

‘We don’t just need warm words, we need actions’

Binna Kandola is Chair of the British Psychological Society’s Diversity and Inclusion Taskforce. He met with Society President David Murphy to discuss some questions we had put to them.

What needs to change?

BK: I was the first chair when the Standing Committee for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities (SCPEO) was formed back in the late 80s. The BPS had no policy on equal opportunities at that time and that was the first task of SCPEO. I believed that we could achieve this within the first year, after which I would stand down. It took nearly three years to get the policy approved. The document did not change much from the first draft to the final one, but the key issue was the lack of commitment by too many influential people to the very idea that we needed such a policy.

This remains a challenge today. SCPEO was wound

up over ten years ago because the Society felt that it had achieved its objectives: Mission Accomplished! The complacency and arrogance behind this decision is all too apparent. In 2018 I wrote a book called *Racism at Work* and I have spoken to many different organisations and groups on the subject. The most difficult people to engage and discuss this subject with are psychologists. Beyond the virtue signalling that some white occupational psychologists engage in – and I am including academics in this – I have found little support for addressing the issues. In several instances their behaviour totally contradicts their espoused views.



Binna Kandola
(left) and David
Murphy

DM: I agree with Binna that a lot needs to change. At present people from certain backgrounds face significantly greater barriers at every stage in their psychology career; as an undergraduate, securing a place on a training programme and flourishing as a trainee, finding a job and developing in their career as a psychologist. It's true that the BPS can't influence all of these barriers directly, but the first thing we have to do is to make the Society a welcoming place to people from all minoritised and marginalised backgrounds and ensure they are represented at every level.

I have therefore made this the first objective of the Presidential Taskforce, and achieving it will require a lot more than words. Posters saying 'Welcome to the BPS!' will *not* be the answer. It will require the Society to be proactive and change the way it does things. That's where the Taskforce comes in. We are in the process of recruiting a group of people from a range of different backgrounds/experiences to help develop the plan for the concrete actions BPS needs to take. Although I think we have to start with getting our own house in order, BPS also has an opportunity – indeed I would say an obligation – to use its influence to promote diversity and inclusion in the profession.

Can you give an example of a specific BPS role?

DM: Education and training through our accreditation function. Discrepancies in rates of entry to the profession from people from different groups have been highlighted for many years. I've been particularly involved personally in addressing this within clinical psychology through my past role as director of a clinical psychology training programme and Chair of the Clinical Psychology Clearing House. I've said previously that the situation in clinical psychology is shameful – on average, White British applicants are about three times as likely to be successful as Black applicants in securing a place on a doctoral training programme. Again, there are a range of factors involved in this... there is a big discrepancy in attainment at undergraduate level, with White psychology undergraduates three times as likely to be awarded a

first class degree as their Black peers.

While I'm not saying the BPS or the universities that we accredit are solely to blame, I do think that the amount of attention it has received and the lack of concerted effort from BPS up to this point has been shameful. So, the second objective we have set for the Taskforce is to *promote diversity and inclusion within the profession and discipline of psychology through increasing entry of under-represented groups and ensuring that training reflects diversity and meets the needs of diverse groups*. That last part is important as it's not just about getting people through the door; it's about ensuring that they flourish once they are inside. This involves recognising and valuing diversity and being proactive in meeting the needs of diverse groups, and ensuring training is truly reflective of diversity.

This is very different from a 'colour-blind' approach, which in reality means burying your head in the sand; 'treating everyone the same' translates to treating everyone the same as the dominant group, which is White, Female, Affluent, Able-bodied, Neuro-typical, Heterosexual and Cis-gendered. It's a sad truth that despite psychology being a focused on people, the pathway through training is significantly more challenging for some people than others. For instance, if you have a physical disability, simply getting to your classroom, concentrating through a lecture, coping with stigma and ableist comments on a good day can be more of a challenge than an able-bodied peer will face during their entire training.

Just going back to diversity and access to training, I should say that we know more about the extent of the problems in clinical psychology, mainly because there is published data from the Clearing House. We simply don't know about diversity, or lack thereof, in other domains of psychology because there is little or no data collected and/or made publicly available. Anecdotally, I think there are similar issues in other domains of practice, and I think that barriers may be even more of an issue in pursuing research and academic careers.

So that's a start! It's not the whole story by any means. As a profession we are well placed to contribute to changing wider systems and narratives. We have

to start by demonstrating our active commitment to equality through our behaviour as an organisation.

Why now / why is this attempt going to be any different or more effective than previous ones?

BK: From my perspective, the reason why this is happening now is because of the commitment of two very senior people: the President, David Murphy, and the CEO Sarb Bajwa. Without this I am not sure anything much would change. The taskforce has the backing of the Board of Trustees and the President Elect has made clear her support for this too. We can be confident that, given this background, the findings of the taskforce will be presented to a leadership that is engaged and committed. How long this support is there will determine how long-lasting the changes made will be.

DM: I think that's a perfectly fair question that I have been asked many times over the past year. I do think it's worth remembering and celebrating the fact that the Society has made some significant contributions in the area of Diversity and Inclusion in the past. In many ways we have been ahead of the curve... in 1929 the BPS was one of the first learned Societies to elect a female President. Many associations didn't allow female members at that time. The BPS first formed an equal opportunities committee in 1981, which later became SCPEO. As Binna mentioned earlier, SCPEO was disbanded in 2009 with the assumption that diversity and inclusion had become embedded in the governance of the Society. I think the reality is that without a body taking a strategic overview of these issues within the BPS we haven't made as much progress as we could or should have. However, I am very clear that success needs to be judged on outcomes not process. We don't just need a fantastic taskforce with a wonderful chair, we don't just need warm words, we need actions and those actions need to be sustained. This is why I set the taskforce a third and final objective of advising the Board of Trustees on what structures need to be in place to monitor progress and continue to take a strategic perspective on diversity and inclusion in the Society.

Are the issues you are aiming to tackle society wide / academia and practice wide / or are there specific priorities for psychology and the Society?

BK: The taskforce is looking at the work of the Society which impacts both academia and practice. It is also about the influence the Society has on the development of courses, the research that it carries out, the chartership processes. But it also needs to look at the topics like recognition and who awards are given to, disciplinary processes. The taskforce has not met yet so I don't want to set an agenda for our work, but

it seems to me that we need to map out the range of activities that the Society is involved in. From this we can see, once we have begun gathering data to examine the wider impact that the Society, and psychologists, can have in society.

DM: I've touched on this a bit earlier but there's no doubt that many of the issues are wider than psychology and relate to inequities that are experienced by some groups in society literally from the moment of their birth. Think about inequities in health outcomes, through early experience, housing and of course, major disparities in educational opportunities.

However, the key question is 'what are we, the BPS, doing in the face of this?' Are we acting to address the problems or are we looking the other way?

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In his recent excellent book *How to be an Antiracist* Ibram Kendi writes in relation specifically to racial inequality: *'One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of "not racist". The claim of "not racist" neutrality is a mask for racism.'*

So we all need to ask ourselves 'Am I, as an individual, and are we as the BPS, anti-racist, anti-ableist, anti-homophobic, anti-transphobic, anti-sexist?' Perhaps it could be simplified to 'Are we exclusionists or inclusionists?', because if we're doing nothing, then we are exclusionists by default. It's that simple... and of course also that difficult!

'Inclusion' relates to all marginalised groups, so are there common paths through these issues that might make the mountain climbable?

DM: In a word – Yes. I've mentioned race quite a bit and I do think this is a particularly critical area at the moment, both in terms of BPS and our wider society, and we thought long and hard about whether to focus the taskforce exclusively on race. However, I do think there are some real benefits in taking a holistic look at inequity and some real limitations on focusing on one aspect of diversity in isolation. Although there's no doubt that Oxford University has a long way to go, during my time working there I was really impressed with the initiatives being made to promote inclusion, both by the University centrally and by individual colleges such as the foundation year programme at Lady Margaret Hall. These programmes take account of a range of diversity characteristics and have been effective at increasing representation of people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

There are many other examples of successes in higher education and also in other professions through taking a holistic approach. That said, we know that having groups focused on only one aspect of diversity can be safest for people with those identities at a

particular time, and we need to accommodate this. I am also acutely aware that many people fear that through focusing on multiple aspects of diversity, race can drop off the agenda as it is too difficult or uncomfortable to address. I completely understand this fear and have also seen it happen. We need to put measures in place to ensure this doesn't happen, both in terms of the composition of the Taskforce and the way it carries out its work.

BK: I agree with David that race is a key issue, certainly within the area of occupational psychology. However other communities may feel marginalised and not welcome too. Taking an inclusive culture approach means that we can be holistic. Inclusion, however, also presents the challenge of looking at how we can ensure that we don't end up turning away from and ignoring some areas because we have less interest in them. Yes, there are common paths, and having identified these we will be in a position to look at how we can make the Society more inclusive.

What do you need from our readers?

DM: Two things – hope and help. I know that some people are sceptical about the commitment to change and I always say to them 'By all means keep your scepticism!', we need it. If we got a group of people together who were all eternal optimists and came up with a rosy picture that everything will be fine by next

week with a few warm words, that would be worse than doing nothing. We need skeptics to ground us and hold us to account, but we also need a bit of hope. Hope that things can change, hope that we as the BPS do have the capacity to get our own house in order and to be a positive influence on the psychology profession, the systems within which psychologists work and wider society.

I'd like readers to channel this little bit of hope (it doesn't need to be much!) into responding to the calls for engagement that the Taskforce will make over the coming year. It's clear in my mind, and I'm pretty sure Binna agrees, that the way forward will not come out of the taskforce sitting together in a room somewhere and then appearing with a magic plan. They will need to engage widely and benefit from the ideas, knowledge and wisdom that already exists throughout the many different networks of the BPS, but also outside it among those people who are lapsed members, potential future members or other stakeholders. My hope is that readers will have enough hope to fully engage with the taskforce and to help them coproduce their work.

BK: I echo what David has said. The taskforce will be consulting widely, so when the time comes get involved. The taskforce has been set by the Board of Trustees because it believes that diversity and inclusion are issues that need to be addressed. Your views about the nature of the issues though may be different to those of other members, so let the taskforce know.



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