

The moment our skin colour matters

by Nitin Shrotri

A conversation at a wedding prompts one BMA member to reflect on race discrimination during Black History Month

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It was the last day of an Indo-Scot-Yorkshire wedding and I had met a bunch of lovely, interesting people, all good human beings. Everyone was nice, friendly, and mingled easily.

Of the 200 guests, a couple, Bert and Ila (as I will call them) were the only Black people. There were many nationalities: English, Scots, Welsh, Swiss, Canadian, and Indians from India, South Africa, the US, and the UK. I'd come from Canterbury where I've lived since 2001, having grown up in India.

Bert and Ila, from Malawi, had settled in the US. Bert, in management, had spent some time in the UK, while Ila was working towards a PhD in science communication. We talked about many things, and I mentioned the celebration of [Black History Month](#) – delighted, they wanted to know how we celebrated it here.

I asked them how it was to be Black in the USA. Two things: the first, Bert quickly said, was that you always had to work much harder to get recognition of any sort. Nothing on a plate.

The second was heartbreaking: Ila said when you entered a shop, as a Black person, all eyes were immediately on you. Boring into you, they instantly labelled you as a potential shoplifter.

Ila had earlier visited her UK mentor, a professor who happened to be Black, at a large institution in London. She mentioned they had entered a shop near her work, to buy something. Upon payment, the professor insisted on a receipt. Ila was curious so the professor explained that without a receipt – without proof that she had paid – she might be called a thief at the exit, leading to all kinds of

trouble. It was eye-opening to me, that this was her everyday experience.

Bert had been to Scotland as an exchange student and I later spoke to his Scottish exchange parents who were also at the wedding. The father said the school had treated Bert as an honoured guest, but had he been walking in the street in their village, he probably would have experienced something different.

Bert said he did not realise the colour of his skin mattered until he moved from Malawi to the US. I can relate to this myself, with a memory that reverberates within me – my M&S moment, as I call it. One winter evening in 1994, I was at a Marks & Spencer in Camberley, Surrey, when I suddenly realised I was the only non-white person in a massive superstore. It was an epiphany! I had never felt so alone.

Five years ago, I said to them, I wrote in a local magazine that if one had dark skin, a non-UK accent and a far-away qualification, one is unlikely to do very well in the NHS. If one dares to speak up, I believe there is a 'blacklist' somewhere! Glass ceilings, often subtle, exist. I sometimes feel ethnic minority staff are considered like children: to be seen, but not heard. My experience isn't singular; many others have had such experiences. The MWRES (Medical Workforce Race Equality Standard) plan, initiated in 2016, was for some time, buried. The end result was a simple five-step action plan, but there has been little improvement in the data regarding inclusion and diversity. Professor

Partha Kar has been responsible for this push and he continues to fight to this day.

During Black History Month, I would hope that we, as human beings, can realise that what matters is our behaviour towards, and our respect for, our fellow human beings. Bert and Ila, who I am unlikely to meet again, left me searching deeply into my soul. It's valuable but heart-rending to hear their stories – to get an insight into the daily examples of discrimination that Black people often endure.

It's also a sad reminder that many of us have our own stories to tell – whether a person is non-white, non-British or non-American, it can be an alienating experience. May we all live in peace, accepting one another for who we are, acknowledging that we will all have our M&S moment!

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