

## Working Towards Racial Equity by Charmian Dawson

When I first heard about UCL's BAME Awarding Gap Project, I was surprised. It had never occurred to me that such a thing could exist, and I was at a loss to understand why it did. I applied to represent our Faculty because I care passionately about education, and I believe in UCL's commitment to fairness and excellence. However, I had a steep learning curve ahead of me; I had never really heard about racial disparities, and I knew little about race and racism other than what I had personally observed.

My first thought was, 'perhaps there's some kind of assessment that BAME students need more help with' – I was soon to learn that when trying to come up with solutions to complex cultural problems, one's first instincts, arising from the values of that same culture, rarely challenge or alter the status quo.

Since that time, I have been studying how prejudices manifest and reproduce themselves, the effects they have on the people who hold them as well those against whom prejudices are held, and the research on how to counteract prejudices and the discrimination that may result from them. Below is a rough summary of my findings.

### Useful concepts to understand:

- Systemic/structural racism as opposed to prejudice and bias.
- Whiteness (<http://www.aclrc.com/whiteness>)
- Indirect discrimination
- Inclusivity, as opposed to diversity

(There is research on 'diversity initiatives' and the effects they actually have, the multiple reasons why they can have 'ironic effects' (opposite to those intended), this is based on that research.)

- 1) Why are we working for racial equity? For them or for us?
  - a. 'For them'-type motivations: To be more fair, to help them, to decrease disparities. These motivations are well-intentioned. They lend themselves to 'deficit model' thinking, i.e. "disparities occur because those people are lacking [skills/cultural values/confidence/knowledge of the system/etc]", and the solution is to 'help' them by giving them extra classes, mentoring them, being super-encouraging, etc. These types of strategies tend to backfire, causing resentment in the dominant group, and communicating very effectively to everyone that the target group is deficient, which isn't surprising, because these strategies come from a position of imagined superiority. These strategies do not involve any self-examination or structural change, but are attempts to change 'them' to be more like 'us'.
  - b. 'For us'-type motivations: To increase our range of perspectives, to increase our talent pool, to improve our team-work outcomes, to improve the quality and resilience of our institutions. These motivations may sound self-serving, but they come from a place of respect, and recognition that the excluded group has value, that we are missing out through their absence. This approach lends itself more to structural change strategies, because we try to recruit and retain people with all their differences intact. We find more ways of doing things, interrogate our concepts of quality, etc, because we genuinely appreciate the value of diversity to our organisations. For this reason I would recommend reading up on how diversity impacts team-work, research and cognitive skills, and considering how this could

benefit our staff and students. This is a good introduction to the topic: 'How diversity works', Phillips, 2014, Scientific American.

- 2) What is the other side of that coin? We need to question our initial responses, and try to look at them from different angles, e.g.
  - a. Part of being socialised into a racial world view is to see racism as something that affects BAME people, not something that affects *all* people. For example, we often talk about the effect on BAME students of not being exposed to BAME scientists/lecturers. We could also ask, what is the effect on white students of not being exposed to BAME scientists/lecturers? How will this affect their relationships with their BAME peers? What PhD supervisors will they choose, who will they collaborate with? What PhD students will they recruit, and how will they treat them? An unspoken assumption that BAME representation in the staff specifically benefits BAME students, rather than all students, is not grounded in an understanding of the benefits of BAME inclusion, or inclusion more generally.
  - b. There are some qualities that disadvantaged groups are often described as lacking, in order to explain disparities, such as confidence, competitiveness, or 'cultural capital'.
    - i. Is that quality purely positive? Might the organisation actually benefit from a more balanced profile of characteristics? Competitiveness **and** cooperativeness, people who are familiar with established working styles **and** people who may approach things in a unique way? Inclusiveness is about valuing differences, not removing them.
    - ii. Is that quality inherently lacking from the group? Assertiveness, for example, is typically considered a positive characteristic in this culture. However, in a context where many people have implicit biases about who has the right to be assertive, and who should be submissive, or grateful they have been included, assertive behaviour can be punished through multiple informal mechanisms. The system needs to be interrogated to see if/how it contributes to the absence of this positive quality in the disadvantaged group.
    - iii. Is the absence of that quality the **real** barrier to success? Or have we built our systems around a quality that a biased society imparts more to some groups than others? Society persistently communicates to the dominant groups a sense of belonging and entitlement in almost every field. Institutions often use the confidence this provides as a proxy for competence (ample research shows that this is a false equivalence), and then rewards that confidence with increased recruitment, prominence, opportunities, advancement, and so on. A culture change would be needed to recognise that these characteristics are not accurate predictors of potential. Sometimes, the very definitions of positive characteristics are centred around white/western norms (or in the case of sexism, masculine norms), such as what it means to look 'professional', these definitions need to be challenged.

In summary, differences between BAME and White staff/students are not always negative in the obvious sense, but may simply have negative effects in the context of our institutional norms, and could even become positives in a more inclusive environment.

### 3) Solutions

- a. Solutions that target specific groups can work if there is a broad understanding that the disparity being addressed is not caused by individual failings. For example, toilets that accommodate wheelchair users don't tend to provoke much resentment. When the cause of the disparity is believed to be due to personal deficiencies, initiatives explicitly targeted at particular groups can cause resentment in the dominant group (which can cause other types of discrimination, hostile work environment, etc), and the target group to feel pitied/patronized, which will have a negative effect on them as well (could be performance outcomes, or well-being). There are two main options for dealing with these situations:
  - i. Offer the solution to a wider group, everyone, or a group with a less stigmatized descriptor, such as first-generation university students/widening participation students. This is a capitulation to the dominant group, but can also have collateral benefits for other disadvantaged groups.
  - ii. Build awareness of the real issues causing that particular disparity, in order to avoid negative effects. This information could be targeted at the specific group, or just generally disseminated. This is more of a long-term activity, but worth working on.
- b. Evidence-based solutions should be the first port of call, but may be adjusted to meet the particular needs of the situation. This will be more effective if there is a good understanding of how the solution works. A flawed or surface understanding of racism etc typically leads to counter-productive 'solutions', and poor/ineffective implementation of strategies that have worked for other institutions.
- c. 'Adding colour' – increasing BAME representation is important, but does not lead to the desired outcomes on its own. In non-inclusive environments, research shows two main types of coping mechanisms.
  - i. Increased self-group identification. This is a more positive response in terms of the mental wellbeing of the individual, though it is counter-productive for career progression etc. (Sadly, 'fitting in' is the best way to get along and get ahead, but it comes at a cost to the individual. Then again, so does 'sticking out'.)
  - ii. Rejection of self-group. This is common in more hostile environments (such as being part of a very small minority), and can take a range of forms, from merely adopting majority behaviours (clothing, food, music, accent etc) to open hostility to the self-group or their stereotyped characteristics. A person experiencing this is going to be of no help on interview panels, for example. Even in more inclusive environments, it can be very uncomfortable for a minority member to advocate for another member of their own group, for fear of appearing partial.

There are also a few more reasons why increasing representation is not an end point in itself.

- iii. In a culture where white authority is the norm, it can be very difficult for BAME staff/students to speak out with dissenting views. The other side of that coin is that white staff/students with implicit biases may also react badly to their views being challenged by BAME staff/students.
- iv. BAME people are not necessarily experts on the huge range of opinions, experiences and preferences of other BAME individuals. Unless they have been conducting research, or are a designated contact for BAME

staff/students, they will be representing a limited range of experiences – though this will likely still add to the collective experiences of a majority-white team.

- v. Increased BAME representation can act as a rubber stamp (within and without the group) signifying that any racial disparities are justified, and lead to complacency.
  - vi. The disproportionate burden placed on BAME staff/students to educate others about racism, etc, takes away time from their career development/studies, with work that does not accord the same respect and is not adequately compensated. This can actually increase the disparities that are being addressed (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01920-6>).
- d. Some problems seem like they only affect a small number of individuals. BAME is an umbrella term, so there may be many such problems. One aspect of an inclusive environment, is that those tiny numbers of people are important too. Making sure their needs are met while their numbers are small, means we are more likely to retain them, and others when they get here. Ad hoc measures after someone arrives are stressful for the person and not particularly effective. A good question to ask is, “How would we handle this if *all* our students/staff had this issue?”
- e. Effective solutions I have come across typically involve disrupting hierarchical structures, and empowering people. In undergraduate education, examples are moving away from the standard lecture format and including more groupwork, peer assessment, problem-solving, etc.
- 4) Common problems. There are some reports on why attempts to address disparities have failed...
- a. Never-ending requests for more data, especially where the data is wanted to allow denial of the problem, or to satisfy curiosity rather than inform actions.
  - b. Lack of resources – staff/students being asked to add extra work on top of their current duties without being given the necessary time, or even any real recognition.
  - c. BAME staff being expected to take on the majority of the work. This type of work could involve more emotional labour for BAME staff because it brings up their own experiences. It also attracts more stigma for BAME people than White people, as they are seen as being biased. Overall, expecting BAME people to take on the majority of this work is unsustainable, and less effective, though it obviously benefits from their involvement (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/mar/14/cambridge-may-drop-bame-mentoring-of-white-academics>).
  - d. A superficial understanding of racism (such as, ‘people being mean to people of other races’, or ‘people mentioning race’) preventing engagement with the need for structural changes.
  - e. A lack of accountability – people who aren’t really invested (or who are under other serious pressures) typically don’t engage unless there are consequences or meaningful incentives.

In summary:

- 1) Research on how improving diversity benefits us and our institution will affect how we approach this issue, and improve the effectiveness of our actions.

- 2) We need to interrogate our assumptions about what the problems are, and what causes them; likewise for our proposed solutions. Our first instincts are likely to be problematic ones...
- 3) Solutions need to be designed and monitored to avoid unintended negative consequences, which are a fairly common occurrence. The term BAME covers a lot of different groups, but paying attention to small groups is a necessary first step to increasing their numbers.
- 4) Some common pitfalls that can prevent success were listed.

The most important thing that has come out of the research is that the effects of racism seep into everything; racial disparities and racialised outcomes are everywhere we look. The most benign form of institutional racism is the belief that the institution (or any part of it) is free from racism; the lack of oversight, and the denials that result from this (often cherished) belief are extremely harmful.

For any questions on topics not adequately explained, feel free to contact [c.dawson@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:c.dawson@ucl.ac.uk)

Thanks for your time.