

Equality, diversity and inclusion champions: An interview with Manisha Guru

Manisha Guru was accepted for the position of an NHS Assistant Psychologist at HMP Long Lartin in November 2022. She previously worked in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Low Secure Unit and Adult Acute Service within the private mental health sector. She has also been an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion champion for Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (Inclusion) since December 2023. She was interviewed by **Dr Hannah Bennett**, who is the Guest editor of the Prison Service Journal Special Edition on Race in Prison.

The interview was conducted in Summer 2024.

HB: Tell me about the role of an EDI Champion? What does it involve?

MG: An Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Champion's main responsibility is to support delivery of the Trust's EDI Strategy and Action Plan and help to drive behavioural and cultural change across the organisation. These aims are achieved by raising awareness of EDI and the Trust's related strategy and action plan, developing and implementing anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices, and supporting cultural transformation.

This includes partnering with the Care Group EDI Working Group to implement local EDI initiatives, serving as the departmental point of contact for EDI issues, and encouraging staff to voice concerns about service delivery and staff experiences. The role also entails promoting adherence to relevant EDI policies and guidelines, sharing information about Trust initiatives and opportunities, encouraging staff to join Trust and Integrated Care System (ICS) equality networks, and supporting inclusive practices both within their service areas and across the Trust.

HB: What do you see as the role of the EDI Champion?

MG: In my role as an EDI Champion, I am passionate about promoting diverse and inclusive services for our clients, the families and carers involved, and staff members. For me, this means having the consideration for fairness and inclusivity. It is about recognising we are all worthy human beings who are entitled to equal considerations regardless of perceived or real differences in any of our protected characteristics such as ethnic origin or social status.

I feel privileged to be part of a network where we can consider ways to improve awareness, provide an outlet for clients and staff alike to raise EDI issues and

help empower all parties to be supported in instilling positive change. I feel it is important to understand the tools that are required to remove the oppressive barriers that marginalise people's experience. This has shaped my holistic approach, allowing me to focus on 'what's happened to you' and avoid labels when assessing and delivering services. We need a more critical understanding of power and privilege, and a commitment to change the system in a way that allows for true equity and moral consideration for all. To allow this change to happen, it is important for me to capture unique perspectives and ensure diverse voices are heard.

HB: How do you ensure that the voices of prisoners from diverse racial backgrounds are heard and acted upon?

MG: If we consider the process of referral and engagement with our services, as an NHS department, separate to the prison disciplines, we encourage anyone seeking mental health or substance use needs to access our services. Our name 'NHS Inclusion' and the way in which we conduct ourselves professionally underpins the values that anyone can be assessed for suitability to use the service. We also promote that our service is a 'safe and confidential space', which provides residents a platform to discuss any concern in relation to our service.

For new transfers into the prison, we make a conscious effort to see residents within 5 days of arriving, to identify if there is a need for our services. However, we do not just stop here; if we feel the resident needs access to other disciplines like chaplaincy, as faith may be protective for them, then we support by signposting to the relevant spaces.

We have residents who may not be able to communicate their needs due to language barriers. To overcome this, we have a language poster, 'Language Line', which helps to indicate what their main language is, and from this, we work with the prison to access

interpreters. I recall a particular case in this prison, where a resident was of Romanian heritage and presented with mental health difficulties. An interpreter was organised and prison officers who spoke the language willingly came forward to support. Our dedication to support all individuals allowed early intervention work to reduce any risk to self and others.

Once individuals are taken onto our caseload, we use resources such as the 'Mental Health Recovery Star'. This tool includes sections to capture ethnicity and different domains of life that indicate what is important to know about the individual's identity. To share some examples, the Recovery Star includes talking through social networks, relationships, identity and self-esteem, which all function as prompts to explore needs.

We are a service that is always evolving around the needs of our residents. To ensure our service is fit for purpose, we routinely capture feedback via our 'Treatment Feedback Forms'. A vital question asked within this survey is 'have you been treated with dignity and respect?' From previous surveys processed, a large majority have felt supported through accessing Inclusion. In addition, Inclusion have collaborated with Care Opinion.

This independent website allows the residents to share a story about their experience of the care by Inclusion. This gives residents a voice to share what has been good, what could be different and allows ways that lead to change for our service.

HB: How does your role relate to race in prison?

MG: In the Equality Act (2010), race can mean your colour, or your nationality (including your citizenship). It can also mean your ethnic or national origins, which may not be the same as your current nationality. Within the Prison Service, and more specifically in HMP Long Lartin, a large majority of the residents belong to Asian, black and Eastern European communities. In my role as an EDI champion, combined with my role as an Assistant Psychologist, it is important to consider the unique experiences of an individual's lifeworld and work together to create a space of psychological safety.

When people come to their therapy sessions, it is vital for me to create an environment that enables them

to feel safe to speak about their personal lives. It is our responsibility to use our privileged position as a professional to open doors to discuss difficulties, it is only then that individuals feel empowered to speak up. In the same vein, people need to be provided with psychologically safe places to explore and have difficult conversations about racism in general and structural racism. It is via these outlets that concerns related to race may be captured. It is then my responsibility to safeguard the individual by alerting the prison's Safer Custody department situated within the prison.

HB: Can you tell me about the continuous professional development training on Cultural Competency that you accessed via the 'Bespoke Mental Health', and what changes were implemented from this, particularly around race in prison?

MG: Weaver described culture as like an iceberg: on the surface level, we can explicitly observe and learn about a person's culture by considering their language, traditions, clothing, food and drink.¹ However, this is only the tip of the iceberg. On a deeper level, there are certain features about a culture that would take commitment and time to uncover and understand. It is for this reason that I chose to attend the 'Cultural Sensitivity in Clinical Practice' workshop delivered by Dr Reena Vohora (Consultant Clinical Psychologist). A key part of this workshop highlighted how healthcare professionals often opt out or simply do not ask culturally responsive questions due to time constraints or fear of getting things wrong.

The training empowered me to consider how our treatment towards clients could be more inclusive. I did some research into important questions about a person's identity, in line with the 'Social Graces',² and fine-tuned our clinical assessment tool to include more culturally responsive questions. From these assessment questions, a formulation is produced. In clinical practice, formulations are used to communicate a hypothesis about the cause and nature of the clients presenting problems. This then provides a framework for developing the most suitable treatment approach. When considering a formulation for clients, I recognised how one's culture and religious beliefs can

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1. Weaver, G. R. (1986). Understanding and coping with cross-cultural adjustment stress. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Cross-cultural orientation: New conceptualizations and applications* (pp. 111–145). University Press of America.
2. Burnham, J. (2012). Developments in Social GRRRAACCEEESSS: Visible–invisible, voiced–unvoiced. In I. Krause (Ed.), *Culture and reflexivity in systemic psychotherapy: Mutual perspectives* (pp. 139–160). Karnac Books.

impact the way mental health difficulties are understood. I came across a paper by Rathod et al which covered the role of culture in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.³ This provided useful prompts to understand unconditional beliefs and values of cultures that underpin individual's behaviours.

HB: Can you share any specific examples of how the culturally responsive questions have led to better outcomes for prisoners?

MG: I once worked with a client who was of black heritage. Through asking about what is important about his identity and culture, he shared that his faith is less common within the prison population and that he had concerns about how this may open him up to being vulnerable amongst other residents who have a more renowned faith group. The client raised concerns about risk of safety. As a precaution, with the resident's consent, the Safer Custody prison department and my team were alerted of a potential safeguarding concern. This helped to explore provisions that could be put in place to reduce and manage risk.

HB: Thank you; this is great to hear. What do you see as the strengths of the current prison system in addressing racial issues?

MG: I cannot comment on how other disciplines operate within the prison system. As I work with an Integrated Mental Health and Substance Misuse team, embedded within the Prison Service, I feel our services are set up to underpin NHS values, ensuring that everyone has equal access to care and resources, and that no one is left behind. To mitigate any issues concerning race, the service works in a way to empower the need for co-production that is involving people in their care and providing an equal level of respect and dignity.

To evidence this, I once worked with a client at HMP Long Lartin, who was of Gypsy heritage. His culture and social identity was of importance to him and by acknowledging his protected characteristic, it was felt that the therapeutic alliance strengthened, and the client opened up more about his cultural identity. The benefit of understanding the personal impact of culture and being aware of our own assumptions,

biases, thoughts and feelings with ourselves and others is impactful because as self-awareness increases, acceptance of others increases.⁴ By acknowledging the client's identity, the client was able to share their appreciation for nature and how this was a key feature of his community lifestyle. Holding his life views and values in mind, his therapy intervention was collaboratively adapted to align more with his identity. This was evidenced to have a positive impact in reducing psychological distress and enhancing psychological wellbeing.

HB: In many prisons, racial tensions and disparities are significant cultural issues that can impact the safety and rehabilitation of people living in prison. Could you discuss the primary racial challenges faced within the prison system, and how do you believe these issues can be effectively addressed to foster a more inclusive and equitable environment? Specifically, what strategies or tools would you implement to facilitate a culture change that reduces racial conflicts and promotes understanding and cooperation among diverse prison populations?

MG: The punitive environment within a prison may unconsciously oppress some individuals more than others. The regimented and disciplinary features of prison operations may reinforce a 'one size fits all'. However, without taking the time to gain an in-depth understanding of a prisoner's background, this may lead to misinterpretation of why certain behaviours by a prisoner are carried out. This could then cloud staff's judgements of prisoners, where they are then categorised into being the 'good, idealised' prisoners versus the 'bad, devalued' prisoners. This can then inadvertently feed unfavourable attitudes, prejudices and discriminatory beliefs about the prisoner(s).⁵ Such unhelpful relationships between the prisoner and staff can unintentionally reinforce the prisoner's difficulties, resulting in inconsistent support and invalidation of the difficulties presented. Consequently, staff may end up inadvertently triggering prisoners and problematic behaviours continue to escalate.

There is compelling evidence to show that change is possible despite the known barriers in prisons and

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3. Rathod, S., Kingdon, D., Pinninti, N., Turkington, D., & Phiri, P. (2015). *Cultural adaptation of CBT for serious mental illness: A guide for training and practice*. Wiley-Blackwell.
4. Speight, S. L., Myers, L. J., Cox, C. I., & Highlen, P. S. (1991). A redefinition of multicultural counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 70*(1), 29–36.
5. Birmingham, L. (2003). The mental health of prisoners. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, 9*(3), 191–199.

there is real potential to address safety and disempowerment issues.⁶ One way I feel this change could be made is by acknowledging the need for awareness and education of working with and amongst people of diverse backgrounds. I feel this should be a key feature of staff training across all disciplines, as part of their induction to prison work. I also feel that there should be more outlets for all disciplines to 'speak up' about witnessed discrimination and/or prejudiced beliefs. We need to actively discourage behaviour that does not align with the attributes that His Majesty's Prison Service stands for. Equally prisoners should be empowered to share racial conflicts with trusted members of staff, and it should be everyone's responsibility to ensure anti-racist practices flourish within the Prison Service.

HB: So, there is a role for the prisoner in promoting racial equity and reducing racial conflicts...

MG: With the relevant resources provided, prisoners could be empowered to celebrate diversity. As an EDI champion, I promote EDI events within my team. I feel it would be worthwhile to have these displayed on the wings as well to encourage curiosity and open communication about various identities. I have recently learnt that the chaplaincy department within our prison are part of the Equality Action Team. They regularly consider significant religious events and organise gatherings for prisoners. As a suggestion, it may help prisoners to co-facilitate talks on significant events in relation to their race and faith groups. This could be done collaboratively with the Education department, namely religious studies and history. By raising awareness and providing spaces to unpick unconscious biases may be one way to get a better understanding of diversity and promote inclusivity.

HB: How do you think the approach to race in prisons will evolve over the next five years, and what changes do you hope to see?

MG: This is a big question but a very important one to ask. I hope race is factored in and considered from the very beginning of an individual entering prison. All prison and civilian staff should have mandatory training, which covers the need to respect all nine protective characteristics as outlined by the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origins), religion or belief (including lack of belief), sex (i.e. being male or female), sexual orientation).

From reception, initial assessment, intervention work and evaluation of services, the voice of all prisoners from diverse backgrounds should be captured and include questions of how we can better understand their race and the experiences that come with it. It may be helpful to capture their voice in their profile under such titles as 'spiritual and cultural needs'. These are all simple but effective methods towards a positive culture change within prisons.

HB: How has your role as an EDI Champion affected your views on race and equality, both professionally and personally?

MG: My race is a big part of my identity. Growing up in a low socio-economic area, I found myself surrounded by people with the same ethnic background. Naturally, this brought up the feelings of belonging and inclusivity because we shared the same understanding, culture, and way of life. This sense of belonging was slightly disrupted when I moved out of my hometown and began to progress with my career. I came to work in a prison, where in my team I was the only ethnic minority, and somehow this heightened my sense of identity. I wanted to use my history and life experiences as an ethnic minority to encourage others to embrace their identity. I wanted all staff and prisoners to feel a sense of safety concerning EDI matters so when the role of an EDI champion came up, I knew this was my calling.

HB: What keeps you motivated to continue working on these challenging issues within the prison system?

MG: I recognise that promoting a culture change within prisons is a challenge within itself; however, it is my morals and values that have carried me through. My ability to share compassion for prisoners and staff helps me to recognise and reflect on unique adversities, and how distress is experienced. My devotion to working collaboratively helps to consider the importance of comprehensive and holistic treatment, working together with the prison to achieve better outcomes. Lastly, the respect I hold for any and every person, irrespective of who they are or where they are from, encourages me to hear stories, learn about new experiences and unpick my curiosity, which helps to answer an important question: what can I be doing to contribute to a sense of safety for all with EDI matters?

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6. Bradley, K. (2017). Speech during the 'Prisons: Overcrowding' debate, House of Lords, 7 September 2017.