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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Our lives don't matter": an exploration of the experiences of Black trainee counselling psychologists studying on a doctoral course in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Black individuals continue to be underrepresented in counselling psychology (CoP) training in the U.K., despite documented and anecdotal evidence supporting the importance of having a diverse mental health workforce in the country. There is a scarcity of empirical research seeking to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Black CoP trainees and systemic disparities within the field. This paper presents qualitative research which explored the experiences of Black trainee CoPs enrolled in doctoral courses in the UK. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. Findings yielded four superordinate themes, each with two-four sub-themes: a) Identity, b) Black and in training, c) The challenge of balancing various professional and personal demands, d) Recommendations and suggestions to improve access and representation of Black individuals within the CoP field. Implications for CoP practice, training and the profession are discussed.

Terminology

This research focuses on the experiences of Black trainee counselling psychologists (CoPs). It is important to understand the terminologies used in this study, recognising that they may not be universally shared. Nonetheless, these terminologies align with the lens adopted in the research.

Race

This term has been defined as a social construct relating to people who are divided into groups based on external physical appearance (colour of skin and hair type), which has roots in the racist history of colonialism, slavery and apartheid (Durrheim et al., 2009; Patel, 2021). Patel et al. (2000) noted that the concept of hierarchy, along with the notion of the inferiority and superiority of different groups, was built within the meaning of the term race.

Ethnicity

The term ethnicity has been defined as belonging to a distinctive social group that shares a religion, nationality or language (Mangan, 2017). It has been argued that this term is not fixed and is situationally defined (Patel et al., 2000).

Racism

Racism is defined as a social construct that seeks to preserve and promote a hierarchy based on skin colour, without any biological basis (Patel, 2021). It is recognised that this term is dynamic, shifting across context and time, manifests in various forms – both overt and covert – and permeates every aspect of society (Patel, 2021).

It is important to recognise that the terms race, ethnicity and racism are complex and political. Therefore, it should not be assumed that all individuals whom these terms aim to describe or categorise would identify with or use these terms to describe their experiences.

Introduction

The UK's social demographics are constantly changing. It is estimated that individuals from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds will make up one-fifth of the UK population by 2051 (Wohland et al., 2010). Despite this, the field of psychology has faced criticism for failing to reflect the diversity of the client groups that psychologists see (Morgan, 2008). For example, Black individuals within the CoP field, remain underrepresented, with only 3% self-identifying as Black compared to 75% self-identifying as White in the UK (HCPC, 2023a). A lack of diversity in the profession impacts the workforce's ability to provide culturally reflective services and reduce the negative experiences of BME clients (York, 2020).

While efforts have been made to increase the representation and engagement of Black individuals in clinical professions, these attempts have been insufficient. The experiences of those practising in the field – which could shed light on prevailing issues – are often located within the clinical psychology profession (Adetimole et al., 2005; Rajan & Shaw, 2008). The perspectives and experiences of Black CoPs in psychotherapeutic research are frequently overlooked, despite systemic and structural factors impacting professional identities, career trajectories, and training experiences, and contributing to the ongoing underrepresentation, sustained inequalities, and accessibility within the field (Faheem, 2023; Raghavan & Jones-Nielsen, 2021; The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology [POST], 2022). This persists despite CoPs making up a significant portion of the workforce in the UK (NHS England, 2019; Rosairo & Tiplady, 2024).

Furthermore, the existing literature predominantly adopts the term BME, despite ongoing criticism that the homogenisation of this term neglects the diversity and lived experiences of those from racially minoritised backgrounds (DaCosta et al., 2021).

Historical context of CoP in the UK

The British Psychological Society (BPS) established a CoP section in 1982 to explore the extent to which counselling was an activity for psychologists (Jones-Nielsen & Nicholas, 2016; Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2009). A few years later, a diploma in CoP was developed, which provided a framework for training (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2009). Following this, the BPS established the Division of Counselling Psychology (DCoP), which became a distinct profession within BPS with its own philosophy, values, and identity (Corrie & Callahan, 2000).

One of CoP's core values is the promotion of diversity and social justice issues, as reflected in the DCoP vision, which emphasises a "commitment to inclusivity, equality, and justice" (Joseph, 2017; BPS, 2025; Lane & Corrie, 2006). These values have been integrated into the UK training courses and practice guidelines to develop culturally competent trainees and CoPs who can work sensitively with issues related to race, diversity and culture (BPS, 2017, 2019, 2021; HCPC, 2023b). However, criticism exists that topics related to race and diversity are insufficiently covered, with the curricula dominated by Eurocentric theories and worldviews (Charura & Lago, 2021; Waheed & Skinner, 2022). This is concerning given the detrimental effects that this could have on clients (Charura & Lago, 2021; Huskisson, 2021).

Furthermore, despite CoP's stated commitment to inclusivity, Black individuals remain underrepresented in the field, with only 3% self-identifying as Black compared to 75% self-identifying as White in the UK (HCPC, 2023a). Moreover, there is a significant gap in the academic literature specifically exploring Black individuals' access, progress and experience within the CoP field.

Structure of CoP doctoral training in the UK

The training is a three-year, self-funded doctoral programme with a university that is approved by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) (Gillon et al., 2017; Kumary & Baker, 2008). The core domains of this training are: personal development, which emphasises trainees' understanding of self and requires trainees to undertake a minimum of 40 hours of personal therapy (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2009), acquiring depth and breadth of psychological theories and theoretical constructs (Murphy, 2017) and placement learning, where trainees integrate their learning and develop their clinical skills (Lawrence, 2016) and research, where trainees must complete an independent research project throughout their course which meets doctoral standards (Hogan, 2017).

As stated above, embarking on a training programme is the only route to becoming a qualified CoP. As Black individuals continue to be underrepresented within CoP (McIntosh, 2017), it is crucial to understand the contributory structural and systemic factors, such as accessibility, enrolment, and experiences on the CoP doctoral programme.

Experiences of CoP trainees in the UK

Despite being very limited, there has been some exploration in the literature, of the experiences of trainee CoPs in the UK. Studies found that the financial commitment of the course such as paying for personal therapy, led some students to take employment outside of their studies, which impacted their personal and professional development and other areas of their lives (Bor et al., 1997; Kumari, 2011). Bor et al. (1997) noted that the financial commitment required to complete training may deter some people from applying for the course as research has noted, on average, Black individuals tend to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Thomas & Berry, 2010; TUC, 2016). Thus, the financial commitment of undertaking CoP training, which is self-funded, may disproportionally disadvantage Black individuals during training. However, these studies were limited by either a majority White sample or a lack of information about ethnicity or race. This, therefore, highlights a need to understand through the lens of Black individuals the financial and practical implications of undertaking the CoP doctoral training.

Kumary and Baker (2008) conducted a quantitative study using a postal survey to assess stress levels among 109 CoP trainees. High stress scores were reported in categories such as academics, placements, personal and professional development, and lack of support. While the study highlights the significant stress faced by trainees, it lacks detail on the specific course components contributing to these stressors. The use of postal surveys may mean the findings are vulnerable to response bias, and the data collection method limits the generalisability of the findings. This is even more important to consider given that out of a sample of 109, only two participants were Black trainees and thus it is unknown whether these trainees, in comparison to their peers, are even more exposed to unacceptable levels of stressors due to wider systemic issues such as institutional racism (Patel et al., 2000). These limitations underscore the need for qualitative research to explore the unique experiences of Black trainee CoPs in an under-researched area.

Daloye (2022) also explored more broadly the experiences of five BME trainee CoPs in the UK through semi-structured interviews. The author approached this research using the terminology BME, which has been criticised as being reductionistic, masking the nuances in the experiences of a particular racialised group (Tong et al., 2019). Participants reported feeling isolated and lonely in the course which, for some, was related to a lack of belonging due to their BME identity. The researcher further noted the importance of having representation on the course in making BME

individuals feel a sense of belonging. Although this study has provided an understanding of the experiences of BME individuals, it can be argued that the terminology used may perpetuate difficulties that may be more prevalent for particular racialised groups in negotiating the training course. This highlights a substantial gap in the literature in understanding specifically through the lens of Black individuals their experiences of the CoP doctoral training in the UK.

Psychotherapeutic training

Given the scarcity of existing research on the experiences of Black trainees within CoP, research looking at access and the experiences of Black and racially minoritised backgrounds trainees within other related psychology fields provide some insight into the experiences of Black practitioners. Whilst these differ from CoP training, there are some similar themes.

Research indicates that gaining acceptance into a clinical psychology training course is significantly more challenging for individuals from BME backgrounds compared to their White, female, middle-class peers (Turpin & Coleman, 2010). Bawa et al. (2019) highlighted systemic barriers faced by aspiring psychologists from BME backgrounds, including limited family resources, a lack of role models, and institutional racism. These barriers all had an impact on the attainment levels of BME individuals, subsequently affecting their ability to secure a place in training courses. Watson (2004) used grounded theory to examine the views of Black counsellors on their training and how issues relating to ethnicity, race and culture were addressed. Black counsellors reported feeling that the curriculum overlooked their perspective. Paulraj (2016) further noted that participants' Blackness was the most important aspect of their identity at a cost to other aspects of their identities, concluding that the experiences of racism, subjugation and social inequalities influence the identity negotiating process which is ongoing and cyclical. These studies demonstrate the difficulties some Black trainees face in navigating aspects of training in a predominantly White space.

Research has also explored how trainees from racially minoritised backgrounds negotiate other aspects of training such as the curriculum. Studies have revealed the difficulties faced by some trainees in navigating discussions on course content focused predominantly on Eurocentrism with minimal attention paid to issues of race and the Black perspective (Rajan & Shaw, 2008; Watson, 2004). Watson (2004) noted that when topics about culture and race were discussed, there was an assumption from peers that trainees from racially minoritised backgrounds would teach them. These studies highlight the exclusionary nature of the curriculum, which is dominated by Eurocentric knowledge. Although these studies were conducted some time ago, there have been concerted efforts within the profession to champion equality, diversity, and inclusivity (Cohen-Tovee & Faulconbridge, 2019). It is plausible that these changes within the profession may have influenced the type of experiences trainees from racially minoritised backgrounds have in ways that were not reported in these studies. Therefore, given the dearth of research exploring the experiences of CoP trainees, particularly Black individuals, it remains unclear how efforts within CoP have influenced the structure and content of training for Black individuals.

The socio-political context may also influence the training experiences of individuals from racially minoritised backgrounds as demonstrated by Upshaw et al. (2020). They provided two illustrative examples of supervisory experiences of Black trainees in the United States (USA) during a time of heightened racial tensions. One trainee reported feeling supported and validated by her supervisor who acknowledged the impact of the socio-political climate on the trainee. In contrasting, the other trainee reported feeling stifled by his supervisor's comments and the perceived consensus of his supervision group when he presented a case about a Black American youth. The authors explained the importance of a nuanced contextual understanding of supervisees and a culturally responsive approach in supervision. They further noted that the exclusion of the socio-political context creates opportunities for harm to trainees. This study demonstrates the additional barrier of navigating the socio-political context that some trainees have to negotiate alongside other aspects of their course.

Whilst the studies above have provided insight into some of the unique challenges that trainees from racially minoritised backgrounds face in other related psychology professions, differences exist between CoP doctoral training and the other related psychology professions training. For example, emphasis is placed on scientific research in CoP doctoral training which differs from counsellor and psychotherapy training (O'Brien, 1997). Thus, there may be unique experiences based on these differences during training that Black trainee CoPs face that were not captured in these studies. This highlights the need for further research to address the existing gaps in the literature by exploring the experiences of Black trainee CoPs in the UK.

This qualitative study aimed to address the following research question: How do Black trainee CoPs make sense of their experiences while studying on the doctoral course in the UK?

Researcher reflexivity

The first author identifies as Black and cisgender female. The second author identifies as Black, Ghanaian and cisgender female. The first author was a trainee CoPs (now qualified) who carried out the research, data analysis and write-up of the study. The second author is a CoPs and academic who supervised the research and contributed to the write-up of the study. IPA emphasises the need for researchers to "bracket" out biases and preconceptions to gain an "insider's perspective" into participants' personal world (Finlay, 2009; McCormack & Joseph, 2018). This is important given that researchers are the "central figure who actively construct the collection, selection and interpretation of data" (Finlay, 2003, p. 5). As authors, we engaged in continual reflections about our own biases and assumptions throughout the research process and how our intersectional identities shaped our engagement with the research (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Finlay (2002) described reflexivity as a thoughtful and conscious process, which the first author endeavoured to engage in through a reflective journal, personal therapy and research supervision. The reflective journal allowed for recording of feelings, reactions and expectations of the research process ensuring, openness and curiosity about the participants' subjective experiences, and that interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts (Kasket, 2011). The first author also reflected on the dual positions as an insider and outsider and the complexity and fluidity of similarities and differences that existed within this research process (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Method

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the most suitable qualitative method for this study as it allows for the detailed examination of personal lived experience (Eatough & Smith, 2017). IPA looks for convergences and divergences within individual transcripts and across multiple transcripts allowing rich, idiographic accounts of participants' experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017; McCormack & Joseph, 2018). IPA recognises that some form of reality exists around participants' experiences while recognising that this reality is mediated through the meaning-making ascribed by participants (Bhaskar, 1975). IPA acknowledges that the same objective experiences (e.g., being a Black trainee CoP), will be experienced differently by each participant, mediated by the meaning participants ascribe to these events based on their thoughts and sociocultural factors (Willig, 2013).

Ontological and Epistemological position

This study adopted a critical realist ontological position, acknowledging that some form of reality exists around participants' experiences of being a Black trainee CoPs, while recognising that this reality is mediated through the meaning-making ascribed by participants (Bhaskar, 1975). By adopting this ontological position, the first author recognises that there will be multiple and differing realities, which are valid and that an understanding of participants' world can only be gained through the interpretation of each participant's account of the phenomena being explored (Willig, 2013). A

phenomenological epistemological position was also adopted, focusing on people's perception of the world and how these are experienced, recognising that these experiences have different meanings for different people (Langbridge, 2007).

Participants

Participants were chosen based on the following inclusion criteria: self-identified as Black or Black British, African, or Caribbean descent, 18 years old or older, be on a full-time or part-time UK CoP doctoral programme accredited by the BPS and HCPC, provide consent to be audio recorded via Zoom or Microsoft Teams and on an encrypted digital recorder during the interview.

Participants were eight self-identified Black or Black British, African or Caribbean Trainee CoPs who were participating in the doctoral course in the UK. A summary of participants' demographic is presented in Table 1.

Procedure

Flyers were advertised on social media platforms, through programme directors of CoP doctoral courses in the UK and professional forums and special interest groups. All participants provided informed consent and the research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the authors' institution.

Data for the present study were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews via Zoom, which were audio-recorded. The interview schedule was developed based on existing gaps in the literature (see Appendix A). Given the underrepresentation of Black trainee CoPs in the UK, a pilot interview was conducted with a qualified CoPs who self-identified as Black British of Caribbean descent and had recently completed their training. This approach ensured that Black trainee CoPs had the opportunity to participate in the study if they wished, as involving them in the pilot interview would have excluded their participation in the study. The pilot interview allowed for the rehearsal of the interview schedule with minor amendments to include a warm-up and closing question. The interview schedule was flexible, consisting of open-ended questions allowing for exploration of things of interest as they emerged (Howitt, 2019). Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Following the interview, participants were debriefed and provided with a debrief form.

This study adhered to Yardley's (2000) principles for ensuring the quality of qualitative research. Sensitivity to context was demonstrated through an awareness of participants' perspectives as well as the socio-cultural context of the study. Commitment to the research was established by staying up to date with relevant literature. Rigour was ensured through an in-depth analysis of the data, which included seeking input from experts in qualitative and IPA methodologies. Transparency and coherence were maintained through research supervision and reflective journal, which facilitated the understanding of the data and personal reactions. Additionally, a clear and detailed summary of the research process was provided. The study demonstrated its impact and importance by addressing a gap in the literature, specifically exploring the experiences of Black trainee CoPs in the UK and offering important and novel findings.

Table 1. Summary of participants' demographic.

Pseudonym	Age range	Gender identity	University	Level of training
Adwoa	40–44	Female	University 1	Year 1
Jessica	25–29	Female	University 2	Year 1
Shakira	25–29	Female	University 3	Year 3
Gertrude	25–29	Female	University 3	Year 3
Jamal	50–54	Male	University 4	Year 2
Tolu	25–29	Female	University 5	Year 3
Nadia	40–44	Female	University 6	Year 5
Jodie	45–49	Female	University 6	Year 6

The participants were based at six different institutions. The mean age of participants was 35.25 years.

Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using steps outlined by Smith et al. (2009) for IPA. Individual transcripts were read and re-read. Initial notes of the written transcripts were made focusing on content, language use and initial interpretative comments. Emergent themes were developed and clustered with related themes. These steps were repeated for each transcript. Connections and patterns across all transcripts were searched and superordinate themes and sub-themes were developed.

Results

The results included four superordinate themes with a range of two to four sub-themes: "Identity", "Black and in training", "The challenge of balancing various personal and professional demands" and "Recommendations and suggestions to improve access and representation of Black individuals within the CoP field". Each superordinate theme and related sub-themes are discussed and illustrated with direct quotes from participants. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' identities.

Identity

A thread within this superordinate theme is participants' Black identity and the influence that it had on the way participants navigated the course, their experiences during training and how other people interacted with them. This theme also included challenges that Black trainees faced which seemed to differ from their peers in navigating training. Within this theme, two sub-themes emerged which were: *Experiencing racism* and *Negotiating Black identity*.

Experiencing racism

Most participants spoke about their experiences of recent and historical incidents of racism and for some, this was triggered by the racial injustice of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that occurred in 2020. For instance, Jodie described her own experiences of racism, linked to various aspects of her identity as a Black individual and as a mother raising her own children of African origin in the UK:

> It really activated my own experiences of discrimination, racism and as a mother, having to always go to my children's school to put an argument because he has been picked on, or has been labelled … . (406–410)

Having to regularly defend her children in school due to reoccurring racial incidents ("always") was physically and emotionally demanding and may hinder her capacity to fully engage in training. Nadia also spoke about her experiences of racism but specifically of her race being ignored growing up. However, unlike the other participants in this sub-theme, her recollection of these experiences was not triggered by George Floyd's death but rather during training where she became aware of missed opportunities to bring up issues around race in supervision that were linked to her own experiences of racism:

> So, the fact that you were Black wasn't really acknowledged unless it was to point out how different your hair is, how different is the type of food that you eat. Erm, so sort of like a peering in [laughs] is the way I'd probably describe it like, oh, look at this and look at the music you listen to. Erm, so that's where in one way race was ignored apart from when it was to overtly set us apart from the so called not norm erm and then it was raised in, an in an uncomfortable way. (26, 555–563)

There is a sense from Nadia's extract, that the lack of acknowledgement of her Blackness was used to ignore the varied and nuanced experience she had in comparison to other children. However, it appeared that when this was acknowledged, it often highlighted differences in a negative way, such as comments about her hair, food and music. It is possible that this may have created an us-and-them divide and may have been an isolating experience for her, especially as she mentioned

during the interview that there were few Black children in her school. These experiences may have influenced how she viewed and expressed her Blackness perhaps trying to hide it to better assimilate into her school environment. Her laughter suggests the pain and discomfort these encounters caused. These experiences during her earlier years, may not only have served as a reminder to her that she is "not norm", as stated by her, but may have led to a feeling of being othered.

Some participants, like Tolu, highlighted the influence of George's Floyd death in shaping her view and understanding of racial injustice, and potentially pushing her to confront and come to terms with her own experiences of racism:

> I think for me the biggest thing is probably like pretending that racial injustice doesn't exist pretending but being affected by it but pretending it doesn't exist. And then that blew everything off the top and then it was like okay guys, it definitely does exist. (Tolu, 32, 726–730)

Tolu's description highlights how the internalisation of these experiences led to her ignoring her own experience of racism. This extract suggests that she has deployed a survival mechanism of pretence to manage and tolerate the violent, disparaging, and negative experiences she encounters as a Black individual within a White-dominant society. Her use of the word "then that" is in reference to George Floyd's death and the BLM movement. It can be inferred that the widespread knowledge of his death and the reaction to this made it impossible for her to ignore the current racialised climate and the racism that she as a Black individual has experienced within wider society. Furthermore, it is possible this may have triggered both unconscious and conscious experiences of racism that were further illuminated by the magnitude and scale of the wider socio-political landscape and the heightened discussions and emotions expressed during that time.

Some participants highlighted the impact of constantly dealing with racism living within a White dominant society and the effects of this on various aspects of their lives such as training. Gertrude shared:

> It just makes it harder than it should be.. and yeah that's really tiring and exhausting because it's like I have to erm, I have to kind of be aware of all of those challenges that every counselling psychologist experiences, experienced but then also hold in mind my own experience as a Black person erm with regards to social disadvantage, racism. (13, 279–285)

Gertrude speaks to the detrimental effects on her physical and mental well-being of having to navigate various multi-factors (such as racism and the course) as a Black trainee. It could be suggested that the detrimental effects of witnessing such racial injustice may extend to her studies; hindering her ability to engage fully in maximising her potential.

Negotiating Black identity

All participants spoke about their Blackness as a core part of their identity and the various challenges they faced during training. Some participants spoke about how their Black identity intersected with other aspects of their identity to create a nuanced experience, illustrating the numerous levels of inequality and difficulties they encountered. Jessica said:

> … I might shift in a context … whether it's like how I speak, whether it's how I present myself or things I might say, there might be someone who says something which seems quite racially provocative but there are times where I think okay, if I say this, am I going to come across as being the angry Black woman. Like, can I say without being perceived a certain way? (21, 458–471)

Jessica's description suggested that she needed to alter aspects of her Blackness based on the context to avoid being stereotyped with the racial trope of being "an angry Black woman." This may come at an emotional and psychological cost in constantly adjusting herself to be palatable to the dominant context. This excerpt also highlights the nuanced experience and difficulties she encountered based on her intersecting identities as a Black woman which Black men may not have to face during their training.

Black and in training

This superordinate theme explores how participants negotiated discussions on racism and their experiences on placement. It explores the implications of their socioeconomic background in negotiating various aspects of their training. This superordinate theme comprises three sub-themes including: *Navigating discussions on racism, Experience on placement as a Black trainee, and Impact of socioeconomic status and financial privilege.*

Navigating discussions on racism

Most participants spoke about their experiences of navigating discussions about racism. These discussions occurred in a variety of ways such as in lectures and between smaller group discussions with peers. Participants also critiqued the curriculum, which was dominated by Eurocentric theories with minimal attention towards topics related to racism. For Shakira, the lack of teaching about the Black perspective and experience meant she took the burden of bringing up these topics to fill the knowledge gap in the curriculum for her peers and lecturers:

> The course content, erm, they, for some reason they didn't really, erm, they didn't really embraced, kind of like talking about race and, and, and kind of like the known the elephant in the room, if you like, you know, having those erm, uncomfortable, erm, conversations. It was always kind of like glided over in a sense. Erm so..it was myself, and a colleague of mine who is also a Black woman. We were always kind of like bringing in the perspective of you know, of Pan Africanism, of, you know or the Black experience in general, or you know, kind of like highlighting the differences of indigenous, erm, cultures and things like that. So, and, but that wasn't brought in from the, erm, you know the curriculum itself or, or, or, you know the lecturers itself. (4–5,90–102)

Her words "elephant in the room" suggest an attempt by lecturers to avoid these types of discussions and perhaps avoid the discomfort of having to manage the feelings that might arise within them and trainees. There is a sense that she is intentional about highlighting the nuances and complexities within the Black experience. This may be a daunting and exhausting experience as it involved challenging the dominant status quo and power structures.

Experience on placement as a Black Trainee

Placement learning is a fundamental part of the CoP doctorate programme. Six participants' spoke about their experiences on placements of navigating various dynamics with supervisors, colleagues, and clients. Tolu spoke about an experience with a supervisor where she was not listened to when expressing difficulties:

> ..I was communicating to them that I wasn't understanding what they were requiring of me or and, and, also the difficulties that I was having but I wasn't heard. It wasn't until months later when I broke down crying in front of one of the supervisors that she said oh I didn't realise that you were going through this, I didn't, I mean, you said it, but I didn't really, I wasn't really, I didn't really take it seriously. And I'm wondering why? Is it because I'm Black and you think that I have thicker skin or you think I'm exaggerating or like and, and, also I hated the fact that I broke down crying in front of her because I hate well my own outward shows of vulnerability. Obviously, I'm a therapist I don't hate other people's show of vulnerability. I hated the fact that I needed to do that in order to be heard. (15–16, 331–345)

Tolu appeared to question why she was dismissed, alluding to her supervisor's potential prejudice that Tolu, as a Black trainee, should be able to tolerate more. This experience may have significantly impacted the supervisory relationship between Tolu and her supervisor. Tolu may not see supervision as a safe space to receive support, make sense of her experience on placement, and reflect on her vulnerabilities, therefore, hindering her learning in training. Conversely, Jodie described a positive experience she had with a supervisor who was Black which helped her better navigate placement and her experience during training:

> I needed somebody whose already in the profession because I was not quite understand, what he meant and what he was looking for. But he, my supervisor was able to, it kind of felt like I had an ally in the sense of breaking things down and acknowledging some of the challenges and what I needed to do to make it, to the point where

> nobody would have any power and control over me, but it kind of feels like [] at this stage, there are certain things that I just have to suck in [laughs] to get through the course. (26–27,592–601)

This extract suggests that their shared identity allowed Jodie to feel safe and contained within their supervisory relationship. Her supervisor may have been more aware of and recognised the difficulties faced by her due to their shared identity which allowed her supervisor to be able to provide sensitive guidance and feedback. In this sub-theme, other participants spoke about the challenges of working with clients from the same race (Black trainee, and Black client) or a different race (Black trainee, White client).

Impact of socioeconomic status and financial privilege

Most of the participants discussed how the impact of their socioeconomic status and lack of financial privilege impacted how they negotiated aspects of the course. For many of the participants, it appeared that their training may have exacerbated the realities of coming from a particular socioeconomic background, grappling with the range of costs needed to fulfil the training requirements. Shakira explicitly described the impact of coming from a working- class background:

> Also, erm, erm coming from, you know, a background where you know it's considered, you know, working class, maybe even lower than working class [Laugh]. So, like I don't have the you, I can't really depend on a family member to you know for financial support. I know that I have to do it myself. Erm so that you know is makes, it makes, it more makes it more difficult, knowing that you don't real have a safety net in case if you know if needed. (32, 712–722)

Shakira's use of the words "lower than working class" suggests a lack of money within her family meaning that receiving financial support from them is not an option. One participant spoke about the effects of structural and systemic issues on the economic disparities between Black Families and White families, and the influence of this on the financial resources that were available to some trainees in this study (Bloomberg, 2021; Thomas & Berry, 2010). Other participants described the consequences and sacrifices that come from being from differing socioeconomic background. For instance, Gertrude said:

> You know, and you know that a lot of people not a lot, but other people that have, are more privileged are able to like go on holidays, erm go for proper break and do something, go to restaurants, and have fun and things like that which I can't. So, it was really hard to manage to kind of hear my course people programme leader, saying, "oh, you need self–care, you need to take a time, time off" and I'm like when? How? I don't, I don't, I don't, have the time and I don't have the money to do that. Um, so it was really challenging. I felt like um, I didn't have um, life. (34, 760–769)

Her extract suggests that she was aware of her socioeconomic background and how this differed from her peers, which may have been illuminated by her course programme leader's advice to "take time off" and for "self-care". In describing her experience, Gertrude changed her tone of voice when saying "oh, you need self-care, you need to take a time, time off" in what appeared to be an imitation of her programme leader, perhaps responding to what she perceived as a tone-deaf comment. Whilst this advice may have been innocuous to her programme leader, it may have been a painful reminder for Gertrude of the difference between herself and her peers not just in terms of race, but socioeconomic status; as she said, "it was really hard to manage to kind of hear".

The challenge of balancing various professional and personal demands

In this superordinate theme, participants discussed the challenges of managing the various professional and personal demands placed during their training. This superordinate theme explored the influence of factors such as wider systemic issues arising from their Black identity and racism in intensifying some of these challenges. Four sub-themes emerged which were: *Struggle to have a work/life balance, Negotiating academic challenges, Financial commitment and Paid employment to fund the course.*

Struggle to have a work/life balance

Some of the participants spoke about the challenges in maintaining a work/life balance and found it hard to rest which had implications in other areas of their lives. Jodie discussed the demands that she had to manage which differed from some of her peers on the course:

> And to the extent where I have to do ten things, whereas, some of my colleagues are not even doing anything and their struggling, they're like "ah no time" and I am thinking I've got three kids, I am running a business, I'm working … (52,1169–1173)

Jodie may feel frustrated towards her peers who may not be aware of the privileges they hold compared to her. Her words "ten" and describing all that she does may have been her way of demonstrating the magnitude of the demands she had to manage. Therefore, it may be difficult for her to take time off to rest. Additionally, her intersecting identities as Black, a woman and a mother may further have influenced how she managed her work/life balance, which may have created unique experiences from other participants and trainees.

Negotiating academic challenges

Five of the eight participants spoke about how they navigated the challenges they faced during training. This sub-theme also captured the varied support some participants received. Some participants received positive support from academic staff. Jamal said:

> Don't hand this in yet, you can defer that till next year and they were very, very accommodating, they were very accommodating … (34, 771–773)

Jamal appreciated the level and type of support provided during a difficult time when he was struggling emotionally due to George Floyd's death and the BLM movement. This support showed awareness and acknowledgement from his lecturers that he may have experienced George Floyd's death and the BLM movement more intensively, and that it perhaps had a greater impact on him as a Black individual than on his peers. Contrastingly, for other participants, there was a lack of support from academic staff which was due to factors such as experiencing racial prejudice from lecturers. For instance, Jodie alluded to the bias that may have been held by her lecturers about her academic capabilities which influenced their actions to make a decision without speaking to her:

> So, the question around intelligence. If I was intelligent enough to do the course. Was something that was daunting to me because I was thinking my first year, I didn't fail anything, in my second year I didn't fail the course and now you know I've openly said I'm struggling and I need support … But the decision has been made. (56–57,1273–1282)

Her extract suggests that the decision made was based on her lecturers' subjective perception of her intellect rather than on her previous academic work. The use of the word "daunting" suggests that she felt surprised by this mistreatment given that she was asking for support. Jodie's experience may further demonstrate why other participants in this study were reluctant to seek support from lecturers for fear of being racially discriminated against.

Financial commitment

A few participants spoke about the financial commitment of undertaking the course and the various financial challenges associated with training. For some participants, "working for free" and the "time commitment" associated with the course may be an additional financial loss, that they have associated with monetary earnings, which they have sacrificed as a part of undertaking this course. Nadia spoke about financial commitment being one of the challenges during training that she has faced so far:

> … it's been quite difficult because obviously thinking of the financial commitment it's a lot. I mean not just the course fees, obviously the supervision, giving up your time to, to erm carry out free labour erm for what 400 hours of clinical, clinical hours. (15,311–315)

Nadia's description seems to speak to the sense of pressure she feels due to her financial obligations and sacrifice to fulfil the requirements of training. Not paying these costs, would severely compromise her ability to facilitate her learning and meet the academic and clinical components of the course. Jamal spoke candidly about being unable to manage the financial commitments associated with CoP training, which led to him withdrawing several times before re-commencing his current training:

> Erm and erm so I pulled myself off the qualification [] for work reasons. (3, 64–65)

During various points in the interview, Jamal mentioned "work reasons" but did not elaborate further on what he meant. However, even though he was funding the course through paid employment, he was unable to meet the financial commitments needed to fulfil the requirements of the course leading to his withdrawal. This extract provides an understanding of one of the implications of being unable to comfortably fund all costs associated with training.

Paid employment to fund the course

This sub-theme includes some participants' experiences of managing paid employment alongside their placement, academic components of the course, and their personal life. This sub-theme further demonstrates the additional challenges that impacted some participants' training. Adwoa described how she balanced her paid employment with other aspects of training:

> … So I could kind of earn a living whilst studying erm but what I have found is that have half a day off out of seven, if I'm lucky. Erm so it's on a Monday, yes I work on a Monday night, so Tuesday is like my only day off and it's also the day where I've got to try and squeeze in personal therapy and supervision, because it's external to my placement. (29–30, 658–663)

Adwoa's description suggests that time off is a luxury given that she needs paid employment to fund the course. The word "squeeze" indicated that she can just about manage the multiple demands placed on her. It is plausible that this may impede her learning in being present in activities such as personal development groups on the course that focus on the exploration and understanding of the self, due to her limited time, space, and mental capacity.

Recommendations and suggestions to improve access and representation of Black individuals within the CoP field

All participants provided a myriad of recommendations and suggestions as to what could be done to improve the representation of Black individuals within the CoP field. Some of these suggestions included reviewing the curriculum and awareness of structural and institutional racism, which affects Black individuals. Within this superordinate theme, two sub-themes emerged which were: *Black spaces to connect and network on training and Recommendations and suggestions for widening access within the CoP field.*

Black spaces to connect and network on training

Three participants suggested that specific spaces for Black trainees to network, connect, share, and reflect are needed due to the nuanced and unique experiences faced by them, which differ from those of their peers. Jessica said:

> Erm [pause] I feel like networking of some kind, would be great. Um, maybe it's a big ask. Maybe I'm like living in some dream world, but if I mean, when we apply we all have to say like how we identify, blah, blah, blah, blah. If that could then be collated to some wider group, whereby those individuals could then network to maybe other people in different uni-university. (54, 1208–1214)

It could be assumed from Jessica's extract that networking across universities would allow Black trainees to feel supported and less isolated given their underrepresentation during training. Her words "living in some dream world" suggests that she was managing her expectations about

what was achievable and realistic within CoP. Shakira described the need for more opportunities for Black trainees to connect:

> Yeah, it's just a very isolating course and it's not compared to like Clinical course for example … there just aren't a lot of spaces available to like connect and erm, erm yeah to connect and reflect and you know and, and share. (49, 1105–1112)

Shakira's reflections seemed to suggest that there aren't enough spaces for Black trainees to connect, which has deeper implications for Black trainees' sense of validation and sense of community within an intense training programme. It could be assumed that the structural differences between clinical psychology courses compared to CoP courses may provide more spaces and opportunities for Black individuals to connect with peers and engage within the wider profession.

Another participant explained how connecting with other Black CoPs allowed her to challenge her own internalised biases and perceptions about what it means to be a professional, illustrating the importance of visibility and positive representation within the CoP field.

Recommendations and suggestions for widening access within the CoP field

Participants provided a myriad of suggestions of things that could be done to improve the under-representation of Black individuals within the CoP field. The recommendations and suggestions were derived from some participants' experiences of accessing CoP training. For Shakira, there was a need to review the route into psychology on a wider systemic level:

> Um, but I think just the whole process of getting into psychology, full stop. Becoming a psychologist that whole process from you know college to, you know, getting your undergrad and then moving on to a doctorate that just that whole process, no matter what if it is counselling psychology or any other psychology that whole process needs to be looked at … (45, 1021–1027)

Shakira's words, "full stop" implied that, without examining the entire process—starting from the early study of psychology—subsequent changes such as those made to the CoP doctoral curriculum, may be ineffective in generating long-lasting change. Other participants spoke about the need to examine the wider systemic and structural issues related to the education system in the UK (including the training curriculum), providing funding and specific information about CoP training. Participants' extracts also highlighted the importance of a systemic, multipronged approach to tackle the barriers that exist for Black individuals in accessing the CoP field.

Discussion

Given the paucity of research centring the perspectives and experiences of Black CoPs in the UK, the purpose of this article was to present the unique lived experiences of Black trainee CoPs and consider the implications of these for training and practice within and beyond the field.

The findings revealed that participants experienced a sense of othering during their training, attributable to their racial identities and experiences of discrimination. Some participants discussed the need to mould or alter aspects of their Blackness to assimilate into the dominant group and avoid being stereotyped with racial tropes during training. The findings build on Rajan and Shaw's (2008) study by demonstrating how altering aspects of their Blackness to be more palatable and assimilate into the dominant group is not solely about belonging but can be a way to avoid negative experiences such as being stereotyped. Participants were directly impacted by structural and institutional inequities, further exacerbated by the wider socio-political context, most poignantly the COVID-19 pandemic and the traction of the BLM movement following the death of George Floyd.

The findings revealed that although being Black was core to participants' identity (Paulraj, 2016), they also held intersectional identities, which had bearing on their experiences within training, subjecting them to unique challenges and further costs to their emotional well-being.

Past research has shown that curricula and approaches within training adversely impacted experiences, due to the dominance of Eurocentric theories (e.g., Adetimole et al., 2005; Watson, 2004).

There was a sense from one participant's account that this inadvertently placed her in a position of taking responsibility to bring Black experiences into discussions to fill the gap in the curriculum, despite the potential consequences to her mental well-being and learning during training.

Similar to other research in the field (e.g. Upshaw et al., 2020), findings revealed that while some participants had positive experiences of supervision, others had negative experiences of supervision during training. It appeared that having supervisors who acknowledged the lived and nuanced experience of being a Black trainee appeared to have a positive impact, influencing how they negotiated placement. On the other hand, having a supervisor who disregarded difficulties raised, which appeared to be influenced by prejudice held by them, created further distress for participants and potentially had a detrimental impact on participants learning.

Several participants spoke about the challenges in trying to have a work/life balance, which made it difficult for them to have time off to rest. This study extends the findings of Kumary and Baker (2008) findings by providing a more up-to-date qualitative understanding of some of the course components that trainees find particularly stressful. Other participants spoke about the varied support they received from academic staff, with a few participants reporting experiencing racial discrimination from lecturers when they sought support for academic challenges. However, unlike the findings from the NUS (2011), these experiences occurred in the present study when participants sought support from lecturers for their academic challenges. Experiences like this could make some Black trainees reluctant to seek support for fear that they will be racially discriminated against, which may have ramifications for their learning during training.

Some participants in this study described how the financial commitments of the course affected their ability to balance the various professional and personal demands placed on them. For some, the learning opportunities and their ability to fulfil all aspects of the course were intrinsically tied to their ability to meet the associated training costs. This study extends Bor et al. (1997) findings by providing a more up to date understanding of the financial implications of undertaking CoP training. Furthermore, it provides an in-depth insight specifically focused on the experiences of Black trainees. The financial commitments of the course could be one of the reasons why some Black trainees withdraw from training. Additionally, this study highlights that underrepresentation of Black individuals exists at access into the profession and these financial barriers permeate throughout training.

While previous studies have highlighted systemic inequalities and attainment disparities that exist for Black and BME individuals accessing clinical psychology training (Bawa et al., 2019; Turpin & Coleman, 2010), the present study advances this understanding by providing insight, specifically through the lens of Black trainee CoPs, into how aspects of the training, such as the financial commitment of the course and participants' socioeconomic status, may be potential barriers to accessing CoP training. This study also includes recommendations and suggestions shared by participants addressing these challenges for Black individuals within CoP training.

Participants provided a range of recommendations and suggestions, which could be adopted to improve access and representation of Black individuals within the CoP field (see Table 2). One suggestion was about reviewing the whole process of getting into the field of psychology and the various barriers that exist. Another suggestion was the need to tackle wider systemic issues around disparities in educational attainment such as institutional racism impacting and creating obstacles for Black individuals in the UK, which may prevent them from gaining a place on CoP training.

A further suggestion involved creating networking opportunities to connect with other Black individuals within the CoP field. While some opportunities exist, such as the DCoP Black and Asian Psychology group, these spaces and opportunities remain limited. Additionally, there is criticism that terms such as BME imply that the people encompassed by the term form a homogenous group, thereby masking the inequalities experienced by different racialised ethnic groups within this classification (Aspinall, 2020). Consequently, some Black trainees might overlook groups such as DCoP Black and Asian Psychology group due to the nuances between being Black and Asian. As a result, they may feel that these groups do not adequately address their specific needs.

Table 2. Summary of recommendations and suggestions for widening access within the CoP field.

Clinical and training implications	Recommendations and suggestions
Reviewing the myriads of barriers associated with the process of getting into the field of Psychology.	• Tackling the educational attainment disparities by reviewing entry requirements and incorporating other forms of requirements that do not rely solely on academic attainment in ensuring that their selection process is fair.
Providing funding for the CoP training	• Lobbying key stakeholders such as Health Education England and higher education institutions to provide funding for these courses. • Lobbying the NHS and placement providers to offer paid clinical placements.
Reviewing the curriculum	• Introduce into the curriculum other worldviews and theories that are not situated in Eurocentrism. • For all trainees, lecturers and supervisors to continually to be open to engaging in issues related to race, diversity and culture, and to be willing to critically examine the origins of theories and their clinical implications. • Training opportunities provided by key stakeholders, such as doctoral courses, BPS, and HCPC, should be offered to trainees and qualified CoPs to continue developing their understanding, skills, and knowledge in working with diverse groups and issues related to race, culture, and diversity.

Some participants suggested the need for funding to ameliorate the barriers to accessing the CoP training but noted that the solution to access for Black individuals appears to be complex and nuanced. At present, CoP training remains self-funded, with limited external funding options available in the UK. While the recent establishment of the DCoP BPS Black and Asian Applied Psychologists Fund (BPS, n.d.) seeks to support individuals from Black and Asian backgrounds in advancing their psychological careers, there is still a pressing need for these courses to receive funding. This need has been recognised by DCoP, who have made attempts to advocate for funding for training to the UK government (Petitions- UK Government and parliament, n.d.). Financial support would help alleviate the financial barriers to entry. Additionally, a multi-pronged approach – addressing broader systemic issues, such as the attainment disparities affecting Black individuals in the UK education system – should be implemented to improve access to the CoP training for Black individuals and enhance the training experience for Black trainees.

Furthermore, some participants spoke to the need to scrutinise the theories, practices and curricula that are centred on Whiteness and lack diverse worldviews. The professional body, BPS, and the statutory regulator, HCPC, have continued to develop practice guidelines and standards to support trainees and qualified CoPs in working in a culturally sensitive way with diverse groups and communities, particularly when addressing issues related to race, culture, and diversity (BPS, 2017, 2019; HCPC, 2023b). Consequently, by adopting these guidelines, all CoPs—regardless of their racial background or intersectional identity – have a responsibility to take ownership and engage with these topics consistently by examining and scrutinising the curriculum and its translation into clinical practice. Examples of this can be found globally within the wider field of psychology. For instance, Williams et al. (2023) explore specific and effective ways clinicians can engage with racial justice, some of which are directly applicable to training and teaching.

The findings illustrate a need to take a holistic, systemic approach to tackle these barriers on a micro-and-macro level to improve the representation of Black individuals within the CoP field.

Limitations

A qualitative methodology was used for this study, meaning that the findings are reflective of the participants in this study. As such, any wider generalisation of the findings needs to be approached

with caution. The sample consisted mostly of females with one male; therefore, it is possible that the account of the male participant may not have been adequately captured.

Another limitation was that although the present study obtained a reasonably homogenous sample, as it consisted of participants who self-identified as Black or Black British, African, or Caribbean descent, there are differences between the cultural backgrounds of these ethnic groups. Thus, the assumed homogeneity did not allow an understanding to be gained of the cultural differences within these groups.

Key implications

This research sheds light on a group that is under-researched within the academic literature and under-represented within the CoP field. The findings could be used in informing training for lecturers in raising awareness of the challenges faced by some Black trainees and helping lecturers to be equipped with skills to provide tailored support.

It is also imperative that lecturers are cognisant of the prejudice and biases they have towards Black individuals. Training programmes can take responsibility by offering reflective space to ensure staff continually engage with these issues. This type of training can be extended to placement supervisors to continue developing their skills and knowledge in working with issues around race and culture within the supervisory relationship.

There is also a need to review the curriculum taught in CoP doctoral courses. Lecturers and trainees must take responsibility and be proactive in finding additional resources to enhance their learning on racial and cultural issues where gaps exist and also challenge course providers and key stakeholders (e.g. BPS) to address this pertinent learning gap in the curricula.

Moreover, participants' accounts highlighted the plethora of solutions that are needed to improve the underrepresentation and increase access to the CoP field for Black individuals. For example, tackling institutional racism and providing funding for CoP doctoral training programmes. These findings could be used when lobbying key stakeholders and higher education institutions. The findings highlighted throughout this research show that CoPs have a pivotal role in engaging with this topic, taking responsibility to tackle both micro- and- macro level issues, and continuously engaging with these these issues as they evolve over time to bring about sustained and long-lasting change.

Ethics statement

All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study. Ethical approval was obtained from City St George's, University of London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee (approval no. ETH1920-1850). The research complied with the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014).

Author contributions statement

The first author carried out the research, data analysis and write-up of the study. The second author supervised this research and contributed to the write-up of the study.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Ireoluwa Sobogun is a Counselling Psychologist with previous experience working for the National Health Service (NHS).

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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Appendix A: Interview schedule

- What motivated you to train as a Counselling Psychologist?

Experience on the course and placement:

- Can you tell me about your experience so far on the doctorate course as a Black individual?

Prompt: lectures, course content, placement

- Can you tell me about any challenges that you have faced on the course so far?
- Can you tell me if you have had to navigate conversations about race and culture? If so, how have you found navigating these conversations as a Black trainee Counselling Psychologists?
- In what way, if at all do you think your race as a Black individual has affected your relationship with:
– Supervisors
– Other Colleagues
– Peers
- In light of what has transpired over the past year with COVID19 and the killing of George Floyd how have you found navigating the course and placement during this time?

Managing personal life along with the demands of the course:

- How have you found managing your work life/ balance since starting the course?

Prompt: relationships with friends and family since starting the course.

- Do you feel that you have had particular struggles in balancing the demands of the course which pertains to being a Black individual?

Prompt: around finances, having the right support from academic staff/peers/supervisors
Implications for the field of Counselling Psychology:

- In your opinion, what do you think could be done to improve the representation of Black individuals in the field of Counselling Psychology?

As we come to the end of the interview, is there anything else that you would like me to know about your experience?