

Pedagogies for Social Justice

Tamara Naouri

Transcribed by www.premiertyping.com, alison.mcpherson@premiertyping.com

Interviewer – Italics

Interviewee – Normal

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Hello, welcome to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast. I'm Fatima Maatwk and I will be your host today. I am very happy and excited to welcome Tamara Naouri, who is a Jordanian trainee counselling psychologist in the UK. Thank you, Tamara, for your time today, and welcome to our podcast.

Thank you for having me.

Just to start, I would like to ask you what brought you to Counselling Psychology, so why Counselling Psychology?

Well, I'd need to take you back to when I was 10 years old [laughing]. I was very fascinated by human behaviour, the dynamics within my family, within a couples' context or with my parents, with their parents, and it's just...I've just been very passionate about Psychology since then. I graduated school and I wanted to do Psychology actually in the States, but that didn't work out at the time, so I did a Bachelor in Management Sciences, and I couldn't carry on with Business – I felt...I always felt like something was missing. So, I decided to have my own private practice, and I saw that I would need to have another Bachelor, and then, eventually, reached to a doctorate level. So, now, I'm here, and very close to the finish-line, so I'm happy about that. In my search, I was looking at Clinical Psychology versus Counselling Psychology, and I found that Counselling Psychology was more relatable to me because the ethos of Counselling Psychology is very humanitarian and, yeah, so that's why I chose Counselling Psychology.

Thank you, and congratulations in advance of almost reaching the finish-line!

Thank you!

And thank you for sharing the background story. So, moving onto your educational journey in the UK, could you tell us, did you ever find yourself facing challenges, navigating your identity, as a Jordanian, female student at a UK university?

Definitely. This is actually something I've been working on in my personal therapy and it's... So, my general experience in introducing myself, first of all, as a Jordanian to my lecturers, I would always get this very strange look, first of all, and, you know, it kind of feels like they're asking me "What is Jordan – where is that?" and so I would need to say, you know, it's in the Middle East and I'd need to mention countries that are more commonly known, so like Iraq, Palestine, Syria, due to unfortunate circumstances, but they are more commonly known. And, because of that, the following, let's say, underlying prejudice that I would receive would be "Can she actually do this - would she be able to cope with the requirements of an academic piece of work?" for example. And so, I always, always felt that I had to do triple the work just so I would prove myself. And then I would, so that would be a fantastic... relief, let's say, which is quite sad to feel, but it does feel good to kind of say or, you know, represent myself as someone who is able to cope with the pressures and up to the standards of UK education. And that was throughout my Bachelor's, Master's, and not Doctorate.

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Thank you for sharing this. This sounds really intense to go through. It's also related to my next question. So, if you think of the journey through the UK educational system, do you feel you had any access to good representations of individuals like you or persons you can relate to on an identity level?

Okay. So, within my Bachelor's, no one at all. But in terms of my ethnicity, no, I would say no, not through my Bachelor's degree, not through my Master's degree. In my Doctorate, we had a lecturer that briefly joined the staff and she's...she was born and raised here, but she is of Moroccan origins. She had just finished her viva. She was very excited and passionate about helping. So, she's quite, you know, open in terms of talking about the Arabic culture in general, and she was very helpful when talking about my research, which is focused on the experience of marital tension for Jordanian couples. So, the way she had helped me, the way she introduced different, let's say, challenges that I might face, or limitations, along my journey of interviewing Jordanians – so, cultural aspects like, for example, finding it difficult to air their laundry, so to speak, so that was something that we discussed extensively, and that was very, very helpful for me because I was able to think of my research not just academically but also culturally.

And there is another lecturer who is Syrian, but she's been doing this for 12 years and I felt like... she's more ingrained in the...let's say...professionalism of the work, which is quite, you know, hierarchical, and so I wasn't able to identify with her as much.

Otherwise, no, I didn't have any...anyone that I felt represented me in any way or that I could relate to or identify with within academia.

I'm glad there was one good example, but it is a very sad fact that it is this way. So, talking a bit more about Counselling Psychology as a discipline, as a practice or a service, what spaces within Counselling Psychology do you feel have been colonised or are racist?

Every space [laughing]!

Good start!

Okay, so just to give you a bit of context, Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology, within that degree, you would need to do practical work, so you would need to finish 450 clinical hours and you would need to do the academic part of things. So, we have assessments throughout the years and then we have our research. Working within different spaces, which would include charities, the NHS, and university, I guess, I have been faced with quite a few discriminatory situations. For example, I've worked in a charity where I gave counselling in Arabic, and one of the – so, within that group of people, there was a lot of issues around housing, around immigration papers, things like that, and I kept saying that we needed to contact or have a contact with Social Services or Housing, you know, just to kind of be a bridge between the two services, and, you know, someone...I was met with a response that "Oh, it's always like that with Arabs".

Oh wow...

Yeah. As in it's...it's nothing new, it's nothing we can do anything about, and I just thought, you know, with that mentality, there is still so much that needs to be done and, you know, I didn't know what to respond to him, being an Arab myself, which he knew. It was a very sort of power dynamic...very difficult sort of situation to be in because I didn't know what to respond, you know, and it's a professional setting as well.

And I recently submitted an audit that I performed in an NHS service and it was around providing equal access to black and ethnic minority...individuals from a black and ethnic minority background, and I was absolutely shocked by the lack of resources, the lack of knowledge, the lack of...initiative to even start this movement.

And I've also seen an advert recently, in one of my placements, that specifically required someone who identified as a black person to apply for this job. Just to give a bit of context, everyone in my service is white British, so the fact that you're just now starting to look for someone from a different ethnic background is...absolutely shocking for me, especially that this service is located in a borough that has a very high percentage of individuals from a black and ethnic minority background.

So, in terms of spaces within academia, I actually looked at my timetables from throughout the three years, and I found that we have had about six or seven lectures in total about diversity, inclusion, anti-racism, and it was an absolutely shocking number for me because we...my cohort, we have been talking about including, you know, different lectures, different spaces, around different cultures, different backgrounds, different ethnicities, even how to work with them in a therapy room, because, like I said, the ethos of Counselling Psychology is quite humanitarian so we always talk about empathy, unconditional positive regard, being in the client's world, working through a very phenomenological position, so, going back to my curriculum, I saw that six or seven lectures were around – and I'm saying six or seven because I only found six and I don't want to have missed, you know, a certain lecture [laughing], so let's say seven lectures around... So, one was about social inequality and wellbeing; one was about working with honour crimes – that was a very fascinating lecture; one was around working with religion and spirituality; feminism and queer theory; working with transgender individuals. So, that's another thing: we did take one lecture about transgender individuals, but never took any lecture about sexuality in general. So, I had to go to external sources and enrol myself in different talks and workshops around that because I was curious myself, about myself, and then working with my clients as well, so I had my own experience around that. So, yeah, in short, all the spaces within Counselling Psychology have been colonised.

That's a very powerful statement, and thank you for sharing all of this. I just wonder, out of curiosity, so, for example, you say you had a lecture on honour crime – in what sense do you feel that this one lecture equips you to deal with maybe a client situation where this is a topic? Do you feel, even if, I mean, thankfully, there is a lecture – do you think it's enough in any way?

No. I have actually been thinking about that because, when I say lecture, I mean three hours, and when I say three hours, there's a half-hour break, so, technically, it's two-and-a-half hours, and, within that, there's the introduction of the guest lecturer and then we introduce ourselves and we talk about our own experience of, you know, what do we know about this topic or if we've ever worked with someone who experienced that. So, in total, I would say two hours or two hours and 15 minutes talking about this very huge, significant, traumatic experience – it's absolutely not enough. And the reason why I mentioned that we did take those lectures was just to be fair to all sides, but in terms of it being enough, absolutely not.

And I just...you just reminded me of something... In my first year, with my cohort, we introduced this idea – because we are quite a diverse cohort, I would say, so we've got some people from Ghana, we've got some people from Bangladesh, I'm from Jordan, one person was from Lebanon, so we had quite a diverse group, and we were suggesting that each of us would have like a presentation about our culture and what to be mindful of, what to do, what not to do, what to ask and how to ask it, how can we be considerate to their experience, and that never happened because... You know, we had a fixed term and there was no kind of...there wasn't enough time, I guess, but that was very, very important to do and take on board.

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Yeah, absolutely, and especially because you, as a cohort of students, you know what you need, and you know what's missing in the curriculum, so if you even have a way to provide that, it's an amazing...it sounds like an amazing initiative.

Mm, thank you.

It's a shame it wasn't taken up.

Yeah [laughing].

So, now moving to an even possibly more difficult question, what does de-colonising Counselling Psychology involve to you?

Okay. So, when I think about Counselling Psychology as a whole, I'm thinking about my work with clients, my clients' experience, institutions, organisations, the NHS, and universities, and training. So, the first thing that comes to mind is equal access and opportunity for all individuals of ethnic backgrounds, especially black and ethnic minority individuals, which then links in with their socioeconomic status. So, not everyone is able to access, due to different reasons, and mainly lack of resources. So, that would be the first thing that sort of comes to mind.

Following that step, let's say they did access the service, it's really, really important to consider cultural and religious factors and how they contribute to the client's day-to-day life, not only in the therapy room or within organisations, but also within academic settings. So, I just thought of an example: one of my colleagues at university is a practising Muslim woman and it was Ramadan time and we had a lecture on mindfulness. The mindfulness exercise entailed smelling, touching, tasting a tangerine, and the whole class – so, when we opened...you know how they...a really strong smell comes when you tear the tangerine – the whole class smelt of tangerine, and she was just sitting there and there was no consideration to the fact that she's fasting. You know, the lecturer could have asked if she was okay with staying in the room or leaving the classroom, or maybe even postponing that exercise to another time. You know, there are so many other things that we could have engaged with that would have equally stimulated our senses than, you know, a tangerine. So, I thought that was completely inappropriate, not very considerate.

And I guess also increasing lectures on working with these differences, so, you know, like I suggested, like I mentioned, we suggested each of us talk about their own culture – that would have been great because we all know the different challenges that we might possibly face in the therapy room. And so, even talking about culture, sexuality, religion, you know, it would have enriched our own knowledge, rather than going through the journey on our own. And just having a lot more lectures on diversity and inclusion, perhaps in a workshop setting... Yeah!

Thank you – these are really great examples, and they are also...I like that you have very practical things to say, so it's actually a good question, why institutions are not picking up on these ideas.

Yeah.

So, what do you think counselling psychologists, on the other hand, can do to help the processes of de-colonisation and anti-racism?

I think what needs to be done, and I think it's already being done, is to start a conversation. So, it's... you know, with the Black Lives movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, a lot of conversations have already started, but it's such a real shame that they started because of the whole uprising of the entire world talking about this, and then it's like, suddenly, oh, this is happening – let's talk about it. It's just... you know, it's great that it's started, but it's a real shame that it's had to start this way, which also links in with what happened in my university – like I said, it was like a wake-up call and everyone was in panic mode. I don't know if I mentioned this, but the staff of lecturers are all white British, except for the one Syrian lecturer, and I actually had only one black male lecturer, and he was absolutely fascinating as well because he introduced different cultural aspects to things – like he spoke about attachment theory and how that wouldn't apply in [collectivist] societies, which makes complete sense to me. I think, in the future, I will be working with Jordanians, possibly go back home, so I would have needed that information and not – it kind of feels like my brain is now wired to work with, you know, white British individuals, and I had to do a lot of extra work to educate myself about the different cultures, you know, because of my clients, but also, ultimately, because I'm curious myself. So, what would help with the process of de-colonisation would be to diversify the team, first of all, the staff – that's really, really important, and I think also diversify the material because... whilst the theories, let's say by Freud, for example, who was a German, Jewish male, would have a different sort of way of thinking than any other person from a different ethnic background. So, to start thinking about how the theories that we are learning can be actually implemented practically in a diverse context. So, working with a Muslim man, as a client, because of my own knowledge of Islam and because of how I was raised in a Muslim country, I was able to tune into that and explore his experiences from that lens, because he is a practising Muslim man so that plays a huge role in how he makes sense out of his experiences and how he perceives people around him, his environment, his experiences. So, yeah, I think that would... that would be very, very helpful, not only helpful, it's really important as well.

Thank you so much. It's very interesting to hear, even for me, because it's something I never thought about. We do think of things like there's only white lecturers or white therapists, but the fact that... that a theory you learn about, which is huge – I mean, with my limited knowledge, attachment theory is a big thing for someone who is becoming a psychologist, but the fact that this theory itself wouldn't necessarily apply to even myself, being an Egyptian person, so it's a lot of food for thought you are giving us here.

Thank you.

So, if we think more about the curriculum and how you experience it throughout your journey, what do you think lecturers need to do to de-colonise Counselling Psychology curricula?

The first thing that comes to mind would be for lecturers to educate themselves about the... different ways of meaning-making that clients and therapists, even students, can engage in, because that is quite important, and we are diverse, as human beings, we're very diverse. I could talk to two siblings that experience the same thing and they would give me two completely different perspectives about their experience. So, decolonising the curriculum would actually help to maintain an open and curious mind because it would introduce so many different factors, so many different aspects to the meaning-making process of things, and how people experience them, which would, in turn, lead to us, as therapists, or future therapists, to engage within that stance of curiosity and open-mindedness, and also having... You know, in my field, and I'm sure every field, knowledge is power, and being with my clients, and being knowledgeable about what they might potentially mean when they say the word "anger" or the word "shame" - specifically "shame" has so many different meanings in so many different cultures. Because, in a collectivist society, when you talk about shame, you're talking about shame in front of your entire extended family, for example, even their friends, and friends of friends, that might possibly know who you are; but when you talk about shame in an individualist culture, it's a very different experience – it wouldn't necessarily be linked with that many external individuals, but it wouldn't dismiss the experience, just the difference between the two. So, in that sense, having just good enough knowledge about each culture and background would very much enrich the process.

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Yeah, absolutely, I agree, and I think, to approach that even remotely, we would need to start by accepting other cultures, but that's a whole different conversation [laughing]!

Definitely!

Yeah. So, you mentioned a lot about the lectures you had and you sort of referred to your peers, so, if you think a little bit, what kind of topics or issues have you found to be difficult to address or discuss in the classroom, whether with your lecturers or with your peers?

Mm...I think race in general has been a very difficult topic to discuss. The reason being is that...my colleagues, who are both Ghanian, were extremely frustrated at the time when the Black Lives Matter movement was happening because we did not have these conversations within our academic settings, and so, they had to voice their frustration, and once they did, our lecturers suggested a time slot in the morning to talk about our own individual experience of what happened with George Floyd and how we viewed it and whether we experienced vicarious trauma, whether we felt like it related to us, and that...that space was...not a safe space, I felt, because...it kind of felt like there was a white saviour complex going on, and then there was the frustration of my colleagues, and then... It was almost like it was a controversial topic because my Ghanian friends were, rightfully so, quite frustrated because that's the first time we've had a space to talk about racism and discrimination, and then there was a white saviour complex going on, and then there was the frustration of my colleagues and then me, as someone whose grandmother is Palestinian - that's worth mentioning because that space on its own did not feel like a safe space for me. I'm not even sure how my colleagues felt about it because that's how awkward it was, we didn't speak about it afterwards. And for me personally, I've grown up with my grandma whose Palestinian and we've spoken a lot about discrimination, oppression because she had to lose her house and immigrate to Jordan and lose everything and leave everything behind and it's always really triggering for me to hear about discriminatory behaviour in general. So, that was my experience of what was triggered for me. And it wasn't my space to talk about that, if that makes sense. So, you know, it wasn't enough, the space wasn't enough, the conversation wasn't...open enough. You know, having to deal with the underlying challenges that came along with that situation was very...challenging I think for all of us. So, being a white British lecturer, having to hold a setting to talk about racism and discrimination, for the first time, after there was a worldwide uprising about this, was problematic on its own. Did I answer your question?

Absolutely. Absolutely, thank you. I think it's a very important aspect you mentioned, how there is one...like the Black Lives Matter movement and the oppression that was screaming, you know, to be heard, and then dealing with your own triggers of what this means to you, it's very important to consider in this setting, in the classroom, and very understandable.

And thinking about sexuality in general, there was absolutely no space to talk about that. So, I wouldn't know if it's a difficult topic or a sensitive topic to discuss because it wasn't even mentioned. We had...one guest lecturer who spoke about queer theory, and there was a lot of history about how it developed and things like – so, it wasn't very relevant, but, you know, to give them credit, it did happen.

Yeah. No, and the very interesting aspect from a curriculum design perspective is that...so you and your peers, you are trained to give someone like me, whose only connection to Counselling Psychology would be as a client, the space to talk about things I find difficult to talk about elsewhere, so I find this really interesting how you yourself are facing these challenges in the curriculum, so thank you for sharing – especially since you're approaching the finish-line of your professional doctorate. So, as a future counselling psychologist, what do you think – do you think de-colonising and working on anti-racism of curricula makes sense when the world we live within is still very much racist and colonial or where do we need to make a start?

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Well, considering I work in a humanistic field, it's absolutely necessary to do that. And I think, at the moment, there needs to be active effort to de-colonise the curriculum. So, that would entail specific spaces...you know, and time for that to be explored. And hopefully, down the line, this would be integrated within the norm, you know, within the... Because, like I said, after the BLM movement, a lot of things sort of changed, and we were sent quite a few papers on racism and discrimination within Counselling Psychology or within the therapy room or how to work with racism with clients, but even that wasn't enough, and I had to...with my clients, I had to hold a very curious position and acknowledge the fact that their experiences are different than mine. So, yeah, at the moment, this requires its own space and time, and it would also be ideal if that was integrated within the internal systems within academia, and even within organisations, because it's...you know, it's quite a hierarchical system and we would need to start to start from...you know, from the top, which I'm assuming, in academia, would be the Head of Psychology, and then thinking about the structure of the curriculum.

And, interestingly enough, I think that our lecturers have learned from our experiences and I think they did mention that they will be diversifying the curriculum for the coming cohorts, which is great news, but I think they would need to diversify the team as well.

Yes. Yeah, absolutely. You cannot offer something that you are not institutionally having in your own system, so it requires both, as you said, absolutely. So, now, the final question we like to ask all our podcast guests, and you can dream, go wild, or start simple, whatever you feel like: what is something you'd like to see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Empathy. Empathy on all levels, so from...empathy towards students, empathy towards clients from different backgrounds, and...and this is a case of a power dynamic here. I think that institutions need to realise this power dynamic, and, hopefully, once they do, and acknowledge it, then perhaps they would introduce a more empathic position when engaging with...whether it's students, employees, therapists, clients, because I think, at the core of it, this would change the...the approaches that you would see in organisations. It would change... I think it would introduce a more humanistic approach...within the values of the organisation, whether it was academia or a charity organisation or the NHS.

And I would like to see a much higher level of diversity, a much higher level of inclusion, equality in opportunity, equality in providing services, equality in the representation of trainee counselling psychologists, and, yeah, I think... I mean, I'm sure, after we end this podcast, I'm going to start thinking of a million other things [laughing] – I'll email them to you!

Absolutely!

But, yeah, at the moment, I think, in a general sense, this is what I'd like to see.

Yeah. I think also empathy is something beautiful to see and to wish for academia – it's absolutely important to be genuine in this kind of work, especially also in Counselling Psychology.

Mm.

So, thank you so much, Tamara.

Thank you for having me. It was very interesting, and it's made me think about a lot of things.

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I'm sure our listeners will also be thinking about a lot of things, and, yeah, thank you for giving us your time today and absolutely important and inspiring insights. Yeah, thank you!

Thank you so much!

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