

My Psychotherapy Career: The need for diversity in psychotherapy

With UKCP psychotherapist Eugene Ellis

Jenna:

Hello and welcome to My Psychotherapy Career, a podcast where we explore the different therapeutic settings our members work in, and how they came into their career. I'm Jenna Rachid, the Digital Engagement Officer at UKCP. Our host Helen Willingham is the Head of Content and Engagement at UKCP, overseeing all our communications to members and the public, as well as our policy and research work. In this episode, Helen speaks to UKCP psychotherapist Eugene Ellis. Eugene trained as an integrative art psychotherapist and set up a private practice in London, offering psychotherapy to individuals as well as adoption support, supervision and training. He is the founder and director of the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network, an organisation which aims to encourage people of African, South Asian and Caribbean heritages to proactively engage with psychological support and encourage more diversity in the therapy profession, where marginalised groups are underrepresented. Eugene has a particular interest in body-orientated therapies and facilitating dialogues within organisations and in psychotherapy trainings around race and culture as it relates to the body. In this episode, Eugene talks to Helen about his leadership role working to support diversity in the therapeutic profession.

Helen:

Thank you for joining me today, Eugene. It's really great to speak to you. Following on from Jenna's intro, I just wanted to pick up on some of that, and you set up the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network. Can you tell us what prompted you to start this organisation?

Eugene :

After I finished my training, I was asked by quite a lot of people, actually, whether they knew of any sort of Black or Asian counsellors they could refer people to, or be referred to. And I didn't really not many. I knew a couple of people I trained with, but that was it. I didn't have anyone to really refer to. And I think there was a sense of isolation, even with those therapists that I knew. And I just assumed that there'd be some kind of, sort of directory or something online. And I found that there wasn't, but maybe they've set one up in America, perhaps, no. So, there wasn't really any in the world, it seemed like. There needed to be somewhere for people who have Black, African, South Asian, Caribbean heritage to go somewhere to be, sort of, met really with a sense of enthusiasm, and a place to sort of connect with shared experiences, learn from one another, inspire each other, or even just to sort of have a simple referral. I didn't set out to create something like that. But that's kind of where it sort of led.

Helen:

So how did you get started, then? You know... how did you really go about setting up the network?

Eugene:

I mean, the first thing I thought I could do is just respond to the people who were asking me whether I knew a therapist, and I got a bit of funding to an organisation called Unlimited, which I think they're connected to the Big Lottery. But they got a couple of thousand pounds and, basically, I use that to set up a website online and do some advertising. So, advertising in the UKCP Journal, the BACP journal and various other places, and just invited therapists of colour to register on the database, and so that clients who were looking good, just go online and see who's around. I didn't know how many people, how many therapists of colour there were in the UK, so I had no idea how many people would join this thing. But, you know, it started to grow in numbers, we got to about 100. So that's kind of how it started. And it went on from there, really, because people on the directory got back to me and said 'why don't we meet up? There's quite a lot of us.' So, we did. We met up. And when we met up, we realized, actually, that we needed to do more. We needed to support students, support each other, build theory, practice together. People just saying, 'this is what we need to do,' and getting into groups and trying to get on with it.

Helen:

And how did you manage that as it grew?

Eugene

I mean, I was a full-time therapist at the time, and, I mean, I did it in the evenings, going into the night. So, building the website, you know, writing copy, doing events. So, it was kind of something I did on the side. It took up a lot of time, but it was also very rewarding as well, you know, because obviously I was creating a network for other people, but I was also creating a network for myself. So, I was kind of highly motivated, because, you know, it was for me, as well. And so, people do ask, 'where did I get the energy from?' I don't know, to be fair. I just got on with it. Yeah.

Helen:

Yeah, that's great. And just thinking about your training a bit. How was your experience of training as a Black therapist? And do you think there have been any changes since then?

Eugene:

My experience of job training, I mean, fortunately, I mean, I had therapy before. And I also had a group therapy, or group therapist experience, which was really, really positive. The therapist was a white therapist, but, you know, she was very switched on to, you know, race issues, you know, how they affect mental health, and, you know, loads of other issues around that. And that was a really good experience for me, actually. I learned quite a lot by being in this group space that this therapist was holding, that I just, I guess I just assumed that this was the world of therapy, really. But, you know, unfortunately, it didn't translate into my actual training experience. The experience I had was quite a rare one. While I was doing my training, we put together a kind of group, we call that out to Black and Asian group. And we met just to support each other, think about what we were doing together. You know, we were going to be launching careers as therapists and we had no real models as such, or there were very few models that we were following. So, we had to kind of create our own way in some way. Have things changed? Well, I think that there has been change, in so much as there's a lot more awareness that something needs to happen around, you know, racial awareness in mental health, generally speaking, having the conversations with clients and with supervisees, and between professionals. So, I think the awareness is a lot more than it was certainly when I was training. There's a lot to be done, of course, still. When it comes to racialised people, therapy is not

really that well served for it at the moment. So, I think students are very keen and very active in kind of letting institutions know. And institutions are responding, I think, the best they can. People wanting things to change, but not quite knowing exactly what that looks like. There's also attempts to keep things as they are as well. So, there's that little battle going on, or big battle sometimes, in some institutions.

Helen:

You kind of touched on this a little bit in regard to working with client groups. But why is it important that therapists represent the communities that they serve and the people that they're working with?

Eugene:

I mean, it's not something that people have to do, I guess, but there's lots of layers to this. If we're just talking about the therapists themselves, I mean, there's something about, you know, working with your community, especially if you're part of a socially sanctioned, oppressed group, like racialised people. There's something about that, that's healing in itself, you know, this kind of idea of contribution to the community. You know, there's quite a lot of benefit for the therapists themselves in terms of their own personal healing, I think.

Helen:

You also work with psychotherapy trainings and with organisations as well and look at facilitating dialogue about race and culture, and how it relates to the body. How did that begin and come about?

Eugene:

Yeah, I mean, my work has been mainly in adoption. So, working with families, working with complex trauma. And, you know, that's trauma and attachment, really, work. And, you know, learning more and more about it, sort of noticing the dynamics of trauma. All this stuff I was learning, when I sort of began to see that there's something very similar going on around racial trauma. Again, it's very relational, racial trauma, just like attachment and adoption. And I started to apply what I was learning to race. And what was very helpful for me was to focus on my body when I was getting into race conversations. I was quite interested in meditation and mindfulness. And I could just feel all this stuff going on in my body, which kind of took up most of my thinking space, you know, 'how can I get away from this body, that's really got a lot of things going on inside it? How could I think?' And I guess in trauma theory, you don't really move away from it at all, you actually embrace, you know, the embodied experience you're having, and you trust that's going to give you a bit of space, that sort of gap I guess, between stimulus and response. So, yeah, so I began to write about that in sort of journal articles. A year and a half ago, I wrote a book called *The Race Conversation*. And you know, as a way of kind of, you know, not just focusing on what you say, but how you say it, and how you feel and how you communicate beyond words. So, the more people got to know about that kind of stuff that I was writing - a lot of therapy trainings and organisations became interested in that. I mean, you know, a lot of people know about trauma, they know about attachment, they've used it in other things, other contexts. And it was easy, relatively easy, for them to sort of say, 'okay, well, this is going on in this particular area, as well.' So, for a lot of people it feels very natural to focus on the body and trauma around race, and the conversation facilitating dialogue. Yeah, so I think people just connected to that idea. And I do a lot of conversations with organisations and stuff at the moment.

Helen:

Great, thank you. And you spend most of your time now working as the director of BAATN, which is the **UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)**, America House, 2 America Square, London, EC3N 2LU

Black, African and Asian Therapy Network. Where does your heart lie?

Eugene:

My whole life, really, is informed by a therapeutic perspective, really. Even being the director of BAATN, I'm sort of bringing a lot of those kind of ideas. I've train around to that role, and to working with the various groups that I'm working with. And you know, racial trauma is informed through sort of collective relationships, really, and needs to be healed through collective relationships. So, my heart really lies in that process, really, of collective healing.

Helen:

And in that sense, does your psychotherapeutic knowledge then inform your leadership?

Eugene:

Yes, it does, yes. It sort of mixes a little bit with Buddhism, because I'm a Buddhist as well. And psychotherapeutic approach and Buddhism kind of go hand in hand for me. And, you know, this idea of meeting challenge, meeting distress in a particular way that's going to give you more chance for you to actually make a connection, make a dialogue, you know, create new experiences. And that's very therapeutic. This is all very therapeutic approach, isn't it? So, you know, everything I do in terms of leadership, and what I'm going to do next, or what I'm thinking of doing, kind of has those, you know, all people are worthy of respect kind of ethos underlying it. Other people have different styles and different ways of approaching this issue. And I think all styles are valid. And they all have value in certain ways. But for me, that's kind of the approach that I take. And training as a therapist has kind of really, yeah, just helped solidify that, really.

Helen:

Great, thank you. And I'll take you back a bit and ask you, why did you become a psychotherapist? And what prompted you to begin training?

Eugene:

Oh, I had therapy in my late 20s, as I said. It was transactional analysis, and it was suggested I do some group therapy, which I've also spoke about. Overall, you know, it was very positive. Parts of myself that I didn't know were there sort of came to the fore. It allowed me to be myself more. And, you know, for me, it was overall a very positive experience. And then I kind of made a transition from the job that I was doing at the time, which was as sound engineer, to, well, what am I going to do next? And I tried a few things out, I went and done a lot of courses. I just happened to be on this art and education course, which was actually the first year of a psychotherapy course. I didn't know that at the time because I was interested in the art and education thing. And in the group as well, in a group therapy, I was surrounded by therapists. Actually, this was a group therapy that included lots of trainee therapists. So, I kind of got to know therapists as well. And I just kind of found myself on this path, really, of training to become a therapist and everything just kind of seemed to fit in with me, really, you know, the ideas that were being spoken about in therapy, therapeutic practice. And yeah, it was kind of like a slow burn to eventually kind of saying, 'okay, let's go for this, you know, let's do it.' And all the pieces seem to fall in the right place.

Helen:

That's exactly what you want, isn't it? And obviously it led to where you are today. So...

Eugene:
Yeah.

Helen:
Yeah. Another kind of question for you to have a think about. Who is your psychotherapy or counselling hero?

Eugene:
I think I've got two heroes and they've both past actually as well. One is Lennox Thomas who was a psychoanalytical psychotherapist, born in Grenada. Started off as a social worker. He passed in April 2020. Not that I knew him that well. We occasionally met. And he was just there, I guess, when I was training. So, he was just there as a therapist working as Black man, the only other Black male therapist that I knew. He was part of Nafsiyat Intercultural Therapy Centre, which has had many reincarnations, but it's still around, still doing really good work. So, I remember him talking about Nafsiyat, really. And from his perspective, Nafsiyat had really long waiting lists. You know the narrative is that Black people don't go to counselling, you know, that's the narrative. And yet, this place had a long waiting list of people wanting to come to this intercultural therapy centre. From his take on things was that actually, you know, if you offer it in the right way, then people will come. And if you don't offer in the right way, then they won't. And then there's an assumption that they don't come because they don't want it, or they don't need it, or whatever. So, he kind of opened my eyes up to this idea 'oh actually, you know, you need to make the offer compelling, you know, you have to sort of do it right and then people will come.' Which was a very different way that things were being spoken about at that time. Another person who I got to know really well, Arike, who died in June 2020, actually, but I knew him quite well. And he was just, yeah, just the kind of person I wanted to be, I guess. He was very open to new ideas. He was very keen to support other people to get on with what they wanted to do, and he would be supporting them in the background. He'd been around for many, many years, worked in Broadmoor in Black men's groups there. So, in a way, he kind of brought out this, a part of me really, this kind of leader part of things, and he always used to talk about that with me, you know, the role that I have, and yeah, just made me look up that role in very, very interesting ways. He was very interested in that side of me. So, he's another hero of mine. Yeah.

Helen:
Thank you for sharing those. And what does being a UKCP member mean to you?

Eugene:
Clients I have, I mean, in the way, they know I'm part of the UKCP, gives them the sense that there's some kind of security around that. And they can seek redress if they feel like I'm not giving them the service that they need or crossing boundaries in some ways. But it's also that gives the clients a sense, and me as well, that I'm not just working on my own here, that there's a kind of a community of other therapists that are kind of possibly challenging me, I'm challenging them. And, yeah, so those are those kind of two areas really around feeling a sense of security for clients, and also a sense of community for me.

Helen:
Now, I want you to think back to training a bit. And then, is there anything you wish you knew before you started psychotherapeutic training? I know we talked about it being a bit of happenstance and you moving

slowly into it, but is there anything that stands out as you think, I wish I did know that'?

Eugene:

Well, yeah, I mean, I went into training, and I've had this from other students who I speak to, and maybe I had it more than most, given my previous experience of group therapy. But I went through the training with a lot of hope, really, and that, you know, race could be discussed, talked about, how it impacts people's lives. It could be, you know, a conversation, ongoing conversation. And it didn't really work out like that. I mean, there was a lot of frustration or disillusionment I had to kind of work through. So, I guess I wish I knew more about, and was more prepared for, the challenge of addressing that. I think a lot of time was spent trying to work out what's going on, and kind of reorienting myself to the space I thought I was going to be in to the one I was actually in. So, I spent a lot of time in that place. So, I kind of wish I knew more about that before, so I wouldn't have spent that time doing that. And I think that's part of BAATN's remit as well, is actually just bringing people to a place of kind of, well, this is the landscape you're joining, and then having some kind of support for the experiences that they may have.

Helen:

That's great, and you're looking to kind of, not addressed totally because everyone's experience is going to be different, but that there is that network to explore that more. It's great.

Eugene:

Yeah. I think for a lot of Black and Brown and people of colour, trainees... as they're going through the therapy, they're also going through a kind of a process of kind of consolidating, coming to terms with working through their racial identity. So, it's quite a lot of work to be doing in the middle of a training. And it's difficult to do it on your own. It is. So, we're really pleased that BAATN's kind of survived as long as it has. We're coming up to our 20th anniversary next year. It's given us enough time to build up the resources, and the people, and connections because even you know, the mentoring project, for instance, has been running for many years, and people have come through the training as students, and now they're mentoring other students, which is really, really satisfying to see. And very, very good for the students.

Helen:

Yeah, that's great. And when you were training, how did you manage the logistics, the cost, the time to train, the different aspects of training?

Eugene:

Fortunately, my previous job was quite well paid. So, kind of had a bit of a break from what I was doing before, which originally was going to be six months. It turned into almost three years. And in that time, I was kind of doing loads of different things, but I also started the training. I did sort of run out of money towards the end and so I had to get a job. So, there was a bit of struggle towards the end of my training. But at that time, the government did provide some financial support. I still had to pay the money back, but it's very different now. It's not available in that in the same kind of ways it is now. So yeah, for me personally, it was only towards the end that financially became kind of a bit more of a struggle. And the time, I had the time because I'd taken time off to just purposely find a new direction.

Helen:

Yeah, and what advice would you give to someone considering training as a psychotherapist or

psychotherapeutic counsellor?

Eugene:

Be prepared to change. I think there's a sense that 'okay, I'm going to be helping people'. When you start training, you realise actually, what the work is about is knowing yourself. So yeah, so the advice would be, you know, be prepared to know yourself.

Helen:

Yeah, I was nodding along there because I think we've made some really good points. And actually, my last question, which was going to be this anyway, but you've mentioned change quite a lot is how is training changed you?

Eugene:

There's change, and then there's becoming more of who I already am. And I think it's probably the latter. But it feels like change. It feels like radical change. It's actually about getting rid of the bits that are in the way, or the false self, you know, trying to be more of the true self that you are. It's a mix of the training and a mix of being part of a community, such as BAATN. I think they've both really gone hand in hand, really. But yeah, no, it's been completely transformative really, I think for me.

Helen:

Thank you. And I think probably one of those things is that you will always continue to develop with new clients and with new experiences.

Eugene:

Yeah, no, absolutely. Yeah. There's always something new to learn. There's always another layer of the onion to peel. There's always more of yourself lurking there that you didn't know that was there before.

Helen:

That's great. Thank you. I think that's a really nice note to end on as well. So, thank you very much for joining me today, Eugene. It's been really great to hear all about your psychotherapy career and your training. So, thank you.

Eugene:

My pleasure.

Jenna:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Eugene Ellis speaking to Helen Willingham, our Head of Content and Engagement. If you're interested in exploring training, then you can visit our psychotherapy training page, where you can find information on psychotherapy as a career, as well as the different training pathways available to you. Just go to www.psychotherapy.org.uk/psychotherapy-training. All episodes of My Psychotherapy Career are available on our website, psychotherapy.org.uk. You can also subscribe to our channel, UKCP, on your favourite streaming platform. Do you have any feedback you'd like to share with us on this episode or any from our series? Get in touch with us at communications@ukcp.org.uk. Join us again next month. Till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.