

Schwartz Round on “Racism at work” - Our Story

Background to the Round

We had started to make links with the staff identity network groups, including the lead for our BAME network group. We hoped these links would build interest, understanding and awareness of Schwartz Rounds, and start conversations about the emotional life that lies beneath the surface in our organisation. And then two members of staff found us, and their stories were both undoubtedly about racism. We have never previously advertised a Schwartz Round as explicitly about discrimination, despite stories and discussion about racism and other forms of oppression. After all, the impact of hierarchy, discrimination and ‘othering’ permeates organisational life, so is always important to attend to. But this felt different. A tagline on our publicity advertising the Round topic as ‘racism at work’ would, we knew, raise individual and organisational anxiety. A tagline saying anything else would collude with individual and organisational denial.

In the week preceding the Schwartz Round, anxiety was high. Ideally at least one of our facilitators for this Round would be BAME, but our longstanding Clinical Lead, of dual heritage, had recently left the Trust. We also still ‘only’ had 2 storytellers, both female and both clinical staff, which made less visible our commitment to a diverse mdt ‘panel’. Our Administrator became unavailable, followed by one of the Facilitators, an experienced Senior Nurse, also becoming unavailable. At this point, the pressure to postpone felt enormous. But, in 6 years we have only cancelled 2 Rounds, and only in exceptional circumstances. What would it mean, and communicate to the organisation, to cancel this Round, on this topic, right now? We held our nerve, took a deep breath, and carried on.

Reflections from a panellist

I told a story about racism at work. On the surface it sounds simple, and that's only the tip of the iceberg because I wasn't sure if, through my story, the people listening would look to see what lay beneath the ocean. It's a lot easier to call out behaviour when it is directly said because their words are my evidence. But how do you accomplish this when these actions are in behaviours, behaviours that we recognise are harmful and dangerous through our own experiences, activated by neural pathways into our memories of the dangers we were in before? And if we've been in it before, how do I get a group of people, who have never nor will ever be in that position to feel worthless shame for the colour of their skin, to believe me? Telling the story was one thing, and reliving it was another. I worked hard to close Pandora's box and when it was opened, those monsters of worthlessness and shame were unleashed. And they were still out in the open when the story was over, and the days had gone by after the Schwartz round. In the same way that Pandora had one last thing in her box, as did I, and that was hope. Hope that if it were to happen to someone else, they would have a person to show them compassion by looking beneath their ocean.

Reflections from a Facilitator

All Schwartz Rounds are memorable as a Facilitator in different ways. Some, however, seem to act as a ‘gear change’, perhaps through their emotional impact on the group, or through tackling a taboo topic. Examples of Rounds that have done that in the past include ‘staff mental health’, and being ‘under investigation’. Our Round about racism at work was memorable for both its direct tackling of a taboo topic *and* its high emotion. It took courage from everyone involved, most importantly the storytellers, who needed to trust the forum, their colleagues, and ultimately the facilitators – we were all stepping into unknown territory for the organisation. It was anxiety provoking, exhausting and very powerful to be part of - and of course, the conversations and work continues.

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Our Report

(Written with anonymity and confidentiality in mind, includes verbatim feedback and always signed off by panellists. Available to all staff, and sent to Exec Team)

Theme – Racism at work

36 members of staff experienced this Round. The majority (88%) had previously attended a Schwartz Round and the ratio of those who signed in from home or on-site/elsewhere was 67:33.

Panellist stories

Two panellists shared different stories about the ways in which racism had impacted on their lives, professional and personal, past and present. Themes included the ways in which coping mechanisms to deal with racism are forged in early life, the painful impact and repercussions of speaking out, and the power of language. The stories showed ways in which our position in the hierarchy and career path impact on the experience of racism at work. It also can influence our agency to deal with it, and the support available to us - a theme across both stories, allowing different experiences to be shared and witnessed. What is it like to be on the receiving end of protracted and sometimes ‘intangible’ racism from patients and colleagues? The lasting impact on our psyche of the daily micro-aggressions of racism was a powerful theme. Power, powerlessness, shame, doubt and strength were all present in the stories, as were tolerance, forgiveness and anger.

Open discussion

The way in which racism operates, and the significant challenges of speaking out, were very present in the *ways* participants spoke about their experiences. Many contributors began their stories by denying any racism in UHP – their stories, however, revealed something quite different. What does it mean, and what is the cost, of the experience of racism being simultaneously denied, doubted, acknowledged and then witnessed? From connecting to the experience of internalised ‘shame’, to revealing aspects of the shared coping mechanism of not speaking out, the Round appeared to offer a space for voices that may have previously had little outlet. Bearing witness appeared an important part of the Round – to hear the stories shared, feel the pain and discomfort and recognise the silence and that has accompanied such experiences. We heard about how racism operates at different levels – personal, interpersonal and institutional. Stories were shared about the internalised shame felt as a result of daily micro-aggressions, racism masked as humour in teams, and discrimination with respect to promotion. The anger expressed towards the end of the Round may speak to the ways in which people censor their emotions about the impact of racism, protecting others, and possibly themselves. The Round appeared to allow a level of safety for more difficult or taboo emotions to begin to be expressed, particularly anger, which has complex associations to the ways in which racism is perpetuated (‘the angry black staff’ as a both a racist stereotype and a way of silencing anger *about* racism).

The Round today felt less a space to explore, or ‘think’ about the mechanism of racism and more an opportunity for those experiencing it to share and have witnessed its profound impact – a first step in the exploration and wider development of understanding something we are all part of.

Comments/Feedback shared in ‘chat’ immediately at the end of the Schwartz Round

- Brave for sharing the story, courage, need to stick together
- The story powerful, emotive and sad.
- Should be an HR /Senior Manager to respond to what is being said.
- Need a follow up.
- Better late than never.
- Don’t feel alone now. (name of non-clinical service) – lots of racism.
- Think this round needs a follow up.

Qualitative Feedback

- Very powerful and emotional, talking about a subject that has always been very taboo
- It was very emotive and needs to be followed up
- Interesting format, frankly alarming stories that made me think - and made me sad that racism is still so clearly so entrenched in UK society
- It was a great insight into the horrible reality of racism that our colleges sadly have faced. It has raised my awareness and gives me more courage to stand up to any suspicions of racism in and out of practice.