

Minority professionals' experience of marginalisation and exclusion: the rules of ethnic engagement

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Abstract

All public agencies take the view that discrimination on racial and ethnic grounds is entirely unacceptable, no less in the process of hiring and firing than in the provision of services to clients. Nevertheless, people of colour still routinely find themselves subjected to systematic marginalisation by their white colleagues, no less in professional contexts than elsewhere. In seeking to make sense of such practices, this article eschews moralistic condemnation. Instead it sets out to explore the conventional 'rules of engagement' which govern interactions across racial and ethnic boundaries in professional environments. In doing so its starting point is an ethnographically grounded account of the dilemmas with which minority professionals routinely find themselves confronted as a result of their white colleagues, before going on to consider the uncomfortable positions which they find themselves required to adopt in order to accommodate themselves to their conventional expectations.

There is a strange kind of tragic enigma associated with the problem of racism. No one, or almost no one, wishes to see themselves as racist; still, racism persists, real and tenacious. When one asks about it, even those who have shown themselves to be racist will deny it and politely excuse themselves: "Me, racist? Absolutely not! What an insult even to suggest such a thing!" (Albert Memmi: 2000: 3)

Racist beliefs are culturally sanctioned, rational responses to struggles over scarce resources; that they are sentiments which, regardless of intentions, defend the advantages that whites gain from the presence of blacks in America. Such beliefs are a pervasive phenomenon which can be found throughout the class structure. (David Wellman: 1997:4)

Most decent-minded members of Britain's indigenous majority are markedly allergic to the prospect of being identified as racist. However, popular theories of 'scientific racism' may have been during the first half of the twentieth century, race theory in its classic format has long been comprehensively discredited. Such notions may still find some support amongst the ill-educated, but members of Britain's professionally-qualified middle classes have long since distanced themselves from such ideas, such that racist attitudes and professional status are regarded as intrinsically antithetical. In these circumstances it follows that any suggestion that someone of professional standing has treated a person of colour inequitably will at best be read as a serious challenge to their moral integrity, and at worst an outrageous insult. If middle-class rhetoric is to be believed, racism is a disease which has by now been virtually

eliminated from Britain's body politic. To be sure some over-excited people of colour may still harbour unfounded chips on their shoulders, but in reality – or so it is widely asserted – racism is now restricted to a small minority of bigoted extremists. Even the leaders of the British National Party insist that they are not racist.

Moreover, as racism has nominally fallen into abeyance, so anti-racism has flourished. There can now be few professionals – especially if they are employed in the public sector – who have not been required to attend a mandatory anti-racism/racism awareness training course. In doing so they will not only have been told in no uncertain terms that racism is not only morally intolerable, but also a serious disciplinary offence. Nevertheless, it would be idle to assume that all is well on this front. Rhetorical commitment to anti-racist practice, no matter how loudly articulated, cannot be taken as evidence of the absence of problems seething below the surface. Active complaints of discriminatory practice remain rare, especially in professional contexts. Is this because anti-racist initiatives have been so successful that the underlying problems have been comprehensively resolved? Or is it because those who find themselves subjected to marginalisation and exclusion – whether as clients of public services or as professionals working within them – have long since decided that there is little to be gained from articulating such complaints, so much so that those complaints that do break the surface of calm complacency are best regarded as the tip of the iceberg?

Whilst the rhetoric of anti-racism has undoubtedly been extremely successful, it now conceals an alarming paradox. Once an institution formally commits itself to non-discriminatory practice, it also insulates itself from the prospect of successful complaints. Minority staff working within such institutions, but who still experience marginalisation and exclusion invariably find themselves facing a whole battery of obstacles if and when they seek to lodge a complaint. If the complainant cannot be mollified by referring him or her to the relevant policy documents formulated by Human Relations, managers still have a further remedy: they can fall back on the rhetoric with which they have been equipped on anti-racist training courses which they will undoubtedly have been required to attend. Confident in their own rectitude, as well as that of their similarly trained colleagues, the well trained recipients frequently react in disconcerting ways – by, for example, expressing sympathy with the historical experience of black people, especially during the colonial period. However, such a ready acceptance of the sins of the past is all too often a platform for suggesting that the contemporary position of people of colour is totally different to that which they occupied in

the past, on the basis of which it becomes possible to suggest that the complainant was mistaken - or perhaps a little over-sensitive. Press further, and the gloves soon come off. Persistent complainants can expect to find themselves accused of having a chip on their shoulder, of seeing insults where no offence was intended, of unfairly upsetting their colleagues, and of seeking deliberately to sabotage all the efforts being made to assist them. In the face of such reactions it is hardly surprising that many people of colour begin to conclude that there is little to be gained from raising one's head above the parapet.

However the object of this chapter is not to complain about the existence of glass ceilings. Rather it is to seek to identify the processes by means of which such phenomena are created and maintained. It consequently explores a series of paradoxes:

- how is it that in arenas where advancement is nominally determined solely by merit and competence, minority professionals – and most especially those employed in public services – relatively rarely make it to the upper echelons?
- how is it that despite the ready availability of statistical evidence of marginalisation, white professionals remain so complacent about the disjunction between their ideological commitments and empirical reality?
- why is it that minority professionals make so few public complaints about this inequitable state of affairs, despite the availability of legal procedures which at least in principle provide them with a ready means of doing so?

In view of all this our argument takes off from Memmi's concerns:

- how and why are processes of racial and ethnic marginalisation systematically maintained even when such practices nominally contradict established ideological norms?

In exploring these questions we have not resorted to statistical analysis. Numerical data on the position which members of the ethnic minorities currently occupy in the British social order is widely available. Likewise we could point to a plethora of regression analyses which seek to show how these outcomes can be explained – or explained away. We take the view mathematics will never resolve the underlying issues. Instead we take a similar stance to that adopted by Memmi and Wellman in the brief quotations with which we began. Our concern is consequently to make sense of an enigmatic phenomenon whose effects are all too real for those who experience its consequences, but which remains largely invisible to its perpetrators. Our concern is not to measure experiences, perceptions and outcomes, but rather to understand the dynamics – and better still the *logic* – of the processes and ideological assumptions which serve to precipitate readily observable outcomes.

Our approach is firmly empirical, and our methodology ethnographic. Our arguments are grounded in our own personal experience, together with the reported experiences of many friends and colleagues, patients and informants with whom we have been able to discuss the nature and consequences of what we and they have experienced. Our own backgrounds differ markedly. Roger Ballard is an impeccable representative of the white professional classes: a Cambridge-educated anthropologist – albeit topped off with a Delhi Ph.D., the getting of which proved to be a truly mind-shifting experience. Meanwhile Tahirah Parveen is British raised and educated, although Pakistani born. In the course of a professional career that took her into teaching, through social work and on into mental health, she eventually became an Oxford-trained Cognitive Therapist – which likewise proved to be a mind-shifting experience. Both of us have also gained a great deal of inspiration from the work of Albert Memmi (1966), whose insights into the minds of both the coloniser and the colonised were in large part a product of his interstitial position as a Tunisian Jew, who was consequently born into the midst of North Africa's Franco-Islamic ethno-religious divide. We can only hope that our joint perspective – located in the experiences of two persons rather than one – will justify our efforts to yet further extend the track initially staked out by the master-analyst who has been a major source of inspiration to us both.

Making sense of race and racism

In common with many other commentators (see for example Miles 1993, Banton 2007), both of us have long since concluded that the concept of racism has ceased to have much value as an analytical category. Given the way in which the term is now understood in vernacular discourse, it provides little or no insight into the processes which it seeks to identify, other than to suggest that they are the outcome of ignorance, stupidity, and moral inadequacy of their perpetrators. Since no-one willingly identifies themselves as falling into any of those categories, it follows that on the rare occasions that racial discrimination does indeed occur it must *ipso facto* have been perpetrated by people other than themselves. Moreover, to the extent that the phenomenon of 'racism' so envisaged is a product of intellectual and moral inadequacy, it follows that whilst such attitudes may still be sustained by members of the lower social orders, they are by definition the antithesis of the attitudes found amongst their more educated and sophisticated social superiors.

If this is so, it follows that so long as 'anti-racist' initiatives are regarded as exercises designed to suppress and excise such mistaken and illegitimate attitudes, it is hardly surprising those

seeking to implement anti-racist initiatives in professional contexts often find the experience a thankless task. Given the way in which ‘racism’ is understood in popular discourse, most audiences – and especially those made up of well-educated professionals – take it for granted that this is a defect from which they do not suffer – at least consciously. In these circumstances the only route forward available to those seeking to implement ‘anti-racist’ initiatives is to highlight that past and contemporary injustices faced by people of colour, in the hope that they can at least begin to precipitate a sense of guilt amongst their trainees. With this in mind the underlying logic of the whole exercise comes into focus. If racism can successfully be identified as a moral fault, and that fault can also be identified as one to which everyone is susceptible, raising a sense of guilt about the prospect that may unintentionally have been a perpetrator of this sin will – or so it is hoped – reduce the propensity such sinners to exclude and marginalise people of colour. Whilst strategies of this kind are a familiar component of the European cultural tradition, since they are closely congruent with those developed by Christian theologians’ understanding of how humanity should respond to its condition of ‘original sin’, the proponents of anti-racism have encountered as much difficulty as have contemporary churchmen in persuading their audiences to accept such arguments. Hence, whilst a small minority of guilt-ridden ‘trainees’ may accept their medicine, most quietly take the view that their trainers are preaching to the already-converted. Indeed that appears to be the characteristic response of most professionals, given that as far as they are concerned racism is entirely antithetical to their established ideological commitments.

Insofar as their ultimate objective is to precipitate a change in institutional practice, it is hardly surprising that the results of anti-racist initiatives built around such premises have for the most part been extremely disappointing. As far as the nominal beneficiaries of the whole exercise are concerned, the consequences are frequently much more negative than positive. If – as is all too often the case – exposure to such programs does little more than reinforce their recipients’ sense of moral righteousness, the prospect of a series of yet more alarming outcomes opens up.

First of all exposure to anti-racist training frequently serves to reinforce professional trainees’ sense of moral superiority, especially in comparison with whom they choose to identify as less sensitive and intellectually aware than they are themselves; amongst other things this also provides a ready means of distancing themselves from those dreadful others who, unlike themselves, are the real perpetrators of racial exclusion. Secondly, those who have

internalised assumptions of this kind can all too easily go on to use their now reinforced and legitimated ‘insights’ to order their relations with people of colour who they encounter in the course of their professional practice, whether as clients and above all as colleagues. If such people have been given a rough time – by people less sophisticated than themselves, of course – it follows that liberal and open-minded people like themselves have a duty to assist those subjected to such handicaps, and to find their way into a liberal and open-minded arena where racism is not and cannot be a significant issue. On the face of things all this should mean that young professionals who finally break their way through into the sunny uplands of professional practice should face a bright future – rather than glass ceilings. The central objective of this article is to explore and explain the roots of these contradictions.¹

The view from below

This state of affairs is a source of growing frustration amongst the growing band of minority professionals – and most especially amongst the British-born. In their experience such professional arenas are rarely, if ever, as open and welcoming as their white colleagues would like to believe. Yet it is quite impossible to suggest that all is not well without causing a major uproar. Even if one carefully avoids using the term racist in the knowledge that it is bound to cause offence, a more mildly phrased complaint that one has received less than equitable treatment is liable to precipitate precisely the kind of reaction highlighted in our opening quotation from Memmi. Nor does this remain a personal matter. Once racism has formally been placed on the agenda – much more usually by the person complained about than the initial complainant – everyone finds themselves driven to take sides; and as they do so it soon becomes obvious that ethnicity is a powerful determinant of these reactions. Whilst other people of colour who have been through the same mill quietly express their sympathy with the complainant, members of the indigenous majority equally invariably take the opposite view. They find it far easier to sympathise with the hurt feelings of an alleged perpetrator than with the person of colour who has been subjected to marginalisation.

In the face of such experiences, many people of colour have begun to reach the conclusion that the overall consequences of the whole anti-racist enterprise may well have been more negative than positive. Once it is established the premise that racism is a dreadful sin, and one

¹ This article is solely concerned with the contradictions which arise as between white professionals and those of their colleagues who are drawn from the visible minorities; in a further article we aim to explore how these contradictions play out in the course of their interactions with minority clients.

by which liberally minded professionals consequently seek to convince themselves they must by definition remain untouched, several paradoxical consequences follow. In the first place it enables trained anti-racists to take the view that they know racism when they see it, not least because they also have the qualifications to legitimate that assumption. As a result of the adoption of these premises, the marginalisation of people of colour becomes quite literally invisible. Having rendered any prospect of such practices occurring in professional contexts oxymoronic, on the grounds that professionals are incapable of acting in such a manner, the adoption of such a perspective closes down the prospect of having any kind of discussion of just how, why and in what circumstances those of one's colleagues who stand on the opposite side of the racial divide can and do find themselves humiliated and marginalised.

The result is a comprehensive shut-down of debate and discussion in professional contexts. Our experience suggests that on the relatively rare occasions when issues of race and ethnicity are raised in professional contexts, it is invariably with respect to injustices occurred elsewhere, or failing that when someone has been disturbed by attitudes and behaviours displayed by one of their white clients. In the latter case professionals are normally primarily concerned to gain solace and legitimation from their colleagues, and of a kind which will legitimate their anti-racist credentials. By contrast more wide-ranging discussions – such as those concerning the challenge of delivering effective services to minority clients, and of establishing more equitable modes of communication across ethnic and racial disjunctions – are avoided like the plague, especially in the presence of people of colour. It is easy to see why. Should a minority professional raise such matters directly, or even make a contribution to a wider debate which touches on such matters, the temperature of the debate changes very rapidly. Efforts are usually made to shut down discussion as swiftly and politely as possible. A really determined refusal to go along with the consensus in such circumstances is likely to precipitate the ominous question “Are you accusing me of racism?” Anyone who fails to back down in the face of such a charge must be prepared for outright war.

Besides closing down the prospect of serious debate across ethno-racial boundaries, the use of racism as a moralistic weapon of mass destruction has had yet more serious consequences still: it has reinforced the very phenomenon which its original designers sought to dissolve, for ranks invariably close in the face of any suggestion that the weapon might be deployed. So it is that whilst the *de facto* experiences of exclusion to which the minority colleagues of white professionals' remain as real and as vigorous as ever, active complaints about that experience

are normally only expressed *sotto voce* amongst themselves. The risk of raising one's head above the parapet is too great to do otherwise. In a deeply ironic paradox, the vocabulary which has been devised as a means of making sense of a disjunction which swirls around us serves to obscure crucial aspects of its presence, so much so that its roots are rendered invisible to its principal perpetrators. In the face of such perversity, only one solution is possible: we need to rebuild our conceptual vocabulary from the ground upwards, so enabling us to disentangle ourselves from the limitations of established assumptions. This can best be done by subjecting the dynamics of the processes which lead to these outcomes to close and careful empirical observation.

The rules of engagement in contexts of low-intensity ethnic warfare

By contrast with the ethno-racial conflicts which erupted on the streets of Bradford and Birmingham and the *banlieues* of Paris in 2005, the disjunctions found in professional contexts are extremely low-key. But wherever in the spectrum between 'hot' and 'cold' the resultant conflicts may fall, they are by definition an outcome of *engagements* across on aspect or another of an ethno-racial boundary. Such engagements may well be of relatively low intensity in professional contexts, but just as in any other form of warfare, they are the outcome of rule-bound encounters between actors standing on either side of the disjunction between them. Hence as Barth (1969) insisted, a central priority for those analysing of the social organisation of difference should be to explore processes by means of which such boundaries are organised and maintained. Following on from his lead, we would argue that Barth's insights can usefully be taken one step further: if tensions across such boundaries become severe, interactions across them will begin to take on the characteristics of low intensity warfare (Kitson 1971), whose rules of engagement we can consequently seek to disentangle. As Kitson and his followers emphasise, such conflicts are invariably *asymmetric* in character, and hence waged between parties of unequal strength and status.

From this perspective it follows that the basic rules of the game are set by those in a position of power. In so doing one of their central aims is to exclude – or at least marginalise – unwelcome intruders seeking to penetrate arenas which they consider properly their own, and hence seek to control. As rule-setters, they are also in a position to identify the intruders as disruptive rule-breakers, whose very presence endangers the stability of the established order of things. In circumstances of this kind not only do the intruders find themselves being

required to play according to rules which are not of their own choosing, but also to do so on a playing field which is (at least from their perspective) far from level.

Whilst being required to play according to rules which are inherently biased may be far from fair, it is by no means an uncommon experience. Social conventions associated with age, gender, social class and disability can all have similar effects to those associated with physical appearance, ethnicity and religious affiliation; hence those who enter the game 'from below' have no alternative but to accommodate themselves to its rules as best they can – at least in the first instance. But whilst those who do so will invariably be acutely aware of the handicaps they face, even as they set about accommodating themselves to those requirements, those on the far side of the disjunction will have little appreciation of what is going on. To those who seek to enforce rules which have quietly been constructed to sustain their own position of advantage, such issues have long since been assimilated into common sense and hence rendered almost completely invisible. Objectivity is hard to come by in such circumstances. Hence it follows that those who routinely have to cope with the inequalitarian impact of the rules of engagement will be in a far better position to disinter their underlying logic than are those whose interests the rules serve quietly and effectively to advance.

Minority experience of marginalisation and exclusion

But we don't notice the difference!

One of the most effective ways of rendering a phenomenon invisible is by denying its very existence. In this context that condition is readily achieved by the frequently heard assertion the "we really don't notice the difference!" If that was really true – and there can be little doubt that those who make such assertions do indeed believe it to be true – it would follow that any complaints about racial marginalisation that their colleagues might make must by definition be misguided, or more likely a product of an over-sensitive and/or over-active imagination. Indeed, once such a scenario has been established, it not only provides a means of dismissing of all such complaints as fictitious, but of using them as a vehicle to turn the tables, and on that basis generate a pious condition of liberal concern:

"I think it is so sad when these chaps start complaining so much. All the sympathy I had for them evaporates when they start shooting themselves in the foot"

"It alarms me when they get such a chip on the shoulder: they keep on taking offence where none was intended".

"They are getting to be their own worst enemies"

"I used to go out of my way to help, but all I got was abuse. I don't know why I bothered".

Remarks of this kind are normally only exchanged in quiet corners of the staff lounge, but they do not go unheard. Whilst reinforcing a sense of mutual righteousness amongst established professionals, they also gradually add to the stock of knowledge available to their minority colleagues.

In the face of such reactions, one might expect minority professionals to stand up and be counted. However, they very rarely do so. The reasons are quite straightforward as they have long since learned that to do so is most unwise. At the very least those who make such protests are likely to be told that they are evidently burdened by a 'chip on the shoulder' whose size had not hitherto been appreciated. Nor are collective protests any more effective: when several minority professionals get together to express their common concerns, the results are invariably yet more counter-productive. Besides precipitating a hasty search by those so challenged to find another minority professional who is ready to confirm that he or she has never experienced any kind of discrimination, the challengers are likely to find themselves facing further complaints about their 'clannish' and 'unprofessional' behaviour. In these circumstances paranoia frequently sets in. It only takes a few of 'them' to be seen talking quietly together for a frisson of alarm to sweep around the office. "Are they talking behind our backs"? "What are they plotting this time"?

The more active the challenges to the judgements or the behaviour of their white colleagues a minority professional makes, the stronger such reactions invariably become. As this happens, arguments they present in support of their position begin to be dismissed with ever shorter shrift, and ever greater efforts begin to be made to personalise the roots of their unhappiness. Could it be that they are simply overstressed? In any event they are likely to be told that they have got the wrong end of the stick, to be over-reacting, to be over-aggressive, and consequently to be the authors of their own distress. Perhaps some counselling might help? Or perhaps a consultation with Occupational Health? Or perhaps they would really be happier working somewhere else?

It goes without saying that systematic rejection of such 'helpful' suggestions tends to precipitate stronger responses. Once managers agree that the complainant's bewildering refusal to reject all their efforts to sort the matter out is causing chaos, a ready conclusion lies close at hand. Since they themselves cannot possibly be blamed for the recalcitrant

complainant's resort to counter-productive strategies of self-exclusion, it follows that the sooner they can be persuaded to leave the better – no matter how great the cost may be. Of course there is always the prospect of an Industrial Tribunal being brought under the terms of the Race Relations Act, which – if pursued to the bitter end – might well have unfortunate consequences for the employers. However, there is plenty of scope for damage limitation in such circumstances. Given competent legal representation on the employers side, a settlement with appropriate gagging clauses can invariably be achieved, given the applicant's pockets are invariably much shallower than those of the respondents.

The logic of polarisation

Such outcomes, which are invariably the outcome of a lengthy dialectic of resistance and response, are not fortuitous. To grasp the logic of the process from the respondent's perspective, the whole exercise needs to be traced back to the point at which the dispute began. This may well have been a relatively minor incident, but its core feature is invariably the adoption of a position of outright denial by the alleged perpetrator. But given that what is denied is manifestly indefensible in ideological terms, backing down is impossible. Instead ever more elaborate arguments and strategies have to be devised in an effort to demonstrate that the charges are plainly ridiculous. In doing so the audience towards whom such arguments are directed is not so much those standing on the far side of the boundary, not least because complainants and their allies are ultimately a lost cause, but rather potential allies on one's own side of the disjunction: as far as those who find themselves accused of exclusionary practice is concerned, it is the approbation of one's fellow hegemon which provides confirmation of one's righteousness. Nor is this particularly difficult to achieve, given that perceptions of what is going on are invariably profoundly conditioned by the ethnicity of the observer. Hence, as the conflict heats up and the rules of engagement begin to bite, observers on both sides find it much easier to sympathise with the wounds suffered by those who stand on the same side of the fence as they do. Once sheltered behind this carefully constructed hall of mirrors, the ideological barricades can be slipped neatly into place. The excluders, rather those who have been subjected to exclusion, can now identify themselves as the principal victims of the whole process. We are back to Memmi's point: "*Me, racist? Absolutely not! What an insult even to suggest such a thing!*" From this perspective Wellman's analysis drives the nail right home: it is on precisely this basis that hegemonic practice becomes embedded within, and consequently effortlessly legitimated by, taken for granted cultural

conventions. Since hegemon invariably regard their own conventions as merely normal, as opposed to the manifestly 'ethnic' conventions of those who differ, the ideological assumptions which sustain the whole edifice are rendered invisible by and to their users.

To understand the dynamics of this process, it is worth remembering that just like a wall, ethnic disjunctions have two sides. Just because one side of a wall presents itself as rows of carefully laid bricks, it does not necessarily follow that it also looks like that when viewed from the other side. Those responsible for its maintenance might well have smoothly plastered it over and painted it purple. The same is true of racial and ethnic boundaries: there are frequently radical discrepancies between the perceptions of those who stand on either side of them.

Asking ethnic questions: unpacking the dominant majority's inscrutable self-representations

Anyone who seeks to write about these matters promptly runs into a problem of terminology. Members of Britain's indigenous majority currently lack a universally agreed-upon collective noun by means of which to identify just where they stand with regard to these matters. The paradoxical consequences of their refusal seriously to address these matters was immediately apparent when a decision was taken to include an 'ethnic question' in the 1991 British Census, the better to measure the scale of the minority presence which was becoming an increasingly salient feature of the social order. Hence, the government explained that the central objective of the new initiative was to collect data which would provide yardsticks for all manner of social policy initiatives – not least the accurate measurement of the extent of racial deprivation. However, implementation of the initiative presented the Census authorities with a substantial challenge: the construction of a form of words which would enable all members of Britain's increasingly diverse population to identify themselves appropriately.

Those responsible for devising the wording of the ethnic question went about their task on a pragmatic rather than an analytical basis. That is hardly surprising. On the one hand there was no agreement amongst social scientists as to how the terms such as race and ethnicity should be defined, and disagreement as to whether it was legitimate to enquire about such matters at all. On the other hand, there was widespread popular agreement amongst the indigenous majority as to what the whole issue was about i.e. the identification of 'them', 'the immigrants', and more precisely still 'the coloureds'. At an emic level, all that was needed was a terminology which would adequately capture the alterity of 'them'.

But whilst the distinction between ‘us’, (the natives), and ‘them’ the (immigrants) was part of the currency of everyday social interaction, such a terminology was unsuitable for use in the 1991 Census. So, too, was race, especially in the aftermath of the holocaust. Hence the Census invited everyone to identify their ‘Ethnic Group’. However, care was taken to avoid hostages to fortune, so the formulators of the question no-where defined just what they meant by ethnicity. Census respondents were simply asked to associate themselves with one or the other of a number of pre-defined categories in which pragmatic testing had shown to be acceptable to respondents. The question consequently ‘worked’ (Peach 1996, Ballard 1996a), even though the categories so constructed jumbled issues of colour, ethno-national origin, birthplace and (in 2001) parentage together on a wholly unsystematic basis (Ballard 1997, 1998).

That said, the underlying logic of the whole exercise was and is quite clear. Having established ‘White’ as the default category standing right at the top of the list, the boxes beneath provided all those who consider themselves to be not-White to identify themselves in terms of racial/ethnic/national categories. Although the results undoubtedly provided a good-enough basis for all manner of analyses of the extent and character of diversity to be conducted, our focus here is not so much on the results themselves, but rather on the character of categorical vocabulary used to generate them. From that perspective, it is immediately apparent that policy-makers had very little interest in the characteristics of those people who ticked the White box, other than as a means of constructing a yardstick against which the alterity of the not-Whites. But although the indigenous majority were content to identify themselves in racial terms (i.e. as other than not-White), to be operationally effective the 1991 Census also had to identify categorical identifiers which would be equally acceptable to the excluded. This proved to be much more problematic. Whilst vernacular usage amongst the indigenous produced a steady stream of categorical terms – running from ‘coloured’, through ‘immigrant’ and ‘black’ to ‘ethnic’ and then to the most recent neologism ‘BME’² – to identify the minorities’ collective condition of alterity, the minorities’ own preferred self-definitions have become steadily more ethno-religious, as opposed to ‘racial’ in character. However, one identifier has remained constant throughout, and remains largely unchallenged

² Whilst a number of formerly acceptable identifiers such as ‘immigrant’ and ‘coloured’ have by now been abandoned, more derogatory epithets such ‘coon’, ‘nigger’ and ‘Paki’ continue to be used. Likewise, ‘immigrant’ remains in widespread use, even though it has nothing to do with where such persons were born. Hence, UK-born people of colour are still regularly described as second- or even third-generation immigrants.

to this day i.e. the default signifier ‘White’. Just what does this actually signify? Contrary to all the rhetoric, colour in some sense clearly matters, especially as far as members of the indigenous majority are concerned. But just how? A consideration of the complex ways in which differences in skin-tone are used as status-signifiers in contemporary Britain provides some illuminating answers to that question.

White perspectives on being tanned

The acquisition – and even more so the maintenance – of a golden tan is a highly valued status-marker amongst members of Britain’s indigenous majority, thanks to its association with expensive holidays, good health and libidinous potentiality. The acquisition of a tan is routinely noted by others, and calls for compliments. By contrast a similar skin tone which is the outcome of heredity rather than having been acquired as a result to exposure to sunshine precipitates a quite different response. In the first place, it is regarded as an inescapable marker of alterity; which leads to such persons being excluded from the category ‘White’. Secondly, when such a person’s skin tone is intensified as a result of exposure to sunshine, it invariably remains *un*noticed. Besides failing to attract the complimentary remarks routinely offered to tanned ‘White’ people, many of those so eager to acquire such a tan are uncertain as to whether people of colour are subject to tanning at all. The hereditary origin of a natural tan overrides all other considerations.

Yet a ‘natural’ tan is not without its own intrinsic significance. As advertising images regularly confirm, libidinousness is popularly viewed as an innate, and indeed as a much envied, characteristic of those born with dark skins. Hence, those who lack colour-by-birth regularly spend millions in an effort to make up that deficiency by acquiring an artificial tan. Whilst a tan consequently has its own attraction – not least because of its alleged capacity to remedy the ‘natural’ deficiency which western Europeans have come to regard as being an inherent characteristic of their own native sexuality (Ballard 1996b:30) – a ‘natural’ tan which has not been artificially acquired is routinely utilised as a marker of extra-European alterity, with the result that it regularly attracts the question “where are you from?”³ In the midst of

³ Raj (2003). It also goes without saying that the each of the minorities make their own categorical constructions of the alters standing in a position of hegemonic dominance over them, from the Jewish *goy* to the South Asian *ghore*, as well as their own self-appellation – *apne* in the South Asian case. Unfortunately, space does not allow a further exploration of these issues in this context.

these subtle complexities the conventional assertion that ‘colour goes unnoticed’ can only be described as bizarre. How, then, do those whose distinctiveness is ‘unnoticed’ negotiate their way through the ambiguous terrain which the palefaces have set out for them?

Rules of engagement in the negotiation of difference

Natives or strangers?

So long as racial and ethnic differences are read in this way, those whose alterity is (un)noticed cannot expect their encounters with members of Britain’s indigenous majority to proceed on a straightforward basis. Instead they find themselves caught up in a form of inequality whose impact overrides another very British obsession, that of social class. The rules of engagement vary depending on the context in which the interaction occurs, and here class – as ever – has a substantial impact. Professional interpretations of the rules are a great deal more subtle (and hypocritical) than they are in many working class contexts, where underlying judgements tend to be expressed far more explicitly. But for all the subtlety of their application in middle class contexts, their impact is as great if not greater than those where exclusionary sentiments are less carefully suppressed.

Until recently, non-white professionals were few in number; most had made their way to the UK to gain advanced professional qualifications. The great majority returned to their home countries once they had qualified, although a small minority stayed on to pursue their professional careers in Britain. Those that did so were frequently disappointed. They found that they overstayed their welcome, with the result that they found themselves being shunted sideways into backwaters of one kind or another. However bitter they may have felt about being passed over in this way, few did anything much about it. After all, they reasoned, we are immigrants. We took a chance, and found that we would forever be classed as outsiders.

In recent years, a very different set of ‘outsiders’ have appeared in professional arenas. Whilst their alterity seemed at first sight identical in character to that of their predecessors, it nevertheless differed radically from that of their predecessor in one crucial respect i.e. their immediate roots did not lie overseas, but rather in one or other of the multitude of ethnic colonies established in Britain by post-war non-European labour migrants. Locally born and bred, the new ‘outsiders’ are in no sense strangers: on the contrary they are already thoroughly

familiar with the complex responses which their presence is likely to elicit from members of the indigenous majority when they arrive in professional practice.

For them the use of their skin colour is in no sense an unfamiliar experience. They have had to cope with the consequences since the day they became conscious of themselves as social beings. Likewise, they will not only have become fluent exponents of the linguistic and cultural conventions of the English middle classes in the process of gaining their educational and professional qualifications, but will also have become skilled in the art of negotiating their way past the exclusionary pitfalls set by the rules of racial and ethnic engagement. Had they not developed such skills, it would have been quite impossible for them to manoeuvre their way into the upper reaches of Britain’s notoriously exclusionary educational system. Yet however well-honed their navigational skills may have grown as they worked their way through school and college, the contradictions with which they find themselves confronted once they enter the world of employment are invariably far more intense than anything they had previously encountered.

Prerequisites for success in the educational system

To people of colour, the fact that most white people are sceptical of the capabilities of persons like themselves is not news. It is merely a fact of life. Nevertheless most have also discovered is that the resultant obstacles are far from insuperable, at least in educational contexts. No matter how sceptical their teachers may have been about their intellectual capabilities, teachers relatively rarely down-grade marks simply on racial and ethnic grounds. In the world of education, hard work is invariably recognised, and correct answers are rarely dismissed as wrong. Nevertheless one still has to be cautious. Minority students still have to convince each new set of teachers of the reality of their capabilities and above all to take great care as to just how they express themselves when invited to be ‘creative’. As they very soon realised, the introduction of arguments and perspectives which draw on the resources of their own distinctive religious and cultural heritage could easily prove to be entirely counter-productive, especially if the results could be read as offering a challenge to the established conceptual, moral and ideological expectations within which their teachers routinely operated. Creative thinking of this kind was much more likely to be viewed as downright offensive than to be received with approbation.

The rules of engagement are inescapable and are as active in educational contexts – from primary right through to tertiary – as they are anywhere else. However, they are not necessarily exclusionary. Provided minority pupils conform to the system's ideological requirements, and apply themselves uncritically to jumping through the requisite hoops, the handicaps standing in the way of achievement are relatively few. Moreover, once they emerge from the relatively sheltered waters of the academy, young people of minority descent promptly find themselves in much more stormy waters. In the world of work competition for resources is much more intense and access to jobs is invariably a zero-sum game. In these circumstances the rules of engagement begin to bite much more deeply.

Making one's way in the world of employment

Having crossed the boundary between education and employment newly qualified minority professionals find themselves confronted with all manner of novel conundrums. Most still hope against hope – despite much prior experience to the contrary – that the professional world will be organised according to the meritocratic ideals which their education has taught them to expect. In most cases those hopes are swiftly shattered. Whilst the outright racial abuse may indeed be absent from professional arenas, they soon discover that the rules of engagement are as firmly in force as they are anywhere else. Although carefully wrapped up under layers of politeness, their alterity is still an issue, with result that they find themselves sidelined from the mainstream in all sorts of subtle ways.

How should they respond? British-born people of colour are not naïve. Having navigated this far through the social hierarchy, they are no strangers to the sensitivities and hypocrisies of the native English when it comes to matters of race and ethnicity. They know the rules. As their parents will repeatedly have told them, if you want to get on, keep your head down and make a good impression. 'Fitting in' is the name of the game.

On acceptable forms of difference

Achieving this goal is far from easy. No matter how much their white colleagues may insist that their alterity goes unnoticed, day to day reactions give the lie to such claims. Not that many of their colleagues will fall into the most obvious traps. By now most white professionals are well aware of the dangers of getting it wrong. Hence, they scrupulously avoid making any queries about or comments on their minority colleagues' personal backgrounds and experiences, partly to avoid the prospect of causing offence (people of

colour are routinely viewed as being exceedingly thin-skinned), but above all for fear that they would not be able to cope with the answers. Race is consequently a no-no issue, but so, too are such matters as family, marriage and religion. There is, however, one aspect of their alterity which is routinely regarded as safe territory: their exoticism – especially when this is associated with dress, leisure and entertainment. Hence, invitations consume and/or to provide the recipe for 'delicious curries' are much appreciated; Likewise 'gorgeous saris' are much admired – always provided they are worn at home, or in the context of carefully organised displays of multiculturalism. Indeed the 'celebration of diversity' in this sense can readily be presented as evidence of 'how well we get on with one another'. In a similar vein those courageous enough to taste 'red hot curries' are admired for the intensity of their commitment.

Nevertheless, there are strict limits on the ways in which, and the contexts in which, displays of alterity are permissible. Above all they should be limited to leisure contexts, and hence kept carefully under wraps when the action shifts into more professional arenas. Hence the prospect that minority professionals might be able to provide a useful source of analytical insight – as opposed to translation services – when it comes to delivering more effective services to minority clients remains largely unconsidered by established professionals. Since established forms of professional practice, together with their conceptual underpinnings, are routinely assumed to be of universal applicability, perspectives grounded in access to an alternative conceptual vision are not regarded as either appropriate or welcome. Blind to the limitations of their own ethnocentrism, the vast majority of established professionals – and most especially those working in state-sponsored public-service contexts – have no time whatsoever for such 'ethnic parochialism'.⁴

The sum total of these practices has many consequences. Constrained by the rules of engagement, communication across the ethnic boundary remains a one way street. As a result almost everything which stands on the far side of the disjunction remains as alien or mysterious as it is threatening, at least so far as members of the dominant majority are concerned. Nor is there much sign that the passage of time means this perception is eroding such perceptions. Whether they encounter people of colour as colleagues, clients, patients or students, the vast majority of indigenous professionals still lack a conceptual vocabulary with

⁴ The remarks in this paragraph apply most strongly in those contexts where minority clients are not fee-paying customers in their own right – as is invariably the case in the course of the delivery of public services. In a subsequent article we will present a detailed discussion of the far-reaching consequences of this point, most especially with respect to the obstacles which it places in the way of the prospect

which to make sense of the rising tide of alterity with which they find themselves confronted. Hence, their own preferred perspective provides them with no immediate means of articulating their feelings of unease about the resultant confrontations, let alone of understanding how the underlying issues might be more effectively resolved (Ballard 2007).

The result – at least at present – is deadlock. Any expression of alterity which appears to challenge the established order is deemed unacceptable. Hence, for example, if people of colour are seen clustering together to the apparent exclusion of their non-minority colleagues, and most especially if they use a language other than English whilst doing so, they are routinely assumed to be talking behind their colleagues backs, and in all probability to be plotting some form of insurrection. Stepping beyond limits of acceptable exoticism contravenes a key rule of engagement i.e. that comprehensive conformity with established behavioural, linguistic and conceptual conventions is a prerequisite for acceptance. Non-conformity (as opposed to mere exoticism) is regarded as provocative, and is likely to intensify the level of marginalisation to which one is subjected.

All this has implications on both sides of the disjunction. Given their awareness of their colleagues expectations, minority professionals rarely deviate from (or to put it more precisely, make overt challenges to) established conventions whilst their majority colleagues are around. At the same time white professionals become similarly circumspect about asking even the most basic enquiries about their minority colleagues' personal backgrounds. To do so might well open a can of worms, and hence open all the underlying contradictions to public view. In these circumstances a retreat into notions of exoticism provides a welcome safety-net for those on both sides of the disjunction. As the prospect of genuine communication across the ethnic boundary is closed down, so yet another brick is slipped quietly into the wall.

The costs of conformity

No matter how much the use of such safety-strategies may keep the show on the road, the costs of so doing are substantial, most particularly for minority professionals. Whilst the capacity to engage in cross-cultural navigation is manifestly best understood as a skill rather than a handicap, the insistence that such skills should always be deployed in the context of a one-way street has a multitude of negative consequences. Whilst most minority professionals deploy such tactics as a matter of routine, those who engage in cross-boundary transactions

which are structured in this way place themselves in a position where they must constantly strive to order their behaviour according to conventions and expectations other than their own, and routinely suppress all evidence of their personal and domestic alterity whilst doing so. As a result they must constantly engage in cognitive dual-processing: they must constantly check out their own immediate interpretations and reactions against those which they imagine those other than themselves might make, and if there is a difference, the latter must always trump the former – at least in contexts where those others occupy a position of social dominance. Dual-processing of this kind has all sorts of unwelcome consequences:

- personal creativity is severely hampered, since one can no longer rely on one's own self-generated internal yardsticks as a guide to action
- the test of the validity of any action is externalised: what matters is whether others unlike oneself would approve of it
- all traces of inspiration drawn from one's own distinctive heritage must be suppressed. Actions and interpretations based on alternative conceptual premises will almost certainly be regarded as being as inappropriate as they are mistaken

It is also worth remembering that these negative consequences would be greatly reduced if the boundary-crossing and code-switching which is a characteristic of all plural societies had become a two-way process, such that the experience of navigating in the reverse direction was widespread amongst members of the indigenous majority. Unfortunately, that is anything but the case in contemporary Britain. The power- and status-disjunctions across the boundary are simply too sharp for that to occur. As a result the vast majority of white interlocutors – including many of those who claim to have a specialist knowledge of 'race-relations' issues – remain entirely unaware of the costs which their taken-for-granted demands for conformity routinely impose on the minority colleagues, and are equally blind to the prospect that there might be anything of value with which they might be able to get to grips if they themselves had the capacity to navigate to the far side of the boundary. Amongst members of the dominant majority the commitment to conceptual and behavioural hegemony is as commonplace and as comprehensive as it is unacknowledged.

All this has further consequences for their minority professionals as they set about trying to establish themselves in their chosen careers. In these circumstances 'fitting in' requires much more than behavioural conformity; what is also required is an acceptance of the existence of these hegemonic expectations, and the development of strategies with which to keep their

worst consequences at bay. Our own observations (and experiences) suggest that these include:

- take care never to outshine your White colleagues on their home ground. This will never be appreciated;
- always 'play by the book'; there is always a prospect that minor transgressions in which one's colleagues routinely engage will nevertheless subsequently be used to damn you;
- never take any step which might seem to place you in a position of privilege or advantage vis-à-vis your colleagues: even the occupation of a larger chair than theirs can precipitate intense feelings of jealousy;
- watch your back at all times;
- never articulate complaints about being expected to behave in this way. At best they will be met with bewilderment, and if pressed can only be expected to precipitate a hostile response;
- if a confrontation does occur, always remember that your white colleagues will find it far easier to sympathise with hurt experienced by the person you have confronted than they do with those of a person of colour;
- when matters come to a head, do not expect to retain the support of your white colleagues: those in denial will always discard unwelcome evidence, no matter how extensive;
- do not be surprised if your minority colleagues offer support and sympathy in private, but affirm in public that they have never experienced such problems themselves.

The result of all this is that in the context of the professional lives, people of minority origin regularly find themselves developing what are best described as 'proxy selves' which – whilst carefully tailored to meet the demands and expectations of their colleagues – nevertheless leave them with no alternative but to incorporate all the contradictions associated with their fulfilment of that role into their own beings.

Conclusion

This stark list of bullet pointed pressures, together with their culmination in the even starker construct of the proxy self is by no means the end of the story. We would also hope to explore the many strategies which minority professionals have begun to develop in their efforts to challenge and where possible to subvert the rules of engagement, as well as the heavy psychological costs – and the very real prospects of shell-shocked burn-out – borne by those who have had the temerity to take the risk of becoming front-line combatants.

From this perspective the analyses and arguments presented in this chapter are best regarded as a report of our observations on developments at the battlefield of a wide-ranging, low-intensity but nevertheless hugely significant set of engagements. It also goes without saying that the analysis we have presented here is anything but complete; instead it is quite deliberately exploratory. Moreover, as in any ethnographically-grounded analysis, the data on which we have relied is qualitative, experiential and hence context-specific in character. With that in mind we make no apologies about the absence of statistical data with which to substantiate our hypotheses about the rules of engagement. Our principal concern here has been to highlight the presence of these rules, and to tease out their underlying logic. Hence at least in the first instance, we would ask our readers to set demands for statistical justification to one side, and instead set our arguments against their own personal experiences – on whichever side of the disjunction they may stand. To quote the inimitable Bob Marley, 'who the cap fits, let them wear it'.

That said, we have little doubt that our findings are capable of generalisation. Every year more and more British-born people of colour, all with their own distinctive ethnic backgrounds are entering an ever wider range of professional occupations, each with their own specific sets of local pressures, expectations and technical conventions. Nevertheless, we would suggest that similarly structured processes are occurring in virtually every direction in which one chooses to look. More strikingly still, we would also suggest that the arenas in which the underlying contradictions have come most vigorously to a head are those in which few if any formal efforts to address them have been made, but rather those in those where long-standing and systematic efforts have been made to take them on. The clearest example of this paradox can be found in the case of the Metropolitan Police.

Despite having made a substantial effort to recruit additional officers of minority backgrounds, and having done so for long enough (largely as a consequence of highly critical reports by Scarman (1982) and McPherson (1999)) for some of those recruits to rise to senior positions in the hierarchy, the Met has faced a deluge of complaints about racial marginalisation from members of its own staff, *and from both sides of the ethnic divide*. It is only when the minority presence within an organisation has reached a critical mass that it becomes possible to mount explicit challenges to the rules of engagement which we have outlined here. In our view, current developments in the Metropolitan Police are best regarded as the tip of a gradually emergent iceberg, in no way are they Police-specific. In the field of

educational, social, medical and mental health services – the fields with which we are ourselves most familiar – the field of battle on which ethnic engagements take place is currently still ill-suited for developments which we have recently witnessed in the Metropolitan Police to occur in the immediate future. Relatively small numbers, bitter inter-professional conflicts and chaotic organisational structures all currently militate against the emergence of parallel developments in these arenas. Yet despite the vigour of the hegemonic process to which minority professionals operating in what can broadly be defined as the welfare services find themselves confronted, it would be idle to conclude that the rules of engagement have reduced them to the condition of helpless pawns operating within the limitations of burnt-out proxy selves. Low intensity warfare has two sides, not just one. Strategies of resistance are already firmly in place, even if largely conducted below the parapet. Our next article will explore the costs, the benefits, and the many complexities of the various survival strategies which minority professionals – and indeed minority communities at large – have now begun to devise.

Afterword

Since we completed this article – and shortly before it was to go to print – Superintendent Ali Dizaei’s account of his experiences as senior officer seeking promotion Metropolitan Police has been published in *Not One of Us: the trial that changed policing in Britain for ever*. Although we are sceptical as to how far the book will actually live up to the promise of its subtitle – if only because of the depth of the problems which his experiences have exposed – its contents nevertheless provide an illuminating in-depth empirical counterpoint to the more condensed analytical arguments which we have presented in this chapter.

In the terms which we have set out here, Ali Dizaei broke all the rules. He was a well educated and highly competent police officer who rose swiftly up the ranks. However he was not content with mere promotion: he aimed for the top, and made no bones about his objectives, and his determination to fulfil all the requirements – no less in terms of academic achievements than as highly competent front-line practitioner – needed to get there. In doing so Ali Dizaei placed himself in the fast stream. However in doing so he also made no bones about who he was: an active member of London’s thriving Iranian community, as well as of the Association of Black Police Officers, within which he took on the role as legal adviser to those of his fellow officers who had substantial grievances about the way in which they had been treated in the constabularies in which they served.

That an officially recognised organisation such as the ABPO should exist at all is quite remarkable: so far as we are aware no other profession or state-supported institution in the UK formal recognition to a similarly structured representative organisation. However its emergence has been far from fortuitous. On the basis of a long history of incidents in which white officers had treated people of colour in a manner which the courts had found to be atrocious, of efforts to recruit more minority officers which undermined by ever louder complaints of equally atrocious treatment within the ranks of the police service itself, topped off by the scandalous response of the Metropolitan Police to the murder of Stephen Lawrence, both the Police and the Home Office had little alternative but to acquiesce to the formal recognition of the ABPO.

All this was also of heightened significance at the point when Ali Dizaei ran into serious trouble. The tenth anniversary of Stephen Lawrence’s death was approaching, and the Met still had a large number of fences to mend. In these circumstances there were excellent reasons why Sir Paul Conlon should quietly signal his enthusiasm for the prospect of Ali Dizaei transferring into the Met from a provincial force, and for him to be further fast-tracked into the training course which is a pre-requisite for entry into the most senior management positions of all. However both Sir Paul – and Ali Dizaei himself – overlooked the vigour with which the rules of engagement would spring into action in such circumstances. It took Superintendent Dizaei the best part of two years to discover that despite his seniority, he and all his personal had been under comprehensive surveillance by CIB3 – the anti-corruption squad. Subsequently he found himself facing an eight week criminal trial, facing charges of perversion of the course of justice, and misconduct in public office: but even though the Crown deployed its top-ranking barrister prosecute the case, the jury found Ali Dizaei not guilty of both charges. Given the basis on which the charges had been brought, the implication of his acquittal was drastic: that he had found himself in the dock as a result of a deliberate effort made by his colleagues to bring his professional career to an end

What had he done to provoke such a response? Our reading of his story suggests that during the course of his career Ali Dizaei contravened almost all the rules of engagement we have sought to tease out in the chapter – and in that sense, at least, there is good reason to believe that those he sought to engineer his downfall concluded that he was ‘asking for it’, and those grounds devised what they themselves regarded – and in all probability still regard – as a wholly appropriate response. Hence even though Superintendent Dizaei is quite right to

conclude that by determinedly standing his ground he precipitated an outcome which was profoundly embarrassing to his tormentors, we remain deeply sceptical as to whether this was indeed a ‘trial which changed policing in Britain forever’. Unless and until the subterranean forces which generated such high-profile efforts to put him in place are countered, his victory will remain as pyrrhic as those won by his many predecessors.

The processes of which Ali Dizaei fell foul were not an outcome of the rules of law, nor of the principles set out at great length in the Metropolitan Police’s policy documents on equal opportunities in recruitment and promotion. Instead his behaviour contravened a much less formal set of conventions: those which are routinely deployed to ensure that alien upstarts do not disturb the established order by barging their way into social arenas which their current inhabitants believe they have a legitimate right to monopolise. As a result Mr. Dizaei found himself in a position with which all other aspirant professionals of minority origin a thoroughly familiar: however friendly his white colleagues may have been to his face, when the chips were down they were not prepared to accept him as ‘one of us’ – most especially when he made it quite clear that he expected to gain such acceptance whilst quietly insisting that in the course of so doing he had no intention whatsoever of either abandoning or hiding the consequences of his ethnic and racial alterity. But by so behaving, Mr. Dizaei inevitably found himself challenging all the conventions so carefully constructed by his white colleagues to keep their position of privilege intact: by seeking equality of treatment whilst making no bones about his alterity he was stamping all over the rules of engagement which bade him to do no such thing. No wonder they gave him such a hard time.

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