

The enemy within: the isolated B in BAME



Let's face it, no one wants to talk race – for some it is inelegant or frankly improper, for others it blurs the lines of political correctness, but for most of us it's just outright uncomfortable! Yet whatever group we identify with, race is something we cannot circumvent nor ignore. It surreptitiously pervades every aspect of our existence.

With all good intentions

Black, Asian and Ethnic Minorities (BAME) initiatives are the epitome of new-age inclusion efforts that attempt to address racial inequities in a White eurocentric hegemony. Notwithstanding the BAME acronym has been hailed erroneous and remains ambiguous, even to the 7.6 million people it is said to represent ([ONS, 2011](#)). BAME statistics are often used as a barometer of diversity, but the BAME aggregate creates statistical lacerations that do not acknowledge the varied experiences and differential opportunities afforded to this vastly heterogenic group. It is a group lumbered together under one inappropriate umbrella of oneness that conveniently assimilates to a bigoted dichotomy of White and 'other'. Rather unsurprisingly, therefore, BAME policies designed to foster equality often fall short ([Ahmed, 2012](#)). They neglect the complexities of a multicultural society ([The Independent, 2018](#)), ignore the singularity of ethnic identities and deny the heterogeneity of racial experiences. BAME is in and of itself reductive, it eliminates space for individuality and distinction while flouting the nuances of individual cultures and colour-palettes. Although well-intentioned, BAME initiatives are predicated on the fallacious premise that minorities are a monolith.

Persona non grata

Stereotypes and racial epithets serve as resources that impose, confer, deny and approve capital rewards in everyday interactions by excluding or privileging certain groups ([Embrick & Henricks, 2013](#)). Yet, the depreciative nature of stereotypes and idiosyncratic perceptions of Black people puts them at a natural disadvantage when attempting to access BAME initiatives that are intended to equitably diversify. For example, [Chang and Demyan \(2007\)](#) found Asian stereotypes centred on intelligence, academic-striving, introversion and rule compliance; euphemised with employable characteristics. Conversely, Black stereotypes have been galvanised in such a way that Black people have been synonymised with crime ([Welch, 2007](#)), incompetence, militancy ([He et al., 2019](#)), aggression and bitterness ([Ashley, 2014](#)), with their strengths pigeonholed to athleticism ([James, 2012](#)). Such sinister labels are reinforced by news outlets and media rhetoric that underpin hegemonic normalcies and contribute to their marginalisation ([James, 2012](#)). Thus, perhaps Black people were destined to be the pariahs of the BAME community. Congruently, they see a downward trajectory of social opportunities, educational outcomes and occupational prospects ([He et al., 2019](#)). Regardless of how one personally identifies themselves ethnically or religiously, being visually dark-skinned with coiled hair comes with a plethora of skewed preconceptions and biases that erode lifetime chances of success.

Priming hurts

There is of course danger of a *self-fulfilling prophecy* where this trifecta of social, economic and political oppression creates an environment of pervasive injustice that arouses threat. Threat can engender a detrimental emotional milieu of helplessness, hopelessness and shame – each equally debilitating, which overtime dulls confidence and self-esteem to the point of disengagement. When something feels much too far out of reach it can dispirit all efforts – efforts that are further undermined by fear of rejection, isolation and endless micro-aggressions ([Ashley, 2014](#)). It can stunt the freedom to explore, diminish the confidence to express and blunt the creativity to innovate; dynamics that invariably influence the efficacy with which one can successfully integrate.

A silver lining

Still, we must not fail to credit Black people who are empowered and motivated by the struggle; who traverse the invidious terrain of racism and manage to rise above it ([Bilodeau, 2011](#)), as impassionedly expressed in Maya Angelou's poem "*Still I Rise*". While others metaphorically swim fanatically against the tide but, lacking power and individual autonomy, hope for a lifeguard to buoy their efforts to shore. Many strive with the hope to reduce incongruities in educational attainment, earnings, occupations and seniority for future generations.

Power

Status differentials between White people and minorities broadly are widely acknowledged, but BAME assumes an equivalence between the power held by Black people and other minorities. This is simply not the case ([Bonilla-Silva, 2001](#)). It is not just the experience of racism, but the strength and breadth of its impact, coupled with temporality of consequences. After all, the "*actions of the powerful against the powerless are not equivalent if these roles are reversed*" ([Embrick & Henricks, 2013](#)). Neutral power relations among minorities cannot be presumed, as groups occupy hierarchical positions within an inequitable racial order. There is real racial antagonism between minorities, of which Black people are most adversely affected. Yet BAME initiatives operate under the premise that all minorities have an equal chance. It also assumes White people alone hold the power to discriminate with injurious outcomes, but minorities at the top of the proverbial food-chain have relative power to oppress. The main difference (perceivably more menacing) is they are shielded by the myth that we are all one – e.g., "*How can I be a racist – I'm BAME too!*".

Birds of a feather

The insidiousness of racism is such that it permeates society and exists between all cultures. Although controversial, (without engaging in diatribe) non-Black minorities must also be challenged to discern and address personal biases and exclusionary behaviours, to mitigate the damage to Black communities who, whether we like to admit it or not, sit low on the totem pole of society. Let's be clear, this is not to negate the very real struggles that all minorities face, nor to discount the basic tenet of groups; to bring belonging and safety. It is instead intended to highlight the discernible disadvantage Black people face in a competitive environment piloted to BAME aspirants, and to submit that distinct interventions are therefore necessary.

Mind the gap

The unique racial experience Black people encounter in education is parallel to the insidious experience they face in society. ~50% of the UK's student population are BAME ([HESA, 2019](#)), but, for various reasons, they represent a 13% attainment gap; being less likely to earn a First or 2:1 classification than their White counterparts ([Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2019](#)). Yet, the picture is more austere for Black students, of whom only 14% gained a First, in comparison to 30.9% of White students, 26.3% of Mixed-race students, 22.7% of Asian students and 21.8% of 'Other' students ([GOV.UK, 2019](#)). Moreover, we see less Black participation at higher levels. Black PhD students represent a mere 3% of 15,560 full-time doctoral students within the UK, with only 1.2% becoming recipients of the 19,868 UK Research and Innovation studentships awarded over the last three academic years ([HESA, 2019](#)).

With universities positioned as a microcosm of society, we see a similar picture in organisational structures with a lack of representation in positions of seniority and a dearth of Black executives ([Arday, 2020](#)). The proportion of unemployed people of Black heritage was highest across all regions, yet those employed could expect on average 7.7% less in pay than their White counterparts. Whereas the pay gap of British (and non-British) Asian groups has narrowed to 4% and Chinese people were least likely to work in low-skilled occupations (ONS, [2011](#), [2018](#)).

Resistance is futile

BAME initiatives strive to embody egalitarian ideals, with the intention to resist and redress racial inequities, but they could unintentionally serve to reinscribe them by failing to acknowledge the polarised experiences of minorities. This peculiar grouping serves as a subtle discriminative practice that leaves Black people at the *bottom of the barrel*, so to speak. BAME initiatives put Black people at an increased disadvantage and makes them more vulnerable to being side-lined. Further, BAME legitimises the exclusion of Black people under the supposition that they are being advocated for and are proportionately represented in diversity statistics. Although we know this not to be true. Therefore, said interventions only putatively support this group. In reality, they serve to maintain societal normalcies, structures and outcomes, while propagating socioeconomic divides. Thus, despite honourable intentions, BAME initiatives are overall antithetical to the Black community.

Change is coming

We need to challenge the existing normative orthodoxy by acknowledging that systemic barriers obstruct people by skin tone. An intricate disentanglement is necessary to penetrate, fragment and dismantle racial inequities, but there is a clear disconnect. We need to be cognisant of the complexities and deep-rooted nature of this issue. Oversimplifying only serves to maintain the status quo. The desire for unity is juxtaposed by the atrocities of intractable historic and present-day afflictions ([Ashley, 2014](#)), but as poetically conveyed by James Baldwin “...*nothing can be changed until it is faced*”. While change could be slow and uneven it should not deter discourse – as Joe Biden recently articulated “*silence is complicity*”. Still, we must be equally committed to actionable, sustainable change that treats the root cause, not just the symptoms ([Banks & Harvey, 2020](#)).

End game

The cumulative effects of ‘blackness’ in society can play a powerful role in governing life experiences, but as a taboo subject it is seldom considered in strategic discussions of equality and inclusion. We must develop an appetite to engage in difficult conversations circa race, racism and the dynamics that purport power and privilege inequities to slow the momentum of denigration ([Arday, 2020](#)). The time has come to scrutinise current interventions, develop nuanced inclusion initiatives that attack the ugly face of racialism and purge structural inequities. Ultimately, we need to cultivate a culture that snubs racial intolerance. New benchmarks need to be set to underscore the complexities of deep-seated discriminative practices. Targeted bespoke strategies should be prioritised to tackle the inequitable landscape and create truly inclusive environments that protect one’s basic right to dignity.



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