

Dismantling the scaffolding of institutional racism and institutionalising anti-racism

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Abstract

This paper addresses the challenge to organisations seeking to address institutional racism. It is argued that racism is systemic in its historical roots, anchored in racialising discourses, bolstered and fused by the ideology of Whiteness. It describes an approach to organisational consultancy, where the consultant can facilitate change in organisations by adopting an anti-racism stance and approach which disrupts Whiteness and engages the organisation in anti-racism praxis, towards dismantling institutionalised racism. Ways in which this process can be facilitated are outlined, as part of the change process towards institutionalising anti-racism praxis.

Practitioner points

1. Racism is historically scaffolded by Whiteness and it is institutionalised in every aspect of organisations, including in policies, structures and practices.
2. Whiteness is reproduced, including in the theories, models and practices of systemic psychotherapy, our training institutions and services.
3. Scrutinising and disrupting Whiteness in systems in which we work, and in organisations we consult to, is essential to anti-racism praxis.

Introduction

Despite racism not being new, contemporary public debates on racism have ignited discussions in many organisations on how to identify and address institutional racism. This paper attempts to address the challenge this ambition presents by first, contextualising institutional racism as historical and ideologically scaffolded, before second, discussing how a consultation process to organisations can facilitate the dismantling of institutional racism. As a British Indian woman with lived experience of racism, including as a trainee, and subsequently in all workplaces, I draw on my experience of consulting to organisations in higher education, in the public sector and in large civil society and human rights organisations in the U.K., to outline some ways in which organisations can be supported to unpack institutional racism and work towards racial equity and anti-racism praxis.

My approach to consultation is heavily influenced by critical race theory (CRT), Black feminist movements and systemic approaches, not least because I believe that none of the traditional approaches (including systemic) to consultation to organisations are adequate for addressing institutional racism. Since a critique of these traditional approaches to consultancy is not the focus of this paper, I will outline CRT which is central to my approach to consultation to organisations.

Critiquing traditional civil rights discourse and building on the limitations of critical legal studies and insights of radical feminism, CRT began as an intellectual movement within law in the 1970s (Crenshaw et al., 1995), led by Bell (1980), a critical legal scholar and activist, one of the key intellectual founders. Delgado and Stefancic (2000) define the key tenets of CRT and methodology thus: (a) racism is not aberrational, it is ordinary, common and ingrained in society; (b) racism is sustained by “interest convergence” (Bell, 1980), or material determinism, advancing the interests and privilege of dominant groups in society and hence there is little incentive to eradicate it; (c) race is socially constructed; (d) different groups are racialised at different times historically– “differential racialisation”, and whilst the contexts may differ, the effect of racism is consistent; and (e) people who have been racialised have a unique “voice-of-colour”, central to the CRT methodology of “counter-story-telling” (discussed later) which is essential to challenging racial power in dominant accounts and institutional practices, towards significant, transformational change.

What is institutional racism?

Historically, racism is rooted since the seventeenth century in ideologies which promoted a hierarchy based on skin colour and biological characteristics. Racialisation refers to the social and political processes by which race, a no-sense term without biological basis, is socially constructed, ascribed particular meanings and value, shifting across context and time, when applied to particular groups of people, who are racialised as the other. Racialisation is ideology in practice, which creates, legitimates and reproduces structural racism.

In science, racialisation dates back to Linnaeus’s (1758) classification of people based on skin colour and later to Galton’s (1891) legacy of eugenics which provided intellectual and ideological weight to many state policies and brutal practices globally, including Nazism, Apartheid and segregation. Slavery, and its dehumanisation, brutalising and commodification of black people and colonialism were bedded in colonial discourses which authorised and justified the devaluing of the other, and promoted the ideology of racial hierarchy. Race science (see Saini, 2020), racialisation, and institutional racism are not modern-day, isolated

problems of organisations, they exemplify systemic racism, the resilient knotweeds of bygone centuries.

Racism has many guises: overt physical violence, verbal abuse and the daily racialised microaggressions and insults, it can be covert and indirect. Institutionalised racism is structured in the organisational culture, fabric and practices within institutions. The systemic embeddedness of racism harms individuals, families, communities and institutions. Its impacts can include exclusionary, fragmented society and divided communities, and the systematic and cumulative exclusion of racialised people in employment, education, and in accessing resources, such as health services. The epistemic violence (Spivak, 1998) of Eurocentric knowledge, research and therapeutic practices, others, silences, erodes alternative knowledges and diminishes racialised people. The structural violence of racism oppresses and harms (Fanon, 1968) racialised and minoritized people, and the legitimacy and integrity of organisations.

International law has established a legal framework for criminalising and preventing slavery and racism. Following the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination was the first major international human rights law adopted in 1965, ratified by 176 states. Several international and regional legal instruments echo this commitment, all constructing racism as an act of discrimination, whilst only the Inter-American Convention against Racism acknowledges racialisation and the ideological processes leading to racial inequality. The U.K. Equality Act 2010 does not acknowledge these ideological processes, focusing on the prohibition of discriminatory acts (categorised as direct, indirect, harassment and victimisation) based on any of nine 'protected characteristics', including race, which, in the Act, encompasses colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin. Why then, we might ask, in the U.K, for example, are there a litany of parliamentary publications and government enquiries pointing to continued institutional racism (e.g., Race Disparity Audit, Cabinet Office, 2017)?

One reason, is that the 'othering', dehumanising and racist discrimination manifest in the public, private and civil society sectors, is arguably ever more sophisticated, or subtle, indirect and camouflaged. Furthermore, the dominant diversity discourse in organisations foregrounds merit (subsuming ability and effort) as accounting for disparities, and constructs difference as identity markers to be embraced and celebrated, thereby actively depoliticising inequalities, and their intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Diversity talk has made it increasingly difficult to explicitly name racism and other discrimination in organisations. Institutional statements of commitment to equality and human rights and organisational policies on diversity, if formulated at all, remain fossilised in the formal structures of institutions, rarely translated into organisational strategies, transparent accountability mechanisms and practice. Such policies and statements may be lauded for fulfilling legal requirements, but as standalone paper commitments, they serve to hinder any sustained scrutiny of the organisation, thereby bolstering and shielding structural racism.

The inadequacy of definitions of institutional racism also serves race inequality. The Macpherson report, years following Stephen Lawrence's murder in the U.K. in 1993, pointed to police failures, defining institutional racism as "the collective failure of an organization 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 behaviours which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist

stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people” (Home Office, 1999, p.28). This formulation of institutional racism is problematic because it conflates individual racism, as actions or inactions of individual police, with institutional racism (Bourne, 2001). Others more helpfully emphasise the operations of power, defining institutional racism as “the reproduction within institutions of practices of power which discriminate against people on the grounds of their perceived ‘race’. These practices maintain the status quo in institutions and can be practices both in the commission of racist acts and in the omission of acts which would redress the situation” (Patel et al., 2000, p.31). Institutional racism is illustrated, for example, by the denial of racism whenever named, blaming rogue individuals, the denial of racialisation, the denial of individual and institutional responsibility, the absence of justice and reparations for historical and current racism as well as institutional failures to take measures to prevent structural racism and to ensure racial equity.

In 2020, the viral video of the murder of George Floyd in the U.S. by police sparked a global outrage, with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Global demands for racial justice and accountability for other such murders and police brutality against racialised people were emboldened by the collective voices of people from many communities. These large-scale protests were countered by protests and violence from far right groups, as well as debates on the existence of institutional racism. Many organisations across all sectors scrambled to publicise statements of anti-racism and declarations of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. More than a year on, few organisations have followed through on what these statements actually demand of them by way of substantial change. The lack of political will is perhaps relevant. The lack of resources, time and competing organisational pressures and priorities are frequently invoked as reasons by organisations, as are bewilderment, helplessness and simply not knowing how to identify or address institutional racism. Therein lies a fundamental challenge to addressing structural racism – the absence of a shared understanding of what racism is exactly, why it persists and what can be done.

The scaffolding of institutionalised racism

Rittle and Weber’s (1973) description of a “wicked” problem is a useful framework for understanding the nature of structural racism. Wicked issues, they argue, are highly complex problems, sustained by multiple and interconnected systems, and as such they are resistant to single solutions. This interconnectedness is no accident. Racism is systemic in its historical economic exploitation and oppression of racialised people, and endemic in organisations and social systems, cultivated and sustained by Whiteness.

Whiteness refers to the racial power which has claimed normative dominance over centuries of slavery and colonialism (see Du Bois, 1920, Fanon, 1967). Specifically, it refers to the pervasive and enduring system of invisible, racialised advantage (where darker, ‘not White’, skin colour is constructed as a marker of inferiority). Whiteness is not about ‘being white’, or an individual characteristic or homogenising identity marker. It refers to a hegemonic lens which racialises the other, an ideology which is dynamic and reproductive in maintaining structural advantage and upholding particular structures, institutions and practices, which in turn reproduce and reinforce racialised hierarchies, exemplified in historical and ongoing practices, including in organisations. It is an epistemological standpoint from which to see oneself and others (Peake, 2009), intersecting and produced with other operations of power, such as patriarchy and class (Crenshaw, 1989; Anthias and Yuval, Davis, 1992). ‘Snowy white peaks’ (Kline, 2014) for example, refers to the dominance of White, male, middle class managers in health services. Striking imagery it is, nevertheless, the outcome (status quo) is

spotlighted, rather than the invisible systems which create and maintain structural disparities. Further, the absence of fine grain analyses in organisations can shroud complexity around which intersecting ideologies, systems of dominance and oppression and their histories account for specific disparities, for example, why there may be relatively few Black women in senior leadership roles in health, law, finance, government, academia etc., and how Whiteness, patriarchy and class interact and intersect.

The outcome of Whiteness is racism, in organisations evidenced in a myriad of systems, processes, communication, relationships and team practices, which in health settings, together may account for unequal health outcomes. Arguments that racism may be the cause, or determinant of unequal health outcomes (Phelan and Link, 2015) however, risks essentialising race and problematising ethnicity (for example, in research unquestioningly using racialised categories), and diverts attention away from the operations of Whiteness as a ubiquitous problem. Structural racism is ideologically scaffolded by Whiteness and the operations of racial power at many levels, and as such, I prefer to describe it as *institutionalised* racism rather than institutional racism. Racism is not a static entity, but constantly operationalised.

In *dominant discourses*, Whiteness is pervasive, and assumptions of racialised hierarchy abound in the media, arts, academia and in biomedical discourses of mental health (Fernando, 2017) and psychology (Patel and Keval, 2018).

At the *national policy level*, whilst legislation may be formulated meticulously, the language used and the practices within the judiciary, parliamentary and executive levels belie deeply guarded Eurocentrism and Whiteness pervades the underpinning assumptions in policy-making and implementation. Practices within criminal justice systems may also betray assumptions of the inferiority, deviance and dangerousness of racialised people.

At the level of *public institutions and systems*, Whiteness imbues all public structures and systems, such as education, housing, employment, health and social care and criminal justice, systematically marginalising and excluding racialised people in multiple areas of their lives. This in turn can prevent them from accessing public resources and services.

Within *organisations*, the design, policies and mission and vision statements can embed Whiteness in their values and assumptions, sustaining racism. Diversity policies designed to increase ‘representation’ (to reflect population demographics) of racialised and minoritised people, construct visible diversity (skin colour) in the workforce as the end goal, rather than rigorously pursuing equality as the fundamental platform for building genuinely fair, respectful and inclusive practices; and racial equity measures to acknowledge the systematic disadvantages racialised people already have in seeking employment and in progression.

The focus on institutionalised racism has waxed and waned in many organisations. Whilst some institutions may rush, as seen after the recent resurgence of mass anti-racism protests, to hastily assemble their public statements against racism and proudly publicise their equality and diversity policies, Whiteness remains protected, invisible and intact. The focus on overt racist acts alone, excluding a scrutiny of Whiteness, effectively scaffolds institutional racism. Similarly, diversity audits and diversity training ignore and depoliticise intersectional inequalities and their impacts. Colour-blind approaches perpetuate Whiteness. Cultural awareness and cultural competency training are important, but elegantly sidestep race-making and racism, again obscuring Whiteness. Culture and race are frequently assumed to be synonymous, or essentialised as one entity; culture is often treated as static, monolithic,

non-intersectional and ascribed to the other. The historical racialisation and devaluing of people from ‘different’ cultures in our theory-building, concepts, models and practices is sanitised in the language of multicultural practice, intercultural therapy, valuing difference etc. where Whiteness remains protected - again, scaffolding institutionalised racism.

Similarly, the acronyms ‘BME’ (‘Black and minority ethnic’) and ‘BAME’ (‘Black, Asian and minority ethnic’) are used in organisations in the U.K. to refer to racialised people, often in the shorthand ‘BMEs’. These acronyms are dehumanising; they assume homogeneity of all racialised people, across continents and countries, conflating different heritages, diverse histories, beliefs, values, languages and experiences of racism; and they foster reductive and racist assumptions and generalisations. The use of these terms (which hold little meaning or value to those to whom they are ascribed) racialises and reinforces the othering of racialised people, averting attention from the invisible and dominant norms against which the terms BME or BAME are made to seem meaningful, thereby scaffolding institutionalised racism.

Within *teams*, Whiteness manifests in formal and informal communication, in meetings, emails and written reports and in casual social interactions; it manifests in decision-making processes and in the allocation of specific tasks or seeking the opinion and views of some staff, and in the judgement, and underlying assumptions, of the performance and quality of work of staff from racialised backgrounds. Viewing difference only as individual and family identity markers (e.g., culture, ethnicity, faith) also risks essentialising difference, locating it in the other and ignoring the normative gaze and the process of racialisation in team efforts to understand or formulate difference - another pole in the scaffolding of institutionalised racism.

Racialised staff may feel silenced, invisible, or hypervisible and problematised in certain team discussions, for example, where racism is raised or discussed, or not, and expectations arise that they should flag any concerns and name issues of racism, and explain racism to colleagues, as well as articulate the solutions to address it. Team criteria for prioritising resources, or service criteria for inclusion may be justified with implicit assumptions embedding Whiteness. Waiting list-management, team reflections, formulations and decision-making, as well as monitoring and evaluation tools and processes may also exemplify Whiteness. In therapeutic work, our approaches, models and methods, our values and assumptions also reproduce Whiteness, together reinforcing the scaffolding of institutionalised racism.

Consultation to organisations: Anti-racism as a stance, approach and praxis

If organisations are to work towards racial equity, how can a consultant to the organisation help facilitate this? Kendi (2019) posits that being anti-racist involves “supporting an anti-racist policy through actions or expressing an antiracist idea” (p.13). He argues that the position of not-being-racist signifies neutrality, effectively a mask for racism, and the opposite of racist is not ‘not racist’, it is being anti-racist in what we say and what we do. In the context of consulting to organisations, I see racism and anti-racism not as constituting a fixed polarity, or as an individual state of ‘being’ and individual actions, rather as a collective process, a movement, which requires significant, concerted and enduring labour throughout an organisation, beyond the mere expression of anti-racist ideas and development of anti-racist policies. Anti-racism is a stance, an approach and organisational praxis.

As a *stance*, anti-racism is a position against Whiteness, and against its effects of systemic racism. It is not simply a declaration of being against racism, it is a stance of activism which commits to creating change.

As an *approach*, anti-racism shifts the gaze to the White racial frame (Feagin, 2013) and its historical legitimisation and reproduction of Whiteness in education, politics, media, health, research etc., which has buttressed systemic oppression and institutionalised racism. Analysis of counter-mechanisms and resistances which defend Whiteness (e.g., Du Bois, 1945/2007) also characterise an anti-racism approach. Hence, as an approach to organisational consultation, anti-racism does not seek to provide an expert analysis and solutions for the organisations policies and structures. It seeks to support the organisation to do its *own* work of anti-racism. It is an approach which facilitates a process of change which renders more visible, then de-centers Whiteness by exploring its effects and structural harms. This inevitably engenders discomfort, at minimum, and perhaps conflict, struggle and negotiation within organisations. The consultant holds the stance of anti-racism, whilst accompanying the organisation in this change process.

Anti-racism praxis in organisational consultancy is multi-layered. It requires (a) critical awareness-raising of racialisation, systemic Whiteness and the invisibility of its normative dominance and everyday machinations. The focus is on race-making and the operations of power and effects (race inequalities). The language of ‘White privilege’ (McIntosh, 1989) is rejected as individualising and essentialising structural advantage (e.g., privilege that someone ‘has’, with the assumption that therefore it can be voluntarily relinquished) whilst detracting from how that advantage is (re)produced and sustained. This awareness-raising process may be with staff, management and the governing board (contrast this to awareness-raising initiatives focused on changing individual attitudes or assumed unconscious bias – strategies which also individualise racism, and evade institutionalised Whiteness and structural racism). Anti-racism praxis seeks to foster critical reflexivity throughout the organisation to examine the ways in which change is resisted, subverted and sanitised, and in so doing examining how Whiteness is produced, defended, legitimised and obscured, thereby bolstering the status quo and preventing change.

Anti-racism praxis involves (b) the systems-wide disruption of Whiteness in its making and proliferation: naming and examining Whiteness in moment-to-moment, daily practices in organisations, the fabric or ideological cement of institutionalised racism; creating space for “counter-story-telling”, using critical race theory methodology, the centering of alternative meaning-making to counter dominant accounts and to create space for radical possibilities. Scrutinising institutionalised Whiteness allows us to pivot our focus from those we racialise – people who have been subjected to racism - as the problem to be addressed, to the everyday language, professed ideals and practices in organisations (including the unquestioning use of received intellectual history, its Eurocentric concepts, models, methodologies and epistemic assumptions) which construct race, racialise staff and those with whom we work. This process of (re-)centering and then de-centering Whiteness can facilitate (c) the dismantling of institutionalised racism in every aspect of the organisation’s structures, processes, decision-making and daily practices.

Disrupting Whiteness and facilitating anti-racism in organisations

My approach to working with organisations, as mentioned earlier, draws on systemic consultation as well as on critical race and Black feminist movements – the latter two explicitly point to activism towards change. For the organisational consultant, what does this involve?

Anti-racism reflexive positioning

Integral to an anti-racism approach to consultation is the adoption of anti-racism reflexive positioning. It is a non-neutral position (explicitly against the machinations of Whiteness and its effects of structural racism), where the historical anchoring of structural and institutional racism is recognised; where the contemporary presence of racism is named; and where racial inequity is challenged. This positioning acknowledges the harms of racism and its illegality and subversion of the equality ideal and human rights principle that all human beings are equal in worth, dignity and rights. However, in organisational consultancy, this positioning is not the moralising against racism in legal discourses (what is legal or illegal) or the individualised, moral opposition to racism (which focuses on individual expressions, acts and intentions). It is a political position which invites an interrogation of the operations of power which uphold racism in organisations. Anti-racism reflexive positioning enables everyday interactions and practices to be examined from different and multiple perspectives of staff, whilst also recognising that the consultant, and those in conversation, may be racialised as the other, and themselves have lived experiences of disempowerment by Whiteness and of institutionalised racism. The pervasiveness of Whiteness are inescapable, and the processes of racialisation and its contestation and navigation are present in every conversation a racialised consultant has in the consultation process.

Preliminary consultation

The starting point for many organisations seeking consultation on anti-racism is often a crisis, sometimes an external, highly publicised crime (e.g., reporting of a racist murder), whistleblowing or a series of formal complaints from staff, people who use services or other stakeholders. Preliminary consultations often enter highly emotionally-charged discussions in organisations. Staff may be polarised and in conflict, there may be a sense of threat and both urgency (to fix) and paralysis (not knowing how or fear of making matters worse). Communication may be shaped by fear, anger, guilt, blame, defensiveness, denial, resentment, mistrust and weighty silence. Important questions include ‘who wants change, for whom, when (or how soon) and why’?

Initial consultations may be with those requesting change, often senior managers, or those to whom anti-racism ‘initiatives’ are delegated – training officers, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion officers, Human Resources directors etc. Deciding who to meet early on is crucial to engagement and trust-building. Racialised staff, at all levels of the organisation, are prioritised in my approach, in line with critical race praxis. Racialised staff (including any at senior levels) may be hypervigilant to (and cynical of) the organisation’s request for help: what is requested (e.g., training on ‘diversity’, ‘unconscious bias’, ‘race-awareness’, ‘anti-racism’, ‘white privilege’ etc.); and by whom is the request being made (management, governing bodies, stakeholders, funders etc.). The origin of the request for help is often perceived by staff as a proxy measure of organisational commitment and the leadership’s understanding of the nature of institutionalised racism – for example, as a discrete problem to be fixed in a tick-

box, incremental approach, perhaps by providing staff development and skills-based training, or as a policy gap to be addressed by an external and independent policy expert. Racialised staff, managers and stakeholders may despair and express exhaustion “at having the same old conversations again”. They may fear becoming hypervisible, as colleagues look to them to explain racism, to disclose personal experiences of racism, and “to be reassured that it’s not that/all bad”. They may fear becoming (further) invisible and marginalised within the organisation, including by the consultant, whose assumed expertise on anti-racism is given credence by management above the lived experience of racism and expertise of racialised staff.

Making explicit to all managers and staff, at the outset, the nature of the request and the rationale by the organisation to invite the consultant to support the organisation, allows discussion on differing views on the question ‘why now?’. In the initial consultation, the consultant may be positioned as an expert – and unpacking the consultant’s stance, can open discussions on how the consultant, and those in conversation, have come to a place of wanting change (or perhaps feeling resentful, ambivalent, or hopeless about change).

Being curious, when clarifying time-lines and the scope of the consultancy, about the differing expectations of those initially consulted in the organisation can help everyone to reflect on their formulation of racism at work (e.g., as individual and attitudinal, structural, relational or as isolated problems in sub-teams). The anxieties and expectations of management, staff and stakeholders about what needs to be urgently fixed or salved – and their solutions, can also be explored, as the beginning of formulating why change is desired, what kind of change and what kind of anti-racism, an exploration which often highlights the organisation’s explicit and implicit boundaries, and fears, of how far the work on anti-racism can go.

Fostering safety and a shared language

Explicit acknowledgement of the discomfort, profound anxiety and anger that talking about Whiteness and racism engender, for all, can encourage discussions in organisations. Fostering safety is not the sole responsibility of the consultant, it is a collective responsibility to clarify ethical considerations. For instance, in protecting confidentiality, negotiating whether themes, rather than individual statements, of what emerges can be shared, and with whom. It is also important to clarify at the outset of the consultancy whether there are ongoing, formal complaints of racism and litigation underway, processes subject to legal confidentiality. It is helpful to acknowledge that these discussions may be deeply uncomfortable, and sometimes distressing; and that at different times people may choose to stay silent, although silence by colleagues in such discussions can sometimes be experienced by racialised staff as indifference, oppressive and hurtful. Curiosity and reflection can be encouraged, whilst acknowledging that race-talk may feel like an emotional minefield, where stumbles, awkwardness and hesitancy in discussions is to be expected. Such preambles are not disclaimers or warnings, rather, invitations to take risks, which creates a context for safe(r) uncertainty (Mason, 1993) in which genuine curiosity and listening is more possible, and where challenges to normalising Whiteness can be jointly explored and a shared language for doing so can be developed.

Developing a shared language is not a matter of linguistic competency in anti-racism praxis or explaining key terminology as the correct language to use. Language changes, and linguistic competency is context-dependent (in terms of geography, geopolitics, history etc.) and different groups may be racialised in different language at different times. Language used, for instance in the U.S., or say in France, Germany or South Africa, to racialise, marginalise and

exclude some groups, may be considered inappropriate and/or offensive in the U.K., due to differing histories and state functions in the construction and usage of those terms. The fluidity and contextual specificity of language can be acknowledged in working with organisations. Discussions on terms in common usage in a given context, for example, racism, Whiteness and intersectionality, can act as a springboard for understanding the meanings of these concepts in a particular context, their functions and how they are used currently (e.g., in decision-making, in therapy processes, in service design and evaluation), and to what effect.

Exploration of the systems map

Understanding different perspectives within the organisation on the systems, infrastructure, staffing, mission and values of the organisation, and the wider social, economic, geographical, regional and political context of the core work of the organisation provide an important initial collaborative map of which are the relevant systems (staff, people who use the organisation's services, funders, regulatory bodies etc.) and why. This may also provide a context for deciding whose perspectives are sought (which staff, which teams, those who use services, experts by experience, other stakeholders etc.), to explore Whiteness, and in which order.

As noted earlier, anti-racism methodology seeks the “voices-of-colour” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2000), from those who are racialised as the other and subjected to racism on the basis of their skin colour. Conversations with racialised staff across all levels of the organisation may take place as a priority, their perspectives and experiences explicitly foregrounded in understanding racialisation, Whiteness and institutional racism in the organisation. Other experiences of different forms of racism, or intersectional discrimination are also relevant. The critical race theory methodology of “counter-story-telling”, the explicit privileging of marginalised voices and marginalised accounts and seeking stories of their realities are seen as resistance strategies in challenging dominant accounts which racialise and oppress the other, for example in legal courts, in education and in health services. As such, collective counter-story-telling is a form of activism. The choice of who to speak to early on in organisational consultancy, and hearing their accounts of lived experience of racism at work and institutional practices of racism, is then seen as central to the change process.

Anti-racism praxis in organisational consultancy resists dominant accounts within organisations which construct racialised staff as the problem, staff who are sometimes seen as struggling and unable to cope, or as invisible and quiet or hypervisible because they voice their criticisms and anger about racism at work. Discussions with racialised staff may explore their accounts of institutionalised racism in their workplace (“what does this look like?”). Staff may volunteer their own experiences though they are not asked about individual experiences since these accounts and how they constitute a person's sense of self are not the focus of the consultation. Indeed, empathic listening to hear and acknowledge the pain and suffering of racialised staff is critical to exploring their stories of hope (Madigan, 2007), and hearing their diverse and everyday strategies of resistance, survival and navigation of Whiteness in the organisation. This questioning and listening is akin to White's (2000) ‘double-listening’ in narrative approaches, except the aim in anti-racism organisational consultancy is not to facilitate individual agency as a move away from problem-saturated stories. Rather, the focus is the acknowledgment of the harm of structural racism and the costs of resistance and survival, and developing collective narratives of resistance and survival (and counter-strategies in the organisation)– exploring perspectives on what has been previously tried and found helpful or unhelpful, how and why. These preliminary discussions with racialised staff can shape the nature of questions in conversations with other staff, management, governance

leadership and key stakeholders, building a nuanced and complex story of the making of Whiteness in the organisation, and why change is desired, by whom, at this point in time.

In seeking multiple perspectives, discussions with all groups (staff, management, governance leadership, stakeholders etc.) explore what is seen as the problem (e.g., recruitment, progression, representation etc.) and how it is explained in dominant accounts and the counter-accounts, for example, of racialised staff and stakeholders. A critical race approach strives to explore the historical development and maintenance of the problem of say, access to professional training by racialised trainees, or of so-called achievement gaps (and deficit accounts which locate the problem in staff or trainees), or the problem of leadership teams which are described as predominantly, or exclusively White, or as “lacking any Black managers”. In exploring these dominant accounts and counter-accounts, and feeding back to the various groups, conflict, and divisions may arise, helplessness and paralysis may take hold, fear of blame and anger at the scrutiny of dominant accounts can halt dialogue. These conversations, however, can help build a collective understanding of Whiteness, its complexities and shifting operations in dominant accounts and the way those accounts are defended, and they can make more visible the evolving morphology of the myriad presentations of institutionalised racism in the organisation.

All groups are also asked the questions *‘what kind of change is wanted and by whom?’* Responses may include: “we have great staff who are committed to anti-racism but we want to get better at what we are already doing”, “we want to assure the public/funders/service users/stakeholders that we are taking this seriously”, “we want to reduce the [race-based] complaints we have”, “many of our BME staff are unhappy and we want to fix that”, “we want to understand why our workforce is not representative of the local population, and funders/public have remarked on this, we want to tackle that [public perception, representativeness, recruitment]...”.

Asking *‘how would you know if the change process was helpful, or unhelpful?’* may be met with silence and bewilderment, sometimes by a fearful resentment. Responses may vary: “that’s why we’re asking *you as the expert*, so that *you* can tell us”, “well clearly we can’t eradicate racism completely”, “we want to have fewer complaints” and “we want to assure the public and service users that we are serious [about racism] and we are actually doing quite well compared to other organisations”. In these initial discussions with the consultant, awareness of Whiteness, within the various responses and in the organisational aspirations, may emerge. These responses often gravitate towards ‘change should be tangible (visible), measurable (out there), realistic (affordable and not idealistic or transformational) and achievable (in the short term).

Whilst maintaining an anti-racism stance, systemic hypothesising (Cecchin, 1987) and circular questioning (Tomm, 1988) can guide the exploration of what is seen as the problem, by whom, and why. Exploring the effects on staff, of these discussions and of the different constructions of the problem by colleagues, can help shift narratives of blame and finger-pointing, and enables a shared understanding of the organisation’s change ambition (and ambivalence), and related hopes, expectations and fears of avoiding a repetition of past ‘horror stories’, conflicts and mistakes. The exploration of multiple viewpoints and divergent and sometimes conflicting explanations, engages different groups in hypothesising, reflecting and perhaps venturing a shared formulation of the status quo, thereby ‘warming the context for change’ (Burnham, 2005) – all the while examining the operations of racial power and the processes of Whiteness.

Formulating, disrupting and dismantling institutionalised Whiteness

Formulating institutionalised racism in organisations, together with all staff and managers, involves creating processes which, first and foremost, invite collective critical analysis of the intersecting dimensions of power which reproduce and uphold institutionalised racism – lifting the conversation from identifying immediate corrective actions (‘what can we do’) and specific outcomes (often as a knee-jerk reaction to the discomfort of unpacking institutional racism), to understanding Whiteness and formulating the daily and invisible operations of race-making. It is important to not essentialise Whiteness or assume homogenous experiences of Whiteness; rather, acknowledge its fluidity and production in communication, knowledge and practice. Building on earlier preliminary conversations, the consultant can ask specific questions, in particular formations (pairs, small and large groups), and in so doing engage staff in the disruption of institutionalising Whiteness and dismantling of institutionalised racism. Staff can begin to explore what anti-racism could look like in practice, rather than look to the consultant to lead the organisation in a step-by-step, procedural way to a specific outcome, or to define ‘good practice’ and specific indicators of anti-racism for the organisation.

Staff are asked to explore Whiteness and institutionalised racism using specific questions, a methodology I call ‘Talking Whiteness and racism’ (Patel, 2021); and at each stage, group discussions are facilitated by the consultant. They are reminded they need only share what they feel comfortable to share, and racialised staff can choose to speak to each other, in pairs, for example, in the first stage discussion.

Stage 1: Initially in pairs, staff are invited to explore two questions:

- When did I first become aware of Whiteness (and its intersectionality); and
- How has Whiteness been salient in my life, my education and work history (including, for some, how they are racialised and at the receiving end of the effects of Whiteness - racism)?

Stage 2: In small groups, they are asked to then discuss:

- What was it like to talk about Whiteness (listening to multiple viewpoints on what talking Whiteness means, and does in the conversation with colleagues) and its effects of racism?

Stage 3: Each team in the organisation is invited to continue these discussions with team members, using a further four questions:

- What does Whiteness look like in our work/team (policies, mechanisms, language, concepts, methods, recruitment, supervision, team practices, management practices, internal communications, external communications and media etc.)?
- What does that do (effects, for example, race inequality, exclusion, marginalisation) and for whom?
- How is that responded to in the organisation?
- How could/do those responses maintain Whiteness, and institutionalised racism?

The questions seek to (a) raise awareness of racialisation in the moment – ‘race-making’; (b) make more visible the invisibility and centering of Whiteness, its machinations, its effects and

embeddedness in the organisation; they (c) create a context for listening to alternative accounts and realities of racialised staff, and (d) they invite an analysis of the ways in which Whiteness is reproduced - for example, in the ways in which it is denied, defended and justified – in daily practices, and how Whiteness scaffolds and reinforces institutionalised racism.

Stage 4: In larger organisations, multiple, facilitated, reflective spaces can be created across the organisation, initially according to grade or shared functions, followed by another round of reflective space discussions, where staff from all levels of the organisation may be mixed, providing opportunities for multiple conversations (using questions in stage 3), with the same staff, in different contexts. Power differentials between grades/ position, for example in mixed staff and management groups, can engender fear and silence, and simultaneously expose Whiteness in communication patterns. This needs prompt and sensitive facilitation, to raise awareness in the moment and to enable the group to bear witness to the impacts of these patterns, particularly on racialised staff.

Disrupting Whiteness then begins with the acknowledgement that there are powerful and invisible processes at play which reproduce Whiteness and racism, ‘out there’ and ‘right here’, within the organisation; intentionality is irrelevant (“I didn’t mean to...”). Benevolent motives, alongside declarations of “we are/I am not racist”, may be invoked defensively, but focussing on intentionality, beliefs and motives individualises racism and shifts attention away from the operations of Whiteness and structural racism. One response by the consultant may be to ask ‘what happens [to the discussion of institutional racism] when we invoke personal beliefs, intentions etc.?’; and acknowledge that a focus on intentionality and individual beliefs individualises the operations of structural power, at every level of the organisation, whilst blocking the exploration of how these responses often abruptly decentre the focus on institutional practices.

Stage 5: Sometimes, further reflective space meetings in mixed groups or staff choosing to participate in ‘racial affinity’ groups (Blitz and Kohl, 2012) or caucuses (Tamasese and Waldegrave, 1994), can be helpful, though the configuration of these groups and their boundaries and names need negotiation by prospective members. The proposition or the very existence of such groups, can create intense anxiety in systems, leading to disengagement, conflict and paralysis. These discussions can enable exploration of institutionalised polarities created along racialised identities (e.g., ‘White’, ‘Black’). They can support staff in identifying how difference is constructed and how assumptions of difference often essentialise difference and obscure sameness, and how assumptions of sameness (‘Asian’ or ‘Black’ or ‘White’) obscure varied experiences of racism and other intersecting inequalities (based on class, ablism, sexuality etc.) and ignore the heterogeneity in histories, including differential racialisation - how racialisation of groups of people changes historically, and within specific contexts. Subsequently bringing all groups and staff together again, to continue discussions, can deepen understanding of the complexity and multidimensional processes and consequences of Whiteness.

This process of multiple conversations, in different group configurations, guided by specific questions facilitates the disruption of Whiteness and dismantling of institutionalised racism: it is noticed, seen and no longer invisible; named and no longer subverted by a myopic focus on whether specific acts ‘really are racism or not’; and its operation and consequences better understood, the crushing weight of this work not held only by those impacted by racism. These conversations often instigate crises in organisations. The consultant, having created

these group structures and facilitated the conversations, has to bear witness to the fear and pain that this process creates; providing a space for continued safe uncertainty, as well as containment where hurt, despair, guilt, anger, sadness, bewilderment, hopelessness and hope all can have space; where genuine openness and respect for marginalised voices is nurtured. Anti-racism work is demanding for the consultant. It challenges the consultant in confronting their own biases, blind spots, fear at rendering visible Whiteness and their own race-making. For the organisation, anti-racism work can disrupt team and staff relationships, it can shake the foundations of the organisation, its stated mission and values and expose the scope (or narrowness) of its vision and organisational strategy. Fear of new institutional risks (and losses), arising as a result of working towards anti-racism, need to be named. The work of anti-racism challenges deeply-held beliefs in meritocracy and it questions intersectional advantages and their embeddedness in the fabric of organisations. It may thereby throw into question the very foundations and existence of organisations.

Sometimes, conflicts surface, teams stumble, become lost in rabbit-holes and staff may declare that they have done enough work or that the work is done, (and ‘real’ work must take priority once more) and they may retreat, repeatedly. Managers may call a halt, citing as justifications: “insufficient funds to do this work justice”; or external drivers and economic, political and social pressures “which mean that whilst this is important, we can’t prioritise this now”; and potential threats to future funding (e.g., in charities/non-governmental organisations) – “our supporters and funders will be worried and we cannot risk losing them”; and threats to organisational reputation – “we don’t want to be seen as radical”; incompatibility of this change process with current strategic priorities “we have other priorities”; inappropriate timing, desire to see where the end point is – “how long will this take”, “how will we know we’ve achieved anti-racism”, “are there any organisations that have achieved this, maybe this is simply unachievable/we can’t do this, it’s huge”. Racialised staff may withdraw, disillusioned and feel silenced, not heard, angry and betrayed; many staff may feel overwhelmed, guilty and helpless, and teams may collectively revolt against talking Whiteness, and demand “KPIs (key performance indicators), clear guidance and a roadmap with tangible, achievable milestones” and declare “just tell us what to do and how to get there”, in lieu of doing the work of anti-racism.

Acknowledging the hazards and disruptions of anti-racism work, and supporting staff to tolerate the angst and discomfort, to explore guilt, ambivalence and anger engendered by Whiteness and racism talk, can oil and encourage conversations to continue.

Reconfiguring and developing anti-racist praxis

Anti-racism methodology, as described in this paper, fosters critical reflexivity and empathy, and seeks to raise critical awareness of Whiteness and its dimensions in institutional racism at work, and in everyday practice, so that organisational structures and processes can be collectively dismantled, reimagined and creatively reconfigured, and practices can begin to transform. Making visible Whiteness is often met with resistance, not least because this challenges power relations and guarded concepts of meritocracy and equality, and the material interests and status derivatives of Whiteness. History attests to the ways in which Whiteness is affirmed and sustained by violence (Fanon, 1967), and in organisations, we may see robust, fierce, blaming, angry and silencing responses to the spotlighting and challenges to Whiteness and racism. Far from being a linear, stage process and inevitable, the reconfiguration in anti-racism praxis at work is cyclical, and reminiscent of Sisyphean labour

– institutionalised Whiteness and racism are recreated and affirmed repeatedly, and challenged and practices reconfigured, repeatedly.

This approach to anti-racism organisational consultancy differs from other approaches where the consultant might adopt an expert position, for example, in auditing and reviewing organisational policies, mechanisms and recruitment, progression, staff development practices, and analysing and problem-solving for the organisation, making recommendations and perhaps even providing a blue-print for change and a strategic road-map. In engaging all staff and management, at every level of the organisation, in anti-racism praxis, everyone is supported in unpacking Whiteness, in the organisation's stated values and mission statements, its policies, strategies and communication (website, materials, staff communication, leaflets for service users etc.). Recruitment (adverts, dissemination, job descriptions, personal specifications); selection processes (interview panels and questions, decision-making and feedback processes etc.); staff progression, supervision and support structures; as well as management and governance practice, may all be scrutinised – with the organisation itself doing the work of anti-racism. Ultimately, the work of anti-racism is to institutionalise anti-racism praxis.

Organisations may create new policies, heralded as evidence of ideological commitments to prevent and address racism, but without a rigorous examination of all organisational practices, these policies risk becoming performative Whiteness, virtue signalling and tokenistic. Staff can be supported to articulate their own aspirations of what racial equity would look like, for example, in pay, work conditions, support and progression opportunities, with genuine inclusion for racialised staff at every level of the organisation, and in decision-making processes. Organisations may review all their systems for monitoring and evaluation, support and supervision structures and practices, exit interviews and reporting; and their mechanisms for staff complaints and for ensuring accountability to people who use their services, racialised communities and other stakeholders. Structurally-embedded reflective spaces and ongoing discussion forums for staff (not as time-limited projects or initiatives) to discuss race equity, Whiteness and racism also help institutionalise anti-racism praxis.

In organisations offering therapeutic services, anti-racism praxis requires an honest analysis of Whiteness, not least because of the impacts of Whiteness on racialised people who may come to (or avoid) services. Such an analysis could include the interrogation of treasured concepts, theories, models and therapeutic practices; of language and methods used in therapy; of methods and measures used to assess outcome and the underpinning assumptions and values; and of communication (e.g., website, leaflets, letters to clients) and of the service design and delivery.

In professional training institutions, anti-racism praxis requires a systems-wide scrutiny of Whiteness in the profession and in training courses' values and orientating principles, their selection process (course selection criteria, interview and decision-making processes), curricula (foundational concepts, theories, methods), teaching (content, reading materials and case examples used, methods of teaching), assessment processes, placement/field experiences, trainee support and professional development structures and practices, placement supervision and research practices (teaching, supervision, epistemologies, methodologies). Providing cultural competency training, or teaching on difference and the Social GRRRAAACCEESSS (Burnham et al., 2008), can themselves reinforce Whiteness by falling into the traps of identity politics and essentialising culture and race, or ignoring Whiteness, for example, when teaching about gender, sexuality etc.

Genuine commitment from the senior leadership is fundamental to addressing institutional racism, and the participation of all senior and other managers, at every stage of this process underlines collective responsibility and decentres the leadership otherwise viewed as distant instigators of change, and beyond challenge. To support senior managers the consultant can provide individual support, as well as regular, group reflective spaces for all senior managers, to explore Whiteness and dimensions of institutional racism, to navigate their own discomfort and ambivalence about the change process and the future, to nurture anti-racism in their role, communications and relationships with staff. This spirit of collaborative accompaniment with managers and staff nurtures creative imagination and collective hope for a different way of working and potentially radical and transformative anti-racism praxis in the organisation.

Footsteps in the sand

The process of organisational change towards anti-racism praxis sometimes resembles footsteps in the sand: attempts to change are countered and any changes in practices are rapidly dissolved, herculean efforts seemingly erased. It is a process which is fitful, with intermittent bursts of determination and energy to ‘do’ something, and periods of fear, paralysis, withdrawal, exhaustion, ambivalence and resentment of the emotional and intellectual labour involved.

Some structural changes may be made swiftly, and senior leadership may make public declarations of commitment to racial equality and praise steps taken as ‘wins’ and as testament to organisational progress. Racialised staff may feel increasingly cast to the margins of the change process, particularly if they raise concerns, venture critiques and demand more, and they may feel silenced by colleagues’ exasperation (“what more do you want us to do then?”, “we just can’t seem to get it right whatever we do” etc.).

Relational changes in teams may include polarisation, othering, competitive deadlocks and mutual blame; dialogue is rejected as illusory consensus-building, for optics alone. Changes, including openness in naming and challenging Whiteness and racism in everyday work life may quickly dissolve into hurt, anger and a retreat into inaction and silence. Well-intentioned action plans to embed anti-racism practice may become trojans of normative Whiteness. For example, the introduction of mentoring schemes for racialised staff (to “better manage” the harm of racism, or to “develop skills to progress” in the organisation) – may seek to address institutional racism by framing the problem as a need to remedy assumed deficits in the racialised staff. Such schemes thereby protect and reproduce Whiteness, and mask institutionalised racism.

The work of anti-racism might be seen as a problem and as creating new problems – unsurprisingly, since previous patterns of communication and relationships are disrupted along racialised fault lines, which in turn disrupts patterns of behaviour and ways of working previously assumed to have been effective, and acceptable to all. For racialised staff in organisations, these disruptions and shifts may offer wisps of oxygen, a glimpse of a different work life. When power is directly named some staff may feel embarrassed, guilty, uncomfortable or resentful at the expectation that something, or their position, has to be surrendered. Where differences emerge (e.g., on how far a service policy is amended, or a training curriculum decolonised, or whether buildings are renamed), any nascent allyship to racialised staff may become lukewarm or elusive. Racialised staff may feel deflated, cynical, sad and hopeless when their colleagues express ambivalence, anger, guilt or seem indifferent.

It is not unusual for some racialised staff to declare, at this point, “there is no hope, it’s pointless”, “it’s not going to be any different to previous attempts to deal with racism”, “there will be a backlash”, “this will never change –because it works for them” and “I just have to keep my head down or get out, it’s killing me”. Change initiatives may be resisted, lose momentum, and sometimes collectively dissolved on the basis of (mis)timing - “we’re dealing with many other (more important) challenges” - and lack of institutional readiness (“perhaps we’re not quite ready for this”).

In avoiding the difficult and complex ongoing discussions on Whiteness and how it upholds institutionalised racism, the organisation may retreat to bureaucracy, and demand a road-map, key steps and tangible, short-term goals and measurable products. Legitimate as these requests may be, on their own they risk a venture into producing a list of actions to tackle racism. Constructing racism as static, and therefore as fixable with action-points rarely lead to sustainable change in institutionalised racism, since racism is operationalised and metamorphoses in different ways, all the time. These demands may reflect leadership anxiety about the risk of cataclysmic descent into the abyss of a dystopian organisation (“we just need to do something to stop this shaking up the organisation”, “we need to show we know where we are going and when we will get there”). Notwithstanding the need for management and collective accountability, and for effective monitoring and evaluation of change, the sole and narrow preoccupation with concrete goals and products misses the point of anti-racism. Indicators of racial equity may include proportional representativeness in the workforce at every level of the organisation, equal pay and work conditions, equal opportunities for progression, equal recognition of achievements etc. In isolation, however, they do not reflect process changes – the disruption and decentering of Whiteness in language used to talk about clients and communities; and in team communication, relationships, behaviours and practices; the awareness and understanding of racialisation in team practices and its effects in institutionalised racism, and impacts on individuals, families and communities; and the unexpected creative spaces where anti-racism praxis may thrive. Without ongoing disruption of Whiteness, organisational milestones are short-lived progress, footsteps in the sand.

Conclusions

Whiteness is pervasive and racism is not a flashpoint or a crisis. Racism is enduring and a resilient, inventive, dynamic and vigorous knotweed – the work of anti-racism, sadly, is never done. Racial equity and justice are an ongoing, collective challenge, for all public bodies, organisations and training institutions. Embracing this challenge requires actively *institutionalising* anti-racism – noticing in everyday practices how racialisation is normalised; naming, interrogating and unsettling Whiteness; and repeatedly dismantling institutionalised racism.

Institutionalising anti-racism praxis in organisations demands of everyone, and it costs everyone. Using different structures and forums, simultaneously, to support senior management and all staff to reflect on the different meanings the change (or lack) has for staff and its implications for staff relationships, is essential. Consultation is then, a process of accompanying organisations as they develop their own collaborative potential to hear diverse and intersectional experiences and views within the same organisation; and as they understand the processes of racialisation and Whiteness in the making, including in decisions to disband, pause, delay or halt the change process.

Anti-racism remains a collective imperative; it is everyone's business and collective responsibility, genuine solidarity and participation are essential - declarations of allyship and good intent simply do not suffice. It demands a collective drive for change and a long-term commitment, which requires courage, humility and stamina. Institutionalising anti-racism praxis is meant to take time, and it is meant to be hard work; the empire, after all, was not built in a day.

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