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Decolonising social work practice

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COMMUNITY CARE LIVE 2021

Decolonising social work practice

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**Professor of Social Work
and Social Policy**



Aims



- Examine key terms
- Introduce black perspectives
- Consider the challenges of developing social work practice to eradicate colonial influences
- Share key messages
- Explore organisational issues

Aims

- Examine the meanings of words in common usage carrying powerful messages such as *gesture politics and moral positioning*.
- Provide a safe place for participants to share issues and concerns relating to racism in the context of Black Lives Matter and decolonising social work practice.
- Focus on the challenges of eradicating racism and discrimination.

Definitions

Perspectives on racism and anti-racist practice

- Black Perspectives
- De-colonising practice
- Anti-racist practice
- Anti-discriminatory practice
- Black Lives Matter
- Gesture politics
- Moral positioning

- Lingering concerns and barriers
- Communication
- Successful organisations
- Improving services
- Messages to professionals
- Strategic areas for development

Black Perspectives



- The circumstances that shape Black Perspectives in social work stem from the experience of racism and powerlessness both **past** and present.
- Black Perspectives are rooted in the principle of racial equality and social justice underpinned by key academic and practitioner leaders under the auspices of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW, 1991 and Bhatti-Sinclair, 2011).

Colonisation

Global

- Commonwealth
- African
- Indigenous
- Native American
- African American
- Arabian

The countries of the UK

- Ireland
- Wales
- Scotland

Colonisation is based on exchange, trade, sexual relationships, inter-marriage, power and privilege.

Divide and rule and strategic alliances are critical to success.

Therefore, the

- colonised and coloniser have shared histories
- colonised can also be the colonisers
- colonised can contribute to colonisation

Colonising discourses are rooted in the distortion of the reality of the experience of the colonised.

This is reinforced by knowledge, power and privilege.

Personal experiences of colonisation

EXERCISE

Hands up if you have experienced the effects of colonisation or have a history of colonisation?



In small groups or pairs
discuss..

Experiences of colonisation as a resident of one of the four countries of the UK

- As an Irish person?
- As a Welsh person?
- As a Scottish person?
- As an English person?
- As a white person?
- As a woman or trans person?
- As a person with disabilities?
- As a working class person?

- As a Black person?
- As an Asian person?
- As a newly arrived migrant?
- As an established immigrant?
- As a professional?
- As a manager?
- As a leader?
- As a student?

Experiences of colonisation as a professional

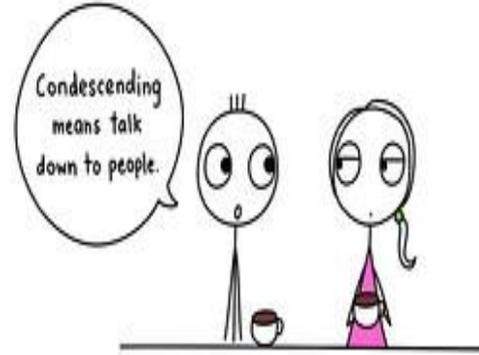
- In the workplace
- In the team
- In the work environment
- In management approaches
- In supervision
- In workplace relationships
- In performance management
- In allocation of work

- In registration and regulation
- In inspections
- In institutions
- In senior management systems
- In associations and unions
- In whistle blowing, complaints and grievance procedures
- In promotion and career progression systems

More Definitions

Anti-racist practice

Anti-racist practice is rooted in universal principles of racial equality and social justice, however, responses have often been superficial. Naik suggested in 1991 (page 157) that three approaches are used:



- **Technicist** – suggests that equality is added on rather than integral i.e. basic adherence to laws and policies.
- **Moral positioning** – rooted in ethnic sensitivity rather than real change.
- **Socio-political** – has a better focus on difference, identity, needs and aspirations.

The problem with a technician response

It is based on the assumption that the problems faced by black people are based on negatively valued systems and poor community support. Naik suggests that welfare solutions lie in the institutional power held within welfare systems.

The falsity of this assumption is that the resources of black people lie in white society. This is at once the tragedy of history and the most fundamental barrier to change.

The entire social work system seems to be predicated on this false assumption...

... the fundamental self-esteem, the nurturance and the sustenance remains in black families and communities.

(Naik, page 162, March 1995).

Moral positioning

‘when we argue for recognition of a difference we are not necessarily morally approving or disapproving of that difference. This does not mean that recognition is beyond the scope of moral principles for moral principles will indeed limit what we can recognise.

Recognition should not infringe the fundamental rights of individuals or cause harm to others. What this means in practice will sometime be unclear and contested.

We are not being asked to approve or disapprove in any ultimate way but allow co-presence, public support, interaction and redefinition’.

(Maddood, 2007, pp 67-68)

BLM legitimises anti-racism and gives the movement public status. It also influences attitudes, mores and actions of the rest of society.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Social Work

BLM has provided...

- Re-energised focus on strategic policy development
- Strategic commitment (BASW, JUCSWEC and SWE)
- Race equality leads (BASW and SWE)
- Data on experiences of racism (SWE/PSW survey and SC WRES pilot)
- Work on de-colonising and liberating social work practice

BUT...

- More about moral positioning than real change
- Lack of coherence
- Reluctance on zero-tolerance statements
- Competing rights (for example: institution/structural vs individual)

Gesture Politics

The Cambridge Dictionary defines gesture politics as:

*‘Any action by a person or organisation done for political reasons and intended to **attract public attention** having little real effect’.*

Football fans have a right to boo the England team for “taking the knee” in protest at racism, the Home Secretary said.

Priti Patel said the anti-racism protest associated with the BLM movement amounted to “gesture politics” and dodged a question about whether she would boo herself.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/priti-patel-taking-knee-boo-england-b1865409.html>

Is taking the knee gesture politics?

**What is your....
moral position on eradicating our
colonial history?**

**What positive actions are you
prepared to take to....
redress colonial influences?**



**What do you think about gesture
politics?**

**Has taking the knee influenced
your ideas?**

**Is there an equivalent of taking
the knee in social work practice?**

**Can any gesture lead to real,
meaningful change?**

Lingering Concerns

BASW 2021



**White
privilege
zone**

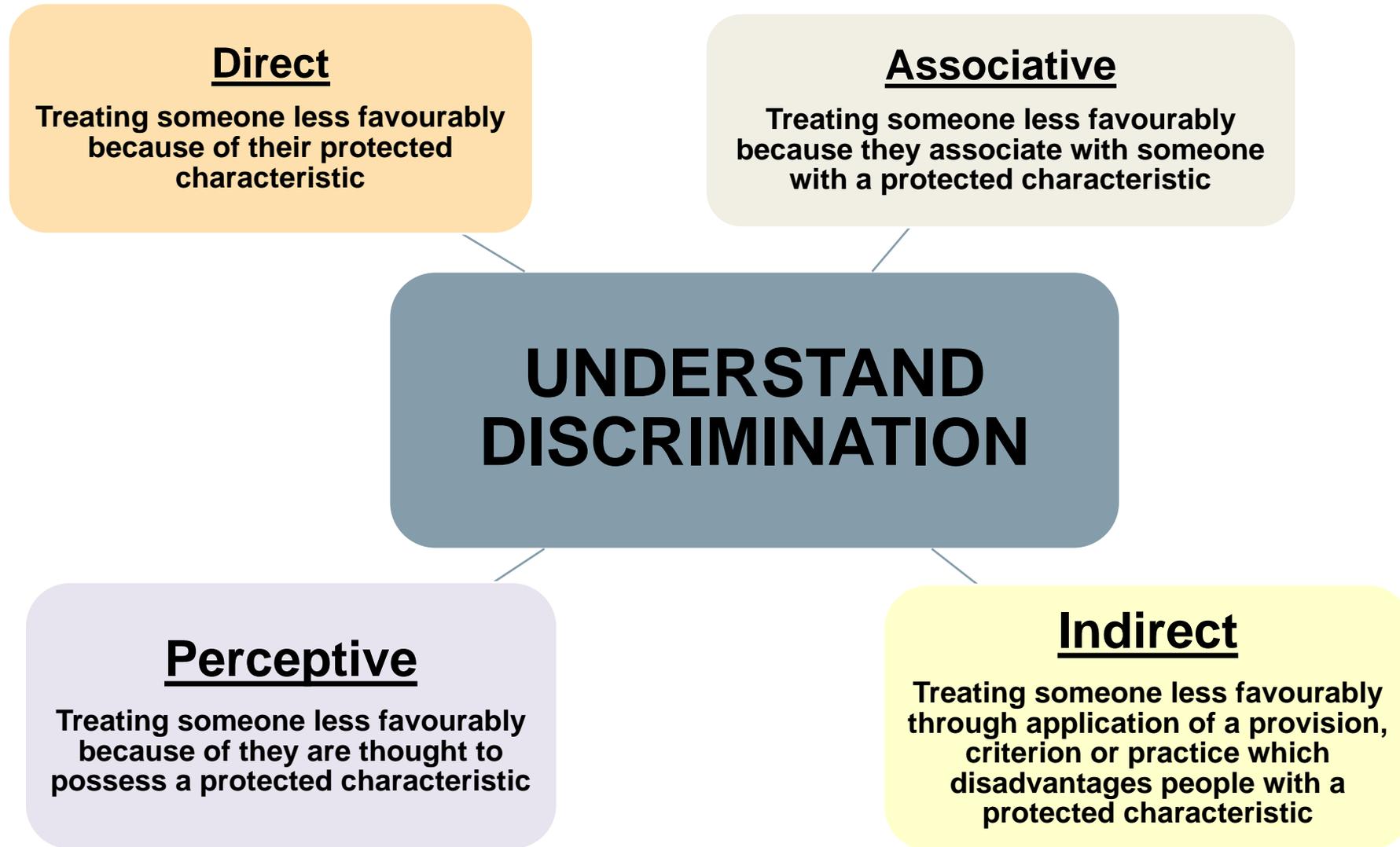
**Fear, denial
and anxiety
zone**

**Where do
you stand
on racism?**

**Train,
educate and
learn zone**

**Grow,
promote
and
challenge
zone**

Duties under the Equality Act 2010



Question ...

We are all associated with the history of colonisation.

What does **associative and perceptive** discrimination mean to you?



Intentional and Unintentional Discrimination

	Understand discrimination	Challenge discrimination
INTENTIONAL	Recognise and minimise overt bias and racism stemming from colonial history.	Demonstrate sensitivity, awareness and knowledge colonial influences. Challenge activity rooted in history.
UNINTENTIONAL	Recognise and minimise subtle bias and prejudice (i.e. unsaid ways of working) in organisational structures, systems and teams.	Eliminate group and institutional discrimination and oppression. Evidence commitment to universal conventions and equality laws. Change policies and procedures.

Barriers to anti-racist communication

- Black Lives Matter and decolonisation seen as **an add on requiring additional resources**
- Eurocentric **organisational cultures** pervasive
- Limited knowledge on the impact of British history on contemporary practice
- **Academics threatened by** new knowledge
- Professional fear of **being held responsible for past atrocities**

Practice is only as good as procedural guidance.

Standards legitimate the profession but are based on Eurocentric, majority driven ideas rooted in philanthropy, patronage and charity.

Regulators and policy makers are driven by the need to protect professional:

- neutrality;
- legitimacy and status;
- elitism;
- knowledge.

INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATION

- Selective use of words and actions.
- Poor interactive, interpersonal, verbal and non-verbal skills.
- Lack of fluency in communicating ideas and validating experiences.
- Relationships based on limited personal experience.
- Inability to empathise.
- Underdeveloped intuition.

GROUP COMMUNICATION

- Generalisations, stereotypes and labels.
- Decisions based on assumptions.
- Collective perspectives based on historical ways of working.
- Poor use of practice evidence and lived experiences.
- Assessment of individual or group needs as a set of problems.

- ✓ ***Cultural norms.***
- ✓ ***Unintended consequences.***
- ✓ ***Discriminatory taken-for-granted ways of doing things.***
- ✓ ***Dominant cliques.***
- ✓ ***Indirect exclusions.***
- ✓ ***Unconscious bias.***

Organisations sustain racism and unequal outcomes for Black people

.... even in organisations with better intent.

**Wayne Reid, BASW,
April 2021**

Improving Services and Systems

What can we do?

Zero tolerance of
racism and
discrimination

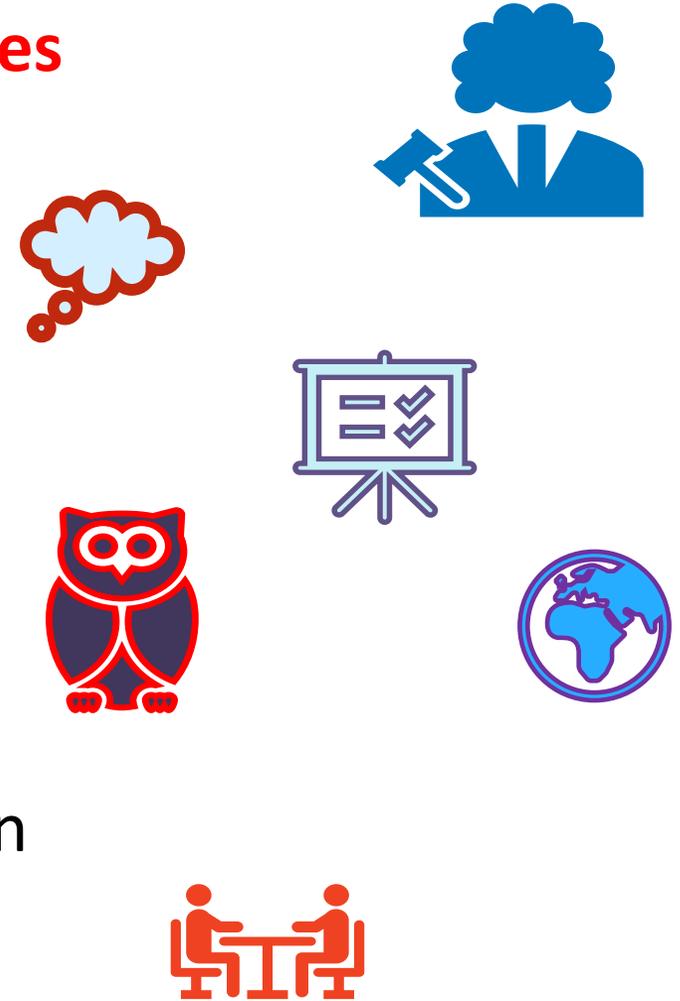


Learn about:

- *Anti-racist perspectives from other countries of the world e.g. the Commonwealth.*
- *Colonial histories from British citizens.*
- *Racism and sectarianism in the 4 countries of the UK.*

What can we do?

- Uphold **laws and duties which address past atrocities**
- Scrutinise **professional standards for bias**
- Exchange and value **indigenous knowledge**
- Create read lists which include **black writers**
- Look for global evidence of best practice
- Invest in indigenous **research methodologies**
- Promote opportunities for black **networking**
- **Audit** structure and systems for institutional racism
- **Act** on staff experiences of racism and discrimination
- Look for and challenge **micro aggressions**



Messages for **professionals** and employers

- **Value debate**
 - **Promote openness**
 - **Make allies**
 - **Seek feedback**
 - **Act on complaints**
 - **Support and guide**
 - **Take direction**
 - **Reflect and learn**
 - **Challenge thoughtfully**
- **Provide easy to access systems**
 - **Believe and intervene**
 - **Respond personally and formally**
 - **Give detailed information on changes**
 - **Give credit**
 - **Celebrate achievements**
 - **Review and audit**
 - **Take it on the chin**

Messages for organisations

DON'T...

- Conflate the experience of racism with other discriminatory actions
- Deny, downplay and dismiss
- Appropriate cultural practices
- Compete with black people
- Act indifferently
- Fear open discussion of colonial racism and discrimination
- Respond defensively to history

DO

- Be guided and led by black staff on experiences of racism
- Set people up to succeed
- Lead by example
- Incorporate anti-racism within aims, objectives and service improvement outcomes
- Test and assess attitudes and behaviours sensitively

Successful organisations

DON'T

- See language as the main and only problem
- Shorten or westernise names
- Dismiss unusual words or terms
- Discuss colonial privilege
- Assume privilege is shared
- Stereotype
- Make judgements
- Deal with real life problems

DO

- Examine the power and impact of language, accent, tone and general demeanour.
- Reflect on the origin of names such as 'Sinclair' in relation to colonialism.
- Ask all staff to share ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds.
- Consider the underlying reasons for lumping groups together.

Successful organisations

- See diversity as an institutional strength
- Have positive approaches to accountability
- Reward good practice
- Refer to global indicators of success
- Spot and encourage talent
- Incentivise innovatory approaches to service improvement

- Collect data on ethnicity, promotions and pay gaps
- Examine racial disparities
- Put in place positive measures themed around equalities and anti-racism
- Encourage evidence and research based practice from global sources
- Support external funding for specific projects

Strategic Areas for Development

- **Data:** should be collected and shared in order to inform processes and actions.
- **Standards:** should address colonialism in a coherent and consistent way.
- **Communication:** should be transparent at all levels.
- **Engagement:** should be honest about the origins of the profession.
- **Professionals:** journey, voice and engagement needs to be acknowledged and tracked in relation to colonial histories.
- **Regulators:** should put in place targeted measures to support registrants.
- **Systems and procedures:** should be scrutinised for historical bias.

In conclusion...

There is a great deal of work to be done! The Black Lives Matter movements has provided a window of opportunity to engage with race and racism in a meaningful way.

There is more energy and enthusiasm now than for many decades... so we must seize the day!

Follow:

- Wayne Reid Twitter: @wayne-reid79
- Social Work Anti-Racist Social Work Education Network
Twitter **#SWEARN**

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Thank you!

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