

Tackling the roots of racism: lessons for success

What are the causes of racism? And how successful are policy measures in addressing these? The main focus in this unique review by Reena Bhavnani, Heidi Mirza and Veena Meeto, from Middlesex University, has been on British research and policy evidence. The review also included examples of international interventions and the lessons from their success. The key findings are:

- Most interventions do not address the causes of racism and how these causes are reproduced in current times. Although there are many diversity and racial equality documents and action plans, few organisations have any real evidence of what interventions reduce racism.
- Anti-racist legislation, including action against racial harassment, has not significantly improved workplace conditions for people from black and minority ethnic groups; racial harassment is frequently unreported.
- Ethnic monitoring can reproduce racism by entrenching racial categories and focusing on people from black and minority ethnic groups as agents of change.
- Everyday interventions tend to focus on local forms of racism in working-class areas not on the elite and powerful expressions of racism (such as those expressed in some parts of the media).
- Some elements of the media and some politicians have contributed significantly to an atmosphere of racism through pronouncements against immigrants and black and Asian people.
- Government Community Cohesion debates tend to focus on faith and intercultural understanding and are less likely to address the key issues of structural segregation and poverty. There is little ongoing evidence of whether these 'cohesion' approaches work.
- The black voluntary sector has the potential to combat racism in service delivery, but it is underfunded and lacks support.
- Successful interventions tend to be educational, aimed at improving knowledge and communication, and strongly led.
- Good communication and an open and honest approach to confronting racism are important. These approaches can heal rifts and lead to reconciliation.
- Anti-racist activists and watchdog groups are important in combating racism in press and institutions.
- Schools, colleges, universities, museums and arts and sports venues have an important role to play in combating everyday racism.
- Racism depends on context – there is no one cause of racism or one solution to racism.



Background

Surprisingly, there is virtually no evaluation research in Britain of successful interventions to tackle racism and the reasons why interventions have or have not been successful. This review does exactly that, highlighting the need to understand micro 'everyday' racisms in order to tackle the macro structural roots of racism.

The researchers grouped British-based 'professional' interventions into two broad categories: equality interventions and multicultural interventions. They discuss whether these interventions are appropriate for tackling the causes of racism, taken as meaning both the origins of racism and the ways different types of racism are reproduced in our various daily lives. They also consider examples of interventions in Britain and abroad which have been successful in reducing racism.

The 'equality' interventions in employment

Professional equality interventions in employment have included policy development, ethnic monitoring, the appointment of specialist officers on 'race' or 'diversity', positive action training, and changing recruitment and promotion procedures. The 'new language' of racial equality and inclusion is now being constructed around achieving diversity.

Limited evaluation, limited implementation

Racial harassment policies in the workplace are rarely evaluated. The limited academic and policy-based research shows that most organisations adopt written policies when they have the force of law. On the other hand, *implementation* of equality/diversity policies is extremely patchy and ad hoc right across the country.

Many organisations have failed to take monitoring on board. 'Ethnic' monitoring in isolation keeps the emphasis on 'ethnic' minorities rather than institutions as the source of change. Monitoring is rarely compared with the 'positive action' of white middle-class men's networks and alliances, which are taken for granted. Monitoring appears to be used as 'record keeping', rather than as a foundation for action.

Effectiveness of employment policies

Changes in recruitment procedures have arguably made a difference to the employment of minorities in both the private and public sectors. However, a case can also be made for the effects of external forces, which have encouraged the recruitment of minorities. These include labour market and sectoral change, public sector reform, and demographic changes. Research on the New Deal (to tackle the social inclusion of ethnic minority young people) shows little impact on the disadvantage experienced by minorities in the labour market.

Negative evaluations of 'racialised' minorities in organisational settings continue to be found in various studies, but these perceptions are not shared *across* or *within* all groups. A 2003 workplace study, for example, found that white men do not perceive minorities as being discriminated against or marginalised. White women are likely to empathise more with the experience of minorities.

Promotion procedures are arguably becoming more objective in assessing those with management potential. However, organisational cultures continue to disadvantage minorities. For example, research continues to show slower progress of minorities in organisations and a greater tendency for minorities to receive lower evaluations of competence than their white peers.

The equality intervention for service delivery

Social policy has encouraged 'equal' access to services, and interventions have been introduced to remove barriers to access. Most 'access' interventions do not address the causes and reproduction of racism.

There have been exceptions to this. In education, there have been initiatives on teaching about racism to teachers and pupils. In the arts, several initiatives have attempted to challenge traditional images of who *represents* the arts in Britain. There are the beginnings of anti-racist work with perpetrators of racial harassment, and there have been evaluated projects on racism in football. Furthermore, black-led social movements in education and the service provision led by the voluntary sector have challenged racism in mainstream institutions.

However, research on the effectiveness of these interventions in most service provision is lacking. Many other services examined, via public inquiries and academic studies, in the areas of education, housing, arts and leisure, health and the criminal justice system continue to show varying degrees of racism.

Some interventions ignore racism completely in a 'colour blind' approach; others focus on the 'racialised' groups themselves as needing to change, whilst the rest automatically assume a singular focus on 'cultural' or 'racial' explanations for complex social problems of disadvantage and poverty.

The multicultural interventions

Multicultural interventions and their underlying interpretation have been much debated since the 1970s. Many 'positive' interventions based on recognising 'difference' – whether faith schools, translation services, heritage projects, or projects on intercultural understanding – have not been evaluated for their effectiveness in reducing racism and lowering intolerance.

Policy responses in community cohesion projects have been initiated on inter-faith understanding, with community facilitators. The concept of community cohesion has been extended to educate the receiving community about refugees and travellers. It has also been further extended to wider social exclusion strategies.

It is too early to conclude the effectiveness of the 'community cohesion' approach to tackling different manifestations of racism in particular contexts or areas ('situated racisms'). Criticisms of these 'cohesion' approaches in Northern Ireland suggest that these initiatives have had little effect in reducing *social and economic* differentials between groups, and failed to tackle other aspects of inequality, including gender and age.

Explanations for limitations of current interventions

The full report puts forward several explanations for the limited effects of professional interventions. However, the key reason for the limitations of professional interventions on 'race', equality and difference has been a failure to address the causes of racism and understand the ways ideas of 'race' are reproduced.

Causes of racism

By causes of *racism*, the study means both the origins, or roots of racism, and the ways in which it is reproduced on an everyday basis.

For example, the causes of 'racial' differentiation and discrimination against certain groups in Britain cannot be understood without understanding the dynamics of the history of Empire and slavery and how these link to post-colonial migration.

There is also a need to understand the more specific context in which racism is *reproduced* in society on an everyday basis. There are many types of racism, but two clear categories stand out.

■ Elite racism

Elite racism is reproduced at a national level through the media, the government and other influential figures. This racism is often hidden or unchallenged and frequently expressed as the 'norm' and shapes public perceptions. For example, misinformation and racialised reporting in the press sanction widely held negative views about asylum seekers.

■ Situated racism

This is an understanding of how a more 'localised' racism is expressed, for example, the way disabled black children in schools express their experience of unequal treatment, or the ways in which some white women in social housing talk about their Bangladeshi neighbours as a threat to *their* families or see them as inferior and 'unhygienic'. It may also be about the way some young white, black or Asian working-class men express their changing position in a hierarchical society through acts of racial violence.

The complexity of how 'race' issues interact with those around class, gender, age and disability inequalities suggests a more holistic approach to tackling the roots of racism is needed. Patterns of behaviour are ingrained in both 'macro' British structures and 'micro' everyday British 'culture'. Not all individuals act in racist ways, but

attitudes and ideologies based on ideas of inferiority and subordination of certain groups, like those of disability, class and gender, are *embedded* in the ways in which British society has developed.

Lessons from successful interventions - Britain and abroad

The review used written literature to illustrate examples of successful interventions.

Tackling elite and situated racisms

Any intervention needs to work in response to the particular context. An understanding of the ways in which elite racism may impact on situated racism also needs to be explored. Exposing underlying assumptions behind what influential people in the media and in government say will impact on how ordinary people communicate about racism.

Interdependence and habitual engagement at a local level are critical for change to take place. For example, in one housing estate some sanctions against racist language will be critical, whilst in another youth workers could use their imagination to bring people together. Using drama to involve whole communities allows the possibility of addressing difficult localised tensions.

Box 1: Education and examining why

A key lesson from an educational intervention youth project, apart from its longer term focus, is the understanding of 'why' racism is being expressed in a particular context. Furthermore, not all teaching interventions were made by 'banning' racist comments; rather a more subtle approach was created, using both an understanding of 'unconscious' and emotional reactions to where these young people lived and their relationships with each other.

Involving all

In working with diverse people living together, interventions that *enable* discussion to take place across differing perspectives are pertinent. Talking about racism openly, without fear of 'political correctness' and with a genuine aim of articulating confusion and ambivalence appears to be an important prerequisite.

Box 2: Involving all

In the USA, a nationwide project on Study Circles which were funded by a charity aimed to involve local people in discussions about racism. Several groups were set up across the country and everyone was included. People involved in the groups (which were facilitated) became more aware, and some wanted to take action in their workplaces.

Understanding the language context

Understanding the conversational and language context is also important in tackling attitudes and behaviours.

Interventions in racism have tried to reduce racial discrimination by a rational imparting of information to counter existing attitudes. Interventions often consist purely of telling people the facts. Practitioners assume that imparting knowledge will have the desired effect and that participants will reflect on and change their behaviour. However, approaching the intervention in its context, and addressing how to respond in informal conversations may be more effective.

Conveying clear messages through leadership

The Arts Council changed their interventions through reflecting more deeply on what diversity meant, and how racism could actually keep audiences away or present an image of Britain as white, male and middle-class.

They made appointments of black and minority people at a senior level. These 'ambassadors' were then seen to represent a new face of Britain with connections made overseas. They have been used in forums in reinterpreting/re-representing British heritage.

Encouraging self help and campaigning

'Racialised' groups have been involved for a long time in 'self help', designing ways to intervene in their own and their group's lives. Examples range from top-down interventions, such as specific museums and heritage sites which expose past treatment, to lobbying and advice campaigns, such as Southall Black Sisters, right down to local Saturday schools, developing community centres and so on. These projects have been aided by both white and 'racialised' individuals working to address change in creative and innovative ways.

Box 3: The media

The intervention of the Presswise project on exposing the racism of the press towards asylum seekers is a good example of a successful intervention in exposing 'media' racism and leading to change.

Box 4: Making anti-racism and multiculturalism central to national policy

Canada's multicultural policy is part of its national policy and constitution. New Zealand recognises its indigenous people in its constitution. The Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975 is a permanent Commission of Inquiry on Maori claims relating to the land. It enables the negotiation between the Crown and the Maori peoples, on any aspects which concern grievances against policies, practices or legislation. In Sweden, multiculturalism has meant taking a holistic look at notions of citizenship. This is not a citizenship bequeathed to people by a sovereign state. It is rather one which engages people to address difference and participate in community development at a local level.

About the project

This review analysed literature in the public domain drawing on a wide range of disciplines including sociology, anthropology and psychology, as well as internal documents held by organisations and individuals. Interpretation of the data presented here was enhanced by talking to groups and individuals, experienced in the field.

The review has brought together evidence from written literature in a necessarily short period of time. It cannot be comprehensive in its coverage of the breadth of interventions, given that new initiatives are continually being started. Racisms, too, are changing and being locally re-interpreted. Co-ordination, exchange and the monitoring of good and bad practice is implicit in the researchers' conclusions.

For further information

The full report, **Tackling the roots of racism: Lessons for success** by Reena Bhavnani, Heidi Safia Mirza and Veena Meeto, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 774 X, price £15.99).

Printed copies from Marston Book Services, PO Box 269, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4YN, Tel: 01235 465500, Fax: 01235 465556, email: direct.orders@marston.co.uk. (Please add £2.75 p&p for first book and 50p per book thereafter.)

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. **ISSN 0958-3084**

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