Reframing Racism

Explaining ethnic inequalities in the UK labour market

Race and racism are difficult to talk about. Those working to combat racism are struggling to shift the belief that it is an issue of the past. This presents a major challenge to practitioners trying to build support for policy change. This briefing compares JRF analysis on ethnicity, inequality and poverty to how the public understand it. It looks at how unions can use values and current ways of thinking on race to better bridge the gap between expert analysis and conventional wisdom.

Key Points

- Despite making great strides in education, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) workers are not protected from low pay. They are more likely to be overqualified for their role and to live in poverty than White British workers.

- Racism and its consequences are not well understood by the UK public. There is widespread belief that racism is now a minor issue that has mostly been resolved. The race story – how we became a multicultural society – is not widely known. Equally, a set of shared values and ways of thinking shape how the public interpret the causes of inequality and poverty.

- This gap in public understanding is a barrier to communicating expert evidence on the causes of racial inequalities in the labour market. Beyond defining the problem, practitioners have to convince a sceptical public that the issue exists.

- There are values and points of view that can help expert opinion on race resonate with the UK public. By understanding how the public thinks, we can make the urgency of ethnic inequalities in the job market clear and build support for measures to solve it. Stories can be a powerful tool to bridge the gap – particularly the 'shared past/shared future' narrative.

Introduction

This joint TUC-Runnymede Trust briefing suggests how unions can better explain or talk about racial inequalities in the labour market. Informed by recent evidence from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), this guide aims to support them with their messaging and storytelling.

The TUC and Runnymede Trust believe that the narrative on race equality is not only inadequate. It also makes it difficult to address or design solutions in response to widespread discrimination in Britain. Labour market indicators for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) workers show that they face systemic discrimination. Great strides have been made for BME pupils in schools. Attainment gaps are shrinking, although there is still work to be done. However, this progress has not been matched in terms of labour market outcomes. Despite various policy initiatives by governments over the years, bias and discrimination affect people at work from recruitment to progression: at the CV stage, during interview and once in the role.[i]

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) research on ethnicity and poverty makes a valuable contribution to the evidence of structural discrimination in the labour market. This evidence is a powerful tool in convincing wider society and policymakers to respond more directly to racial inequalities. But this evidence will not convince everyone by itself. Some will see inequalities but no injustice. We need a better way of explaining or narrating the evidence on racial inequalities in the labour market, and better stories on race in Britain more generally.

Reframing Racism

What the evidence says about ethnicity, wages and poverty

Research by JRF shows us that:

- Improved outcomes in education are not translating into greater success in the labour market.

- All ethnic minority graduates are more likely to be overqualified for their job role.

- Education does not protect ethnic minorities from low pay.

- Racism and discrimination contributes to this inequality.

BME workers are concentrated in low paid work

BME workers are concentrated in low-skilled sectors associated with low pay and more likely to be in insecure work than white workers. Ethnic minority groups are trapped in low-paid work, have lower-status jobs within high-paying occupations and struggle to access jobs that pay well.
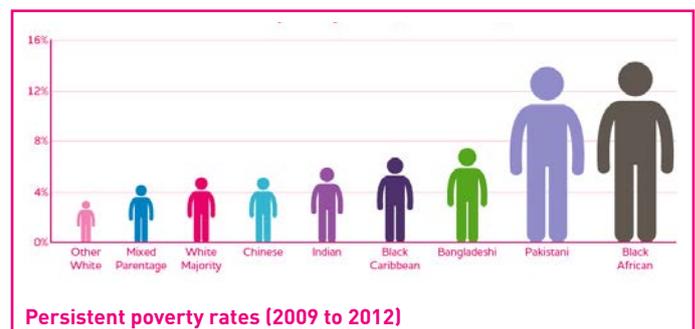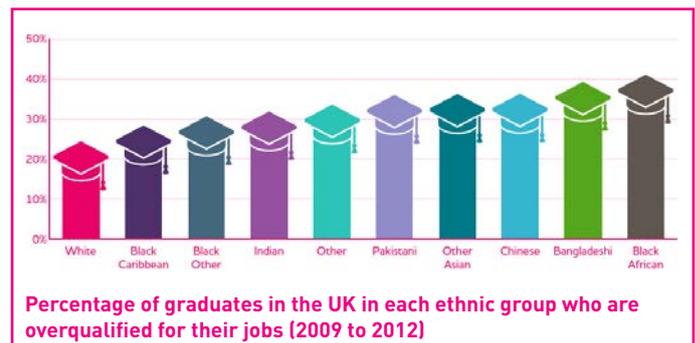
BME workers are paid less

Most ethnic minority groups are in a double bind: in the lowest paying work and more likely to be poorly paid. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that ethnic minority groups are more likely than white workers to be concentrated in low-pay sectors in the first place. Pakistanis and even more so Bangladeshis are hit the hardest, with 38.3 per cent for the former and 51.9 per cent for the latter paid below the living wage between 1993 and 2012. This means that over half of Bangladeshi workers over this long period have been paid less than the living wage at some point.

BME graduates are overqualified for the work they do

Educational achievement is touted as the route to success and security. Education does affect employment opportunities. However, whether graduate or not, BME people are less likely to be making full use of their qualifications. They are all more likely to be overqualified for their role than White British people. A proportion of highly educated people from minority backgrounds are not getting a fair return on their education.

As a result, BME communities are the poorest in society

Although the evidence makes it clear that inequality exists, it does not fully explain why. For the evidence to cut through, we need to reframe the race debate and find new narratives to make sure the causes are properly understood.

Percentage of each ethnic group working in the lowest paid occupations

Percentage of employees below living wage, by ethnic group

Percentage of graduates in the UK in each ethnic group who are overqualified for their jobs (2009 to 2012)

Persistent poverty rates (2009 to 2012)

Figures reproduced from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

For more information see: Malcolm Brynin and Simonetta Longhi, *The effect of occupation on poverty among ethnic minority groups* (JRF, 2015): https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/effect-occupation-poverty-among-ethnic-minority-groups

Reframing Racism

What the public think about race

Common explanations for BME workers position in the labour market include:

- **Lack of educational attainment:** BME people are not doing well in school or university and this is why they are concentrated in low paid positions.

- **Lack of experience in senior positions:** There are not enough qualified BME workers for senior positions. The talent pipeline doesn't exist.

- **Lack of role models to aspire to:** The lack of qualified BME workers for these roles means BME workers at entry-level have no one to look up to. There is no one to lead by example.

- **'Cultural' reasons:** BME workers are not doing enough to 'get on' at work. They are not working hard enough or choose not to enter the workplace.

These assumptions are shared widely because they fit the framing of race in the UK – common ideas and ways of thinking about BME people.

What are frames?

Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. They shape the plans we make, the goals we seek, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions.

In the same way that our minds use stories to understand the world, they also think in frames. Frames are a sort of mental shorthand – a quick way for us to understand the world based on existing values or preconceptions. Frames can be shifted by repetition and prevailing discourse reinforces particular values and beliefs. As a result, our messages cannot be interpreted neutrally. People unconsciously tend to reject and discredit data and evidence that challenge their values.[ii]

To change the way people understand racism in the labour market, we have to reframe public discourse. Equally, policy and legislative change can shift the goalposts: redefining what constitutes 'common sense'.

The framing of the race story

Traditionally the story of race discrimination in the UK has been framed in terms of mass migration, racial tolerance and multiculturalism. The most common version is that the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948 was Britain's first experience of Black communities and that problems of racism followed. Mass migration from the 1950's onwards led to some discrimination (the infamous 'No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish' signs), but this was soon addressed by policymakers through race relations

Photo © Daily Herald Archive/SSPL/Getty Images

legislation and judge-led inquiries into the worst cases (Scarman and Macpherson). From early hostility, the story is that public attitudes quickly adapted and transformed Britain into a multicultural society in a short generation.

This framing is inadequate in various ways that prevent Britain from understanding and addressing racial inequalities in the present. People of African origin have lived in Britain since Roman times and migration has affected nearly every major social and cultural development in the intervening millennia – the language we speak, Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution or Empire (www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk). Furthermore, Black and Minority ethnic communities and anti-racism campaigners organised and campaigned to get access to housing, jobs, antidiscrimination legislation and political representation.

This work was vital and helped to delegitimise overt racism even as racism hasn't disappeared.

The history of migration to Britain has also always included a mix of success and contribution, as well as rejection and violence. Two and a half centuries before the racist landlord signs of the 1950s, Daniel Defoe criticised English resistance to accept German Palatine refugees, while serious rioting in 1919 saw black people attacked in the street and in their houses in Liverpool, Cardiff, Newport and London.

Nor have politicians always shown leadership to defend race equality. Enoch Powell's comment that 'In this country in fifteen or twenty years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man' was controversial enough to lead to his sacking by Ted Heath 50 years ago, but fostering white resentment is now a regular occurrence among leaders in the UK and beyond. Less overt but still negative, contemporary governments have invoked freedom of movement in the EU and the conflict in the Middle East to reframe race in terms of national security, citizenship and shared values.

The Runnymede Trust in their report on the future of multi-ethnic Britain identified this as: '*a sense of national identity [based] on generalisations and [involving] a selective and simplified account of complex history. Much that is important is ignored, disavowed or simply forgotten*'. This collective amnesia is more important to challenge than ever, as Britain renegotiates its place on the world stage post-Brexit.[iii]

The hidden and complex nature of modern racism - embedded in institutions and the labour market - reinforces the idea that racism is a thing of the past. Any inequalities in the labour market must then be the fault of ethnic minorities who are not doing enough to 'get on' in life or a handful of racist employers. This bears a striking resemblance to narratives around poverty in the UK.[iv]

Prominent narratives on race

Who are the racists?

These frames set the parameters for the prominent narratives on race in Britain. Racism has been framed as something marginal to British society, and linked only to illiberal or violent views. On this popular account the people that hold racist views are ignorant, from far right parties and working class.[v]

Of course, racism exists throughout all strata of our society. It is not a working class phenomenon and nor does it only occur in racist incidents on our streets. Institutions and individuals from all socioeconomic groups are capable of racist views and behaviours.

Politicians and the media are not immune. They too stereotype and stigmatise people from BME communities. This calcifies what is already a toxic narrative for BME groups.

Millions of EU mirants grab our jobs: Time for Brexit to FINALLY take control of borders

Hammond: African migrant surge imperils EU social infrastructure

News > Politics

PM: Calais crisis is caused by 'swarm' of migrants crossing Mediterranean
Britain not a safe haven for migrants, asserts PM

Examples

Multiculturalism and tolerance

Multiculturalism is branded as something that has outlived its usefulness. In line with the tolerance frame, multiculturalism has given too much space and power to ethnic minority communities.

Photo © Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

In this narrative, Britain is a uniquely tolerant nation that transformed itself and its sensibilities since 1950s. This has been championed by politicians such as former Home Secretary Roy Jenkins (1974-76) when he commented: 'Integration is not a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'.

However, this exceptional tolerance has been taken for granted. Some ethnic minorities are not holding up their end of the bargain. They are living separate lives and refusing to integrate. With racism now nearly eradicated and increased migration from the EU, discrimination based on skin colour is consigned to the past.

Reframing Racism

As we know, racist and xenophobic attacks against EU and non-EU migrants have risen since the referendum result.[vi] Equally, discrimination and hate crimes against visible Black and Ethnic minority communities continue. Furthermore, Ethnic minorities are not residentially segregated. All Black and Minority Ethnic people live in Local Authorities where they make up no more than 10% of local population. It is the White British group is more likely to live separately, on average living in districts with 85% White British residents.[vii] BME groups are most segregated in the labour market, where they face discrimination and barriers.

Examples

> Warning on 'UK Muslim ghettoes': Nation within a nation developing says former equalities watchdog

> **Britons are World's Most Racially Tolerant People**

> Britain 'sleepwalking to segregation'

> Muslim schoolchildren are still leading parallel lives to the mainstream

What does this tell us?

That with the current narratives:

- Racism is seen as an individual problem that only occurs when a BME person is directly discriminated against – not as an institutional or structural issue

- Victims of racism are blamed because of their social circumstances or culture

- There is little recognition of institutional discrimination in the labour market and society

- The long-standing presence and contribution of BME communities to the fabric of our society is not part of the shared past, shared future narrative of the White majority.

- The voices of BME communities are not included in the discussion

- This makes it difficult for anti-racist campaign messages that we promote to be heard by other trade unionists and the wider public.

How can we provide an alternative framing on race?

Using Stories

Stories or narrative are often used in politics to convey ideas and frame (set the terms of) the debate. They are a powerful way to persuade people. They are easy to follow because they have a clear structure: a beginning, middle and an end. We can empathise with the characters and become more interested and invested in issues that may not even affect us personally. The disbelief that characterises discussion about race and racism – its scale and even its existence – can be suspended. Where successful, the audience sees the story as removed from their day-to-day life, can feel less implicated in its rights and wrongs, and address it with fewer preconceptions.

Narratives are:

- Consistent;

- Memorable;

- Full of vivid images and emotional metaphors;

- Simple enough to be readily understood and retold.

Example: Conservative Party - Shared Society narrative

In 2016-2017, the Conservative party have used the shared story narrative to frame their policy agenda. In the speech, *I'm determined to build the shared society for everyone*, Theresa May's stated that: *"the mission I have laid out for the Government – to make Britain a country that works for everyone and not just the privileged few – goes further."*

This speech referenced injustices affecting a cross-section of British society and emphasising a prosperous shared future. The term 'burning injustice' is both vivid and memorable. The wider speech referenced both a shared value – fairness or justice – and highlighted where British society needed to better live up to that value. Furthermore, while racial inequality was mentioned as a burning injustice, it was listed as one of a number of such injustices, including mental health. This allows for people to identify with the wider value and problem without necessarily sharing or understanding some of the specific 'burning injustices', including racial inequalities. This may be a strength – if it encourages people to support all forms of burning injustices – or it can be a weakness, if people are only willing to support particular injustices they recognise.

Reframing Racism

Example: The Runnymede Trust and CLASS – shared story narrative

In March 2017, the think tanks The Runnymede Trust and CLASS used the same narrative to frame their analysis: *Minority Report: Race and Class in Post-Brexit Britain*. In *the Guardian*, Dr Faiza Shaheen, Director of CLASS, told a story about her mother-in-law, who had been made redundant that week along with all of her colleagues. She stated that:

"These dinner ladies – who represent the whole spectrum of race – are all in the same boat. Public spending cuts mean they are all losing their jobs, and as a group of women without higher qualifications they are all faced with dead-end, low-paid and insecure work. Why does it help to divide this group when they have so much in common?

This really gets to the root of why the white working class narrative is so problematic. It divides a group that when united and mobilised can be a real force for change."

By recognising the challenges *all* working class people are facing, she emphasises experiences that cut along racial lines. This makes it clear that a thriving future for all of us can only be achieved if we are united. The story is short, emotive and can be easily retold. There is, however, a risk – BME people's experiences can be hidden and overshadowed. Unions should be mindful that the experiences of BME workers are still prominent when this narrative is used.

Recommendations for future narratives on race

GOAL: to support unions in their messaging on ethnic inequalities in the labour market

SOLUTIONS: Future narratives that we use about race are necessary to bring the urgency of ethnic inequalities to life. For unions, the focus should rest on recognising the challenges *all* workers are facing whilst highlighting that BME workers are facing further inequalities:

- BME communities have contributed as long standing residents. Through colonialism and empire, we have a shared history and integral stake in the making of modern Britain.

- BME communities are fellow citizens and should be respected as equals and not just tolerated.

- Threats to social cohesion and security result from the changing nature of our world not because of multicultural communities or the movement of people. These changes are affecting us all but BME groups are being hit the hardest in some cases.

- State and institutional discrimination in the labour market and society play a fundamental role in the inequality suffered by people from BME communities. Use stories to bring this to life.

- Racism is not just a problem for people from BME communities; it undermines social solidarity and affects everyone's prosperity.

i **For more information see:** Baroness McGregor-Smith (2017). *Race in the Workplace: The McGregor-Smith Review.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/594336/race-in-workplace-mcgregor-smith-review.pdf

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TUC (2017). *Let's Talk About Racism: An interim report about the experiences of Black and minority ethnic workers in the workplace.* Available at: https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/LetstalkaboutRacism.pdf

ii **For more information see:** Lakoff, G. (2014). *In Politics, Progressives Need to Frame Their Values.* Available: https://georgelakoff.com/2014/11/29/george-lakoff-in-politics-progressives-need-to-frame-theirvalues/

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Darnton, A. and Kirk, M. (2011). *Finding Frames: New ways to engage the UK public in global poverty.* London: Bond.

iii Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (2000). *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh report.* London: Profile Books.

iv Volmert, A., Gerstein Pineau, M., and Kendall-Taylor, N. (2016). *Talking About Poverty: how experts and the public understand UK poverty.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/talking-about-poverty-how-experts-and-public-understand-uk-poverty

v Khan, O. and Shaheen, F. (eds.) (2017). *Minority Report: race and class in post-Brexit Britain.* London: Runnymede.

vi Khan, S. (2017). *Mayor: zero tolerance as hate crimes spikes after London Bridge attack.* Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/zero-tolerance-of-hate-crime-after-borough-attack

vii Catney, G. (2013). 'Has neighbourhood ethnic segregation decreased?' *The Dynamics of Diversity: Evidence from the 2011 Census.* Available at: https://www.ethnicity.ac.uk/medialibrary/briefingsupdated/has-neighbourhood-ethnic-segregation-decreased.pdf