

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Race equality through anti- racism guide

March 2021

‘A real barrier and challenge to race equality is the fact that race and racism remain great taboos and are underestimated.

‘The fact is that the dominant race in a society rarely admits to its own racism, with denial being near universal.

‘The reasons are manifold. It has a huge vested interest in its own privilege and will often be oblivious to its own prejudices.

‘This is fundamental to understanding the way in which racism is underplayed as a national and global issue.

‘Without an experience of racism except as perpetrators, racism is constantly underplayed by western institutions – governments, the media and corporations who have a vested interest in denying the extent and baneful effects of racism.’

Martin Jacques, journalist and author, 2003

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Foreword

The UK and many other countries in which we operate are multi-ethnic and multicultural, or moving in that direction. Within them the roots of racial discrimination, racial disadvantage, xenophobia and intolerance can run deep.

There have been gains and improvements over the years, but social, economic and other indicators consistently report that inequalities and reduced access to opportunities, determined by racial and ethnic background, persist. These play out in society, the workplace and beyond, and affect our external and internal work.

It is the backdrop to, and reason for, a renewed call for engagement with and application of our race equality guide first launched three years ago and one of a series of British Council guides to support the inclusion we aspire to in our main areas of focus.

The richness that racial and ethnic diversity brings cannot be overstated, but to benefit from it we need to acknowledge, engage with and understand this, including the subtleties and nuances and the reasons for our frequent avoidance of doing so, despite being a cultural relations organisation.

As Race Champion for our organisation I commend this guide to you and encourage engagement with the area of racial and ethnic diversity and the adoption of an anti-racist stance. I ask that you make your own contribution to helping ensure the behaviours and values it encourages and requires are applied in all aspects of our work.



Christopher Wade

Race Equality Champion and Director Marketing

Introduction

In an increasingly complex world, attempts to cope with ethnic tensions and overcome race-related inequalities¹ are assuming greater – not, as we perhaps might imagine, less – significance. This is highlighted by the murder of George Floyd alongside so many other continuing race-based murders and injustices.

Worldwide, countries are increasingly recognising and implementing anti-discrimination measures in response to this and in an attempt to fully benefit from and include their diverse populations. This is shown:

- in legislative and policy changes being introduced
- in practices being encouraged, including by the European Union and other bodies
- in the support for pluralism
- by cities and organisations marketing and positioning themselves as diverse, anti-racist and welcoming to all people.

In this guide

The aim of this guide is to add our own contribution by encouraging a continuing conversation about issues of race/ethnicity, racism and racial equality, and nurturing good practices and anti-racism. Ultimately we want to do better, be fully inclusive and achieve improved outcomes for all racial groups.

Our particular focus is on minority ethnic groups, who largely but not exclusively lack power and status. Ethnicity refers to belonging to a social group that has a shared language, history, culture, codes – sometimes but not always related to religion.

1. Race here is broadly defined and includes racial, ethnic and national origins, nationality, skin colour, tribe and caste.

Ethnic categories are fluid and geographically specific. For example, a Chinese person living in the UK would likely list their ethnicity as Chinese. A Chinese person living in China would identify their ethnicity from one of the 56 Chinese ethnic groups, including Han, Zhuang, Manchu and Uyghur.

It is important to remember that everyone has an ethnicity. Different ethnic groups often experience different treatment in society, depending on power, status, societal norms and structures, and history, among other things. In many countries there is a majority ethnic group that holds power over one or many more minority ethnic groups. It is not always the case that majority status denotes power, as is the case in South Africa.

Limitations of this guide

Issues of race are generally given limited attention and there is no desire to reinforce this. At the same time the guide can only ever be a partial picture of a complex, deep and wide area. Some of what is set out is done so more bluntly and with less nuance than we would like.

We rely on colleagues to engage with the guide constructively. We urge them to accept the limitations of any guide dealing with multifaceted social relations, within complex historical, socio-political and geographical contexts and with diverse linguistic elements. And, of course, there is the issue that few people will have the time to read and engage with a lengthier guide.

How to use this guide

There are four parts to this guide.

- Part 1 identifies racism as a global phenomenon and explores some of the ways in which it manifests.
- Part 2 addresses how race/ethnicity sits within our own approach to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), specifically focusing on the business, moral and legal strands.
- Part 3 is about action. It sets out examples and makes suggestions, moving us away from information to the concrete and specific.
- Part 4 is the summary and conclusion.

We suggest flexible engagement, although we would like to encourage reading it in full. Those less interested in Part 1 could skip it and move, perhaps, to Part 3, which more directly addresses our work. Alternatively, begin with Part 2 and then read Part 3 to get a sense of how race equality is relevant to our overall approach to EDI.

The guide is a dynamic document. It will be kept under review and will be informed by feedback and examples for potential inclusion, which we very much welcome. As one of a series being developed for each of our EDI areas of focus, the guide is aligned to and supports our Equality Policy and EDI Strategy, which are referred to on a number of occasions.

1 Understanding racism/s

The origins of racism are based on the discredited belief that human beings can be divided into distinct groups labelled 'races' as a result of inherited physiological characteristics such as skin colour, facial features or hair texture.

This view reduces human attributes and indeed behaviour to the sphere of biology – sometimes referred to as biological essentialism. It separates people into oppositional categories ('other-ing') and ascribes generic traits to them which are viewed as natural, fixed and generally applicable to the group in question. These include behaviour patterns, personality and intellectual ability.

This view also gives rise to the belief in a ranking of human 'races' and promotes the idea that some are superior, and others inferior. This is used to explain and justify the advantages of some so-called races over others.

Scientists and anthropologists have long challenged and disproved the idea of 'race' as a biological reality. The overwhelming body of scientific opinion, including that of the Human Genome Project, maintains that:

- 'race' is meaningless as a biological category
- there are no such sharp distinctions between populations
- all human beings are genetically virtually identical.

Likewise, Article 1 of the Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice, adopted in 1978 by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, states:

‘All human beings belong to a single species and share a common origin. They are born equal in dignity and rights and all form an integral part of humanity. All peoples of the world possess equal faculties for attaining the highest level of intellectual, technical, social, economic, cultural and political development. The differences between achievements of the different people are entirely attributable to geographical, historical, political, economic, social and cultural factors. Such differences can in no case serve as the pretext for any rank ordered classification of nations or people.’

Different forms of racism/s

New and more subtle forms of racisms continue to emerge, derived from the false doctrine of racial differentiation. They include:

- imposing greater financial checks on people of a certain ethnicity
- restricting their movement
- clearly linking concepts of ideal beauty with one ethnicity rather than another.

These new forms of racisms are found in different regions, at different times, and are not mutually exclusive. Ideas and actions related to the perceived ranking and superiority/inferiority of individuals and groups can, and do, move fluidly between these different expressions of racism.

Increasingly, particularly within a European context, the phrase racism/s incorporates xenophobia,² anti-semitism³ and Islamophobia.⁴ What is useful about this is that it reflects that skin colour and physical appearance are not the only markers of difference generating hostility. Hostility arises from markers connected to culture, language and religion, reflected by the plural term ‘racisms’.

The term racisms is, we believe, of particular value and relevance to us. It acknowledges the above but also:

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2. Xenophobia is a fear of people from other countries.
 3. Anti-semitism is hostility or prejudice towards Jewish people.
 4. Islamophobia is hostility or prejudice towards Muslim people.

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- anti-black racism
 - anti-indigenous people racism
 - anti-Asian racism, which is sometimes referred to as orientalism
 - anti-Irish, anti-Roma and anti-Gypsy/Traveller racism
 - caste- and tribal-based racism.

How racism/s manifest

Of course, racism manifests itself in different ways in the different contexts in which we operate, including by criminalising certain groups, negatively portraying them or making them invisible. It also manifests in how attribution bias is displayed and affinity bias impacts.

Racism plays out within and can be perpetuated by people of the same and different skin colour; it is not simply perpetrated by white people towards those who are not white. Indeed, notions of 'whiteness' change over time and place: groups that appear white in one context and at one point in time may be racialised as the 'other' at some point, e.g. Irish, Jewish, Eastern European and Chinese people.

Colourism and shadeism, forms of discrimination based on skin colour, are also part of the broad and complex landscape of racisms. This demonstrates that within ethnic groups there is a subtle ranking, where those with darker skin are held to be of less value than those with lighter skin. This is prevalent in all parts of the world where we have a presence and plays out within a given ethnic group.

Whiteness is increasingly being given attention, including through an examination of white privilege⁵ and white fragility.⁶ These concepts help highlight power and status, bringing attention to that which can be taken for granted and is often unspoken about.

5. For more on white privilege see Peggy McIntosh (1989) [*Unpacking the invisible knapsack*](#).

6. White fragility is where talking about racism triggers emotions or behaviours that close the conversation down. [The phrase was coined by Robin DiAngelo in 2011.](#)

Racism is undeniably linked with other areas of unjustified discrimination. People are not simply identified by their race/ethnicity. Self-identification and the way others see us is complex. We all have multiple identities, with different aspects that come to the fore at different times, depending on where we are and who we are with and the resulting power dynamics. These dynamics are potent in nurturing and sustaining racisms and the consequent oppression.

Understanding institutionalised racisms

Racism operates at a range of levels, including at the structural and institutional levels. This means racism is systemic and woven into the fabric of a society. Examples of this can be found in apartheid South Africa and, some would say, in Israel and other parts of the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia.

Racism permeates institutions, laws, policies, procedures and practices. This includes in the USA and UK, which are often held to be progressive, 'developed' countries. It is embodied in, for example, the judiciary, police and civil service – often through deeply entrenched stereotypes that lead to harsher judgments and treatment, or a denial of the impact of circumstances and distinct needs.

Racism consequently ensures the systematic discrimination or disadvantage of people from different cultural and ethnic groups, even without anyone necessarily making a deliberate decision to do so.

This routine and 'natural' subjugation often have the net effect of significant disadvantage for particular ethnic and national groups while maintaining the status quo and advantages enjoyed by the dominant group. This group needn't be in the numerical majority (as in the case of South Africa where dominance was held by a minority ethnic group).

Institutional racism is variously defined, including as follows by Sir William Macpherson (1999):

‘The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour that amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people.’

In reading this guide we ask that you hold in mind the diversity of racism, encapsulated in the term racisms. The guide will move between the terms racism and racisms for stylistic and other reasons.

The relevance of anti-racism

Anti-racism is a specific approach that deliberately tries to dismantle racism at individual, institutional and structural levels. It aims to support inclusion and human rights and promote race equality.

Anti-racism is therefore a proactive, action-oriented approach that acknowledges intersectionality. This means it recognises the interconnected nature of different aspects of a person’s identity and how together they can affect, determine and compound that person’s experience of discrimination. Anti-racism is also deeply analytical.

It is defined in various ways, and by the Diversity Unit as ‘proactively working to challenge and dismantle racism in all its forms and manifestations’.

The consequences of racism

The belief in inherent biological differences between groups of people, among other things, has, over the centuries, given justification to racist, inhumane actions. These include:

- slavery
- colonisation
- segregation
- apartheid

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- the holocaust
 - genocides
 - ethnic cleansing.

The result has sometimes been the significant displacement of ethnic groups and numerous refugee and asylum seekers in quest of a safe haven and security. New hostilities and intra-ethnic conflicts continue to emerge, fuelled by political and economic divisions, with wide-ranging costs.

Ethnic conflicts, civil disturbances and genocides have been witnessed in all continents. By some estimates, one or more of these are currently prevalent in around a quarter of countries worldwide. They include but are not restricted to Afghanistan, Australia, Bosnia, Colombia, Darfur, France, Germany, Libya, Russia, South Sudan, Syria, Spain and the UK. They have claimed billions of victims.

Alongside these extreme and violent instances are numerous individual acts of prejudice and unlawful, unjustified discrimination, micro-aggressions and incivilities against people because of their ethnicity. With these come negative economic, social, cultural and personal consequences, including racial trauma as a result of exposure to racism, racial discrimination and harassment, racial hostility and intolerance, and xenophobia.

The United Nations, the European Commission and many other international governmental agencies and non-governmental organisations consistently report that the life chances of a considerable proportion of the world's population remain limited and constrained. They also report that perceptions of race, colour, ethnic and national origins are major factors in determining this.

This is apparent in the criminal justice system where sentencing patterns and use of the death penalty among minority ethnic groups frequently differ significantly from majority groups.

Minority ethnic groups also experience:

- lower levels of access to education and educational attainment
- higher unemployment and under employment
- greater ill health and uneven attention to its causes
- reduced lifespan
- lower quality housing and overcrowding.

The relationship between power and racism

Power, which we have already commented on, is of course central to the ideas and manifestations of racism. It is not simply prejudice on grounds of race. It is the power to act on those prejudices and subjugate others that makes racism such a threat, including to the cohesion necessary for a stable, secure world.

2 Our approach: business, moral, legal strands

Our organisational framework for EDI has three strands and six areas of main but not exclusive focus. Race/ethnicity is one of these. In this part of the guide we summarise these strands with specific reference to race.

The business case for race equality

Our business case for race equality is consistent with our general business case for diversity. We believe that:

- race equality supported by an anti-racist approach helps us foster mutually beneficial and respectful long-term relationships worldwide with various individuals, groups and organisations. It sensitises us to the needs of all ethnic groups and the barriers they face and makes us more likely to respond appropriately, with insight and awareness and with a level of confidence and competence because of this. This helps position us as a partner of choice and aids our reputation and standing as leaders in cultural relations. It extends our reach and helps us to serve our audiences better, including by reflecting the ethnic diversity of the UK and elsewhere
- the best creative talent can come from untapped employment pools, as can future leaders and influencers, programme participants, partners and customers. Given demographic trends these will increasingly be drawn from minority ethnic populations. Race equality can help us access and use diverse talent pools
- racism and cultural relations are incompatible. With a desire to create friendly knowledge and understanding as a bridge between the UK and other countries of the world, our work would be undermined if racism on our part was suggested, or prevalent, or if we failed to take action in response to it

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- supporting and adopting anti-racism helps us to combat racial prejudice, stereotyping, harassment, unjustified discrimination, and undignified and culturally insensitive and offensive behaviour in our interactions with one another and in the delivery of our various activities. It means that British Council employees, in the context of their work, are less likely to be perpetrators or victims of racism and are more likely to be able to effectively challenge racisms. It also means we are more likely to, for example, reduce UK/locally contracted divisions and manage prejudices related to whether our teachers have English as their first language
 - by nurturing race equality, we can minimise distress and the damage to our reputation, purpose and organisational values, and the costs and time involved in dealing with complaints, employment tribunals and negative publicity.

The moral/ethical case for race equality

Anti-racism and race equality are about social justice. It is simply the right thing to do to treat others with dignity and respect, to empathise, and to create and nurture spaces that are not infected by preconceptions and stereotypes, by hate and violence, fear or ignorance and the abuse of power.

It is also right to acknowledge that people have experiences and perceptions different from our own. We should be open to learning about these rather than dismissing or devaluing them.

The moral strand is especially aligned to our organisational values which should underpin everything we say, do and stand for. Our values are in turn aligned to our commitment to inclusion and human rights.

The principles of human rights help nurture our shared humanity and a world where we can all be supported to be fully human; a world of hope rather than fear, with the benefits that come from feeling fully included. Human rights in practice support global security and stability, as well as daily life, and life stages that help citizens thrive and give of their best.

Racism is harmful and dehumanising. Racists are motivated by, among other things, an irrational fear or anxiety – the fear that immigrants will swamp the population, say. They have been unable to counter and unlearn the racism reinforced through socialisation. They inevitably have ‘blind spots’ and defences.

An anti-racist organisational culture and supporting practices can provide a moderating influence and minimise the negative impact of racists' ideas and beliefs.

The legal case for race equality

Wherever we work there is legislation in place supporting the inclusion of various disadvantaged groups, often including those disadvantaged on grounds of race. There are also overarching legal instruments that many countries are signatories to. One of these is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). We encourage understanding of these and the practices which bring them alive and make them meaningful.

Legislation has been an important, and in instances powerful, engine for change. Worldwide, it has unquestionably led to a reduction in inequalities and unjustified discrimination. Legal requirements are a non-negotiable that frequently silence sceptics and dissenters. We do, however, acknowledge that it is the enforcement of legislation that makes the critical difference.

Defining racial discrimination in the UK

Of particular note because we have a UK headquarters are definitions set out in the GB Equality Act (2000). These hold that racial discrimination can be:

Direct

Direct racism means treating a person less favourably than another person would be or has been treated, on racial grounds. It is not possible to justify direct discrimination. For example, you could not state that there is a business need to discriminate on racial grounds because customers would complain about receiving a service from someone from a particular ethnic group.

Also, motive is irrelevant. So whether you meant to treat someone differently on racial grounds, or had a benign motive, is of no relevance whatsoever.

Indirect

This occurs when a provision, criterion or practice is applied equally to members of all races but:

- puts or would put members of one or more races at a particular disadvantage compared to those of other races
- disadvantages the person it is applied to
- cannot be shown to be a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

An example is schools and workplaces that have introduced dress codes that do not allow for hairstyles such as cornrows, which are more likely to be worn by a certain racial group. Another example is organisations that have introduced 'native English speaker' requirements, leading to the rejection of someone who is bilingual, despite speaking as a 'native' English person, because their ethnicity is perceived to suggest otherwise.

Racial harassment

Racial harassment, which can constitute direct or indirect racism, includes:

- unwelcome remarks, jokes, innuendos or taunting about someone's racial or ethnic background or origins, nationality or skin colour, language or accent
- displaying racist, derogatory or offensive pictures or material
- insulting gestures or practical jokes based on racial or ethnic grounds which cause embarrassment or awkwardness
- exclusion and creating an isolating environment, e.g. making people of particular ethnic or cultural backgrounds feel unwelcome, or holding social events in places some ethnic groups don't feel able to attend, despite knowing this.

Similar definitions are contained in the legislation of several of the countries in which we work. You can find examples, including of the distinctions, in a range of internal and external sources.

Progress towards our race equality targets

In the UK we have equality targets for senior staff representation that contribute to promoting equality, achieving inclusion and eliminating discrimination. The data that informs them helps identify barriers to progress.

In contrast to our gender targets, we have made limited progress towards our target to increase the proportion of UK-contracted minority ethnic senior managers. We have found progress towards them has been unravelled quite quickly given the small numbers. Progress towards our disability targets has also been limited. Wider ownership of and engagement and commitment to gender equality, compared to race and disability equality, accounts in part for this.

Our view on quotas

Targets and quotas are not the same. In some of the countries in which we work we are required to fulfil quotas – for example, to employ a certain percentage of nationals of the country or a certain percentage of disabled people – and we should make strenuous efforts to do so.

These countries include Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as part of their nationalisation programmes, and Germany, Thailand and others to support the inclusion of disabled people.

As an organisation we do not support so-called ‘informal quotas’. Nor we do support any practice that tries to fill jobs with a certain number of minority ethnic or disabled people, or women. We believe this to be unnecessary. The talent is out there and can be accessed with effort and intention. No majority ethnic group member, or indeed any person, should be denied a job because of their ethnicity.

It is worth emphasising here that wherever we have a presence, we should carry out equality monitoring of our own staff and identify any concerning trends that indicate under-representation exists. This practice is encouraged by our central mainstreaming tool the Diversity Assessment Framework (DAF). It should be informed by benchmarking with relevant local data.

Doing so will help us to comply with any legal quotas, support our own targets, raise awareness, and help us to understand and identify potential bias.

How we use positive action

Positive action in the area of equality and diversity is permitted under various pieces of legislation globally. It aims to help address evidence-based under-representation and achieve inclusion. It allows for actions related to training and encouragement to apply for jobs, but does not allow selection or promotion decisions based on race.

The British Council has used the following positive actions:

- media specifically targeted at minority ethnic groups
- targeted training for under-represented groups
- interview practice
- mentoring schemes
- welcome statements like these:
 - The British Council is committed to equality and keen to reflect the diversity of UK society at every level within the organisation. We welcome applications from all sections of the community.
 - The British Council is committed to equality and keen to reflect the diversity of UK society at every level within the organisation. Minority ethnic staff are under-represented in positions at this level in the organisation, therefore applications from minority ethnic people are particularly welcome. All applications will be assessed on merit.

3 Action and examples

Defence mechanisms

Acknowledging and examining our defence mechanisms can be an important part of taking action to improve our practice as they undermine progress and help maintain the status quo. Some defence mechanisms include the following.

- **Denial:** refusal to accept racism exists, especially its cultural and institutional forms, and viewing it primarily as the personal prejudice of a few extreme, irrational people.
- **Omission:** ignoring the racial dimension of social interactions; not seeing the relevance of ethnic difference in most situations and relating to others as if racism doesn't exist.
- **Decontextualisation:** accepting racism exists in general terms but 'out there' in, for example, apartheid South Africa; refusing to believe it permeates everyday activities undertaken.
- **Taking a colour-blind approach:** treating minority ethnic people as if they were the same as the majority group and holding this position to negate people's specific experiences of racism. Making statements such as: 'I don't see your colour, I only see you as a person; why are you bringing attention to colour?'
- **Dumping:** placing the responsibility for racism and addressing it on minority racial/ethnic groups. There are two elements to this:
 1. placing responsibility for racism on minority ethnic groups, e.g. highlighting that Africans were also involved in the slave trade, or indicating that racism has been blown out of proportion and highlighted unnecessarily
 2. expecting minority ethnic groups to come up with the 'solutions' for racism, e.g. when white people say they don't know how to change or 'just tell me what I need to do differently'.

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- **Patronising:** deeming the majority racial/ethnic group's ways superior while 'tolerating' the ways minority ethnic people do things – 'they are entitled to their quaint ways'. Feigning empathy and understanding while really believing those expressing concern about racism are 'being too sensitive'.
 - **Avoidance:** there is an awareness of race as a factor in social interaction but opportunities for confronting it are avoided. This usually means flinching at racist behaviour but keeping quiet about it. Or not challenging minority ethnic people or those from other races when they should clearly be challenged, e.g. about bad behaviour or poor performance.
 - **Retention of power:** a reluctance to act or speak in a way that might support a transfer of power to minority ethnic people.

In addition to defence mechanisms are the following comments, which will of course be manifested in behaviours. All of these have been expressed during the course of our work.

- 'Talking about these differences is unnecessary and creates unnecessary tensions.'
- 'Ethnic differences and tensions have devastated our country; we are trying to rebuild ourselves and we don't want to risk opening old wounds.'
- 'The indigenous people are the ones that talk so much about differences and try to gain special privileges. Things will change with time. It doesn't help to agitate and create upset.'

How to deal with defence mechanisms

To help address defence mechanisms:

- discuss them and any reasons for them in a constructive way; this can be supported by a video, example, trigger tape or by a facilitator sharing the defence mechanisms they recognise in themselves
- draw on or supplement with relevant data
- develop empathy by learning about and understanding the experiences of those who occupy a minority ethnic position within a given context; it may help to borrow someone from our living library

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- understand the concept of bystanding and being a bystander – the inhibitors to action
 - learn effective ways of highlighting things that are inappropriate and of challenging to support change and improvement.

Review the examples that follow, discuss them and potentially use them as learning aids. Send any more examples that might be helpful to the Diversity Unit.

Making and challenging assumptions

Example 1

‘A local TV station came to the UK Education Exhibition in China and asked whether I could help them to identify a few universities to do an interview. I readily agreed.

‘When I approached one of the universities to tell them about this, I saw two people standing at the booth, a Chinese-looking man and a white British person. Without thinking I asked the British person whether he would like to be interviewed and talk about his university. He said he would love to.

‘A few minutes later, the Chinese-looking man complained to my colleague, saying that he felt insulted because actually he was the official representative of the university, and he had employed the other person who had been teaching English locally to help him out at the booth.

‘I was very, very upset with myself when I learned about this. How could I make such a mistake, especially with what I thought was my awareness of equal opportunities and diversity?’

‘I went back to apologise to the university representative and fortunately the other person was not around at that time. In the end I arranged for him to be interviewed by the TV station and not the person I had originally asked.’

Example 2

‘I was organising a project visit for a small group of young Arab women who were visiting London. The aim was to portray young British Muslim women in their London environment; at some point they specifically mentioned women wearing hijab. I identified areas of London known for their Muslim population, mosques and traditions, falling back on common knowledge.

‘My first surprise was when I met the Arab women: make-up, trainers, jeans and t-shirts. I realised then that subconsciously I expected them to arrive in hijab and conservative clothing.

‘My second realisation was that they were not interested at all in the Pakistani or Bangladeshi communities I had identified. It was the London Arab community that they were interested in. The common denominator of religion proved presumptuous on my part and non-existent for them.

‘I shared my assumptions with some colleagues and was commended for my honesty.’

Challenging assumptions in the classroom

Here, British Council teaching centre colleagues share their experience of how assumptions and stereotypical views are made and expressed in the classroom.

Example 1

Student: Teacher, the UK is a dangerous place for Muslim people, isn't it?

Teacher: Why do you say that?

Student: They don't like Muslim people.

Teacher: I have lived in the UK all my life and I have never personally had any problems or felt that.

Student: So it is safe to visit?

Teacher: Yes, overall it is safe to visit and the people there generally welcome all nationalities.

(Teacher comment: I try my best to highlight to students and reassure them that they should not feel threatened or intimidated by what they read about or see.)

Example 2

'I took a group of representatives from 13 universities to visit a local university in South China. The president of the university suggested that we should take a group photo. Here is an extract of the conversation that followed:

President: Are there representatives from the British Council?

Me: Yes, I am from the British Council (somewhat surprised because he knew me and I had also introduced myself again a short time before).

President: Well, I mean, their official staff.

Me: I am their official staff. I am the deputy director.

President: Well, I mean British people.

Me: Chinese colleagues can equally represent the British Council.

'The president looked disappointed.'

Example 3

Student: Where are you from?

Teacher: I come from the UK, so I am British.

Student: Where are your parents from?

Teacher: They are from Egypt.

Student: So you are Egyptian?

Teacher: No, I'm British.

Student: You don't look British.

Teacher: In the UK we have many people whose parents or grandparents came/come from different countries like India, Pakistan, Africa and the Caribbean.

Student: But they are not really British.

Teacher: How about Will Smith and Beyoncé, what nationality are they?

Student: American.

Teacher: Thierry Henry?

Student: French.

Teacher: So, it is the same in the UK. People of different colours, religions, races, etc. can also be British.

Our credibility

During the induction phase of one of our programmes, a mixed ethnic group including African, African-Caribbean and South Asian people raised questions about the British Council's own Equality Policy and Diversity Strategy. These came up because of the issues of equality, diversity and difference under discussion.

They were preparing for the role of facilitators and felt concerned that this wasn't communicated to them. As a result they questioned the appropriateness of the British Council delivering a leadership programme with issues of diversity and inclusion at its heart. This questioning took up considerable time and created tensions.

In response a policy and strategy briefing was organised and the related opportunity for debate and discussion created. Feedback was positive. It highlighted that, had this taken place at the outset, it would have saved time and reduced tensions. In particular, participants felt reassured, by knowing about our EDI work and approach, that it was appropriate for us to be running a leadership programme with a commitment to inclusion and empowerment.

An exams enquiry

A British Council exams candidate walks into the office, has a quick look around and decides who she thinks is the person she needs to talk to about sitting for the exams.

The office manager walks towards her and asks whether she can be of assistance. Without acknowledging the presence of the office manager, who happens to be a black South African, the customer walks towards a staff member, who happens to be white, and proceeds with her enquiry.

After a brief exchange she is directed towards the office manager, who deals with the request in a professional way without acknowledging the 'little exchange' that has just taken place.

Once the customer leaves there is a discussion about what should be done if there is a repeat of this as no action was taken involving the customer.

Demonstrating awareness and sensitivity

A white British country director was developing the emergency procedures for the office. In consultation with the Diversity Unit, they made a checklist that included reference to any disturbances or threats that would place particular ethnic groups at especial risk.

Recognising and anticipating that civil and other disturbances may be rooted in ethnic differences within the African country demonstrated cultural relations awareness and support for EDI. It raised questions about other ways in which awareness could similarly be displayed.

Challenging stereotypes

Example 1

The line manager of a member of staff newly promoted to a senior position was concerned at an emerging view of the South Asian staff member as unassertive by their team. This new manager was from a minority ethnic group in the country. The perception was in part attributed to the dominant Western cultural view of what assertive behaviour is and that people of the ethnic background of the new manager were unassertive.

On the basis of a commitment to providing effective support, the line manager sought advice and guidance. As a result he felt better equipped to intervene and was open with his direct report. In addition he constructively and overtly challenged stereotypical innuendoes about the passivity of people from a particular ethnic group. He also dealt with comments about not being seen as a dynamic team, as well as speaking over the individual.

The outcomes included improved team working, a stop to the subtle displays of disrespect, and a more empowered and effective direct report.

Example 2

A group of colleagues expressed that it was impossible for a Roma person to secure a job in the respective British Council office. Their reasoning was that Roma people lacked the educational background necessary for the kind of employment available. There was also some inference that their temperament was unsuited to the work of the office.

A heated discussion ensued in which the general point of reduced educational opportunities for Roma people was acknowledged, while the assertion of ‘impossibility’ was challenged and the unsuited temperament inference was surfaced.

The conclusion was an acceptance that country-wide, negative stereotypes about Roma people were all-pervasive and needed to be challenged and monitored. Colleagues also decided to consider developing links with organisations working with Roma people to explore relevant opportunities for relationship building for mutual benefit.

Challenging racism

Example 1

A meeting took place in the UK in which a UK national uttered a racial slur which was deemed offensive in the UK and many countries. One of the senior managers present immediately responded: We ‘don’t use phrases like that, they are unacceptable and offensive.’

The response was timely, clear, assertive and constructive – it was short but to the point with no ambiguity. It was also followed up later.

Example 2

A staff member based in MENA, but not a national of the country, shares an experience encountered by her husband, demonstrating the different ways in which racism can be experienced:

‘There was an incident where my husband (from the Philippines) went to the aid of someone who had a heart attack in the street, supporting the man as he collapsed to the pavement and putting his rucksack containing his gym kit under the man’s head to cushion him from the pavement.

‘Another passer-by assumed my husband was robbing the ill man and shouted abuse. Fortunately, this was noticed by two police officers who had been attending another incident nearby and they gave the abusive person a warning. But it just goes to show what assumptions some people make because of racism and how far from the truth they can be.’

Example 3

A regional director acknowledged the existence of racism by sharing a recent experience of race discrimination in Austria in the context of opening remarks at an internal EDI workshop.

In addition to this, he managed an allegation of unlawful race discrimination effectively and was active in the resolution of the surrounding conflict. He played a particularly useful analytic and mediating role, providing candid, insightful, informed feedback, drawing on his knowledge of different cultures. He also engaged relevant parties to ensure resolution.

What he did not do was dismiss the allegation, fail to constructively manage it, or leave things unresolved.

Examples of unchallenged racism

Here are some examples from colleagues of racist comments made by contacts that were deemed to be accepted as they were not challenged.

- ‘As Europeans we have to recognise the challenge of dealing with them. They have yet to acquire our experience and so it is much more frustrating working with them.’

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- ‘The continent (Africa) is backward and its problems are of its own making.’
 - ‘You must be finding it difficult. Things just don’t work as they should, I realise this. It is partly to do with our people’s attitudes to work but also the fact we (in the Middle East) are so dependent on these workers from elsewhere.’
 - ‘It is frustrating for me and my family especially living and working here, and it must be for you too.’
 - ‘I want to speak with one of the UK staff. My problems are not going to be effectively dealt with by your local staff.’

Addressing under-representation

Racisms and the economic disadvantage that is so frequently a part of this were said to be the main reason behind the absence of staff from a significant Diaspora population in Brazil. We have a number of offices in the country, and several divisions, including economic, along racial lines.

It would perhaps be easy to adopt the position that this absence of reflective diversity is beyond the offices’ control as the suitably experienced and qualified candidates from the Diaspora group in question just aren’t there due to the way racisms are institutionalised within wider society. This issue is often aired in relation to disabled people, for example. However, this position was not adopted.

Recognising the workplace as a microcosm of society with responsibilities to contribute to change, one office adopted a modest initiative of work experience for members of the under-represented group. This was led by the country and deputy director and supported by all staff.

The initiative provided relevant learning opportunities that, it was hoped, would ultimately translate into a job, possibly but not necessarily in the British Council. In the process staff had the opportunity to work alongside members of wider society.

There was also support for continued attention to the marginalisation, unemployment and under-representation of a large section of society. This will, of course, require concerted effort and a strengthening of relationships with institutions that can help.

Tips for leaders and managers

Because of their positional power and influence, leaders and managers have a particularly valuable role to play in promoting and encouraging anti-racist practice and achieving race equality. To this end all British Council leaders could:

- reflect on their attitudes, assumptions and general leadership style, and consider how consistent these are with *promoting* race equality and anti-racism within their areas of responsibility
- encourage peers to do likewise
- encourage open and constructive discussions on race, related power dynamics and the relationship to work areas
- be proactive in discussing race equality and anti-racism and any impact on work
- show people are valued for their contribution and achievements irrespective of race, avoid micro-behaviours⁷ that undermine this, and make judgements based upon evidence rather than stereotypical assumptions, including race-based ones
- use the available equality monitoring data to explore how to address any under-representation of particular ethnic groups, consider exploring positive action, and in the absence of data commit to collecting it
- ensure that the HR guidelines for competency-based recruitment and selection are properly followed
- strive for ethnically diverse recruitment panels and a merit-based approach to appointments and training opportunities

7. Micro-behaviours/inequities/aggressions are small, subtle differences in treatment that communicate over time that someone has less value. They include mispronouncing someone's name, confusing them with someone of a similar ethnicity, passing over their ideas in a meeting, interrupting them mid-sentence and not making eye contact. For more on micro-inequities, see Mary Rowe (1990) [*Barriers to Equality*](#).

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- identify strategies to reduce unconscious bias, including affinity bias
 - attend general and race-specific EDI-themed training to keep informed of related issues and wider debates
 - consider the relevance of appropriate ethnic monitoring systems to evaluate the take-up and involvement of, and respective outcomes for, different ethnic groups in relation to services and/or facilities provided by the British Council and within your locus of control
 - engage with British Council groups and forums promoting race equality
 - deal with allegations of racism in a timely, fair, transparent, non-defensive way
 - equality-screen and impact-assess all policies with high relevance to equality, giving due regard to opportunities to promote race equality and good relations between different racial groups and mitigate unjustified race discrimination. This includes equity between locally and UK-contracted staff
 - avoid reinforcing divisions between UK and locally contracted staff and comparing different national groups and staff groups in different regions
 - avoid positioning locally contracted country directors, who may be nationals of the country, as having less value and status than UK-contracted ones.

Tips for all colleagues

Although many of us, including leaders and managers, like to think of ourselves as fair, tests of unconscious bias show different results.

We may not be aware of our own unconscious biases which drive our behaviour, influence our decisions and affect our interactions with other people.

We therefore need to recognise and accept that we are all indeed biased, remain alert to our individual biases, avoid 'othering', and create climates that enable constructive discussion and challenge.

- [Try the Implicit Association Test](#). The test explores unconscious bias, including race bias. Discuss your results in a constructive environment.

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- Understand why and how race equality is an issue locally and in the UK.
 - Consider race and other areas of equality at the planning stage of a variety of work and use the appropriate tools to monitor this.
 - Make an effort to pronounce unfamiliar names properly and do not resort to shortening or changing them.
 - Avoid the insulting phrase 'playing the race card' as a means of denying the perception or experience of racism, sometimes called 'gaslighting'.
 - Contribute to a working culture where issues of race/ethnicity/culture and the often-sensitive topic of immigration are constructively discussed and debated.
 - Become an ally who supports anti-racism.
 - Seek out reverse mentoring if you are a senior manager with knowledge and skills gaps in the area of race equality.
 - When procuring goods and services, tender in a way that reaches diverse ethnic groups, particularly those under-represented as contractors or consultants.

Review the contact database and key relationships to ensure racial/ethnic/cultural diversity is represented. Take action if not – in the first instance, this could be a discussion of the facts and factors behind these.

- Develop conflict management and resolution skills involving race/ethnic/cultural difference and allegations of racism. This will involve recognising a reported racist incident as valid if perceived as such by the reporting party. It will involve attention to evidence as well as feelings and perceptions going forward.
- Attend to the customer journey of different ethnic groups, including the evacuation procedures for different ethnic groups in areas of civil disturbances and conflict.
- Read the Equality Policy. Note what it says with specific reference to race, consider the implications at a personal and professional level, and make active use of it. You could do this by:



- bringing it to the attention of people newly recruited as temporary or permanent staff, consultants and examiners in the context of an induction to our work
 - integrating/drawing on it in the context of English language teaching
 - including the policy, in whole or part, in relevant documents and shared electronic spaces.
- Use sources of support as necessary, e.g. the Diversity Unit, members of the British Council Living Library, our Race Champion, Race and Culture Working Group members, our regional diversity leads and accredited EDI facilitators.

Colleagues could also try to address any under-representation of racial and minority ethnic groups to ensure reflective diversity in all areas of our work. Use positive action measures to do this, if helpful.

This could include measures to empower marginalised and overlooked racial and minority ethnic groups to network with business leaders and decision makers from their own regional or national governments. This would help to ensure that the groups themselves have the opportunity to influence and be a catalyst for change in their own societies.

This can be achieved by inviting them to participate in local programmes and initiatives, and to attend relevant events and receptions we hold. It may help to develop leadership skills within the respective communities, modestly contribute to reversing the effects of past racial discrimination or disadvantage, and open up the local political process.

Advice on communications

The broad area of communication plays an important role in all aspects of our work and also in transmitting or challenging cultural norms and stereotypes.

Here are some tips for ensuring our communications promote and encourage anti-racist practices.

- Present the British Council, and in particular the UK, as a diverse and welcoming place to everyone, irrespective of race, while acknowledging as necessary the reality of racism within UK society.

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- Ensure that the respective promotional materials reflect the multi-ethnic and cultural make-up of the UK.
 - Ensure that marketing efforts are welcoming and encouraging to all ethnic and cultural groups in the countries where we operate.
 - Ensure that diversity and race equality as subject matters are properly reflected in teaching materials, and are discussed openly and sensitively in the classrooms and teaching centres.
 - Contribute locally sourced, ethnically diverse images to the corporate image bank.
 - Use appropriate language. We do not offer a glossary but instead provide links⁸ to some here. They are not exhaustive or definitive but may be useful. We highlight that:
 - language is complex and fluid; it has a history that may mean some terms are more problematic or sensitive than others
 - terms inevitably change from time to time, and what was acceptable at one point can become less so
 - some terms can have a slightly, or completely, different interpretation in different countries or cultural contexts, while others can be well understood in one environment but not transfer at all to another
 - all of these factors pose challenges for us and mean we should check local or regional differences in the understanding and meaning of terms.

Perhaps an important point to always bear in mind, beyond the specific terms themselves, is that of conveying respect for others. People will not usually take offence if they realise you are attempting to be respectful. Both the intention and the tone behind what is said or written, or body language that is observed, can cause as much offence as the actual words or terms used.

8. These language guides might be useful: [*Diversity in diction*](#), [*The language of equality*](#) and [*NATFHE guide to equality language*](#).

Crucially, if you have been told that you are using an unacceptable term, act on that feedback immediately. Don't ignore it, unless you have provided an explanation for continuing to use the term.

Good practice communication:

- uses clear, accessible, inclusive, anti-racist language and avoids inappropriate pairing of text and images which can reinforce stereotypes
- responds to the fact that minority ethnic groups can benefit from communication approaches and content relevant to them
- avoids any tendency to be over-reliant on images of perceived 'ideal looks' held within the majority population which will generally only represent the ethnic majority
- translates documents into other languages to increase access based on a sound business case and commitment to inclusion
- incorporates relevant race equality and anti-racism statements and issues into the body of reports to help demonstrate awareness and convey due regard
- acknowledges the potential of digital communication and social media to spread racist and stereotypical information and puts plans in place to mitigate this
- recognises that humour does not always transfer effectively across cultures and humour which tackles taboos, ridicules and disparages, frequently on grounds of race, ethnicity or culture, can offend
- does not ridicule accents or different, culturally rooted communication approaches.

Words are
beautiful.

Actions
are supreme.

4 Summary and conclusions

Race equality and a commitment to anti-racism are part of, and important to, effective cultural relations, as well as the inclusion, positive social change, and friendly knowledge and understanding that we try to achieve through it.

At the British Council we, like others, hold that the real significance of 'race' is as a social construct. It is a way in which societies choose to categorise people on the basis of assumed biological differences and evident both within and between racial and ethnic groups.

We recognise that racism is expressed in different ways, including at the individual, personal level and at the structural and institutional, too. We, like other organisations, are vulnerable to these.

This is particularly true because of our global footprint. It is also the case because we have contracts and roles whose eligibility is, in part or wholly, determined by nationality, and ethnic and national origins. This is a complex and sensitive area but one, especially given our commitment to integrity, that we should acknowledge.

Our approach to anti-racism and race equality

It is not surprising that we have all been infected by racist beliefs and practices given how socialisation works. Even with good intentions, racist thoughts and actions filter through unless we actively try to eliminate them. An anti-racist approach helps us to pre-empt marginalisation, exclusion and unfairness. It also helps us to deliver services and work in ways that are constructive for all people, irrespective of their ethnic background.

Racism is life threatening and life limiting. It can involve various cruel, unkind, violent and unlawful acts that affect many areas of life. It runs counter to human rights principles and practices.

Race, as we said, includes ethnicity, ethnic and national origins, nationality and skin colour, and associated areas like language and accent. It is one of our main areas of equality focus and we proactively work to support and achieve race equality. This is consistent with our Equality Policy, Diversity Strategy and cultural relations work.

We have a strong business case for supporting race equality, recognising the richness that we experience because we can learn from colleagues from so many different backgrounds and contexts.

The moral/ethical strand acts as an important imperative to challenge and eradicate racism whether overt or covert, recognising the harm that can be caused and the benefits of doing so.

The legal strand acts as a useful lever for improvement and the often 'necessary stick' with the potential to temper the worst excesses of organisations and individuals. To be really effective it requires strong enforcement mechanisms that are often not in place. This, in itself, can be evidence of institutionalised racism.

Racism can manifest itself at every job level and occupation and is not the standard of behaviour that is acceptable in the British Council. Regardless of role or location we all share responsibility for taking action. Fulfilling these responsibilities helps achieve a consistently felt sense and experience that our organisation truly engages with, values and promotes diversity, including racial diversity and race equality.

Why we don't advocate a zero-tolerance approach

Issues of race affect our organisational life in many different ways. We can and do frequently respond effectively, but there is room for improvement.

Accountability is an important part of ensuring improvement. However, the Diversity Unit does not advocate a zero-tolerance approach to racist or other discriminatory or unacceptable behaviour, especially for a hugely geographically, culturally and linguistically diverse organisation like ours.

A zero-tolerance approach is often associated with meting out the most severe punishment possible for any breach, or a punishment for every wrongdoing. It does not allow those in positions of authority to exercise discretion or change penalties to fit circumstances subjectively.

Rather, it applies a pre-determined punishment that does not take account of individual culpability or response, including the 'victim's' response, or extenuating circumstances, context or history. It is a blunt instrument for a complex area and hugely diverse relationships, power dynamics and contexts.

As a response to racist acts we do not believe it is an effective tool based on experience and available data that acts as a deterrent and achieves a reduction in such acts.

This does not mean accountability should be watered down. It should not and must not. Racism has no place in our cultural relations organisation and our commitment to anti-racism must be made clear to all who work with and for us and use our services.

Using media and social media

For many populations the media is a key source of information about events, topics and social norms, and offers powerful interpretations. All too often it represents minority ethnic groups in a consistently negative light and as a persistent threat.

Our media and social media footprint is growing. This area generally has the ability to negatively or positively affect minority ethnic populations, as does our own footprint. We need to carefully consider what is conveyed about different parts of the world and different populations and ethnic groups.

About this guide

We have provided examples which demonstrate some of the race issues we confront and, in instances, how we have responded. They are intended to encourage discussion and learning. We have not provided stock responses as there are significant constraints to this, but we have set out things we could all be doing to support race equality. We have provided insights and information and asserted the relevance of race equality to cultural relations.

The aim is to encourage and steer our organisation towards the ideal of a more just and inclusive, meritocratic one where human rights can flourish for all ethnic groups and our cultural relations contribution and delivery is appropriate and meaningful.

Finally, we will be exploring the addition of FAQs. Contributions to this will be welcome, as will contributions of examples deemed to be especially helpful in terms of learning and unlearning. Please send any to jane.franklin@britishcouncil.org in the Diversity Unit.

Appendix: Useful links and resources

For more information and advice on the British Council's policy and work on race equality and diversity contact:

The Diversity Unit

British Council, 1 Redman Place

Stratford, London E20 1JQ

+44 (0)207 389 4187

Visit the Diversity Unit website at www.britishcouncil.org/about-us/our-values/equality-diversity-inclusion

Our intranet site, which includes a section focused on race, is available at britishcouncil.sharepoint.com/Site/Diversity/Pages/Race.aspx

UK links

Equality and Human Rights Commission: www.equalityhumanrights.com/en

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland – Race Equality Division: www.equalityni.org

Institute of Race Relations: www.irr.org.uk

Runnymede Trust: www.runnymedetrust.org

International links

European Network Against Racism: www.enar-eu.org

Minority Rights Group International: minorityrights.org

SALTO Cultural Diversity Resource Centre: www.salto-youth.net/rc/cultural-diversity/resources/

Solidar: www.solidar.org

United Against Racism: www.unitedagainstracism.org

UN Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities: www.osce.org/hcnm