

The elephant in the room

The vast vocabulary relating to race and diversity must not obscure the need to tackle racism and discrimination head on, says **Neville Adams**.

Surveying the current circuitous linguistic map of race equality in the drugs' sphere and wider public sectors, one can't help wondering, as in the myth of Babel, whether or not those who originally dared to use the terms 'race', 'racism' and 'race equality' – in trying to make accountable powerful, but unjust, societal forces – were punished by the powers that be for erecting so direct a tower, that they were thereafter forced to speak many languages.

Language is important because it can define who can speak, what can be said, and, more importantly, what cannot be put on the agenda. It is thus both enabling and disabling. It can help identify, or misdiagnose the problem; recognise the solution; or signpost a cul-de-sac.

Take the term 'race' for example, which is a linchpin term in the anti-discriminatory legislation both in the UK and Europe. It is used in those instruments not in the sense that there are biologically different human races, but as a 'social construct'. This simply means that certain biological differences like skin colour, or ascribed biological differences like 'intelligence' – a contentious social creation in itself – have been used, historically and currently, as the bases for unjust social discrimination against those with these features or ascribed characteristics. 'Racism', the force that drives this form of discrimination, is the one that needs to be tackled.

Yet today, the clarity of that position is obscured by a multiplicity of terminological and conceptual obfuscations. 'Race' has been displaced by equal opportunities, ethnicity, diversity, cultural competence, social cohesion and a host of other sub-terms, like 'minority ethnic' all of them jostling and competing with, or misdirecting the best means to do away with 'race' as a destructive force. It brings to mind Malcolm X's observation that, 'Racism is like a Cadillac. Every year they bring out a new model.'

It is little wonder then, that within the public sector there is a feeling that equality is 'fad' driven – an impression that compounds the tendency for race equality to be marginalised. But there is more to the changing terminology that just conceptual fashion statements, because they reflect the small 'p' political battles over the direction of race equality in the public sector over the past 25 years.

One of the basic principles of democratic life is that all who are directly affected should be involved in the diagnosis of problems and formulation of solutions. As a general rule of thumb, there are two

main tranches of race equality action which can be identified over the past few decades: those that can be seen to have flowed from the demands of the various minority, particularly visible minority communities, and have involved them; and those that have been initiated and originated within institutions, be they public or private. One can discern as well, two main impetuses to these, with the former being concerned broadly with what can be described as emancipation – a 'freedom from' outlook – and the latter with a proclivity for the management of 'race' – a 'control over' approach.

Exemplifying this last perspective is the case of 'diversity', which emerged in the early nineties in the UK at about the same time that national and local government, involving both major political parties, were for differing reasons distancing themselves from eighties equality initiatives. The lukewarm political support for race equality in the public sector at that time catalysed the emergence of organisational approaches to equality, which were deemed to be less threatening and more amenable to overall institutional aims.

Organisational 'diversity', an American import, was a key one. In the States, 'diversity' originated as a less threatening approach in the private sector from the wreckage of the Reaganite turn away from the civil rights era equality framework. It was white corporate America's revenge on affirmative action. Its importation into the public realm in the UK was facilitated through the grateful conduit of organisations like the Institute of Personnel Development, which sought to justify the cheerleading of diversity through the disingenuous caricaturing of eighties initiatives as being concerned almost solely with positive action, being for only Black people, and too conflictual. One thing is certain: in both the States and the UK, 'diversity' as a means to tackle racial inequality did not come from the demands of the various visible minority communities.

The sheer indeterminate nature of what exactly it stands for, other than 'we-are-all-individual-and-different' allows for a plethora of interpretations, and thus a view by those working in the equalities' field and by visible minority communities that it legitimates talking about exclusion and inclusion without having to do anything about it. Diversity comes to be, among other incarnations, about acknowledging differences; recognising other areas of concern not as inequalities, but as differences such as religion; a substitute title for what had been previously acknowledged as equalities work;

an assertion of a 'whole organisation' approach; and, pertinently, a more 'business friendly' perspective. But its claim to be a new way of approaching the issue of race inequality really turns on the assertion that it values and celebrates differences, usually by fallacious reference to the multi-variegation found in nature.

However, these differences – of culture, identity claims, gender, sexuality etc – are social, not natural; they are constructions. Further, not all differences can or should be acknowledged, especially those that are forged out of the denial, exclusion or oppression of others. Once one starts recognising that, we are again in the territory of collective wrongs and the solutions to these – the very approach diversity wishes to distance itself from.

It took the unfortunate racist murder of a Black teenager and the subsequent movement and campaign for justice – a campaign originating in, and led by the Black community – to refocus equalities' work on the prime concerns of race, race equality and racism. The main impetus for the Macpherson Report, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, 2000 (RRAA 2000) and the current race equality framework for the public sector, can be traced back to that tragedy. Unfortunately institutional ways to control these changes, rather than embrace them, still emerge. Brief mention needs to be made of one of these, because it exemplifies the way in which race can be submerged by the layers of competing agendas.

Cultural competence, another American import, seems to have been uncritically adopted in certain parts of the UK public sector, particularly in the health and allied sectors, and, unfortunately, is quite prominent in the drugs' sector. The approach seems to have taken its operational and intellectual cue from the saying – the origin of which is attributed to native Americans – to the effect that one cannot judge people until one has walked a mile in whatever footwear is folkishly suitable. In other words, for services to be appropriate they have to be competent culturally for however many supposedly culturally distinct communities there are.

This of course is a nonsense; one can no more be 'competent' in other cultures than one can be in one's own imagined cultures. An approach like this assumes that cultures consist of an unchanging reservoir of attributes, which can be unproblematically banked in other people's consciousness. They do not. They are, instead, dynamic, fluid, contingent and ever changing.



Imagine the problems associated with trying to conjure up a transmittable core of what constitutes English culture. Who to leave out? What to include? This approach is an invitation to supercharge the rewind to the bad old days of 'rice and peas and samoosas' style multi-culturalism. Rather than address the real issue, it is more likely to license those who feel they should be the guardians of, and gatekeepers to, what they deem to be culturally appropriate.

Moreover, in reality, cultural competence is marked by its distinct lack of intellectual justification, other than a very conservative notion of culture, and its willingness to re-label as its own, anti-racist based race equality work that has long been in the public domain. There is no evidence to support any claims for the better efficacy and effectiveness of cultural competence as an answer to the problem of race inequality in public sector services, and drug services in particular – even if the use of the term 'competence' permits a certain degree of superficial interlocking with certain managerial techniques now common in the public sector.

One of the key reasons for the failure of public institutions – including, according to the Commission for Racial Equality's final report, key government departments – to implement properly their respon-

sibilities under the RRAA 2000, apart from the usual 'lack-of-political-will' culprit, stems from the conceptual and attendant policy confusion surrounding the way in which racism and its remedial end goal, race equality, are mangled through the obscurities of approaches like diversity and cultural competence. The government is being misadvised.

On the other hand, we who are committed to an anti-racist and race equality approach must re-affirm and re-assert the primacy of this framework for the public and other sectors – not, therefore, because we wish to be, and be seen as, culturally or individually different, but because tackling race and racism, as social constructions, points the way to addressing other inequalities.

We assert this then because the task enjoined on us by the legacy of racism is that not only do we not want to see visible minorities treated in this way. We do not want to see anyone else, particularly those experiencing the unjust forces of social discrimination – women, disabled, gay men, lesbians, Muslims, Jewish people, working classes – treated in that way either.

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