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ORGANISATIONS, RACE & TRAUMA



Birkbeck
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



SIGNPOSTING RESOURCES IN THE WAKE OF GEORGE FLOYD'S DEATH

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The Trauma

The world has witnessed the reactions to George Floyd's death in the USA. Traumatic images have circulated not only about George's death, but also the violence experienced by peaceful protesting individuals. Graphic images and video clips have been widely circulated on social media, unfortunately often without any trigger warning signposting potentially distressing content. This happened during the COVID-19 crisis when the UK and many other countries have been operating social distancing, meaning that many individuals are not able to access sources of support. Clearly, George's death is not an isolated, tragic one-off incident. Racial prejudice continues to be rife and is embedded as institutional racism. It is also clear that individuals, in particular members of the BAME (Black, Asian, Ethnic Minorities) community, are experiencing strong reactions to what they have witnessed. This makes many individuals distressed and some traumatised.

Introduction to this Guide

This brief guide is intended as a 'first stop' resource to help individuals understand:

- a) A brief outline of **Institutional Racism** so that individuals can read up and better inform themselves about the context– with the caveat that some content might be distressing
- b) The role of **Activism**
- c) An explanation of **Racially Traumatic Events** which affect people at work and in their private lives



- d) Some **Practical Strategies** to help individuals cope with the trauma they have witnessed
- e) Further resources about **Tackling Racism in Education** and decolonising the curriculum which contain advice, facts and guidance. Much of this information may be of interest to the wider community.

Institutional Racism

The following section provides a brief overview of racism and institutional racism to offer the reader context. This is meant to encourage individuals to recognise that racially traumatic events are not due to individual faults or failure but are deeply engrained systemic issues. Racism refers to the belief that some races are better or more superior than others and this results in racial prejudice and discrimination, including reactions and behaviours marked by hostility against individuals and/or groups. **Institutional racism** happens when racism is expressed through the practice of social and political institutions and organisations. The results are differences between people regarding their access to employment, housing, political and organisational power and education, as well as a range of other outcomes.

In the UK, a landmark case was that of Stephen Lawrence - a black teenager who was murdered just over 20 years ago. There were numerous failings in how the police dealt with the crime. Sir William MacPherson, the chairman of the subsequent investigation resulting in [the Report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry \(1999\)](#) defined such 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 behaviour which amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people” (p. 49).”

This definition describes that some expressions of racism may be intentional, whereas other expressions might be due to lack of consideration of the potential impact of actions on others. Such expressions and behaviours accumulate over time, so that they become ‘normal’ and not questioned. It becomes hard to speak out, or

do things differently, when prejudice and discrimination are either overtly and/ or silently tolerated. It might be helpful to reflect on the issue of racism from a critical perspective to consider both the conscious and unconscious effects of discourses of racism¹.

For readers who would like to know more, [JSTOR has put together an online guide](#) as a teaching resource which is informative, but also makes for uncomfortable reading. We advise that you read these sources selectively and talk them through with members of your community. We recommend not to read these on your own as the content may be upsetting. But reading these might help you understand why racism has such a long history.

Given that the violence in the George Floyd case came from police officers, it is necessary to ask why this is happening. The issue is complex, not least as there are thousands of police forces in the US, and the training can be very short. Cultural and institutional factors also play a key role. In the UK, black males in 2018/19 were more than six times more likely to be stopped and searched which has been a persistent issue². Police forces need to promote positive attitudes and behaviours that current and prospective police officers have towards people of other backgrounds through recruitment and selection, training and more community focused ways of operating³. People working in police forces should reflect the diversity of society. Police officers should also be personally accountable which needs to be instilled through practical, scenario-based and realistic training which needs to encompass a broad human rights perspective.

The Role of Activism

Racism continues to exist because it is institutionalised and tolerated. Activists take a stance and speak out openly against such injustice to ensure that marginalised

¹ For further reading please see: Hook, D. (2004). Fanon and the psychoanalysis of racism. London: LSE Research Online. Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/2567>. Accessed June 2020

² UK Government (2020). Stop and search. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/policing/stop-and-search/latest>

³ White, M. D., & Escobar, G. (2008). Making good cops in the twenty-first century: Emerging issues for the effective recruitment, selection and training of police in the United States and abroad. *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*, 22(1-2), 119-134.

voices are heard and call for change. In other words, their aim is deep and lasting social change. History has witnessed many examples including Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman and Claudette Colvin. [John Amaechi](#) has written about how standing up to hate is everyone's responsibility and an '[ordinary, daily routine](#)'. He advocates passionately that simply posting messages of solidarity on social media is not enough. People should all target ignorance and behaviours that are wrong and counteract these and in the moment. Where individuals witness a behaviour or practice which impacts on others because of prejudice, hatred or ignorance, there is a need to call this up and challenge. The more this is done, the greater the momentum.

All this begins with education, with numerous articles, books, videos, podcasts, film and television series, and other resources available to deepen understanding of anti-racism work. This includes the [Black Lives Matter website](#) which provides tools for understanding the movement's goals and resources for taking action. Beyond this, consider donating to support anti-racism (one suggestion [here](#)) and black rights charities and movements, sign petitions and write to your MP.

It is important that we recognise and reflect on our implicit biases (beliefs that influence our behaviour without us being aware). [The American Association for Psychological Science has put together a useful online resource](#) which explains this, as well as relevant concepts such as the role of culture and social processes which sustain them.

What are Racially Traumatic Events? How can organisations support their people?

Racially traumatic events, including physical and verbal violence and brutality, have acute and lasting effects on people at work and in their private lives⁴. Individuals who are affected by this are likely to experience a range of negative emotions and

⁴ For a thorough overview, please refer to: McCluney, C. L., Bryant, C. M., King, D. D., & Ali, A. A. (2017). Calling in Black: A dynamic model of racially traumatic events, resourcing, and safety. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*.



reactions such as anger, anxiety, sadness, and helplessness⁵⁶. As a result, they may avoid their places of work and colleagues. But in doing so they may also cut off valuable sources of support. It follows that organisations need to create a safe space for individuals to recover from racial trauma which is a form of psychological injury; which affects people's capacity to cope, can cause physical harm and can make people feel as if their life is at threat⁷. Such trauma may be experienced first-hand, or vicariously through observation and conversation. This threatens people's identity – their sense of self.

A chain of reactions then happens. Where people identify strongly with a victim of racial trauma, this threatens their own sense of worth, which takes away from their social and psychological resources. The result is that they feel less well, and disengage from others. The important thing to note here is that witnessing such racial trauma increases the likelihood that individuals of the same race also feel threatened⁸.

What can Organisations do?

It is important to communicate compassion and engage in meaningful conversations which signal genuine interest and concern. Leaders and managers should openly voice support. Everyone should provide the scope and support to strengthen their racial identity for instance by partaking in movements and being members of support and lobby groups. Long term, organisations need to make sure that they consider diverse perspectives as part of strategy and long term planning to increase resources. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) [has a range of general resources about building and managing diverse and inclusive organisations](#). This includes asking challenging questions about representation at

⁵ Smith, W. Jr (2010), "The impact of racial trauma on African Americans", African American Men and Boys Advisory Board, The Heinz Endowments, Pittsburgh, PA. Available at: www.heinz.org/userfiles/impactofracialtraumaonafricanamericans.pdf

⁶ Smith, W. Jr (2010), "The impact of racial trauma on African Americans", African American Men and Boys Advisory Board, The Heinz Endowments, Pittsburgh, PA, available at: www.heinz.org/userfiles/impactofracialtraumaonafricanamericans.pdf (accessed June, 2020).

⁷ Bryant-Davis, T. (2007). Healing requires recognition: The case for race-based traumatic stress. *The Counselling Psychologist*, 35(1), 135-143.

⁸ Perry, B. L., Harp, K. L., & Oser, C. B. (2013). Racial and gender discrimination in the stress process: Implications for African American women's health and well-being. *Sociological Perspectives*, 56(1), 25-48.



senior levels. The racial wage gap within an organisation has been reported as bigger than the gender wage gap by a [recent symposium](#). Other important issues are how systematic power is perpetuated, under- and precarious employment of BAME workers and whether an organisation can influence its community and supply chain. The [McGregor-Smith Review](#) provides a helpful overview of how to manage diverse talent. Psychological research shows us that in order for everyone to thrive, workplaces need to be psychologically safe, where people's value and worth is demonstrated in an inclusive way, trust is high and learning is shared⁹.

Researchers have also written about the profound impact of 'mega threats' – highly publicised events such as the recent murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. Like other forms of racial violence, they can lead to individuals thinking negative thoughts and feelings which are likely to have a profound impact. Individuals from minority groups who otherwise choose to 'blend in', might become compelled to speak out and assert their identities. This can lead to 'pro-group voice', so speaking on behalf of others, and 'relational bridging', forming meaningful high-quality connections with diverse individuals. Both are helpful activities as they increase social capital – so a rich network of connections with good relationships and mutual support. For this to happen, it is important that the organisation signals that inclusion is important, diversity is celebrated and that leaders are compassionate.

In summary, the following is needed to counteract racial trauma and build inclusive organisations:

- a. Listen, and be compassionate – this must include leaders at the top, who need to voice understanding and support.
- b. Give people the space and time to voice their feelings and thoughts.
- c. Encourage the building of connections and advocacy for the minority.
- d. Create psychological safety: build trust, encourage learning and mutual support and compassionate leadership.

For individuals this means having the courage to speak out and to actively seek out others in solidarity.

⁹ McCluney, C. L., Bryant, C. M., King, D. D., & Ali, A. A. (2017). Calling in Black: A dynamic model of racially traumatic events, resourcing, and safety. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*.

Dealing with Trauma – What Can You Do?

The first step is acknowledging that trauma is a real experience. The effects of vicarious trauma can be as profound as having witnessed trauma first-hand. The previous section has given an overview of racially traumatic events. This section is aimed at individuals who feel traumatised and are looking for support.

The British Psychological Society has [a brief guide](#) on what happens after trauma. A whole range of reactions is normal, and people will react in different ways. Some will want to talk; others want a period of quiet reflection for instance. Social support from trusted individuals is crucial. Psychological symptoms may include anxiety, feeling helpless or low and negative thoughts. A simple framework for recognising and dealing with negative thoughts to increase resilience, which is based on good evidence, has been developed by the [British Army using the acronym CALM](#). This practical framework encourages you to be curious about your thoughts, accept where a situation is tough, label how you feel and then move on by focusing on something you can control:

C urious	“I feel so upset at the moment. This situation is so awful.”	Notice how you feel.
A ccept	“This is a crisis situation for everyone – around the world.”	Accept that there are events you cannot change.
L abel	“I notice that I feel upset.”	Label what you are thinking.
M ove on	Direct your attention to things you can control.	Do something – e.g. join an activism group, distract yourself by listening to powerful music to lift you up.

Physical symptoms might include feeling tired or experiencing disrupted sleep or appetite. It is important to try and facilitate a good sleep routine by having quiet time before going to sleep and staying off social media. It is also important to keep



hydrated and keep up an exercise routine. It is very important to watch out whether any of the symptoms persist over time. If so, seeking help from qualified specialists such as a counsellor or medical professional may be needed.

[Black Lives Matter have a resource on healing](#) that covers what to do before, during and after an action that some may find helpful. This includes behaviours relating to self-care, community building, group processes and reflection.

More generally, the [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#) approach draws on the research evidence to provide five ways we can better look after our wellbeing. We provide you with general examples, but also from an activist perspective, so learning from those who further racial equality actively to help you find examples and strategies which are particularly relevant in this context.

Ways to Wellbeing	General Examples	An Activist Perspective
Be active	Walk, cycle, run, take up yoga. Find an activity that you enjoy.	Join a march. Hand out leaflets or put up posters. Speak out and talk to others.
Connect with others	For example, speak to a friend or colleague about what you are thinking and experiencing.	Talk to other people around you about this topic. Who can you learn from? Who can you challenge?
Take notice	For example, reflect on what is going on around you. Still your mind.	Notice how you feel. How are people around you reacting?
Learn something new	Learning new things helps us build self-esteem. For example, sign up for a course, learn a new skill or read a good book.	Learn more about the protest, BAME experiences and anti-racism efforts.
Give back	Giving back to others makes us feel good. For example, volunteer in your community, help others with shopping/ tasks.	Join a network or movement.



Other strategies which are likely to be helpful in this particular context are:

- a) Increasing our self-observation, and taking action when we become too preoccupied, such as seeking help from a qualified counsellor through the Birkbeck Employee Assistance Scheme
- b) Being aware of shouldering personal responsibility for events which are outside our personal control, and taking steps to balance such a perspective
- c) Prioritising self-care during difficult times and communicating to others that this is necessary.

Further information on tackling racism and decolonising the curriculum

People are reacting to the events in various ways. Some are protesting online, some joined actual protests on the streets, others feel the need to educate themselves and increase their knowledge. For those who are involved in teaching and curriculum design, it is vital to recognise that teaching content in universities typically represent a Euro-centric perspective as the dominant perspective, with a distinct lack of representation of alternative voices, readings, research and ideas¹⁰. There is now a strong movement to tackle racism in education and ‘decolonise curricula’ to challenge, and counteract, hidden assumptions about race, education, and intersectionality rooted in the history of colonialism. Decolonising the curriculum therefore refers to: *“Creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum, and with respect to what is being taught and how it frames the world.”*¹¹.

- It is beyond the scope of this report to explore this in depth, but there are again numerous useful resources to inform and guide this process: [Building the Anti-Racist Classroom](#).

¹⁰ Charles, Elizabeth. 2019. “Decolonizing the Curriculum”. *Insights* 32 (1): 24. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.475>

¹¹ Keele University, “Keele Manifesto for Decolonising the Curriculum,” <https://www.keele.ac.uk/raceequalitycharter/raceequalitycharter/keeledecolonisingthecurriculum>



- [Decolonising psychology creates possibilities for social change](#) (The Conversation)
- [To decolonise the curriculum, we have to decolonise ourselves](#) (WONKHE)
- [Decolonizing the curriculum](#) (UKSG)
- [Decolonising the curriculum: what's all the fuss about?](#) (SOAS)
- [Academics: it's time to get behind decolonising the curriculum](#) (The Guardian)
- [We don't just need warm words. We need actions](#) (The Psychologist)
- [Decolonising among clinicians](#) (The Psychologist, March 2020):
- The March issue of [the Psychologist](#), which covers issues such as the lack of progress in anti-racism within the discipline and the profession and where the two articles above came from.

Where to find further support information with regards to your wellbeing and mental health

1. Looking after your mental health:

[Every Mind Matters](#)

[Mind](#)

[Samaritans](#)

2. Tips to help you talk about mental health:

[Take Time to talk](#) (now called Psychological Therapies)

[Time to Talk Day](#)

3. Resources, tools and guides to help you manage mental health at work:

[ACAS managing mental health at work](#)

[Mental Health at Work](#)

4. Evidence summaries and evidence based resources for work, health and wellbeing: [Affinity work, health and wellbeing hub](#)



Summary

The recent events have affected many individuals and communities deeply. This resource pack has deliberately taken a diverse perspective to help individuals understand some of the context to the events, why strong reactions are normal and how to deal with such reactions at a time when access to usual sources of social support is more limited than usual. We also leave our readers with resources for further reading. Putting this guide together has been an educational and moving experience. Racism has no place in modern international and intercultural societies. It's time to fast-track change. It is important to keep ourselves well so that we can channel our energies where they are likely to contribute to such change.

Biographies

Professor Almuth McDowall

A Professor of Organisational Psychology and heads up the department as one of the Assistant Deans in BEI. Her research is driven by practical issues and focused on helping individuals and organisations better balance their working lives, as well as how to foster professional learning and development.

Dr Kevin Teoh

A Chartered Psychologist and the Programme Director for MSc Organizational Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London. His primary research interests are around developing healthier workplaces, and the translation of research into practice, policy and public dissemination.

Dr Uracha Chatrakul Na Ayudhya

Uracha is Lecturer in Organizational Psychology and Programme Director of MSc Human Resource Management at Birkbeck, University of London. Uracha's research focuses on the intersection of gender, race and ethnicity, nationality, and life course transitions in shaping working lives. Uracha is Editor of the journal *Work, Employment and Society*.

Mark Stringer

Mark spent over thirty years working within organisations in a number of areas and is now a lecturer and programme director in the Department of Organizational. His research interests lie in qualitative approaches, influenced by both Critical Management Studies and postmodern/poststructuralist/psychoanalytic interpretations of organisational life.

Dr Rachel Lewis

A registered occupational psychologist, specialising in work, health and well-being. Her work focuses on understanding how those working in inherently stressful and difficult occupations and job roles, continue to do what they do. Rachel leads the



Professional Doctorate in Organizational Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London and is co-Director of Affinity Health at Work, working in a job share arrangement with Rachel Lewis across both roles.

Dr Jo Yarker

An organizational psychologist, specialising in work, health and well-being. Her work focuses on supporting people to thrive at work, particularly when they are experiencing times of challenge or vulnerability. Jo leads the Professional Doctorate in Organizational Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London and is co-Director of Affinity Health at Work, working in a job share arrangement with Rachel Lewis across both roles.

Dr Kate Mackenzie-Davey

As a senior lecturer, Kate is also a Chartered Psychologist, she publishes on a range of topics including identity at work with a recent paper focused on the experiences of migrant workers. She is Dean of College which is a pastoral role.

Dr Alexandra Beauregard

Alexandra's research interests are centred on the work-life interface, flexible working arrangements, and diversity management, with a particular focus on gender identity and gender equality. She has published widely on these topics in academic journals and in practitioner outlets, as well as authoring chapters in a number of edited scholarly books and teaching-oriented texts. Alexandra has carried out commissioned research for both public- and private-sector organisations.

Dr Caroline Kamau

Caroline is a senior lecturer in the department of Organizational Psychology. She specialises in research about occupationally preparing medical doctors, nurses and patients. She is a member of the Birkbeck Centre for Medical Humanities; her research has widely featured in the national press.



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