

## Series 1 Episode 2

### British racism and anti-oppressive practice: A Conversation with Rick Bowler



[00:00:00] **Lesley:** Hello and welcome to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work. I'm your host and my name is Dr Lesley Deacon.

[00:00:13] **Sarah:** And I'm your other host and I'm Dr Sarah Lonbay. So we hope you enjoy today's episode.

...

#### Introduction to Episode 2

[00:00:28] **Lesley:** Hi there, this is Dr Lesley Deacon and welcome to our new podcast recording. Here today, as usual, with Dr Sarah Lonbay. Welcome Sarah.

[00:00:37] **Sarah:** Hi Lesley.

[00:00:38] **Lesley:** And today, our guest is Dr Rick Bowler, who's here to talk to us about his CASS article, which is entitled 'Whiteness Britishness, and the Racist Reality of Brexit'. Welcome, Rick.

[00:00:48] **Sarah:** Welcome Rick.

[00:00:49] **Rick:** Thanks Lesley, thanks Sarah. It's great to be here. My name's Rick Bowler, I got my doctorate in 2015, and my interests really have been driven, I think, by these issues of oppression and disadvantage and fortune and privilege, somewhere in there. So most of my focus has been around the issue of racism, anti-racism, I'm really a bit of a probably awkward person who continually talks about anti-racist practice, or praxis really, how we think about it as well as practice it, and it's driven me into a lot of areas. So I'm also extremely concerned actually about the place of young people in our society, partly because I was brought up to believe, and I fundamentally believe it, that

young people are our future. That as a society, we should believe in young people, and we should look after them. If you don't look after your future, then we've somehow misunderstood what the best cultures, the best human cultures in the world have ever taught us. And I think that is the worst kind of arrogance, when we're currently in a society which has no idea how to look after its young people, its children and young people.

### **Understanding 'racism' and the power of words and meaning**

[00:02:24] **Lesley:** It's really lovely to have you here because I think it's been an absolute joy to re-read your paper because obviously I haven't read it for a little while, I read them when they came out and then I've re-read, so it's been really, really great re-reading it and having a really good think about things that are just still as equally important as when you wrote this. Nothing's really changed, unfortunately... in terms of society, we're still in the same place. So it's been a really good point to revisit. So do you want to just tell us a little bit about the article and how you came to write it? Because obviously it's related to a paper that Professor Pete Rushton had produced. So obviously, unfortunately we don't have Pete here anymore to be able to talk to us about that, but if you could contextualize how this came about, that'd be really helpful.

[00:03:18] **Rick:** Yeah, thank you for those kind words too. I actually also re-read it, and also re-read Peter's paper, and of course it took me back both to how brilliant and wonderful Peter Rushton was, and how supportive he had been as a colleague for all those years, and the legacy he left.

So Peter wrote the paper, he wrote the first paper and the paper was, if I get this right, it was titled 'Brexit Vote in Sunderland', and I reviewed it. That was really how I got into writing my paper. So part of the way forward was working with Pete about his views on Brexit, and I guess my views on Brexit, and of course Pete was a brilliant historical sociologist and took a very particular view around class, and particularly I think central to his paper, as I remember it, was that Sunderland had been targeted, and I can only think of that as the right word, by the establishment, to be called a 'Brexit City', with a kind of underlying deficiency discourse that somehow the aberrant people of Sunderland had voted in a way which marked them out as extra-ordinary and different, when in fact Pete's paper eloquently argues that the title really might've better been 'Sunderland: a Pretty Ordinary Place', that in fact there was nothing particularly aberrant about Sunderland, or anywhere else, but

there was something very particular about the Brexit Referendum and its outcome.

[00:05:18] **Lesley:** Yeah, because I re-read, obviously, Pete's paper as well, and I was reflecting on that because I remember after the vote had happened, I was actually at the Graduation Ball. And I remember talking to some of our students who had actually voted to leave, and I was talking to them and I had to kind of, sort of... was a bit surprised at the time. And I remember saying to them, "okay, tell me why, tell me why, what was going on in your head as to why you felt this was the right decision". And I found that really interesting, that I think that when you actually look into the reasoning behind it, it's not always what you think it is. You know, there's these perceptions of why people voted, and actually, to me, there's an awful lot of people saying "I'm not being listened to". "I'm not being heard". "I need to be heard". You know, feeling that the establishment doesn't care. At all.

[00:06:13] **Rick:** Lesley, I think that's really important actually. There's some really important contextual frames, I think, to just set down, partly if we're going to talk about issues of race and racism and whiteness, otherwise I think people will misunderstand what those terms might mean. I think that's both in Pete's paper and I think in mine, I tried to talk about some of the contexts of precarity, and the precariousness of much of the working class. In fact, I would always, when I think about the working class, think about white and black working class, so I would think about the combination of how the intersect between race and class is absolutely critical, and always has been, but for many people, their lives are difficult and I think the idea that the trail of Brexit leaves today, I can see that. So I can use a couple of my younger daughters' experiences where they've had to work, as many, many, many young people have to, in zero hour contract employment on minimum wage. For 16 year olds that's four pounds something, rising to something like eight pounds if you're in your twenties, eight pounds something, and you think this is absolutely disgusting, these young people have very little opportunity, and many of them are graduates of universities, that they have very little opportunity to have a foothold in the society. And of course, for older members of society we've seen the expansion of vans and the delivery drivers and a whole range of those kinds of areas of work, if people are lucky enough to be in work, which tell us something about the place that we live.

[00:08:11] **Lesley:** Yeah, definitely. Because you touched on some of your concepts there already, because I think it'd be helpful maybe for our listeners

to hear, when you use these terms like 'whiteness', what is it that you mean by that? So we can then think about what social workers need to be thinking about when it comes to that sort of terminology and what it means.

[00:08:35] **Rick:** Okay, I like that Lesley. What I'm going to do before I say something about it because I... well, first and foremost, if I say that when I'm talking about whiteness from a particular critical race perspective, I'm really talking about a system, an organised system, that was underpinned really by supremacist ideological views, racial logics, as we might call them, which posit a particular view of humans and how humans are organised in some kind of stratified system of classification. And so my starting point is really to say that the reason I wanted to write that paper, and the reason why I wanted to do research, or do any kind of research and writing and teaching, is because I think the first point is that we're human. And much of the processes that we've just talked about in terms of precariousness, that's an *organised* social system. It isn't an accident and it is not natural that many, many people are on very low wages and live very poor existences and have to use food banks. That's a dehumanising system. And so the starting point is to recognise what is humanising and what is dehumanising about the contexts and the places we work and therefore the people we work with, we begin to see something else. And we can then begin to talk about racism or other forms of social inequality.

[00:10:21] **Lesley:** Yeah, that's right, because when I was reading your paper I was looking at it and I was thinking, yeah, this is the particular issue of race. You can almost say, well, we can look at disability as one of those, we can look at gender as one of those, you know, it's the same sort of thing in a system that doesn't seem to... says it's fair, but actually acts *unfairly*.

[00:10:47] **Rick:** Yeah, I agree with that entirely Lesley. I think one of the ways, and some of the interesting other research that's been done in this area around, say, landscapes of hate, Brexit was interesting for this, I mean when I use the word 'interesting' I don't mean that I like it, but it was interesting, and that one of the things about the referendum itself was there was a significant increase in hate crime. And that hate crime didn't just affect people who were not white, in the sense that it didn't just affect people who might be labeled as 'migrants' or 'immigrants' or 'asylum seekers' or 'Muslims', or from black and minority ethnic communities. But it also affected people who were gay, LGBT people. And you thought, well, how on earth does this work? And then it also, of course, we know, caused the significant rise in things like domestic and interpersonal violence. And you think, well, how's this working? Or hate crime

against disabled people. And you think what are the connecting points here? And so some of the more recent work by other academics around this, I think is very, very interesting, because it doesn't actually make sense, but it tells us something about when we have policies of social division that play off people against each other. And we have populist ideas that produce culture wars where it is all right to say whatever you want to say, it is okay to believe whatever you want to believe, as if somehow these are, again, natural processes and not processes of discursive, social construction, then I think we're in dangerous territory.

[00:12:46] **Lesley:** So if we look now particularly at race, and think about race in relation to social work practice, what do you think are the key issues there for social workers?

[00:13:02] **Rick:** Okay, I mean of course you know I'm a community and youth work person.

[00:13:05] **Lesley:** We will make that clear in the introduction!

[00:13:09] **Rick:** But of interest to me is, of course when I started out in this world, social work and community work were sisters really. One came out of the other, and one influenced the other, and that's been my own experience too, that social work and community and youth work are absolutely key parts of a wider educational and interventionist system for really dealing with the fallout of what I would call socially unjust processes. So my thoughts about race here are really to do with this, that race isn't something that one can easily just superimpose as an idea. It was a social system. Racism was a social system that developed to justify some of the greatest brutalities the world has known, in terms of transatlantic slavery, into Empire for Britain, its Empire stretched everywhere, it's almost impossible to think of somewhere that Britain's footprint hasn't been. And sometimes that footprint was good, and sometimes that footprint was not good at all. In fact was extremely bad. And then we had colonialism, and this idea of colonisation, not only just of land but of *resources* and of *people*, left this legacy of how we as human beings are organised into these groups, as I said earlier, and that really is, I guess, the central argument I'm making in the paper. That the idea of who can be known as a 'British citizen' or as belonging to Britain, as being English British, as an English British national, really was part of the discourse that was used in the Brexit referendum to scare people, and to 'other' people, and to separate

people, as if we were not actually all rather interesting human beings with our different foibles.

Core to that, I think, was this idea of the 'immigrant'. So I just wanted to try and see about something about words, power and meaning. And this is really important for social work, in its entirety, because how we describe people may not actually be very clear in relation to when we're asked to think, well, what do we mean by that? So when we describe people as 'immigrants', what we're really doing is we're avoiding a description of who are *not* immigrants. Well, so let me try and give an example. When I was doing my doctoral studies, I was really fascinated by the fact that there are far more 'ex-pats' – a word that's used to describe everybody from England, Britain, who goes and lives somewhere else – they're 'ex-pats', they're never 'immigrants'. I don't think it's possible. Were the British 'immigrants' in Hong Kong? Or were they 'ex-pats'? They were 'ex-pats', they're 'ex-pats' everywhere. And so the idea of 'immigrants' is clearly a way of demarking one group of people from another. And this idea of always talking about the 'other', and the 'other' is always 'othered' in this kind of process, is really at the root of my own conceptualisation of thinking about how, as a social worker or community and youth worker or a teacher or a nurse or a doctor or any other kind of professional, how do we work with people if we start from a position where we start to see them as a label? And a label without particularly deep thought and meaning.

[00:17:26] **Lesley:** I think that's always an issue that we encounter a lot. I remember, Sarah, when you were doing one of your CASS seminars and you were talking about words like, was it 'vulnerable'?

[00:17:37] **Sarah:** Yeah, I was unpicking that in relation to adult safeguarding. And I think what you've just said is so important, Rick, and I think it kind of sparks in me one of the things I wanted to ask you about your paper, in regards to power dynamics within those relationships. Because you're talking about starting with that position of someone as an 'other', with a label in mind, rather than looking at them as a person and as a human. And I think we do that in these professions because we categorise 'professional', 'not professional', 'social worker', 'service user', there's power inherent in that already, without then adding on other labels that we might give to someone like 'vulnerable' or whatever else. And I'm just wondering if you could share your thoughts about those sorts of aspects and the power dynamics inherent in those roles and the labels that we ascribe.

[00:18:26] **Rick:** Yeah, that's great Sarah. I think it seems to me that that's absolutely essential, any critical professional must start from the basis of what is the purpose of me utilising this language, in terms of what kind of relationship do I need to have with the person that I'm working with, and here, I'm not wanting to be 'over-liberal', if that's the right word to use, to suggest that we don't have to have a position or a line – we must have a position, and we must be clear about what that position is, but we must actually make that transparent. And I think part of the issue for me is that so much of this use of labels, and use of 'organising principles', is hidden. So they're not transparent, either in terms of the 'vulnerable', utilising that construct, either to the person who's labeled with it, or to us. And I think that's the bit in the middle that I really would like to bring out and make public. So I think some of the things that... no, *many* of the things that happen on a day-to-day basis, in this country, and I'm really thinking here about political processes, but I'm also thinking about interventionist processes, need to be made transparent. And that's difficult for professionals I think, it's difficult for all of us, but we need to have those difficult, complicated and discomfiting conversations in order to get a better understanding of what our roles are, what our responsibilities are, and what our purpose is.

[00:20:15] **Lesley:** Yeah, because there were a couple of things I was thinking from what you were saying, Rick, one of them was about the fact that we don't have the conversations. There's a very 'romantic' view, I believe, of Britain's colonial past that is taken, which isn't actually filled with the harsh realities of what it actually meant and what it looked like to people experiencing it. And I was trying to think back myself about my own education and how much of that was really made aware to me. And I honestly can't...

[00:20:56] **Sarah:** There's a huge gap isn't there.

[00:20:57] **Lesley:** It's massive isn't it? And then when I was thinking about social work education, I couldn't think of any *at all* on that. And that really concerned me because I think that otherwise, I think your point of the critical practitioner, to me that's really important. That's what we're really talking about. If we've got critical practitioners, then it's almost like you're in slightly safe hands there with somebody who will challenge and question. And what I was thinking about was, you and I have known each other for quite a few years, and one of the things I brought into social work education, particularly that I've found interesting, is moral philosophy. And the thing with moral philosophy is it is about: you need to see the person before you see the label,

the process and everything else. And that was so challenging for social work students, because it's almost like by the time they're at a point to be open to that level of criticality, they've had law and policy through their heads for sometimes two years or a year, about the importance of that and "this is how we do things". And then suddenly I was saying, okay, let's just put that out the door. It's not in the room. It's not here. We're not going to discuss that. Forget it. Now let's talk about the person, the human being, because that's the only thing that we share in its entirety, I think, is humanity. We're all human beings. At least I hope so, I might find some philosophical question later on that questions that, but what are your thoughts about that kind of thing in things like social work education and in general?

[00:22:50] **Rick:** Well if I try and come back to the paper and think about how we go with that in terms of social work education, because I think it's really important for social workers, students and practitioners to really understand things that many people don't like, actually it's not that I want them to forcibly do things they don't like, but I often, and I think we live in this society at the moment where the education system, I think is *devoid* really, for many people, of an understanding of politics and policy, of how the social processes in this country are organised. So it took a footballer like Marcus Rashford, just to use him as an example, to highlight to the country that children are not fed on a regular basis. Large numbers of children actually have to live very, very precarious lives. That's not good for children. I mean, we know that, we just know that, all public health people know that. In fact, all professionals, good professionals, know that. The government knows this, the government has known this for years. It's not a shock to them, although they often *appear* to think, "oh my goodness me, I didn't know that". Well, I guess, I would argue, that if you draw your politicians from a very narrow band, and so one of the arguments I make in the paper, is that much of the Brexit debate – for or against – was led and portrayed by white, middle-class men. There were very few other voices. There were a few women's voices, but they were particular voices and, and they were mostly middle-class voices. Occasionally, if they needed to utilise a voice from 'below', they would pick one that supported their cause. But the actual voices of ordinary people were not heard. The voices of young people were not heard, the voices of all these diverse groups of people were not heard. And the complex voices of maybe working-class people, men and women, were not really, really heard, in terms of what did this major policy change *mean* for them, in terms of things like economy, in terms of things like day-to-day living, in terms of things like services, in terms of things like health, access to health, or in relation to the burgeoning



voluntary and community sector 'filling in the gaps' with things like food banks and community care. Okay, so how does that context relate to those specific sorts of questions? But I think if we don't get an education about those things, if we don't *understand* how our local democracy works, how we can *ask* for things, we can *demand* things we can engage collectively to try and organise to have things, then the services *to us* can disappear. And so leading up to Brexit was almost, well it was 2016–17, so we're talking at least six years of austerity. And austerity was sold to the public as a policy to deal with very, very wealthy people in 2008 running away with the money. I mean, the global financial crisis, this is not my greatest area of strength, but it would be clear if you were to talk to anybody in the know at that time and today that the global financial crisis was not caused by working-class people. It was not caused by young people. It was not caused by any of the diverse groups that we're talking about. It was caused by a very small group of highly entitled bankers and others who decided to gamble with our money, with the ability for each of all of us to have services. As a consequence of that, our politicians, and from a very limited background, decided that they had to impose severe cuts to public services. And the public services are *ours*, they're *people's*. I mean we can argue about them, we can sometimes say, oh, we think our doctors should be better, or our nurses should be better, or this facility should be more important than that facility, but they're the basis of all other health and social care in this society. And of course, we can see the problems of social care everywhere.

So that contextualization, for me, I thought, well all of this is absent from the Brexit debate. This isn't being discussed at all. That it's as if somehow we haven't had all these cuts, that there is a decimation in local authority services. So for social workers the problems are rising, the resources are lessening, the demand is increasing, the support is lessening. And for people on the bottom end in the most difficult aspects of life, those people living in poverty – and I cannot understand how we've arrived in 2021 and do not understand that poverty is something that we should easily have eradicated. If somebody can have 400 million pounds a year salary, plus millions of pounds worth of bonuses, well they could keep a million pounds and give the rest out, and we could start to redistribute some of that resource to deal with things like poverty. I'm very happy to, myself, pay more taxes if that was the case. So we haven't really dealt with any of these substantial issues at all. So then we enter a debate about whether we want to stay or leave Europe. Now, as we've just said before, one of the dilemmas for us in this country is we have a very poor social education system. I mean, it may be really good in very particular bits:

my eldest brother is a brilliant science teacher, he's a fantastic science teacher; my oldest daughter's a fantastic primary school teacher. I know teachers are brilliant. They teach really, really good in the subject areas, but they would both agree, as with, I think, most educators, head teachers, and all the unions and teachers would agree that social education is absolutely essential. And we don't have it in this country. So people actually really had had a narrative about Europe from both, from all the major political parties – actually, none of them come out of this very well – all the major political parties, that Europe was somehow a terrible place. Now I'm the child of an immigrant, my mother, for all her interests and beauty and care and difficulties, brought us up to believe that we were in Europe. We came from India and we are in Europe. We're in Britain, you're in Europe. This is a part of Europe. She had an education that told her that different continents lived in different places in the world, and Britain was in Europe. So I was fascinated, myself, by this idea that somehow Britain was *outside* of Europe, in a debate about whether we should be part of the European Union or not. And probably the most telling example of this, for me, was a young man in Wales who was interviewed, he'd come out of a sports centre, he was a young working-class lad, he'd come out of a sports centre and he was interviewed, I think it was on one of the major TV channels, and behind him was a big sign that said 'Paid for by the European Social Fund', and the new sports centre, the new community resources and facilities and all the road systems leading to them, were all part of this thing that we call Europe, were part of our involvement and engagement with the European Social Fund, and we got that because we were members of this club, and he was interviewed, and the irony was that he was standing of course with his back to this big notice, and he actually said to the interviewer, "well, what's Europe ever done for us?" And it was like a Monty Python sort of moment. It was one of those moments where you think, okay, we've got a mismatch here between what people understand, and what the politicians are trying to portray on either side of this debate. And so that was my starting point to think about, okay, I need to say something about this paper.

### **The role of the critical practitioner and social education**

[00:32:16] **Sarah:** Yeah, and you said a lot of very eloquent and really important things in the paper that was enjoyable to read, definitely. And some really interesting points that you made about the role of educators. I think you've touched on sort of teachers there, but more widely in the paper you seem to be, particularly in the conclusion, suggesting, or saying very clearly, that educators have a role to critically expose these oppressive systems and the things they come across in their practice. But who would you classify as

being an educator? I mean, obviously there's the obvious ones, teachers are educators, all of us in this room are educators, but does that role apply more widely than that? Would you see other professions like social workers having that kind of role as well?

[00:33:03] **Rick:** Yeah, I would definitely see that Sarah, I think social workers have a duty to, as community and youth workers do – actually we're two of the professions that still retain an ethical commitment to anti-oppressive practice, anti-discriminatory practice. And this is really important because these are part of our standards. But we've lost a little bit on the journey of what that means. We've come to sort of almost think of them in 'light' ways, that we need to be polite to people, but not think about the social conditions that we're being asked to go into, or that the people we work with are living in, and to think about them in a much more wider and deeper, more expansive way. I think I would say that we, social work educators, but also our social work institutions have been through an awful lot of changes over a very short period of time, lots and lots of interference, by politicians. This is a fascinating way that our democracy operates. It's a very dysfunctional way of operating, and it's a very one-directional way of operating, but it means that often the social work institutions that are supposedly looking at standards are, in my view, neglectful of these underlying social problems. So that they expect professionals to solve problems or to work with people as if they were completely and utterly individual. And I think this process of individualization has become just routine now, it's almost as if that is how the world is. Well, partly I'm fortunate because I'm older it's that I was brought up in a social welfare system. Partly I think how I was fortunate because I had a parent who, although educated in India, was very knowledgeable, and so would insist on us thinking about other people all the time. I think there was some religious duties in there, so, you know, our daily job was to think about helping other people and to get out and look at other people. But as a consequence of doing that, you end up engaging in discussions with other people and you begin to find out richness, the richness and diversity of life, and how people have got great resilience and fortitude to overcome things. And those things I think get missed for social workers if we don't critically problematize the places that we work and the people we work with.

[00:36:00] **Lesley:** So when you were talking just then Rick, it was making me think about the missing social education that seems to be throughout the whole system, that we're not getting that, which is almost like the critical thinking element of looking at things and actually questioning rather than just

accepting. And that was making me think about when I became an educator in social work that one of the ways in which social workers can achieve that is by actually taking a radical social work perspective. But I remember that when it was started, as colleagues who had been there during that movement, which was in the seventies, students saying, "oh, well, why is it relevant? Why do I need to be looking at something that was going on in the 1970s?" And what I've really tried to champion is to actually try and get students to really acknowledge that it's as relevant now as it's ever been, in fact even more so, and really what this is, is about the fact that when you're a practitioner, what you don't want to be is an agent of the state that is actually discriminating against individuals by implementing policies and practice that actually cause further discrimination. And some of the things that I've been trying to get them to think about, and it's going to sound quite silly in some respects, but I actually get them to think about a toilet roll and how actually, if you think about how you buy toilet roll, it's like the system is set up so that the people with the most money can get the best value out of a sheet of toilet paper, because it's cheaper to buy bulk, and you can only do that if you've got surplus cash. And the majority of the people that we're working with in social services do not have surplus cash. So even just a simple matter like that, to try and get them to stop and think, and they have found that quite surprising because nobody thinks about these things. It's like those little pointers, isn't it, to try and almost poke a hole in all of that, that you've just set out, and say, "hang on a minute, let's look at what that really means. Let's look at what that really means".

### **Safe spaces for critical thinking**

[00:38:18] **Lesley:** So leading on from that, I just wondered, how you think, do we have space? Because that was one of the aspects. Do we really have space for these conversations? In other podcasts we've talked about, in order to think you need space, and that's not just physical space, mental space, time... just wondering what you thought about that.

[00:38:46] **Rick:** No, Lesley, that's really fantastic. I think that gets to the nub, really, of a problem in community and youth work. One of the things I think that I've written about a bit actually is safe spaces. I think it's really important for youth workers working with young people to develop safe spaces so that young people can discuss their own concerns. What are the concerns that they have about the lives that they lead? Whether they're young women or young men or whatever their particular concerns are. One of the other problems that

we have in this 'ultra-efficient' – and I say that with a great deal of irony, because it's the most inefficient system, if one starts from the point of social justice and social change – is that we don't have any time. So the thing that I feel, and maybe I shouldn't say it this way, but this is how I feel about it, is that over my years as a professional, the things that have been stolen from me are time and space. And, of course, these are not concepts that necessarily are used in our professional world. They're maybe much more in physics, or in other worlds where people might talk about time and space, in terms of the way that everything works, everything is organized this way. Maybe you see this in some more critical geographical thinking too. So time and space are absolutely key. And if we don't have any time to talk about these things, and we're given no space to do it, then they're never going to get talked about. And so I take it back a little bit to some of the arguments I think I was trying to make in the paper about the Brexit and the referendum and the outcome of it and the way it was conducted is that, again, that was a rushed process, actually. So people themselves had never really had very many spaces or opportunities or time to discuss some of the complexities of what racial identities might mean. What does it mean to be white or not white? What does it mean to be in Sunderland, or Newcastle, or Hartlepool? What does it mean to be English, or British? What does it mean to be Scottish or Irish? What does it mean? How do we begin to have these sorts of discussions about who we are in the world? And as an absence of having any of those discussions – and we used to have them, there was a period in social work and in other places, so I do go back to come forward, and I'll do that a little bit in a minute – but in order to have those conversations, one needs safe spaces, because they can be difficult conversations, and we need time. And the time is absolutely crucial to be able to capture each of our humanities in the process of understanding where we're coming from in those debates.

[00:42:03] **Lesley:** Yeah, because the issue with that, I mean that's why we're doing these podcasts to some extent, because we want to get this knowledge out to current practitioners who don't have time, or the access levels necessarily, to access a lot of this research and knowledge that we're talking about. So we're hoping that people are listening and they're in their cars and they're going between things and they're having a little bit of space, because it's gone. But when you were saying then that's changed, but I think about, we hear about some of the larger organizations, about the offices that they have that are actually completely set up to give people creative space. And yet we don't have that in professional practice environments. It's like it's seen as not a creative process. And yet having space to think is a creative process, isn't it?

And we *need* that in order to actually look at: "Is this the right thing to do?" "Should I be doing this?" "What's going on here?" "What do I understand?" You know, so going back to that idea of each case almost being an individual, actually yeah, okay, each case is. But it's not. So think about how does it connect up with all of those other things?

[00:43:21] **Sarah:** I think I completely agree with that. And I just think what you were saying then about that time to understand, the time and space to think and to talk and to discuss, it is so important, but it goes beyond that because you were saying before about this idea of everyone as an individual, but actually that ignores the fact that we are embedded within these oppressive structures. We have a government that denies that institutional racism exists, and you're talking then about, well, how can we have these conversations about racial identity and what that means to each of us without that time and space? I think, you know, it is part of that examining your own individual practice, but also if you only do that and you don't have that time and space to understand it on a broader, wider level, then social workers are never going to have a role in actually challenging those unhelpful processes and policies that they're embedding and using in their practice. And they are at the forefront of actually understanding because they see the impact of them on the individuals. So it's about understanding it to examine your own individual practice. But I think perhaps that role in challenging policy at a wider level as well... I don't even know if there was a question in that I just jumped in because it was just making me think about that overlap, and I don't know really to what extent social work as a profession has that voice in challenging things that are higher level. Although they do seem to be, to me at least, in a really good position to be able to do that because they see what's happening on the front line, but does it come back to that time and space that they don't have it? Maybe? I don't know.

[00:44:54] **Rick:** Yeah, no, I think what you're saying, Sarah, I agree with that. I mean, of course I think part of what we're trying to do, isn't it, is try to understand how we've got to this position. How have we got here and how do we get out of it? I think that's probably the way I would tend to sort of think about it. I think in this sense, I suppose it's about being practical with the problems that face us. And so I think we've got into this position because there's been a move to, as I say, partly make things efficient, and partly, apparently if it's efficient, it's effective. Well, of course these two things are just completely contrary. They don't make sense if you just put them together. And if you just keep saying them, as if that's going to make it work, then well

that just makes it even worse, it just compounds the problem. So we can see it, whether we look at the prison system, it's really become an industrial complex of warehousing often young people from care, or young people who've grown up in poverty, and young people who might have experienced family breakdowns, or young people who have experienced domestic violence in their backgrounds. All of those kinds of issues don't get looked at, even though the researchers are sharing this knowledge with us, and our voice isn't actually in the social policy process. I think that's the bit that seems to me to be the trick, actually, I think somehow there's been a con, and that is that those people who rise up through the ranks of political leadership end up running things, and I mean, many of them have never run anything before. It's not that they've got experience of running things, but they get to these positions. But the whole process is a top-down, imposed instructional design really? It's "You, as social workers must do these things. We can now tell you that these are the things to do." Well, if I could do anything, I'd probably say to people, think Grenfell. Think Grenfell Tower. If we think of anything, we must think about issues like Grenfell Tower, as one example, or food banks, or Marcus Rashford's idea of children not being fed. Well, social workers know this, community workers know this, lots and lots of ordinary parents day-to-day know this, primary schools know this really, really well, certainly primary schools that are working in areas where these issues are day-to-day realities of life, but none of those voices are fed into local, regional and national policy.

[00:47:47] **Lesley:** No, they're really not. I mean, when I was thinking about being a practitioner, I did see that. I did. And I remember it, the only comment I remember I used to say to people was, you know what, you wouldn't really object to people receiving benefits if you saw how they did live, because it's not like some wonderful existence with, you know, bucketloads of cash for nothing. It doesn't look like that at all. You know? And I went round areas that I didn't know until I went round them. And then I encountered a young person there who, I was saying things to her like, you know because I have reflected on my practice afterwards and felt was that the right thing to say? And I said something to her along the lines of ,she was missing appointments, and I said, "well, just pop to Smith's and get yourself a diary". And she looked at me. And I was like, "you know, Smith's". And she went, "no", shook her head. And I was like, "WH Smith's? You know, the stationery sort of shop." No, because she'd never been, I was talking about the city centre and just made a massive, massive assumption that she would know exactly what I meant, and it was not part of her life. So even just in that sense, I had to step back and go, hang on a minute Lesley, what on earth are you doing there? And that was years ago and

it's still with me as I reflected back on it. But I saw things, as a practitioner, I was then also a mum and I felt I want to do something, but the reality of me driving past my house at like six o'clock at night to go on a visit, you know, miles away, by the time I got back, there was nothing left in me, you know, to actually do something. So social work does have people like the Social Work Action Network, and there is activism there, but it's like you were saying Rick, it's like people are speaking, but it's not being heard, and it's not being fed into policy. And that's the bit that is part of what Sarah and I are trying to achieve with our work, is about the fact that we need to get the information out there, but we also need to get the information back, and work out a way to do this. That was more just a comment, really.

I wonder if it's all right, Rick, to take you back to that idea of safe spaces to talk, because one of the things, again like I was saying, when I read your article, I reflect on cases that I've worked on, and again it's something that has stayed with me for a long time. So the context of that was working with two children, the oldest child had been born in Angola, but the youngest child was born here. To all intents and purposes they identified themselves as British, that's how they talked about themselves. They were going through the adoption process, and I had a disagreement with their court-appointed Guardian, because the court-appointed Guardian said they'd identified an adoptive parent for them, that adoptive parent was Afro-Caribbean, with no connection whatsoever to Angola. The Guardian's view was the cultural identity of these children was incredibly important. And I questioned whether that was based on anything other than their skin colour. And I questioned them on that because I could not see any other reason why that person in particular was being chosen apart from their skin colour, and it created a very uncomfortable silence in the room. And I wondered since then, I don't think that's changed because I've seen that in classrooms, where you actually raise these issues, and I think there's a tendency for people to be quite uncomfortable about talking about it. And I just wondered what your thoughts were on that.

[00:51:54] **Rick:** I think this, again, is part of a broader problem, I think. So I'll try and keep it at that level, Lesley, rather than try to think about the individual cases. Because, I just want to start with your element about the past to the future, really, and think back to the time when social work had active groups, actually, there was a lot of active groups that looked at things like being black in care, they were looking at some anti-racism in social work, they were looking at transracial adoption, there was a whole range of these, which were not easy debates, I think that's the other thing that I would say is important for



us. We need to recognize that we might enter a room and experience a degree of discomfort because we might, albeit however clever we think we are or how much we've studied, we may not have studied everything, and certainly I most certainly have never studied everything, I've studied some things, hopefully done quite well with them. But there are lots of areas where I don't know a lot, and it's maybe useful for me to feel a little bit uncomfortable about having to hear new knowledge, new ideas and new ways of thinking that help me, actually. Help me put together maybe opinions that I've formed, which I'm not sure where they've come from, and professionals are no different in my view to ordinary people. The way that we learn opinions, it's just when we're professional we pretend, I think a little, that we don't have them. And so the reason I'm saying that is because I think this idea of something like transracial adoption or complex adoption processes are really about several things. They're about who do we think is a family? What do we think about who's the right kind of family? And where are the voices of those people who specifically are the marked Other in this process, where are their voices in this discussion? And one of the difficulties for social work as a profession, I guess it's the same for other professions, is if we don't have very many black social workers, we don't have many social workers of 'difference', however one wants to flavour this, then actually what we're in is always a room where the knowledge that's been born from one particular frame, and I might call out 'whiteness' in its broader sense, has not really been engaged with from another frame. And actually what we need to recognize, as people, and I can make this link to colonialism and post-colonialism and the realities that we live in, is that if there is a dominant frame, then we ought to know it. We ought to know it much better, and I think it's probably what you're saying there Lesley. And if there's a dominant frame then it's really important to hear voices that trouble that frame. That doesn't mean that the end product is going to say, yes, you, whatever you say is right, because that's not what I'm asking for, but really we need to hear those voices and we need to then experience the healthy discomfort... I can't think how many times in my life I've been uncomfortable... To get to a point where we can helpfully think what's the best decision here? What's a good decision?

[00:55:37] **Lesley:** Yeah, and you should be able to unpick whatever decision it was, regardless of what the issue was. We should all be comfortable, well even if we are uncomfortable, we should be accepting of questions and accepting of that sort of challenge to our reasoning, and need to be able to do that, don't we, in order to have that.

## Indigenous knowledge

[00:55:59] **Lesley:** I do feel that race as an issue, there's an aspect of it where people who are white feel like I don't want to be appear to be racist. So there's this fear that if I say something, again thinking of a student that a few years ago, who was from Zimbabwe, he said to me that a colleague, and I'm not going to say, *ever*, who this colleague was, had always looked to him when they mentioned something like black in a lecture, always looked to him and he felt really uncomfortable about it, and he said, "do you think they want me to say 'no, I don't think you're racist'?" You know? So there's almost like this slightly middle-class kind of discomfort around "I don't want to say", "I don't want to be seen", so I'll say nothing, or I'll do something that actually is a little bit awkward.

[00:57:01] **Rick:** I think that's a beautiful example, actually, Lesley, thank you. I think that's a really powerful example because it's at a micro level, isn't it, that much of everything that we do works? That's really, for social workers or for anybody else, all of the contextualizing is important, but actually what we do with another human being in the moment really is key. And it seems to me that this is one of those areas where if we don't really interrogate systems of power and systems of knowledge – it's really actually about what kind of knowledge is *knowledge*? Ultimately this, for me, is where it comes from. And if we've had a colonial system that went around the world, tramping its feet and telling people that the only people who can know stuff are people who look like me or do this, and then eventually discover that the people that they've been telling "we are so knowledgeable and you're not" have a voice, and that voice comes back and starts to say, "actually, we've got another way of looking at the world thank you very much", and indigenous knowledge is now really, really crucial. There's a lot of writings around indigenous knowledge now, and of course people were talking about this stuff hundreds of years ago, but nobody listened, but now it's being formalized, and it's troubling the dominant. But of course I think, exactly like you say Lesley, we should be doing that on a daily basis in our classrooms. Not for any other reason than a *good* reason, and the good reason is that we don't know everything. Our knowledge may not be perfect. There are different ways of looking at something. There are different ways of seeing or holding or feeling or touching something. And we need those different ways to come into our social work and our community work and our teaching, in order for us to be able to respond in the right way, in a *good* way to the people we have a duty of care to.

[00:58:58] **Sarah:** Yeah,

[00:59:00] **Lesley:** Absolutely Rick.

[00:59:03] **Sarah:** Okay, well I've absolutely loved that conversation with you, Rick. Thank you so much for coming in. It's been a real pleasure to talk to you about your paper and just have a chance to have that conversation with you. So we're both really grateful. Thank you.

[00:59:20] **Lesley:** Thank you, Rick, it's been fab.

[00:59:21] **Sarah:** We will say goodbye.

[00:59:23] **Lesley:** Goodbye.

[00:59:24] **Rick:** Thank you, bye.

[00:59:25] **Sarah:** Bye.

...

[00:59:27] **Sarah:** You have been listening to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work with me, Dr Sarah Lonbay.

[00:59:33] **Lesley:** And Dr Lesley Deacon. And this was funded by the University of Sunderland, edited by Paperghosts, and our theme music is called, *Together We're Stronger* by All Music Seven.

[00:59:44] **Sarah:** And don't forget that you can find a full transcript of today's podcast and links and extra information in our show notes. So anything you want to follow up from what you've heard today, check out there and you should find some useful extra resources.

See you all next time.

[00:59:59] **Lesley:** Bye.