears that there are calls from within the helping professions for review of the pedagogy and curriculum for cultural competence. There are calls for the inclusion of cultural competence within the curriculum and/or a more rigorous approach to the teaching of cultural awareness for helping professionals. There are also calls for the review of the pedagogical “facts” on “cultures” or cultural “traits” in teaching practice (Knipper, 2013).

Review of literature suggests that the concept of cultural competence includes definable elements, with an initial element of willingness and openness. There appears to be overall agreement, across fields, of the importance of micro- and

macro-level cultural competencies involving practitioners’ own knowledge and scrutiny of their own socio-historical embedded identities. There is caution shared about the potential for practical attempts for decolonisation of thinking and practice which may inadvertently suggest to learners that their racial experiences are not valid or real (Leonardo, 2002).

The literature guides those facilitating cultural competency to develop insight into their own racial identity, a task which could be challenging given Wood and Patel’s (2017) assertion that privilege [...] renders [discrimination] invisible (p. 13). Eddo-Lodge offers an important description of “White privilege” as the *absence* of the negative consequences of racism (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 86). This absence of consequences, and subsequent invisibility of discrimination, is a potential barrier to the implementation of cultural competence pedagogy.

Within the psychology context, the inclusion of culture within psychological formulation is encouraging. In training and practice, the next steps might include explicitly defining concepts and applying established theories of the mind to stimulate scrutiny. The literature provides several strategies that can be provided for newly qualified helping professionals (Demie & McLean, 2018; Gillborn, 2020; Leonardo, 2002) and novel teaching tools (Golightly & Nottis, 2017; Poyrazli & Hand, 2011).

Currently, Eurocentric norming is present within the helping professions. This article focused on discrimination based on skin colour. Coloured People Artworks is presented as a tool to support the facilitation of cultural competence within the helping professions. It is hoped that the works can provide visual stimulation for critical reflection on mental associations linked to skin colour. Colleagues might find this tool useful in (1) supporting professionals to permit themselves to allow the external world to drop away and explore the subjective self, (2) reducing the conflicts identified based on the facilitators own awareness of social identity, and (3) mitigate any attributions of responsibility for reflection on those possessing particular social identities.

My view is that our ability to reflect on our senses, our thoughts and absorbed narratives during interactions with our cohorts, colleagues and service users offers invaluable opportunities for critical reflection in both training and practice. The works I have shared may offer support to the effort focused on addressing these social issues within the helping professions. It is hoped that this novel tool can foster a sense of practitioner-wide responsibility for the decolonisation of helping within professional practice, and I welcome any discussion or collaboration on the use of these tools.

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