



An Organisation for Promoting  
Understanding of Society

# UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY:

The Psychodynamic Impact and Implications  
of Covid-19 on Black and Minority Ethnic People  
*- Listening to the experiences of BAME people -*  
Covid-19 and racism are real.

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## Authors:



### Augustine Sagoe

Augustine Sagoe is an independent Organisational, Leadership and Mental Health Consultant with extensive clinical and board level experience in the NHS in the UK. Augustine provides Group Relations Learning, Leadership and Psychodynamic Coaching / Executive Consultancy Services in Ghana, West Africa. He has been a staff member on several Group Relations Conferences nationally and internationally.

His current research interest is on Conscious and Unconscious Racism and the Psychological Impact of COVID 19 on BAME front line staff in predominantly white organisations.

Augustine has been a Director/ Trustee of OPUS since 2014.



### Leslie Brissett

Leslie Brissett is the Director of the Group Relations Programme, Company Secretary and Principal Consultant Researcher at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London. He co-created and Co-Directs the Institute's Dynamics at Board Level programme, from which an edited volume is being published by Routledge in 2020. He consults to boards and senior executives applying Tavistock thinking to explore what it means to be human in contemporary social and organisational systems. COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter provide a rich compost from which to unravel species level body identification and its deployment to limiting and control the availability of resources.

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**OPUS** - An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society is an educational charity (no. 282415) founded in 1975 to promote understanding of society. It encourages reflective citizenship as a way for people to take more personal and collective responsibility for the common good – through active involvement in society and its institutions, rather than self-interested behaviour.

**OPUS** provides a combination of education, training, academic research, publication, public events and organisational consultancy. OPUS Listening Post methodology is now in regular use in over 30 countries around the world.

[www.opus.org.uk](http://www.opus.org.uk)

## INTRODUCTION:

During the recent worldwide outbreak of the Coronavirus and its associated Covid-19 disease, there has been an unexpected spotlight on racism. The death of George Floyd, an unarmed African-American man at the hands of the Minneapolis police in the USA has sparked widespread 'Black Lives Matter' protests in many countries. In the UK, Public Health England's [recent report](#) on Covid-19 shows a disproportionately large number of deaths and hospital admissions for people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities.

This seminar was organised by Augustine Paapa Sagoe, Director and Board Member of OPUS: an Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society, in collaboration with Leslie Brissett Director of the Group Relations Programme at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. The event was hosted on the Zoom web conference platform by OPUS. OPUS aims to develop a deeper understanding of conscious and unconscious organisational and social dynamics; and to promote reflective citizenship – using this understanding to enable individuals to act authoritatively and responsibly as members of society.

A total of 100 people were pre-registered to attend. On the actual day 77 participants from several different countries on four continents joined the online discussions. We listened to and reflected on various views on the two pandemics of Covid-19 and racism in our societies.

The purpose of the event was, in a very traditional OPUS way, to offer a space for BAME and white participants to share their pre-occupations as citizens on a conscious and unconscious level. The seminar provided an opportunity for us to make sense of what is going on in our societies during these unprecedented times.

The paper aims to give a flavour of the event and does not seek to be a detailed review.

## LISTENING SPACE – LARGE GROUP AND SMALL GROUPS

Most of the participants were able to find their voices either in the large group or small breakout groups or to communicate their thoughts in writing on the Zoom 'Chat' section. The seminar was divided into three sessions.

In the large and small breakout groups, we touched on two key issues:

- Racism and Covid-19
- People's experiences and, or, association with them.

The preoccupation was overwhelmingly on racism ("I can't breathe"; 'calling 'Mama' is a call to all to hear the voices of Black people.")

Thinking about race and class is a powerful nexus of concepts that have underpinned the development of the British Empire and the existence of the role of the UK in the construction and development of the global order. Covid-19 has enhanced the need to think about the role of the UK in the global network and the potential to work collaboratively to make sense of the next stage of our development.

A participant from South Africa said that the meaning of Whiteness is changing. This is a challenge as it means that there is now a need to consider where the container for difficult feelings of and about Whiteness has to be placed – for the concept to be meaningful, or not.

The perspectives of some Asian participants were from three angles. Firstly, the experience of an Asian who feels White until it is otherwise pointed out. Secondly, intra-Asian prejudices existed between an already-established Asian community in the UK and Asians who migrated from East Africa to settle in the UK much later. Thirdly, there was prejudice by the East African Asians towards the Black community in East Africa. The East African Asians perceived themselves as being a buffer between the Whites and the Blacks (indentured Asian servitude).

The participants noticed that the system run by the Whites was designed to keep indigenous Black Africans deficient in key skills, to keep them on the lowest rung of the economic ladder, and denigrated.

The Jewish perspective was that of Anti-Semites. Anti-Semites had socially and physically dehumanised and labelled Jews. For example, Jews were forced to wear yellow stars to

make them identifiable for discriminatory action. This act pre-supposed that Jews were not always easily recognised by so called native White populations.

Black people are easily identified because of the colour of their skin (“We don’t need stars to be identified”). A Black person’s view was, “we can never enjoy the simplicity and peace of being invisible outside of our own continent

A participant from the USA described that almost six decades ago Dr King wrote the following from his jail in Birmingham: “First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the White moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the White moderate.,” Today, if we should refer to this observation and find it to be true now as it was some six decades ago, then we should note that we are all as much complicit in perpetuating this state of the struggle, as our “White moderate” compatriots. How? You may ask: Most of us persistently see this struggle solely as a Black struggle, rather than a struggle to save Humanity.

## KEY THEMES / QUESTIONS

- Race is a complex matter that infuses many areas of social life. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, race has moved to the forefront in how we think about its impact on society as a whole.
- The notions of Blackness and Whiteness are difficult to make sense of as the emotions involved are often experienced as paralysing.
- “Black Lives Matter” has opened the way for a collective encounter between "allies" to address inter-connected dynamics of identity.
- People are struggling to make sense of why approaches and thoughts on racism are different this time. What is the impact of Covid-19 on the capacity to think about race?
- Radical thoughts such as abolishing the monarchy and eradicating private school education as the symbols and processes of perpetuating racist thinking exist, how do we examine those?
- Fear about an underlying racist policy systematically to eradicate Black populations by any means necessary. This fear is manifesting as a deep suspicion of immunisation programmes targeting Black populations worldwide.

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- Class system and its impact on White “guilt” in particular. The role of the dynamics of shame and guilt, in general, need to be thought about in the context of Covid-19 and its disproportionate impact on Black and Minority Ethnic communities.
  - People of colour stating how tiresome it is trying to explain to White folk how they felt and, irritated that they had to do the educating.
  - Where is the “Knowing and Caring” leadership? When are White people going to demonstrate and call for this sort of leadership?
  - When will White people demand true equality for both Blacks and Whites?
  - Where are the projections located? How are the police unconsciously mobilised to maintain the brutalities in the system?

Whites are in control of economic, social, political, judiciary and media power.

- A powerful question- where did White people get the psychotic imagination to constantly reinvent vicious structures for oppression?
- The powerful image of a Blackman carrying a Whiteman to safety is a profound reminder of our humanity.

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## CONCLUSION

The event demonstrated that when difference, especially of colour is named, it could enable individuals or a group to look at their own differences, and thereby provide some insights into their own internal dynamics.

We see anger represented by the protesters and the pulling down of statues and, at the same time, we see a need to make sense of the ongoing projections of one group into another, with a view to doing something about the resulting injustice.

It showed that by providing a listening space during this unprecedented period, individuals and groups can begin to think about the plight of black people:- the denigration, the killings, the inequalities, and racism; and their role in understanding society. One can choose to be a bystander, turn a blind eye, or pay attention to the anxieties and tensions that are inherent in being a reflective citizen.

The overwhelming desire of participants is for society as a whole to come together to deepen their understanding of what is going on in the world today in order to bring about change.



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