UK, the Macpherson Report and after: Anti-Racism Has Been Reduced To Politically Correct Exercise

Monday 19 September 2016, by **ELLIOTT-COOPER Adam** (Date first published: 24 February 2013).

On the anniversary of the Macpherson Report, Adam Elliot-Cooper argues that the current approach to race is part of a larger problem which may lead to the gains of anti-racism campaigning being lost completely.

Walking home from the Tube one evening in north London, I noticed a car being pulled over by a police van. Being involved with Tottenham Defence Campaign and Newham Monitoring Project, both of which work to defend the rights of citizens against police misconduct, I approached the vehicles. Inside the car were three young black men, protesting that they had not broken any laws, and could not understand why they had been stopped. After informing the young men of their legal rights, and the police's legal obligations, I was promptly told by the police that I was nosy, to mind my own business, and that this was a 'routine stop' under the Road Traffic Act. As someone who is all too familiar with 'routine stops', I told the officers that we all knew the real reason these three men had been subject to such a routine. This observation infuriated the officers. One turned to me, pointed his finger in my face and bellowed: "You... are... racist!"

The *Macpherson Report*, which proved the existence of institutional racism within the police service, was a landmark for anti-racist activists across the country. Not because it was one-upmanship against the state or a radical anti-police dogma; but rather because it demonstrated an understanding of racism beyond nasty name-calling. Institutional racism is more damaging. It affects education, employment, criminal justice and other essential components of the quality of life of a person or community. It legitimised the efforts of activists to address structural discrepancies, policies and – most importantly – a renewed form of anti-racist learning. Unfortunately academic, policy-based and anecdotal evidence indicates that these opportunities have not been efficiently utilised.

The resources that were pushed by activists and eventually supported by the Government, have led to a general consensus (more or less) that racism and other forms of discrimination should be regarded as a bad thing. This is an important victory for our society.

But the reaction to this progress is a brand of racism that tries to deny any link with the term.

Racism is now so universally accepted as unacceptable, that an accusation of racism is often taken with as much anger and offence as the racial slur that prompted it. This new understanding of racism is dangerous in its superficiality. Individuals who deny being racist, and in fact publically condemn racism, have managed to confuse the courts and the public into ignoring acts of racism far more overt than those examined by Macpherson.

Police officers who have admitted to comparing black people to monkeys and Neanderthals, in a style of racism most progressives thought was extinguished twenty years ago, were found not to have violated the Race Relations Act, after it was explained that the officers were engaging in a discussion about evolution, even though the officer in question did not know what the word Neanderthal meant. A white man in Stoke-on-Trent who shouted 'n****r' at a black person was let off after describing it as a term of endearment he had learned through hip-hop music. Most disturbing, however, was last year's case of police officers kneeling on the chest of a black man and saying "the problem with you is you will always be a n****r". After hearing that they were merely trying to mend the self-esteem of a young black man who apparently viewed his ethnicity in a negative light, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) found no grounds to prosecute.

The high-profile cases of overt racism which fall in favour of the victim are now often far more trivial, such as Liam Stacey's 56 days in prison for a racist tweet about former footballer Fabrice Muamba. What race equality training seems to have done is teach police officers and others in power, the language to use when being caught racially abusing someone. This serves to create a culture of impunity for an institutionally racist police force which include some openly racist officers. Furthermore, it creates a reactionary backlash to these more trivial cases, under the banner of 'political correctness' gone mad. Not only is this a step backwards for anti-racism, but it also paints a false picture of minority ethnic groups in Britain which, because of their size and status, have very little socio-political power.

The 'unlearning' of racism and other forms of discrimination is still rather like a primary school teacher instructing a group of pre-adolescents not to swear. The teacher tells the children which words are unacceptable, and that they may be punished if they do not comply. Equality training generally focuses on learning which words relating to race, ethnicity, gender, physical ability or sexual orientation are/are not offensive to the apparently over-sensitive social group(s) to which they relate. For example, the phrase 'non-white' is generally seen as acceptable, if we employ the 'nasty name-calling' analysis of racial discrimination.

But in order to understand how institutional racism operates, deconstructing such a term can prove useful. The first thing we can do is to turn the phrase on its head: would anyone consider describing a white person as 'non-black'? The answer is clear, and the explanation for that answer is revealing. What the phrase 'non-white' does is normalise whiteness. It makes being white the norm to which all other ethnic groups are compared. Secondly, it homogenises Caribbean, South Asian, Arab, Latin American or any other racial/ethnic/national group it seeks to categorise into this single 'non-white' entity.

This form of normalisation and homogenisation may appear relatively harmless. But such concepts are central to racism. Racism essentialises race, explaining the thoughts and actions of an individual as a product of their racial/ethnic/national group, rather than understanding that person as an individual member of society. Depending on the prevailing stereotypes, that could determine whether your school teacher predicts you a higher or lower grade than you are likely to achieve, or whether you are deemed by an employer to be a candidate worth interviewing. The normalisation of whiteness means that this process will not apply (negatively) to white members of society, as they are more likely to be judged by characteristics other than their racial/ethnic origin. The language we use reflects these assumptions, and offers a powerful tool for understanding how institutional racism operates. Racialised language, like gendered language, has evolved over centuries to reflect, and explain, a particular world view.

This kind of analysis is often interpreted as cumbersome, time-consuming and even self-indulgent on the part of groups that experience discrimination. But it is only by understanding how our language essentialises race that can we understand that "the problem with you is you'll always be a n****r" is

not just an insult, but a way of characterising people as a racial category. And that categorisation shows up the stereotypes of power dynamics.

Discussions with police officers about institutional racism are, in my experience, almost always interpreted as a direct accusation of racism and, by extension, a personal insult. What this reaction does is indicate that they (as an individual, or the police as an institution) have made no effort to understand what institutional racism is, only how to put up a barrier of defence against any accusations which appear linked to racial discrimination. The ongoing cases of overt racism and continued prevalence of institutional racism indicate that without the necessary approach to accountability and learning, the gains of recent decades could be lost in reactionary denial.

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P.S.

* Posted on: 24/02/2013 08:56 PM:
http://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/anti-racism-has-been-reduced-politically-correct-exercise

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