**BACP podcast transcript**  
  
From catering to counselling  
  
Hi. My name is Anissa. I am Chinese and I have lived in the UK for 45 years. My first career was teaching maths in secondary schools, and then I changed direction. I am now a registered member of BACP, a qualified psychotherapist and supervisor with UKCP, and I have been running my private practice in the Midlands for almost 20 years. In 2010 I joined the Sherwood Psychotherapy Training Institute in Nottingham as a tutor. Whether I was delivering training at introductory level or at master's level, I found it rewarding to connect deeply with the white students, as well as those from other ethnic backgrounds, due to my bi-cultural experience. When I heard from BACP that they were setting up a mentoring scheme for non-white training therapists I volunteered to be a mentor without hesitation. I wanted to invest in the next generation of therapists with the hope that I can pass on my baton, and they would be motivated to make their marks regardless of their race and culture. This podcast is a result of that. I was matched with Pepe in the mentoring scheme, and through listening to her story I thought I could help her extract some of her experiences and turn it into a podcast. The following conversation with Pepe focuses on how the learning she gained from catering can inform her counselling practice, a topic I believe is seldom explored. I hope you find it stimulating. Hello, Pepe. First of all, would you like to introduce yourself?

My name is Pepe Sarpong. I'm in my 50s and of black African ethnicity. I'm a mother of three and a grandma, and have lived in this country for nearly 40 years. I have successfully completed Level 4 diploma in therapeutic counselling in Kent this summer. Currently I'm working part-time in catering and also at a garden centre, which I find very therapeutic and grounding being surrounded by beautiful...

Thank you for what you said, Pepe. Can you tell us something about your life in the UK in the '80s?

After completing my secondary education I started a secretarial course and worked as an administration secretary at a private hospital in Surrey before moving to Kent. I've had a few other jobs whilst bringing up my family, and I've also run my own catering business, being in this sector for almost 20 years.

Okay, so what was your experience of running a catering business in those days?

The catering business was called Pepe's Tea Room, located in Gillingham, Kent, which was not the most affluent area in the county at the time. It was predominantly white-populated, but now it feels much more diverse and multicultural. In the early years of the business when people saw a black woman running a tea room they wondered why I was not cooking African or Jamaican food. Looking back it was interesting to see that 95 per cent of my customers were white, despite their thinking at the time. Life was not always straightforward. Even though there were white people who were accepting and respectful after they had got to know me I still experienced racist comments and negative attitudes towards me. I have had remarks while standing in the team room with people walking past saying, 'It is a black person in there, so let's go elsewhere up the high street.' I also had comments in my tea room that said, 'It looks too clean,' and they would walk off. I had eggs thrown at the shop many times, and I also had people walking straight past me in the shop to my white staff members asking them for jobs, or asking for the manager. Sometimes the act of discrimination was more obvious and aggressive. On a few occasions white people shouted at me, 'Go back to your country,' or they wrote those words on my car windscreen when I was parked next to a pub. They would come to see what I would do when I went back to my car, but I just wiped the graffiti off and drove away. It was horrible to experience that. However, one of my customers who used to go to that pub a lot asked them to stop being so nasty. He defended me and said I was a hard-working woman. There were times that I wanted to report the incidents to the police, but never did as I was worried about the repercussions. Without a doubt there was unconscious bias against me as white people judged me based on their perception of me as a black woman. As a person from a different ethnic background I have learned to always work twice as hard in everything to win trust and respect, something that a white person would not even need to think about due to their white privilege. After customers had given me the chance to prove myself they told me that they were glad to have tried my food as it was delicious. They subsequently recommended me to others, which became the best form of advertisement for my business. Pepe's Tea Room became one of the best places to eat on the high street. I was also the first to gain a five-star rating amongst all the eateries in the area. Even the food inspector who came to Gillingham to inspect all the shops knew that my shop was very clean and the quality of the food was of a high standard, and would have lunch there himself. He even on one occasion brought his wife for a Sunday roast after a family event in Kent on their way home to Essex. These experiences taught me to remain authentic, to be genuine, and to shows my customers the kind of person I truly am despite the stereotyping. Even though they judged me based on my race and skin colour I still served good food and offered them unconditional positive regard, no matter who they were. I was proud to have gained trust in the white community, but I feel sad that I had to work so hard.

Wow, Pepe. You were doing so well with your tea room. What made you move from catering to counselling?

I had gone through a stage in my life when it was traumatic and I felt vulnerable. I was greatly helped by receiving counselling, through which I gained a purpose in life. The altruistic part of me wanted to give something back by helping others. I had a good relationship with my customers and over the years I had listened to their life-challenging issues, thus strengthening my hope that one day I could do that professionally and support people at their most vulnerable time in life. While in catering I was able to meet people's basic needs of hunger and thirst, but according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs I aspired to meet people's higher needs for security, belonging, and esteem as part of their self-actualisation process. Friends and family around me always affirmed my natural ability to tend to others, and their words motivated me to move from catering to counselling training.

Pepe, you have obviously reflected a lot on the changes you made in your working life. Could you share with us what learning you had in catering that helped to prepare you in counselling?

I know I've always listened with empathy, so transferring that skill from catering to counselling seems natural to me. This quality is something that has also been noticed and commented on by my tutors, supervisors, and personal therapist during my counselling training. I aim to work professionally as my catering career has strengthened my resilience and increased my humility. I have confidence that my clients will feel safe and comfortable, and I can gain their trust by being non-judgemental and empathic. In catering, even though I know what healthy eating for my customers will be - for example, having brown toast instead of white, or having salads and fruit instead of cakes - I have to go along with their choices of food and give them what they ask for. The insight that I gain from catering is that when working with clients I need to listen to them from their frame of reference and understand their thoughts, their feelings, from their phenomenological perspective. It would be most unhelpful to direct their process based on what I think is best for them. Another point of learning is that in catering I stick to cook good and tasty food for my customers when they come to Pepe's Tea Room with the hope that they will come back again and again for more food, and my business will grow. In counselling, my aim as a counsellor will also be to offer my best service to my clients. The big difference is that I hope they will feel empowered and become autonomous when they feel able to leave counselling, to move forward in life without the need to come back to me. It will be bad practice if I hold on to them, keep making them return for more sessions, and encouraged dependency for my own gain or to satisfy my own needs.

These are really great insights, Pepe. You have made excellent links between catering and counselling. Looking ahead though, what challenges do you anticipate as you go into private practice from now on?

It was one thing to be able to discuss and process issues of race and discrimination with my white peers, tutors, and personal therapist during training, but I know the real world is less safe and accepting. As I said earlier, there were people who looked through the tea room window, saw that I was black, and did not want to come in to try the food. I am therefore acutely aware how clients might perceive me as a black counsellor in a predominantly white profession. They might assume that I would not understand them, and look for a white therapist instead. To advertise myself on a counselling website with a photo of me would create barriers. I may not get a chance to prove myself as a counsellor, just like the early days of my catering. The big challenge is to be congruent, to trust myself, but be prepared for possible discrimination and stereotyping even though I have lived in the UK for decades and I understand what life struggles we all face. There are more commonalities between us than differences. White therapists seldom see the need to examine their white privilege, whereas therapists from other backgrounds like me have to work doubly hard even to get to the starting line. I'm also mindful of the reverse of historical power in the counselling room when meeting with white clients, and that could affect the therapeutic process even though my desire is to support them in their struggles.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts so honestly, Pepe. We met because of the BACP mentoring scheme. How did you find the scheme, and in what way was it helpful to you?

I joined the BACP mentoring scheme in September 2022 as I wanted to find out the experience of non-white counsellors who have started their journey before me. Anissa, it has been rewarding to have you as my mentor. I feel encouraged, supported, and understood as we in fact share similar experiences, even though we are from different ethnic backgrounds. Your ability to fully integrate into the white counselling world and your career progression has allayed my fears and given me hope for my future. Thank you for capturing my story and turning it into a podcast. I've had a wonderful experience being part of the mentoring scheme, and would encourage BACP to offer this scheme to trainee therapists from all ethnic backgrounds as they can share their experience in training and be validated. It is also a safe space to voice their concerns and worries of the profession. I hope in the future more non-white therapists would come forward as mentors. Thank you, BACP, for this opportunity. To conclude I want to thank my family and friends, and all those who have inspired and supported me on my catering and counselling journey. I appreciate you all.

Thank you very much, Pepe, for sharing your story.

Thank you, Anissa.

Thank you.  
  
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