

The sheer weight of Whiteness: Race and Higher Education

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The Macpherson report: A brief history

Origins: Murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993;

Racist murder not unique but this particular case resonated with people across society;

Stephen's parents search for justice eventually led to a judicial inquiry in 1997 chaired by Lord Macpherson;

The inquiry report was published in 1999 and its findings accepted by the government.

Macpherson report: Findings

- ‘The conclusions to be drawn from all the evidence in connection with the investigation of Stephen Lawrence’s racist murder are clear. There is no doubt but that there were fundamental errors. The investigation was marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers’ (Macpherson, 1999: Para 46.1).

Macpherson report: Reception

- ‘The inquiry’s assessment is clear and sensible. In my view, any long-established, white-dominated organisation is liable to have procedures, practices and a culture that tend to exclude or to disadvantage non-white people. The report makes 70 wide-ranging recommendations, and I welcome them all’ (Home Secretary, Hansard, 1999: Col 391).

Barriers to race equality in higher education

- BME staff are disadvantaged in terms of recruitment, employment status and career progression, with some reporting experiences of racial discrimination and harassment (Carter et al, 1999);
- BME students are less likely to be found in old universities, more likely to drop out, less likely to be awarded good honours degrees and more likely to do less well in the labour market (Connor et al, 2004)

Government initiatives for the promotion of race equality in HE

- FOR STUDENTS widening participation strategies;
- FOR STAFF equal opportunity policies as part of human resources strategies;
- Both were colour blind strategies;
- The Race Relations (Amendment) Act, 2000 prioritised race and identified in addition to the general duties specific duties for HEIs.

Widening participation strategies, class and the marginalising of race/ethnicity

- The funding letters never mention race or ethnicity but invariably refer to social class or a proxy measure of it
- The performance indicators used are wholly class based
- Many policy documents selectively use particular pieces of research to make the case that the under-representation of...ethnic minorities has been largely solved

The result is that 'the needs of BME learners are mostly rolled up into generic widening participation policies' which effectively means that 'BME participation is dropping off the agenda' (Aimhigher, 2006)

WP and the specific needs of BME students

- Under-representation in prestigious universities: Students from minority ethnic backgrounds are 'far more likely to study less prestigious subjects in less prestigious institutions' (Jary & Jones, 2006)
- Under-achievement in good honours degrees: The sector is prioritising pre-entry and access initiatives at the expense of interventions once students have entered HE' (Thomas, May et al, 2005)

Equal opportunities initiatives, gender and the marginalising of race/ethnicity

- The creation of the Equality Challenge Unit;
- The requirement of human resources strategies to address equal opportunities as part of special funding to reward and develop staff
- Both initiatives were evaluated positively in 2005 (HEFCE) BUT
- The evaluations reveal that many key staff do not believe in the importance of EO, and other research indicates that many staff are in fact highly sceptical of the efficacy of equal opportunities policies (Deem et al, 2005) AND
- 'Activities undertaken...appear to have had the greatest impact on the role and reward of women in the majority of institutions' and as a result 'the role of minority ethnic groups...has received much less emphasis...compared to the emphasis on gender equality' (HEFCE, 2005)

Race Relations (Amendment) Act

- Under the RRAA, HEIs were obliged to develop race equality policies and plans by May 2002;
- This prompted a flurry of activity in HEIs as policies and plans were developed often for the first time;
- These policies and plans were audited, on behalf of HEFCE, by the ECU in 2003;
- Some progress was evident compared to 1999 when very few HEIs had any specific race equality policies (Carter et al, 1999);
- The initial audit conducted by Gus John found 45 (out of 130) HEIs still to be noncompliant in 2003;
- Subsequent audits by OPM (2004) were less scathing than the initial audit and highlighted the progress made

The interacting dynamics of institutional racism

- Is there evidence of 'indirect discrimination' in the services provided for members of minority ethnic groups?
- Are 'employment practices' racially inequitable?
- Is the 'occupational culture' ethnically inclusive?
- Is the 'staffing structure' one in which senior staff are disproportionately white?
- Is there a 'lack of positive action' in involving members of minority ethnic groups in decision-making?
- Do 'management and leadership' consider the task of addressing institutional racism a high priority?
- How widespread is 'professional expertise' in intercultural communication?
- Is there evidence of relevant high quality 'training'?
- How much 'consultation' is there with representatives from minority communities?
- Is there a 'lack of information' on the organisation's impact on minority communities? (Parekh, 2000: 74-75).

The interacting dynamics of racism at Midshire

- Indirect discrimination HIGH/MEDIUM
- Unfair employment practices HIGH
- Racism in the occupational culture MEDIUM/LOW
- White senior management HIGH
- Lack of positive action HIGH
- Low priority given to race equality HIGH
- Low expertise in intercultural issues HIGH
- Inadequate training in race and community relations
MEDIUM
- Poor consultation with minority ethnic communities HIGH
- Lack of information on the impact of policies, practices and
procedures MEDIUM/LOW

Summary 1

- HEIs need to be prompted to take action to promote race equality;
- Action was other government agendas relating to community cohesion have subsequently marginalised one concerned with race equality particularly evident in the period, 2002-03;
- Arguably (Pilkington, 2008);
- Massive lacunae still remain;
- BME academic staff continue to experience significant disadvantage in higher education ten years after the publication of the Macpherson report (Leathwood et al, 2009; ECU, 2011) and BME students continue to be less likely to be awarded good honours degrees (Brooke & Nicholls, 2007; HEA, 2008)

Summary 2

- Universities are complacent: they see themselves as liberal and believe existing policies ensure fairness
- They ignore adverse outcomes and do not see combating racial/ethnic inequalities as a priority
- This points to the sheer weight of whiteness (if not institutional racism)

Implications for us

- We are good at gazing outwards, identifying for example the need for a more ethnically balanced police force and the need for a more evidence based penal policy
- And yet we remain oblivious of inequalities in our midst and the need to ensure that our own policies and procedures are evidence based