

# Race and the core conditions

**Dwight Turner** revisits a classic text exploring race and Rogerian counselling that he believes should be on every course list

In 2006, I took my first trip to Africa. The aim of my journey was to complete a task set out in a dream I'd had several years before, directing me to visit Victoria Falls in Zambia. On my way back from that personal pilgrimage, I and my travelling companion decided to spend a few days on the island of Zanzibar, off the coast of Tanzania. While we were there, we visited the capital, Stone Town, to take in the sights and smells of Forodhani Gardens at night, visit the Old Fort and sample the food of Mercury's Restaurant on the seafront.

But the most important part of my journey was a visit to Christ Church, the Anglican cathedral on Mkunazini Road. It stands on the site of the biggest slave market on the island, which was the epicentre of the slave trade along the East African coast - a trade maintained by the British-supported Sultanate of Oman. On my visit, wandering through the former slave pens, which can still be seen beneath the cathedral, I could feel the oppressive - no, horrific - experiences of the hundreds of men and women who would have been kept down there, chained together, waiting for their turn to march out to the waiting boats to be taken to one of the other colonies. But it was in the cathedral itself that I was most affected by the visit. Our guide took us through the building and pointed to one circular slab of marble among all the other memorials that you would expect to see in such a setting. This one, our guide explained, was where the tree for the slave market stood. And it was there, against that tree, that slaves were chained and then beaten. The aim of the beating was not to discipline the slaves but to evidence what these slaves were worth. The slaves who could endure a harsher beating without crying out would fetch more money in the market. These stories, these scenes, formed a huge part of the experience of black men and women during the time of slavery, and long after; the enduring of pain has been a significant feature of our bodies' traumatic transgenerational memory for hundreds of years.

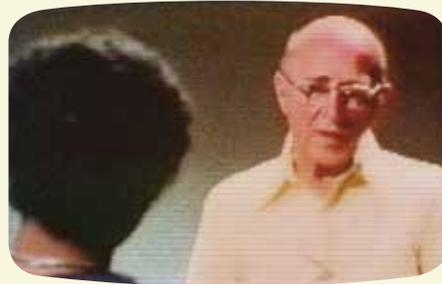
### Anger and hurt

Recently, I had reason to read *Carl Rogers Counsels a Black Client*,<sup>1</sup> a collection of essays gathered together by Roy Moodley, Anissa Talahite and Colin Lago and published in 2004, that examines in detail two

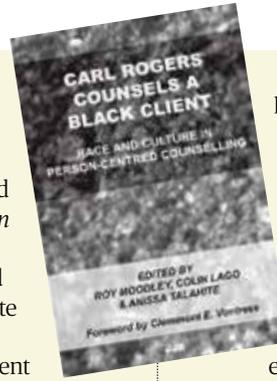
demonstration videos made by Carl Rogers of counselling sessions with an anonymous black client. The videos are titled *The Right to be Desperate* and *On Anger and Hurt*. The client was in recovery from leukaemia and recently separated from his white wife and their young children.

Before reading the book, I went online and re-watched the videos. I say 're-watch' because, while I had heard of them, for the life of me I had no recollection whether I had seen them before or not. My four-year training as a psychotherapist only involved two hours of work on difference; issues around race were mashed into the same tokenistic space as those of gender, sexual difference, disability, ageism and all the other protected characteristics of the 2010 Equalities Act. The only research I did around difference and psychotherapy during this time was when I personally sought out articles on difference and re-read books on racial struggles in the UK and US. That this book was not even on my course reading list back in 2004 shouts loudly just how much trainings struggled to engage with difference, and in particular race, less than 20 years ago.

So, watching these videos from that simplistic perspective is of itself a good beginning in any exploration of the main tenets of person-centred counselling and



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psychotherapy. But the idea that these tenets could and should cross racial lines surely demanded that books such as this should be recommended to students to encourage exploration and engagement with the difficulties such assumptions raise. For

example, although I work as an integrative psychotherapist and teach on a psychodynamic counselling course, my work still references Rogers' person-centred approach within it. The core conditions form a hugely important layer in my relationship with my clients, even across racial lines. When I work with other black clients, it is often in the sauna of racial empathy that we meet, where the supposed similarity of experiences allows us to build the container within which my clients can explore their lives outside the counselling room, where whiteness dominates, nay moulds, their identity.

### Otherness

One of my most interesting engagements with Rogers' work over the years since I trained was reading a transcript of the conference conversation he had with the eminent theologian Martin Buber.<sup>2</sup> Their discussion, about the similarities and differences between the Rogerian and Buberian approaches to relationship, spoke heavily to me of the importance of recognising how we position the other, be it consciously or unconsciously. To me it is significant to note that Buber's perspective arose out of his experiences of oppression during the Second World War, and were therefore driven more by his 'outsiderness' than by his privilege, whereas Rogers' views were the opposite. That a traditional Rogerian approach could eschew the political relational while many of Buber's ideas arose out the experience of political oppression points out for me how difficult it is for most of us to keep politics out of psychotherapy - should we wish to.

Holistically though, it is important to recognise that psychotherapy has changed in this country since this book was first published more than a decade and a half ago. Its chapters talk about the dearth of black counsellors and psychotherapists, yet here in the UK organisations such as the

Black, African and Asian Therapist Network (BAATN) have emerged and are working extremely hard and effectively to support practitioners from across all cultures and modalities, including person-centred psychotherapy. Along parallel lines, the number of black practitioners has mushroomed, and many are forging new ways of working based on the foundations laid by Rogers, Buber and Freud. More and more black writers and theorists are constructing and challenging political narratives around race and cultural difference and otherness, looking at how race manifests in the psychotherapy room, how oppression works, and differences among non-white cultures, to name but a few of the avenues covered in our increasing explorations.<sup>3-7</sup>

We live in an age where there is an increasing attention within psychotherapy to how privilege and otherness feature in the therapy room, and how a more intersectional understanding of identity opens the door to a complex and more nuanced exploration and understanding of oppression. One of the more interesting contemporary angles on exploring these more nuanced perspectives is intersectionality.<sup>8,9</sup> Briefly, intersectionality recognises that we hold multiple identities at all times - identities that then make up a whole. The notion of intersectionality divides these identities into sections that are either oppressed or hold privilege. For example, Raskin recognised that 'Rogers was a product of his time - a white, middle-class male who assumed a place of privilege in a white male-valuing society... his capacity for empathising with women was limited. So, too, was his capacity for empathising with black people'.<sup>10</sup> Rogers' lack of awareness of his own intersectional identity and how these competing aspects of who he was might have impacted on his client probably explains some of his over-assertiveness. For example, re-watching the videos through Rogers' person-centered lens, it makes sense that he would compliment the client on his ability to hold and acknowledge his anger. Yet, given Roger's position as a white, heterosexual, able-bodied man, his assertion that the client is a credit to his race, in the historical context, could be seen as a compliment from the privileged safety of

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his whiteness towards the acculturated (or enslaved) blackness of the other.

### White privilege

I could hypothesise that it is the unconscious fear of Rogers' whiteness that leads the client to resist Rogers' best efforts to get him to open up emotionally and express himself authentically. Rogers clearly assumes that the client resides within the same cultural space - cultural container - as Rogers himself. That he fails to acknowledge or question this now widely recognised, fundamental assumption is an example of Rogers' privilege at play.

Yet, can I really fault Rogers for this lack of awareness of the cultural context of his work? Possibly not. In his foreword to the 2004 edition of the book, Clemmont E Vontress offers a succinct explanation of what culture is: '... culture is an embodiment of time as it constantly re-invents itself to respond to new ideas, technologies, environmental conditions, and politics'. Holding this statement in mind, I am struck by just how forward-thinking this book is in its time, and therefore increasingly important today, in exploring the role, formation and impact of racial dynamics within the psychotherapy space.

I question whether therapy can, or even should, divorce itself from the cultural

construct it is always operating within. Some examples of important dates around the time of the videos and the explorations within this book add weight to this argument. For example, 1974, when these videos were made, was the year not only when Nixon resigned from office as president of the USA but also when Muhammad Ali defeated George Foreman in Zaire in the fabled 'Rumble in the Jungle'. It was also the year that Alberta Williams King, the mother of Martin Luther King, was murdered at a church service in Atlanta, Georgia. Meantime, in 1976, here in the UK, the Race Relations Act became law, racial discrimination was finally outlawed and race started its long journey towards becoming an aspect of identity protected by law.

If we shift the historical focus even slightly to 2004, the year this book was first published, the US, the UK and their allies were at war in Iraq, and in this same year Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King were both posthumously awarded Congressional Gold Medals by the US Government for their invaluable civil rights work. Since then, the US has had its first black president in Barack Obama, and in 2012, London opened the 27th Olympic and Paralympic Games with a cacophony of colour and music designed to present and celebrate the best of British diversity and acceptance.<sup>11</sup>

This was a time when many of us fantasised about post-racialism - a mirage many of us fell for and drowned in. The vision stands in stark contrast to today's reality, in 2020 - an era where Donald Trump has been elected President of the US, where racism is as prevalent in the narratives of that nation as it has ever been, while here in the UK, Brexit has fuelled the vilification of minorities and xenophobia has, arguably, been the key factor leading to the UK's departure from the European Economic Union.<sup>12-14</sup>

### Nuanced exploration

Culture, like any aspect of society that informs us and our identities, has never been a static space or a fixed position of safety, echoing Hegel's concept of man's journey being like a river,<sup>15</sup> meandering back and forth on itself. Rogers' videos are about the core conditions and his presentation

of them is perfectly fine. But this does not mean that there is no space to explore the more nuanced aspects of these interactions and offer ideas about how person-centred therapists might work with black clients, with women or with any other type of intersectional identity.

Language and how we express ourselves are another factor that identifies culture and one's position within that cultural space. As Christine Clarke rightly points out, there is a silencing of female clients in patriarchal environments - an experience often reported by black clients when there is an attempt to look at difference through the lens of race.<sup>6</sup> Being black means we often adapt when in white spaces.<sup>16</sup> We may change the language we use when working in white spaces, whether by suppressing patois or using more Anglocentric words and expressions. Both these strategies are built on a fear of systemic whiteness and are an adapted means of deferring to the power dynamic within a supremacist environment. For Rogers, a white man of privilege in the age of the civil rights movement, to be unaware of this power dynamic, while also giving permission to his black male client to express himself, is at best racially confusing and at worst one of the most scary things for a black client to experience.

Roy Moodley's exploration of ideas of whiteness was very much ahead of its time and makes some interesting points with regard to the importance for white counsellors of understanding their own racial identity. What does it mean to be white? How does being white impact on the racial other in the therapy space? While studies of the construct of whiteness and its impacts are increasing,<sup>17,18</sup> these are ideas that have come from outside counselling and psychotherapy, from authors such as Fanon,<sup>19</sup> Memmi<sup>20</sup> and other post-colonialists, who have long argued for an exploration and therefore an understanding of whiteness in relation to blackness. If we lean outside of person-centered therapy, Brewster's excellent book on race as a Jungian complex presents some interesting ideas as to how this social construction of race binds both white and black parties together in psychotherapy.<sup>21</sup>

Ideas and assumptions will always be present in conversations between two

people, because at no time are we totally authentic, and at no time are we totally free from believing we know something, anything, and even occasionally everything about the person sitting opposite us. This is particularly so in racialised therapy spaces. So, while it is impossible to be free of these, if they are not at least acknowledged, they will come out in some of the clumsy comments, assumptions and directiveness that make person-centered working problematic for black clients.

### Anger

So, returning to my trip to Africa, one of the other emotions I experienced on that day in the cathedral in Stone Town, Zanzibar, was anger. On reading *Carl Rogers Counsels a Black Client*, on watching the videos, the one aspect that most resonated for me as a black man was empathy with the client in his struggles to allow his anger to the surface. Allowing our anger to be seen can feel like a risk, even for me and even now, at this stage in my career. From the layers of silencing to the backlash of whiteness, to be able to freely express myself is to be able to rise above my racialised conditioning towards an authentic expression of my blackness, without fear of punishment or annihilation.

Reading this book and watching the videos in this era of racial supremacy and the re-emergence of the racial distress of the black other, I am struck by how much ahead of its time the book actually was. It deserves to be read and regularly re-read, and to be added to as we deepen our understanding of how Rogerian psychotherapy works with black clients. ■



### About the author

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