



# Language in Reports - Appropriate Challenge

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# The Power of Language

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“Language is not neutral.

Through our use of language, whether consciously or unconsciously, we can exacerbate existing inequalities”

(Annacrafttrust.org)

# Written Records

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- assessments,
  - reports,
  - case conferences minutes
  - chronologies,
  - records of visits / case notes
- ...and more.

Written records are of huge significance in practice & have a big impact on lives

# Current Landscape

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In the context of disproportionate representation of children from 'Global Majority' families in social care departments, alternative education provisions and the criminal justice system, there is increasing query around the role of the 'systems' in place in, to assess and meaningfully intervene with a particular lens on race & culture and the language used to further marginalise them.

# Current Landscape Cont'd

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## **Strong Narrative**

- Structural and institutional racism in social work workforce – (What Works, 2021)
- Disparity in responses to 'BAME' children compared with their White counterparts (J Davis, Where are the black girls in our CSA services, 2019)
- Concern regarding the 'Adultification' of 'Black' girls and boys by statutory services (Child Q)
- A desire for greater emphasis on normalisation of difference as opposed to the prior resistance to this – this is interesting
- Movement towards a collaborative approach to address issues around race and culture – (White Allies)

# The Bigger Picture

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The inappropriate or misuse of language is only a small part of a bigger picture of social concern. There is an entrenched culture that undermines and systematically marginalises ethnic groups and in response there has been a distinct appetite for change in terms of culturally competent & anti-racist practice. Although this started long before the murder of George Floyd in the US (May 2020); his death and the rise of black live matters definitely played a role in raising awareness and accelerating the issues

# Barriers to Challenging...

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- lack of support, fear of retribution?
- lack of confidence to challenge?
- lack of skill to challenge?
- lack of exposure and understanding?
- feeling silenced, fear of unemployment or unfair targeting

To name just a few

# An Emotive Word?

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Consider: What does the word 'challenge' mean to you?.



# Reframing the concept of challenge

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Our own perception of the word 'challenge' can affect our readiness to act on language that we feel is appropriate. We may fear causing upset or offending people but the reality is that the outcome will be the same if you do not challenge – the only difference will be the recipient of the upset.

This can however be reframed.

Appropriate challenge can also be a way to create a learning experience or deeper exploration of the meaning applied to something. It can be a safe and non-judgemental opportunity to reflect, remain curious and explore the basis of your thinking and resultant use of language.

In this context it is about development and fair representation of the people we work with as opposed to being about berating someone about their practice.

# Help the Practitioner to Reflect

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Challenging of language is best achieved at the time the problematic language occurs to allow reflection and also amendment. This isn't to demonise, rather to help to develop.

Might there be an aspect of confirmation bias in the manner in which information is being sought and recorded?

Make enquiry about what is written and explore with the practitioner whether there might be an alternative explanation for something?... remain curious,

What is fact and what is assumption?

This might not be something the practitioner is aware of or they might be aware but not know how to shift this thinking.

# Not Just Words

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Challenging language is not just about the words used, it is also about exploring tone.

As a report authoriser it is also necessary to observe the tone of reports. Tone is also a communication and can demonstrate frustration or a dislike for someone. In such instances the report can read quite one sided and without balance and if you line manage or know the case well enough you may find yourself questioning or wanting to offer information to counter some of what you are reading. Tone very much sits within a couple of the areas mentioned earlier in the presentation - (about how we write & about the meaning beneath the words) and families may pick up on this tone. Our anxieties, fear, dislike or ambivalence for someone can bleed into the way in which we engage with them and write about them and this can cause a bias of recommendations made concerning their lives.

# Scenario 1

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Police referral –

RR - 12yo girl Black British, looks older, quite developed. Alleges sexual assault by a 17yo black male named A (she didn't get his surname). Met online on a social media app on which she is talking to a number of different boys of various ages. RR arranged to meet A and when she arrived with her 12yo cousin (TS), they saw that there were a gang of boys waiting for them. RR said that the boys took her and her cousin to a secluded area and tried to force them to have sex. Both girls said to have fought and screamed. TS managed to get away unharmed by biting the hand of boy holding her. Doesn't appear impacted RR was unable to get herself out of harms way and alleges to have been digitally penetrated by one of the boys and then vaginally raped by the A and one of his friends.

# Scenario 2

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## Assessment extract:

PW is 15 years old and is of dual heritage, born here in the UK. Her mother is Black British and her father is African.. PW's complexion is quite dark so she will likely have experienced racism and marginalisation. This might explain her resistance to engage and her at times aggressive demeanour. There are concerns about PW's exposure to her mothers poor mental health which can result in physical aggression by mother, towards PW. PW is very protective of her mother and does not like to speak to professionals about things that happen in the family home.

# Scenario 3

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Extract from Brady-Williams (2019) reporting on research findings relating to experiences of Black social workers:

*I think sometimes it's really hard to challenge the issues when you're the most junior member of staff. You're sitting in group supervision hearing people saying negative stereotypical language and you're the most junior staff. It's really difficult to challenge. Well, I found it really difficult to challenge it, especially in the moment. D(FG6)*

# Language in Reports

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**Language in reports;**

**It's not just about what we write, it's how we write it.**

**It's about what we mean beneath the words; what we do and don't communicate & it's about how we are presenting and representing people.**

**Yes, language be supportive, encouraging & empowering, but equally language can subjectify, disempower and marginalise.**

**To not challenge is to allow and by default collude with the misrepresentation & marginalisation of families**

**“Children from all cultures are subject to abuse and neglect. All children have a right to grow up safe from harm. In order to make sensitive and informed professional judgements about a child’s needs, and parents’ capacity to respond to their child’s needs, it is important that professionals are sensitive to differing family patterns and lifestyles and to child rearing patterns that vary across different racial, ethnic and cultural groups.**

**Professionals should also be aware of the broader social factors that serve to discriminate against black and minority ethnic people. Working in a multi-racial and multi-cultural society requires professionals and organisations to be committed to equality in meeting the needs of all children and families, and to understand the effects of racial harassment, racial discrimination and institutional racism, as well as cultural misunderstanding or misinterpretation.**

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