



THE EXPERIENCE OF A BLACK PROFESSIONAL IN A WHITE PROFESSION

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Jacqueline (Jackie) Gagliardi: We can read many articles about white fragility that are written about this topic, but we don't often see stories of people actually practicing and experiencing what it's like as a person of color in a white profession. So, I want to thank you, Porsche, for doing this interview, and it's really exciting for us to be working together like this. So the first question is how did you first become interested in becoming a therapist?

Porsche Lockett: So, when I was younger I knew that therapy was a thing, I knew that it was important. I went to therapy as a kid. Throughout my life, I've gone to therapy, and I knew it was important. However, it just felt weird connecting sometimes because all of the therapists I would see were white. And it wasn't wrong or bad, it just felt like I had to be zipped up and present a certain way. So, you know, that joke of therapists become therapists because they need therapy...and I was like, "Oh, absolutely not." Like, I just decided this on my own accord and just knew that I would be great at helping people. My family is why I'm a therapist and decided to join a program specifically for couples and family; that says a lot. So I knew I cared about people, I knew there was something different.

Growing up in a religious, Black family in the South, I knew that there was something more than just saying, "Pray about it." Or just deciding not to acknowledge feelings or talk about things. And I think that comes from a historical hardship that Black people have faced, and it's like, "You have freedom. You have a roof over your head. No one is trying to take anything from you so your life is good."

However, it diminished or did not make space for emotions and feelings and being sad. And it's not that it's totally ignored or not an option, however, it's uncomfortable. There's not much space for it. And these things did not equate to not being loved. It doesn't mean that you're not loved in your family, it doesn't mean that you're not cared about. However, you know, on the contrary, love is expressed by showing someone how to be resilient, and being resilient means that you put things on the shelf. And so, I decided that there needed to be more people and therapists

that look like me. And being a POC does not give me the merit of assuming that I will work well with anyone of color; it just gives people the option to say, “Hey, we’re represented here. It’s okay. This is safe too.”

Jackie: Thanks Porsche. I’m really glad that you explained also why African Americans don’t necessarily want to go to therapy. I’m wondering if you could talk about your journey to becoming a therapist. Because I know we talked a little bit about in undergrad, how you were discouraged from going on.

Porsche: Yeah. So I started off my college career in business because I was like, “Well, I’ll be an accountant. I can make money from that.” You know, my mom wanted me to be a doctor or an engineer or an architect. I do not like bodily fluids and the other stuff did not seem as fun. And so I went into business accounting. So I got into an accounting program and was so unamused. I was like, “If this is boring now I would not imagine it gets better after graduating.”

So I actually had psychology as my minor because I was interested in people and why people do what they do and why things happen; and why does depression exist or why do eating disorders happen? And why does anxiety take place? Or why do we feel sadness in our bodies? Or why are we sad about things that didn’t happen to us but happened to other people? And so once I realized that I was more passionate about that, I flip flopped and made psychology my major and business my minor.

And I went through my program, and I was definitely the minority. I was occasionally the only Black person in my class at times—and this is in college—or one of two or three people.

As I was going through it, it was interesting because I understood what was going on; however, I am not a strong test taker. I am better at writing a paper or having a discussion or, you know, putting things into practice. And so, I was also just trying to figure out, like, “What does this look like? What happens?” Or even feeling uncomfortable in class, being called on as the only Black person to be a Black representative and answer a question or speak to a theory—which I often thought was inappropriate, however, that’s how it went, that’s how it goes, and that’s how it still is for many students.

And so it was my senior year and I was having a couple of health issues. That year was a bit harder. I was at class, I showed up, I did what I was supposed to do, and I completed the class; I was so grateful.

And so, since my grades were in, I knew I was graduating, so I decided to confront a couple of the professors in my program. And there was one professor that...he, of course was an older white gentleman, and was just so dismissive of me throughout the process. And I confronted him, and I said, “You know, I feel like you think I’m lazy. Or like I’m not dedicated or like I’m not committed to the work. And like I’m just another college student coming through.”

I said, “I really hope that you do not project that onto other students. Maybe I should’ve said this earlier, but I have health issues. But I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to be stigmatized or categorized or labeled as lazy or not being a good student. And the energy and the lack of regard that you projected was really discouraging and I hope that you don’t do that to

other people.

I found out he was retiring, and I said, “It’s probably a good idea that you’re retiring. You know, you have said you’re a man who loves God. And I am a person, I am a woman who loves God. But being around you did not feel that way; it felt very opposite.”

And this man just starts crying. And I have been accepted into a graduate school in Boston and that is where I’m going. I said, “I’m pretty sure you didn’t expect that. But I am dedicated to doing this work.” And there was a point where this same person had told me that I probably would be better suited in a different profession. That not many people in the profession looked like me. Not many people did the work I wanted to do.

I said, “Well, isn’t that a good reason for me to do so? Wouldn’t that be a good reason for me to become a therapist?” And I don’t know where that gentleman is or what he did after that. And I knew that at that point I was going to leave that experience behind. And I decided that I was going to grad school in the North, that I was tired of the South.

And yes, the North has its racism in a different way; however, I was just over the South. I was like, “I can’t. I can’t imagine I can do this work and feel the way I’m feeling in these different places. And something has to change.”

So, back when it was Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology, I decided, “Ok, that’s what I’m going to do, that’s where I’m going to go.” And it was the best decision ever. I would not have chosen to go to another program. I looked at other programs, interviewed, and I feel like I ended up...not ended up; I feel like I arrived at the place I was supposed to be at.

It was the first time that I spoke to a professor who did not look like me, and when I told them my experience they were appalled. I didn’t know that was an option. And it was the first place that I feel I got to show up as who I was. And to learn to do the work that, as cliché as it was, that I needed for myself as a person, so then I could be the person who could then go and help other people.

And so, although it can be tiring, it can be draining—especially for someone like me who is a sensitive person, which is not a bad thing, which is something I had to learn—someone like me who’s an empath and feels everything deeply, widely, overwhelmingly—I’m so grateful that I get to do this work and be a good representation of therapists, a person who helps people, a healer. And so that is what my journey to being a therapist was like.

Jackie: Wow, I’m so glad that you ended up having a good experience in grad school after you had such a bad experience in undergrad. What has it been like for you as a Black woman to see our profession attempt to address antiracism?

Porsche: It has been an interesting process that...I’m an over-analyzer, so on the one hand it’s like, “Great, this is great, let’s talk about it.”

And on the other hand, it’s like, “Ok, but you have to remove your whiteness. You really have to because your whiteness is the thing that still separates you from seeing what’s truly going on. Yes, you are white. It is ok, accept that and be fine with it. And move through it because holding onto what happened in the past, what happened historically, only keeps you at a “Woe is

me” place. And it blocks the work that can be done. It really does.

And I see people trying and I see people's intentions, and I think that if people were quiet and still and listened more than always trying to have their perspective heard, they would learn a lot more.

Jackie: What do you mean by that: “Having their perspective heard?”

Porsche: In the sense of...sometimes people come to work out their own issues instead of showing up to learn. And I think you should work through your emotions and feelings. However, certain conversations are not for that.

Jackie: That sounds to me like white fragility.

Porsche: Yes.

Jackie: So what’s the difference between that and honestly wanting to be an ally and help make change?

Porsche: It’s a double-edge sword. It’s two things you have to do at one time. Like, for example, being a Black woman, I have to make peace with the fact that I’m a Black therapist and have to show up in very white spaces, but that that does not diminish my responsibility in the time of work I need to do. So I work through one, and I work through the other, and they’re parallel to one another. However, they both impact each other.

Jackie: So, what would be your recommendation in terms of, for example, white people trying to understand themselves? Are you saying that they’re trying to understand themselves in regards to history of racism and that sort of thing and their part in it? And what should they be doing differently?

Porsche: I think that there is the space of acknowledging, “This is my role. This is how it’s impacted me. This is the history of my culture, my lineage, whatever it may be.” Ok, that is there, that is what’s happened. However, lingering in that space and dwelling in it, in the, “I can’t believe that happened. It’s so unfortunate. And this sucks and how do we make it better?” All of that sucks. All of that is not fun. Great. But staying in that space does not help progress. How do we make it better is the part you should be focusing on.

Jackie: So understanding all the stuff about antiracism is like the theory, but what I hear you say is, “Let’s get to the practice.”

Porsche: Yes, exactly. If we are focusing on the theory all the time—and I know that is the basis of our careers, our industry, what we do—it’s going to keep us stagnant. Theory is wonderful. But

if you're not using that information to actually project forward then what are you doing? You're just staying stagnant, and you're staying in the cycle. And so, this cycle that has existed for hundreds of years and decades, and has looked very different and it's still the same rat race. So that means that something has to be done different. A part of the circle needs to be broken so that a new trajectory can take place.

Porsche: Yeah. Actions speak louder than words. So you can speak about how bad and sucky it was, but nobody really cares if you're not taking any action.

Jackie: So that brings me to another question: How do you think our profession could be more active in, for example, helping Black therapists?

Porsche: Being willing to listen and to learn. And when I say listen and learn, I think that can come along without debate. Everything in our field does not have to be a debate.

Jackie: So when you say listen and learn...exactly what do you mean by that?

Porsche: Listen and learn. Listening to Black therapists about what Black people experience and their pain and what they're facing and not always questioning, "Well, why do you feel that way? Should we start over with reading the books again?" And understanding that when a Black person comes to therapy, it's a victory in and of itself.

Jackie: How can this white profession hear the voices of Black therapists better?

Porsche: So, it does tie into what I was saying earlier. I think learning from Black therapists about people of color who are in therapy, so that they can also be a safe space for those Black clients, that would help. Because right now as a Black therapist, I feel overwhelmed with the caseload. There's not enough Black therapists, but there's still Black people who need therapy. So if white therapists—even white therapists who I would consider to be racist or, you know, any of these things—to be intentional about being culturally competent.

I talk to some of my colleagues about, "Oh, this is a really good training. It's about working with people of color." And I'm like, "Oh, this is great. I haven't seen anybody sign up to do it." And so, dealing with your whiteness so you can move past your whatever shame, guilt, neglect you may be feeling, or helplessness or hopelessness you may be feeling...moving through that so that you can also work with people of color who need a safe space. Because Black therapists are tapped out and full.

Jackie: So I know that at William James College, we have an undergrad program for African American students. And we've been very proactive about having a really diverse population. And I'm wondering how we can increase that in other academic settings so that there are enough Black and Brown therapists?

Porsche: I think that universities as a whole need to be more intentional. We have kids who are undecided about their career track, or they even have someone who is kind of itching at being interested in psychology. Nurturing that curiosity, that desire. Letting them know, “Yeah, do you want to be a therapist? Well, this is what it takes.” Right up front instead of making people get to their senior year and guess-working it.

Jackie: So from the beginning, even in undergrad, educating about their career direction.

Porsche: Yes, and what it looks like to get from point a to point b. I felt like there was information I had to go digging for that other kids were just provided with. I knew at a certain point, I was like, “Ok, I want to be a therapist. What does that look like?” And I had a professor say, “Well, you have to get a masters degree and I don’t know if that’s a part of your trajectory.”

Jackie: So encourage instead of discourage.

Porsche: Absolutely. And informing them, “Okay, this might sound overwhelming, but you’ve got to finish undergrad, you do have to go to a graduate program, and you go through that process and that’s what it looks like to get the education to be a therapist and it is worth it.”

Jackie: Yeah. I don’t know if this is part of the same question, but what feedback would you give to Black therapy undergraduate and graduate students?

Porsche: Undergraduate students, I would say, “Do not get discouraged. What you’re learning right now may feel mundane and it feels like, ‘Ok, so this is how I’m going to help people?’ It is; at that point you are working on the philosophies, the foundations, the theories, and then when you get to grad school it is a different space. It is a space to evaluate yourself, it is a space to evaluate what population of people you want to help. And you learn the practicals and the fundamentals. And then you go into your practicum and your internship and you get to see the people. You get to see the work. And this is where you get to define what your career will be. And it’s ok.

Jackie: I think that’s great advice. What do you think are some ways that our profession can make therapy more accessible to Black couples and families?

Porsche: One, becoming culturally competent and marketing that. So, I often read people’s Psychology Today, especially people who work with couples. Making it clear that you work with couples of all kinds, or whatever you specialize in. So if you’re working with a Black family, understanding the cultural dynamics that come in with being a Black family which also impact the couple. Because there’s a high chance that both members in that relationship had big T and little t trauma, have these dynamics within their families that had to be challenged, and they are trying to create a new legacy and a new behavior and a new narrative in this marriage, in this relationship, in this family. But to do that you have to be culturally competent.

Jackie: You know, I'm really struck by what you say, is that most white therapists don't advertise that they'll see people of color. I do see people of color, but they come to me through other referrals. But I don't advertise like at AAMFT Therapist Locator or Psychology Today, as a person who sees diverse populations. That is such a great idea, Porsche.

Porsche: Because it's already scary looking for a therapist. Psychology Today is overwhelming. Calling your insurance company is overwhelming. Talking to your PCP is overwhelming. It makes it a lot easier when a client can look at your website or your Psychology Today copyright and see, "Oh ok, I can see their line of thinking, I can already see where they stand." And that one makes it a little bit easier for them to go ahead and reach out to you and see if you are their soul therapist.

Jackie: That's a really great pointer. Thank you.

Porsche: You're welcome.

Jackie: So are there any differences in working with white clients from working with Black and Brown clients?

Porsche: From an approach stance? No. Because skills are skills are skills, and approaches are approaches are approaches.

However, for me, I would say my energy and my perspectives shift. When I work with clients who are white I have to remind myself that the same generational and ancestral traumas that you work with Black clients are normally not going to be what you're treating with your white families and couples and individuals.

So I have to remind myself, like, "Okay Porsche, if they say that it's just this, you've turned over every rock and looked at everything, it is just that. It's not trauma-based, there is no trauma back there. This is just breakdown in communication or awkward dynamic. It's not because this person had this in their mom or their dad or this that and the other, because I'm always like, 'No, there has to be more. There is more.'" And it's like, "Oh, no, nuh uh. This infidelity was strictly because you felt insecure. Okay, you felt insecure because of how you were raised in your family. But it wasn't because there was this cultural trauma and generational trauma. Okay, alright."

So being aware of that within myself has been very helpful, and I'm like, "Oh, okay, Porsche. It doesn't negate, and it doesn't mean it's different, however, it's ok to take it at face value; whatever needs to present itself will and it will be okay."

I know that when I was in my practicum internship it was very different because the first year I worked in an underprivileged community. I was in Lawrence, MA and it was a lot of trauma, a lot more putting out fires. And then my next year I was in Wakefield, and it was so different. And I was like, "So where are the fires?" And they were like, "No, we just need to work on these social skills." I'm like, "So, nothing's burning down? There's no trauma?" "Oh, well, they did have this one bad experience." And I'm like, "I'm not trying to diminish your trauma, however, okay...that's...alright."

And then, once I graduated school, I lived overseas for a year, came back, and went back to Lawrence. I didn't do it on purpose, but I was just drawn there. And those strong Williams James ties, the office that I worked at, there were eight of us, and it was not intentional. Some of us were interns, some of us were—like myself—practicing clinicians, and some of us had graduated like a year apart from each other. It was a very odd year.

I was back in a place of like, “Okay, we're working on trauma; that's what we're doing. High alert everyday.” And then, more recently, I went to another practice in Danvers, and I was like, “Ok, alright, this is like Wakefield again. Alright. This is interesting. There's no trauma. Ok, we're back to no trauma. Ok.”

I know I'm naming cities, and I'm naming cities because it was different. When I was in Lawrence, it was people of color; when I was in Wakefield and Danvers it was all white. And now that I'm in private practice I have a split; it's 50/50. And it's been so interesting finding the balance in showing up.

And I'm like, “Okay Porsche, you got this; you have the skills to show up in this space with both people of color and people who are white, and it's fine. You can do it.” And it's a mind shift that I have to have. So again, my approach and my skills are the same, however, the conversations and the energy and the background and the perspective does have to shift.

Jackie: Yeah, that has to shift, but what I hear you saying is that you're culturally competent and sensitive.

Porsche: I try to be, yes. Because as a Black person, what cultural competency looks like for me is being aware of whiteness and what that looks like and what that dynamic is like. That's what I have to be aware of. And it's interesting. It is very interesting having those two paradigms I feel like going on in my head at one time.

Jackie: Yeah, I can imagine. You know, I was impressed. Before we started the interview, you were saying how you've helped other therapists start forming a practice, you've developed a peer supervision group, and you really stay in touch with a lot of your colleagues. How do you end up getting people to help other people?

Porsche: So it's a mix. I had not intended on being in private practice but had a poor experience being at an organization I wasn't at for very long and decided to move into private practice.

I was helped by a wonderful friend of mine who was like, “Yeah, look just do it.” She had done it and was like, “Yeah, this is what needs to happen.” And so once I got into it, I just had this conviction—maybe as a woman and a person of color—a conviction that you should have your own. Why not be your own boss? Why not work for yourself?

And so I could've easily started a group practice, brought people in, trained them and all that jazz, but I just had the conviction of “each one teach one.” “If I teach you how to do this, you can then decide what you want to do. If you want to be in a group practice, that's because you decided to be in one; if you want to be in private practice, that's because that's what you decided

for yourself.”

At this point, a lot of the people that I’ve helped have been friends in my close circle. I just have lucked up and have a majority of my close circle of friends are therapists. I would say out of my eight really close friends I think six of them are therapists. A lot of them are therapists, which feels like such a blessing and which feels so wonderful.

So in my head I was like, “Oh, these are my friends. I’m going to give them this information because I want them to be great too.” They’re like, “Let’s do a group practice.” And I’m like, “You can get more money being your own entity, and we just share an office space, how about that?” And they’re like, “Oh, oh yeah, that works too. We can just split the rent, and split utilities, and share referrals, but you can be your whole own business.” And they’re like, “I didn’t even think about it like that.” It’s like, “See, yes, we can do that.” And that’s what happened.

Then I just met other colleagues and they were like, “Can you help me?” And I was like, “Absolutely, sure.” And then you sent over a fellow William James alumni and I was like, “Absolutely.” This person happens to be a Black man and I was like, “Yes. He needs to be his own business first and foremost.” And so I have talked to many friends and even my own coach, and they’re like, “So, thanks for doing this for free with us. Thank you. But you really should make this a business. Like you should charge people.” And I was like, “Who would I charge? All the people I’ve helped are friends? I wouldn’t charge you guys!”

And so I thought about it and I was like, “You know, that could be a nice little side gig: get people started into private practice.” So yeah, that’s how it’s happened thus far.

Jackie: Yeah, yeah, you’re right. That might be another specialty of yours. I can’t thank you enough. This has been an unbelievable experience, even for me; you even gave me some suggestions that I hadn’t really thought about. And it’s just amazing to watch how you’ve grown as a former student of mine. I know you really well and have always admired your zest for life and your dedication to the profession. So thank you very much!