Interview with Nike Oruh

Conducted by Laura L. Paterson

Mr Nike Oruh is a therapeutic lead for a young people's charity in Edinburgh. His role focuses on aiming to increase young people's knowledge and awareness of emotional, sexual and physical health issues, enabling them to make informed choices about the way they live and relate to others. He is also a musician, performing under the name Profisee, as well as an active blogger. I met Nike at a public-facing event entitled 'Critical Discourse and Resistance: How Language Promotes Inequality', which was organised by the University of Edinburgh. During this event, Nike spoke about the important role that language plays in his work with young people. After the event, I caught up with Nike to ask him some more questions about his experiences.

Laura: Thank you for taking part in this interview with the *Journal of Language and Discrimination*. Could you tell me a bit more about your work and your experiences in the music business and how this has influenced your take on the power of language and how language can be used.

Nike: As a person-centred counsellor, I have a keen interest in empowering individuals to reach their potential. This interest was first sparked from my clinical and community work as a dietitian. Post qualification as a dietitian, I was presented with the exciting chance to develop my musical passion/career through a record deal.

Under the moniker Profisee I was a member of the hip-hop group called Scotland Yard MCs, before performing as a solo

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artist and collaborating with several musicians and producers across the electronic genre. In addition to performing, I have presented documentaries and hosted radio shows. During my time as a recording artist, my partner and I set up our own record label to distribute music, and co-promote several club nights and events.

I believe I have always delivered a forward-thinking eclectic take on hip hop, and utilised my lyrics and language to express my ideas and viewpoints. All these experiences have provided me with a unique opportunity to develop my interpersonal and communication skills. In essence, whether via the music or therapeutic practice, the common theme has been connections and relationships. Language has been a vehicle to convey many feelings, emotions and messages across my working and creative life.

Laura: Based on your experiences, then, what relationship, if any, do you see between language and discrimination?

Nike: I see a strong relationship between language (accents, dialects and other types of communication) and discrimination. Even today in modern society, language is frequently used to portray status, wealth, rank and intelligence. People sometimes talk about their 'phone voice' or a 'voice' they use when in particular situations and environments. Why? I believe it is to convey a certain view of self, attitude or demeanour. Language is frequently used to differentiate groups – race, age, sexuality, etc. The distinction of difference and the fear of the unknown can sometimes lead to language being used in various forms of discrimination.

As a black male, my experience of language and discrimination has been framed by many words and descriptions that degrade my very being. Without knowledge of self, love and nurture, the discrimination through language I have encountered and still experience may have led me to a conditioning of negativity, self-loathing or hatred. Sticks and stones may break my bones ... but rather than 'words can never hurt me,' if not addressed or understood they can in fact haunt forever.

Both my parents came to the UK (from Nigeria and Trinidad and Tobago) to further themselves and make a better future for their family. Growing up, I was taught from a very young age that education was essential. By gaining a decent education, my options and choices would be vastly improved especially

in the face of discrimination. Part of this process was ‘speaking properly’ in the ‘Queen’s English’. The way we speak and our grasp of language can frequently place individuals into certain classes or groupings. Even the term ‘speaking properly’ may deem those who do not use language in a particular way as uneducated or worse – stupid.

Laura: That notion that words can hit at the core of someone’s very being is really important. You’ve hit on two issues here; people being discriminated against because of the language (or languages) that they use, and the way they use it (pronunciation, dialect features, etc.) and also the specific language used to discriminate against people by labelling them in a certain way or by speaking to them in a certain manner. You also highlight that language and discrimination can take many forms, and be intersectional, stemming from racism, sexism, also classism, and religious intolerance. Why do you think teaching people about the power of language is important?

Nike: What is very clear, and agreed by many linguists, is that language and power have an intrinsic relationship. Language is information, and information is power. Those in positions of power utilise whatever tools they have available to maintain their status quo. People, communities and institutions all use language to develop power and in many instances keep a hold of it.

Wars have utilised language through propaganda, and the current social and political landscapes are dictated by headlines and online traffic. It is my opinion that by teaching people about the power of words, individuals can have a greater understanding and control of their choices and decisions.

Language has the power to condition people’s thoughts and attitudes, as well as to inspire and motivate. Many elite athletes use mantras and have quotes in their environment (e.g. gyms, clubs) to drive and motivate them. At Anfield, the home of Liverpool Football Club, the players step out onto the pitch under the sign ‘This is Anfield – You’ll Never Walk Alone’. Fans and supporters frequently sing the rallying call ‘You’ll never walk alone’, which creates a sense of strength and togetherness. This symbolism, which has developed through the years, aims to propel the team, and offers a clear illustration of the power of language. The use of language in song is a powerful tool; chants and anthems are used throughout the world to invigorate and unify.

Laura: There's a parallel here between the power of words and the power of people, but you also suggest that individual people can gain more power, over themselves if not necessarily someone else, by learning about language and the social power of words. This chimes very much with many of the articles that the journal has published, and will publish in the future. Is there anything you think researchers working on language and discrimination can do to make sure that their findings get disseminated widely and/or their work includes input from people outside academia?

Nike: Often language can be used to oppress others by excluding them. This can be done by educated people (in academia) excluding the uneducated by using words and vocabulary in ways that can't be easily understood. This can make people feel left out and inferior. Ensuring the findings can be accessible to all is very important, as well as getting feedback from and including the voices of those being researched.

Laura: In relation to your work as a counsellor working with young people you've argued that language can play an important role in inspiring change. Could you give an example of how you draw attention to language in your counselling sessions?

Nike: A fundamental principle of the person-centred viewpoint that I take is that to a large degree, our behaviour is actually a reflection of how we feel about ourselves, and the world we live in. Therefore, often the things we do are a result of how we evaluate ourselves. Carl Rogers proposed that 'the organism reacts to the field as it is experienced and perceived'. This perceptual field is reality for the individual, and it could be argued that the words we hear and receive play a major role in our understanding of self. If a person feels worthless, rubbish and weak, they are more likely to behave in a way that confirms these beliefs. This makes developing high self-esteem a difficult and sometimes uphill struggle.

Self-esteem, or the beliefs we have about ourselves, plays a vital role in understanding our rules for living. One's self-esteem may go up and down, but if we have established a positive core belief, we are able to persevere. The term 'self-worth' is often used interchangeably with self-esteem, as both illustrate a person's value of self. However, my differentiation between the two would be that self-esteem is constructed along with external stimulus

such as parenting, whilst self-worth is perhaps more about the intrinsic values each person possesses as an individual.

The work that I deliver within my work is primarily solution focused. The one-to-one support that we offer gives young people the chance to talk privately about how to cope with difficult feelings and work towards goals that we set. In particular, we use a cognitive behavioural therapy approach when exploring self-esteem. Part of the work looks at the type of words and language we use to describe ourselves, and how this affects what we think and feel about self. One exercise we do is called 'Twenty Words'. In it we ask young people to best describe themselves in twenty words, and explore the impact this has on their emotional wellbeing.

Laura: It must be so rewarding when you see people engage in these activities and get them to think about how, sometimes, it's our own internal monologues that can be, in a sense, discriminatory. But there's also the acknowledgement that we are affected by our external stimuli (it's not all in our heads) and we are influenced by how others treat us and the (structural) inequalities that people might face. Just to focus in on one particular aspect of your work, I'd also like to ask you about a recent blog post where you talked about the relationship between language, discrimination and gender. You also mentioned this at the event in Edinburgh. Can you tell me a bit more about how you bring discussions of gender into your work and your music?

Nike: Language can be used to oppress intentionally or unintentionally. Despite the progression in technology and accessibility to information, sexism and gender discrimination still exist and, in many cases, are still rife (take the #MeToo movement as an example). As you mention, I discuss some of these relationships in my blog (Oruh 2018). In the work, I am conscious to explore and, where appropriate, challenge discriminatory language. Through my music, I try to pose open questions, and offer alternative perspectives to engage the listener.

Laura: You've also written online about how the media portray the lives of musicians in the hip-hop and grime scenes. How do you think the media can influence wider society's interpretations of particular music genres? And why do you think this is important?

Nike: I feel that the media can and do have a major influence on the portrayal of musicians, especially those from the hip-hop and grime scenes. Whilst these scenes are now worldwide and multicultural, they have their roots in Black culture. One way in which systems have oppressed Black people and Black culture is in the way that language is used to devalue, exclude and invalidate the experience. Previously, this was through restricted airplay and censorship, and, in many cases, a double standard regarding creative license.

As an artist I try to choose my lyrics with care and reflection, so as not to contribute to oppressive stereotypes and attitudes. However, art is not always to be taken literally! The media has a responsibility to not perpetuate industry and societal prejudice. Language can be a window to the attitudes and beliefs we hold; this is why it is important to be aware of the words we use and how they are used to describe us.

Laura: This is a great example of discrimination taking multiple forms. There's discrimination against particular genres of music, or even individual musicians, and the cultures that they are closely related too, and this discrimination seems to be top-down and influenced by who has power. But there's also a really strong point to be made that as someone with a voice in music, in your support sessions with young people, at public events, on the blog, and so on, that you wouldn't want to inadvertently reinforce certain ideas. Thank you for answering a few questions for the journal. It's important to us that we expand the voices that we publish beyond academia and include testimonies and responses to real-life examples of discrimination.

To find out more about the work that Nike does, please see the details of his blog provided below. You can also find him on Twitter @Profisee and hear some of his work on SoundCloud (<https://soundcloud.com/profisee>).

Laura L. Paterson
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Reference

Oruh, N. (2018) *How Language Reproduces Inequality and How it is Used to Challenge it*. <https://medium.com/@profisee>